REPORT OF THE P.N.E.U. MEETING.

NATURE STUDY.

By V. C. CURRY.

IT is difficult to know whether the P.N.E.U. have set about to choose their speaker on this occasion with a spirit of recrimination or discrimination! Had they knowledge of my very early life I could think the former. They must at any rate know that I have no bold words of wisdon [sic] to offer this assembly of eager listeners, and you must therefore take it that I am here to expiate in full those secret faults for which Longfellow says we would much rather be punished outright than suffer in silence. I refer of course to those days when I was somewhere about eight years old and helped on the cause of science in the following way. There was little that my brother and I did not know about newts—crested and smooth—just where they basked in the spring sunshine, and how best to catch them by slipping under their sleek orange waistcoats a cunningly twisted willow withy, and exactly what they required for nourishment, and also their ability to escape from even the most slippery-sided jam pot to roam loose in the house, or even 'cutely to bury themselves beneath a marble curb round the drawing-room hearth. At that time one of my joys in life was to go into the elementary schools not far from our house, sometimes to have a lesson, sometimes to peep curiously in and find out what boys learnt from masters differently from girls from mistresses. One form was particularly interesting for it consisted of boys taught by a woman. We resented this, it spoilt the pattern somehow. Besides was she not tall and thin and unnecessarily old—she must have been quite thirty! Our hostility must have been apparent—groundless as it was—and we were not to be wooed by being allowed frequent peeps at her aquarium, for which, (O woeful day!) she asked us to obtain specimens. We set to work and kept up a constant supply of newts. It was not for us to tell what we had discovered by observation, and not a doubt but that it must have been edifying to her class to see her neat slimy little minnows become definned and beheaded and then disappear; to see her water beetles appear less hairy about the legs, then with a distinctly deflated appearance; to see the newts themselves, frill-less, legless, minus, till but one champion remained within the lists to wait with eager, clawing little hands the arrival of fresh victims. I have since wondered if any of her pupils bore with them such deep marks of zeal as

I carry to this day in my forehead—the scar of a cut made by the edge of a spade whilst scanning my brother's work as he strove, in the name of science, to find the *skeletons* of the day old kittens drowned and buried three weeks ago, now coveted to embellish the good lady's museum of bones!

But I see that what I have to say about Nature work in the P.N.E.U. is only part of a general title—Democracy and Taste. These terms are so often on our lips that perhaps we seldom pause to consider that one of Miss Mason's contributions to education was to find that there is no Democracy, only Persons in whom is the image of God painted, the promise of God revealed. Stella Benson in her *Little World* has pictured what would happen if the "Voice of India" appeared in the Legislative Assembly—no vehement Swarajist, not a learned British Statesman, but just an Indian. It is an interesting thought. Miss Mason has gone further. She

has given us the key by means of which girls and boys taught in her principles may unlock the door of knowledge and say indeed, “Thou hast set my feet in a large room,” and gather that with which they may become no mere tinkling cymbals when their chance to speak comes.

It was Ruskin some fifty years ago who wrote that though we may have appeared to give up *slavery*, yet to all intents and purposes so long as we neglect to educate man in all his many parts, we are in effect keeping *slaves*. We cannot therefore stop to consider the utility of every subject put before a child, remembering that if we cannot put mental food and drink before him he must perforce stoop to the gutters and take what he finds there. There can be little doubt that most children have a real love of knowledge of outdoor things. Let us then not deny them this part of a liberal education.

To the country child such books as the P.N.E.U. offers for Nature Study will come as a matter of course. The books are merely a preparation for, or a chance of recalling, some out-of-door’s observation. I was lately walking in the fields with some ten children all about eight years old when a green woodpecker yaffled and flew close to us. It was a matter of a second or two to remind the children of the woodpecker that they had already read about in the “Eyes and No Eyes” series, but even then it was no easy matter to help them to see the shy bird. Without such knowledge as they had I should
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have thought it impossible. I can to this day remember the glow of pleasure that swept over me when at ten I found the first grass of Parnassus growing somewhat obscurely beside the Weir. I knew of it and recognised it immediately, though how I do not know, only being certain that unlike Robert Louis Stevenson, I did *not* learn the names of any plants from my nurse. (Must I recall for truth’s sake that my cousins who lived near the Weir and had never found, much less named, any flower that I could discover, were so delightfully and appropriately discomfited at my display of knowledge that I wore my scarlet tam o’shanter more jauntily than ever and swanked not a little!) No, it was not Nurse nor “Sister Dorothy” who taught me to love Nature. I was possessed of few books, but these treasures I had:—one, indulgent parents, who allowed us to roam and “stand and stare” and to row anywhere on the Thames provided locks and weirs were avoided, so that by ten years old I was familiar with frog and caddis, water vole and miller’s thumbs and dragon-flies;—secondly, an invalid friend, who as far as I knew could name any flower in the world; and, thirdly, a kindly garden boy who was guaranteed to brush one’s boots and allow one to wash in the greenhouse tank before presenting oneself within doors after an adventure. The consequent glorious experiences (so that for ever after such an expression as Keats uses “cool-rooted,” will recall to my mind no mere poetical vision, but a vivid experience of pulling the long purple stems of marsh marigolds growing in tufts beneath the heavily-scented may-trees in flooded meadows) might have been of a more scientific nature had there been a book to help. But one cannot tell, for you can read the life-story of a boy—now a famous writer—who under parental pressure at ten years had discovered a new species of sea-anemone and fifty years or so later can write this:

