

* Special Papers. *

THE ELEVATION OF THE COUNTRY SCHOOL.*

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ALMOST all present have made the acquaintance of at least one country school, and have doubtless deeply considered this subject. Surely all admit that it is one deserving of thoughtful study. Much has been done but much remains yet to be done.

This Canada of ours has a people, so largely an agricultural people, whose education for the greater part must be drawn from the country schools, that it becomes imperative that we should more and more secure the efficiency of these institutions. It is a people whose unexpressed motto is "Onward." There is a demand for leaders from their own ranks. The leaders of the future are in the school. All along the line the country has sent her tale of men to the front, and she will certainly continue to do so. Count all the men in the foremost positions in our land—could you question each I fancy it would be found that the homes of the majority were farm-houses; and that their early school days were passed in rooms whose windows looked out on forests, or fields of grain or grass. Were these *all* it would be sufficient reason for interest in the advancement of our country school; but they are not all, only an important minority. The men who stand out from the others are only a few; the men who follow must have education that they may learn how and whom to follow.

Fichte has given his view of the end of education as follows: "Education cannot create anything in a pupil, cannot put anything in him from without; it can only develop into consciousness the powers that are in him, by arousing him to self-activity. Education finds its aim in the formation of character, in self-emancipation, in self-government. Character-building is the only aim of all education." If any class more than another need to be awakened to a consciousness of their powers, it is the farming class. Some of its members are fully aroused, and prove to the world that they can stand side by side with the professions in refinement of mind and manners. The others cannot take the step upward because their minds are in a state of torpidity. Their future looks dark, if something is not done to render the occupation worthy of the respect of their sons. If a boy shows any special ability he is quickly singled out for a profession, when he should remain on the farm to elevate farming. It is Greeley who well explains this desire to get away. He says: "Our farmers' sons escape from their calling whenever they can because it is made a mindless, monotonous drudgery, unintellectually pursued."

The country school must provide the remedy. The work of elevation must be the work of raising the souls of the children.

Then arises the question, who are to be the elevators, and by what means is the work to be accomplished? The teacher must be the leader. His work once begun, he will not lack either assistants or means. The person who is to take the lead in so great an undertaking must be worthy of some notice. Let us suppose that he has passed his non-professional examination and has taken his professional course. Will that be sufficient to entitle him to the position? No. Granted that he has been an honorable and diligent student, and that he is going into the work with an earnest desire to make it a success. Will that be enough? No; it is much, but he may still be a failure. There are certain qualities which it is absolutely necessary he should possess if "lifting up" is to be done—energy, vigilance, firmness, sympathy "large enough to enfold all men as brothers," an enthusiastic appreciation of his work and a determination to succeed. If he possesses the germs of these, the school-room will nourish them to vigor. In addition he should be a close observer of human nature, yet not priding himself upon reading at all times truly. And still more must be demanded. "Moral culture is pre-eminently the aim of all education."

He must have an unflinching, childlike trust in God, a heart full of love for the King who places him at work among the gems for His crown.

The teacher takes possession of the school-house, the school-yard, and the school-children. The band consists of forty or fifty children, unpolished it may be, but jewels nevertheless. The plans are kept in the background—one has to be content to "make haste slowly." He makes many trips back to the time when he was a child; wanders among the wishes, the fears, the difficulties, the strivings and the triumphs, and examines them again and again, but when he comes back to his pupils how easily he interprets the drooping head, the shuffling gait, the restless movement, the tearful face or the pained look. His sympathy goes out to the little travellers through childhood; soon it is followed by a true, tender love for each one in his flock. He understands the truth of Kant's words regarding children. "They should be open and as cheerful as the sun. If they are happy they stand the best chance of being good" and he counts nothing labor that interests the little ones or adds to their happiness, for he knows they are moving up higher. Teaching is not a soulless drudgery. He reads in the little faces "a mute appeal to all the wisdom, sympathy and love that are in him." All his energies are bent to the gathering and preparing of knowledge in inviting forms. He is what he wishes his pupils to be.

"With a feeling of keen pleasure that the recitation is at hand," he comes before a class and feels a wonderful joy in the work there awaiting him.

"It is not toil without recompense." Pupils are not slow to acknowledge care and kindness. No gift can be more precious than the gratitude and esteem of little children. Once won they are not difficult to keep.

In the beginning possession was taken of two parcels of inanimate property. How have these been utilized?

One day the teacher tacked a picture upon the wall of the school-room; next morning some one brought another; the next there were half a dozen more. That day the floor was swept cleaner than in many past days; the teacher dusted the stove, and the girls cried, "Oh, if we had only dusters we would dust the desks." Next day that is done, the old blinds are criticized and forthwith come down, while new ones go up. Soon in that room all the untidy articles gather up their skirts and march out, while neat and orderly ones march in. The boys and girls have grown proud of their room and talk over it so much at home that the parents begin to wish to see it. The trustees, when interviewed, readily agree to get new maps, etc.—but the teacher knows better than to ask for more than one donation at a time.

