GIVING THE YOUNG PERSON A BOOK

By Louise Hunting Seaman

ONE day, in the pages of THE BOOKMAN, I met the Peepshow Man. He lived in Ireland, before that land knew a victrola or a moving picture. Many a child first heard of Napoleon while taking a penny peep into the black box on his back, where he might *see* Napoleon crossing the Alps. One boy would wait hours by his gate for this man, and after his peep would listen to more tales, while the man rested in the shade. The boy was Padraic Colum, and some of the tales are now put up into a little blue book, with the Peepshow Man walking through its pages. This new book bears the man's name, but he lives in the spirit of all of Mr. Colum's work besides. And how much does that man live in the love of learning, romance, language, of that great story teller. Boys and girls of today are lucky in that meeting. But they are not all quite so lucky as the small boy himself. For he was led to books through enthusiasm; his curiosity as to old tales and old ways, his sense of wonder in the world about, were fired by a human touch. He tells tales himself, Mr. Colum, to a few lucky children. From him and the story tellers and teachers who may have his communicable sense of magic, children must turn to books with a new eagerness.

But after all, a book is, to a very young person, an alien thing. There it lies, flat and inanimate, full of type much less easy to the eye than the wind in the trees; with pictures so much smaller and less vivid than the bright street. Probably it speaks a language rather different from that of the people near by. And certainly it is much less pleasant to handle than the puppy, or a ball, or a haymow. Some people say that all these sights and feelings are truly more important than books, and that children should not read nor be confined with books in schoolrooms until they are, say, ten or eleven years old.

Let us hope that such children have story tellers about who are scholars and poets and scientists as well. Then they are safe. But what of their spirits if they have no interpreters, no remarkable new words to fit this happening, no new play idea to shape that escapade? There are so many paths for the mind, so many kinds of expression for the body that the mind alone can find first, so many ways of individual happiness opened through chance doors of the imagination — oh, well, to put it boldly, you'd think that most parents would suspect they alone must be a bit dull for such bright spirits as children.

The interesting parents (aunts, uncles, grandfathers, etc.) are the ones who do suspect it, want their youngsters to be different, and don't know how to go about it. They pore over book lists, attend lectures, buy large piles of books for Christmas and birthdays, even take their children into the comparative bewilderment of a bookshop. The wise children resist, luckily; probably they come to "hate

books", grow up healthily, and perhaps at college or at a play or while talking to some stirring person meet the magic years later. It is quite possible for children to go through several schools, travel to many interesting places, meet many friends, and never happen on someone to unlock the magic door.

But I have a Sesame for the parents who are clear eyed enough to know their own need of it. It's not so far from Ali Baba, either, in feeling. It is this: Make a ceremony.

Suppose that you are too busy, too much apart from your child for him to see you absorbed in books for hours, or for you to share stories and books with him for hours. Suppose that books are not a real part of your own life and thinking (but then you wouldn't be reading THE BOOKMAN — never mind, I'll tell it to you, you may pass it on). In any case, you can make a ceremony. You can take an oath never again to give a book carelessly among a dozen other packages, or among half a dozen other books, but always alone by itself, and with a ceremony. Here are some of the obvious, easy ceremonies, recommended for self conscious people who aren't used to "play" and need outside assistance.

Watch for Shakespeare in the theatre or at the annual performances of your own or near by colleges. You may want to read the appropriate Lamb's Tale before the play, but certainly, before or after, have a copy of the Temple or Tudor or Cambridge edition around, easy to slip into the pocket, quick to turn to for capturing the phrase or point or character that is obvious in its effect, and that will lead into quick rereading, reacting, possession, of the whole. The play is great, be it Walter Hampden or the local Shakespeare Club, but the book that comes with it is the thing. A marionette show may lead a child to the rather grown up humor of "The Rose and the Ring" or "Don Quixote", with their priceless phrases. Incidentally, the marvelous "oaths" in such plays have helped many a clever parent past an attack of street slang and real swearing.

After a field day, or some athletic spectacle in a bowl or stadium, bring out a book like "Buried Cities", which includes a stirring story of the Greek games, with pictures of their stadiums both reconstructed and in ruins. When you see a nine year old poring over headlines and rotogravures of the Olympic games, that's the time for such a hero tale of Olympia as the one in "Buried Cities".