> “It is surely a mistake to look too near at hand for the benefits of education. What is actually taught in early childhood is often that part of training which makes least

impression on the character and is of the least permanent importance. My labours failed to make me a zoologist, and the multitude of my designs and my descriptions have left me helplessly ignorant of the anatomy of a sea-anemone. Yet I cannot look upon the mental discipline as useless. It taught me to concentrate my attention, to define the nature of distinctions, to see accurately and to name what I saw. Moreover, it gave me the habit of going on with any piece of work I had in hand, not flagging because the interest or picturesqueness of the theme had declined, but pushing forth towards a definite goal, well foreseen and limited beforehand."[1]

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But for the child in the town, what hope that any book or any world of nature can reach him? It is idle to suppose that because a rare bird is occasionally seen above the city, or the less rare birds are tempted to the various bird sanctuaries of the vicinity, that a child can thereby be attracted to study Natural History. Nature study is a matter of the trained eye. To the child who seldom, if ever, sets foot outside the town, Nature must be reached through literature. We are not seeking to teach from books what could better be learned out of doors. Geography is not to become a string of facts because it is not for us to visit the "still vexed Bermoothes," those "Cyprian groves" or the "clashing Symplegedes." I shall not easily forget the delights of *preparing* to go to Florence some years ago, nor can I easily forget the subsequent discovery that I saw only that which, since I was about sixteen and read *A Wanderer in Florence* word for word till I almost knew it by heart, I had prepared to see. There now seems to be, in some sort, a flow of humanity pouring out of our cities into the country. If we have been partly responsible for barring the road to fresh air and sunshine and joyous living before, keeping the goodly heritage of country houses and seaside holidays to ourselves, shall we not at least teach the children what to look forward to before they trample our heritage to dust? I am thinking now of some acres of magnificent trees, of a small space formerly white with snowdrops in the spring, never to blossom again, for a well-made macadam road is on top of them, and the trees are felled and "stubbed up" and the country has crept a little further away from all of us.

Is it not strange that man should have such an eye for regularity? I would at least like to think that the child, destined at fourteen to leave school and go to a factory to wrap up caramels in paper hour after hour, or depend for a livelihood on the regularity with which some other piece of work is done, has studied some of the works of God in their exquisite *irregularity*. Have you ever looked at a pheasant's feather? Even the maimed corpses in the poulterer's will show what I mean,—no two feathers are alike, the bars of iridescence, the sheening waves and lines, such a wealth of colour to each tiny plume, soberly backed with a downy plumelet along each shaft. It is at least due to the children to let them know that such things exist. For all there is the sky overhead, there are the sounds of nature, drowned though they may be by man. To

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the child who has learned to adapt himself to the sounds and sights of the country, no town can ever prove such a prison as the country does to the town dweller, who perceiving no signs of growth and life, and hearing nothing to break the monotony of his own thoughts, finds indeed that the country is a dull place. In Hardy's novels one is frequently struck by the contrast between the evident enjoyment of country life by those who live in it and the boredom of the town dweller who, from force of circumstances, is condemned to stay in the country for a few

months. It was not Fitzpiers, the clever young doctor lately settled near Hintock, but the bark-gatherers who, busy on stripping and peeling the felled trees, thought this April "a pleasant time."

> "The smoke from the little fire of peeled sticks rose between the sitters and the sunlight and behind its blue films stretched the naked arms of the prostrate trees. The smell of the uncovered sap mingled with the smell of burning wood, and the sticky inner surface of the scattered bark glistened as it revealed its pale madder hues to the eye."

Nor, though the idea of forsaking all practical aims to live in contentment, dawned on him, did it appeal to Fitzpiers that as his friends drove out of the woodland grove, "their wheels silently crushed delicately patterned mosses, hyacinths, primroses, lords-and-ladies and other strange and common plants and cracked up little sticks that lay across the track," though those sights and sounds were as meat and drink to the sublime figures of "Giles" and "Marty," Hintock-born.

