

## IMAGINATION AS A POWERFUL FACTOR IN A WELL-BALANCED MIND.<sup>1</sup>

BY E. A. PARISH.

MRS. GRAY has made us all feel the great need of imagination; she has shown us that life cannot go on well without it; that unless we have that gift from God we cannot hope to be reasonable and considerate, loving and sympathetic; she has encouraged us by making us believe that the power of imagination is, to some extent, latent in every individual, and she has pointed out the duty of parents and teachers to train this power. When we hear what great things may be achieved by the proper use of the imagination, how social problems and political differences way [sic] be straightened out by it, and family life softened and sweetened, we see that imagination is indeed a powerful factor in a well-balanced mind.

It appears to be abundantly evident that the power is given in varying degree to every human being. It is not the monopoly of the great or rich, but is the inheritance of us all. "God has planted the world in man's heart."

"To the child, from the beginning, life is the unfolding of one vast mystery; to him our stalest commonplaces are great news, our dullest facts prismatic wonders. To the baby who has never seen a red ball, a red ball is a marvel, new and magnificent as ever the golden apples were to Hercules.

"You show the child many things, all strange, all entrancing; it sees, it hears, it touches; it learns to co-ordinate sight and touch and hearing. You tell it tales of the things it cannot see and hear and touch, of men 'that it may never meet, of lands that it shall never see'; strange, black and brown and yellow people, whose dress is not the dress of mother and nurse—strange glowing yellow lands, where the sun burns like fire, and flowers grow that are not like the flowers in the fields at home. You tell it that the stars, which look like pin-holes in the floor of heaven, are really great lonely worlds, millions of miles away; that the

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earth, which the child can see for itself to be flat, is really round; that nuts fall from the trees because of the force of gravitation, and not, as reason would suggest, merely because there is nothing to hold them up. And the child believes; it believes all the seeming miracles.

"Then you tell it of other things, no more miraculous and no less; of fairies, and dragons, and enchantments, of spells and magic, of flying carpets and invisible swords. The child believes in these wonders likewise, why not? If very big men live in Patagonia, why should not very little men live in flower-bells? If electricity can move unseen through the air, why not carpets? The child's memory becomes a storehouse of beautiful and wonderful things which are, or have been, in the visible universe, or in that greater universe, the mind of man. Life will teach the child soon enough to distinguish between the two.

"But there are those who are not as you and I. These say that all the enchanting fairy romances are lies, that nothing is real that cannot be measured and weighed, seen or heard or handled. Such make their idols of stocks and stones, and are blind and deaf to the things of the spirit. These hard-fingered materialists crush the beautiful butterfly wings of imagination, insisting that pork and pews and public-houses are more real than poetry; that a looking glass is more real than love, a viper than valour. These Gradgrinds give to the children the stones, which they call facts, and deny to the little ones the daily bread of dreams. [sic]

I have been quoting this from Mrs. Nesbit<sup>2</sup> and I would echo her plea. It is the children who are right and we who are wrong, the world is more wonderful and more beautiful than even children think, and yet we would for ever correct them and inform them as to what we believe really is. We substitute facts for that wonder which is the seed of knowledge, and then we are amazed that eager, sweet-faced children grow into dull and indifferent little boys and girls.

The word imagination means to face—to visualize an image, to almost make the thought concrete from within. The power of reasoning and the power of imagining go hand in

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hand. The power of reason without imagination tends to make us materialists and unable to understand faith.

“This life’s five windows of the soul  
Distort the heavens from pole to pole;  
And lead you to believe a lie  
When you see *with* not *through* the eye.” [sic]  
*Blake.*

The teacher must bear in mind that his most important task is to train this magnificent helper, to educate it in the right way, to set it on the right path. When children seem to be very unimaginative, much may be done by teaching them to visualize things, not from their own point of view, but from the point of view of those they love. For imagination is born of love and it is only through love that the child comes out of himself and looks at things as they are, apart from his ego. It is only through love that he will forget himself till his visualization is peopled by others than himself.

