

# Sketches Grave and Gay

(By PEDESTRIAN for N.Z. Tablet.)

## MY OLD SCHOOL BOOKS.

It is strange what importance we sometimes attach to a random remark. The remark that I have in my mind was made in my hearing by a lady travelling into town by tram one morning. "I always impress upon my children to take care of their reading-books all through their life and to study them from time to time." The speaker bore many traces of the teaching profession. Her tone of authority, her disregard of the vanities and niceties of fashion, her choice diction, a crispness of articulation which many might consider exaggerated, and a slowness of speech which assisted her to find the precise word after a diligent search, might all be accepted as evidences that she was a teacher. "If one would keep one's school books always, one could amuse oneself—nay, educate oneself—by means of them." My previous suspicions that she was a teacher were confirmed by that further remark and the form in which it was moulded. If I needed any more evidence, I found it in some allusion to an "overloaded syllabus," "Montessori method," and "proficiency."

Why I have chosen to comment upon the lady's remarks is this: when I was a boy at school the Brother urged us to keep our old school books and to read them from time to time. What my companions have done I am unable to say. But, as for myself, I have guarded them as a rare treasure. I have lent books of various kinds since then, grave and gay, poetical and historical. One or two have been returned to me; the rest are in the North Island or Australia. But my old reading books I have jealously kept. I have never offered to lend them, and nobody has shown any wish to borrow them. On many of them I have been always amused to read the ghastly warning:—

"Do not steal this book, my friend,  
Afraid the gallows might be your end."

Prompted by the remark of the lady of the tram, I have drawn forth my little bundle from its resting-place. Though it is not tied up with silken strings, the parcel is as dear to me as the little bundle of love-letters was to ladies of the mid-Victorian era.

What memories, pleasant or painful, my old Fourth Book revives! The first lesson, "The two roads," interests me intensely. I must have been proud of my new book, for I evidently learned that lesson by rote. "It was New Year's night. An aged man was standing at a window. . . ." I fear, however, I did not grasp it thoroughly in those far-off years. I can join heartily in the closing appeal, "O youth, return! O give me back my early days." What an admirable lesson contained in that simple story! And how little of that lesson I have retained except the words! However, a sort of general, elusive influence remains, a *je ne sais quoi* ("I don't know what") instead of a distinct and definite impression.

As for poetry, I fear that some of us must have given but little satisfaction to the Muses or their favorites. We scarcely ap-

preciated the shades of meaning, the carefully-chosen word, the charm of poetic licence which we foolishly considered permission to write ungrammatically. I had trouble with the opening lines of "Try Again":—

"King Bruce of Scotland flung himself down,  
In a lonely mood to think";

I remember forming an image of some dark dungeon into which he had thrown himself. For "mood" I must have taken the liberty of substituting "pool." From this pool I drained the water, converting it into a "cellar" of some sort. Otherwise, I could find no place for a spider. The spider taught King Bruce an important, a heartening lesson. The poem taught us the same lesson of trying again even if we had failed many times. We had the same idea in a musical setting:—

"First if you don't succeed, try, try, try  
again."

I am wondering whether I should be branded as a Philistine by the teachers of to-day if I said that modern reading-books, viewed in comparison with mine, are, in a well-known phrase, "only as I roved out."

And again, here is a reading lesson that should be committed to memory and recited in the elocution class and parsed and analysed, so that boys and girls may never forget what it teaches, viz., "The Apples—Bad Company." It is the story of the bad apple put into the basket containing the soundest apples of the garden. In a short time, they were all rotten, absolutely decayed. And how earnestly the good Brother lectured us on that startling fact! He told us of excellent boys of whom he had entertained the highest hopes, boys who were obedient to parents and teachers, obliging to companions, paragons of virtue. They fell away from the practice of religion through keeping bad company. The facts as laid before us were fraught with warning to us, but the sorrowful manner of the good teacher in narrating those facts was still more impressive than the facts themselves.

And "Whang, the miller" can never be forgotten by those who were ever "in the Fourth Book." We knew but little then of poor old Noll Goldsmith. He might have been a jeweller and goldsmith combined, as artificers in gold so often claim to be. But in my young days we were more limited in our reading than are the children of to-day. Our modern children would be told in which of his books Goldsmith immortalises Whang, and they would be advised to read the whole work in order to get the atmosphere of the short sketch. The more advanced pupils now-a-days, those intended for the Honors paper, would be asked to discuss the methods of distributing flour in Whang's day and to point out whether the cornering of wheat, as practised in America to-day, would have been punished as illegal by the Chinese Government at that uncivilised period. The children

of to-day read more than they can digest. With apologies to modern pedagogues, I hold that we shall have to revive the methods, since discarded, of the days when I was young.

And just now I lighted upon the *Sayings of Poor Richard*, and another lesson, *Too Much for His Whistle*. How often I have quoted these since I passed away from Fourth Class into Fifth, and then into the great University, the world! Since then I have read a good deal about Benjamin Franklin. Much of what I have read about him I have forgotten, but not so those reading lessons. Perhaps it is because I have so often paid "too much for my whistle" that I have never forgotten the wisdom it teaches. Sometimes I have bought books on the strength of a favorable critique and found them fit only for shaving-paper. I have cut my face with a safety razor, I have torn my hand with a safety-pin, and during the war safety matches were such a protection against fire that they would not light even a cigarette. Oh! yes, I have often paid too much for my whistle. My frequent experience of the disappointments of life must have helped me to remember those blocks of philosophy chiselled by Franklin in his own striking style out of his acute observation.

And then the lessons bearing on science. James Watt comes before me and I at once recall the well-known lines that the steam-engine drones out to itself:—

I blow the bellows, I forge the steel,  
I manage the mill and the mint,  
I hammer the ore, and turn the wheel,  
And the news that you read I print.

Those lines might not find a place in modern anthologies, but they have found a place in my memory for many, many years.

Scripture History lessons gave us the touching account of Joseph, and we felt justly indignant at the cruel treatment to which his brothers subjected him. And, after all this, the mercy he lavished upon them. Why he favored Benjamin we could not fully understand until Brother explained that Joseph wished to see whether his brethren would be jealous of Benjamin as they had been of himself.

The history of Moses interested us without, however, touching the same delicate chord that the story of Joseph did.

It all comes back to me again—the lessons and the boys and our teacher. Our teacher is now, I trust, reaping the reward of his labors; the books are still my valued possession, but the boys—many of them attained high positions and did honor to their school, but of one or two I shall say nothing, for the charity of silence hinders me from discussing their subsequent careers.

I thank you, dear Brother who taught me for several years, that you advised me to keep my old books through life; and to you, dear Unknown lady in the tram, I tender also an expression of my gratitude for having thrown out a hint (if a woman of such precise diction will tolerate such a phrase) that "one should always keep one's books beside one, for one never knows when one will need them."

J. O'Rourke

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