Gleanings.

ELEMENTARY EDUCATION IN EUROPE.

The question of Elementary education attracts great attention at the present time in every country in Europe. Philosophers are busy working out the unsolved problems connected with human culture and development. Statesmen are considering the ways and means of increasing national strength and prosperity by making education universal, and teachers are discussing courses of study, and methods of imparting instruction. Within the last few years great progress has been made in establishing and improving systems of elementary schools, and the future, in this respect, is full of promise.

During my tour, I saw large numbers of city, village and country schools of the lower grades; and at the Paris Exposition the opportunities were all that could be desired for inquiring into systems of education, their administration, and the practical working of schools. An account, in detail, of what was learned must be postponed for the present; but some general conclusions may be stated.

First, let me mention a few particulars, in which, I think, the elementary schools of the nations of Europe, educationally the most advanced, are superior to ours.

1. *They are more carefully inspected.*—The local school officers seem to be generally selected with reference to their qualifications for the place, and the inspectors are specially prepared for their work. They have fewer schools to look after than our superintendents. Their tenure of office is for life, or good behaviour, and they are held to a strict accountability by superior officers.

2. *Their course of study is better.*—They do not have so much abstract grammar or arithmetic in their schools, or so much detailed geography; but, in place of these branches, they have drawing, vocal music, and the elements of the natural sciences. Many of them make special application of the natural sciences to agriculture, horticulture, and domestic economy. More teaching is done without the text-book.

3. *Their terms are longer.*—The schools are almost everywhere open for nine or ten months in the year.

4. *The teachers have made more special preparation for their work.*—They are, for the most part, either graduates of normal schools, or they have served an apprenticeship as pupil teachers, in a school under the direction of a master of acknowledged skill. As a class, they are more learned than American teachers. They have, also, whatever advantages arise from constant employment, and a permanent situation.

5. *More attention is paid to moral and religious instruction.*—The teachers of the elementary schools, as a class, seem to be professors of religion. Religion, as a branch of study, is found upon almost every school programme. Under this head lessons are given in the Scriptures, and in the doctrines of the church to which the pupils or their parents belong Intermingled with this intellectual religious instruction, there is much done to develop the religious life. A devotional feeling prevails in many of the schools that is very rare in America.

Some of the particulars in which our elementary schools excel those I saw in the Old World are the following:

1. *We have better school-houses.*—This is true only in a general way of village and country school-houses. I saw school-houses in Berlin, Vienna, and other cities in Europe equal to the best we have in this country. Under the policy lately adopted by some States, of requiring all school-houses to be erected according to plans furnished by a skilful architect, employed by the Government, those recently built are admirable in all respects. But as a whole, there is no country in Europe whose school-houses will compare in size and general adaptation to their purpose with those in Pennsylvania.

2. *Our school furniture is superior.*—Several European nations had exhibits of school furniture at Philadelphia. It was acknowledged on all hands that none of them compared in excellence with the furniture shown by American manufacturers. A like superiority was accorded to our school desks and chair at Paris. In a majority of the country schools all over Europe, the pupils sit on long, clumsy benches, and write on long, clumsy desks, similar to those in the schools of Pennsylvania half a century ago. Blackboards are in the schools; but they are generally small, and seem to be used mainly by the teachers. I did not see a class of pupils working at a black-board in a single school I visited.

3. *Our text-books are better.*—I speak of text-books for elementary schools, and I risk nothing in saying that they are better than those of any country in Europe in matter, in arrangement, in method, in attractiveness—in all that goes to make up a good text-book for children of from six to twelve years of age. I do not believe that a single teacher, competent to compare the merits of text-books, who examined the several exhibits of this kind at Paris, could have come to any other conclusion.

4. *Our schools are free.*—There are no free schools in Europe, except in some parts of Switzerland. All children who attend school, not on the poor list, must pay a fee. A child whose parents are unable to pay the fee can be exempted from it; but this in Europe, as well as in America, is to put a mark upon him.

5. *Our teachers have more tact.*—I have admitted that European teachers are, as a body, more learned than ours. They have made more special preparation for their work. But if my observations are at all reliable, they do not evince that natural aptness as instructors of the young, which is characteristic of American teachers. They seem to be too heavy, too slow, wanting in versatility of talent, in mental flexibility and ready sympathy. They appear to teach under some restraint, and to be unable to forget themselves and the outside world in an effort to make not only scholars, but men and women, of the children placed in their charge.

6. *More is done in our schools to form character.*—American schools are defective in the effort they make to form the character of the young, but with all their defects, they form a happy contrast with European schools in this respect. The highest aim of the average teacher of a country school in Europe seems to be to impart to his scholars such knowledge as will be useful to them in the sphere of life in which they were born. This instruction contains no element prompting them to make an effort to rise to a higher one—none teaching the great doctrine of human equality, or evoking a self-reliant, independent executive power. In America the school is a social force, always moving upward; in Europe it is a social force moving on a horizontal plane. Here, the effort is made to prompt inquiry in all directions, to promote free discussion, to encourage criticism, to accept nothing that is bad because it is high, and to despise nothing that is good because it is low, and to implant in the breast of every child an abiding faith that God has made him the peer of any man, and that it is lawful for him to aspire to the highest place on earth; there, the children of the poor, who alone, as a rule, attend the public schools in the rural districts, are taught to be content with their condition, to follow quietly the avocations of their fathers, to accept as right all that is done by their rulers, to repress all longings for something higher and nobler, and to live and die as generations of their ancestors have lived and died for hundreds of years.

It was a surprise to me to see how little the public school systems of the Old World have uplifted the aspirations or ameliorated the condition of the common people. Doubtless a large majority of the children in the most enlightened countries are taught to read and write; but the houses of the poor, their food, their dress, their mode of life, the amount and character of their toil, are to-day what they have been for many generations. If the efficiency of a public school system is to be tested by its ability to reach its hand down to the lower strata of society and elevate and ennoble, my observations must be greatly at fault if many of the European systems most praised are not comparative failures. Of what avail, for example, is a little reading and writing to the millions of peasant women and girls who are compelled to do most of the work of the fields, as well as that of the house, to carry heavy loads, to drag heavy carts—to make themselves in good part beasts of burden? A public school system may be an instrument in the hands of a despotic government to make obedient subjects, good soldiers, efficient machines; but when so used an American cannot be expected to look upon it with much favor, although he may admire it as an organization. The truth is that the social and political systems of the Old World and the New are so different, their ideas and aspirations are so far apart, that the only common standard that can be applied to the schools of both is one that applies only to their outside—their mere mechanism; all that is vital concerning them must stand or fall with the popular institutions and customs among which they were established, and under whose influence they have grown up.—*Supt. J. P. Wickersham.*

—Daniel Webster is credited with having said: "If I had as many sons as old Priam, I would have them all learn a trade, so they would have something to fall back on in case they failed in speculation.