MISS MASON'S METHODS AND PRINCIPLES IN THE PARENTS' UNION SCHOOL IN THE HOME SCHOOLROOM.

From the point of view of the Mother
who teaches her own children.

By MARY L. KINNEAR.

SINCE your Committee has done me the honour of asking me to read to-day a paper on the Home Schoolroom from the point of view of the Mother who teaches her own children, I have naturally thought a great deal about what I should say, not because there seemed so little to say, but because there is so much one would like to say, that it cannot all be contained in a paper of ten minutes' duration.

Therefore I thought it best to select a few points which may interest others, and I propose to tell you:—

(1) Why I have been so bold as to attempt to teach my own children.

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(2) How I have succeeded, as far as one can estimate one's own achievements.

(3) Some suggestions for your consideration.

I must blame or rather thank the House of Education at Ambleside for *forcing* me to attempt to teach my children. When our eldest boy was six, we had three younger children,—a boy of four, another boy of two and a baby girl one year old, and I must tell you that since then we have a fifth treasure. With such young children in the nursery, a nurse was absolutely necessary. We had had, up to this time, an under-nurse as well, but now the eldest boy needed lessons, we could not afford to keep three people to help me with the children, so I decided to have an Ambleside governess for the two eldest boys, aged six and four, and my nurse was willing to be single-handed for the two babies.

But I did not know then that no Ambleside governess is allowed to take a post where she is expected to care for the toilet and clothes of her pupils, and when I learned this, it was a great blow to me. What could I do? We live in the country, where there are no classes to which we could send the boy, and he was badly needing lessons. I did the next best thing I could think of: I found a very capable lady as nursery-governess, who took entire charge of the two boys and their clothes, and so on, and she taught the elder boy reading, writing and simple arithmetic, and she did it well. But she would not attempt more than that. Now, from his birth the boy had been surrounded by a P.N.E.U. atmosphere—I do not know how else to describe it. I read Miss Mason's Home Education when he was a fortnight old, and I re-read it, and I read many other books suggested by her, and in the book lists in the *Parents' Review*. After Miss Mason's books, the books which I found most helpful in the earlier years were Dr. Helen Webb's *Talk to Mothers and Nurses*, and the books of Mrs. Read Mumford and Mrs. Dyke Acland on Child Training. From the time he could understand, I had tried to carry out Miss Mason's wise suggestions, and in this I was ably assisted by my nurse; so that the boy's mind was awake; it was already full of interest in the things around him; he knew every bird and wild flower and tree that grows near us; at four years old he even knew most of the trees in the winter with their leaves off. So it was not likely that he was going to be satisfied with learning

his letters and writing his copies and saying his
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multiplication tables, as good little boys of his age used to do. He wanted more than these *mental exercises*; he wanted what Miss Pennethorne describes as Mind Food, and I saw that he was not going to get it unless I set to work and helped him myself. So he had one hour every morning with the nursery-governess, and one hour with me. I gave him English History, Geography, Tales, Nature Study, Picture Study, French, Solfa and, of course, the daily Bible lesson, in everything trying to follow as well as I could the programme of the Parents' Union School. Soon some of our neighbours, who had a boy of seven and a half and babies in the nursery, asked me if their boy could join ours for lessons. The advent of a little companion proved to be the greatest blessing. The two boys, who had played together before, were now working together, and although we had not caught him young enough for him to get the full benefit of the Parents' Union School grounding, because he was rather old when he came to us and he soon went away to school, yet I hope and think it did help the little neighbour too. The boys seemed to enjoy their lessons so much; it was always difficult to stop at the right time, and they were really disappointed when we put away the books for the day.

One great difficulty was the narration. At first my boy could never begin to narrate the lesson, but if I just gave him a lead by beginning, he could go on quite well, and usually gave me everything back practically in the language of the book. When the little friend joined us, he had the same difficulty, and I found a good way of helping them was to sit with a pencil and paper and write it down. I do not know why it was, but I have proved it many times since, that a child who would remain dumb while I waited expectantly for his narration, would, when I got out pencil and paper, reel it off so fast that I could only write it down by using many and drastic abbreviations.

Most of my friends were very sceptical about this narration after *only one* reading, and they would say to me: "Oh, yes, of course, it's one thing to narrate it directly after they hear it, but you will find that in a week or so they will have forgotten all about it." In spite of my Jonah-like friends, I persisted in my own way, or rather, of course I mean in Miss Mason's way, and, when it came to examinations at the end of the term, so far from having forgotten anything, it all seemed as fresh in the boy's memory as if he had learned it the day before. I must confess that in my most sanguine moments I had not expected
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that lessons only *heard once*—for the boy could not then read—three months before, would be retained so completely, even to the actual words used in the book. This was especially the case in the Bible lessons, Tales and History and French lessons.

Since my experience with these two boys, I have taught several other children—my own and other people's—in the same way, and almost invariably with the same result. The exceptions are the children, who, up to the age of eight, nine or ten, have rubbed along somehow, with more or less good teaching of its kind, but who have not had the priceless gift of concentration, natural to every child, trained and developed, and who seemed *for a time* to find very great difficulty in absorbing a lesson at one reading. With these children I have not found the same fluency when their first examinations come round, but after a term or two they respond to the method better, and in time they too find it quite easy.

Another difficulty I had was that however carefully I tried to make all possible

arrangements both for the household and otherwise—it was almost impossible to be quite sure of being uninterrupted during my lessons with the children. If it was not about some household matter, it was about the Women's Institute, of which I was then Secretary. So after a year or more the nursery-governess left, and I decided to do all the teaching myself, and I found a lady, quite a young girl of about twenty-one, who had been a V.A.D. during the war, and who took charge of the boys out of lessons. During lesson hours, from 9.30 until 12, she gave out stores, she kept my cupboards tidy, she paid the books and she saw callers—in fact she stood between me and the world, and it proved a most satisfactory plan.

