

## TOPICS OF THE DAY

PLATO AND THE MULTI-MILLIONAIRE: A HOMILY ON SCHOOLS.

RECENTLY an Englishman of affairs was heard to say: "You Canadians seem to be a breed who are fearfully quick at figures when it comes to piling up your private fortunes, but in the matter of economics and politics you can't think straight for ten minutes together. All your figures seem to desert you there." When pressed for proof, he admitted that he was generalising on his observation of a few Canadians now living in England, and that Joseph Chamberlain and other non-Canadians had had the same sort of limited intelligence. He countered, however, by demanding to know whether those in the company present could not think of a great many Canadians in Canada of the same type.

The outburst reminded me of a vehement, but very deliberate, passage in the Fifth Book of Plato's *Laws*. (It follows a long diatribe on the political mischiefs which result in a State where many individuals are concerned with piling up money for themselves and their posterity):

For, in relation to economics, to politics, and to all the arts, no single branch of youthful education is so important and influential as the science of numbers. (Here he refers to geometry as well as arithmetic, in our sense). Its chief advantage is that it wakes up the mind that is naturally drowsy and slow-witted, and makes it quick to learn, able to remember, sharp to devise: exceeding the natural capacities by an art that is divine. But these subjects of education will prove useful and suitable only provided you can by additional laws and institutions do away with illiberality and avarice in the souls of the pupils,—who are to be addicted to these studies just sufficiently, and so profitably. Otherwise you will find that you have turned out not wise men, but clever fellows, who will boggle at nothing. This is to be seen in the case of the Egyptians, the Phoenicians, and many other nations that are illiberal and under-bred in money-making and many other activities. This may be due to their having a base law-giver to begin with, or some other piece of bad luck. Perhaps it is because of a natural disadvantage. For this must never be forgotten: some districts are naturally superior to others for the breeding of men of a good or bad type. And there is no use in a legislator trying to counteract this. Some districts in the world are cursed and some are blessed, according as the winds blow and the sun shines on them: in other places it is a matter of drinking-water, and in others of the produce of the soil,—

which differs in excellence not merely as food for the body, but as sustenance for the mind and soul also, and is of an efficacy to implant this or that sort of character. . . . These are the things which a sensible law-giver will investigate, so far as the wit of man can investigate such matters, and then, and then only, attempt to lay down laws. And these are the things which must first be investigated when you send out a colony.

I don't suppose that the sort of modern multi-millionaire whom the English critic had in mind has ever read this passage, or that he would show any patient understanding of it, if it were pointed out to him. Indeed, if I had only such a reader in mind, I should not waste such heavy metal as Plato on him. When a certain French general saw in clear day-light the Irish castle he was to take, he issued the order: "Limber artillery, bring up the rotten apples."

But to a certain extent our candid English critic was right about us. We do show an amazing precocity in getting rich, and a rather perverse slowness in applying arithmetic to public affairs. As for Plato's demand that we have special laws, and take special precautions, to do away with illiberality and avarice in the souls of men, where is there evidence of such a thing in our midst? Do not nearly all of us show the greatest confusion of mind about material and immaterial things? How often do we hear it said that if the community could be induced to pay its teachers and preachers well, it would have good teachers and preachers! It is assuredly true that a community which refuses to pay sufficiently for education, art, and other things that matter will be badly served in these respects. On the other hand, no community can by a sudden spending of wealth procure for itself, either in the present or the third generation hence, good education or good art. It must spend more than its money: it must spend its time, its thought and energy, and it must spend them continuously and with a consistent purpose. Its soul must be turned out, as Plato would say, from the getting and spending of money to a consideration of the best use of life. Again, how quantitatively we think! Recently, I heard it said, in a gathering of "educationalists", that before Canada catches up to the United States in education, it must increase its university attendance by one-third! What would Plato think of this arithmetic, finding the proportion of total American college students to gross population, doing the same in Canada, and then rating the education of the two countries on that basis? It would be the last push into the abyss if Canadian universities deliberately set about increasing their enrolment. In

