

THE HISTORY OF A P.U.S. SCHOOLROOM, BY THE MOTHER WHO RUNS IT.

By MRS. W. J. BROWN.

FOR four years now in my house we have had a P.U.S. schoolroom and look forward to, at least, another two years.

I think I must have been asked to relate my experiences there because we have followed the *whole* programme of the Parents' Union School up as far as Form IV., in which the average age is fourteen, from almost the lowest form. The reason that we did not begin at the very beginning was because I was unfortunate enough never to have heard of the Parents' National Educational Union until my eldest girl was ten years of age.

Also my adventures may be of interest because I started as a person absolutely unqualified for the work I was setting out to do. I use the word adventures advisedly, I really was, to start with, quite as much at sea as any merchant adventurer of Elizabethan times; my ideas as to my actual route very vague indeed, my aim was to hunt for treasure. My reward has been great gain.

As my experiences have been limited to my own schoolroom will you please excuse what may seem a very egoistical use of the pronoun I? Fortunately the first person singular soon changes to the plural as I realize more and more that it was not *I* who was to teach but rather the *children* who were to learn.

Four years ago I found myself faced with the question of "What to do with our girls," aged ten-and-a-half, nine and six. We live in the country far from adequate schools. Until this time we had shared a governess with friends, but the elder ones had outgrown that stage—then came the problem of what to do next. On enquiry I found that a really well qualified governess was beyond my means, and although I had always thought and said that I would do any bit of work

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under the sun rather than teach—well, we never know what we may come to, do we?

When it became a choice of giving up a life in the country and going to live in a town near a school, or staying in the country and teaching them myself, I chose what was in one way the greater of two evils and decided to teach them myself! I've been thankful ever since that I did, though, in the early days, there were times when my courage nearly failed. We "carried on" alone and unaided for a term with moderate success; then came salvation in the form of a letter from an old school friend of my own. Hearing of my difficulties she wrote: "Why don't you do as I did? Join the P.N.E.U. and the P.U.S. If you can afford it have a P.U.S. governess; if not, teach the children yourself under the P.U.S." I wrote to headquarters at once and obtained all particulars, then spent the holidays reading three of Miss Mason's books which I had sent to me from the lending-library. The beginning of the new term came and with it the programme of work. When I read our programme for the few weeks ahead of us my heart sank. Little did I think then that the day would come when I should seize each new programme with avidity. However, we set to work on this terrifying programme, following our instructions to the letter and, as far as it was possible for new disciples to do so, in the spirit. We did our work that term not too badly, the examination results were moderately good and the children had come to the conclusion that they liked this school—the books were so interesting. From that day we have

never looked back (though we have gone through some strenuous times). We have for four years done *all* the work set every term with increasing enthusiasm and better results. The day came at last when I was able to send the two elder girls to their public schools where they have taken places which compare, I am told, quite favourably with those taken by girls educated under much better qualified instruction.

Any success we have attained is due to the fact that the Time Table and the Programme were strictly adhered to. Nothing short of real catastrophe must be allowed to interfere with the work. That is, I think, the one essential, but it is essential.

It is absolutely necessary that the whole of the work set should be done—in fairness to the children. As one subject helps another it is easier in the long run to attempt it all
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rather than to try leaving out bits of the work here and there as being either apparently unnecessary, or too difficult, or rather a bother to do. We found that most of the subjects can be attempted in spite of the fact that the teacher may be almost as ignorant of the subject as the pupil!

The secret of this method of attack is for the teacher and taught to work together as fellow-students. I never, from the beginning, took up the attitude of pedagogue! The whole of our enjoyment and success depended on the fact that we did the work together as friends and fellow-labourers. There is no need to fear that this attitude lowers the dignity of the teacher, it doesn't. When the teacher really knows—the fact is obvious and the pupil accepts his decision as final, and when the teacher doesn't know, the method we adopted leads to endless interesting discussions and to strenuous effort to arrive at the solution of whatever problem may have arisen.

