

THE PUBLIC SCHOOL AUTOCRAT

An Answer to "Public School Teachers Versus Mothers"

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IN the October issue of the CANADIAN HOME JOURNAL, under the courtly caption "Public School Teachers Versus Mothers," appears a paper written by a teacher who enters therein her comprehensive plea against the Canadian mother. Among the many grave charges presented, the following stand out most conspicuously: "The mother has criticized and censured the teacher since the world began"; she "has no sympathy"; "the average class of forty-five pupils has one hundred and forty-five varieties of dispositions," all presumably, directly traceable to the mother; "the mother exerts a perpetual handicap upon the teacher because she lives in constant fear without which teaching would be a joy"; "the mother regards the teacher as a step-mother, and is suspicious lest she inflict barbaric torture upon Johnny"; "the mother questions Johnny after school to entrap the teacher in indifference and general misdoing." At this stage in her arraignment, the teacher who penned this article ceased for a moment to arraign, while she "blushed for the Canadian mother" after which operation she promptly admits feeling a mild measure "of contempt for herself for imputing such unworthy motives to the mother," but justifies her exposure of the mother by affecting to cherish an incipient conviction that such accusations driven well home publicly, will induce the mother "to consider seriously." Arrived at this interesting and logical sequence, the teacher now presents what is supposed to be a verbatim report of a sample dialogue ("actually overheard by teachers boarding"—within earshot) in which the mother is alleged to have encouraged Johnny in falsifying reports of school happenings. Indeed, so altogether diabolical is the conduct of Johnny and his mother that "the distracted teacher asks herself wildly: Are mothers possessed, and all Johnnies liars?"

From this distraction the teacher recovers poise somewhat, only to find the mother "shaking a metaphorical fist in her face and with clenched teeth daring her to touch darling Johnny." As though this were not bad enough, the mother now resolves to "force the teacher out of the profession" by means of "a suspicious and inimical regard." But the teacher is "game," apparently, for Johnny has now to come to his mother's aid with a full measure of "tantrums, noises, leg-pinchings," and even the "mud of Johnny's boots grinds with a screeching and excruciating torture" peculiar to no age but this. Since "misfortunes never come singly" it is quite to be anticipated that "two or three" Johnnies should contract a corresponding number of coughs in their own right with the preconceived purpose of "jarring every fibre of the teacher's body." The teacher's testamentary climax quite naturally arrives with "the determined knock of an irate mother at the classroom door." The foregoing is a very much boiled down summary of the teacher's charge against the mother, and by the same authority the immediate and inevitable result of the mother's iniquity will be "that teachers' chairs will soon be vacant, for they will keep silence" no longer unless "the mother takes to her heart the admonition found here," and makes prompt reform.

Exhausted, but resolute still, the teacher now hands the knotted lash to the Education Department, and causes that hitherto inoffensive and pacific body to declare that "the home has been a failure," inferentially because of the mother, and "therefore, to the teacher is given the most delicate and sacred of the mother's duties." With this vigorous and overwhelming upheaval of all recognized social laws involving "mothers' duties," regardless alike of wreckage and obstruction, this scalp and gory hunting teacher sweeps fiercely on to demolish the last fragment of "the mother's rights" by taking over the garment making "for Johnny's doll," and telling him the fairy "bedtime stories," so many centuries the inalienable prerogative of motherhood. But whether the mother or the Education Department is most to blame for this "last straw" that broke, not the camel's back, but worse, the teacher's fealty to the Heart and Head of Learning, is not very clear; but, whether one or both, certain it is that imposition could go no further, and so the teacher is in revolt, rising upon Rebellion's very crest, by the added super-indignity thrust upon, or at, her by "Public Opinion" (that changeful, unchastened Mrs. Grundy before whom all else is grass), "the teaching of self-knowledge" to little Johnny.

This seems to close the plaintiff's case.

Is the bill true?

Let Public Opinion be the judge, after the mother puts in defence.

Not because of the teaching fraternity, nor yet because of the chastized mother, does it become a compelling duty to enter the courtroom of "Public Opinion" to give evidence in the case, but wholly and solely because of little Johnny. For where is Johnny while the court sits?