An instance of the complete negation of imagination is given when the Egoist greets himself in the eyes of his adoring Letitia.

If, as Pestalozzi said, a child’s awakening consciousness brings him a twofold idea—first to build a house in which to live, and next to build a door through which he can communicate with that which is outside the house—that door is the imagination and the key is memory. Wordsworth shows this in his Poems of the Imagination, and notably in the “Reverie of Poor Susan,” whose heart is in heaven as she sees, not only remembers but sees, “green pastures, a mountain ascending, and a vision of trees,” and all in Cheapside.

“If anyone wants Fairy-land  
A grassy field will do,  
A grassy field, blue sky o’erhead  
With whitest clouds about it spread,  
And just a child or two.  
If anyone wants Fairy-land  
A grassy field will do.

“If anyone wants Fairy-land  
A London street will do,  
A street that windeth to the West,  
Where sunsets do their heavenly best

For hearts that love the view.  
If anyone wants Fairy-land  
A London street will do.

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“Oh, near and far is Fairy-land  
And *everywhere* will do!  
The earth is full of shining dreams  
E’en darkest nooks reflect their gleams  
Most magical of hue,  
Oh, ye, who enter Fairy-land,  
'Tis yours to prove it true!”<sup>3</sup>

The work that the children are doing in the Parents’ Union School is full of opportunities for developing the great gift of the imagination. One has only to take up any book in use in the Parents’ Union School to find abundant mind-food of the kind we are seeking. Take this, the first lesson on the New Testament, set for the term’s work for the beginners. We read in St. Luke, “And it came to pass afterwards, that he went through every city and village, preaching and shewing the glad tidings of the Kingdom of God; and the twelve were with Him.” Here we are bidden to remember how the Lord led his people of old: “As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings: so the Lord alone did lead him,” and we see at once that we must pause here and picture to ourselves “the meek procession of the Lamb,” that dear frail figure striding onward to work and sorrow, shielding, bearing, helping, with divine patience leading those who followed till they would be fitted to be sent forth alone. Perhaps nothing so fills the mind of a child with dreams and beautiful imaginings as the Bible language. I have known a child of six so thrilled with the thought of “the Spirit moving upon the face of the waters” that he could think over it for days. Miss Mason always urges teachers to use the Bible and the Bible only in teaching, to read passages to the children and to let them narrate; difficulties may be explained first, but the words of the Bible must always be the last sound in their ears, a possession for ever.

It is a great thing to have a teacher who makes it a rule of life never to tell things that can be found out unaided. Listen to the young Pisistratus Caxton:—

“‘My dear,’ said my father, leaning his hand on my shoulder, ‘everybody who is in earnest to be good, carries

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two fairies about with him—one here,’ and he touched my heart; ‘one here,’ and he touched my forehead.

“‘I don’t understand, papa.’

“‘I can wait till you do, Pisistratus!’”<sup>4</sup>

The most thrilling things are those which nobody understands. Such as the unanswerable question that was asked by Algernon Blackwood’s Uncle Henry a short while ago, “Why has God put blue dust upon the body of a dragon-fly?”

It seems that a very little fact will start one on a good deal of imagining. Daffodils bloom early because they have had food stored up in the bulb since the autumn, how about the anemone then, has that a bulb? If not, how does it manage? I will quote again straight from one of the books in use. “Deal with plants as living things with wonderful habits and marvellous life histories. Let our questions be, ‘Where does it live? How does it grow? Why

does it climb? How does it climb? How is it protected? What is the advantage of this or that particular form, colour and habit?' etc., [sic] It is far better to encourage the continuous thoughtful observation of the commonest weed in the neglected corner of the garden or on a wayside bank, than to make a study of the most conspicuous flower apart from its accompanying growth—its natural surroundings.”<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps this is one of the secrets of the good work which is being done in this subject by the pupils of the Parents' Union School, they feel that the world of nature is free to them, for they are left, as far as possible, unhampered by “must not” and “do not.” Their study of nature is loving and sympathetic, and carried on with fullest recognition of the rights of the Nixies and the Pixies. Much free time is spent in the open air every day, and the children are guided wisely and not too obviously. They know what it is to breathe the freshness of the morning, to feel the loneliness and peace of quiet places, where the parsley fern is growing, where the streamlet trickles over butterwort and sundew, they know what it is to find the world so beautiful that the heart leaps and is glad. It is in these silent places that they come face to face with God, and register high resolves which form the [p 384]

