

SO YOU'RE THINKING OF BEING A TEACHER?

I'M determined to play this radio parlour-game according to the rules. I'm going to pretend my audience is not in fact composed of Anxious Mother, Constant Listener, Radio Reviewer and stern old men who ought to be playing cribbage. Not Ladies and Gentlemen then, but Young Man, Young Woman: eager, credulous, anxious—So you're thinking of being a teacher?

This probably means that you're good at everything or that you're good at nothing. It's a sad state of affairs, sadder by far for the youth who's good at everything. He's good at Maths., but just as good at English and languages. No particular bent has been built into him; over-generous Nature has embarrassed him with riches. If she'd withheld the gift of tongues, his ability in Maths., or his interest in chemicals would have pointed clearly to a science degree and a rewarding career in industry or research. As it is, though, he spins uncertainly in the centre of his abilities, spreads his talents thin over a University degree and finds that the only thing to do with his bag of precious trinkets is to sell them again to the young. The old adage tolls in his ears more and more resoundingly: he who can does; he who can't teaches. It's a mockery, of course, because such a teacher is a can-man, over and over again.

Then there's the youth who's good at nothing. He just passes, with fatal equivalence, in all his High School subjects. He writes reasonably correctly

but without flair. He reads regularly but without perception, without discernment, without delight. He can satisfactorily apply the rules of mathematical manipulation, but could never have invented them, can never anticipate the new rules; can learn to work by the rule but never know why the rule works. The Training College lures him by laying before him the prospect of further easy rules of learning, with examinations that he will doubtless find it no harder than before to pass; only he will be prettily paid to learn these things and pass these tests. He drifts to the net like a perplexed trout. He teaches the young to pass. He extols to himself and his friends the advantages of steady pay, short hours and long holidays.

You can see that I'm not being paid to boost the campaign for more teachers, and that ought to reassure you. Of course, I've grossly misrepresented the position. But remember I'm talking to those who're thinking about going into teaching, not about those who are going into teaching, and I'll probably get around to them in a minute or two. I just want to complete the sorry history of these two classes I've been considering—those who are good at everything and those who are good at nothing. Both are very apt to spend five or ten years as teachers and then quit. Girls of the first type make animated wives and mothers and are later found on committees which would be lost without them. Girls of the second type make efficient wives and mothers and their husbands stand in pleasant awe of their spelling and their vulgar

fractions. Men in the first class may find that with maturity their interests and ability finally settle in one area and they quit and take up medicine or law or accountancy and become a phenomenon in these fields, because they're not merely qualified, but educated. Men in the second class keep on teaching but take on other jobs in the T.A.B., keep poultry or raspberry canes, or mix concrete with such devotion that teaching becomes a spare-time occupation. And as teachers all these are more or less lost to the profession.

But there are, however, the born teachers who are going in for the profession, anyway. I suppose you may be a born teacher and not know it. As one who is not a born teacher I have been privileged to look on from the outside at these people all my life. Let me show the difference. The born teacher looks at his new class at the beginning of the year with interest and even excitement. He notices a little red-headed girl over on the left and recognises the sister of Sally whom he taught two years before. Sally was dull but sweet. Will what's-her-name—Linda—be the same? Up in the back there is this year's edition of the Jackson tribe—same black staring eyes, same black flat hair, he's wearing Bruce's pullover and he must be Derek. He already knows these children, he's pushed them straight in assembly, he's seen them in the grocer's, he's reproved them for riding in the playground, found their underpants in the baths, heard their requests on the Children's Session. He's interested in children, he's happy to hear their tales, their confidences, to know they've just had another baby—another Jackson. Above all, he's happy that he knows more than they do, to think he can interest them, amuse them, make them think, make them grow. He's a teacher. Outside of school he may be planning new projects for them, or he may joke about them, grouse about them, repeat their stories and call them little so-and-so's. But he depends upon their dependence upon him. If children didn't need him and love him and talk to him he'd be lost. In a prison he'd probably teach fleas.

I've met another sort of born teacher—these people are mostly in High Schools. They have only a mild interest in children, but they have a father's love for their subject. It's their subject, Latin or Maths. or English, that they cherish. They're so fond of it that they grow fond of any cranial cavity into which they can transplant it. McTavish is not so much a boy, a personality, as a warm receptacle for the precious subject, a place where the seeds can be

"The born teacher . . . is interested in children; he's happy to hear their tales"

A talk by RAY
COPLAND in the
series "My Poor
Boy . . ."



planted and strike new roots. So the relationship between the teacher and pupil is not direct but as it were triangular—they are like parents who are kept in harmony by the precious bundle of joy, the subject, which they dandle between them. The trouble is that such a born teacher tends to be bitter and sarcastic to the possessors of unsuitable skulls. Yet I have never heard such a teacher despised. He'll be called Bags or Pongo, but the work he sets will be done, with assiduity and disgruntlement, and when they leave his pupils will recall him with forgiveness.

Well, now, there are the two born teachers. Are you one of them? If not, don't you think you'd be better off in insurance or as a land agent or as a dental nurse, or in one of the Government lurks like the State Fire, State Advances, State Coal, P. and T., Health or Income Tax Department? Believe me, there are thousands of cheerful, dreary occupations where you handle fivers not your own, fill in forms not your own, and promote ulcers not your own. You drink departmental tea, talk about footy and horses, slap each other playfully, develop a tight little behind-the-grille camaraderie and tolerate applicants and outsiders. Sometimes you run a sweepstake.

Does that sound too forbidding? Then maybe you ought to think about this teaching business again. Suppose you're not a teacher born, but cherish your independence. Well, then you will find that though certain hours are required of you, you can please yourself very much just how you fill those hours. After the first year or two you will find yourself left more and more to choose topics for yourself and to treat them however you wish. There's endless scope for inventiveness, for variety, for sudden changes, new deals, rearrangements of all sorts. The classroom is no longer so supervised by headmasters and inspectors, all tyrants for ritual and regimentation. If you go into a country school you suddenly find yourself with loads of responsibility but plenty of freedom in meeting it. Your word has already become law, you acquire prestige, a shadowy town personality suddenly becomes a vivid rural one. You are The Teacher, and doors are opened to you, lives are entrusted to you. Your own life is simple and well-paid and sociable.

Your independence as a teacher carries beyond the class room. As a teacher you're not bound by other people's proprieties. If I go to visit a teacher-friend I can often pick his house in the street—there are palings off the fence, a tent and Indian feathers on the front lawn, several bikes against the front porch, the front door is open, the ZB or YC programmes blare with equal unconcern from within. You're not in the business world, as a teacher. You're not in the office world. You can wear sports coat and grey slacks unpressed to work. You can wear a soft-collared shirt, and go to the pictures

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