

HOW WE TEACH LITERATURE.

BY DAPHNE CHAPLIN.

It was said by Solomon, the wise King, "Much study is a weariness to the flesh." This at all events is not true of the literary studies of the children of the Parents' Union School. Upon reviewing our programmes for all the Classes, from Ia. to Class IV., I am struck with the continuity of the work. There is no period when the children say (to themselves), "If this is literature, I've had enough": a sentiment I have often heard from harassed students of the Clarendon Press.

In Class Ia., we dignify the lesson by the name of Tales, and always we look upon literature as the tale of the world's wealth of ideas, whether it be of persons or things, of the concrete or the abstract.

Since this paper is primarily on "How we Teach Literature in the Parents' Union School," let me say at once that we don't teach it at all, in the sense of pushing the Class through a passage or an author; but it would be more correct to say we *read with* the children, bringing our riper intelligence and experience to help theirs, and above all, our enthusiasm. It is enthusiasm for reading that we want to encourage. Of all subjects, literature is the widest, and if we can get children to enjoy reading, to appreciate good style, to discriminate between various treatments of a subject, they will not, in later life, be tied to one form of reading, even to one type of novel.

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Let me briefly sketch the work laid down for our Classes in the Parents' Union School:—
Classes Ia. and Ib.—Tales and narration by the children.

Class II.—Shakespeare read aloud; Scot, Plutarch, and more exact narration, or written reports of a part of what has been read.

Class III.—Short History of English Literature, Wider Reading, Composition.

Class IV.—No text book, but still wider range, embracing Letters, Memoirs, Autobiographies, Books of Travel, etc. Précis and attempts to write in a given style.

With your permission, I will try to explain these points somewhat more fully. The general aim of our literature lessons is that the children shall become familiar with the best, so that they shall have "no use" for the inferior writings that abound.

Their taste is to be formed from the first; therefore, it isn't *any* story that will do, even at six years old. We use such books as *Tanglewood Tales*, *Tales of Troy and Greece*, *Heroes of Asgard*, and we heartily discourage the badly-written self-centred chatter about Susie at the seaside, and all the vapid or frightening things that happened to her there. Of course, I do not mean that by thoughtless censure we are to separate ourselves from the children's natural preferences, but by making them know the best, we believe, and experience proves this to be so. the [sic] second best and trival [sic] becomes distasteful to them.

After once hearing a story or part of one, the children in Classes Ia. and Ib. attempt to narrate what they have heard, in turn, so that the whole passage is thus re-told, and even now it is not too soon to require them to speak well, and to make their story intelligible and pleasant to hear. One need seldom trouble to insist upon accuracy; that is a virtue commoner to children than to older people.

In my own experience I have found that when narrating some children unconsciously

adopt the style of the original, and very few can get through a passage without using some of the exact phrases. We obviate the possibility of slavish imitations of one style by giving many books of different authors.

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In Class II., the children range from nine to twelve years old, and their literature lessons are re-animated for them by the interest and pleasure of reading aloud. Thus, even when so young, they come to know and enjoy Shakespeare; there are not many people who do both. Each term they read a play, attending only to the swing and beauty of the lines, the simpler points of characterization. I found the other day a child whose sympathies were all with Cæsar, and who thought Brutus did very wrong. I wonder how often the teacher forces her view on the child; the grown-up view, lacking the simplicity of the child's. It is one of Miss Mason's strongest tenets that the teacher must let the book speak for itself. She therefore deprecates any but the best books, and abridged editions are never used.

And now they begin to form the habit of *good* reading aloud. I wonder why it is thought so slight a disgrace to read aloud badly. Indeed, some account it a virtue, assuming it to be only the vain and egotistical, or the eccentric, who can forget themselves in favour of what they are saying. It is true that some children seem born with an intuition for words. One of my pupils who cannot even read fluently, will yet manage to be interesting, and in a miraculous way will emphasize the right word and adopt the right inflexions, however haltingly she may stumble through the sentence.

