

Only a Few Were Teachers

IT IS NOT NECESSARY to discuss, man by man, my high school teachers, even if I could remember them all. Let me present an analysis of several of them as I saw them and as I see them now—thirty years later—in the light of greater experience. They fall into four classes: the Teachers, the Gentlemen, the Conscientious Souls, and the Wastrels. Five per cent would comprise the first group, 10 per cent the last; the other 85 can be divided between the Gentlemen and the Conscientious Souls, with a slightly higher percentage in the Conscientious Souls group.

Those Who Were TEACHERS

I must begin with the principal of my first high school, Dr. M—. He wasn't teaching in a classroom, it is true; yet he was indeed a teacher of the highest



"The boys would do anything for him."

James D. Landsdowne, Principal of Hamilton Public School, Philadelphia, casts a backward glance at the persons who were his high school teachers and arrives at the interesting conclusion that times have changed—and, thank heaven! The author went to high school some thirty years ago, when President Wilson was in the White House and world wars were still unknown. Mr. Landsdowne's account is a heartening indication that today we are at least beginning to understand that Education Is People.

calibre. He was warm and kindly; yet he would tolerate no monkey business. He understood boys, he was friendly, and the boys would do anything for him. He was loved, respected, and honored, for he was a fine old gentleman as well as an educator. He made a practice of conversing with the boys as they passed in the hall and he would grant a boy practically any request. His trust was evidenced in every movement and every syllable. When he found it necessary to scold, he never stirred antagonism; instead, he made us feel shame and, at the same time, anxious to cooperate and live up to the standards he presented and represented to us. His spirit not only illumined that school but also it touched the soul of every boy in it.

Mr. T— was the teacher of algebra who was absent most of the term because of illness. I had the advantage of a few weeks of his presence and came to know him better in later years when I

returned to that school to teach beside him. He understood and loved boys. His outstanding quality was alertness. Not only did no one sleep in that classroom, but also no one spent any time musing on the ball game or any other subject so dear to the hearts of youth. Furthermore, he was thorough. He had the ability to make his explanations as clear as crystal and to set up associations so they would stick. No boy left that classroom until he understood thoroughly the lesson of the day and could apply it. Homework was always prepared. His personality was forceful without being autocratic. He was as energetic as a dynamo, sharp as the proverbial razor, vibrant as an electric current. Every boy worshipped him, every boy attacked assignments with zest and thrilled at the mastery of mathematical mystery which came from Mr. T—'s guidance.

Mr. V— Was a GENTLEMAN

Mr. V— gave a course in Shakespeare. He was a fine-looking man and always well-groomed. He was always pleasant and cheerful, always courteous, always friendly. The boys both respected and admired him. Yet, despite the admiration on the one side and the geniality on the other, there was lacking the personal warmth which a leader must have to inspire his followers. Perhaps, in essence, the measure of the man lies in the fact that he was always referred to as "Mr. V—," never by any nickname. His Shakespeare never reached home.

Dr. K— lectured in chemistry to a group close to two hundred. He knew his subject and knew how to present it. Yet he never came to know any of his boys, even by name. He, too, was in-



"His Shakespeare never reached home."

variably patient and courteous, willing to answer any question no matter how foolish, willing to repeat and to give extra help after school. His entire attention focused on subject matter, the student never seemed to enter his consciousness.

The CONSCIENTIOUS SOULS —at Least They Tried

The outstanding example of this type was Mr. S—, also a teacher of English. He was young, fresh from college, where he had pitched for the baseball team. He was a handsome chap, a regular Adonis, yet no poseur, but a sincere, hard worker. He pushed my nose against the grindstone of reading, public speaking, and writing compositions with a firm hand. Written work was corrected carefully and returned, graded fairly. The boys admired him for his athletic prowess, his knowledge of subject matter and the vital interest he displayed in imparting it. Consequently,

they strove to satisfy his demands. In retrospect, his emphasis was on subject matter for the sake of subject matter. His personal appeal did not carry over to the subject, which seemed to have no relation to daily affairs.

A second Mr. S— was another of the same type, without the personal glamour of the preceding Mr. S—. His subject was medieval history. He looked the part of the student—glasses and serious mien. He was business-like and very, very earnest. By talks, daily recitations



"... very, very earnest."

(marks registered in his book), and tests, he strove to implant his subject into our heads. We had to know what the book said. He worked diligently to make sure we accomplished that. But there seemed to be no beginning and no end—no tie-up to anything. Medieval history was medieval history; that was all. How he could have enriched our lives had he but made Charlemagne flesh

and blood, to cite but one instance of where he missed being a teacher.

A man who went to the extreme in this group was Mr. P—, a teacher of German. His sarcasm was more cutting than the whips of the Pharaohs, his dictatorship more drastic than that of Frederick the Great. He had all of us scared out of our wits, but he made us work. He couldn't make us learn, however, for we hated him and his subject with a fierce hatred. Yet he, I believe, felt it was his duty to earn his salary and since it was his job to teach German, by the Lord Harry, the little wretches would have it pounded into them!