Nature study should be a perpetual voyage of discovery. It may not be for us to discover fresh forms of life even though it is interesting to hear from time to time how vast are the fields of unexplored life amongst the lower forms of plant life or in the great ocean beds. It came with a distinct surprise to learn lately that the largest known plant is a sea-weed, which, growing to a height of 600 feet can cover acres with its leaves, and yet to hear that next to nothing is known about this class of plant. With all the spread of *information* concerning Nature to be found anywhere from the back of a cigarette card to the fortnightly-issued-in-40-parts-at-1/3, written down in popular language, one does not necessarily find a great *knowledge* and *love* of Nature. In one of the latter books it was somewhat exciting to turn to a chapter labelled "Hidden Marriages" only to find that the scientific word Cryptogamia,—in my school days as fascinating to me as Cotopaxi to the little boy in the modern poem, and, too, a joyfully acquired word to
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cover facts I'd learned myself from the violets in the garden,—thus blatantly explained!

It is delightful to read in Lord Grey's memoirs of his busy life of his refreshment in the country:—

> "Another aspect of the Akaba trouble was peculiar and personal. There are a few days in the first part of May when the beech trees in young leaf give an aspect of light and tender beauty to English country which is well known but indescribable. The days are very few; the colour of the leaves soon darkens, their texture becomes stiffer; beautiful they are still, but the 'glory and the dream are gone.' Unless Whitsuntide is unusually early, Sundays in the first half of May are the only days on which those who live in towns can be sure of a whole day spent in the country at leisure. The first Sunday in May was a little too early for the perfection of the beeches in the country round my Hampshire cottage; the second Sunday in May was the perfect day. In my calendar it was known as Beech Sunday, a day set apart and consecrated to enjoyment of the beauty of beech leaves and to thankfulness for it. It was my habit on that morning, each year, to bicycle to a beech-wood some nine miles from the cottage. There I lunched every year on that day at the foot of a certain tree. The wood was entirely of beech, the

> trees standing far apart, the grey boles straight up and clear and smooth for some distance above the ground. . . . . On the morning of Sunday, May 13th, we awaited the Turkish answer. About mid-day it came; it was completely satisfactory. I remained, so far as ultimatums to Turkey were concerned, a sadder and a wiser man. This ultimatum had been necessary but it was the outcome of a long drawn-out dispute and there had been no need to choose even a particular week, still less a Sunday, for its last day. I had now to wait another twelve months to see the great beech wood as I knew it in its greatest beauty."—[2]

or of the friend who had to leave a country retreat, after a few months' trial, no longer able to bear its "tingling silence"—perhaps such a silence as was experienced this last day of 1925 when, turning away from the raging North Sea and the great expanse of warm reddish sand traced and retraced with delicate patterns of ringed plovers' feet or the great trident-shaped mark of the gulls, and the shells skilfully emptied by the crows, we turned inland, and between walls of warm yellow car-stone, paused to take breath. The sun was gleaming on green moss pincushions now filled with little fruits as yet stalkless, and here and there a tiny orange cup of lichen showed. In the shelter of a rick a robin burst into song, and further inland beside a moat two slate-blue nut-hatches chased each other with excited whistle; one paused to creep precipitately head foremost down a wych elm, tapped and drew out a fat white maggot to be devoured on the next tree. Beneath ruddy osiers which threw the reflections of summer flowers into the water, moorhens "corked" occasionally, and blackbirds and
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thrushes threw the dead chestnut leaves about with much rustling.

It is impossible to look forward to the dawning of a New Year unmoved. Probably much of 1926 could be surmised for most of us. But with all its hopes and fears for me it dawns the brighter that I can hug myself in the knowledge of a discovery of 1925 that, live in the suburbs as I may, for some two shillings' worth of bus fare I can at a certain longed-for date betake myself to the spot where for a certainty I shall find mauve Pasque flowers for the first time—and two months later, a less romantic looking, but more prized flower, for nowhere else in England does it grow, and in the London list it stands honoured with "Counties—One" against its name; albeit that it stands not far removed in relationship from the little homely groundsel.

But let not the unwary grown-up admirer of P.N.E.U. ideals enter lightly into the study of birds—for before they do so I would have them understand what alienation it is likely to produce! From henceforward they must stand alone—incredulous, amongst the incredulous. No longer for them the easy path of credence in their neighbours' stories. Running down to breakfast flushed with the joy of having watched from my bed a king-fisher perch for a moment or two in a yellowing hazel tree in the late autumn, I found myself received coldly for "the birds that my friends, husband, children and maids see are invariably hoopoes, golden orioles, and spotted woodpeckers—whereas what *I* see are sparrows and hen chaffinches. How do you *know* it was a king-fisher?" Or from a short-sighted companion—"How did you *know* they were *swans* flying over the house—they just looked to me like any other bird!" Ten years ago I might have winced, but to-day I remember the stony silence with which two years ago I received the information that the bird that had just gone over was a widgeon. "I *know* because I saw a widgeon a few months ago!" I turned away to hide the well-if-it-was-it-had-no-business-to-be

expression on my face. Then there was the time when the Waxwing appeared—having failed to record himself on any previous visit to Ambleside. But he had the good grace to return to the same spot a year later, and my reputation was established for once.

