

NATURE IN THE NURSERY.

BY J. R. SMITH.

SURELY, a Nursery in which Mother Nature is a stranger or nearly so must be a miserable place! Sad the child who is cut off, even if only in part, from all the joys she brings with her. Therefore it is, that we of the P.N.E.U. would have her be the constant friend of our children from their earliest days.

We want them to feel

“ . . . An overseeing power
To kindle and restrain.”

And

“ . . . the breathing balm,
. . . the silence and the calm
Of mute insensate things.”

Most of the time of the Nursery Folk is spent out-of-doors, and rightly so. Therefore it is quite an easy thing to help them to be friends with Mother Nature.

What child is there who does not love to gather flowers? Up he comes with his little bunch to you, and then is the time to teach him the name of every flower in it. It is not often that a little child gets a great variety in his bunch, so that a constant repetition of the names of the two or three flowers he gathers will soon fix them in his head. Then, realising that flowers have names, and perhaps being told some of the old legends about them, he will immediately want to learn more, and you will continually have him bringing fresh flowers for you to name and tell about. Here, may I say, that to a beginner in Flower Study, I think Johns' "Flowers of the Field," published by George Routledge, price 7s. 6d. (before the war), is of inestimable value, at least I have found it so myself. Quite a good game on a walk would be to tell the children to see how many different kinds of flowers, or leaves, they could pick in a given time, say ten

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minutes. This would train their powers of observation and would also help them to learn the names of the flowers, for you would name and say something about each flower in the bunch.

Then again, what better way is there of teaching colour, than from flowers? A dear baby of twenty months old used to go out for walks with me, and learnt all the chief colours from the flowers. No matter how many different kinds of yellow flowers you showed him, with how many different-coloured flowers between, he always knew yellow when he saw it, and the same with pink, red, blue, and green. He would toddle round the garden calling out the names of the different colours of the flowers as he passed them. Up to the age of six, a child's training should be mainly sensory. One of the senses which is least cultivated is the sense of smell. Here again flowers come in to help

us. Let your two or three Nursery Folk pick some sweet-smelling flowers—we will say cowslip, orchis, and crosswort, to begin with. Tell them to smell carefully each of the three. Then make them shut their eyes and smell again, and see if they know which is which. You will find that the children love doing this, and that they will very quickly be able to distinguish flowers without any trouble.

No Nursery should be without its vases of wild flowers in spring and summer, its sprays of autumn leaves and berries, and in winter the twigs of different trees, which live quite happily in water from late October to February when the buds begin to burst into leaf, provided that the water is changed about once a week, and that a small piece is cut off the end of each twig every now and again—say about four times altogether. The children themselves should learn to pick the flowers with nice long stalks, and they should also help to arrange them in the vases. The older ones might do a vase all alone. Here let me say that I think no little child should be allowed to pick flowers and throw them away, but they should learn from the earliest age that flowers are living things—the gift of the All-Giver, and therefore they are to be treated reverently.

A thing which will be found to give great pleasure to children is an indoors garden. Let them one wet day, ask cook for an old dinner plate, and Nurse for a piece of flannel. Give them a packet of mustard seed and another of cress, and shew them how to plant it on the wet flannel—cress first, and mustard three days later. How anxiously they will watch the seeds sprouting, and how proud they will be when they can give Mother some mustard and cress for tea. Let them also have a good-sized wooden box [p 540] filled with sawdust, in which they can plant some Broad and some French Beans, also an acorn or two and a chestnut. The beans can be kept in the sawdust until they get quite big, but the acorns and chestnut must be planted in earth in a pot, as soon as the rootlet appears, and they will then grow to quite a good size that summer. They should be planted out at the end of August, and then the children can watch their growth in the garden.

We once grew some Runner Beans in pots in London, and trained them to grow up the sides of the schoolroom window. They went right up and across the top, and actually flowered in August. So even dwellers in towns can bring Nature very much into the Nursery! Another amusement for a wet day for the elder Nursery people is, to either paint, or draw in chalk flowers and leaves. A book, similar to that used by the youngest children in the Parents' Union School (price 4d. at the P.N.E.U. Office), would be a great source of delight and pride. It is a ruled book, interleaved with drawing paper, so on one side the paintings could be made, while on the other, Mother or Nurse would write down any special thing which the owner of the book had noticed, such as, the first cowslip seen, a thrush singing on an apple tree, or a hedge sparrow's nest, how many eggs, what colour, etc. The child's pride and interest in such a book would be great, and he would be always on the watch for something to note down, and fresh flowers, etc., to paint. Never mind if his drawings are crude at first! With a little help in mixing the paints, and a little practise in using his brush properly, he will soon be able to show quite creditable work.