the last few years there has been an unprecedented building boom in our large cities. But in spite of all our palaver about town-planning, how many fine public buildings, monuments or thoroughfares have been added to our cities? I can think of one or two monuments. In Renaissance Italy, or even pre-war Germany, materialistic in many ways as that Germany was, while there would have been, in a prosperous era, considerable waste of energy, from the democratic point of view, on the palaces of princes, there would also have been great and fine public buildings erected: cathedrals, public museums; boulevards, loggias and parks; concert halls, picture galleries, and theatres—built with no view to rents, fees or money-making. The nearest thing to a great new public building that I can think of, built or talked about even, in Toronto or Montreal during the last few years is a railway station; and perhaps it is significant that in both cities railway stations are more talked about than built. But hotels, banks, office-buildings are erected with unheard-of speed. Both cities have recently “enjoyed”, to use the general word for it, an unprecedented growth of population. But in neither does one discover anything like the attention that once was shown to ensure new and beautiful park areas. A comment on our lack of taste is the hideous driveway on the lake shore in the West of Toronto. It is largely given over to concessionaires, who have patterned it after the American idea of Heaven. Meanwhile, near Montreal, two beautiful stretches of river have been ruthlessly converted into power-sluiques.

There is another striking passage in the Fourth Book of the *Laws* that often recurs to my mind in thinking of Canadian affairs: to the effect that God alone does not rule human affairs; that he has two co-partners, Luck, and Art. Under Luck Plato instances such catastrophes as war, pestilence and the poverty which comes from a succession of bad crops. Canadians know something of these things, and perhaps would add immigration to the list. By Art, of course, Plato means the devices of men to ameliorate their lot. He urges that the law-giver co-operate with God by understanding truth, so far as science and thought will reveal it to him, and that he co-operate with Luck as a good sea-captain makes use of occasion.

Now, how could we Canadians best set about being artists in public affairs? There is no wholesale panacea, of course, and there is no short-cut. Even Henry Ford has given over belief in short-cuts. He began by thinking that a minimum wage of five dollars a day would convert the United States into Paradise. When the War interfered, he tried to stop it by going in person to

Europe. Later he advised his fellow-Americans to forget history. Then he discovered that Prohibition was the highway to Heaven. The last news is that he intends to devote his whole attention to education. If he keeps on this tack long, he will soon be obliged to take history into account, and he will probably learn something about war, and about Prohibition itself.

Some of us talk as though if we filled the Civil Service with university graduates, and as though if all our members of parliament were university men, all would be well with Canadian public life. Alas! nothing of importance is so simple as this! And again, "university men", from coming to mean so much and covering so many classes, really means nothing at all to-day. We are making a fetish of the phrase. It is ridiculous to assume that a man cannot be educated outside a university. But it is just as ridiculous to assume that all who pass through a university have been educated. Yet we so continually assume both that we are now lost in words and phrases. In one of our largest provinces, furthermore, education, high and low, has become a political football, with disastrous results. And all through the country every ignoramus almost, especially if he be a university graduate, is delivering himself of opinions about education, and what ought to be done about it. I listened recently to a number of university graduates, whose average opinion seemed to be that nothing could be done to improve education in Canada until we could institute "junior colleges" on the American model, and that, as the money was not forthcoming for such a purpose, we should have to wait! Once more, a mere matter of money!

