

## THE SPIRIT AND THE LETTER.

By R. A. PENNETHORNE.

ST. PAUL, who, in his missionary journeys knew men of many minds, cultures and civilizations, drew near to the attitude of the great modern South African thinker who has given us "Wholeism" when he wrote: "There are diversities of gifts—but the same spirit."

Now there is all the difference in the world between diversities and divergences. A dead uniformity can only be found in replicas of a statue—a living form changes with each fleeting expression, and yet remains the outward and visible sign of the same indwelling spirit.

We, who have now existed for thirty-five years and have found our work as applicable to the post-war world and even more needed there than it was in the far away 'eighties; we, whose work can now be found in every continent and every English speaking country, we need to confer together that we may be informed everywhere and always by the same spirit; a whole-hearted belief in each child as a person—while all the time we may in practice grow with the needs of our own days and the expansion of our children's potentialities.

Our movement was initiated to rescue the home schoolroom from the desultory, the petty and the inefficient—it was begun by Charlotte M. Mason in the days when any kind of trained teacher out of the Government's elementary school was a rarity. A great change was worked, and before the war the standard and position of the home teacher had greatly improved, largely owing to our founder's wise institutions for her students. Graduates, Froebel trained teachers and students of other colleges besides our own might be met doing the necessary though almost anonymous work of preparing boys and girls to take their places in the great schools of the country or directly in the world. The Great War, changing all social conditions, changed all this, and, let us confess it, greatly for the worse. With the great increase of openings for women's work more and more highly educated and trained women gave up teaching for other occupations.

[p 671]

Girls are trained nowadays as secretaries, as doctors, as lawyers, etc., but not as general teachers so much as specialists, who will undertake *one* subject in recognised schools.

Parents find that the teachers available to begin the first lessons in a child's own home become scarcer and more difficult to obtain, of a lower type intellectually, and more and more children are sent to little preparatory schools where they get companionship and quite often a trained teacher.

Those households which, keeping the children at home, follow our Parents' Union School correspondence scheme, have to remember their responsibility of upholding a high standard when *they* pass their children on to the schools. We hear magnificent accounts of the good places taken and the splendid work done by P.U.S. children when transferred into schools—a book of such records is kept at our office and can be consulted by anyone interested. But we sometimes hear other tales—we are told, in sweeping generalizations, that "P.U.S. children cannot spell," or "are weak in arithmetic," etc.

We have recently offered to home schoolrooms some measure of the help which we have long extended to affiliated schools—they too can ask for and obtain the visit of an "inspector," one of our trained teachers—and such visits have shown us the basis on which such charges are founded.

In Kent, Sussex and Wiltshire there are already appointed "visitors" available. When

P.U.S. children are given the books to handle *for themselves* which are marked for them on our programmes, they spell better than the average, because they see for themselves the printed word—but when to save the cost of the book the teacher reads everything aloud just *because* the words of a standard author are of a more literary type than those used in a school text book, the spelling is erratic because the word is heard and *not* seen.

It is *not* part of either the spirit or the letter of our work to encourage endless slipshod poorly written and poorly spelt work, however fluent; Charlotte Mason impressed upon us, her trained teachers, the value of the “habit of perfect execution”—giving a standard of performance. When children do rapid written narrations it is well to let them use rough paper and hear their best efforts read aloud afterwards, but *not* ever to see again some slip of the pen made in the heat of the moment which blurs—sometimes for ever—their vision of the *correct* form of the word.

[p 672]

Much could be said of interest to teachers about preparation of dictation and its correction in *another* book so that the original wrong form is not seen again by the pupil. These are indeed details of the letter, but they bear out the spirit of never confusing the child’s mind by letting its own error obscure its powers of visualization, or reception, or—like a clear photograph “negative”—the just impression of an idea.

Now for the standard of performance it has been for long in many schools customary to rely upon “marks” as a spur to incentive and a useful record for the teacher and a sop to the pride of parents. We in our nearly seven hundred P.U. Schools of divers types lay down a general principle, “Rely on the interest of putting forth effort and the child’s natural need of its spiritual food—knowledge.”

