

A HOME-SCHOOLROOM IN MADEIRA.¹

By Mrs. EGERTON EVANS.

The fact of my writing a paper on Home Education might well give rise in the minds of my hearers to an expectancy of settling down to listen to an authoritative and learned discourse by 'A Mother who knows!' It is only fair to dispel any such illusion before embarking on my experiences, which contain no pearls of wisdom nor any startling records of success.

The reason I have been asked to record my experiences in this most interesting field of education is, on the contrary, just to show that a very busy and house-tied mother *may* undertake this work; that even if she may fall short of some of the ideals and programmes of work, yet she may claim a success amply sufficient to justify her decision to start a P.N.E.U. home-schoolroom.

This paper may be said, then, to be written for the encouragement of busy mothers who think they have not time to teach their children.

But for the help and guidance of the P.N.E.U. and P.U.S. I should still be thinking that myself. They, however, helped to provide a strong and eager ally who has been my faithful assistant at all our lessons. This helper's name is Interest. Any success that may have attended my own efforts has been due in very large measure to the interest aroused in the children—and in myself—by the carefully thought-out programmes and books on which their teaching is based.

[p 294]

In January, 1930, when my youngest child was three months old, I realised that the time had come when arrangements had to be made for the education of the two girls, then aged 6 and 5 respectively.

Our home was in the island of Madeira, a little bungalow with a large sunny verandah, standing on a little plateau some 300 yards from the road and surrounded by precipitous hillsides clothed in pine and eucalyptus woods. We were 2,300 feet above sea level and over an hour's stiff climb from the town of Funchal. At this height, the climate is healthy and invigorating and children thrive amazingly. As there are no poisonous reptiles or insects or dangerous animals to be feared, they led an absolutely natural and unfettered life from the time they could crawl—in fact they were healthy little savages.

Our reasons for deciding on home education were not that we had any theories or startling new ideas that we wished to try out on the children, but rather a financial difficulty, together with the fact that we were geographically some considerable distance from any school centre, and even as regards education at local schools (such as they are!) our inaccessibility was such as to make this impracticable.

Some months earlier I had come in touch with the P.N.E.U. and read the books, so I decided to enrol, and I have never regretted my decision.

When it came to the point, I must admit I was full of doubts as to the feasibility of my being able to tackle what seemed at first sight to be a whole time job, whilst continuing to do my household work and care for my baby. My own education had been of the sketchy variety and I felt terribly at sea—that was nearly five years ago and the children just beginning, and here we are still at it and still managing to keep up.

Our house was not a large one, but also it was not a model one—no refrigerator, vacuum cleaner or other labour savers; no electric light or gas, even no coal, just oil lamps and a wood stove involving attention at frequent intervals just to keep it alight.

With a family of a husband and three invariably hungry children to feed, and a house to keep moderately clean (if not

[p 295]

polished) with no help except that of a raw Portuguese peasant girl, the prospect of devoting hours each day to the schoolroom seemed somewhat overwhelming, especially when I considered the many other jobs which had to be tackled, such as, for instance, looking after poultry, keeping an eye on the 'fazenda' (Portuguese for farm and kitchen-garden) while my husband was in town at work. I was simply appalled and reminded of the old song of the farmer's boy 'And the rest of the time's your own.'

However, by getting up early and keeping busy, it all got done and in 'the rest of the time' I have worked up quite a useful little business in home-made sweets, chocolates, cakes and jam, etc.

Anyhow I, metaphorically speaking, rolled up my sleeves and decided to see what I could do about it. I realised at this stage that these first two children had no pre-training and that was going to handicap us in getting under way on the programme, and when I went into the programme it seemed to me impossible that we should ever manage to cover such a vast range of subjects as was there set forth!

A small sitting-room was re-named the schoolroom and lessons were begun.

Certain initial difficulties arose and, it must be confessed, have never been properly overcome. I refer to tidiness and punctuality. However much we home-schoolroom mothers may strive in this direction, our chances of success, I'm afraid, are far smaller than in a school, or in a schoolroom presided over by an experienced teacher. We miss the complete change of atmosphere, the transition from the world of play to the world of work that appertains in a school.

Are our own particular youngsters more unpunctual and more untidy than others, I often wonder? In these matters, I fear, we cannot claim success.

The encouraging aspect is that somehow we scramble through, hoping for improvement and that, despite a failure here or there, we manage on the whole to go forward successfully.

Another early difficulty in my case, and one which may apply to many mothers, was the realisation, which trying to teach

[p 296]

brings to some of us, of our own ignorance, even on subjects upon which we had felt ourselves to be reasonably well informed.

My own experience is that one's confidence grows as one's knowledge increases—in fact, I feel I am learning as much as the children.

Once under way, most of the difficulties which loomed so large at the outset disappeared. Some, however, remain.

I suppose most of us have some special bugbear. Mine is mathematics, and here I really did *not* feel myself competent to instruct. Our solution to this problem was to arrange a weekly visit to town for an arithmetic lesson from a friend. School books for the day's work go with us and a picnic basket and we do all the day's work in town. If the weather is good, we do a lot of

our lessons on the rocks down by the sea, with a long break for bathing. It is not an ideal arrangement, perhaps, but the best we can manage. The children's father keeps an eye on the arithmetic books during the rest of the week and so we manage.

A serious and inevitable remaining difficulty is the co-ordination of school and house work. There is no real system for this in our case. I won't attempt to say how it is done. It is just a day to day, an hour to hour, problem, which I can no more explain than I can say what is for dinner a fortnight hence!

