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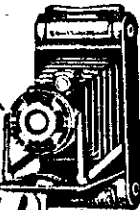
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# A TALK OUT OF SCHOOL

## Lunch With A Septuagenarian

IT is my privilege to eat occasionally with a retired teacher who was a headmaster before I was born. Not that this makes him very old: 70 perhaps, or a year or two one way or the other. And even if he is older than I think, he is still a chicken by comparison with G. B. Shaw, 88, and Sir Ian Hamilton, 91, whose *Everybody's What's What in Politics* and *Listening for the Drums* are England's two liveliest books of the year.

My friend is growing old just as slowly, and I never have any hesitation therefore in tugging at his trouser leg. I always get back a little more than I give, but when I met him the other day I was not in the mood for leg-pulling. In 48 hours I had read about half-a-dozen attacks on progressives in the field of education, and the cumulative effect was a touch of the blues. But was my friend blue? Not in the least. On the contrary, he was clearly rather elated.

"It is a good sign, my boy. It means that they are coming out into the open. Let them all come with all their guns."

"You mean the critics?"

"Far more than the critics. A critic is a man with opinions. The people I am thinking about are those who have prejudices only. They are always with us, but sometimes it is difficult to find them. But if I am not mistaken, we are entering on a period in which we shall see them in full cry."

"You are not alarmed?"

"Not a bit. I would be alarmed if nothing at all was happening—if the world was changing everywhere else and New Zealand slept on."

"But they are saying some disturbing things."

"All the better. Let such things be said. If they are right it is time we heard them. If they are not right, the sooner we know where they are coming from the sooner we shall know how to deal with them."

### Progress at a Price

"Would you agree that some of the criticism has a foundation?"

"Of course. Much of it. Our schools are better than they were—better all in all than they have ever been in our history. But they are not better in every way."

"You think we are making progress at a price?"

"Yes. But it is necessary to pay the price. In the meantime we must get the picture in focus. A generation ago every schoolteacher worked to a dead-line, the fixed end-of-the-year requirement in which the three R's loomed large. The Proficiency set this requirement for Standard VI., and work in the lower classes was a graduated approach to it. There

were other subjects, art, music, hand-work, drill, but the inspection of these was sketchy and the results not good."

"But something was achieved?"

"Something certainly, but not enough. The outlook of the school was unenterprising; its methods and results uniform. The pupils' minds were passively receptive of the instructional handout. As regards discipline, there was a good deal of 'keeping in,' and a fair amount of corporal punishment. Except for the

more and, except for examination purposes, their grasp of the rudiments was uncertain. Three months away from schooling and they would lapse sadly. But an upper 20 per cent of those who passed, if kept in training—a thing as necessary to mental as to physical fitness—would prove acceptable employees to commercial concerns."

### Discipline and Detention

"Would you not agree at all that the school of a generation ago was more thorough? Were not the practical everyday essentials instilled in such a way so as to become a life-long possession?"

"No. You might as well argue—I have heard it claimed as one of the virtues of those days—that 'youngsters were kept in their place.' Of course they were, and that place was their half of a dual desk. Physically and mentally, children were under detention, and, on the whole, learned as a matter of habit to submit to detention."

"Well, let us face about. What of the school to-day? Have you been inside a school during the last 10 years? Could I myself see one of these places at work?"

"Of course you could. But you would be a little surprised if you went expecting something like your own school-days."

"Is the change really marked?"

"Well, it depends on how much you see. You will not, for example, see many of

the outward signs of discipline. The teacher does not drive, the orders she gives are few, she keeps to an easy level conversational tone. During two hours she does not utter a single rebuke. She trusts the class and the class trusts her. The children are not submissive or subdued, but they never fail in friendly respect; and they never attempt to play the fool. They co-operate in what has to be done, and do so the more readily since it is part of a well-planned and soundly-established routine."

"What about the classes? Are they as big as they were?"

"I am afraid they are."

### Still Mass-Instruction

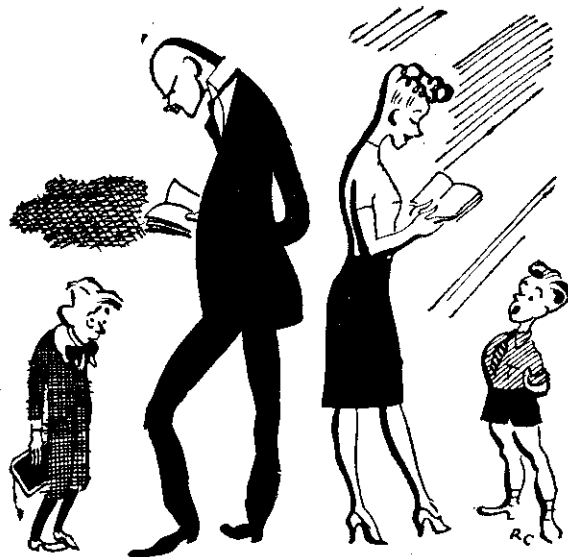
"So it is mass-instruction still?"

"Yes, the teacher herself tells you so; numbers make individual education impossible. Even to divide the class into four or five 'project' groups would mean an amount of going and coming and of animated and clashing discussion that would destroy the order indispensable to getting any work done at all. Even adults could not conduct the proceedings of four committees in a room just big enough to hold all four without distracting each other till confusion worse-confounded supervened."

"Not much progress there, then?"

"Not as much as there should be, but it is your fault and mine, and not the teacher's. She doesn't want 50 or 60 in

(continued on next page)



"... The first step in teaching a dog tricks is to get him to look at you. Discipline begins with interest."

customary small percentage of rebels, all the pupils accommodated themselves to the uninspired routine."

### Teaching is an Adventure

"There was discipline?"

"There must be discipline if anything at all is to be achieved; but discipline secured by such methods becomes a strain on teachers and irksome to those taught. The classes become restive. The cardinal virtues are diligence and doing what one is told. No one used the terms 25 years ago, but the instruction was 'mass instruction' and the discipline was based upon 'external control.' Individuality in the young was not so much ignored as unthought of, and there was little scope for initiative in teacher or taught."

"But teaching must always be a strain. You are surely not suggesting that it is an adventure?"

"That is precisely what I do suggest—an adventure, and more than that. I would not give a fig for the teaching that is mere repression and grind. Unless it opens up vistas and widens horizons, it is lifeless, and almost if not quite useless."

"You admit that the teaching of those days achieved something?"

"Oh, yes. About 80 per cent of the pupils obtained Proficiency; 60 per cent of the marks allowed. The work of half of those granted Proficiency was medi-