

Special Articles

A LOST OPPORTUNITY

By W. A. MCINTYRE

I met an old friend yesterday, and as nearly as I can repeat it this is what he had to say:

"I have not one unkind word to utter with regard to my teachers—the teachers of a past generation. Their faithfulness to duty, their belief in the virtue of honest effort, their willingness to attempt brick-making when straw was denied them, make me ashamed of my own work in these days of greater opportunity. If they were in any way narrow or bookish, it was not a personal failing. They faithfully and maybe fearlessly reflected the spirit of the times.

"Yet, as I look back upon what we received then and place it over against what we might have received, as I balance the gains against lost opportunities, I can but regret that the spirit of the times did not make it possible for the teachers to have a broader and more generous outlook on life. Indeed, I can but think that the words of the prayer book were intended for them—'We have done those things which we ought not to have done, and left undone the things which ought to be done, and there is no health in us.' And again let me say that the teachers are not to be censured unduly. Teaching at best seems to me to be a somewhat thankless task, and in those days it must have been particularly irksome.

"On the whole, my school experience might well be described as uninteresting. In it there were few thrills—excepting such as were induced by the slippery-elm twig. Things were painted drab or brown. There were no rainbows, no golden lights, no dazzling splendor. If there were kings and queens who, in the guise of lowly men and women walked the earth, we met them not; if there were wonders on sea

and land, we observed them not. Our imaginations were not kindled through the reading of good literature, our souls were not delighted with sweet songs, we missed the joy of creative effort. This is, perhaps, not overstating it, and it is not a heartless criticism of the men and women who taught the schools some forty years ago. They were victims of the system.

"You look as if you did not understand me. Let me explain myself by means of an illustration. You know how strenuous life was on the old Ontario farms, and how unrelieved was the monotony of work. Then you can imagine how sweet were the hours on Sunday mornings in summer when we were free to walk to the woods and explore to our hearts' content. It was then that there came into our lives a sense of freedom. We loved the trees and grass and flowers. We breathed the open air and gazed upon the blue sky; we looked and wondered, and wondered again—but the tragedy of it all was that there was no one to interpret and to inform. Though we yearned to know the stories of the rocks, there was no one to explain them. They lie there yet with their fossils and their ridges of granite, great, immovable, useless bodies, and each one held a secret that should have been revealed to us. And the soil had a story, but we never heard it. The birds we slew because no one taught us to love them. Poor, timid ground hogs, that might have been tamed, were ruthlessly destroyed. All nature was calling us to worship in those days, but nobody taught us to sing and pray. We entered into the sanctuary to destroy. No! let me take that back. There was the restraining, refining influence which nature always exerts, and it was silently