And, Lastly, the WASTRELS

The Wastrels consisted of several types, of which two will be presented. Dr. B— was a German whom I encountered during my second and third years of the pursuit of that language. He knew, apparently, nothing of boys and less of teaching. Despite his earnest presentations, his anxiety to be helpful, his admonitions, his pleas, his scoldings, the boys went to his room with the avowed intention of raising Ned and they did, like the little savages boys can be. Catcalls, jeers, insolence, stamping of feet, freeing of frogs and snakes, throwing of shot against a metal ceiling, all must have made that man's life a perfect hell. He was no teacher, and he had no business holding that position. It is, I fancy, unnecessary to add that I learned no German.

Mr. Z— was a math man, pretending to teach trigonometry. He also fancied himself a comedian, and spent most of each period exchanging banter and jokes with the boys. When he did attempt an explanation, he failed to explain, usually

winding up with the remark, "Do it this way," which served for that problem, but left us just as bewildered for the next. He gave me the highest mark, "A," for the term; yet I never knew what I was doing, or why. His teaching was nil. The boys had lots of fun in his classroom, but, certainly, he wasn't being paid for the sort of performance he rendered.

In summary, what did I gain from my high school experience? The results seem to be largely negative. When I entered high school I was full of curiosity and eager to learn. I wanted to know so many things. I had ability and a fine record. When I left high school, I was an entirely different personality. I had lost the ambition to learn; in fact, I scoffed at learning.

As I pointed out, under the discussion of personnel, practically all the high school men were well prepared scholastically and were earnest and sincere in their efforts. Their faults were faults of personality, and that is of so much importance in school relationships. For

generations, as an aside, teachers have been selected for their scholastic attainment. Isn't it about time that that be put into a place of less importance? A few, a small percentage, were time-wasters or incompetents. They should have been forced to change their procedures or they should have been dismissed. In general, all the men were gentlemen—fair, patient, setting a good example, and lacking in teaching ability.

One phase of teaching in which they displayed great lack was in the clarity of their explanations, or its absence. The particular problem would be explained carefully, but there was no stirring up of the apperceptive basis. There was no searching for hooks within the child's experience upon which to hang the new; there was no definite, planned formation of associations to aid the understanding and the memory. Each subject, each lesson, was delivered in a cellophane package. So the subject and school in its entirety became a segment of Life unrelated to the life outside the school walls, to Life itself. Instead of the school



"His teaching was nil."

Illustrations by Ruth Cunningham
From *Leadership at Work*

being Life, or even a part of Life, an enriched part, a part functioning in all other phases of current and future endeavor, it offered almost monastic detachment. It was cold and useless.

The display of faith and confidence in the pupil was so rare as to be remarkable. Not that many of the men were deliberately cruel or suspicious: the general attitude was, here is a group of young swine before whom I am pouring pearls of wisdom. They have no desire to ingurgitate; so I must pour it into them in some fashion, as painless as possible to them and to myself. They don't care a hoot about learning, but I'm being paid to "learn 'em"; so I shall do my duty. There seemed to be no thought, understanding, or even consideration for problems the pupil might have. Illness at home might interfere with the work of the pupil. Lack of encouragement at home or financial handicaps might cause physical disease from lack of nourishment and/or mental dis-ease from deprivation. The school was disinterested.

There was just one man among my high school teachers who ever displayed the slightest interest in the problems with which I had to contend. That one man put up with a series of disorders from me in his classroom until one day he told me to report to him after school. There were just the two of us. What he said, I cannot remember, but he obtained my confidence by his words and manner to such an extent that I blurted out a

few facts of my underprivileged existence. The interview gave me a feeling of having an understanding friend; it gave him a pupil who was no longer a disciplinary problem but a well-behaved little boy who earned a "B" at the end of the term.

As a Group They Lacked the Personal Touch

The men as a group were interested solely in subject matter; the keynote of teaching seemed to be impersonality. Mary Ellen Chase has said: "In the classroom of the mediocre teacher, there are always three distinct elements: the teacher, the subject, and the students. In the classroom of the good teacher there is no such division. The students are caught up with the teacher in a common ownership of that which he is interpreting for them." Which citation, at first glance, sounds like justification for the kind of teaching which has been described. The "common ownership" cannot, however, enter without a community feeling, a fellowship which springs from understanding. There was no attempt at individualization, no effort to ascertain the pupil's problems, his desires, interests, or abilities, let alone to draw out, educe, anything the pupil might have.

The moral of this account? Yes, I think there is one, and it is simply this: Thank God, schools and teaching have improved.



The Common School is the greatest discovery ever made by man.—
Horace Mann.

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