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THREE EDUCATIONAL IDYLLS.

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WE are waking up to the artistic delight and beauty of Education, and begin to see it as it is, a fine art, and the most delicate and remunerative of the arts. Within the last year, we have had three educational idylls displayed to us, and people have been arrested by each in turn because life offers nothing more exquisite for our observation than a child who is expanding duly under the process to which we give the clumsy name of *education*.

First, Mr. Holmes introduced us to "Egeria" and her school of young peasants in Sussex. Now, labourers in Sussex are not conspicuous for their intelligence, and to find their children capable of writing and acting scenes from the Waverley Novels, for example, of finding for themselves by research in their school library the appropriate dresses for given periods and personages must have made the lady we know as Egeria feel "like some watcher of the skies When a new planet swims into his ken."

No wonder the mistake arose of supposing that she had found out the right medium, or method, of education; children must be fed upon jam, she would say; and she taught the multiplication table and the facts of geography by the "dramatic method!" Now, jam is enticing, but it is upon bread and butter and beef that children make muscle, and "dramatic" teaching, charming on occasions, is not to be depended upon for solid results. Egeria's discovery was something of far more importance than a mere method of instruction; she, as well as some others, has discovered the infinite educability of any child; and, that knowledge is the mind-stuff on which children develop, the human knowledge known as Letters.

Whoever interprets this experiment as a sanction for a "dramatic method" of teaching, misses its meaning and is

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too likely to produce fantastic ignorance rather than knowledge; but what good cheer this message from the hills brings to those who can read it, how good to know that the minds of children are exceedingly accessible to knowledge!

Another equally impressive and picturesque idyll reaches us from Italy. We all know the story: Dottorressa Maria Montessori had her attention called to the subject of education some years ago when she was assistant doctor at the Psychiatric Clinic of the University of Rome; there she became interested in idiot and feeble-minded children, and by degrees worked out a system of education for these somewhat on the lines of Seguin whose remarkable work in America opened the way to the education of defective children.

By degrees, it occurred to the Signora that the methods which answered with defectives should be successful with normal children; and, seven years ago, she was empowered to organize an infant school in the model tenements of the Roman Association for Good Building, in San Lorenzo, in fact, a bad slum quarter of Rome.

Here we get the idyll that I have spoken of; a gracious Madonna with the children of the very poor gathered about her in the heart of their own home quarter, raised to her level through her gentleness and wisdom, and in their turn, raising their families, for gentleness is very catching. The method is intended for children of from three to six, but she hopes to carry it further and to introduce it into schools for children of all ages.

The children are delightfully good, and very independent, for one of Dr. Montessori's sound principles is that the teacher must take a back place. What is to be done the children do, under the minimum of instruction. But already we discern the little rift within the lute, for the teacher is to be engaged in observing while the children work, the system being a system of *scientific pedagogy*. I shall speak of this matter more in detail later.

The occupations or lessons of the children consist largely in buttoning and unbuttoning, lacing and unlacing, tying and untying, upon frames designed to assist them in the art of fastening their own clothes. There is too, a great deal of work in what used to be called "form" and "colour," for the matching of colours and forms has long been familiar in kindergarten

schools. But Dr. Montessori has invented a new way of handling geometric forms which would appear to have surprising results. In a word the children seem to learn to read and write by touch without ever having had a lesson,—that is, a direct lesson; a child surprises and delights himself by being able to write sentences and even a letter on the blackboard, in a quite clear hand-writing and with correct spelling. This really is the bait that catches the gudgeon. Everybody knows that it is a labour for a child to learn to read and write; some children learn nobody knows how, and can do both quite well before they are five years old; but, usually, children do not read and write until they are eight. No wonder that India, China, Mexico, Korea, Switzerland, the United States, are about to establish schools to be taught upon this magical system. Nor is England behind. We in England have our Montessori society, and are sending ladies to Rome to be qualified as teachers. Eureka, we are inclined to cry—"Education" is discovered at last!

