

IMPRESSIONS OF CONFERENCE WORK WITH CLASS II.

BY ELEANOR M. FROST.

The "Children's Morning" at the P.N.E.U. Conference was one which, I think, will not quickly be forgotten by the "Mothers," "Scale How students," or "Children." The joy and interest of these last was absolutely infectious, for they came, big and little, agog with delight to meet others who were doing the same work and, in addition, full of expectation about the coming lessons. It was very charming to see each carrying school books and pictures, as if they were really treasured possessions. After the opening talk and hymn downstairs, I led my eighteen pupils to our allotted room and started proceedings by a "roll-call," which did something towards cementing the bond already existing between a "House of Education" student and children of the "Parents' Union School."

The first lesson was in General History, and from the term's work I had chosen the subject of "exploration and discovery in the Tudor period," the consequent rivalry between England and Spain, with a detailed account of Sir Francis Drake's voyage round the world. Two maps were put on the blackboard, one showing the known world at the beginning of that century, and the other, the known world at its close; the English and Spanish colonies were coloured respectively red or black, and a few of the more important voyages were also shown. These, we discussed quite briefly, the children, for the most part, telling of the great seamen who had sailed to this or that part of the world. These large maps seemed to set a light to their interest, for from then onwards they were ready to bombard me with questions or suggestions as they were given opportunity. Next the dates 1545–1596 were written on the board, and one of the children said "Sir Francis Drake" and another, from a knowledge of contemporary History, was able to say through whose reigns he had lived. Then we read of his early life in the hull of an old ship

[p 574]

at Chatham, and of course certain probable results were deduced, such as, a familiarity with and love of the sea, a large acquaintance among sailors, and the tales he might consequently hear of strange and beautiful countries far to the west. Next, from "Westward Ho," we read that well-known description of him as a man. One or two had evidently read this book and from their pleased recognition one felt that the whole lesson was bound to gain in interest. Then from a verse of Newbolt's "Admirals All" we gathered some idea of his courage, calmness and good seamanship. With the map we quickly followed his two first adventures to the West Indies and Mexico; then to give the children some idea of what a voyage implied in those days I took in detail his great journey round the world, reading or telling something of his ship, and of incidents connected with each port of call. This first part of the lesson ended with narration and some mention of the spirit of discovery still alive, as shown by the great Antarctic expeditions of our own day. The next part of the lesson the pupils were to have read on the Tudor age of discovery from the "Story of the World," to be followed by a second narration, which, however, had to be curtailed owing to lack of time.

The very striking point in this and the following lessons was the children's supreme unconsciousness both of themselves and of the twenty to thirty listeners around the room. It was obvious that they associated lessons with pleasure and they came prepared to enjoy and to

work. The fact that there were eighteen all doing the same subject seemed to lend a certain natural stimulus, and proved no difficulty, as the appeal to general knowledge had a wider response, and the narration could be heard from one and another apparently chosen by chance. It would have been possible to vary this by asking each to write a short report. Their attention to the work was the more remarkable when one realised that the busy hum of the street, the people moving in and out, made a great change from the quiet of the usual school-room: These P.U.S. children had truly acquired the habit of attention.

The next subject was a "Picture Talk" on the "Madonna di San Sisto," and the aim of the lesson was to lead the children to appreciate its exquisite beauty and thought. First I drew from them some of the ideas we gather must have been in Raphael's mind as he painted, and how we can recognise them. For instance—that the Mother and Child are coming from, and bringing Heaven with them, as shown by the glory of angel

[p 575]

heads—that they come in haste, seen by the blown-back draperies and hair—why coming in haste?—for love of His people. These and similar points the children delight in discovering for themselves. Then they looked at the picture with half-shut eyes to see the divisions and shapes of light and shade, the general balance of tones and the composition of the whole; then with open eyes to notice the wonderful serenity and the details of attitude and line. All this took about ten minutes only, for it seemed essential that after being shown how to see fully, the children should be allowed the greatest and most valuable part of such a lesson, namely, time for a silent contemplation of the picture, that its beauty might speak for itself.

It was interesting to notice that nearly all the children knew quite well how to use that time, for most of them grew absorbed. There was one small detail which made the great charm of the lesson from a teacher's point of view, and that was that some of the children put down their pictures after the "quiet time" with a short sigh, as though they had come some distance back to the present. The memory drawings were generally fair. For the last two minutes the children told me a little of what we might learn about the artist of such a masterpiece, namely, that he must have had a fervent love for holy things. By a short comparison of the term's pictures they found how far the general characteristics of the "Madonna di San Sisto" were noticeable in Raphael's other works.

One feels that in the study of such pictures term after term, the children are given a great opportunity for good, for the greatness of soul in the painter calls to the possibilities in the soul of each child, in addition to which the development of the aesthetic sense must come as a great uplifting force.

"Natural History" was the next subject on the programme, and from the word "Diptera" and its derivation the children knew how this lesson was going to connect with former ones of the term's work in this subject. Each was given an ordinary house-fly—*Musca Domestica*—which was examined and described; then drawings of the fly and its different parts, the stages of egg, larva and puparium, etc., all very much magnified, were fastened on the board, to show the pupils what otherwise could only be seen through a microscope. Next, mounted specimens of flies, daddy-long-legs, mosquitoes, were passed from one to another, that the children might see other members of the same order and which had different parts more conspicuously marked.

[p 576]

After this we traced the life-history of the house-fly, summing up by naming the reasons for its classification among the Diptera. Its food, rate of increase and enemies were mentioned, and the children, with a little help, made a list of the other members of the order. This was followed by narration, then reading from "Life and Her Children," and a second narration.

This lesson proved how much children love things they can examine, and how everything they can discover for themselves gains an added interest and joy. One felt that a house-fly was a real test of their powers, for it required quite an appreciable amount of patience and exact observation to discover its parts. It is perhaps a truism to add, but useful to remember, that effort brings power.

The last lesson was a quick ten minutes' practice on the map. "South America" was shown and the questions were all on the once-famous Inca Empire, which had incidentally come into the morning's "General History" as a Spanish possession. Following in their own atlases, the children found the countries it had included and its boundaries; then the parallels of latitude and the parts of other continents that lay between the same. From this and from a consideration of the position and direction of the "Andes" they deduced a few facts about the climate—at this point I read from "Pole to Pole" a short descriptive passage of the characteristics of the scenery. Next they found the four highest volcanoes and two of the chief towns. Then, after a few minutes in which to look at and memorise these places, the children shut their atlases and answered such questions as, "What are the boundaries of Ecuador?" "Which volcano lies directly south of Quito?" etc. The idea underlying such a lesson is, that it should be rapid oral work, to familiarise the pupils with maps, and must not be confused with the infinitely fuller and more detailed Geography lessons.

I do not think it is possible to have spent an hour and a half with those dear children and to have felt anything at the end but stimulation and delight, for they brought with them such an atmosphere of spontaneity and interest. I was much impressed also by the readiness with which one "struck sparks," for whatever reference was made somebody seemed to know something about it, which showed in a marked manner that general knowledge and keen intelligence which comes of a happy intimacy with books.