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The Woman, the Child and the Fairy Tale.

Paper Read to the Ladies' Reading Club by Mrs. Hector McNeill.

This was, at first, to have been a simple little paper on "The Nursery Bookshelf." However, in order to do anything passably well, one must think seriously—must drink at the fountain-head—so to speak, and on going to the nursery bookshelf we find deep things.

In a short article by Hans Andersen, describing a churchyard, I came across these lines:—"Here rests—well, it's a very mournful reflection, here rests a man who spent sixty-seven years considering how he should get a good idea. The sole object of his life was to say a good thing, and at last, feeling convinced in his own mind that he had got one, was so glad of it, that he died of pure joy at having caught an idea at last!"

Now, an idea came to me, but I sincerely hope that when this reading will have come to an end, you will not wish that it had been sufficiently striking to have sent me to keep that old gentleman company!

In the first place we discover that every good fairy-tale is an offshoot of that Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. It is the perfume and glory of Eden which it exhales, and like all beautiful things which have had their root there, spreads out its branches into the happy-ever-after-time of the future.

For the spirit within is always calling to the Spirit without, while the most ignorant savage searches in the earth, sea, and sky, for the meaning of the Mystery of Life: and the myths of the ages have come down to us as the strange lore of the childhood of the world.

The fairy-tale is the child's first stepping-stone to a knowledge of the Universe—for the faculty of wonder is the basis of religion. That last sentence is suggestive. It points to the nursery as being the centre round which human life revolves.

The artists of a bygone age evidently thought so—if we take their favourite subject of the Madonna and Child into consideration. George Sand (who herself wrote fairy-tales for her grandchildren) has said that she could trace the ceaseless working of her imagination back to the earliest days of her childhood—and adds, "to suppress the marvellous in the life of a child, is to set at naught the laws of nature. A child lives quite naturally in what are really super-natural conditions; for all within him is wonderful, and all without must, at first sight, appear wonderful also."

When we learn that one of the strictest schools of theology declares that, given a child up to the age of seven years old and they have that child for life, we know that something of vast importance must be going on in the child's mind. Plasticity and curiosity are its chief features.

Nathan Oppenheim, A.B. (Harv.) M.D. (Coll. P. & S. N.Y.) author of several books on the development and medical diseases of childhood has this to say:—"His (the child's) plasticity is so great, that it assumes the like-

ness of an active influence, as a sponge fills out with the water in which it floats. Therefore, the time to begin forming a child's disposition or character, is really at birth, or even before birth."

The ancient Greeks, indeed, provided for prenatal impressions by surrounding the expectant mother with all that was beautiful and harmonious.

It has been affirmed that "George Sand's whole life was coloured by the influence which surrounded her cradle—a child of the people through her mother, and a child of the aristocracy through her father, she ascribes her chief instincts to this peculiarity of her birth, 'athwart two classes,' as he expresses it, 'to her love for her mother, a love constantly hurt and wounded by prejudices felt long before they could be understood; to her unreasoning affection for her father; and to the violent contrasts which life had presented to her from her infancy!'"

Oppenheim dwells also on the influence of personalities, and says:—"The mistress of the house will often assume the personal care and supervision of her fine china, or a fine picture, and she would never think of putting a piece of old lace in the custody of a chance servant; but a child is evidently considered less valuable or less susceptible to injury."

Since every mother naturally believes that her baby is the most precious thing on earth, the conclusion naturally follows that she does not realize how intimately he may be, and is, influenced by early companionship, and again he says, "and thus we arrive at the conclusion that the earliest companionship of a child is a matter of grave importance," and still again he insists, "The care and rearing of a child are matters of such importance that the mother alone should be entrusted with them." He has no high praise for Kindergarten work, nor approves of children being sent to school too early.

He declares that much may be done in the nursery, in the way of instruction, in the form of narrative, nothing pressed—nothing memorised,—the chief concern of these early days being the example set, that the foundation of a fine character may be well and truly laid.

Nor is the father allowed to escape from Oppenheim's ideal nursery. He must enter into the games, rambles, etc., of the children as much as possible; "for being one of the main springs of human life." In discussing the decorations of the nursery, he says:—"The covering of the side walls and ceiling deserve the expenditure of thought and taste, for they have much to do with deciding the character of the room, and the first formative impression upon the child's eyes," etc.

When environment is known to mean so much to grown people, what does it not mean to the child?

Surely if even a plant can be so sensitive that its leaves shrink from the mere approach of a finger—the mind of a child must have a susceptibility quite incomprehensible to us. For the child responds to its surroundings more quickly than its elders—not only mentally, but physically as well, according to the psychologists. Could we children of an older growth be happy, if our sky had no stars, if it

rained every day, if we had no fairy-tales of another world to comfort us?