keynote of their lives. It is not only that they are learning botany or natural history, though these studies can immeasurably increase their joy, but they are also acquiring a priceless treasure which can never be taken from them; which will fill their hearts with praise. I have noticed reverently, that those of my friends who seem always young, no matter the date of their birth, are those who have never lost this happy intimacy with nature, they still “believe in love, believe in loveliness, believe in belief;” and they still know what it is

“To see a world in a grain of sand  
And a heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And eternity in an hour.”

If you were to ask me which part of the Parents' Union School gives most scope for the exercise of imagination, I should tell you that I do not know. As I take up the programmes headed by the motto “I am, I can, I ought, I will,” itself so full of stimulating thought, and glance through them from the beginning of class i. to the end of class iv., I can see nothing but food for the imagination, if rightly used. The balance is held between things and books, the Gardening Book, which makes you want to begin gardening straight away, “for the pleasure of looking at flowers in someone else's garden is not nearly so great as the pleasure of growing flowers ourselves. We enjoy their beauties much more when we have watched them growing from the time when they first pushed their tiny green blades through the brown earth. Anyone who has a garden should try and make a little paradise of it—a place in which they can always be happy and busy like birds, butterflies and bees.”<sup>6</sup>

Paper folding enables children to design and execute their own models, raffia work provides them with Christmas and birthday presents, and affords such excellent opportunities for independent and original work.

Handicraft classes with us are not stiff and formal proceedings, children may move to fetch their materials or to get a better light on their models, they may talk. One sees the proof of the interest they are taking in the fact that [p 385]

at these times, they only want to talk about their work. Those of you who teach will know the expectant and pleased air of the child who comes to fetch a lump of clay. He knows that he is going to model an apple and he already sees in the clay the wonder of beauty which will be the result of his work. He is, at first, surprised that his efforts at modelling produce so strange a result, that when he would press he squeezes, that when he would make a dimple he makes a hole, [sic] Gradually he comes to know that, first of all, he must think what he is going to do, and that after long thinking only may he venture to act. By imagination, he must see the goal towards which he is working, with his brain he must so control his hands and arms, and that they will fashion for him the thing he has in mind. When he experiences this sense of mastery over material, he has taken the first great step towards independence, and he has the comforting sense that what he does will not be touched, that bad or good, it will stand as his work.

What has this to do with imagination? you ask. I think it has a great deal. The child who knows how to make a basket, a clay model, a cardboard coalscuttle, an apron, a pudding, and who, later on, can design and work in leather or copper and ultimately bind a book, such a child has visions of a house beautiful and knows that it takes but a turn of the hand here and there to turn the barrack into the home. "Loving eye and patient hand, shall work with joy and bless the land."

For the right use of the programmes two things are necessary—solitude and independence. Children must have these. Nursery children come off fairly well in these respects; they get time when they can wander and dream alone in the garden. But this happy state often ends where school-room life begins. Lessons, walk, and lessons again, always in company, and always something that must be done now. Miss Mason devises time-tables which cover such reasonable hours as to leave time over for this solitude, but parents are often very culpable in thinking that Tango or some other new thing must be learned as well, and the much needed time for solitude is used for plans which necessitate hurried journeys, always in the company of a responsible person, who feels it her duty [p 386]

to talk in an instructive way, and the thinking time, the growing time, the time in which the mind is to find food is diminished, and the child becomes restless, tiresome, irritable, disobedient, everything that a child who is reputed to be difficult can be. The parents marvel and say, "But we are giving him the best education that can be procured, we are neglecting no opportunities." Kind, generous parents! You are giving your child every opportunity but one, and that is self-development; by your generous care you are safeguarding him from ever using his own mind, ever relying upon himself in any way. The child who at first found interference irksome, later depends on it so much that he is unable to work without constant prodding from his mentor. I believe that this is the prime reason of the oft repeated lament of teachers and professors, "little ones are so eager, older children are less keen, adults are dull and lethargic."