We began with Plato, who never talks long about politics without reverting to education. Without fanatical belief that education alone, even if ever so well conducted, will solve all political questions, and cure all social ills, let us confine the rest of our remarks to our schools, seeing that most of the readers of these lines are connected in some way or other with our schools or their product, and in view of the popular fallacy (if fallacy it be) that reform must somehow begin with us. For my own part, I have at present a particular reason for laying emphasis on the subject because recently I have encountered several hopeful signs in the situation. For one thing, in places where education is at its lowest among us, there is a divine discontent, inside schools and colleges and outside. There is some willingness also, not general as yet, but perhaps it is spreading, to make comparisons and to look abroad for guidance. The Savage Report on Secondary Schools in Ontario, published by H. M. Stationer, London, 1928, but with

the consent of the Ontario Department of Education, is one sign of this. At the same time—and I think this is partly owing to the indiscretions of a self-constituted high-priest, who wishes to reform us from without—more and more of us understand that we must be reformed from within. Above all, there does seem to be growing a realisation of the simple fact that, as there are many kinds of man, so there are also many kinds of child; and that education in consequence is a highly complicated thing, best left to specialists and experts. True, the old notion that one inspector can go about, grading all the schools of a province in a purely mechanical way, dies hard. (There is even a demand being made at this moment for a uniform system of education from coast to coast!) But more and more people are asking awkward questions, such as: "But suppose, from some accident, a school staff were weak in languages, would it not then be better to concentrate on science, or something else that the staff can do well? Suppose a brilliant boy can do the work of eight years in five or six, must he then be kept in the treadmill of his comrades' stupidity? Suppose an enthusiastic teacher gets a whole class reading Parkman, or Walter Scott's poetry, must the class, at an inspector's pleasure, be held to the snippets and gobbets of a school-reader? Must elementary teachers spend so much time assigning and tabulating marks and percentages for principals and inspectors that they have no time left to teach anything?" Again, I have recently met several men and women who are impressed by the great diversity in history, tradition and present constitution of our Canadian universities. They consider this a great opportunity for diversity of contributions to the stock of human knowledge. In particular, they think that some of the younger and smaller institutions might agree among themselves to specialise in some of the many activities that are now associated with university work, and leave other activities to other growing institutions. If each of them attempts law school, medical school, engineering school, in addition to the all-important work of an arts college, all of these things must suffer in all places.

Now, on this occasion as always, the great reformer will be the man who knows how to take the next step, whether that step be a long or a short one. Again, education being first and last a process of dealing with human material, the educator *par excellence* will distinguish himself by ability to work in and through committees, and to pick men,—especially to pick teachers. There is no one step, that I know of, that must be immediately taken in different parts of Canada. No two parts of Canada are at precisely the same stage, or faced with the same difficulties in educa-

tion. But even suppose we had all the same difficulties at this moment, our supposed reformers and divinely-gifted teachers would still be as various as the human species itself. They would not be men and women addicted to the same idea. A drawing-mistress who discovers promise and elicits genius—what has she in common with the painstaking teacher of mathematics? A master who ferrets out the boy who collects dragon flies, and makes an entomologist or botanist of him, may or may not be able to teach English literature.

But there is one thing, I believe, upon which all these teachers and experts will be agreed: and that is the great wastage of treading down different types of ability into a common pulp of mediocrity. Too often we are trying to make all sorts of children fit our own preconceived norm or, at the outside, two or three norms. We too often imagine that all children reach the same level in a given subject at a certain age, and, neglecting their ability and zeal in the subjects they have attained, frown because something else of necessity comes later. In general, we too often take it for granted that all children require the same length of time to master a course; or, if we talk airily about "elasticity of promotion", we allow, out of laziness or mechanical habits, the bright pupil to be held back with the average, and so waste years of his life. The natural tendency is to be more concerned with delinquents than with head boys, who invariably give less trouble. The years which the bright pupils now waste in lower and middle school should, of course, be spent in special post-matriculation classes, along with a few mental peers. Teachers will never have much time to teach these supererogatory pupils, but will find it the joy of their lives to superintend their independent work, and to stimulate them to new and more advanced subjects.