Let us take arithmetic as an example of a subject with which we were likely to have some difficulty. At school I was decidedly poor at arithmetic. I'm not brilliant now, but I have spent many interesting hours working at problems with my children—problems which baffled us, sometimes for days, but we were never beaten, we always solved them in the end—occasionally, it must be admitted, with some assistance from relatives and friends! It may be an unconventional way of doing arithmetic, but a child who has taken the trouble to walk half a mile with a problem, or written a letter to an aunt in the North of England to ask her to explain some knotty point, is not likely to forget the working out that she carefully follows on receiving the answer to her S.O.S.

Our method, if unconventional, acted well. It kept us keen and interested in our work—and is the average child in the average school really interested in arithmetic, apart from the mark-gaining point of view? I don't think so. At school I hated mathematics, although there *were* marks to be gained. None of my children dislike mathematics, though they have no marks to gain. They are none of them mathematically minded, yet they do enjoy doing their work. The school standard for arithmetic in these days is high, but in spite of our unconventional methods we managed to keep up to it.

With an unqualified teacher, such as myself, in charge, the children develop a very useful habit of learning to find

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out things for themselves. After having met, several times, in answer to a question, with the reply, "I don't know, go and get an atlas," or "You'll find it in the dictionary," or whatever book

of reference may be necessary, they soon begin to hunt out things for themselves without help or suggestion. They learn to use their tools for themselves to dig out bits of the treasure of knowledge—and it is these little bits of hard-won knowledge that stay with us and become permanent parts of our equipment. The facts that are poured out to us in lectures and in oral lessons and even in oral replies to questions, as we know, run through our head like water through a sieve; but the facts that we have taken trouble to find out we usually take the trouble to remember. Eventually it became so that I was referred to not so much on matters of fact as on matters of opinion. As for matters of fact it is so simple to make a habit, during a history lesson, of having an atlas handy, and so with other lessons, we soon learned what books of reference were likely to be needed, and this was one of the ways in which we learned from experience that what the P.U.S. says is quite true. The children must have books—they are absolutely essential if the work is to be properly done.

I think I have proved from experience that lack of knowledge is no bar to undertaking the work. Let the children do the work and educate themselves. I work alongside my children and enjoy it—getting at the same time a good education without much effort!

Another subject which we might take as a similar example is music. Now I am not very musical. I had, of course, piano lessons in my youth and, fortunately for me, was taken to concerts and brought up to enjoy music, but on the other hand, once I had left school I never played again, and certainly no one had ever shown any signs of pleasure when I had played formerly. Also I cannot sing a note! Not a very promising beginning. Knowing that one road to happiness is closed to anyone who does not love and appreciate music I decided that in spite of everything the children should have the opportunity of getting to know and love some music.

Also music and musical appreciation lessons were on the programme and therefore the subject had to be attacked. Now I have always felt that many a child's early liking for music, if not exceedingly well developed, must have been strangled in infancy by that dreadful half-hour of piano

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practice on a dark, shiny and forbidding-looking instrument usually kept in a room quite apart from the ordinary homely part of the house inhabited by the younger members of the family. For my children I bought what is known as a schoolroom piano. These pianos have only five octaves; they are encased in unpolished oak—no French polish, nothing cold or forbidding about them, more friendly-looking altogether than the ordinary adult instrument in the eyes of the small folk. Ours lives in the schoolroom as one of the family. It belongs to the children and they use it.

Of course we have a gramophone, a good one, and the remainder of our outfit consists of tin whistles at sixpence each—not to be despised. Have you ever heard how really recognizable the Rosamund Ballet Music or Wagner's Motifs can be on a tin whistle?

Then a music library of books and gramophone records began to grow—our great standby being Mr. Scholes' two books which are given in our programmes as books for study and reference—affectionately known in our schoolroom as "fat Scholes" and "thin Scholes." I think that a book with a nick-name must have proved itself many a time a real friend. Most of the gramophone records recommended each term for study we bought.