But while we cherish generous appreciation of this lady with the lamp, and of the excellence of her work, it behoves us to look closely into a discovery which may prove disastrous to mankind in proportion as it is attractive. How is this amazing feat of reading and writing accomplished? Simply by touch. The children pass their fore-finger round the contours of various geometric forms, and, later, round those of letters, continually, we gather, round a single form or letter; for how many minutes at a time we are not told, later, they perform these motions with little sticks, and then, presto, they can write!

It is astonishing that so simple a process should issue in such considerable results. But is it possible that, after all, the children pay too dear for the whistle? I suppose we could answer this question best by spending some time daily in tracing rather minute forms with the two first fingers; I think we should find the exercise dead dull, until, presently, it became curiously soothing; that is, until a certain hypnotic effect set in. I think the silences, the sudden hush, the tiptoe movements, the *dottor*essa's commanding personality, are likely to have this same hypnotic effect; and the pictured children in "The Montessori Method" appear to be rather wanting in vivacity. They are very gentle and graceful, but have something of the aloof look proper to persons under

undue influence; and this is especially remarkable in the American children shown in an interesting American appreciation of the method. Now any approach to the hypnotic state implies brain-exhaustion, and children whose lessons are conducted, even partially, under this influence will doubtless have to pay their arrears in adult life; they may possibly become the parents of defective children.

I think, too, that the excessive cultivation of the senses is not without its risks. The child who can arrange in due order the shades of colour exhibited in sixty-four silk "tablets" is exhausting in infancy one of the increasing pleasures of life, and is likely to suffer from an undue and purely mechanical strain upon his attention. Is it safe either to train little fingers too early in continuous buttoning, hooking, tying? In every nursery and every home the little one is proudly but casually initiated in these mysteries; this is Nature's way—and I believe it to be the best. For the muscles as we know are controlled by nerves, and the nervous strain of performing a difficult mechanical act under a sort of moral compulsion is likely to tell in later school-days and to increase the number of neurotic, "jumpy" children.

There are curious gaps in the "Montessori Method." We hear of no "Hi-diddle-diddle" songs, no holy hymns, no Bible tales, no fairy tales, no tales of beasts, no tales of heroes, never a tale at all in fact, and we wonder why. But we must not forget that this new system is one of *scientific* pedagogy and all these things are out of the domain of science. Love creeps in unawares, but that is because Dr. Montessori is better than her method, and we have the vision of the gracious lady with the little ones clinging to her skirts. It is in fact the human element, hardly recognized by the founder herself, which saves the situation. The dottoressa is quite consistent. Scientific pedagogy is what she proposes to herself, and having a logical mind she perceives that science can deal only with things seen, things demonstrable, to be touched, tasted, handled. So while her own humanity sheds grace and courtesy over the little school the actual teaching of the children appears to be confined to the sort of mechanical exercises I have indicated. Influence does the rest, the influence of mind and heart escaping from a great soul. Nevertheless, I think the children are

defrauded; the intention is to develop the "whole" nature of the child, but the hungry mind is left out of consideration.

We see a great deal with which we are familiar in the Froebel teaching, but the Head declines Froebel games and occupations as being rather frivolous and leading to nothing; again, we see the influence of Rousseau in a system which is occupied with things, not words; but Dr. Montessori's real parentage must be sought in our own eighteenth century school of Educationalists; just so would Maria Edgeworth have conducted a little school; just so curiously serious and responsible would she have made the little people in her charge. Visitors to the *Casa* pronounce that the children are "little men," that they are as "judges seated in deliberation." Just so would Maria Edgeworth have had children appear and behave; and she also, being a woman of powerful nature, would have succeeded in producing little people of admirable behaviour without effort.

