

THE ABUSE OF READING.

BY MARY CADWALADER JONES.

More than a hundred years ago a little boy in England made a practice of continually running to his mother with all sorts of questions, as little boys have done since the beginning of time. Now, this particular parent, instead of answering anything which came into her head, or telling the child to go and play, was in the habit of protecting herself, and preserving her reputation for omniscience, by saying, "Read and you will know!" The boy grew up to be Sir William Jones, a deep student of the Oriental languages, and a light of learning generally, and he always loyally declared that he owed to this constant stimulation of his curiosity the distinction which he gained in after life. It is probable that he was inclined by nature to study, and that his mother's admirably simple reply, which must have saved her a great deal of trouble, would not have worked so well with another kind of mind, but the story may serve as an illustration of unquestioning faith in what used to be called book-learning, which still survives, especially among people who do not read much themselves.

The idea that reading for its own sake must necessarily be an advantage, comes down to us directly from the Middle Ages, when, for several hundred years, there were only three classes who made any difference in the history of the world. First came the fighting man, who knew little enough except to cut his mark deep with his sword; then the man of letters, in his quiet cell or study, who interpreted law and kept alive the learning of an earlier day; and last, the merchant trader, sending his caravans and cockle-shell boats to and fro over the roads and seas, like shuttles slowly weaving different countries together into the web of our modern world.

It was comparatively easy to be learned then, for there was much less to know, and much easier to amuse people, because they had less to think about. For a long time after the invention of printing books were still so rare and so expensive that they seldom came in the way of common folk, and the ownership of even a few volumes entitled a man to more consideration than he would receive now from a large library. To be able to read at all was an accomplishment, not a necessity, and the business of common life was conducted very well without it, as it is in many countries to this day. In Italy, for instance, a master mason will carry in his head without a mistake all the necessary figures relating to the building of a house and its cost so far as his trade is concerned, and so will the other chief workmen. We have come to look upon universal education as such an unmixed advantage that it is curious to think of what it might have cost us if everybody had always known how to read. For hundreds of years the poems of Homer were handed down from one zealous and reverent memory to another, and the same was true of the sacred books of the East and much of our own ballad literature. The man who could recite could amuse, but when people can amuse themselves they will not listen to anyone else patiently, and it is impossible for tradition to hold its own against the cheap newspaper. Those of us who are old enough to have been brought up in the romantic school will remember that we were taught to think of the Neapolitan fisherman as spending his almost continuous leisure listening to a comrade who could improvise or repeat the poems of Petrarch and Tasso. The Sicilian or the Calabrian, safely ignorant in his beautiful wild country, does so to this day, but in Naples the breathless and attentive group is usually gathered around a boy who is reading about the latest murder or bank robbery.

Modern scientific surgery has found out a great deal about the brain as a physical organ, but with regard to everything which makes it different from the eye or the heart there is still almost as much mystery as in the time of Galen. It seems, however, tolerably certain that each new impression wears it away ever so little, and although the mind, like the body, is undoubtedly strengthened by exercise, it becomes confused when too many different kinds of material are stuffed into it. The memory of men like sailors and shepherds is apt to be extremely retentive, because they spend most of their time alone out of doors, where they must needs be constantly observant, and yet are not distracted by a multitude of trivialities.

Within the last fifty years there has been an extraordinary multiplication of books of every kind for readers of all ages, until we are now brought face to face with problems which are

the mental counterpart of those besetting us materially with regard to the widespread use of machinery in manufactures. Nobody for an instant denies that many inventions, such as the steam-hammer, spinning-jenny and sewing-machine, have been of immense service to humanity, but the inevitable tendency of every machine is to make a machine of the man or woman who serves it, and it is growing more difficult year by year to have the kind of work done in which hand and brain work intelligently together.

A machine will make each separate part of a pistol more accurately than a man could do, and turn out many more, but it is doubtful whether the civilization of the world is much advanced thereby, and certain that the elaborately ornamented weapons which one sees occasionally in gunsmith's windows are hideous compared with those to be found in any collection of old arms. Or, to take an instance which appeals more closely to women, let any one compare a piece of embroidery done by a skilled needlewoman with the specimens exhibited to show the perfection of any sewing-machine, and the contrast is even more striking. The same design and the same materials may serve for both, but the difference is as great as between a living person and a wooden doll. Machinery, from having been a useful slave, is rapidly becoming a tyrannous master, and we are in danger of forgetting that there can be no real power which is not creative, and that nothing can give the effect of life which has not life itself.

Etchings and engravings are perfectly legitimate works of art, because the artist meant to work in black and white, and to produce just the effect which we see and admire, but a chromolithograph is almost always a libel on the picture which it tries to copy, especially if the latter is an oil-painting. As to the crude and glaring colored sheets which now disfigure so many newspapers, they are simply abominable and calculated to do an infinite deal of harm, for the reason that as we become used to them we shall not feel the difference between good color and bad, which is really as marked to a trained eye as the difference between harmony and discord is to a trained ear.

All this may not seem to have anything to do with reading, but unfortunately the connection is only too close, because we are in great danger of being overwhelmed with machine-made cleverness, just as the market is sometimes over-stocked with machine-made furniture. The human mind is like the human body in that it can only live and grow by what nourishes it, and must make its food part of itself, or assimilate it, as the physicians say. In old times children used to be brought up to eat whatever was set before them, without choice or complaint, and although this rule now seems somewhat tyrannical, it had at least the advantage that parents presumably chose what they knew to be wholesome. With regard to nourishment for the mind, such vigilance was scarcely necessary, as the larder in those days was apt to be better provided than the library, and a child not in much danger of a mental surfeit from the books within its reach. If there were any at all, however, they had usually among their number some of the English classics, such as Shakspeare, *Paradise Lost*, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and greatest of all, even apart from its religious character, the Bible. In many families there was a large illustrated copy, and those of us who are no longer young can probably remember long Sunday afternoons before the fire or under the trees, when week-day play was forbidden and we wandered instead with the children of Israel through the wilderness, and rode with David and Gideon into their bloody wars. As we look at them in after years, neither the Bible nor Shakspeare seem fit for young readers, but honest and healthy childhood is protected by its own innocence, and as, like charity, it thinketh no evil, it does not remember anything which could do it harm.

No book which comes into a decent house is as likely to put ideas into children's heads, to use the nursery phrase, as the careless talk of older people who ought to know better, but who are too apt to forget the great reverence which the old Romans declared long ago to be the due of youth.

It is commonly said that young people will no longer read Walter Scott and are bored to death by Shakspeare. If so, it is certainly their misfortune but scarcely their fault, and the cause