Historic pilgrimages are another obvious help — to the New Bedford Museum for "Moby Dick" and "Two Years Before the Mast", "Captain Nathaniel Brown Palmer", Masefield's "Salt Water Ballads", etc. To the Hall of Armor in the Metropolitan before Rackham's "King Arthur", Pyle's "King Arthur", Colum's "Island of the Mighty". (Who would object to the expense of such weekends as this demands? Only the father who knows that a school or tutor is doing it all for him.)

These suggestions may sound as obvious to most "good" parents as buying "The Boys' Own Book of Great Inventions" when the boy is building his first airplane model, and "Everyday Mysteries" when he first puts a new washer on the kitchen faucet. There certainly are harder jobs in this book-giving ceremony, and, because of their greater subtlety, more important ones. I can't make them up to order, so I'll tell you some ceremonies out of real life.

A mother decided that her five or

six year olds (a boy and a girl) knew too much about the makes of automobiles and bicycles, with too little color and poetry to balance. She told them the story of the Little Lame Prince, gave them each a "magic carpet" and a pair of "magic" spectacle rims. There was a certain hour each day when they were allowed to fly on the magic carpet, and, often enough, a new journey was provided in the shape of a new book. Her cleverness went almost beyond mortal hope, for she managed to suggest that the perfect way to get all the magic was to sit thus and so (approved relaxation after Dr. Mathias Alexander), to do this and that with your eyes — you see.

Have a father next. One who "used to love poetry" but "sort of forgot about it", and suddenly decided that wife and school were giving his children too much "here and now" and plain prose. He bought a fat anthology for reference and a thin one for carrying around, but he was "just plain embarrassed" when it came to reading from them and starting the game. So at last he wrote little notes and slipped them into the school coat pockets, saying something about a very special surprise, a package that held the things he liked best to have in his head, waiting for them when they came home from school. He'd be grateful for a secret conference, to find out whether his favorites were their favorites. At this conference they planned to learn some of the poems by heart as a surprise for mother — and after a few such surprises, "it worked".

It is not so hard to find a real English "penny dreadful" doll to come carrying a copy of "The Memoirs of a London Doll", or a real Italian puppet to bring the first "Pinocchio". But it might be hard to think of a way to "get into" Andersen or George MacDonald. Some youngsters seem troubled by the tragic sense in these writers; others are lazy about the prose style, if they have not been fed by good vigorous English with a definite personal style. Generally this kind of imaginative tale, very close to reality, and frequently close to satire or a bit overloaded with symbolism, is spoiled for children by being given them when they are too young. But "The Snow Queen" might be saved either for the hottest day of summer or for the evening of the first snowstorm, and presented to youngsters who are beginning to appreciate what friendship means, or may mean, how it has to be guarded from unhappiness. Older boys and girls who are ambitious to draw or write, enjoy the story of Andersen's life, his own cut out pictures. They can appreciate the tales technically, and retell them or act them in Andersen shadow pictures for the rest of the family.

As for Little Diamond, I suppose he may still be seen in London, but a ride in a New York hansom cab, a walk through some "converted" mews — no, nothing will do but to swallow any embarrassment and read it out loud. The human voice is a comfortable thing, and soon the vigor and poetry and plot of George MacDonald's masterpiece will carry you both away.

James Stephens demands reading aloud, too; but if one really can't, there's always the summer day when somebody has to eat his fill of berries — blueberries, blackberries, little wild strawberries — hot from the hillside. Then, in the cool at home, to be given the tale of that rare god who turned himself into the Carl of the Drab Coat and nearly lost Ireland to the Fianna because his love of blackberries held up the race with the invading champion

— this is one of the perfect conjunctions of inner and outer good.

To put the right book in the right place at the right moment is a matter of inspiration, based on sober knowledge. But the gleam of the eye, the sincere absorbedness, the obvious enthusiasm for an idea as opposed to a material thing — these are most contagious. The best excuse for devising ceremonies is that, in making them, no creature can avoid gathering contagion from the book, the idea, which is the centre of the stage. All the devices of mental hygiene, of psychoanalysis, cannot procure any greater good than enthusiasm for thought, a sense of the ecstasy of absorbed living in the great thought of another. How can this be given away?

I cannot give you the Metropolitan Tower;
I cannot give you heaven;
Nor the nine Visigoth crowns in the Cluny
Museum;
Nor happiness, even.
But I can give you a very small purse
Made out of field-mouse skin,
With a painted picture of the universe
And seven blue tears therein.

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