

SINCLAIR'S JOURNAL

Of British North America.

QUEBEC, 23rd JUNE, 1849.

FEMALE EDUCATION.

THE POSITIVE—THE POSSIBLE.

Great as are the improvements the last twenty years have seen in female education, and continually increasing as is the number of enlightened and faithful teachers who, having dedicated their lives to the work, carry it on with renewed success from day to day, it is still a melancholy fact that, in the majority of our schools, we find many of the old mistakes in full force, together with a general non-progressiveness of character which, to the thoughtful, becomes a subject for serious consideration.

To such as call to mind the days of back-boards and samplers, and knowing only the really good schools of to-day, rejoicingly draw a contrast between past and present, the assertion just made will probably appear both uncalled for and unjust. But that, unhappily, it is neither the one nor the other, increasing acquaintance with facts will testify. So far from wishing to obtain credit for her statement through undue weight attached to the facts on which it is based, the sole desire of the writer is to induce a more careful inquiry into what schools are, and a more earnest consideration of what they should be. Still, such facts as she may adduce—not being selected to serve a purpose, but chosen from the general number as most characteristic and expressive, and being all matter, not of hearsay, but of personal knowledge—deserve that degree of consideration which should be accorded to every contribution, however, to the cause of truth. It may assist the better understanding of the subject, if we take a particular class of schools, in order to indicate the traces of old errors still to be found in them; and perhaps those in which it will be most easy to demonstrate our position are the religious.

But before going further, an attempt must be made to guard, if possible, against misconstruction. It is the primary article of the writer's faith, that however gifted or amiable an instructress may be, whatever her native powers or acquired accomplishments, she is unfitted for the charge of rational and immortal beings unless her heart, mind, and conscience be under the influence of religion. In speaking, then, of 'religious schools,' it must be borne in mind that it is to such as have taken to themselves the name, not such as we should be disposed to give it to, that reference is always made. These are sometimes further characterised as 'evangelical.' Now, in the use of this word, we are influenced only by a desire of indicating to those who are conversant with them the class of schools referred to, and it is employed with as little of an inviolable meaning as the terms 'preparatory' or 'finishing' would be, if they suited our purpose. However designated, perhaps the great mistake of the schools in question consists in this, that religion, which they are undoubtedly right in making their first object, is so formally and unattractively presented, so restlessly obtunded at all times and seasons, and so connected with pain and discomfort, that unless a strong interest has been already gained for it in the more genial atmosphere of home, the best result we can hope for is—indifference, and that which we shall most commonly find—dislike. For it will not be asserted, that to bring tired children in from a long walk—where, if really desirous to

improve, they are just beginning to arrange how to make the best of their time—and summoning them all around you, to read six consecutive chapters from the Bible—prophecy, history, genealogy, or doctrine, just as it may happen—are the means best calculated to give a love for the Scriptures. Or that, after prolonging lessons for an hour and a-half before breakfast, to keep them kneeling a quarter of an hour or more on a cold morning, whilst you are pouring forth prayers which, however true of your individual soul, are without meaning to youthful hearers, is the most hopeful way of leading their hearts to God. And yet these are the established usages of religious schools. One verse from the Bible, chosen with reference to time and place—one heartfelt aspiration, poured into the ear of a child whose heart was tuned to receive it—would do as much good as these well-meant but ill-judged attempts do harm. Nor are they the only customs that appear injudicious. The habit of learning from the Bible as a lesson, of being hurried to church twice in the heat of the summer day, and reproved for the consequent bodily weariness, as if it were a moral crime; the dulness and gloom of Sundays, the formal preachments made on the slightest occasions, and the unfortunate practice of meeting children at every turn with no lighter argument than the Day of Judgment—all these are mistakes more generally made, and more serious in their consequences, than any who are unacquainted with the subject practically can well imagine. So little knowledge of the child's nature is sometimes shown, that an 'Essay on Faith' has been required as a vacation lesson from a whole school, including at least two little girls under eleven. Now, if this had been imposed only on the advanced pupils, by whom the subject was understood and felt, and the younger ones suffered to write on some other subject within their comprehension, no fault could have been found. But imagine unfortunate little beings suddenly stopping in the midst of some game to which they have given their whole heart, and vainly striving to recollect some text, or fragment of a text, that may stand in place of original ideas, and fill a decent page in the theme book! Imagine the utter dislike they will feel to such subjects for years to come. Teachers seldom fail to see this dislike, but for the most part attribute it to natural perversion and innate depravity. God knows, there is enough of both in every heart, however comparatively innocent; but the question is—Is the right means taken for removing it? And to some of us the further question arises—May not the mistakes of the teacher help to confirm the wrong feelings of the child? Again: in many schools deceit is effectually taught by the system of espionage maintained over letters. If children are told to say just what they like, but know at the same time that every word they do say will be overlooked, they will, either consciously or unconsciously, be hypocrites in the writing. They cannot fail to say what is likely to give pleasure or gain favour; and going in time a step farther, when communications of a contrary nature have to be made, a piece of paper will be slyly slipped in after supervision of the original letter.

And yet, under these influences are brought up every year a large number of children, whose parents, thinking they have secured for them the inestimable benefit of a sound religious education, vainly hope to see springing up in their hearts that good seed which, for want of due preparation of the soil, has never taken root. Happy is it if they do not find in its place indifference, callousness, deceit. Now it seems impossible that intelligent parents, and honest but mistaken teachers, should meditate on these evils without feeling that they must be removed, at whatever cost or effort.

It is to such I address myself in the following attempt to determine how many of the errors that belong to our present school system are essentially interwoven with it, and how many only make part of it by accidental association; in short, to set the positive in the light of the possible.

In doing this, we require one principle given; namely, that schools are a substitute, and at best a poor one, for home training, which, when attainable with few or none of the inconveniences commonly attached to it, we hold to be the perfect mode of education, the normal state appointed by God; and which, therefore, we may not change without and sufficient reasons.