To begin then, in order that the judge may quickly render his decision, and restore peace, so that Johnny may safely come from hiding, and return to the classroom, let us go back to the first

charge laid, "the silence" and inaction of the teacher under the public censure and criticism of the mother." During a period covering over three decades of miscellaneous reading, never, with one exception, did there cross my path a press complaint made by a mother. During the same period every such reader must have seen in newspaper, magazine and journal, and heard in and out of teachers' convention, numberless papers treating upon the mothers' infirmities of temper and reason—her faults commissive and omissive, "twice told tales," always reported by the teacher.

Pity it is if these prime forces, mother and teacher, are at variance, as it means loss to both, and worse, means inevitable and irretrievable loss to Johnny. But are these forces really at variance, and if so, why?

Antiquity sustains the adage: "Teachers are born, not made." Because enough teachers are not "born," many have to be "made"; hence many imperfect ones; hence difficulty in adjustment to either perfect or imperfect mothers; hence Johnny's imperilled predicament.

The "born" teacher knows that the school was made for Johnny, not for Johnny's mother, nor for Johnny's teacher. Both the school and the teacher are bought with the mother's money, and Johnny also is her property. It would seem then that when the teacher and Johnny cannot, "like birds in their little nest agree," that the teacher would do wisely "to fold her tent like the Arabs and silently steal away" to another school in a far country. Should the teacher still find herself unreconciled and irreconcilable to the mothers and the Johnnies there, and having also tried elsewhere, she can then quite reasonably rest assured that she is one of the "made" teachers, and a very poor job.

Mut friction and heartburnings would come to an end if the "made" teacher saw eye to eye with the "born" teacher in the particular that Johnny, his mother and the school are fixtures; the teacher only is the peripatetic. Conclusive evidence, if such is necessary, that the teacher who fails is "made," lies in the fact that the "born" teacher succeeds where a succession of "made" failures preceded her.

In her vague and blind gropings after the cause of her bondage (for she is in bondage), it is deplorable that the talons of the teacher should have struck through Johnny and "the home," and therefore straight into the mother's heart.

To the teacher falls the most blame, for, practically speaking, every teacher was brought up in a home, the average home, and knows rather well the mother's labors there. Few mothers, comparatively speaking, were trained to, or fully comprehend, the teacher's arduous duties. The teacher is trained to do her work, and paid for it. She should be tactful, strong, resourceful, patient, magnetic, a veritable radiator of cheer, good-fellowship and mixed reserve. She does not embody these attributes. Why not? Because she is overworked and underpaid. She has to compete on equal terms with her brother in the classrooms, at the teachers' examinations, in the extortionate payment of tuition and other requisite school fees; in the years of heavy application to books. When qualified at exactly the same monetary expense and labor as her brother, she is not paid as much for doing in the same way (often a better way), the same work as her brother. All the plums of the profession fall into his lap; what he cannot or will not eat are infrequently available to her, but usually her portion is the unripe crab. When there are not enough Canadian brothers to devour all the plums, brothers are imported from foreign lands. A fixed principle is, plums for men, crabs for women teachers. This is probably due to the exclusion of women from school boards. The girl teacher is compelled to qualify at the same expense of energy, time and money as her brother, though there is practically no probability of her ever being privileged to occupy a school position equal to his. Her expenditures in education hold no promise of equal monetary recompense. To illustrate more fully: A degree in mathematics costs not one dollar or effort more to acquire than a degree in history, English or moderns. The price is set high for teaching mathematics. (Why?) A woman can seldom get a position even as assistant. Many have qualified. Many have tried. This is unjust. Either her investment should have as high an earning power as her brother's, or she should not be compelled to qualify as high as he. Having then less salary but as heavy work, the teacher must live less comfortably than her brother. She must eke out her insufficient revenue by home and home-made economies of disappointing apparel, instead of like her brother, sloughing off the clinging worries of the schoolroom day in outdoor, care-free, healthful abandon. Like the barnacles that rivet themselves to the vessel's hull, so are the irritations of the school classroom. And poor Johnny is the victim, his mother, the accused before the court! Neither is guilty. To-day's Johnny pays the penalty of his own misdeeds with principal and interest on the heap of yesterday's Johnny.

