

TEACHING CHILDREN HOUSEKEEPING.

By ALICE STRONACH.

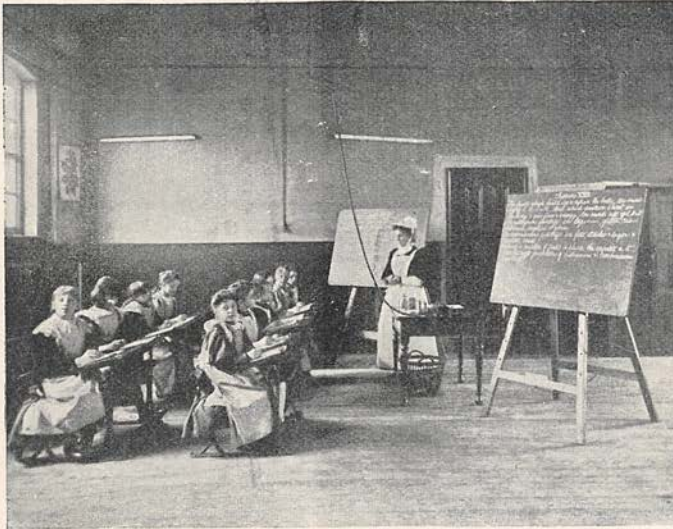
Illustrated by Special Photographs.



FOR at least a generation girls in the higher standards of elementary schools have been taught domestic economy. But they have been taught by precept only, and houses kept by book and dinners cooked by theory are apt to prove failures. So the London School Board, wisely determined to revive the almost forgotten art of housewifery, has at last begun to teach domestic economy by practice as well as precept. Beginning with the practical teaching of cookery and laundry work, the Board has now gone a step further, and has added practical lessons in housewifery to the subjects for girls in the higher standards. Three domestic economy centres, each with its separate school for laundry work, cookery, and housewifery, have already been opened. Other centres are preparing to open, and before long every district in London will be provided with one of these schools for young housewives. The complete course in domestic economy in the scheme drawn up by Mrs. Lord, the organising teacher of these classes, covers two years, and is so arranged that a girl who remains at school until she has passed through the seventh standard can hardly fail to be an efficient housewife. Beginning in standard six—that is, when she is eleven or twelve years old—the Board School housewife has short courses of twelve lessons each in

cookery, laundry work, and housewifery, the housewifery lessons dealing only with kitchen and scullery work. In the seventh standard she has a second course of lessons in each of the three branches, the housewifery lessons including lessons on drainage and ventilation, on the chemistry of food, on sick nursing, and some lessons on thrift and on simple ethical subjects.

The most novel part of the scheme is the practical housewifery teaching, which is given in a small house or in rooms arranged and furnished as an artisan's dwelling. Needless to say, the lessons are hugely enjoyed by the little housewives, for has not "playing at house" been from time immemorial the favourite pastime of the average little girl? And even with the element of seriousness introduced by the use of *real* furniture, *real* fires, *real*



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LEARNING THE CHEMISTRY OF FOOD.

[W. H. Bennett.]

food, and even *real* money for marketing at *real* shops, there is still plenty of fun to be had out of these lessons, especially when a teacher combines with an innate gift for teaching, a kindly sense of humour, and infinite tolerance for the funny mistakes made by very juvenile housewives. Fortunately such teachers have been secured for the two housewifery schools already opened when this article was written—one in Abbey Street, Bethnal Green, the other in Alma Road, Bermondsey.

Visiting the Bethnal Green centre one morning, I was ushered into a large school-

room, where eight little housewives, each wearing a big brown canvas apron, were having a theoretic lesson on the chemistry of



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IN THE KITCHEN.

foods. Evidently they knew all about food-stuffs, and could have held their own with some of the chemistry students in secondary schools. But, what was more to the point, they were learning, for instance, why fresh fruit is an important article of diet, and why milk, and not "just wot we has ourselves," is the proper food for infants—a lesson that should help to lower the rate of infant mortality in East London. The lecturer, Miss Horner, an ex-student of Bedford College, and a born teacher, seemed to miss no opportunity of making her theoretic lessons of practical value to the future mothers of the working classes.