"The problem of religious education, the importance of which we do not fully realize, should also be solved by positive pedagogy. If religion is born with civilization, its roots must lie deep in human nature. We have had most beautiful proof of an instinctive love of knowledge in the child, who has too often been misjudged in that he has been considered addicted to meaningless play, and games void of thought. The child who left the game in his eagerness for knowledge, has revealed himself as a true son of that humanity which has been throughout centuries the creator of scientific and civil progress. We have belittled the son of man by giving him foolish and degrading toys, a world of idleness where he is suffocated by a badly conceived discipline. Now in his liberty, the child should show us, as well, whether man is by nature a religious creature."

I quote this passage to show that Dr. Montessori does not ignore the question of the religious teaching of children—but rather postpones it in the hope that scientific pedagogy may in time furnish suggestions as to matter and method!

The third idyll I have in view is more difficult to speak of because it is more personal. This, too, had a romantic setting to which it was greatly indebted, but in any setting I think the children would have been lovely. I refer to the meeting of the Parents' Union School at Winchester, in the past summer. They came in twos and threes from Ireland, from Scotland,

from the far counties of England as well as from the Home Counties. Contingents came from schools which are doing the same work. They ranged in age from six to eighteen, and they had never met, though for years, perhaps, they had been doing the same work in their several homes and schools, according to age and class. The children took Winchester by storm. They did not swarm over the fine Guildhall, because so splendidly was the whole thing organized (by the Hon. Mrs. Franklin and Miss Parish, especially), that each child was presented with a card showing him in which room he was to be, at what hour on each of the four days. Now, the children are in the habit of reading and following instructions, a habit learned in carrying out the schemes of work and the examination papers which reach them every term. These school-fellows had never met in numbers before, but *l'esprit de corps* required no cultivation, it was there; every child found his or her own class in the appointed place, and set to work at the usual lessons under a strange teacher with great simplicity and earnestness. They sang together, because they had all learned the same songs at home, and the same hymns, which the Dean benevolently allowed them to sing in the Cathedral where he gave them a delightful address. A newspaper reporter records how he heard one little fellow say, "I'll show you the way, we've made a plan, you know!"

The children were quite independent and quite docile and gentle; a member of the medical profession remarked on their freedom from such neurotic symptoms as fidgetiness, inattention, gazing about, restlessness, excitement. There was no display; the children had met because the school had, so to speak, come of age, and it seemed to be an occasion for as many to meet as should find it convenient to do so. Some two hundred and fifty appeared, and their mothers and governesses who accompanied them made up a company of six hundred. The children moved among this large gathering of people with perfect simplicity and sweetness, exhibiting charming manners (perhaps because, as the newspapers remarked; they belonged to the upper, and upper middle classes, but I think that was not the only reason). No attempt was made to amuse them and no opportunity was given for display; even in the great Historical Pageant of the Ages, as these are connected with Winchester, no one was

remarkable because everyone was remarkable. There was practically no discipline—because every child knew what was to be done and did it. This, too, was an educational idyll, which, although I had not the happiness to see it, I was able to realize from many pages of description.

Now what was the real meaning of this little episode, and, if the children were exceptional, why were they so? I think because they are being educated in a school where certain very definite principles are being carried out. As in Dr. Montessori's Casa, the teachers keep themselves in the background. The business of every day is not for the teachers to teach, but for the children to learn; when the children are at work, she works too; if they are painting a given object, she paints it, giving no more than the little friendly monitions called for when they go wrong. The secret of it all is that the children are intensely interested in knowledge, in a pretty wide range of knowledge; and that they get this knowledge out of books, not often books specially prepared for children. No effort is necessary to keep their attention by means of pleasing lessons; they attend for two reasons; first, because they care to know, and secondly, because they must know, the lesson in hand. It is not often necessary to enforce this "must"; it is in the air; there is the given work to be done in the given time, with the examination ahead at the end of the term. There are no prizes or place takings in the school; no honours lists, no marks to be gained or lost—for the children take pleasure in the work and in the examination to follow; for this no revision of passages out of the considerable number of books used in the term is usual. The teacher ascertains that they know each lesson or chapter, and it remains with them. They answer questions on the term's reading with much fluency and accuracy. I need not say more about this Winchester gathering because it is possible that the readers of the *Parents' Review* are a little tired of the subject; at any rate it is fresh in our memories. What I should like to urge, though I do so with diffidence, is, that a great deal lies behind what was carried through with so much simplicity and naturalness.