More than this—you must expect your kind offers to go for a walk with anyone to be repulsed with "not if you're going to stand at every gate to the woods and think you hear a
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nightingale," or, "must we look at birds? A few common names of flowers I don't mind, but I *won't* learn about mosses and birds."

I instance these few reminiscences in no spirit of levity but to show what valuable training is to be had for the mere taking. Where lax speech and thought are common and when man's invention is ever turned towards that which will save taking pains, that power of patient watching and close and accurate observation is no small gift to give a child. I quote from Ruskin:—

> "Peace, obedience, faith; those three for chief good; next to these, the habit of fixed attention with both eyes and mind . . . . this being the main practical faculty of my life, causing Mazzini to say of me a year or two before his death, that I had the most analytic mind in Europe."

It is at once the joy and elusiveness of Nature work with children and adults,—that it can never rank as imparted knowledge, but must always be an individual experience—ratified and confirmed it may be by the scientific writings and the wealth of literature available to everyone. It has been a matter of some interest to me since I grew up to wonder whether the learned Oxford don who took me for the only kind of walk I ever had that approximated to the P.N.E.U. "Nature Walk" really knew the names of the little yellow and brown flower in a stream and the great golden over-grown buttercup in a ditch; or whether, skilled teacher as he must have been, did he know what intense delight it would be to me to carry two plants home and search for their names in the one poor little Flora I possessed, and triumphantly name them Bladderwort and Greater Spearwort? But delightful as were his stories of birds, they fell on deaf ears—my one book on the subject of ornithology being about birds' eggs and "nesty-ing" and "minny-ing," the last hardly recognisable as fishing for minnows perhaps,—being fairly strictly forbidden by my nurse—and anyhow impossible except in Spring. Would it not have been some relief to the rather frightened child of twelve who, awakened by bright moonlight pouring into her room, rose to look out towards the Hinkseys of Matthew Arnold's poems and found the world a flood of song as lark after lark rose in the light that was indeed bright as day, though dawn was yet far off—to have been able to narrate this in a Nature-note book and read about happenings as wonderful in the *Fairyland of Science* or *Winners in Life's Race*? There was
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only fear felt—the more so that the story was not believed—by the same child at eight year's old, who, walking barefooted as the gipsy outside Bagley Wood, surprised a sleeping grass-snake which leaped into the air clear over a tuft of fern. A simple fact to remember for twenty-five years until a snake-lover could be found who accepted the story gravely because it tallied

with his own experience. The P.N.E.U. child, familiar with records of animal life, British and Foreign, might have followed up such an event with joy and understanding.

That Nature has inspired Art and Poetry ever since either began is readily appreciated. What were the first carved acanthus leaves like when the sculptor, looking at the plant, first saw them—I mean saw them in the way that every year some common plant will dawn afresh on one's mind, until one says, for instance, "can it be that I ever saw hollyhocks before—certainly I've never noticed the way each bud stands poised on a supporting outstretched little leaf." Certainly there is something refreshingly beautiful about the carved forms of leaves taken from Nature and worked into no stiff pattern, such as one sees on the tomb of Frideswide in Oxford Cathedral. Keen, accurate observation must result from the attempt to record some beautiful fact, by painting as children do in Nature-note books. From Ruskin again I quote and with him end—glad to think that the P.N.E.U. teaches its children to read and appreciate the works of one who thought truly of Education, and who with Miss Mason has always seemed to me to be a Doer and not only a Hearer of the Educational "word":—

> "That small aspen tree against the blue sky. Languidly, but not idly, I began to draw it, and as I drew, the languor passed away; the beautiful lines insisted on being traced without weariness. More and more beautiful they became, as each rose out of the rest, and took its place in the air. With wonder increasing every instant, I saw that they 'composed' themselves, by finer laws than any known of men. At last, the tree was there, and everything that I had thought before about trees, nowhere . . . . That all the trees of the wood (for I saw surely that my little aspen was only one of their millions) should be beautiful—more than Gothic tracery, more than Greek—vase imagery, more than the daintiest embroiderers of the East could embroider, and the artfullest painters of the West could limn it. This was indeed an end to all former thoughts with me, an insight into a new silvan world."

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[1] *Father & Son*, by Edmund Gosse.

[2] *Twenty-five Years*, by Viscount Grey of Falloden.