Quite little children can be taught to know our ordinary birds if anyone will take the trouble to help them. In winter it is an excellent plan to let the Nursery Folk take the crumbs out to the Bird Table after every meal. The table should be placed where it can be easily watched from some window accessible to the children. They will take great delight in watching the different visitors, and will soon learn to distinguish between them. In the spring and summer, when playing in garden or meadow, their attention should be called to a thrush or blackbird singing on a tree, a blue-tit or a robin flitting along a hedge, and so on. They will soon learn willingly to keep silence for a moment or two, to see and watch some feathered friend. If Mother or Nurse keep a sharp look-out for nests, imagine the joy of the smaller nursery folk when the wonderful treasure is discovered to them, and that of the older when by little hints thrown out, they are able to find

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the nest for themselves. Let them realise while still babies, that these beautiful little eggs are going to turn into Bird Babies, and that it would be unkind to take them away from Mother-Bird, and far more interesting to watch them hatching out.

Always encourage the Nursery Folk to watch spiders, bees, ants, and butterflies, and tell them all you can about their wonderful ways of life. I have been told that in modern hives you can watch the bees at work. Just imagine how delighted the children would be to see them actually at work in your own hive, or that of some kind neighbour, especially if someone would explain what they were doing, and if they had heard something about the wonderful ways of bees beforehand. Then there are the ants. It is comparatively easy to find a disturbed ant hill, and the children's joy would be intense if they could see the nurse ants running away to a place of safety with their charges. As to butterflies—I have known a boy of five who lay motionless for 10 minutes, watching a butterfly sipping honey from the flowers in a garden bed.

Tadpoles are a great joy, especially to small boys, who will spend a long time watching their movements. Quite an interesting aquarium can be kept in a bell jar, such as gardeners use for covering delicate plants. A stand must be made out of a block of wood to hold it upright. The jar could be bought for 1/6 before the war. Do not put more than half-a-dozen tadpoles in, a few water snails, which act as scavengers and help to keep the aquarium sweet and clean, some caddis worms, and some duckweed or other green water weed to oxygenate the water. A water beetle might be kept in a 2 lb. glass jam jar, as he is too voracious to be kept with the other creatures. He must be fed on very small pieces of meat tied to the end of a piece of cotton, so that any remains can be removed and the water kept clean. He is a very interesting and beautiful creature to watch, with his big bubble of air which he carries with him wherever he goes.

You will find your labour in starting the Aquarium amply repaid by the children's delight, and by the many quiet quarters of an hour you will get while they are watching the performances of their water friends.

Silk worms are very interesting creatures for the children to watch, and they are quite easy to keep, provided you can get a supply of mulberry leaves or lettuces. I should begin with the eggs, as it will be so much more interesting for the children to remember the tiny eggs when they see the huge caterpillar just

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before it spins its cocoon. Keep the caterpillars in a box with a glass lid, if possible, as the children can then go and watch them at any time, without any fear of letting them escape. Pin up the cocoons in paper bags in some safe place, but where the little ones can see them, and let some of the cocoons at least hatch out into the beautiful silk worm moths.

If the Nursery Folk live by the sea they have a splendid opportunity of gaining a very intimate knowledge of sea birds, sea creatures and sea flowers. What a dear little friend the Dunlin is, with his funny busy little run; the seagulls, of course, are a never-failing source of interest and can be watched so easily, and how amusing it is to see the Guillemot—one moment bobbing with his friends on the top of the water, the whole party looking like so many corks, and the next minute, when you look, they have all disappeared under the water, to appear again in quite a different place.

In summer, how the children will love to watch the crab scuttling along sideways across the bottom of some warm pool, or the star fish moving lazily along, or the beautiful sea anemone opening its tentacles. You might manage to make a small sea aquarium in the bell-jar, where the children could watch the movements of the different sea creatures for a day or two at a time, and then take them back to the sea. I should change the water every time you bring fresh visitors, as in that way, I think, you would have no accidents. How proud the children would feel to be carrying some "beasties" home, and habits of gentleness and kindness could be inculcated because they would not wish to hurt their little helpless visitors.

I think I have now said enough to show that we are justified in wishing our Nursery Folk to make a friend of Mother Nature, for the joy she brings is incalculable and the Nursery Folk will all their lives be grateful to those who have shewn them the way into the heart of this great mother, and as the knowledge which she gives grows and widens, as it is bound to do, so more of reverence for the Great Giver of all Good Gifts will dwell within, and an abiding thankfulness will help and strengthen the Nursery Folk, when it comes to their turn to take part in the great battle of life.