The theoretic lesson over, the young housewives were assembled in the bright little kitchen to be assigned their practical work. Two were set to scrub—the envy, these, of their companions; for scrubbing is, perhaps, next to marketing, the favourite occupation—two to clean knives, one to blacklead the grate and light a fire in the small sitting-room, one to lay the table for dinner, and so on. Already two had been to market to buy the dinner and stores for the day, and on their return had cooked the dinner. Presumably it was Sunday, or the artisan would not have been treated to such a feast of roast beef, potatoes, French beans,

and batter pudding. Miss Horner, looking like a hospital sister in her pretty cap and apron, flitted from room to room, giving hints to the little kitchenmaids and housemaids, and, above all, to the young tablemaid, who evidently thought that a carving knife and fork and tablespoons were useless commodities. It also wanted a gentle hint from Miss Horner to remind the little maid that the angles of the table were not the places that diners would choose to sit at. "It is in laying the table that most mistakes are made," remarked Miss Horner; and, listening to her instructions, one thought of the debt of gratitude that future employers of these young tablemaids would owe her. At last the table was laid, and the two young cooks were called to dish up the dinner. But the proof of the pudding was yet to come. In the Belgian schools of housewifery the young cooks eat the dinners that they cook. In Bethnal Green the pudding and its preliminaries are put to a more severe proof, for they serve as lunch for the teachers at the domestic economy centre. On the day of my visit the young cooks scored a triumph with their nicely browned meat, potatoes boiled to perfection, and everything else to match.

Cooking, and scrubbing, and window cleaning were in full swing at the newly opened domestic economy centre in Alma Road, Bermondsey, on the morning of my visit to it last September. Two little housewives,



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LEARNING HOW TO MAKE A BED.

[W. H. Bunnett.

wearing blue checked aprons, had been out to market, and had returned in triumph with just the right piece of meat. As a rule, these

young cooks are adepts at laying out money to the best advantage, and could possibly give hints to their teacher in this branch of housewifery. Having set the two little cooks to prepare a dinner of boiled mutton, potatoes, French beans, and rice pudding, Miss Skillman led the way to a room that at the Alma Road school, as in many an artisan's abode, does duty both as parlour and bedroom. Two little housemaids had made a bed that hooked up against the wall behind a curtain. Bed-making, by the way, affords a text for a useful little sermon on sanitation and ventilation, and a double sheet of brown paper, neatly bound and perforated, that did duty as a top blanket, showed that the children are taught to make the most of small resources. A demonstration lesson given by Miss Skillman to the assembled class on the right and the wrong way of sweeping a floor reminded one of certain well-worn lines, also of the fact that even in so simple a matter there is a science and an art.

The selection of a house and furniture, and the portioning out of the weekly income, are some of the subjects included in the scheme of housewifery lessons that give a clever teacher excellent opportunities. In the tiny houses used for the lessons the rooms are daintily simple and neat, with good, substantial furniture, and none of the superfluous draperies and ornaments, so-called, that serve merely as so many dust-traps. This in itself should be a useful lesson to the embryo housewives.

"Do you have the support of the mothers for the scheme?" I asked one of the housewifery teachers.

"Yes, for the most part," was the answer. "At first there were some who insisted that they could teach their girls housework at home. But even when the mothers are capable of teaching their girls systematically, they have no opportunity of doing so except on Saturdays. But usually the mothers highly approve of the lessons, and sometimes when a girl leaves school they wish her to continue her housewifery classes. We have

messages to tell us how much more useful the girls are in their homes since they attended these lessons. Indeed, that may prove a danger with selfish or overworked mothers, and may lead to the girls being even more frequently kept at home to help with the housework than they are at present. We try to interest the mothers in the classes by inviting them to come and see the lessons, and by encouraging the children to bring such articles as an old metal teapot or rusty fire-irons to be cleaned. Nothing proves so convincing as some miracle accomplished on these or on the parlour furniture by the polish made by the girls at school."

"Funny mistakes? Oh, yes, we certainly have these. There are recipes for milk puddings that, if carried out, would produce startling results; and one girl, asked how she would cater for a dinner for a family of four, suggested as a preliminary the ordering in of a stone of beef. Then, as you know, their notions of laying a dinner table are peculiar. Very few of the girls who come to us have ever seen a kitchener, and the cleaning of flues is a sad puzzle to them at first."

Of course it is not the object of such training to provide a supply of reliable

domestic servants; but, possibly, if a leaving certificate for skill in housewifery were supplied to girls who had satisfactorily completed a two years' course at one of these schools, the domestic servant difficulty would be satisfactorily solved. But, in any case, the good results which may be expected from this new experiment in practical education can hardly be overestimated, and we may reasonably look forward to a new era of domestic comfort in the homes presided over by the little housewives who are now being trained in the Board's schools of domestic economy. These schools, it should be mentioned, owe much of their success to Mrs. Homan, who, as a member of the Domestic Economy Committee of the London School Board, has taken an active part in organising the Board's domestic economy centres.



From a photo by]

[W. H. Bennett.

LAYING A TABLE FOR A MEAL.