Spinach, Codliver Oil and Americanization

By Mary H. Anderson

"Nurse! Nurse! Come quick! Mister Flaherty has thrown his wife, Nora, and she's near dead!" Our excited visitor at the Infant Welfare Station in one of Chicago's worst slum districts was an Irish woman. The nurse who is the head of the station and has charge of the babies registered in that district and I, the nutritionist whose special interest is the pre-school child, questioned our volunteer. We discovered that Mister Flaherty was on one of his periodic sprees. His wife had not prepared the evening meal as rapidly as her lord desired and he had thrown a kettle of boiling potatoes at her, scalding her face, arms and neck. As we had the Flaherty children under our care, we went to investigate the situation. We climbed three filthy flights of stairs expecting at any moment an angry reception from Mister Flaherty. We rapped gingerly on a door that bore evidence of many a drunken combat. After a few minutes a child's voice said, "Who's it?"

"It's the infant welfare nurse," I said, giving the answer which had been our entree into many interesting experiences. There was a brief struggle with the lock, and then the door opened upon a scene of utter dilapidation. The room was filthy and reeked of stale food odors and unclean humanity. The floor was unswept, the table piled high with dirty dishes. On a cot in one dark corner lay the object of our visit. She half raised herself and in a rolling Irish brogue related her tale of woe. She and the children had spent the night huddled on the steps where they had been driven by the irate husband. The mother's face was swollen beyond recognition from the scalding water, and straggling strands of dark hair were matted into the flesh. Near her on the floor sat Mary, whose pail and deep circled eyes told a story of under-nourishment, irregular hours and over stimulation. She was disinterestedly eating oatmeal gruel from a tin pail. Patrick and John stood wide-eyed and frightened in one corner, fearing the imminent return of their father. Nora held blue-eyed baby Kathleen and tried to soothe the fretful cries of the neglected child.

A copy of Mona Lisa hung upon the cracked wall, looking down with that world-famous, inscrutable smile upon this tragic little scene. We soon left that hopeless home, promising a doctor and what help we could give, and continued on our morning calls.

The slums of Chicago hold the dregs of the nationalities. The better classes move on to more healthful districts as soon as possible. There crime, disease, high death rates of children, poverty and unhappiness flourish. Harvey W. Zorbaugh, in his book, "The Gold Coast and the Slum," defines the slum as an area which has reached the limit of decay and is on the verge of reorganization as missions, settlements, play parks and business come in. In this environment the Infant Welfare does its part to lower the incidence of disease and the too high death rate.

It is fascinating to walk the crowded streets and hear only the excited, high-pitched voices of the Italian, Greek or Sicilian, the lazy, drawling tones of the negro and the utterly unintelligible cries of banana peddler and vegetable dealer as they wheel their carts along. In the trash heap of the alley a little gamin plays with a tin pail and a stick, while a little girl barely eight years of age carries a baby much too heavy for her. These children learn responsibility at an early age. When there are sixteen children in a family, such as Mrs. Domino can boast, there is little chance of a child becoming pampered.

As I threaded my way thru groups of colored and Italian children, past fresh fish stands and into the heart of my district, a voice drew my attention. "Heah comes mah nuss! Heus comes mah nuss!" Sammy was an Infant Welfare child, who lived in a dark basement of a rear house. As we walked down the dark alley, Sammy clung to my hand and hopped along, telling about the ball he had found in the alley. On the porch of the basement house sat Sammy's mother, braiding four-year-old Mandy's hair into innumerable wire-like pigtails. She gave me a broad smile as she greeted me with, "Mornin', Nuss, how's your all? Rest you' hat. Get away, Sammy, don' be pesterin' around dat Nuss." To the slum population, anyone who is not a policeman, but who is in uniform, is a nurse. Mrs. Washington's easy manner and casual acceptance of life is a never ceasing wonder. Her husband is dying of tuberculosis and she is keeping seven children and two adults well satisfied on seven dollars a week which she receives from the charities. As I talked to her about Sammy's diet, his rest, and general well-being, she answered it all with, "Yes, Man, dat chile sho' do eat everything ah gives him."

