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DEFECTIVE SIGHT.

(Harper's Magazine.)

I have known fond and doting mothers take their children of four and five years of age to have their first teeth filled instead of having them extracted, so that the jaw might not suffer in its due development and become in later years contracted, while the eye, the most intellectual, the most apprehensive, and the most discriminating of all our organs, receives not even a passing thought, much less an examination. It never seems to occur to the parents that the principal agent in a child's education is the eye; that through it it gains not only its sense of the methods and ways of existence of others, but even the means for the maintenance of its own, nor does it occur to the parents for an instant that many of the mental as well as bodily attributes of a growing child are fashioned, even if they are not created, by the condition of the eye alone.

A child is put to school without the slightest enquiry on the part of the parent, and much less on the part of the teacher, whether it has the normal amount of sight; whether it sees objects sharply and well defined, or indistinctly and distorted; whether it be near-sighted or far-sighted; whether it sees with one or two eyes; or, finally, if it does see clearly and distinctly, whether it is not using a quantity of nervous force sufficient after a time not only to exhaust the energy of the visual organ, but of the nervous system at large.

The reason why a near-sighted person is apt to be sickly is not far to seek. A near-sighted boy, unless the trouble be of a very moderate degree, cannot compete successfully with his school-mates in any of the games of youth where a nicely balanced co-operation of skill and strength is required, for the simple reason that most of them lie beyond the range of his vision. Ridiculed by his companions for clumsiness and inaptitude, due to a physical defect of which neither he nor they are aware, he throws up in disgust, one by one, the health-giving sports in which he never can hope to excel, and takes to books, not as most boys do as a disagreeable duty, but as a recreation, till what was at first a pastime turns into a passion, and reading for the mere sake of reading, often without understanding, and nearly always without reflection, becomes a necessity—a craving which is not only not opposed by his parents and teachers, but even fostered.

Abstraction from fresh air and exercise is, however, not the only evil engendered by this condition; the very attitude under which the use of the eyes is performed is detrimental to general health and due development of important organs. The book is brought near

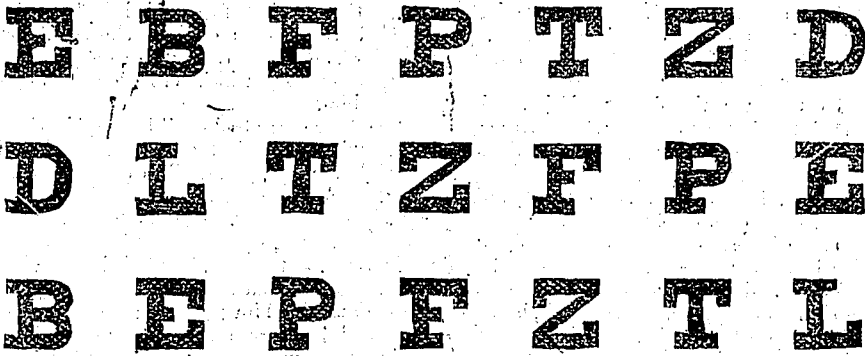


FIGURE 1.

to the eye, the head is bent upon the chest or over the table, according as the occupation is reading or writing, till the shoulders become curved and the chest contracted, the inspiration shortened and insufficient.

But it is not alone these physical attributes, even the mental are affected. A near-sighted child cannot, even across the table, see clearly the features of his own family, let alone those of his instructors, nor catch the ever-varying expression of the eye or the subtle changes in the muscles of the face, by which an idea is emphasized or a principle enforced. As he grows to manhood his very sense of the beautiful in nature is hampered and curtailed. It is the same in art, an indifferent miniature in the hand gives him more pleasure than a Raphael on the wall, and the love of detail and intricacy is fostered in him at the expense of unity and comprehensiveness.