In connection with this habit of narration, I should like to tell you a thing which was said to me recently, which encouraged me very much. One of the two boys of whom I have spoken, now at boarding school, works with a tutor almost every holidays—at his own request, be it understood; one rarely finds a P.U.S. child who looks upon lessons as anything but a pleasure. This tutor, an Oxford graduate, showed me an English essay by this boy, written while the tutor was coaching a younger boy in mathematics. He told him to choose his own subject, and the boy, then nearly twelve, wrote an essay on "A Walk by the River," which astonished my friend. He said that it was quite unusual to find a boy, even at two or three years older, who not
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only could express himself so well and in such good English, but had such a fund of interesting information to express. I explained how it was that the boys were able to express themselves so easily, and in such good English; it is because, from the very first, they have been intimately acquainted with only the best books, especially the Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress*, and of course I used the occasion to attempt to gain an adherent to P.N.E.U. This tutor teaches, during the school term, in a well-known Preparatory School, and he has charge of the English teaching and of the School Library. He told me he had much difficulty in getting the boys to read anything worth reading; if they read at all, they seemed to prefer what he considered trash, and he was interested to hear the kind of books P.N.E.U. children read for their own pleasure, and in their spare time. For instance, in the holidays you go into a room, and you find two schoolboys, each deeply absorbed in a book; you expect to find, perhaps, a boy's story book or a cricket annual—well they are very keen on cricket too—but the books which are interesting them so deeply are: (*a*) a boy of ten is reading Mrs. Creighton's *History of France*; (*b*) a boy aged twelve, *Jock of the Bush Veldt*. Trash does *not* appeal to the P.N.E.U. child.

I have told you how I came to attempt this work, and I have tried to give some idea of how far I think I have succeeded in carrying it out. I should like now, if I may be allowed to do so, in all humility, to make a few suggestions.

First, to any mothers who may be present, and to fathers too, if they have the opportunity of superintending their children's education, do please see that from the very beginning your child's opening mind, which is receiving impressions in early childhood at a far greater rate than it can ever do later on, do see that you place within its reach every possible thing that is lovely and of good report. We are most anxious that the food, clothing and general physical welfare shall be cared for, but important as these are, it is after all of little use to have a beautiful body unless the mind and soul which occupy it are also beautiful, and we are sometimes inclined to leave these things to chance in a way we would not dream of doing in the case of purely physical welfare. Let us see that in our nurseries, which are, after all, the early schoolrooms of our children, there shall be no grotesque toys and pictures, such as one

sees everywhere now. I tried last week, in a beautifully appointed
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bookshop, to buy a picture postcard to send to a sick child. The assistant directed me to a stand full, as she said, of children's postcards; they were all, in my opinion, so hideously ugly, and many of them so revoltingly vulgar, that I felt obliged to tell the assistant what I thought of them. She was mildly surprised, and assured me that they were quite the latest thing, and that everybody was buying them for children. It is very sad if this be true.

Again there are many really charming and beautiful books and stories for young children. Why should their taste be spoilt at the outset by some of the gaudy picture-books and papers people buy for their children, in which the children or, more often, animals dressed as children, do many impish tricks, which may be quite amusing if they are not demoralising, but which are very poor mental food for the eager, enquiring mind of a child of four or five.

Let us, from the beginning, try to have about our children people, whether nurses or in whatever capacity, who love nature, who will second the mother's efforts, for instance, when out for walks, and hunt for flowers, watch the birds or clouds, and so on, and when the time comes that the child is obviously requiring definite lessons, which may be at any time between five and seven years old, let us see to it that the child has the very best teaching we can possibly procure. The younger the child, the wiser and more experienced should be the person who teaches him. One hears it said so often: "Oh, of course Miss So-and-so can give him his first lessons, and then of course later on, we must get a really good governess to prepare him for school." Now I think that is really just the wrong way round. It is the first lessons which are more important than any which may follow. Most children are tremendously keen to begin lessons, and so often they lose their first freshness and become quite bored, and after a time they simply endure them because they have to be done. One does not find this with a child taught from the first on P.N.E.U. lines. The enthusiasm grows as the child's horizon is enlarged, and his powers are developed. Therefore, mothers, if we cannot afford to pay the high salary required, and rightly so, by the highly cultured and trained governess, then do let us consider whether we cannot try to do the teaching ourselves. The P.N.E.U. conducts a most helpful reading course for mothers, and if a woman can run a household in these difficult times, play tennis and golf
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and bridge as they are played nowadays, or drive a motor car and run a business, then it is not at all beyond her powers to teach her child, *if* she will put her whole powers into her preparation for it. In any case, if we cannot undertake it all, let us give the daily Bible lesson ourselves; there can surely be no finer programme, or one which will give the child a better foundation for his religious life and belief later on, than that given in the P.U.S.

I would also suggest that it is a good plan, helpful both to teacher and taught, to get our friends and neighbours to lend one or two children to work with our own. It is apt to prove rather a strain on mother and child if she has her own child alone for lessons. We are all apt to expect so much of our own, but if we can have, with our own, one or two outside children of similar age, it usually acts as a sort of brake, and prevents us from pressing on too hard in our eagerness to help the child.

I have to thank you for allowing me to say a little of what I think about the P.U.S. I could only bring myself to do it by reminding myself that one of the objects of the Union is "to afford

the parents opportunities for co-operation and consultation, so that the wisdom and experience of each may be profitable to all," therefore I am glad to be allowed to co-operate by offering you may experience, in the hope that I may profit by the wisdom and criticism of my fellow members.