We do not find this but contrariwise, class iv. is even more keen than class i. The reason is not far to seek. All the way through their school career the children have been relying on their own minds, feeling themselves increase in wisdom as well as in stature, keeping a right estimate of their own progress because they have seen that nowhere at any time they have been nearer than the threshold of the dwellings they love; that at no time, no matter what opportunities be theirs, will they ever get beyond the first few steps of the dear dwellings, therefore they will view their own progress with ever increasing humility. But this humility will not be accompanied by hopelessness, for the very search is so

delectable. Days go like that, finding a little here and a little there and always finding that which is so precious. All of us must know what it is to have longed very ardently for something which has seemed almost entirely beyond our reach, till at length, by dint of great and persevering effort, it has been attained, and oh! the joy of it! We will not, then, deprive children of this highest of all joys, the joy of attainment, but remember the teaching of God, who never gives to us as a free gift that which we may obtain by our own efforts. Might not this bring some light on the problem which we are trying to solve this week, this problem of law and liberty?

This necessity for effort is the central cord in all the  
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discipline of our lives. It is not a cause of sadness for us but rather of joy, exhilaration, whenever we conquer. The children are so eager because they see beyond, because in every lesson they take, they understand what they are after. Writing; but is this then an aggravating game which merely enables you to make a straight or round line? Read in *Just So Stories* "The First Letter," and now you want to go to work with a zeal. There is always a glorious reason for everything we have to do, and to find it we have only to look beyond, but the children must learn to look beyond for themselves, and not indolently to use our eyes. But let no one think that this means a flowery path of ease for the teacher. No child will get far who has for her companion a teacher to whom these things are a matter of indifference, whose own vision is limited.

Rightly taught, every subject gives fuel to the imagination, and without imagination no subject can be rightly followed. It is by the aid of imagination that a child comes to love people who do not belong to his own country, and as he learns the history of their great deeds and noble efforts, he is eager to learn something of the country in which they lived, of its shape and size, of its mountains, woods and rivers, of the causes that made the people what they are. We English people, I am sorry to say, have not usually the art of teaching our children to love other countries, and many of us think of foreign lands as we might think of a show at the White City, something that is there for us to look at, something that may rest us or divert us, but not something that stands as high, if not higher, than we do. We are still deluded by the idea that we may travel in a missionary spirit with civilisation streaming from our garments. We must change something in ourselves before we can hope to do much for our children in this respect. We may help ourselves as well as them by using books which will help us to visualize the adventures of other people and the beauty of their lands, such books as Marco Polo knew how to write six hundred years ago, of romantic wanderings, the account of which created Asia for the European mind.

Those who have used them know what Miss Mason's Geography Books do for the children, how they present

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pictures of the spot to the mind's eye, and treat of those matters which the traveller and reader seek to be instructed upon, leaving a taste and desire to read more about it all later on.

Foreign languages may be taught in the same way, though here the teacher has even more help in the material she is using, for she has as her handmaid, the beautiful imagery of the language she is teaching, the joy of the sound and rhythm of the beautiful words. But she, as well as her pupil, must see the fresh horizon that opens out and the new light that plays upon her own language, as it is made more intelligible through the study of a foreign

tongue, teacher and taught must be inspired by the sympathy towards those who are strangers to them and whose language has hitherto been but a sound in their ears.

