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Compulsory Education.

(From May number of *Scribner's Monthly*.)

A peculiar feature of the legislation of the past winter has been the unprecedented number of measures designed to secure more general and more regular attendance of children at school. Not only in the National Legislature, but in several of the State Legislatures, bills have been introduced for the promotion of public education by devices ranging from penalties for non-attendance at school, as proposed in the State of New York, to rewards for regular attendance (by remission of taxes), as proposed in Illinois. Though these schemes have been, for the most part, unsuccessful,—the time not being ripe for them, as their friends allege,—they have shown very clearly the drift of public opinion. The nation has been aroused to a sense of its educational poverty, and is earnestly casting about for a cure. It has learned that some millions of its population are illiterate; that millions of children are growing up unschooled; that ignorance is everywhere associated with, if not related to, poverty and crime; and that the productive force of the country is seriously weakened by lack of intelligence. The natural inference is, that a wider diffusion of elementary instruction would go far to inaugurate a happier state of things. And the inference is just. But when people assume, as the advocates of compulsory schooling do, that

the instruction now given in the schools is a certain cure-all for the evils noticed, and that the one thing needful is some means of bringing all the children into the schools and keeping them there, then their position may be reasonably questioned. It is by no means evident that such an extension of the scope and power of the public schools would be an advantage. Indeed there are reasons for suspecting that it might prove a national calamity unless a radical change were first made in the matter and methods of popular teaching. Let us not be charged with hostility to public schools. We believe in them firmly. It is not only the wisest policy but the highest duty of the community to make education a public concern, and to see to it that no poverty, indifference, or greed shall be suffered to deprive the young of suitable opportunities for instruction and culture. We believe, further, that a well-devised and properly-conducted system of public schools is the directest, cheapest, surest, and best means for securing the instruction of all classes. Nevertheless, we seriously question whether the existing system is anywhere near that state of perfection which would warrant us in stereotyping it, and enforcing it on all children. We are by no means sure that the instruction given in the schools is, in the main, such as the children need. We doubt whether the mental habits fostered by the schools are really beneficial to inhabitants of a working world like ours. We doubt whether instruction is offered at the most suitable times and for the most suitable periods. In short, there is not a feature of the popular school system that we should not wish to have carefully reconsidered before extending its sphere and power. The perfection of the system is to be found in Boston. It is the professed desire of the advocates of compulsory education to secure, as far as possible, to all the children of the land, the school advantages provided by that city. In view of the testimony of the hundred and fifty physicians who have joined with the parents of the pupils in the Boston Latin School in protesting against the system of long hours and cramming enforced in that school in particular, and in the public schools in general, we may be pardoned for accounting those "advantages" something fearful. "I cannot doubt that the modern system of forcing the tender brain of youth lays the foundation for the brain and nervous disorders of after years—the cases of melancholia, paralysis, softening of the brain, and kindred diseases becoming so fearfully prevalent." So writes