THE LITERATURE OF THE CHILDREN

The Public Ledger of Philadelphia is authority for the statement that under the auspices of the University of Chicago nursery rhymes are to be stricken off the list of things suitable for the minds of children. The Public Ledger makes vigorous protest, and in doing so speaks for the countless thousands who are not too dignified to confess membership in the free and independent order of the simple hearted, and who do not have their heads so high in the clouds that they have failed to observe the things that have moved the world and have moulded men and women for the world's betterment.

Some mighty poor suggestions come from some men who owe their prominence to college professorships. Not long ago one genius of this sort said that Rockefeller was greater than Shakespeare; another declared that the old hymns were doggerel; another denounced Santa Claus as "the foolish creature of foolish minds"; and there have been instances where some half-baked "educator" proposed the abolition of the Creator! All of which goes to show that "a little learning is a dangerous thing."

Why should the nursery rhyme be abolished? Because it sounds foolish to the abolitionist? Apply that rule rigidly and there will be little left in literature but the cyclopedia and—carried to its logical result—the rule would soon leave the cyclopedia a mass of shreds and patches.

The nursery rhyme is an essential part of a child's education, and it is indispensable to the parent who fraternizes with his offspring and finds pleasure in the simple songs and tales that delight the child's heart. It may be defended on broad educational lines, or, so far as it interests—and instructs by interesting—the children, on literary merit, even as it may be justified by the pleasure it gives to the children and the softening influence which it has upon the character of the adult who learns it, loves it, and doesn't care to forget it.

Education does not begin with the sketch of John D. Rockefeller's life as published by the United States Commissioner of Education, or the tributes paid to the oil trust magnate by professors of colleges that have been subsidized with his ill-gotten gain; it does not begin with Shakespeare nor with Browning, nor even with the alphabet. In the language of one who may be counted among the champions of the nursery rhymes "Education begins with a mother's look, with a father's nod of approbation or a sign of reproof; with a sister's gentle pressure of the hand or a brother's noble act of forbearance; with handfuls of flowers in green dells, or hills and daisy meadows; with birds' nests admired, but not touched; with creeping ants and almost imperceptible emmets; with humming bees and glass bee hives; with pleasant walks, with shady lanes and with thoughts directed in sweet and kindly tones and words to Nature, to beauty, to acts of benevolence, to deeds of kindness, and to the source of all good—to God Himself." And the nursery rhyme does all that.

The men and women of today were reared on nursery rhymes, and after recognizing all their merits and demerits, they are really a fine lot of people. We recognize the educational principle of the nursery rhyme in the kindergarten, in the historical novel, and in the art—for it is an art—which some men and women writers have of "humanizing" animals, describing their ways, their wants, and their characteristics in stories told by the animals themselves. We may even say that the principle is recognized in poetry, for the poets who have left their imprint in politics as well as in literature are those who have written of the simple things of life and written in a simple way, directly, as it were, from the heart of one human being to the heart of another human being.

Some men can swim as soon as they strike water, but most of us must first wade. Some instinctively turn to Browning, but most of us must be led up gradually, perhaps first drawn in that direction by coming in contact with vagabond sentences or by having its beauties pointed out by some master hand. Men are often lead to a study of literature by a speech or sermon that has presented some literary fact in a captivating way, and the historical novel has its uses because it has often aroused the interest of its readers and prompted them to search the pertinent history—which search will, by the way, show that some of the authors of these novels take a great many liberties with history.

David Swing said that the writings of Shakespeare, of Homer, of Milton, passed into all languages because the great thoughts of those writers belong to the human heart; that "all the thoughts of literature spring from the soul, that is, from the emotions, from the sentiments, rather than from the intellect alone"; also that literature is "nothing else than thought ornamented." That being true the nursery rhyme is entitled to rank as literature. To be sure, it is not entirely satisfying when one has passed the age for which that literature was prepared; although even the well lettered man may yet derive, at times, great enjoyment in reading or reciting these merry jingles to little ones, just as the professor in algebra might find pleasure in unravelling the mysteries of the multiplication table to one to whom that table is yet a puzzle, or as the disciple of Byron, of Moore, of Coleridge, of Wordsworth, or of Tennyson might find pleasure in leading the young along the paths made beautiful by the pen of Eugene Field, of James Whitcomb Riley or of our own Will M. Maupin.

Froebel, the founder of the kindergarten, is known the world over, and in the centuries to come little children will lisp his name as that of one of the great benefactors of the human race. Froebel said: "What the child imitates he begins to understand. Let him represent the flying of birds, and he enters partially into the life of birds. Let him imitate the rapid motion of fishes in the water and his sympathy with fishes is quickened. Let him reproduce the activities of farmer, miller and baker, and his eyes open to the meaning of their work. In one word let him reflect in his play the varied aspects of life and his thought will begin to grapple with their significance."

There are little boys who are required by thoughtless parents to play alone—if, indeed, their pastimes may be dignified with the name of play. But few rays of sunshine are permitted to fall into their lives. They are strangers to the children's rhymes and tales because within their parents' souls no music dwells. When they are grown these children may amount to something so far as real service to the world is concerned, but if so it will be because, sooner or later, in spite of the efforts of their eminently practical parents, they have learned that "Whatever mine ears can hear, whatever mine eyes can see, in Nature so bright with beauty and light, has a message of love for me!"—and that, by the way, is one of these nursery rhymes which are to be barred.

