

## THE CHILD IN THE GARDEN.

BY E. A. PYPER.

“ONE thing, at any rate, we know with certainty that no teaching, no information, becomes knowledge to any of us until the individual mind has acted upon it, translated, transformed, absorbed it, to reappear ... in forms of vitality.”

“Oh, here are the children’s gardens,” said the mother, turning into a rather neglected-looking corner of a well-kept kitchen garden, “but really they take so little interest in them I almost wish I had not given them plots of their own. Somehow they don’t seem to be a bit keen on them.”

And indeed, as I looked at the rather untidy, dry little beds, with a few patches of untended seeds, coming up much too thick and nearly smothered with weeds, I felt what a pity it was that this was what stood to the children for a garden. I wonder how many “gardens” there are, children’s gardens, neglected, untidy, and unloved, instead of being as they were meant to be, objects of care and attention and sources of joy.

Why is it so? Surely it is right for a child to have a garden to tend—surely it would be a mistake for him not to have his own precious plot, where he may put in what he will, how he will? And yet, how many parents must know that their attempts to interest their children in gardening have ended in failure, and that the little plot that was planned and begun with enthusiasm is seldom voluntarily cared for. Here and there, it is true, one does come across children’s gardens that are all one could desire, but far more often, I fear, this is not the case. Now, why is this?

The answer to the problem has been solved for me by the conditions brought about by the war. In the June of 1915, our gardener left us—left us at a week’s notice—with a large garden

[p 534]

to which he had devoted the whole of his time and found that little enough. We could not get labour of any kind, and we could not let the well-stocked garden become a wilderness. So, that summer saw my husband and myself working hard—and hard, incessant work it is, too—and there is always more to do than one can possibly cope with; and—like woman’s work—it is never done! Many readers of these pages know by experience by this time, I have no doubt, what it means, and perhaps they will realise that, of all busy months in the year, June is one of the busiest! There were boxfuls of young plants to be put out (or left to die), marrows to put out, tomatoes to tie up and keep pruned, cucumbers to keep watered and aired in the frame, the vine to prune—dahlias and chrysanthemums to put out, winter greens and lettuces to prick out, and all the time one was doing these numerous jobs the weeds grew apace and the hoe had to be in constant use. Every week, too, the lawns had to be mowed—a laborious task, as anyone who has done it week in, week out, through the length of a hot summer, can testify. There were peaches to attend to, and gooseberries to thin out, and peas and beans to pick, and always the tomatoes and the vine, *and* the weeds crying for attention.

And now I come to the object of these remarks. All that time, John, aged two and a half, trotted about the garden, delighted to have so much of Mummy and Daddy, and absorbed in all we did. We had a few children’s tools of a size suitable to his age and strength, but he would

not look at them. Had the rake disappeared? John would be seen, in his little Butcher blue smock and knickers, sturdily trudging up the garden with it, and if he was left with it in proud possession, he would attack a bed; or he would drag the great spade and try and use it, or the heavy fork. If Daddy was using the hoe, John would fetch another one from the toolhouse and copy, exactly, the motion. He learned, by degrees, to discriminate between weeds and flowers, and to notice the different kinds of vegetables. In July, he was quite useful in picking peas, having learned to hold the stalk with one hand and pull the pod with the other. Also he learned to shell them, though this he did rather slowly and found rather boring after the first five minutes. By August of that year, he names, to my amazement, peas, beans, turnips, potatoes, cabbages and lettuces in a neighbouring cottage garden, and noticed onions and asked what they were. He learned, too, to love the flowers and to know their names—watched the delicious, hairy, big poppy heads split up the side, revealing the crumpled scarlet flower within—knew by

[p 535]

name, Borage, London Pride, Phlox, Sweet William, and many others. If he did not know the name of any flower that attracted him, he always asked, and if he forgot, he asked again, and he was very particular to pronounce even the longest name, correctly.

In the Autumn the apples and plums had to be picked, and John learned to place them gently into the big trug baskets, so as not to bruise them. Then came the digging for potatoes, and he was much interested in the large families produced by each plant, and in all their various shapes and sizes; and he knew that Daddy was very careful not to let the prongs of his fork go through a potato. He also learned that seed potatoes are left out in the open, and grow green, and that eating ones are put in the loft, and covered up, to keep them in the dark.

