

THE EVOLUTION OF HOME EDUCATION FOR GIRLS.

BY MRS. PELL.

I HAVE been asked to write a paper giving some details of personal experience in Home Education as worked on the P.N.E.U. lines. In order to contemplate, in the light of comparison, the wonderful metamorphosis wrought by Miss Mason in our Home Schoolrooms I must revert to the days before the influence of this educational genius was felt amongst us.

I feel exceedingly diffident in venturing upon such a theme as Education, being able only to speak as one who has passed through the stages and disadvantages of the old régime, when the higher standard of education for girls was very distinctly discouraged in the homes of families where the daughters were unlikely ever to depend upon their own ability to earn a livelihood.

Under this old order, women might aspire only to rise as satellites to the greater luminaries of mankind! They were but a recognised necessity for the existence of man and a relaxation from the sterner duties of life. Their function was to attend to the comforts of the home, and to concern themselves exclusively with the rearing of children.

A little social diversion was permissible [sic], but the less book learning that distracted their attention the better.

A curriculum of the "three Rs" and a little study of languages and music was considered ample education for the average girl. Anything beyond this being conducive to mischief.

The mere mention of college was an offence. A girl who was given to much reading was designated a "book-worm," a "Blue-stocking," "eccentric" or "clever," and was shunned accordingly! It was considered *correct* and desirable that girls should cordially *hate* all lessons.

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Schools had not yet arrived at their present high standard, the average school girl did not shine when she returned for her holidays—"awkward giggling school girl" was the type too often presented to the prejudiced elders. Her manners were hopeless and she was "a fish out of water" in the drawing-room or in the society of her parents. School girl intimacies were not conducive to high ideals, but were too often undesirable. There was, therefore, nothing for it but to submit to the monotonous drudgery of an uninspired schoolroom at home.

How little "the present-girl" realizes the debt of gratitude which she owes to the mother who endured the last stages of this dreary drudgery, and so bridged the way to better things for her future daughters!

Never will the vision fade, so indelibly imprinted upon the memory, of years which seemed twice their length under the grim rule of a middle-aged German Fraulein, in herself "cultured," conscientious and high-principled, but having neither the gift nor the patience to *impart* her knowledge. "Das ist verboten" was her infallible maxim for all occasions!

A proficient pianist herself, she was totally incapable of conceiving the difficulties arising to the ungifted child mind. Storms and tears were the regular accompaniment of every music lesson, interspersed with wrathful ejaculations: "Himmel!" "Schrecklich!" "Warum versuchen Sie Klavier zu spielen!" There seemed to be no method, no life, no purpose or aim in anything, beyond that of the conscientious pursuit of "drudgery," relieved

by the still more distasteful daily constitutional—“there and back” along the same dreary straight road, generally pursued in silence, under the influence of varying moods.

How well I recall arriving at the age of fifteen. Two elder sisters had just obtained emancipation. How were the remaining three years of schoolroom drudgery, I wondered, to be endured and overcome before *my* turn came to be free? The fourth “victim” being then still much younger.

A timid suggestion of school was, of course, promptly dismissed as quite out of the question! A small effort was, however, made by way of joining weekly classes for one term at a neighbouring large country house, conducted by the resident Tutor. Here a slight smattering of Latin, Euclid, Literature and Grammar were acquired, but the scheme was abhorrent to the German Fraulein who, taking deep offence, declared it to be a

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personal insult and a reflection upon her competence as a teacher. The classes were therefore abandoned!

The dreaded three years were somehow dragged out until the welcome age of 18 secured emancipation, but what an ill equipped mind resulted! What conscious ignorance handicapped everything and what incapacity to approach the Gates of Knowledge without guidance! That overwhelming sense of “*books*” without acquaintance and the utter bewilderment of not knowing where to start and what to read! This was frequently the next step confronting the home-taught girl—unless she happened to be blessed with an innate love of reading, when she probably plunged into every available book without discrimination.

Subsequent foreign travels—visits to the treasures of Italy, France, Bavaria and Egypt. How much would have been gained by greater previous familiarity with the history and contents of their museums and galleries!

The spare time of the debutante of those days was chiefly devoted to dabbling in fancy “art.” Endless decorative painting of ridiculously useless articles, embroideries in crewels upon horrible draperies, *not needed and not wanted*, all served to kill time and crowd the house with dust traps and bad taste.