A child once trained on “marks” may clamour for them, just as some palates need mustard or Worcester sauce—but it is an acquired and a non-natural attitude. The desire to excel *is* natural, but to excel our own past efforts; so mighty is the power of association and of team work that it is equally possible to train for and by co-operation as it is to stimulate by competition, if parents would believe it and not ask for the results which show *their* child “finding its level”—i.e., being continually above someone else’s child.

The leaflet recently sent to our schools—“Leaflet U”—laid no command upon anyone, but it reminded those who work with us of the underlying principle of belief in a child’s natural love of, and reaching out towards, that wholeness and response to life which knowledge alone can give.

We hear so often on the wireless in those Sunday Evening Services which unite so many of different points of view that wonderful prayer asking that we may

“Toil and not seek for gain  
Labour and ask for no reward.”

We acknowledge the spirit on Sunday night, and on Monday morning the marks and places for the week are read out. The children are eagerly straining to hear whether the arithmetic with which father helped them has beaten Tommy—who struggled desperately alone! Marked “home work” too often ignores the spirit of fair play and teaches a low standard of honour. Marks are absolutely contrary to the spirit of all “narration” lessons—we are not

asking for “right” or “wrong” answers but for the workings of a soul—are we to  
[p 673]

quench the struggling of a spirit to the light because it does not yet show the natural power of another?

We ourselves give block marks for the termly examinations, as we are practical people and know that teachers and parents must have some guide, but we publish no list in order of merit. The first public Teachers’ Meeting which I attended at the Cape was to condemn the practice of publishing the name of the school against the name of the winning candidates—for that practice leads to terrible inter-school competition and hence to cramming with all its attendant evils.

But Charlotte Mason never meant to leave the home schoolroom without a definite *law*. Home schoolrooms must remember that they are part of a world-wide school and must keep its *rules* as given on Form H. The want of method and efficiency in some home schoolrooms is distressing. I am *not* alluding to any violent naughtiness or disorder, or suggesting any curtailment of liberty or originality, but to a vague “go as you please” and “is it worth while” attitude which persists through life in desultory and “why should I?” habits.

When we hear of problems of former P.U.S. pupils in the great schools we can often trace their past history back to work with some untrained person in such haphazard ways.

Our programmes by themselves are no substitute for the zeal, the energy, the devotion of a teaching mother or a selfless teacher—it is deplorable that uneducated girls who would often not be suitable material for training are employed in homes by members of our Union.

We are doing our utmost to help suitable people—teachers and mothers, and for mothers there is the Reading Course—to some untrained teachers, we give introductions to schools where they may see the standard of work obtained and expected from the pupils, or to home schoolrooms where they may see the true discipline of right habits of mind in teacher and taught.

There are many teachers who never had our training, and some who have had definite other training, and some who have had none at all beyond the reading of Charlotte Mason’s books, and occasional visits to centres of our work and conferences, who have magnificently caught the spirit embodied in that one sentence “The child is a person,” and who are carrying on the work of the Parents’ Union School scheme with energy and true success—all honour and credit to them. But there are others who do not seem to recognise any obligation in under-

[p 674]

taking a work which has a standard to uphold and a gospel to live, and for which they can obtain help and information for the asking.

It is only the nucleus of general culture which is binding upon all our members—the wide history of the world and its contemporary literature, the general appreciation of great art and the general knowledge of the facts of outdoor nature in their own local surroundings. Beyond that in languages and mathematics the needs of the individual child must be considered: often the programmes will give the essential help, set a reasonable standard and keep the balance between the subjects and so keep the development of the child regular and equitable. But it is the *child* who must be considered in all subjects where continuity is essential, and the programmes must not be considered as hindrances and difficulties to individual help and progress. No child must miss essential facts in arithmetic or Latin grammar.

We are not a body which penalises divergences when they are manifestly for the well-being of the child and are not simply dictated by the vagaries or specialisations of some teacher who has never grasped the underlying spirit of the whole.

Truly that one sentence, "The child is a person," is not merely a text for many a sermon but a basis for the daily life of teaching and training in home, in schoolroom and in school.