With this outfit and by doing the work set for us each term in the programme we have learnt a tremendous amount and have had an indescribable amount of pleasure.

The proof of the pudding is in the eating. Has it been worth while? Have we had any repayment for the time, trouble and money spent?

We have. Out of three children I must admit that there is only one who can produce real music from a musical instrument. But that is not our standard of success. That is the standard of the old days when visiting relations sat in state while Jane played her piece and Tommy recited his. No. A better proof of the success of the work is this. Last winter the children all bought their own tickets for the children's concerts at the Central Hall, Westminster, out of money which they themselves had earned. I had taken them to one concert as an experiment, and after that they insisted on going to the others as being the greatest possible treat they could have. Our experience with this subject may give, I hope, encouragement to someone who [p 288]

may be diffident about undertaking such a specialized subject as music.

There is a note on each programme saying that the children cannot do their work completely unless they keep nature note books and century books.

We have found the Century Books invaluable. In connection with our music they are a great help. Each musician as he is studied in his turn (one each term) is entered in the Century Book in his own century among his contemporaries, with the artists, scientists, writers, historical characters and events of his own period. This gives us the proper perspective which is necessary to the understanding and enjoyment of his music. The children who have this historical perspective do not, when listening to an air by Purcell, expect the sort of music they would hear if they were listening to Wagner. Thanks to the Century Books they put the music against its proper background. To a child with a training like that, Purcell and Arne do not sound thin. They expect to hear a clear melody and know that these men had not the means of producing the vast effects achieved by Beethoven or Wagner.

You will see from what I have said that there is nothing here but what may be attempted by the veriest amateur. Of course if any instrument is to be studied a proficient teacher must be engaged, but as regards the training of the child as a music-lover I think I may claim that our efforts succeeded.

When I can hear my children whistling about the fields and garden the themes from the works of the great musicians, or hear them fingering out on their piano a tune that they have heard at a concert—and sometimes even working away at a tune they have made up themselves—then I am satisfied.

The Time Table we have always kept most conscientiously, the number of hours spent in school varying, of course, according to the forms in which the children are working.

I have to admit that anyone who undertakes the education of her own children is taking on a whole-time job—it cannot be run as a side-line!

When we started, our schoolroom hours were from nine o'clock to noon. Later on, as the children went into the higher forms, we were in school until 12.45. Now that there is only a lower form child left at home we are back to the shorter hours. In the afternoons we do handwork, reading, music, nature notes and drawing, and in the evenings we do a certain [p 289]

amount of reading also. I hope the hours do not seem discouragingly long. I have often wished them longer. There is so much to do and the work is so extraordinarily interesting that the time literally flies.

Every Wednesday we go for a nature walk and spend the whole of the afternoon in the woods and fields searching for treasures of very various kinds—all to be recorded later in our Nature Note Books. A frosty evening, too, will take us out for a sharp walk when we are working on star maps.

Saturday afternoons are often employed in undertaking more distant excursions, usually with some special object in view, such as a visit to a museum in connection with our history lessons, or to see some building of historic interest. Occasionally our visit will be to some site made familiar to the children by their reading of a story book. In our family *The Pickwick Papers* can only be properly read in a little wooden house up an oak tree, by the light of a stable lantern and as the accompaniment to a feast of roasted chestnuts. I remember that those readings led us to undertake an expedition to see Mr. Pickwick's bedroom at "The White Horse," at Ipswich, where he had his adventure with the lady in curl papers! For the benefit of the youngest member of the party we carefully explained that Mr. Pickwick was an entirely imaginary character—(she had a short time before that expressed both astonishment and disappointment on finding out that Julius Caesar was dead). After duly admiring the early Victorian furnishings of Mr. Pickwick's room with its two great four-poster beds, as we wandered through the maze of narrow passages in the old inn a small voice asked, "But *was* Mr. Pickwick a real person?" I suppose to a small child of seven he must have seemed quite as real, in spite of our explanations, as the Romans whose actual dishes, spoons and brooches we had been to see on a previous Saturday. In the three years which have intervened since then she has gradually disentangled the real from the imaginary world enough to know that Julius Caesar's visit to Britain really happened, while the visit of the Pickwickians to Dingly Dell is the effort of a vivid imagination.