Professor Holmes, of Harvard University, in his introduction to what in the English edition is called "The Montessori Method" says, "It is wholly within the bounds of safe judgment to call Dr. Montessori's work remarkable, novel, and important.

It is remarkable, if for no other reason, because it represents the constructive effort of a woman. We have no other example of an educational system—original at least in its systematic wholeness and in its practical application—worked out and inaugurated by the feminine mind and hand. It is remarkable, also, because it springs from a combination of womanly sympathy and intuition, broad social out-look, scientific training, intensive and long-continued study of educational problems, and to crown all, varied and unusual experience as a teacher and educational leader."

I have lately undergone half playful chiding from one who has earned some little right to chide because she gives much of her life to the spreading of those principles of education for which the P.N.E.U. stands. I speak, of course, of our Hon. Org. Secretary. I lamented dolorously to her that the members of the Parents' Union hardly seemed to realize that we stand for the most advanced, and, I suppose, the final movement in educational philosophy. Her reply was, that it was my fault; that I have hidden behind such phrases as "P.N.E.U. thought," which people who belong to the Union and are not aware of any particular line of thought, take for a *façon de parler*. This is why people do not realize how much there is before them to examine, receive, carry out and propagate. *Mea culpa*; I believe my friendly Mentor is right, and that it is my sole fault if we are not a Society passionately devoted to a great cause, the greatest cause in the world.

If one discovers, it is because the thing is there; there is no credit in making a discovery; gravitation was there for Sir Isaac Newton, the possibility of communication without visible medium, for Signor Marconi; in like manner, educational principles are present in human nature itself and only wait to be discerned, discovered.

For forty years I have laboured to establish a working and philosophic theory of education, and, I think, with success. It has been said that "The best idea which we can form of absolute truth is that it is able to meet every condition by which it can be tested." Now, the truth which I have formulated,* is, I think, able to meet every such condition.

*In some five volumes, of which, had they the good fortune to have been written by someone else, I should be able to say, read them through every year or two, so that the truths they embody may become a usual and natural part of your thinking.

In Dr. Montessori's work we come by chance upon a set of conditions which offers such a test. An able writer in the *Contemporary Review*, for September, remarks that this method is valuable, not for its results, but for "the principles of life" it exhibits. That is, no doubt, the true test of all educational theory; but sympathetic as one necessarily is, the question occurs, is it principles of life or principles of death that are to be seen at work in the Casa dei Bambini?

We believe (*pace* to our Hon. Org. Secretary, it is hard to say 'I' after thirty years practice in saying 'we')! we believe that a child is born a person; the scientific pedagogist believes that a person is a product. We think he is a whole person, body and spirit (including mind, heart, soul, will, conscience, whatever we include in the immaterial as well as the material properties of a person): his business is to increase in wisdom and stature; he grows by eating, sleeping, playing, running, jumping, skipping, shouting, in the free air as much as possible. He grows in wisdom, too, that is, as we (!) say, in the science of relations; after a year or so, he no longer wants to hold the moon in his pinafore, he has learned something of the relation of distance, he knows far and near; he does not put his finger in the fire, nor sit like that delightful yellow-headed boy on the duck pond, because he has increased in wisdom and knows hot and cold, solid and liquid. Can we realize what it is to become acquainted with a world and its ways? To adapt yourself to all the surprising properties of matter, to turn a corner, climb a stair? To learn to speak a language, too, (he *can* learn two or three at the same time), or rather, to learn language, and form unused organs to the production of strange vocables, to learn arts far beyond those of skating, skying, tennis playing, watch-making, in difficulty, for these are all developments of the initial arts of walking, running, lifting, carrying, throwing, which baby acquires with marvellous assiduity in his first two or three years of life. Consider, too, the infinite number of things he learns to know and to name, how amusingly happy he is in finding what the French call the just word, how careful and beautiful his articulation is unless he has bad models. Let us think again how the little person loves and how he trusts, how tender his conscience is, how loyal his obedience, how insatiate is his craving for knowledge about all he sees, and we

begin to understand what is meant by a child being a person; and to realize that he wants space and air and liberty in which to develop all that he is. We shudder to see him confined for all those long hours of the day (from nine till five!), a specimen in a case, under observation, subject to experiments, even the kindest and wisest.