Now, these latter are the flower of our youth. For such, our universities were originally intended. If universities bent their efforts to securing these young men and women as students, giving them scholarships if necessary, instead of wasting their substance in advertising night-classes and extra-mural degrees for the rag, tag, and bobtail of the populace, and gave these good students, who had shown an interest in intellectual pursuits, the same special treatment as the post-matriculation classes had given them, there would be an incredible quickening in schools and colleges alike. Admittedly dangers would attend the school and college days of these youths. Many teachers would attempt to over-train them, and if the race were made competitive in any narrow way, the students would be intellectually exhausted in early life. But these things have only to be stated and understood to be avoided.

There is another thing also which would be a universal concern to those who interested themselves in Canadian education: greater permanency in the teaching profession in our primary and secondary schools. Now, from the nature of things, one way to secure this is to secure a much larger proportion than at present exists of male teachers. And this brings us at once to an economic aspect of the situation: men cannot compete with women in any profession where the remuneration lies close to the margin of a living wage. Either, then, all salaries must be raised, or married men must be doubly paid. This part of the problem is undoubtedly financial. But before even this matter can be considered, there must be a change of attitude towards the teaching profession. It must become what it was in many places in pioneer days among us, and what it has continuously been in many European countries,—an exalted profession, inferior to none. For the means of achieving *this* miracle, I have no specific to advise!

But permanency in the teaching profession in elementary schools, as well as in secondary, must be steadily aimed at, and achieved by whatever means available. This essential part of the problem soon confronts anyone who attempts improvement at any link in the long chain. The problem of education is, after all, a unified problem, from the lowest school-class to post-graduate work in the university. There is, in a sense, no high or low in education. Those who have studied the matter closely always find themselves gravitating to the conclusion that the teacher of the lowest grade is the most important of all. And I can say, out of some experience, that the heaven-sent teacher for a primary grade is about the hardest thing in the world to find. But suppose an excellent primary teacher is found, and fairly good teachers for the succeeding grades. What then happens is that a few bright pupils, having been *interested* in their work, are eligible for more rapid promotion than the usual. Promote them more rapidly, and some of them still persist in rising to the top of their classes. If, however, after a couple of such promotions, these pupils fall in with a stupid teacher, who believes that twelve-year old children cannot do more than the first half of a certain text-book, all the good work accomplished by the earlier teachers may be destroyed. Again, in cases that have come under my notice these pupils are deliberately held back by the upper teachers of the secondary schools, because there would be nothing for them to do after accomplishing the school curriculum, and before they are old enough to enter the university! And so in the last grades of the secondary schools these precious bits of human material take no good them-

selves, and as often as not bedevil the rest of the class, for lack of interesting occupation. The obvious and sensible treatment would, of course, be to let these pupils finish their secondary education at the speed which comes easy to themselves, and then let them measure themselves against other bright pupils in more advanced classes, where they are not so much taught as trained to work for themselves, in advanced and new studies. This is the best sort of preparation for university work, which differs from school work precisely in being independent of teachers. And if these good pupils are not to go on to university, surely they are entitled to some reward for ability and celerity in doing easily what most students have found hard to do: surely society owes it to these bright and eager spirits to give them some further experience of the things of the mind. They have earned, at the least, a year or two of respite from plunging into the welter. Why not use it for the sake of themselves and of society, to give them an abiding taste for reading and study; to fire them with some enthusiasms; and, above all, to develop still further those tastes and proclivities which they themselves have shown? But the schools independently can hardly be expected to show this steady and consistent zeal for making the most of the material offered them, unless the university co-operates with them by continuing the same sort of differential treatment for the various types and various capacities of advanced matriculants. A college course which sprawls all over the multitude of subjects possible, and which gives the student no opportunity of doing advanced work in his own subjects, is not merely a dunce's corner in itself; it is discouraging to good work in the schools. Furthermore, the university must, for the sake of all concerned, occupy itself to a large extent with sending back good teachers into the schools. It can do so only by giving special and advanced courses in the subjects which these men are later to teach in the secondary schools.