Please do not suppose that these excursions, designed to combine instruction with amusement, are a penance to the parent—I mean parents. They can be great fun. History and picnics, geology and bathing, go very well together. The

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instruction and the amusement often become so intermingled that it is difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins.

One of the advantages of a home-schoolroom is its adaptability as regards space if not as regards time! We spent the middle of the summer term many miles from home, but lessons continued as usual. At short notice we had packed a few clothes, a good many books, and transported ourselves to a cottage in the downs, near the sea. During our stay the mornings were spent dutifully over our books, and the afternoons devoted to outdoor studies. In long explorations on the shore and in the hills during a glorious June we did indeed find "earth crammed with heaven." Innumerable finds rewarded our search for treasures—birds, and butterflies new to us, lots of new insects of many kinds, and very many new flowers. Providence was very kind to us on this occasion—we had rain nearly every morning and glorious weather in the afternoons. Virtue was rewarded very promptly in this case.

The term we had whooping-cough we remember, as we lost so little time by being ill—another of the advantages of our home schoolroom! Whooping-cough ordinarily means many weeks' absence from lessons.

One advantage a home schoolroom mother has over the mother who does not teach her own children is that she sees more sides of the child's mind and nature. So many mothers

see their children in out-of-school hours only, and school hours take up a good part of the days.

On the subject of the numerous points of contact which the teacher-mother can have with her child's mind, I have found that, working as we do through a very wide curriculum, it is inevitable that a vast number of subjects must come up for discussion. Many of these are subjects which are more easily discussed between parent and child than between class and teacher. It is often specially important that they should be discussed as soon as they occur to the child, otherwise the opportunity is lost and they may never come up for discussion again—in the case of a child in class I can imagine that many of them may never be asked at all—either from shyness or possibly from discouragement. The Bible and Shakespeare are in every school. These classics cannot be read without innumerable questions entering the child's mind. I think it must be much easier for a mother to explain and discuss questions which are naturally difficult of discussion between

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people of different generations and who have not had the same amount of experience of life. The children, I may say, never showed the slightest hesitation about asking any question that occurred to them on any subject whatever.

The mother knows, or ought to know, what stage the child's mental development has reached—she can enter just as deeply as may be necessary into the question according to the stage of the child's development.

A mother who has taught her own children, or rather, who has read the same books and discussed problems and difficulties of various sorts, has an intellectual tie with her child's mind which strengthens as time passes. Some of the earlier ties are inevitably weakened—the tie of dependency disappears, but the ties of common interests increase.

From the parent's point of view, in teaching one's own children there is much to be gained—more time spent in company with the children, an extraordinarily interesting occupation, a widening of one's own intellectual outlook as one is kept in constant contact with all the best thought of all time, and, in short, a thoroughly happy existence. The day when the child must go to school comes inevitably, there comes a time when enthusiasm and an average brain cannot cope with the work—specialists in the various subjects are necessary; that time would vary according to individual circumstances—in our case we managed to carry on until the eldest girl was fourteen-and-a-half.

For P.U.S. parents the next chapter of the story has been very much simplified. The girls shut their books at the end of their last term in the home schoolroom—at the end of the holidays they can be opened at the following page and without any interruption whatever they continue their work as usual at Overstone.

I suppose I ought to mention the subject of the difficulties we have met with. Well, I found that they were, in most cases, like the apparent hills one often meets in driving along a straight road—the nearer one comes to them the more they tend to flatten out, and the steep hills turn out to be after all easy gradients.