He judges of men and their intentions rather by the sound of the voice than the expression of the face, and is apt, for that reason, to be suspicious of strangers, and

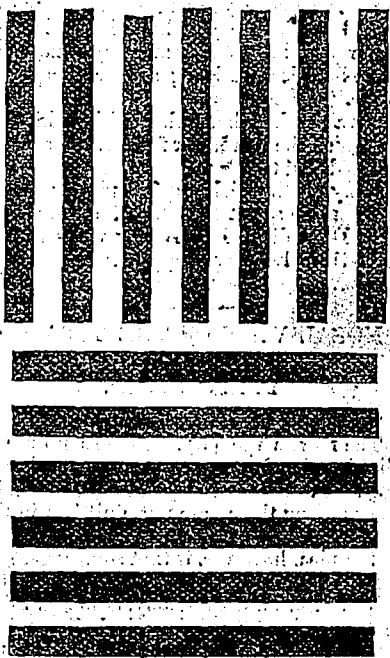


FIGURE 2.

overconfident in mere acquaintances, and this is even more the case with places than with men.

Now all this must have an effect on the general health, and reduce longevity, and I feel confident, however difficult it may be, with individual exceptions, that in a great number of near-sighted people the general average of physical vigor would be less than in the same number of those who possess long sight.

If, now, this reduction in physical vigor were counterbalanced by an increase in mental force, less objections might be raised against the defect. But I have certainly never noticed that, as a whole, near-sighted persons are any more intellectual than those who have normal eyes.

More studious they certainly are, but studiousness and intellectuality are not convertible terms, though I am aware most people think they are. Thus pale, delicate children, with a towering if not hydrocephalic forehead, and with prominent myopic eyes, are continually brought to me with the assurance by their parents of their great studiousness and consequent intellectual capacity and development. The most cursory examination proves just the contrary, unless a pert precocity about books and things, of which they really know very little, and should know less, is a sign of intellectual development. These children read much, it is true, but it is only because they can do nothing else. In no possible way, either mental or physical, is a defect in vision a benefit to the individual or the race.

But besides the condition of near-sightedness, which consists in too great a length of the eye, there is another where the eye ball is too short, or the hypermetropic eye, and which, though less dangerous to the organ, is even more distressing to the subject, because less apparent. For a short eye can, by making an effort, see in the distance usually, as well as a normal eye, the only difference being that where a normal eye is using no effort to see an object clearly, that is, in the distance, a short eye is making a physical exertion proportionate to the amount of the de-

fect—a strain which always fatigues and sometimes exhausts the nervous energy not only of the eye, but also of the whole nervous system. All this is even worse for near objects, and the result is that a hypermetropic eye never, from the beginning to the end, sees an object distinctly without an effort. From the fact that by making this effort those affected with this trouble can see both distant and near objects clearly, the defect is rarely recognized unless of a very high degree, until the near approach of adult life; though a number of symptoms and complaints may have shown themselves in former years whose true cause was unsuspected by even the sufferer himself, such as headache, vertigo, neuralgia and general nervous exhaustion—symptoms so grave that they occasionally lead to either a temporary reduction of or to a total abstinence from all study for a shorter or longer period, during which the sufferer is supposed to have all possible ills, especially those of a nervous character.

Toward adult life—that is from eighteen to twenty-two—however, a new symptom begins to appear. Vision which up to this time had been perfectly clear, notwithstanding the strain with which it had been performed, now begins to fail, and the page to be blurred at one moment, to become perfectly clear in the next. These temporary vanishings of the type increase in frequency, accompanied by a tense feeling over the brow, and since there is now a failing of sight, attention is called to the eye for the first time, an examination is made, and the evil remedied by the proper glass. But this is at the end of the education, not, as it should be, at the beginning, or rather before it was begun.

The extra strain must have an effect upon the character of the child and its natural disposition, and it must tend to render it often, when least expected, peevish and fretful, desponding and wanting in self-reliance. The mere effort to see must react on what is seen, and there can be no doubt that the physical exhaustion which follows the effort to adjust the eye, which is a muscular action, subtracts from the quickness of perception, and therefore of comprehension, and it must impede that maintenance of attention which is the surest evidence of mental vigor, just as the maintenance of power, not its production, is the surest sign of physical perfection.

With those who are affected with the too short eye the result is just as serious of what it is with those who are near-sighted. People with this defect even in very early life acquire, without even knowing why, a distaste for books.

A boy with this deficiency of optical power sits down to study, apparently fresh, and with a determination to perform his task.

THE NATION GALLON

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