I have had to re-arrange the timetable slightly in order to give myself a little spare time to deal with outside demands. For instance, written narrations on the morning's lessons are written in the afternoon while I am busy about various matters. Map-drawing is done then too, and anything else that the children have to do by themselves. We try to give the correct amount of time to this work, but not at the given hours. Not ideal, but unavoidable in the circumstances.

The children certainly do enjoy their lessons and are always glad when the new books and papers arrive and we can begin the term after the holidays. Of course, we *do* strike bad patches and occasionally we have had to drop a subject for a time when it begins to pall, but they always resume it eagerly after a rest.

It is often very hard to keep to just the amount set for each lesson, so eager are the pupils for '*just a little more, please.*'

[p 297]

History of all kinds is the favourite subject of all. Friends are often amazed at these children's knowledge of history and their sense of period, a matter that is tremendously helped by the Century Books.

Picture Study is another great joy. One evening an excited young person came rushing along to drag me to a certain spot. 'Come and see the sunset—it's a Corot one, all swimmy light.'

The *Illustrated London News* is seized with eagerness and the pictures in it discussed with us, and usually something is found on which our lessons have touched and vitalised. The P.U.S. programmes and books certainly do feed these avid young minds and open windows everywhere! And another boon they confer is a taste for literature and an intolerance of 'trashy' books, already noticeable in these youngsters.

Geography is very popular too and the geography game frequently enlivens meal-times.

The children always rejoice when a knotty problem sends us to the reference books—I make a point of *never* pretending to knowledge that I do not possess [sic]—the Encyclopaedia and Atlas are so full of fascination and the point on which we were doubtful becomes very firmly fixed when he [sic] have had to hunt it out.

As soon as their father returns home in the evenings, there is a voluble recapitulation of the day's lessons for his benefit.

Thanks to the excellent English in which all the books used in the P.U.S. are written, the children have a good and wide vocabulary, and they often surprise strangers by their ability to discuss many matters not usually thought to be of interest to such young people—mostly subjects introduced in their lessons and talked over afterwards with their parents—and still they are true children, full of fun and joy in the common, jolly things around them, and at times *far* from angelic!

They are very proud of their school books and always enjoy showing them to their friends—the other day the elder girl heard a young tutor complain that he *could not* get his pupil interested in geography and she chimed in ‘Well, you ought to teach him out of our geography books, and then he’ll like it all right.’

So I hark back again to the choice of books—the burden that the P.N.E.U. takes off the inexperienced teachers’ shoulders.

[p 298]

I do consider the learning and practising of various handicrafts, such as the P.N.E.U. advocates, a most excellent thing for children, but as I’ve had no time or facilities for teaching these to my youngsters, they have turned their spare energies to all sorts of practical work, such as sewing, cooking, washing and ironing clothes, washing dishes and making doll’s furniture and clothes. They take care of poultry, rear chicks and pigeons, exercise the calves, harvest fruit and make themselves generally useful and are, in consequence, becoming thoroughly reliable and a great help at home.

When an old man came to convert our withies into baskets for the farm use, the children spent any spare moments with him and at the end of a day or two, I was presented with charming little baskets they had made out of rushes and small osiers.

Their nature studies are largely self-taught, for it is seldom that they can be formally taken for a walk and they range the countryside, precipitous as it is, freely and collect much Nature lore, and this they do in all weathers.

Often they erect a tent and do ‘camping,’ cooking many odd little meals over a smoky fire. I have never known them bored.

Unfortunately, the difficulty of obtaining the requisite gramophone records has prevented our attempting the Music Appreciation. There is a prohibitive Customs Tariff and no Gramophone Club to join. This is a great regret of mine, for my own powers as a pianist do not enable me to substitute pieces played on the piano for records made by the great!

In this lovely, remote spot there are no facilities for the study of architecture or antiquities or for stimulating an interest in historical matters by visiting ancient places and buildings or museums, but even so, the children take a deep interest in any discoveries reported and illustrated in the newspapers, and we often plan wonderful pilgrimages to the interesting spots we have read about and which they seem to see so vividly in imagination.

It is fascinating work, this studying *with* one’s youngsters, and ‘off duty’ we have always so much to discuss and plan and think about that we are all the greatest of friends.

[p 299]

Often when I have a sudden large order for sweets wanted in a hurry, one child will read aloud to us while the others work with me, preparing nuts or some such tiresome job, so wings are lent to our fingers and the lesson gets done automatically.

When the youngest child, a boy, got beyond the morning-sleep stage, he was put on to the verandah floor with a number of toys to play with while we were at lessons in a room opening off the balcony. That scheme answered all right for a bit and then he began to long for admission to that fascinating, forbidden room. It was explained to him that if he were allowed in, he must be quiet. At first he was given bricks and allowed to play on the floor, and would do so quietly for quite long stretches. He is now promoted to a high chair at the table, and has pencil, paper and paints and a book and amuses himself quietly at what he terms ‘my lessons’

for a couple of hours each morning.

He can read and write all the letters and listens to many of the lessons so carefully that he knows his sisters' recitations as well as they do and knows all the maps they study—all without actually being *taught* anything. He will be far easier to begin than the elder children were, for he has learnt of his own accord to concentrate and to regard lessons as something very desirable.

His sisters often play at 'school' and have taught him an amazing amount in that way. He is now 5½ and when he is 6, he will be ready to begin at IB—a pre-school training without tears or trouble for anyone.

¹ P.N.E.U. Conference Paper.