The writer saw him often in his little rough blue Harris coat and leather leggings spending the afternoon with Daddy in the garden, instead of going for a walk with Nanny.

There was digging to be done, and pruning, and, joy of joys! an occasional and glorious bonfire! Then he would get a long stick and help to keep the heart of the bonfire hot and bright, and learned where and how to poke it, and—by painful experience—not to go on the wrong side of the wind and have the smoke blown into his eyes. People said: “How dangerous to let such a child use a big garden fork—a rake—a long stick;” but I think he learned to handle tools sensibly and wisely. Certainly he never came to grief.

This summer, John is four and a half, and a man of wide and varied experience. He now instructs Michael, aged two and a half, where he may, and where he may not, tread; which plants are weeds and which are flowers. He can drop potatoes and use the hoe skilfully enough to hoe efficiently between the rows. He can pull out weeds by the root and fetch the barrow, a big, gardener’s one; and cart them off. He knows how to prepare the ground for sowings seeds, and he has learned how to “dibble out” small plants. He can give considerable help in mowing the lawn, by pulling vigorously at my side, and by emptying the box on to the grass heap and fitting it on to the machine again.

Something of everything goes into “my garden,” which consists of various odd patches in odd corners. “My garden” has two sets of lettuces dibbled out by himself at two different periods, and protected from the pigeons by a lavish display of wire-netting. The plants have survived the transplanting and are doing well,

[p 536]

though not quite ready yet, as he optimistically suggested, for eating! "My garden," in another place, grows two potato plants and a gooseberry bush, to which have been added two young plants of sprouting broccoli, put in, under supervision, but quite alone. "My garden" consisted, in the unproductive winter months, of about eight very "leggy" Brussel sprout plants, from which he would pick, every now and then, a handful of very frost-bitten sprouts and give them to cook, and insist on re-discovering them at lunch in another form! He never ceases to wonder at the transformation from flower to fruit in gooseberries, apples, strawberries, plums, and quite realises that such "marvellous works" can only come from God Himself.

Indeed, whatever is going on, John has a finger in the pie. His knowledge *is* knowledge, "the individual mind has acted upon it, translated, transformed, absorbed it." Education is an atmosphere, a discipline, a life, and he was put in the environment of a garden with an atmosphere of keenness, and all the rest followed. So far it has not been a discipline to him, for he follows his own sweet will, and if asked to do something not altogether congenial, he says, "But I have my *own* work to do," or "I am *werry* busy in *my* garden." It is certainly a life, for his active mind is feeding on living ideas and developing every day.

Now, what does all this teach us? Surely, that a child as much needs the "real thing" as grown-ups do. He will not be put off by a tiny patch of ground and baby tools, when he knows that the "real thing" is a garden big enough to grow all sorts of things, and that only big tools will do for it. He does not want to be "artificially restricted" to one spot in a garden. His mind is of too enquiring a nature for that. He loves to roam as he will, and make his own decisions as to where, and what to grow.

I can hear someone say that these ideas are all very well as far as the child is concerned, but what about the garden—does it not suffer? We have not found it so. Indeed, I think that a child who follows his parents or the gardener about—watching the care they take, unconsciously assimilates a like care and reverence for plants and tools. He is much less likely to run over a bed of seedlings or bang apple-blossom with a stick, than a child who simply uses a garden, of which he knows nothing, and for which he has done nothing, as a playground. And what a delight and privilege it is to have your child sharing your work and interests through all the seasons, in the garden, and watch his life,

[p 537]

physical, moral, mental, spiritual, develop and blossom like the flowers.

Is it not the root of all P.N.E.U. teaching, that the personality of the child only wants the right environment and a little wise guidance and help, and the rest will follow; and also that he has a "right to, and a necessity for, as much and as varied knowledge as he is able to receive?" I do believe that for children under six, a garden offers endless opportunities for training and developing on every side. Hand and eye, brain and soul, all are trained and strengthened, and under God's bright sun and soft rains the child grows sweet and fresh as any flower. The garden becomes the most heavenly place in the world, and "my garden" only exists when the child's need of expression becomes so poignant as to make it a sheer necessity to him.