4 (a). The New Facility in Composition.

By MR. C. JONES, Head Master of Woolaston Council School.

Teachers who follow Miss Mason's methods will readily admit that under her scheme composition has made great strides, and a little thought will reveal the reason. In her book on "Home Education" she gives some useful information. "Our duty," she says, "is to provide the children with the material in their lessons, and leave the handling of such material to themselves, for, if we would believe it, composition is as natural as running and jumping to children who have been allowed due use of books. It is well for them not even to learn the rules for placing full stops and capital
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letters until they notice how these things occur in their books." The thought which prompted these remarks is plain, and the advice, if we wish for real composition, is sound. For children under nine years the whole question of composition resolves itself into that of narration; narrate a part and write a part, or write an account of a lesson studied, an incident witnessed, or some such simple matter that they know. Compare this with the "Suggestions." "For purposes of instruction, the plan of calling upon one or two children to give a full connected account of the lessons is undoubtedly superior to the method of question and answer. It is, indeed, indispensable if real fluency of composition is to be obtained in later years." (Page 31, par. 23.)

The books from which the lessons are taken are undoubtedly literary and interesting, and appeal to the scholars. In narration, the author is followed, and his words and phrases are reproduced. Thus, then, even very young children are imitating the styles of good authors, enlarging their vocabularies, and increasing their powers of expression. There is greater interest in the work, a larger amount written, and the quality is superior to that we have been accustomed to. Errors are frequent, it is true, but Ruskin has truly said, "The best that is in us cannot manifest itself except in the company of much error."

Children of seven will write a connected and clearly expressed account of a lesson several weeks after it has been given, provided that lesson has been followed by narration. I give an extract from one of Grimm's Fairy Tales, from the examination paper of a boy of seven:—

"In the middle of the night in came two little men, who jumped up on the bench and began hammering away so swiftly and lightly that the shoemaker could not take his eyes off them, and they did not go away till all was finished. When they had finished the shoes, they began jumping over tables and chairs until they came to the door, and then they ran off. The shoemaker's wife said: 'They must be cold although they run about, for they have no clothes on their bodies.' She said she would make for each a shirt, a coat, a waistcoat and trousers, and she said 'Do you make a pair of shoes for each.' In the night the two little men came in, and they found clothes, but no leather, so they put on their jackets and began smoothing them down, saying:

'Smart and natty boys are we,
Cobblers we'll no longer be.'"

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Let us then pass on to the older children. It must be remembered that these have not received the full benefits of the scheme, but that narration is taken, although much more writing is done. It is in these classes where the effect of the reading of good literature is felt most. There are, of course, some scholars who compose better than others; in fact, each has his own individual style. It is here that the greatly increased vocabulary makes itself felt, where errors are fewer, and the style generally free and flowing, where the scholars have the eager, earnest looks on their faces, while their pens glide rapidly over the paper, and then sometimes fail to travel quickly enough for their minds. That the lessons studied are remembered, and that the style of the authors is imitated, we have abundant evidence. I give an extract from another examination paper:—

Question: Write an essay upon Pandora's gifts.

"Pandora (the first woman) was made in Heaven, and given by Jupiter to Prometheus and Epimetheus as a punishment to the former for stealing fire from Heaven. Everyone in Heaven gave something to perfect her. Venus gave her beauty, Murcury [sic] persuasion, and Apollo music. You would have thought that Pandora was a good gift, but later on we shall see she was not.

In his house Epimetheus kept a jar containing things he did not require for the making of man. One day Pandora was seized with an eager curiosity to see the contents of the jar. I daresay she knew she would be doing wrong by opening it, but she allowed her curiosity to overcome her. She had no sooner removed the cover than out flew rheumatism, gout, colic for the body, and evil thoughts for the mind. Seeing this, Pandora hastened to replace the lid, but everything had escaped except hope, and that still lay in the bottom. If we get into sore distress, hope does not entirely leave us."

This is one story, but I will tell another.

Without comment, reproductions of Fra Angelico's picture of "An Angel" were distributed to a class of boys and girls of ages 10–13. I should like to give a few of the compositions (which were by no means perfect), but the reading of them would occupy too much time. I content myself by giving a few of the expressions. "Her wings are arched like Cupid's bow"—"as beautiful as Diana"—"more beautiful than Pygmalion's ivory virgin." One girl, who was evidently charmed with the picture, said: "I cannot put into words the beauty and glory of the angel."

Miss Mason's scheme requires the writing of verses in the

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upper forms, and this introduces the interesting subject of verse composition. Let us be quite clear what we mean by this. It means the writing of verse, and verse is purely and simply a matter of form. It should not be confused with poetry, which is something indefinable and infinitely beautiful that appeals to all that is highest and best in us. Poetry is not a matter of form; it is inspiration, and proceeds from inspiration. We shall be fortunate indeed if we find in our schools children who possess the divine gift of poetry, but it is possible for our scholars to write creditable verse, and that is what we call verse composition. We may succeed in enabling

them to write not merely good verse, but something that is very near true poetry.

