

NATURE and the NEW EDUCATION

By R. S. SHERMAN

For many years, educationists have felt that there is something radically wrong with the system which they have been called upon to work under. Tentative efforts have been made to improve the old system, by adding a subject here, modifying one there, curtailing this, enlarging that; correlating, intensifying, energizing, elaborating. When I was a boy the three R's were a holy trinity, claiming our undivided devotion. A little history, mostly kings, battles, treaties, acts of parliament, and dates—lots of dates, as many dates as events. A little geography—mostly lists of names. A little grammar—mostly definitions and rules of syntax with parsing and analysis as a special treat. Drawing once in a blue moon. That was our curriculum. But strange to say many men and women received an education, achieved an education, or had an education thrust upon them, in spite of the curriculum. Two subjects were left severely alone in the public schools—literature and nature study. When weary of the routine studies we could turn to these for rest and education. What has the modern child left to turn to? Mischievous and the movies.

I honestly believe the public taste in literature was higher and keener when literature was not taught in our public schools. And I believe there was a deeper, truer love of nature before nature study was dreamed of in our philosophy. This does not mean that these subjects should not be on our curriculum. Far from it. But it means that there is something radically wrong with our methods of handling these subjects. To be perfectly candid, I believe that our much boasted of system of education is a failure. It was wrong to begin with, and it has been getting worse, because of constant tinkering.

Look at the antiquity of our system of education. It has never been radically changed. Patching and tinkering will not do. The system should be scrapped and an entirely new, up to-date, efficient system installed in its place. And who will accomplish this? Not the scholiasts and academicians, who seem incapable of waking themselves from the hypnotic sleep; but the citizens of Canada, who are gradually realizing the fact that they are annually spending millions of dollars in perpetuating a worn-out moribund institution. The time is not far distant, when the people will sink the antiquated ark in which the schoolmen are complacently drifting, and will build and launch a brand new ship of their own, with not a plank, a bolt, or a rivet from the old hulk, in its make up. Nature study, instead of being a mere piece of ornamental bunting on the masthead, will be the framework of the whole ship. That is precisely what I mean; nature study will be the framework of our educational system. Not nature study as we know it; not nature study with awful ceremonies of bell, book and candle; not nature study with some book-wise pedagogue instilling his superior wisdom into the receptive minds of little children. But these children and their teacher both seeking knowledge and strength and wisdom in the school of Mother Nature. Who gets the divinest good, the most glorious gifts, from nature's temple, the primeval forest? Not the lumberman with log-scale, or the scientist with his vasculum and microscope, but the poet with his dream. Well, every normal child is a poet at heart. He is a poet until his parents, his teachers and his corrupted companions smother the poetic fire and trample on its ashes. I would make the spirit of poesy breathe into him the very breath of life. Instead of dying out, or being trampled out, it should be fanned into an inextinguishable flame. That

would be accomplished by the new education with nature as the mother force.

Rythm is a rapture of the soul, the dancing of spirit feet to celestial harmonies. Only when the heart sings do lips utter words that thrill. To the nature taught, rather than to the student of nature, come the rhapsodies of music interwoven with the ecstasies of thought.

That is why poetry is a dead language. Words have been devitalized. In spite of, or perhaps because of, our modern education, our vocabulary, the one we really use, is a meagre collection of the most lifeless words in our language.

One of the most interesting men I ever conversed with could neither read nor write. He had lived much in the woods, in logging and mining camps, or alone as a prospector. If ungrammatical, his language was picturesque and vital. His powers of observation and his memory were remarkable. You may assert that this man would have gained much by a school education. I doubt it. In fact, I am convinced that he gained something from nature which he could not have gained from the school, and which would have been debarred by a scholastic training. He had never been forced to use words which possessed no relation to his life activities, or his thought activities, and so when he spoke his words were vibrant with reality. To some the criterion of a man's place in society is the amount of money he accumulates. The man I refer to could hardly be called a failure, for he retired at the age of fifty with a fortune of \$150,000. Others again judge people by the place they gain in public esteem. Well, for many years the man I refer to held the position of school trustee.

The new education, as I see it, will not try to make a tree whose natural growth would extend over twenty years, blossom and bear fruit in seven. What is the result of such forcing? The fibres of the tree are weak and will not bear the strains of storms; the new education will ensure natural growth under natural environment. Environment, in fact, will play a major part in the child's education. Interest, play, joy in life smiles, sunshine, fresh air, plains, mountains, rivers, and seas; flowers, birds and butterflies; clouds and rain, frost and snow; fields of grain; billowy orchards in bloom; the fire side with story, song and jest—these are some of the influences which must be employed in the education of the child.

Our primary work as carried out under the present system has proved a great success, chiefly because the natural interests and play impulses of children are utilized. But when once the children get into a "reader" their enslavement to barbaric routine begins. Henceforth they are chained to a book—first reader, second reader, third reader. New incentives to study are presented to them, such as standing in class, extra hours for neglected lessons, fears and hopes of examinations, and occasionally corporal punishment. Coercion has taken the place of exertion. The teacher ceases to be a kindly big sister to the child. She is now more dignified and unapproachable. The magic current of sympathy has been bottled up in sealed storage batteries, to be released a little at a time, on rare occasions. But there is now no electric thrill in the touch of the teacher's hand. The insulation becomes more complete as the child advances through the grades.

Here we have the secret of our ill success. The child comes to realize that it is under the iron heel of a system, an intangible tyrannical monster that controls even the