Probably some people might consider that one difficulty would be that the child taught at home would suffer from lack of companionship. My experience is that, until the age of thirteen or fourteen, the family, with their immediate friends

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and neighbours, and their pets, fill their minds and provide plenty of companionship for out-of-

school hours. In school they do not need companionship as each child works alone—my three were usually working in three separate forms—and of course in a P.U.S. schoolroom there is no room for the companionship which is sometimes considered necessary in order to provide competition in the work. We all know that in the P.U.S. there is no such word as competition, and, personally, I did not find that we ever needed it. The children enjoy their work and need no spur.

A real difficulty and a danger to be avoided in a home schoolroom is this:—Each home has a mental atmosphere of its own. This atmosphere surrounding the child influences its mind unconsciously. The mother who teaches is in danger of taking that atmosphere into the schoolroom with her and the children run the risk of becoming narrow-minded. The school child who leaves home every day leaves this atmosphere behind him: he hears questions discussed from many points of view and soon learns that there may be more than one opinion on most subjects. Once the danger I have spoken of is realized it can be avoided.

The home atmosphere, the family tendency towards conservatism or enterprise, as the case may be, has its chance in out-of-school hours. In school hours a habit can be formed of approaching all questions in an absolutely open-minded way. All arguments for and against ought to be welcomed. It is only fair to let the children know that though one can, and indeed ought to have, an opinion of one's own, that opinion is not either necessarily correct or shared by the whole of mankind. It is a temptation to be avoided—that of pushing one's own pet theories on to the young expanding mind, however dear they may be to oneself. The child in a P.U.S. schoolroom has in the wonderful supply of nourishment provided for its mind—if left alone to choose its impressions and opinions—a real chance of developing an individuality of its own. It is, of course, far more of a temptation to a mother than to a teacher to interfere unduly and to aim at producing a replica of herself instead of giving the child a chance of becoming something different and, possibly, better.

A minor difficulty is to keep track of the books we use. A rule which has to be more and more strictly enforced, we found, as time goes on and we reach higher forms and the books [p 293] become more interesting, is this: "All books borrowed by adult members of the household must be returned before breakfast time. This rule applies particularly to those books borrowed surreptitiously after the owners have gone to bed." It is not conducive to an atmosphere of school discipline to hear a low-toned voice mutter to a hot and bothered sister, vainly searching her shelves for a missing book, "Try the table by daddy's bed." And that reminds me about the importance of each child having its own library. In our case we each had a plain oak book-case with several shelves, and, what I found an admirable plan, the lowest space turned into a cupboard by the addition of two little doors—this is most useful for all odd, untidy forms of books such as pamphlets, loose maps, etc. The possession of this book-case, where all the books can be kept by their owner in order, does encourage the child to love and care for its books.

Perhaps it occurs to someone that it is difficult to be, at the same time, both school-mistress and house-mistress. Most mothers are housekeepers. I am one myself, but please do not imagine that because I go into the schoolroom every morning at nine o'clock, I rival Mrs. Jellaby in my housekeeping methods. I have tried and find it quite possible to live comfortably with the minimum of outside assistance and yet to leave time available for a more intellectual

occupation than the usual round of housekeeping duties.

May I suggest that in establishments where there is not a large staff the children can help very considerably. Work which is classed as dull and uninteresting by adults is often quite interesting to them. And of course household, like any other work, is, to some extent, interesting and enjoyable according to the spirit in which it is undertaken. At the worst it can be looked upon as means of making money. My children have always been paid wages for their work. This is a good plan. Their interest in the work is kept up and it gives them money to spend which they themselves have earned, and they have therefore a proper appreciation of its value.

Thanks to the P.U.S. our family has spent four very happy years. We can never feel grateful enough to the P.U.S. or to Miss Kitching for her kind help, and we do hope that other home schoolrooms may be encouraged to embark on a similar voyage of discovery.