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## READING AND COGNATE ART.

It has been said that mankind is happiest where people do not read. This may be true of human beings as animals; but one is likely to think it a kind of happiness that you and I should not enjoy; like the happiness suggested in the adage, "Where ignorance is bliss, it is folly to be wise."

Nevertheless, that a people can maintain a high state of civilization and yet not be readers, has been demonstrated time and again in history. This was true in most of the ancient civilizations and is the case today in many parts of India, Persia and Arabia.

The absence of a printed literature tends directly to enhance the powers of memory; and the office of poet, and historian, becomes hereditary. The amount of tradition and folklore that one mind can retain and transmit is something incredible. It is said that professional story-tellers of India are able thus to relate word for word, over twenty folio volumes.

The fact is, we have probably overestimated the value of reading, at least in so far as we trust to books what ought, once for all, to be fixed in our minds. In the days of Charlemagne, reading and writing were held in a kind of contempt, as fit only for clerks and priests. The soldier, the man of affairs, and the gentleman, were quite above being contaminated with them. It is curious to read that even in that early day, the reason urged against these arts was that they destroyed the memory.

Reading is usually counted the bar or chief distinction between the educated and the uneducated. It need not be so, however. A lady of my acquaintance in Brookline, wealthy and highly cultured, has persistently refused to learn to read for the reason above named, that it destroys the memory. She maintains, moreover, that a delicate spiritual something which she feels in listening to conversation and to vocal reading, would depart from her were she to come face to face with the printed page. Accordingly she hires a trained elocutionist to read to her two hours a day.

The Catholic church is dependent almost for its existence upon the powers of memory. So highly valued were the personal experiences of the early saints who were contemporaries of Jesus, and the oral traditions handed down from them, that little attention was paid for two hundred years to manuscripts. And the Catholic church does not hesitate to let these traditions take precedence over the written record whenever there is a conflict.

The first books of every people are held sacred. They come to us from a time when the very marks that go to make up the alphabet are looked upon with awe and dread. Every letter was held to be significant of some occult idea, and as a matter of fact, they figured largely, in different colored inks, in the incantations of magi-

clans, astrologers, and sooth sayers. A, for instance, was supposed to symbolize the harrow; B, an ox-yoke with which God plowed up the world; R, a dog, from its resemblance to a snarl; T, a bird, and so for all the sounds.

From the beginning of time, or at least since we have had any record of teaching, learning the alphabet has been counted a prodigious task; and men have cudgeled their brains in the attempt to work out some smooth way up this rugged hill of knowledge. These attempts are very amusing, indeed, to modern teachers, who know that a child picks up his a-b-c's without apparently knowing how or when, after he has already learned to read. Old educators made mountains of the work; hence, naturally enough, they had mountains to climb.

Basedow made ginger-cake letters which a child was permitted to have when he could name them. No doubt this was a happy device to teach the distinction between letters—especially such letters as I and M. Pestalozzi, though rightly called the father of modern education, followed an alphabet system which involved unnecessary mouth consciousness. Children were kept at exercises of articulation and pronunciation which had practically little or no relation to fixing the letters in memory.

Other educators carried this idea to such an extent that systems were invented at length involving the learning of 400 different sounds and acrobatic sound-combinations. No wonder children dawdled along for months on the alphabet. These same systems would prove a year's hard work for many teachers of today.

Such is the fungus tendency of ideas, when left to grow in cloisters, cellars or elsewhere away from the breath and sunlight of nature.

After the ability to read was somehow acquired, spelling came in for several years of torture and agony. How long it would have taken Germany to outgrow these laborious artificialities by natural evolution, will never be known; for in 1872 they were summarily forbidden by law. Since then, one large city—Wittenberg—has ordained that but one year shall be spent in learning to read and write. That is, after one year, reading and writing must cease to draw attention on their own account, and fall naturally into place as mere tools for the acquirement and expression of knowledge.

That learning the alphabet consumed months of unnecessary time was demonstrated by the wife of John Wesley, who taught her boys their letters in one day; taught them so thoroughly, too, that they never forgot them. At the present time the old saying, "You can't read till you know your letters," has been proven worthless as an argument for antecedent impossibilities. But even now there are primers, gift-books, children's handkerchiefs, plates, napkins and other articles, with the letters

printed upon them and arranged in mnemonic verse; the theory still holding that learning the alphabet is the great mountain or Sahara desert of childhood.

All this represents the mud tide-marks of cram methods. The pedagogic stream is somewhat clear today—in places; but there is still much of the purely individual or personal in the current of teaching methods, and every little while, down some obscure hollow, comes a turbid contribution from some enthusiast or other whose methods and devices while suited admirably to his own personality, serve only to bennuddle those who would imitate him.

Let us not, however, go to the other extreme and pay no attention to methods. A wide repertoire of methods and devices will always make the teacher of tact and resource. The mistake is made when we fail to discern the living principle beneath the methods. It is as if David had attempted to fight in the war accoutrements of Saul.

Germane to the subject of reading is the question of script and print. As respects script, the vertical has the advantage over the slant, in that it saves fully one tenth the energy in the reading, and is written without the danger of curvature to the spine, which is ever present with the slant. Two photographs, one of a class in slant writing, the other of a class in vertical, both taken without the knowledge of the students—prove this fact most conclusively.

As respects print, we have still something to learn. Take a page of our best type, and you will find that the energy necessary to recognize individual letters is by no means uniform. Some forms can be read at twice or even thrice the distance of others. Prof. Harris has in consequence of this fact, started a movement for the reform of typography. He believes in compensating obscurity of body by increase in shade.

The German type is very difficult and draws so much upon the mental energy, that it is fast being superseded by the Roman—a reform which will be welcomed in scientific circles.

But with the best type and the most kindly intentions of printers, things occur that draw disastrously upon the nervous energy. Here is a case in point:

A noted general had been toasted in a certain banquet as a battle-scarred hero. He naturally protested against such an imputation. The editor was profuse in his apology, and promised to set the matter right. Judge of the general's indignation when he read next day that he had been toasted as a bottle-scarred hero!

[This story gives me, as the humble reporter of these lectures, an opportunity to protest against the many, many typographical and other errors that somehow have crept into the publication of them. When the series is