Truly, there was no way of escape but by marriage, and this was the only career open to girls, and consequently became too often their sole aim and object. It was natural that, having minds, they should desire something better than an aimless existence, however luxurious *home* with their parents might be.

How happy is the evolution of to-day. No home schoolroom need be dull. Inspiration, interest, aim and purpose are all imparted to those who come under the P.N.E.U. influence.

Young minds are stimulated to carry on the *self-education* which ever appeals to a cultured intellect.

The gates are unbarred leading to wide labyrinths of knowledge. Perhaps the chief attribute of the Ambleside method is the regular issue of an interesting programme of books for each term’s work. A programme hailed with as keen enthusiasm by the intelligent pupil, as the arrival of the library box to the ordinary reader.

By some parents the advantage of many books is not duly recognized, they complain of the needless extravagance of the P.N.E.U. system in this particular. How truly does Ruskin say, “We talk of food for the mind, as of food for the body; now a good book contains such food inexhaustibly,—it is a provision for

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life, and for the best part of us, yet how long most people would look at the best book before they would give the price of a large Turbot for it?"

It is true that in some instances a portion only of a book is required for study, but surely it is not necessarily wasted should the book not be read from beginning to end. The contents of a book sometimes resembles the mind of a friend, whose acquaintance it may be enriches us, not by the whole extent of his knowledge and personality, but by so much only as meets our particular need at the time. Books are read in conjunction, contemporary writers of history are brought together accompanied by peeps into various works bearing on the same subject or date, either in poetry, classics or standard fiction. Thus the student's mind is broadened and her interest widely increased by a thorough grasp of the subject.

Perseverance in research and love of books is not always innate, but, by these means, much is acquired and becomes a life-long gain.

The nucleus of an inspiring little library soon accumulates in the schoolroom—the child early realizes the advantage of possessing books of reference and also the pleasures of collecting the works of favourite authors. The acquaintance with books, though only cursory, is in itself an education. Those who can enjoy a visit to any bookseller's shop fully appreciate this fact.

To know a book and its author, even by name only, is always worth while. Is it not generally considered advantageous to know *who* people are in our social life, even when we may not have the pleasure of their personal acquaintance?

Those who can enter a library with a sense of delight and spend hours happily looking at the title of books, here and there taking down one to dip into, understand well that it is not always essential to read stolidly through every page before acquiring something worth knowing.

To the true book-lover the mere possession of books is a joy, in the same way as a lover of China delights to gaze upon the treasures of his collection, so the book-lover revels in the enlightening atmosphere of his library. I have known men and women who when ill or confined to the house, can be made happy by the mere proximity of their favourite books, they will have them placed around their bed or sofa, much as a child might place its toys within sight, and so they rest content and in some measure derive pleasure and solace through their influence.

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I maintain that Miss Mason's ambition that the many educational books she recommends should be such as shall form the nucleus of the student's library, redolent with information upon almost every subject, is most certainly attained by those who follow her guidance in the happy choice of books, retaining them in their shelves instead of discarding those out of use.

Speaking from personal experience of the P.N.E.U. School, it has proved to be the happiest solution of the educational problem which exercised my thoughts from the early days of motherhood. Being blessed then with two small daughters whose home-education must be carried out under the difficulties confronting those who dwell in isolated country districts, I was determined that they should never know the dreary years of the lifeless lesson-drudgery with which childhood and girlhood can be associated.

From the age of eight, they became Ambleside pupils. Most fortunate we were in the chance of securing one who for nine years proved herself to be a most competent and successful daily governess. Who, having had no previous acquaintance with Miss Mason's methods and system, yet worked on the successive programmes without difficulty, making

the schoolroom life one of the happiest possible. Her pupils were fired with zeal and the desire for knowledge. The examinations were carried out punctually and regularly without strain or effort and with invariable success. The result far exceeded brightest hopes. The elder pupil having arrived at Form VI., taking the examinations more than creditably; at the age of seventeen had two terms in London, attending classes at a good Finishing School, where she easily won the special prize for Literature and was classed above average in all subjects taken. The younger girl remains a most promising pupil and a very keen student and adherent to the P.N.E.U. System.

During the recent absence of her governess for one term, she persistently followed her programme of work, as far as possible, and determined at her own wish to take the term's examination at the end. Pupils themselves declare that the great attraction of Miss Mason's scheme is the pleasure of *independent study*, which is made possible by means of the many good books provided—and how much greater value has the knowledge sought out for oneself as compared with that acquired through the systematic cramming by others.