There is nothing new in the things here advocated. They have long been tried in certain parts of Canada and elsewhere. But certain notions, generally branded "American" but long ago called "French" by Emile Faguet, have been spreading insidiously in Canada. For example, the notion of "democracy in education"—a good thing if the words are taken in their proper sense; for democracy means, now as ever, *une carrière aux talents*. But the phrase is often used to mean a featureless swamp of mediocrity, and some who use it have themselves a dog-in-the-manger attitude towards any sort of excellence or beneficent eccentricity. Again, the notion of mass-production has invaded our education: we



have in some of our cities monstrous masses of buildings, called schools, containing scores and scores of classes under one roof, so that a principal has been heard to boast that he does not know some of his teachers. How, then, can he know his pupils? How can he direct their studies, or give advice suitable to their needs? But the most noticeable mischief that has come upon our systems of education has come through the disruptive influences of immigration. These are many and various, and cannot be described here. But if anyone will reflect on the necessary unity and continuity of education, he will see that all this must have been shattered by the sudden and artificial increase of school population,—requiring in some places a doubling of the teaching staff in a decade or so. A trained profession can never meet such a demand. Besides, the school population became, almost in a moment, utterly heterogeneous.

Since writing the above, I have been called upon to translate a letter from a German school-girl. She writes from the village of Stalluponnen (in East Prussia, about ten miles from the Russian frontier). Since she is writing to an unknown Canadian school-girl, she has much to say of her own school course. She is 16, and with her sister of 15 will try this Easter their school-leaving examination from the Lyceum. This admits (or did in the pre-war Germany I knew) to any of the German universities *for certain courses*. But it is also the hurdle set between Lyceum and Ober-Lyceum (high school and upper high school), and it is thus that the writer speaks of it. If they go on, they can complete their upper school course in three years,—“if, that is, we do not just sit still,” she adds. She makes it clear that there is no Ober-Lyceum in Stalluponnen itself. It is a village of 1,000 inhabitants. It contains three schools: the elementary, the High School for boys, and, at a considerable distance from it, the High School for girls. She apologises for the girls’ High School having no gymnasium. “When the hour for exercise comes, we have to go to the gymnasium in the boys’ school, and so we lose a good deal of time.” In summer time the girls also have the use of a large swimming tank, in a village ten minutes away. She won her swimming diploma a year ago—one requirement for which, she adds, is that you must be able to swim continuously for an hour and a quarter. She describes with enthusiasm the folk-dancing which the girls do weekly in an assembly room in the village hotel, and the walking-tour which twenty of them made together under a class-leader, last summer, through the lake district of East Prussia. They put up nightly at a *Jugend-heberge* (an institution well-

known to those acquainted with the now famous "Youth-Movement" in Germany). She speaks, rather enviously, of the beautiful mural decorations of the schools she saw in the larger towns. Stall-uponnen, one gathers however, must have some compensating advantages, for her parents moved thither from Konigsberg two years ago that she and her sister might attend the school, and they will move back again when she and her sister have passed the examination.

The system of elementary school, high school and upper high school here adumbrated, selective, specialised, and intensive, and with provision for other things than mere book-learning, has been the system in many European countries for generations. A continuously expanding course, for those who are able to profit by it, from infant class to university! And, be it remembered, these are state schools, not private institutions with high fees.

One of the most useful things a Canadian newspaper could do at this moment would be to send to England an educationist of experience, have him tour the reformed state-schools which have come into existence in the last two decades, and after his return to this country describe them in a series of weekly articles. Here is philanthropy, imperial relations, and sound business all in one: the most opportune and resounding journalistic stunt that an editor or business manager could hit upon, after a year's cogitations! I make a present of the idea to the *Manitoba Free Press*, the *Montreal Gazette*, and the *Ottawa Citizen*. But the educationist must be a Canadian, who knows the conditions and historical development here, and who will not have the folly to advise mere imitation.

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