But, I am sure we are meant to be masters of our tongues and of our language, and everyone with practice and the desire to do so, might be able to read aloud intelligently and pleasantly, according as they understand and enjoy what they read.

Miss Mason, in the programme, details books for home reading, because she considers that what we read is largely a matter of habit. Surely the Magazine habit is acquired by those children who, apart from games and lessons, have "nothing to do." It is very important that just then they shall be offered a book worth reading. I think, that Magazine stories are the last refuge of the lazy-minded.

Children have so much time, and their minds are so receptive, that it is now that they must form a habit of reading intelligently, I might almost say, strenuously. Now, also, their memories are most retentive, and does it not seem a thousand pities to store them with trash when there is so much that is worth remembering.

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I consider we cannot too strongly fight against the habit of desultory reading.

Now we have accounted for the literary training of children between the ages of six and twelve.

To what does it amount?

The power of listening; the power of discriminating; the power of narrating; the power of reading aloud with spirit and understanding, and the power to grapple with a real book, the message of someone with something urgent to tell you. That is what a book should mean to a child, and so it will if we give him such books, of which there are many hundreds, if we would take the trouble to put them in his way.

For Class III., we carry on the interest by allowing the children to cover a wider field; they read the literature of their historical period, getting into personal touch with as many

authors as possible, an intimacy enhanced [sic] by their knowledge of the events and manners of the time.

They also learn poetry by heart, which indeed they have always done, even scenes from plays, and more important than all, they write themselves. This sounds very alarming, but, in effect, what is it? Merely a way of making the children take a greater interest in the efforts of other people. That to my mind is its value, and a very real one. After all, what is Literature? It is written thoughts, so well expressed and such eternal thought that it has stood the test of time. Let the child understand this and you will have touched the personal note without which he will never be a literary person. This has been lately realized in the teaching of music. Children learning on the Yorke-Trotter, Curwen, Spencer and similar methods begin very soon to write little tunes, using certain chords, certain keys, etc., not, I imagine, believing such tunes to be valuable in themselves, but so that they may understand the lines upon which our great composers have worked and may the better appreciate their great results. And, I think, this is why Miss Mason likes the child to compose.

But he is not to write out of himself—that would suppose genius—“Nothing can come of nothing.” He is to compose on a given subject and in a given style perhaps, and remember this is the result of those six years of habitual narration. I think it was Robert Louis Stevenson who, even knowing he

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could write *well*, would still spend *hours* practising himself in the style of one of his literary heroes.

This practice then need not be considered a waste of time for those children who have no genius; and the sympathy for literature that it will probably create will do more to sharpen the literary appetite than any amount of suggestion. It is certainly our duty to fit ourselves to appreciate genius, and we do not need any Heaven-sent gift to enable us to do so.

In Class IV., we are near the end of our task, which was to send the child from school with a lasting interest in books, a critical faculty well developed, an appreciation of the matter and manner of a book and an absolute distaste for anything unworthy or inferior.

In Class IV., we are dealing with girls of fifteen to eighteen, who already have a wide range of literary knowledge. We pursue the same methods, we increase the range. Instead of a text-book on English Literature, they read more extensively from the authors chosen; they compare and criticize, where before the intention has been more to appreciate. Both in Classes III. and IV., there will be occasions for a lesson from the teacher upon perhaps an author or a book new to the Class. In those lessons the teacher will have her opportunity in giving the girls a wide human point of view that yet concedes nothing to the low moral tone that may have to be reckoned with.

With regard to novel reading, Miss Mason thinks it most useful for supplying experience to the inexperienced, and upon this point let me read you two paragraphs from *Ourselves*, that deal with it.

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In conclusion, I will just add a sample of the work achieved by this method of teaching. I will give you first, the book set; second, the question asked; third, the answer given, dealing with each class.