As a preparation for verse composition, let the scholars' minds be saturated with verse, encouraging them to emphasise the rhythm as they sense it. Lead them to see that there is something else in verse besides the meaning of the words; there is music in it. Then turn especially to ballads, which should be read aloud while the pupils beat out the rhythm. They will notice there are four beats in the first and third lines, and three in the second and fourth. They will notice that there are weak and strong beats, and that the strong beats should fall just where they do, according to the way in which the word is pronounced in ordinary language. They will tell you also that the second and fourth lines rhyme. They are then ready to commence verse composition, but they must have a story to tell. Any short simple fable will do. The first ballad might be a piece of communal work. Let the scholars suggest suitable lines, and after each has been examined, write the best on the blackboard, and so continue until the ballad is completed. Then should follow individual work. The work of your scholars will surprise you, and give you and them much pleasure. I give a girl's first attempt:—

THE FOX AND THE GRAPES.

A hungry fox one day went out,
Said he: "I'll get a meal."
He wandered through a vineyard
To see what he could steal.

On looking up he saw some grapes,
And thought on them he'd feed;
He jumped, and tried to get them down,
But never could succeed.

At this, the fox got very cross,
And so he turned away;
Said he: "I think the grapes are sour,
So I will let them stay."

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Now, when you can't get what you want,
And disappointed be;
Don't try to make a lame excuse,
For that seems wrong to me.

Occasionally much amusement, as well as enjoyment, is occasioned by the scholars' attempts. Note the ending to the "Ballad of the Ant and the Dove," written by a small boy who had evidently struggled hard.

The moral of this story is
As plain as plain can be;
If someone does you a good deed,

You should repay it. See!

One never knows; children's attempts are full of surprises. It was Alfred Tennyson who wrote when a boy:—

Sure never yet was antelope
Could skip so lightly by;
Stand off, or else my skipping rope
Will hit you in the eye.

From the common ballad metre proceed to the long metre type, which should present little difficulty. A little liberty should be allowed the scholars in the verse patterns if they desire it.

By this time the scholars will be busy examining various verse patterns, and will be eager to try their skill at some of them. The teacher will lead them to whatever pattern he requires, but having mastered the ballad metre, they are now ready for verse composition on historical incidents and characters in the term's reading. I quote the last portion of a girl's verse composition on "Apollo and Daphne":—

The youth one day did chase the maid
Beneath the forest trees;
And overtaking his dear love,
He fell down on his knees.

"Oh, Daphne dear, be thou my bride!"
But she was sore afraid;
"My father, I do cry to thee
To come now to my aid."

Her limbs went stiff, her body too,
And soon t'was made quite plain,
She'd changed into a laurel tree,
And caused her lover pain.

It is not claimed that the compositions quoted are by any means perfect. The usual childish faults are frequent, but there is a new delight, a deeper interest, and a greater fluency in the work, which is encouraging, and from which we take heart.

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MISS BALLARD, of Cam Girls' C. of E. School: [sic] I am new to the method and I wanted to ask—Do you find that Miss Mason's scheme is quite good in the hands of young, inexperienced Teachers. Is it as good as the old methods?"

MR. G. H. SMITH, of Uplands Council School: "Yes! The Teachers are all the better

Teachers after they have learned from the books that are provided to teach the classes. I know I am a much *better* teacher—whether you count me among the good or the bad. Your methods should be good and your matter should be equally good. Miss Mason's methods and matter are good. Yes, the Teachers *must* be better."

MR. BRAIN, of Kingswood, High Street Council School: "The size of the class does not affect the success of narration at all. The child is very anxious to demonstrate his power to narrate. I should like to say that I had a very interesting experience as late as last Thursday. I believe Mr. Household was responsible for a visit of students from the Bristol University. I was very pleased to see them, but Mr. Household was not there to help me out! They had been reading his papers and they had got the impression, after a good deal of discussion (assuming of course that what Mr. Household had said was true) that we were entering upon an educational millenium [sic]. The point they were concerned about was how it was possible for little ones of Form Ib. and Form Ia. to be able to remember what was related to them six, eight or ten weeks previously. I was prepared to say that Mr. Household was perfectly correct in his claims for Miss Mason's Scheme (although I was not keen to have a demonstration at my School)! They absolutely insisted, however, and when we went into the class-room containing Standard II., the three students who were with me asked that some little boy might narrate a story that he had heard several weeks previously. The story chosen was "The coming of the Normans," and the Teacher called upon a lad to narrate it who, to my knowledge, had never told a story before. To our astonishment he brought William of Normandy across the water and landed him on the Sussex coast. He also narrated every fact in the coming of Harold from the north of England. I was exceedingly pleased and I fully believe the claim which is made on behalf of Miss Mason's Scheme as regards the power of narration which the children have when once they have heard the story and listened to it attentively. [sic]