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The Teaching of English Literature in Schools.

Paper read by F. STORR, Esq., B. A., before the College of Preceptors.

I sometimes amuse myself by trying to analyse my dreams—to pick out the little bits of coloured glass, which in the kaleidoscope of sleep are transformed into such methodically mad visions. Will this grave and learned body pardon my levity if I tell them a dream I had, and the stuff it was made of? I had been giving, as usual, a lesson in Shakespere, and after that I had heard a class translate from the Gorgias of Plato (it was the passage where the irrepressible Polus is silenced by Socrates). On coming home from school, I found your Secretary's letter, reminding me of my engagement to lecture on the teaching of English Literature. My thoughts went back to the lesson of the afternoon, and I took down my “Morley” from the shelf, and, as I turned over page after page, I reflected somewhat sadly what a fraction of English literature I knew myself—what a fraction of that fraction I had been able to impart. To solace myself, I took to bed with me, as is my wont, one of my favourite authors; it was Heine's “Harzreise,” and I had read as far as the dream of the Göttingen professor, who wanders in a garden where the flower-beds are sown thick with quotations, from which the professor is busy selecting choice specimens and replanting them in his own flower-bed, while

above his bald head the nightingales sing their sweetest songs. Then there came a blank, and I have a dim recollection of a book falling; after that (how long I cannot tell) I was hurrying along Guilford Street, and was just opposite the Foundling, when from out the gateway a man met me, whose face and figure I seemed to know. The broad, wrinkled forehead, the bushy eyebrows, the upturned nose and prominent nostrils, could belong to no one but the son of Sophroniscus. I gave him a familiar nod and walked on, for I was behind my time, when he called me by my name and I was compelled to turn back. Taking me by the hand, he asked me reproachfully whither I was hurrying so fast, and whether I had not a moment to spare for an old friend. I told him I was going to give a lecture to the College of Preceptors, and was already late. “At least you have time to tell me the subject,” he said. I told him, and I know as I told him that I was lost. Step by step I was led into a discussion which seemed to me interminable. In vain I struggled to escape, he held me spell-bound like the wedding guest. I have only a confused recollection of an infinite series of inductions, in which blocks and razors, sunbeams and cucumbers, cobblers and lasts, eggs and grandmothers, formed successive steps; but before I awoke from my nightmare, I remember clearly that he had made me agree to four propositions—1. That I knew no English Literature myself; 2. That I knew still less how to teach it; 3. That English Literature (like virtue) was not possible to be taught; 4. That I was an impudent fellow, and no better than a sophist, in professing to teach teachers the art of teaching what I was ignorant of myself.

Gentlemen, I have told my dream, “which was not all a dream,” or at least issued from the gate of horn. I have come here to-night, like Chaucer's poor scholar, glad to learn no less than to teach, not to deliver an address but to assist at a symposium—a picnic to which each guest contributes his *eranos*, though on me has devolved the honourable and onerous duty of saying grace. You must already be taking me for a Scotch minister, and without more ado we will to supper with what appetite we have.