The imagination of the child must be awakened. The nursery rhyme operates upon the little one as sunshine acts upon the plant—"In the heart of a seed, buried deep, so deep, a dear little plant lay fast asleep. 'Wake,' said the sunshine, 'and creep to the light.' 'Wake,' said the voice of the raindrops bright. The little plant heard, and it rose to see what the wonderful outside world might be." And that is another of the rhymes that are to be barred from the men and women of the future!

Some of the simplest verses have drawn the children's attention to eternal facts. There are some unobserving men who do not know that one particular little star seems to act as the moon's chief of staff. In a nursery rhyme the attention of children is riveted upon this fact: "Last night I looked out of my window just before I repeated my prayer, and the moon with the star close beside her was climbing high up in the air. Did God make the little star baby 'cause the moon was so lonely up there? Yes, God made the little star baby 'cause the moon was so lonely up there."

One of the prettiest thoughts relates to the similarity between the color of the sky and the color of the violet, and is conveyed in homely nursery verse: "I know, blue, modest violet, gleaming at dewy morn, I know the place you came from and the way that you were born; when God cut the holes in the heavens to let the stars shine through, he let the scraps fall down to earth, and those little scraps were you."

There are many grown men and women who could learn valuable lessons by a study of these nursery rhymes. They cultivate sweet flowers in the hearts of the little ones and inspire them to good purpose. How would this college professor instruct the little one in love, in duty and in courage in better form than is given in the nursery rhyme: "Oh Daffy-down-dilly! so brave and so true, I wish all were like you; so ready for duty in all sorts of weather and showing forth courage and beauty together." Or, as in that other nursery rhyme: "Come, my love, and do not spurn from a little flower to learn. Let your temper be as sweet as the lily at your feet; be as gentle, be as mild, be a modest, simple child."

How would this college professor tell of purity, of generosity and of service in better form than:

> The red rose says: "Be sweet,"
> And the lily bids: "Be pure."
> The hardy, brave chrysanthemum,
> "Be patient and endure."
> The violet whispers: "Give,
> Nor grudge nor count the cost."
> The woodbine, "Keep on blossoming
> In spite of chill and frost."

How would he admonish contentment in better way than:

> Whichever way the wind doth blow
> Some heart is glad to have it so.
> Then blow it east or blow it west,
> The wind that blows, that wind is best.

One of the prettiest stories told to the children is entitled "To whom shall we give thanks?" The author was so impractical that he undertook to give thought and voice to many inanimate things. It is related that a little boy quenched his raging thirst at a pump, and then gracefully raising his cap thanked "Mr. Pump"; but the pump disclaimed the credit and said that he only helped the water run. Then the little boy offered thanks to "Cold Water"; but "Cold Water" disclaimed the credit, saying that the spring on the hillside sent him forth. The boy said that then he'd thank the spring; but the spring in turn disclaimed the credit, saying that it could do nothing without the dew and rain. The boy said he'd thank the dew and rain, but they also declined to accept the honor, and said that without the sun they were powerless. Then the boy turned to the sun and offered "ten thousand thanks"; but the sun, "with blushing face," admonished the little fellow not to thank him, because he drew the draught from the ocean's mighty stores. Then turning to the ocean the boy offered thanks, but the ocean echoed back "No thanks to me," adding:

> "Not unto me, but unto Him
> Who formed the depths in which I lie,
> Go give thy thanks, my little boy—
> To Him who will thy wants supply."
> The boy took off his cap and said
> In tones so gentle and subdued,
> "O God, I thank Thee for Thy gift.
> Thou art the giver of all good."

These men who object to the nursery rhyme will soon object to "baby talk," and then to coddling, and then to playthings; and then instead of a lot of bright-faced, happy children we will have an assortment of dressed up, intellectual midgets who will want to talk to us of "the profoundness of profundity," when we would prefer to have them tell us about "Onery, orry, ickery, Ann, fillison, follison, Nicholas John"; and finally there will be no love and no life for the baby, no life and no love for the parent, and no fun for any one other than the solemn owls who seem to obtain pleasure only by denying it to others.

Long ago we read: "The greatest truths are the simplest; and so are the greatest men." This sentence was forcefully recalled to my mind on one occasion during the present summer. At a private picnic party, perhaps seventy-five people—among them many children—were gathered. In the party was a man of wide experience, of great activity and of recognized ability. When luncheon was spread he was invited to take the place of honor at the head of the snowy cloth spread on the green grass. I have heard that man deliver speeches that swayed multitudes, but I was never so impressed at once with his greatness and his simplicity as I was by an act of his on that occasion. Looking around the gathering he asked: "Do you remember the little verse in which we gave thanks at our last picnic?" Many children and some of the grown folks responded in the affirmative. It was one of the prettiest sights imaginable when, with bowed heads, the men, women and children joined with this big, powerful man in repeating the simple words:

> God is great and God is good,
> And we thank Him for this food.
> By His hand must all be fed,
> Give us, Lord, our daily bread.

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