

CONFERENCE LESSONS.

CLASS II.

By K. M. CLAXTON.

For this group, I had 17 children, varying from the ages of 8 to 11. The lessons chosen by the Committee were: General History (30 minutes), Picture Talk (25 minutes), Natural History (25 minutes), and Map Questions (10 minutes).

Before giving an account of these lessons I should like to say that it was a perfect joy to teach these children, for they came up to their classroom as if they expected thoroughly to enjoy their lessons: they scarcely seemed aware of the audience behind and around them, but were delightfully natural, taking a keen interest in their work, and seeming only too glad to tell me all they knew.

Two children whom I asked to read aloud did so very correctly and with much expression, and one little boy of 11 gave me a beautiful narration in the Natural History lesson. It was easy to see that he had been accustomed to narrating in a true P.N.E.U. way, for his English was perfect and his words well chosen.

General History.—As this lesson was preferably to be taken from “The Story of the World,” I chose a lesson which came towards the end of the term’s work, i.e., that on the war between Philip II. of Spain and the Low Countries. We should have begun this lesson at 10-45, but, unfortunately, it was nearly 11 o’clock before the visitors were finally seated, and so I was obliged to make the lesson somewhat shorter.

By way of introduction, I made the children tell me the meaning of the “Reformation,” and how it resulted in the rise of “Protestantism,” and how these two in their turn gave rise to “the Counter-Reformation” and the long struggle between Protestants and Catholics all over Europe.

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(Since this subject is rather a difficult one for young children, I was specially pleased to find that the children knew their term’s work well, and were anxious to tell me all they knew.)

I then explained that the struggle between the Protestants and Catholics was most bitter in Catholic countries under Protestant rulers, and in Protestant countries under Catholic rulers, and that to-day we were going to read about a struggle that took place in a partly-Protestant country which was ruled over by a Catholic king. At the same time I reminded them of the special interest we would take in this lesson since part of this same country was now taking part in another great struggle.

Several of the children were able to tell me that the Emperor Charles V., on giving up his empire, had left Spain and the Low Countries to his son Philip, and Germany with Austria and Hungary to his brother Ferdinand.

After describing the character and rule of Philip, and after showing them his portrait, I read to them from “The Story of the World” (since only three of the children had copies of their own) a description of the scenery of the Low Countries which included the story of the little boy who saved his country by stopping up with his arm a hole which he found in a dyke.

Then, after a short narration, I showed the children, on the blackboard, a map of the

Low Countries in which I had marked the towns of which we were going to read,—at the same time reminding them of the present fate of some of these towns. I then read to them from “The Story of the World” the account of the beginning of the war with Spain, the arrival of Alva and his cruel tyranny, the capture of Brill by the “Beggars,” the sieges of Haarlem and Leyden by the Spaniards, and how the latter town was eventually saved by the opening of the dykes at the order of William the Silent, and then how the struggle at length ended in the Northern Provinces becoming the independent Protestant kingdom of Holland, and the Southern ones, the Catholic kingdom of Belgium.

The lesson ended in a narration which, in nearly all cases, was very good.

PictureTalk.—For this I took “The Miraculous Draught of Fishes,” as being the picture which I thought most of the children would not yet have done. I first asked for some information about Raphael, and managed to get from the children that he was born in Italy, and that since his father was a painter, Raphael “used to paint when he was a little boy.”
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Next I told them of the history of this picture,—how it had been designed for a tapestry, and how after finding it, and 6 others, in Brussels, cut into strips, Rubens brought them over to England, where they were bought by Charles I., and were afterwards repaired.

Then, so that the children should have the events of the picture before their minds, I read them the account of The Draught of Fishes from St. Luke’s Gospel.

After studying the picture for several minutes, the children, in turn, described it to me.

At first, they were a little meagre in their descriptions, but this was evidently not due to insufficient study of the picture, for after a minute or two they blossomed out into such excellent detailed descriptions [sic] that I am sure one could have composed the picture without ever having seen it!

Then, after a few appreciative words from myself, on the life and energy displayed, on the beauty of the forms, and on the beautiful shading of the picture, I let the children draw the chief lines of the composition.

I think that in every “Picture Talk” lesson we have some proof that art can be appreciated by even the youngest children. For instance, when I drew the attention of the children to the beauty of the picture, even without its colour, one little girl remarked, “Oh, I *should* so like to see the real one!” I was very glad to be able to tell her that her wish could be easily realised.

Natural History.—The children first told me what insects they were taking this term,—i.e., Insect Sippers and Gnawers which change their bodies within their coats,—and then, after naming the butterflies, moths, and beetles, as being some of these, they told me of the four stages of the Insect Sippers and Gnawers. After asking one of the children to tell me the number of wings belonging to each of these insects, I told them that to-day’s lesson was to be about some of the Two-winged Insects, or “Flies,” several of which they were able to name.

I now showed them two daddy-long-legs, which I had caught, in a jam jar, and made them notice the pair of little pin-headed stalks, or “balancers,” behind the wings. When they had compared these with a drawing of a “daddy” which they had in their books, they read a paragraph from “Life and Her Children” which told them that these “balancers” were really the second pair of wings, and had gradually diminished to their

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present state through disuse. Then we read a few short paragraphs which introduced them to the distinguishing characteristics of the life of the house-fly, botfly, gadfly, bluefly, and gnat.

After a short narration on these two-winged flies we went on to the life-history of the gnat, which is the most wonderful of them all.

I had managed to get several empty pupa cases and one pupa, but as it was impossible to let the children examine the whole 4 stages of the gnat direct from nature, I showed them large charcoal and chalk drawings, on brown paper, of the little raft-like mass of eggs, the larva, the pupa, the insect emerging from its pupa-case, and the fully emerged insect.

After letting the children examine these for a minute or so, and after trying to help them to realise the wonderful construction of these 4 stages, I asked two children, in turn, to read the life-history of the gnat. In these paragraphs, the children learnt of the way in which the gnat leaves her wonderful raft of eggs to float on the surface of the water, and how, when the eggs are hatched, the larvae swim head downwards in the water, keeping the little air-tube on the 8th segment just above the surface, while they sweep microscopic animals down into their mouths by means of a fringe of hairs. Then we learnt how the larvae, after several moults, change into pupae, which, though they no more need food, yet still need air, and therefore have *two* air-tubes, which, instead of being on the 8th segment, are now outgrowths from the “head” of the pupa. Lastly we read of the great wariness which the gnat shows when emerging from the pupa-case.

After showing the children a bottle containing several empty cases, I ended the lesson by asking them to narrate the life-history of the gnat, this being done fluently and with great detail. They all promised, too, to look for gnat-eggs, larvae, etc., for themselves.

Map Questions.—I was rather timid about this lesson, as I think it very difficult to give a 10 minutes’ lesson on Map Questions to 17 children whom one has never before seen. However, it was more successful than I expected.

I chose map questions on North America, from the term’s work in “From Pole to Pole.”

The children were able to recognise an outline map of North America, and after giving me the two great divisions of North America, were able to fill in all the boundaries.

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In “From Pole to Pole,” the children are introduced to this continent by following the travels of a Swede, named Gunnar, and so, after questioning them as to where Gunnar landed, and what places he visited after leaving New York, I asked them to learn from their atlases the exact position of several of these rivers, towns, and mountains, after which they filled in the names of the places, from memory, on the outline map.