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HOW TO IMPROVE THE PRELIMINARY STAGES OF CLASSICAL EDUCATION.

BY PROFESSOR PILLANS, EDINBURGH.*

It must, I fear, be admitted that there exists a growing indifference to the study of the ancient languages of Greece and Rome. The public mind is less disposed than it used to be, to regard that study as the indispensable preliminary to a course of liberal education. Nor is this to be wondered at. We live in an age which is eminently scientific in its tendencies,—an age when clear demonstration, minutely accurate knowledge, and full possession of the question at issue, are becoming more and more the passports to promotion in every branch of the public service. Now, it is a notorious fact, that of the British youth who have gone through the long and compulsory drill of our grammar schools, a vast majority carry with them from school a very superficial acquaintance with the languages they were sent thither to learn, and no desire to increase or even retain the slender stock they may have acquired. And yet there is no want either of weighty argument or the authority of great names in support of a proposition which is as certain as reason and philosophy can make it, that no instrument has hitherto been contrived so well adapted for developing the youthful mind, and training its faculties to their appropriate exercise, as a well-devised course of classical instruction.

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My business at present, however, is not to defend classical training as the best, but, taking for granted the proposition I have just stated, to shew how the practice of teaching may be improved. There must, it is natural to think, be something radically wrong in a system of training which so egregiously fails in accomplishing the object proposed, that, of those trained upon it, a small percentage only go forth into life with a mastery of the subject, to the study of which the best years of their boyhood have been devoted. A large proportion of the rest get a sort of top-dressing, and acquire, perhaps, a habit of dogged hard working, which is not without its use, though far from yielding full compensation for the precious time it has cost them. Such may be able to quote occasionally a line of Horace or Virgil, still found *rari nantes* in the *gurgite vasto* of their ignorance, and may thus gain consideration among their unlearned compeers; but these are worthless and dear-bought advantages.

How, then, is a remedy to be found for a great and growing evil that threatens to extinguish a literature which rescued Europe from the darkness of the Middle Ages, which, ever since the revival of letters, has been the boast and glory of modern times, and which is interwoven with the whole tissue of our literature? How are we to secure its permanence? How render more generally efficient than it now is, a mode of training which even its partial successes have proved to be the best? The cure, I conceive, can only be effected by surrounding the first steps in the study of Latin (for from that language chiefly I shall draw my illustrations) with such attractions as shall prevent, or remove at the outset, a prejudice against it. Such a prejudice can hardly fail to arise in the mind of a boy, from the dry, uninviting task of learning by heart what is imperfectly or not at all understood; and it is to the means of accomplishing this object that I would call attention.

To secure a boy's grappling willingly and successfully with the difficulties of grammar and syntax, we must begin with awakening curiosity and gratifying his self-esteem by leading him to think for himself. We must invest the subject with an interest that will carry him triumphantly through the difficulties that await him at a subsequent stage. By no other means can we expect to arrest the growing evil, and vindicate the claims of classical learning to take the lead in the higher education of our youth. A few preliminary observations will enable me to explain what appears to me to be the origin of the