James, of Harvard, tells us that there are different kinds of imaginations, and relates—in his work on the Principles of Psychology—how an almost world-wide investigation was caused to be made of the subject. An interesting fact came to light. It was proved beyond a doubt that "visual memory" of things is possessed more often, and in a greater degree, by women and children than by men,—and, indeed, that men whose lives are spent in studying cold scientific facts, almost invariably lose it altogether. Here we must quote George Sand again: "It is impossible for anyone to imagine," she says, in recalling the days of her childhood, "what takes place in the minds of children who live, as it were, with nature, without in the least understanding her, and who have the strange faculty of seeing all that their imagination presents to them with their bodily eyes."

That this faculty should predominate in women, and children of both sexes, points to the reason of the greater, and more necessary understanding of the child by the mother than by the father. It means such intuitive sympathy.

To me, it seems as if the imagination of the ordinary man is founded more upon knowledge, as a handsome building is founded upon a rock; whilst the imagination of woman is like a lightning flash at night-time—with its swift revealing of the landscape. We might account for the preservation of this faculty in the girl—as a provision for future motherhood—but there seems to be no reason why it should grow latent in the mind of an ordinary boy as he develops into a man. That it could be preserved is proved by the fact that it is, in the mind of the genius, one of his richest assets.

In Dickens' Christmas Carol—(which is a kind of fairy-tale)—there are, in about a dozen lines or more descriptive of Scrooge's sad boy-hood at school, some pregnant suggestions on the child mind, environment, "visual" memory, and the value of the fairy-tale. "They went, the Ghost and Scrooge, across the hall, to a door at the back of the house. It opened before them, and disclosed a long, bare, melancholy room, made barer still by lines of plain deal forms and desks. At one of these a lonely boy was reading near a feeble fire; and Scrooge sat down upon a form, and wept to see his poor forgotten self as he used to be. Suddenly a man, in foreign garments, wonderfully real and distinct to look at: stood outside the window, with an axe stuck in his belt, and leading by the bridle an ass laden with wood. "Why, it's All Baba!" Scrooge exclaimed, in ecstasy. "It's dear old honest All Baba! Yes, yes, I know! One Christmas time, when yonder solitary child was left here all alone, he did come, for the first time, just like that. Poor boy! and Valentine," said Scrooge, "and his wild brother, Orson; there they go, and what's his name, who was put down in his drawers, asleep, at the Gate of Damascus; don't you see him! and the Sultan's Groom turned upside down by Genji; there he is upon his head! Serve him right, I'm glad of it. What business had he to be married to the Princess!"

To hear Scrooge expending all the earnestness of his nature on such subjects, in a most extraordinary voice between laughing and crying; and to see his heightened colour and excited face would have been a surprise to his business friends in the city, indeed. There is the "visual" memory of the dismal schoolroom of the boy, in the mind of the man. An unpleasant memory of uncongenial surroundings carried all through life.

Then the striking illustration of the value of both fairy-tale and visualising faculty, which, through the printed pages of "The Arabian Nights Entertainments" had the power to transform a bleak environment into pageants of oriental splendour! And surely a forcible suggestion of the injustice done to children when we condemn them to pass at least half their days in surroundings which are more or less depressing and unattractive. Can we wonder that children grow up with a stunted sense of beauty?

If we really wish the world to become beautiful, we must begin with the nursery, and even venture to pry into the school-room. So far, we have considered a few hints gathered from an eminent physician, a leading psychologist, and a woman of literary genius,—just a sketchy summing up of the importance of first impressions in the nursery—the inner nursery—and the necessity of the personal supervision of it by the mother.

Now just as the father should be represented in the little inner nursery of the home—so motherhood should be represented in that outer nursery which surges to our very doors. It is only a short while ago that the motherhood of St. John's acknowledged herself sensible of this responsibility. With that keen eye of hers she gazed out over the threshold of her little inner sanctuary upon that outer nursery of ours,—the back street,—and said: "We must give up

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a few of our junketings, and teas, and help in some of this cleaning up!" But Man rose up and gave the time-worn reply, "Tut, tut,—go home and cook me a mess of pottage such as my soul loveth!"—And the birthright of the children of our slums,—civic motherhood,—was again sacrificed!

So, out of the corners of the playground of the poor, every day come processions of men, to dig deep holes in hallowed fields—where they hide away the little boxes containing the blood by which they write their names. That's one way of getting rid of—the Dust!

If man had the same imagination as woman,—if he could see with that third eye of his as she does,—that nursery play-ground of the poor—there would be a fine rivalry in order to procure the honour of cleaning it up."

For the Star still leads to the stable!

But, you will say, after this war work is over will be plenty of time to think more seriously of children and nurseries! The strange thing about it is, that Germany has already begun to organise schemes by which marriage,—of sorts,—is to be pressed upon her people, and the birth-rate increased; while the English newspapers testify to the growing importance attached to Mothercraft, there since the War began.

(To be continued.)

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