When the three schoolmen see the necessity of repairs, and have had a confidence established in the teacher's ability to protect such repairs, there are no "We can't see our way for it," "Wait till next year," "Our taxes are too heavy now."

The trustees of a country section are the very best friends a country teacher can have. And another, one who helps much, may be counted in—the Inspector. His visit imparts new vigor to teacher and pupils for coming weeks, while his suggestions, the result of experience and study, oftentimes "lighten the burden of care." Children ever welcome visitors, and counsel from one has more charm than a story from the teacher. In a few moments with them one may accomplish what the teacher requires weeks to do. On one occasion an Inspector, noting the inclination of many in a class to stand with "bent shoulders," walked up the class, straightening those who "stooped," showing them how an erect position improved the appearance of the whole class. After that day every class in the school-room assumed a more correct position, and did it with a feeling that they had taken a step upward.

But to return to the parents, there is help to be drawn from them. The teacher visits the homes, does not disabuse the mother or father's mind of the idea that teaching means, as I once heard it defined, "sitting behind a desk and calling up classes for big scholars to hear;" but makes the bright side very bright; praises the little folks where he can, where he can't keep silent. Then he remembers to ask the father to call in some time and see his girls and boys.

One day the old gentleman goes home and remarks, "Well, I don't see how that master keeps that whole school full quiet, when we can hardly manage our six. My! you ought to have seen the little fellow's eyes dance when they answered. 'Goin' to school there ain't like what 'twas when

you and me went," and the mother adds, "Couldn't you let Johnny go all year and I would manage without Katie"—and it's all settled. Something similar happens in every home. The children are coming more neatly dressed. Disorderly hair is an exception. Voices are toning down, the loud laugh has changed for one just as hearty but more musical.

Spring has come, and with it Arbor Day, and the change in the yard corresponds with the change in the school-room. Nobody that day can complain of drones. How many doors are opened for knowledge—the trees, the flowers, so many things are invested with a new charm; the workers go home full of so many plans for their home gardens.

There are plenty of wild flowers in the woods, hepatica, adders, tongue, spring beauty, violets and trillium, and by the ponds marsh marigold. How eagerly these are gathered, and how delighted are the little folks to notice differences, and with what surprise they find that the poplar, the maple, the beech, all the trees have their flowers, many very beautiful and all very wonderful. One boy takes a long tramp to get a pine branch to show a class who have never seen the pine needles, another hunts up some pine cones when he finds that the readers are interested in the subject too.

About this time many of them begin to pay some attention to the crow, the blackbird, the woodpecker, the meadow lark, the grey bird, etc., and to compare the voices. Soon the eggs and nests will be examined but not disturbed.

The weasel that races across the yard with a mouse in its mouth, and keeps it there in spite of half a hundred boys and girls, will demand just a little respect.

The stars at night will not be just stars. There will be more "whys," and as a child always insists on having his why answered, other people will be awakened to the necessity of learning why.

The boys and girls begin to find out that they know more than they thought they did; they can even tell their teacher something, but for some reason they do not conclude that the teacher is "a stupid." Much has been accomplished when a boy or girl learns that his or her ideas are worthy of consideration. No danger that conceit will step in and take possession.

Into the school lessons is introduced as much of the outside world as possible. The pupil is led to consider the Creator of the beautiful handiwork, for then only may he attain the greatest height of earthly joy. The poet wrote:

"Acquaint thyself with God if thou wouldst taste
His works. Admitted once to His embrace
Thou shalt perceive that thou wast blind before,
Thine eye shall be instructed, and thine heart
Made pure; shall relish with Divine delight,
Till then unfelt what hands Divine have wrought."

The Readers are filled with choicest selections of poetry and prose. What an opportunity for inculcating a love of books. When Locksley is read a little more of the story may be told. "Little Nell" will urge a sketch of "The Old Curiosity Shop," and when the pupils reach the books they will be ready to read them. Perhaps the teacher introduces a library.

The pupil can see much beauty in "The Prairies" and "Ocean;" but it is in after years that the intensity and grandeur of the thoughts will flash upon him. The teacher's finest work must be hidden for years.

So many things there are to contribute to the work of elevation—pictures, stories, gems of thought, music, beautiful forms of nature, earnest teaching and good example.

The teacher dare not say "I have labored in vain;" he sees not his whole harvest but he need not despond.

The difficulties that thronged round his rugged path have been his most faithful helpers; without them he must surely have failed. In working to elevate others he has elevated himself. All wrong has not been put down, but there has been implanted a desire for the noble and the good, a love of knowledge as a means to be truer, a thoughtfulness for fellow creatures, a reverence for things holy and pure, and there has been given a training in self-government that must make itself felt in the government of others. "We learn to rule by learning to obey."

All through the school days the children have been taught that "toil is honorable, and that nothing is dishonorable but shirking one's duty."

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