
BOOKS AND READING.

IN the making of a man recipes and formulæ fail. What was good for one may be bad for another. The nature of the original stuff is so complex and delicate; formative influences are so subtle and elusive, that causes are not easily or surely traced to effects. Advice, therefore, to the young for the formation of habit and character is mainly by way of suggestion and general principles; few absolute and universal laws, except of honor and integrity. So as for books and reading, whether one should read little or much; whether carefully or hastily; whether at random or by method; whether novels, poetry, or history; and numerous other questions,—all must, under certain restrictions, receive but a relative answer, to be modified by time, place, and person. That reading of some kind, in some manner, exerts a strong formative influence, will, however, go unchallenged. In a series of articles which recently appeared in a prominent magazine in which the writers, eminent in education and literature aimed to estimate the moulding forces of their youth, it is notice-

able how large a place is given to books and reading. Probably one profession owes more than another, and the professions more than other vocations. Yet it is none the less true that the man whose nursery was a select library, and whose first uncertain steps received support and direction from familiar shelves, works on vantage ground. From a mind thus stored with what is choice and sweet will come forth thought of richer flavor and of aroma more delicate.

But it is the experience of but few to have been reared in the library. The great majority grow into manhood and womanhood without these advantages. In our new West this is especially true: money is primary, books secondary. Multitudes of children grow to youthhood without a loving familiarity with a dozen standard volumes. Soiled and well-thumbed "arithmetics," "jographies" and grammars are for them the world's literature. How can such conceive the exquisite sense of pleasure coming from holding in one's hand a well-bound, substantial book of choice reading? Even a book-shelf in the house is unknown; a county paper, if happily that, the current literature. I speak not to condemn, but to pity. Culpable negligence there sometimes is; but often parents are poor, and good books still cost money. Parents lack taste for reading and are unconscious of the wrong they do their children in failing to supply them with books. Children themselves have to work, and have little time for reading. In this respect the boy in the town or city has great advantage over his companion in the country. The town boy of twelve commonly has his out-of-school hours and his vacations to devote to our wonderfully rich juvenile literature, so full of highly-seasoned information and of appetizing food for both mind and imagination. But the boy on the farm—well, only the boy himself can do justice to his duties; with chores before and after school and field work in vacation, time for reading is exceedingly slender; and the fortitude of Lincoln or of Garfield is not yet so familiar as to breed contempt. Then,

there is, of course, that large class of youths who, in their earlier years, failed to make use of their abundant facilities; books and time they had, but the value of general reading they did not appreciate.

The first need of a young man or young woman whose early reading has thus, for one reason or another, been neglected, is to become fully conscious of the deficiency; and the sooner the better. This is not always easy to bring to pass. The boy who has been reared in a home where a good book is a curiosity, who has no taste for, or knowledge of, literature will with great difficulty comprehend his lack. Only as he gets away from his old surroundings and companions; only as he enters into a new world and comes into contact with those who are not only as quick of thought as he, but indefinitely more intelligent, and as he begins to see the infinitude of knowledge and the possibilities of knowing, only then does the light begin to dawn upon him and does he begin to see his own nakedness. And a startling revelation it sometimes is, especially if it comes late. To get into active life, to find the duties of the hour beyond number for multitude, to find a thousand expectations and demands which you had not anticipated, to find your foundation for a plain, square house wholly inadequate for the modern style with its porticoes and porches, its angles and projections; to find yourself but fifty when you should be a hundred horse power; to be compelled to weave the woof without the warp, to battle with the billows when you thought on placid waters,—all this is not pleasant; it is appalling; you choke and feel that you are sinking. Examination of the world is not the examination of the class-room. It is not fifty chapters of Cæsar, or a book of Homer, or Quadratic Equations, with three weeks for review. It isn't even, What do you know? What do you know that we know, is the question; answer that or be damned; and the more ignorant your particular examiner, the more unreasonable the examination and the bitterer the malediction. You must not

only know all you know but you must know all everybody else knows besides. It is in vain that you protest against the injustice; the sensations of sinking will be no more pleasurable. If you haven't transcendent genius, you must have fair attainments.

If not before, there can be no better time to awaken to one's danger than while in college. Past neglect cannot be wholly atoned for. A large portion of that literary lore which is best and most permanently laid up in childhood may not now be acquired. But by painstaking and industry the deficiency may, in part, be supplied. To do this, begin at once. Don't stand paralyzed in contemplation of the vastness of the task. Begin a book; let the others take care of themselves—they will keep until you get to them. And now for a few suggestions.

First: Reading should be estimated so highly as to receive a fair portion of our time. If we are crowded, it should not be made secondary to everything else, but should suffer only in proportion. Give it an honorable place.

Second: A large part of your reading may be most profitably grouped. That is, read along the lines of your study. If one is studying Greek history, it is the best of all times to read books upon Greece. If one is studying American literature, that is the time to read the writings of American authors. And so of the sciences and other studies. I think it best to read not in advance but in the wake of a study. For instance, if the study be in Roman history, it is well to wait until by your work in the class-room the outlines are firmly fixed in your mind; then fill in by general reading. In so doing one reads with more profit and pleasure, and with less pains.

Third: If you follow the previous suggestion you will not make the error here noticed. A great many students read with relative waste. They have no regard for their capacity to comprehend. They read logic and economics, metaphysics and theology, before they have the training necessary pro-

perly to comprehend such difficult subject matter. They get something, doubtless, but their time were more profitably spent on simpler themes. They devour strong meat before they have teeth; it is indigestible. I am aware that it is impossible to lay down any definite law; especially with regard to what is more strictly called literature. Even children are often able to appreciate the most classic productions—or rather certain features of them. I remember very distinctly how as a mere lad I sat through the long winter night reading “Paradise Lost” with a fascination it does not have for me now, though my appreciation of its real merits is indefinitely superior to what it was then. One usually reads standard literature profitably if enjoyingly. But the difficult sciences and abstruse philosophies we may usually read with most profit when we come to them.

Fourth: Buy a good book now and then. There is a sweet satisfaction in owning a good book. Don't envy too much the man who is able to buy a quantity of books. Books bought by the yard don't become so dear to the owner. But even if you are poor, buy a book now and then; a good book; well bound, not gaudy—substantial. Become acquainted with it; fall in love with it; woo it; cherish it; it will be a helpmate to you.

F. S. DIETRICH.