To-morrow's Johnny? Ah, well! Let us hope morning will dawn in time for him. Mothers may some day appear on the school boards. Meantime must Johnny pay the penalty, and his mother stand accused? And meantime what of the teacher? She (or he) is curious sometimes, illogical often.

To illustrate: A teacher toiled minutely through a tale of woe over that *bete noir* of the fraternity "the lates." On opening morning class her custom was to read a thrilling tale, ceasing each day at a critical juncture. "The late missed what he was not in time to hear. The classroom door was locked. The teacher began to read. Breathless quiet reigned. A "late" knocked at the locked door. The reading ceased. A pupil was requested to move forward and unlock the door. The "late" entered. The door was relocked. The two pupils resumed their seats. The reading was resumed. Another knock. "We had to interrupt the reading every time to unlock that door. Now just look at all that," mourned the teacher.

"But why did you lock the door, if you intended to unlock it each time, and admit every pupil?" questioned her listener. A flush and confusion occupied her face. She had been locking and unlocking that classroom door for nearly two years.

Another case: A teacher had "lates." She locked the school door and kept two little girls on the street. Eventually they went home and reported the cause of their early return. The mother complained to the trustees. "The mother was a little sick, of course, and kept those girls late just to wash the dinner dishes. Who cares for her old dishes?" indignantly queried the teacher. Two little girls punished by a half-day suspension because they obeyed their mother. In the same district (same teacher) lived a Russian family, the father a section foreman, the mother and nine children were living—Vira, the eldest, thirteen years of age. They "had moved last fall from a section in the wilderness near Fort William," because the mother "had heard there was good water and a school in X—" but, oh! the teacher was so cross about the lessons, and I no Inglich but little, an' Vira, she scared so she cannot know anything, and I spare her there for the school, but I so need her, an' she want to stay with me, the teacher so cross. I know not how to help, I do anything for Vira to go to the school, but—" A visit to the school revealed Vira standing in the middle of the floor, face tear-wet, shaking in every limb, making futile struggles to spell "thorough," the teacher towering over her, menacing her with ruler and raucous voice. In hopeless confusion Vira was dismissed to her seat and a younger brother took the rack on the floor, failed as miserably as Vira, and both had to "stay in."

Another case—the teacher told her own tale thus: "And would you believe Minnie Jones' father wrote me a note asking me not to keep her in after four, as he needed her at home. I just wrote back and told him I was running that school, and if he thought he could do it better than I, let him come up and try, and I'll go drive his horses, but while I'm in this school Minnie will get her home work or stay in till she does." Minnie was an only child, twelve years old, kept house (all the keeping it got) for father and two hired men. Father was so anxious for Minnie's school work that he got dinner himself, but Minnie faced a table of dirty, dried-up dishes every night, and no mother. Many a night Minnie couldn't get a minute at her lessons until after ten p.m., but she was kept in, and the teacher "bragged" about it.

The lessons to be drawn are various: One teacher can do a great harm in a school; one mother very little harm. One teacher can do a great good in a school; one mother considerable good. But one good teacher and one good mother combined in any school can make a paradise for Johnny that all the powers of darkness can never smirch, and at life's close our Johnny will be still the knight, both true and strong, the faithful worshipper at mother's shrine and at the teacher's too.

The initiatory move should be the mother's care; her interest is incomparably the greater. But Johnny "late" need not be a deadly personal insult to the teacher; it may only have been that baby was sick over night, or the cows strayed farther than usual. Though not a premeditated insult to the teacher, neither need Johnny "late" mean a careless mother; mother has many suddenly imperative duties, among which she must be allowed to choose. But if careless, still it does not become the servant to rebuke the mistress by punishing her child. It is the mother's privilege to determine how early and how often Johnny shall appear at the school. It is the teacher's duty (for which she is paid) to teach Johnny whenever he presents himself.

System, says the martinet, would change all that. Perhaps, but system has been known to change more than that, and Johnny was the loser.

The teacher "born" discovers Johnny's graces rather than his faults; sees a possibility of slowly-budding genius in Johnny's dullness, a fair bright promise of the man that is to be, and then she leads both Johnny and his mother by a single hair.