Yet we must allow that there are still some among those who

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teach, and those who learn, who fail utterly to appreciate these happy methods of study. Perhaps they start with prejudiced minds, determined *not* to succeed! There are governesses who take offence at the request that the Ambleside syllabus should be followed. Unfounded and absurd objections are raised about the supposed "unceasing study." One governess actually wrote, "I do think that pupils should be allowed at least a short respite during the morning walk!" Another finds the examinations "so harrassing [sic] and worrying." Another announces that the method "is only suitable for quite little children," and yet another complains that "advance is hindered by a system of constantly dodging backwards through the books!" One parent told me that she belonged to the P.N.E.U., but usually substituted books of her own choice! Needless to say, but poor success was attained and the three pupils concerned were finally sent away to separate schools; whereas, when successfully carried through, the P.N.E.U. system has undoubtedly been proved to make it possible for girls to work at home up to the University Standard. The convincing fact remains that an ever increasing number of schools, as well as home schoolrooms, are steadily growing adherents to the Ambleside System, this being the case already in no less than 63 Council Schools. Surely there can be no greater proof of its increasing fame amongst educational experts.

Perhaps the greatest consideration, after all, is the question as to what is the bearing upon the physical health and development of the P.N.E.U. pupils. And this, above all, is its chief recommendation! Girls whose minds are well occupied with constant varying topics of interest are not liable to low spirits and consequent inertia.

Miss Mason would have the minds of growing girls fed with healthy, happy thoughts and aspirations.

Practical observation in botany and natural history is an incentive to out-door life, as well as the health-giving Scout movement carried into their games. Days cannot be dull or vapid,—that miserable condition of being at a "loose end" is unknown. The day is all too short for the many diversions it brings!

How frequently a doctor may make a mistake in ordering the total banishment of all lessons for a child. In so doing he often removes a wholesome interest and gives nothing in its place! It is seldom salutary or health-giving for a mind to be reduced to complete idleness. It was another matter under the old régime

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of “drudgery,” when yawning was the inevitable accompaniment of lessons, as it still remains under the infliction of a dull and tedious sermon.

Health is one of the first considerations of the P.N.E.U. curriculum. Each morning’s half hour’s drill and play with those salutary breathing and Swedish exercises and the final march round the room with books easily balanced on the head to the cadence of a cheerful tune, produces fine upright figures and graceful deportment.

Singing should always form part of the daily programme from the earliest years of childhood. Whilst being so pleasurable to the children it produces vocal power and is of immeasurable benefit from the physical point of view. A celebrated doctor advocated this daily singing for a child who suffered the common defect of a slightly drooping shoulder, his theory being that whilst singing a child is bound to hold up the head, to take deep breaths and to stand erect. It is well known that good voices are often developed in this way which might not otherwise have been produced.

Fortunate are the parents who have given their minds to the question of education whilst the little ones are still in the nursery, they are then able, when the time arrives, to cope satisfactorily with the problems before them.

In the case of joining the P.N.E.U. School, it is advantageous to start in it from the beginning. Taking all such subjects in the curriculum as deemed desirable. The regular examinations taken twice yearly enables parents to know how the work done compares with that of pupils having school education. A great deal no doubt depends upon the ability of the teacher as well as the intelligence of the pupil. It is well to remember that it is not always those who hold the highest diplomas who are the most capable of *imparting* knowledge. Sometimes it is the less learned and the more sympathetic who understand and grasp the difficulties presented to the average minds of beginners. If it is possible for the mother to take the Scripture teaching herself, she will find the systematically arranged course of the P.N.E.U. programme invaluable, and will never regret the time she lays out upon the daily quarter of an hour’s morning visit to the schoolroom.

Many hidden talents are discovered and made manifest which might never have come to light without the impetus which calls them forth. The quality of Poetry and Composition,

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responding to examination demands, is often astonishing and is sometimes found to be worthy of publication, thus begetting literary enthusiasm leading to greater things. We seldom realize what we can do until the occasion arises!

I venture to think that the girl who has successfully gone through Miss Mason’s Educational Course makes an interesting companion for any age, and is well equipped for all the exigencies of life. She becomes most assuredly a blessing to herself and useful to all around her.