

The Magic in Children's Books

By FRANCES HODGSON BURNETT

THESE has remained with me throughout my life a certain haunting memory of my childhood. It is the memory of a ceaseless because always unassuaged longing for "something to read." That was the way in which I expressed it. I can remember wandering about the house on long, rainy days, like a little ghost sighing desolately under my breath if I just had something to read; and the word "just" was a sort of a small wail which nobody really heard. I lived in a place much given to long, rainy days—in Manchester, Lancashire, England, and I used to think that Manchester's rainy days must be longer and drearier than any others in the large world. Nothing is more certain than that I should not have thought so if I had "just had something to read." A book which one could have sat down on the hearth rug before the nursery fire would have shortened the hours and shut out consciousness of leaden skies and ceaseless drizzling of sweeping rains. But where was such a source of incredible joy and comfort to be found? With one's modern knowledge of the endless flow of books for children of all types and characteristics, such days seem as remote as the paleolithic age. If one did not personally remember them, one would not quite believe that there was a period when books—as apart from school books—were absolutely disregarded as a necessary factor in the existence of young human beings. During that period the mind of a child was seemingly innocently ranked slightly above the mind of a turnip. Acridly or sentimentally moral or pious tales and unconvincing adventures were in rare cases bestowed, at long intervals as prizes or birthday presents, to be covered with paper, read and reread and occasionally "lent" as an enormous favor. The bindings and illustrations of such volumes were crudely gruesome things. Those of us who

by chance still possess odd copies of such relics humorously guard them as treasures to laugh over almost to tears as we turn their pages in actual wonder. When they were published no one owned "books" in the generous sense known by the child of today. And supposedly anything was good enough for a child. Apparently it was believed that he or she began life unbiased by even rudimentary perceptiveness and taste. Intelligent powers to appreciate must have been supposed to spring forth from untilled and even unseeded soil during the years between 15 and 20, if they ever sprang forth at all.

But the magician Time at last waved his wand and today the smallest creature who can turn a page sees before its awakening eyes beauty of line and color, and the grace of fanciful images. Now nothing is too good for a child—even a baby. Unconscious training begins with Mother Goose charmingly illustrated, even set to pretty music. To spend even one's first years accepting beauty as a natural part of existence must without doubt be a preparation more desirably stimulating to developing mentality than to find one's self hungrily staring at ugliness of color and grotesque form. The "fairy book" most beloved of my child soul almost broke my heart by the unsatisfyingness of its fairies. "That is nothing like a fairy," I used to complain. Children really know what fairies "look like" and even the illustrators of today should move delicately and beware.

It is an arresting, almost an appalling, thought that a child knows only what it is taught by us, by what we say and look, by the books and pictures we put into their hands. It is a newcomer in our unknown land. It has never been here before. Let us not confront it with reasons for not asking to remain. Its subconsciousness may recall a place that was more alluring. A stimulating thought is that now it has books—

books—books. They are given to it as bread is given, it is warmed by them as it is warmed by the nursery fire. Their morality is sane and unthreatening, they allure attention and are generally beautiful to look at, and they are often exquisitely illustrated even when their pictures illuminate mere laughable nursery rhymes. To the growing child they frequently present facts—material and ethical—in a form which fixes itself in the impressionable mind, not because they have been laboriously learned, not, indeed, because they have not been learned at all, but have been remembered because they were part of some beguiling story or clever picture, of fanciful musical verse. There are ten chances to one—a hundred to one—that if they had been committed to memory as the result of not too enthusiastic effort at school they would have faded away, even have been thrust away as things it was rather relieving to forget. The amount of valuable information which children unconsciously absorb from their books, become joyfully familiar with, chatter with each other about, is woven into a rich background for developing years.

When I first began to watch the rising tide of attention attracted to literature for children I told myself and others that in days to come those who did the great work of the world would begin to do it early in life when they were young, and it would be because they had begun to live, to see, to be stimulated to intellectual activity in those years during which their forebears had literally been expected to remain mentally almost utterly quiescent. One is beginning to see the prophecy fulfilled.

For the sake of the child who wandered a small desolate ghost through the Manchester house on the long and dreary days of rain, I have myself given to my children and to their and to others—books—books—books—and again—books.