The spark of the Divine Power which we call Imagination must for ever remain a spark unless it is fed. The plentiful diet provided for the children of the Parents' Union School teaches them to feed themselves and no longer to rely on spoon-fed doses, and it teaches them that one book leads to another, that when they are learning about the reign of Henry III, they can find many sidelights in the writings of Roger Wendover and Matthew Paris, that the Sire de Joinville gives a most graphic description of the "world of the Crusade," and the saintly King Louis, and fills you with love, not only for the people and scenes he depicts, but for himself, the honest genial chronicler. That "Tales of a Grandfather" gives them information which is eagerly received when it is taken simultaneously with the life of Edward I., and that the "Ballad of Sir Patrick Spens" has a peculiar charm when learned during the same term. So it is with all that the children learn, each book is hailed with delight because it is to tell them more about things which interest them already, it is as though there were no beginning and no end, but one long delightful middle. Long before the children can read, we set to work to establish the reading habit, and the little ones are familiar with Hans Anderson's *Fairy Tales*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, Mrs. Gatty's *Parables from Nature*, Andrew Lang's *Tales of Troy and Greece*. We do not tell the tales, we know we cannot, we read them as well as we know how

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and without comment, unless questions are asked. We rely upon the imagination of the children to work upon this material until it becomes theirs, and I think we do not deceive ourselves by so doing. A great thinker has said, "Children find their dreams in small things, men have ceased to dream and find nothing in great things."<sup>7</sup> This was written many years ago, is it better now? Let us take courage and believe that children who are being brought up by thoughtful P.N.E.U. parents will not come to see nothing in great things. Being accustomed to the "law which gives us freedom,"<sup>8</sup> having learned how to master material and had free access to books from their earliest childhood, having had food for the imagination and enjoyed the leisure necessary for its development, they must, nay, they do, become men and women who are distinguished by the happy balance of their mind.

I will conclude by quoting a passage from Dr. Greville Macdonald's most beautiful book, "The Child's Inheritance."

"The soul's light, the manhood's imagination, is that something in the child which recognises the shining light in all things living. It is the glad calling of voice to voice across the deeps of materialistic denials; across the graveyards of unserviceable ideals. It is that which makes the song of the birds, the colour of the flower, the smile of the baby and the voice of the prophet. It is, in a word, proof and justification of the glory of life, even as, because of our lifeless outlook, our uninspired education, our strife for the things of Cæsar, the light dies down in our heart and we sleep on the bed of our fooling. The imagination uplifts the living purpose; it is the will to do and become, the power to bear flowers and fruit as witnesses of Truth.

The soul of man is that full and rounded life of the man that may look forth where it will from this or that point of its habitation to find Truth. For Truth is not to be defined as objective or subjective, not to be demonstrated from without or to be perceived from within. It is "within ourselves and takes no rise from outward things." The truth at

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once appears and is lived as soon as the torch of imagination sets light to the burning bush, and discovers from that moment that the bush has always been a-burning. Thereafter also, that light which will never more lack oil, becomes inward, and the truth which we needed to discover without, is really within ourselves. But as is the quality of our igniting torch, so will be the quality of the bush's burning with rosy and upleaping or pallid and fluttering flame. "The establishment of truth depends upon the destruction of Falsehood continually," insists Blake; and the imagination intent upon its labour for Truth, will not rest until every dark window in the innermost keep is cleaned to let the light shine.

The imagination is a shining light which illuminates whatsoever it looks upon. Thus does the world without and the inheritance within, look so variously to different minds. By how much the soul shall illumine, by so much will it understand. The imagination is "the light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world."

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<sup>1</sup> Read at the P.N.E.U. Conference, held at Darlington, March, 1914.

<sup>2</sup> *Wings and the Child*.

<sup>3</sup> *Rose Goodwin*.

<sup>4</sup> *The Caxtons*.

<sup>5</sup> *Nature Study Guide*, Furneaux.

<sup>6</sup> *My First Book about Gardening*.

<sup>7</sup> "I fanciulli trovano il tutto anche nel niente, gli uomini il niente nel tutto." *Leopardi*.

<sup>8</sup> "Das Gesetz nur kann uns Freiheit geben." —*Goethe*.