My next call took me into an Arabian home. My knock was answered by an old man, the grandfather, who beckoned me in. My imagination can vision him roaming the desert, shiek of his tribe.

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Waiters, Not Dishes, Get the Breaks

In the line of institutional improvements, how is this? The waiter who, with his tray on his shoulder and his heart in his mouth, used to stare his way back and forth thru the swinging doors of the service pantry, no longer performs his little two-step when the door opens in his face. Let us present the automatic door opener! As the waiter approaches the door he interrupts a small beam of light, which gets instant results.

In the line of institutional Spinach and Americanization

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His eyes are dark and piercing, his beard is long and grey, and his carriage erect.

Soon the mother, late from Bagdad, came into the room. She had just come in from shopping and still wore a shawl over her head. Catherine, the three-year-old child, peeked at me from under the table.

She is beautiful, with serious black eyes and curly hair. She is a very sturdy child despite her very poor diet and large amounts of coffee. I tried to talk to Mrs. Awakian, but she understood no English. By using hands, feet, and heavy, formal gestures, I conveyed the idea that I would like to have her bring Catherine into conference. I left with little talk on diet, but with a great amount of bowing, shrugging of shoulders and gesturing of hands.

It was nearly eleven-thirty and Conference Day in the afternoon. Conference Day is a big event to Infant Welfare mothers and children. They come once a month to the Welfare station. The children are weighed, measured and examined by a physician. It is a social center where Greek, Italian, Irish, English, Scotch, Armenian, Russian, Mexican and Negroes meet with a common interest, their children. It is interesting to see little mahogany tinted Narcissa and sallow, ear-ringed Antoinette Sansome play happily together with a doll. It is, if you please, a melting pot where much may be done in Americanization while cod liver oil and spinach are being emphasized.

The Child Who Will Not Eat

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about this and that which disagrees with him? If we cannot have cheerfulness and geniality at the table, we cannot expect anything but poor food habits to develop.

Some parents coax and beg the child to eat. They make him feel that he must eat the spinach because he is Daddy’s big boy, or because the canary in the cage will sing a little louder. This kind of fussing discourages the interest in the food. Perhaps it would be well to respect a child’s opinions by letting him have at least one food he does not have to eat. Often his interest is centered on playing for adult attention. He enjoys seeing his parents irritated at his dawdling, and worried because he scares them into thinking he will starve. As a matter of fact, he will not starve if the situation is handled correctly. Allow him three regular meals with one light lunch of orange juice or tomato juice, or even a piece of apple in the morning, and a glass of milk in the middle of the afternoon, with absolutely no other between-meal offerings. He may not need the lunches. Psychologists say that it is quite safe to believe that no child who is mentally sound could ever hold out until starvation, if good food is placed in front of him. The portions served must be small at first, with an increase as his interest grows. One may often successfully serve the objectionable food first, promising the rest of the meal when this is finished.

Another method which often proves successful is that of holding back the dessert, and using it as a reward after the main dinner is all gone. It may also help to give half of the milk with the main dinner and the rest with the dessert. This is a good policy, because the child will not have a chance to fill up on milk before the other food is taken. It also gives him the satisfaction of another chance to pour from his pitcher.

Water can be eliminated from the meals entirely. It is the one thing which should come between meals. If a child fills up on water at a meal, where will he put milk and solid foods?

If children are worried, excited or extremely disappointed, they will not eat. In this case do not expect them to, because their bodies are not in a condition to digest food, anyway.

Children can be shown how to have a general interest in food by their own help in the preparation of it. In this case mother must take time to allow for pleasant associations in the kitchen or garden. If May or Bobbie themselves scrape the carrots, shell the peas or butcher the sandwiches, they are going to enjoy these foods more when they see them again on the table. One four-year-old girl who had learned to enjoy her food thru assistance in the preparation, was also concerned with the eating habits of the other members at the table. Often when she ate her dinner she would relate her experiences in the kitchen as she prepared the foods served, telling often how hard it was to fix this kind of vegetable or how long it took to spread all those sandwiches. This attitude was good for the rest of the children, too. They were proud that someone in their own little world knew something about food and its preparation.