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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Monday, April 4, 1938

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "EASTER EGG DYES." Facts from Federal Food and Drug Administration, Washington, D. C.

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On Easter Monday, two weeks from today -- around fifty thousand people will congregate on the White House lawn. Some of these people are parents, but most of them are children. For in Washington, D. C., Easter Monday belongs to the children, and the children belong on the White House lawn, where they roll brightly colored eggs down the green slopes -- and then roll after the eggs. It has been said that there is no celebration in the world like Easter Monday in Washington.

Now, quoting from our Washington letter, here's a practical note. Are the gaily painted purple and green and yellow and red and blue and pink Easter eggs safe for the children? Even if some of the dye is eaten, right along with the egg, when a tired Easter-egg-roller gets hungry?

The answer is "Yes." The artificial dyes used nowadays to color Easter eggs -- and other food products, for that matter -- are perfectly safe and wholesome.

Now quoting directly from today's report from the Federal Food and Drug Administration.

"Four years ago, just before Easter, Food and Drug officials undertook a brief campaign to remove from the market certain Easter egg dyes that contained poisonous ingredients. The colors were essentially in the class of house paints, containing such poisonous ingredients as cadmium sulphide, zinc sulphide, and barium sulphate, with small percentages of lead as a contaminating impurity.

"But that was four years ago. Nowadays most all the dyes on the market are harmless, manufactured from colors certified by the Department of Agriculture. Consumers may be sure that all food colors certified by the Department are both harmless and pure."

Well, that brings up an interesting question. Just what is a "certified" color? And may any color be certified? We shall find out.

Continuing: "The first use of artificial color in foods was not a strictly ethical one. Artificial color was used to cover up a change of shade, due to damage or adulteration, or to make a product appear better looking than Nature made it. For example, some of us remember the time when copper salts were used to give garden peas a green brilliance that far outshone the natural color of even the best garden peas. We remember when artificial color was used to disguise moldy catsup, and make it appear bright and clean. Mineral salts of all kinds were used freely, and brilliant compounds of lead, mercury, and copper found their way into food products.

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"The early artificial colors were first, mineral pigments, which are usually not satisfactory and are frequently poisonous, and second, vegetable colors, which are generally harmless but often unsatisfactory.

"When the Department of Agriculture took over the regulation of coal-tar dyes, more than 30 years ago, seven colors were selected -- seven colors which, according to the information then available, were considered harmless for use in foods. These seven colors offered a wide variety of shades and were thereafter known as permitted dyes. The permitted list now includes 15 different dyes.

"To assure the public of pure and wholesome colors, the Government issues lot numbers to all manufacturers who submit samples of each batch of dye for examination. That is lot numbers are issued if these batches of dye meet the very rigid legal requirements of purity. Such colors are known as Certified colors. The word, Certified, has become widely recognized as the Government's guarantee of purity and safety in coal-tar colors.

"Certification by the Food and Drug Administration implies not only that the dye itself is harmless, but that it is not contaminated by poisonous substances."

And what are the fifteen different coal-tar dyes on the Government's permitted list? Up to date, they include four shades of red, one shade of orange, five yellows, three greens, and two blues. By the way, I'm quoting this list of permitted dyes from a leaflet called "Certification of Coal-Tar Food Colors" -- a technical publication for manufacturers of food colors.

Here's another quotation that will interest consumers:

"The use of color of any kind to conceal damage or inferiority in a food product is defined by the Federal Food and Drug Administration as an adulteration, and, when damage or inferiority is concealed, the employment of artificial color is not permissible, even though certified colors are used and their presence is declared on the label. In general, where colors are legitimately used in food and beverages, the law requires a statement on the label of the presence of artificial color."

Well, that seems reassuring enough. And here are some figures that may interest you -- from the annual report of the Food and Drug Administration. Last year officials analyzed 1,540 batches of food colors, representing the output of 31 firms to see that these food colors complied with the requirements of the Pure Food law. During the year only 25 batches of dyes and mixtures were refused certification.

Quoting directly: "It is noteworthy that the total amount of straight dyes certified was 123,693 pounds greater than has ever been certified in any previous fiscal year . . . ."

As for Easter egg dyes, officials say that manufacturers are now fully aware of the requirements of the law, and they comply with the law. So -- here's for bigger and better and brighter-colored Easter eggs.

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