I sympathize with Dr. Montessori's strong sense that children should have liberty, but the liberty of children who are being carefully trained within the limits of four walls and a little court is not enough; perhaps it is safe to say that the unregarded liberty of the kerb-stone and door-step is more proper for little persons who have so very much to do on their own account both with mind and body, that is more important than the best ordered scientific work within four walls: the rough and tumble of cottage or nursery life is proper to the children, and gives Nature the opportunities she requires for their development; our part is unobtrusive care, for the instruction the children ask for and no more. It will be urged that children in a poor quarter must be safe-guarded from the evil in the streets; they are safe-guarded, as Wordsworth, Mr. Barrie, many hospital nurses know; is it that the angels hold them up by their skirts as in Richter's quaint pictures?

We may not impose any great strain on the attention of young children. We must eschew geometric forms and squares of colour in favour of the things lovely which Nature provides; we must give them the shelter of love and not hurry them into too early independence. Our work is chiefly negative with little children, we must keep the divine law within our hearts and see to it that we do not despise, hinder or offend them. In obedience to this law, we teach them to do as they are bid, and train them in habits of decency and propriety.

For the rest, we begin to perceive that it is only in a little child we get any measure of the illimitable mind and heart of man. Of course, in right of his mind and heart, the little child must have Bible tales, fairy tales and hero tales, picture and song, and how dreary is that Casa in San Lorenzo where are none of these things.

We begin to understand the amazing performances in reading and writing just as we understand little John Stuart Mill's great doings in Greek; there is nothing else to do and think about, and the children, who are persons endowed with minds,

clamour to be taught to read and write. We can do it with our children if we like, but it must be at the like cost, the exclusion of the intellectual and imaginative interests and joys proper to children, the devotion of dreary hours every day to these *dead* pursuits. No, let us be content to be the handmaids of Nature for the first five or six years, remembering that enormous as are the tasks she sets the children, she guides them into the performance of each so that it is done with unfailing delight; for gaiety, delight, mirth, belong to her method. If a child chooses to read and write before he is six, let him, but do not make him; and when he does begin, there is no occasion to hurry; let him have a couple of years for the task. At six his school-life, his lessons, should begin, and there is so much to be done during the first two years of a *person's* school-life that he will suffer if too much attention be given to these two necessary arts; he already works on a wide curriculum.

To prick so fair and iridescent an educational bubble even were it with Ithuriel's spear is a thankless task. It has not been possible in a short paper to do justice to the charm of that Roman *Casa*; but I think the initial idea is a mistaken one; to apply to normal children the methods that answer with defective children is an injustice to the former, however successful the methods may prove. I have found on the contrary in the very few cases where the attempt has been made, that defective children respond to the intellectual appeal and overtake their contemporaries.

"It is our system that counts," says Emerson, "not the single word or unsupported action"; and I would pray all members of the P.N.E.U. to make a thoughtful, earnest and continuous study of a system which meets the perplexities and the aspirations of our age, and which should issue in a generation of men and women, who shall be indeed, beings of large discourse, looking before and after.

We of the P.N.E.U., if we be minded to advance in our thousands with one heart and one purpose, are strong enough to bring about a Twentieth Century Renaissance, more glorious and permanent than that of the Middle Age, because its ultimate source shall be a profound Christianity, in lieu of the poisoned springs of Paganism. We have the one thing to offer which the whole world wants, an absolutely effective system of education covering the whole nature of a child, the whole life of man.