

The Importance of People

Mary and Harry H. Giles

PROFESSOR AESOP AND THE UNWILLING BLOND

OLD PROF. AESOP was hungry. He moved impatiently in his seat, adjusted his spectacles, and just then felt the plane lose momentum as the motors cut down. The airport at last!

His old friend Dr. Kingsbury was waiting to meet him.

"Got your wire," Kingsbury greeted him, "and just guessed that you would fly in from Denver. Want you to come home and have supper with me. I've saved my points and have a regular elephant-sized steak waiting."

"That sounds great," began Prof. Aesop, then turned and stared.

Dr. Kingsbury chuckled. "One of this year's crop of co-eds."

"That girl reminded me of the time when I first discovered—"

"Pretty pink cheeks?" inquired Dr. Kingsbury.

"No, another blue-eyed blond," said the professor.

After dinner, Dr. Kingsbury and his guest seated themselves in the study.

"Aesop, what about the blue-eyed blond? Or is it a painful memory?"

"One of the pleasantest," said the professor.

"It was in the days when the workshop



movement had begun to ebb. Many universities had adopted the name but not the substance of this new form of teacher education.

"I was to give a talk here at Metropolitan University that night, and in the afternoon I strolled by the river. I noticed an attractive girl sitting on a stone bench by the boathouse, and to my pleasure I discovered that she was a former student of mine. So we talked of many things we recalled from old times. It was not long before we were on the subject of the first workshop in which we had both taken part. We remembered the beautiful lake where our group had gone to grill steak sandwiches and to sit around the campfire and sing. We recalled the night when Ernest Druckker, the famous clinical psychologist, had created a special one-man



polka after the long evening of beers—of the clay figures Supt. Charles had modeled—

“And as we talked of these good times, we naturally came to the subject in which every teacher takes a deep and abiding interest—what happens inside of students as they go to school and after they leave us.

“I have thought often of you and of that summer when we were both in the workshop,” the girl began. “There were so many things that troubled me deeply.”

“You know,” she went on, “that summer was a turning point in my life.”

“Whom did you meet?” I inquired.

“A new idea,” she answered, “one which has grown and grown ever since.”

“Now that is important talk, so I was at once all ears.”

“When I came to the workshop that summer,” she continued, “I was ready to quit teaching.

“It was a last resort—just to see whether there was anything at all in the new ideas I had heard about. I suppose I wanted to prove to myself that there was *nothing* to make me stay in school work.

“I had gone straight from college into a public school in my city. It was a large high school, with three thousand students. Most of the faculty had been there for years, and they didn't let a newcomer forget it.

“But first of all, we newcomers were confronted with a great mass of machinery to learn—rules and regulations, report blanks, checking in and out, prescribed minimum content to cover—all that. But we didn't mind so much, because we thought that soon we would get on to the ropes and would make things hum. We would be helped by

the older teachers and there would be lots of discussion of how to improve education and a lot of interesting experiments to report.

“Time went by, and no one was interested in our ideas. I talked to the principal and he agreed to have a faculty meeting on curriculum. I made some suggestions and the older teachers either said they had tried them years ago (and they didn't work) or resented what they felt to be criticism of their private kingdoms—their hallowed courses and ways of doing.

“I was teaching six English classes a day and trying to do my best with over two hundred students. After two years of it, I came to feel that I was in a treadmill from which there was no escape. So long as nothing went obviously wrong and I didn't bother the older staff members, they let me alone. Perhaps I would have learned to accept the routine and to live uncomplainingly—if not richly.

“But the summer after my fifth year of teaching, I found I could take a special-rate cruise with the money I had saved. So off I sailed to Italy and France.

“Two things happened to me on the cruise—I met interesting people and I got a vision deeper than I had ever had of how the world's literature could be made to come alive.

“When I returned to school, I brought with me many odds and ends from the places I had visited. There were children's toys, bits of dress goods, eating utensils and such things.

“With these and with poems, plays, and stories, I was going to attempt to create a living picture of the larger world and its people as I worked with my children.”



"She was silent, for a time, remembering what had happened.

"What did your students do? They couldn't see the point?" I asked.

"No, the students loved it. But the same old thing got in the way—the other teachers objected. They complained to the principal that I was not teaching English but social science. They were provoked because two of my classes asked for extra time from other subjects to put on a pageant of Italian and French revolutionary leaders who had influenced America. This upset their schedule, they said.

"Well, enough of that. I had had what seemed to me a beautiful idea. Others didn't see it. They made remarks which hurt—most of all when they said them to my students or to parents. They didn't know, really, what I was trying to do; they didn't really try to find out, it seemed to me. They were not really concerned—oh, I was easily discouraged, perhaps, but I wanted someone to *care*. I wanted to share ideas. I wanted to be human, and the school seemed to be growing more and more a great impersonal machine which was grinding down lives to produce a uniform, impersonal product.

"Then came our workshop. The principal had encouraged me to attend. I went, feeling that it was as good a place as any to say good-bye to school-teaching and make a final test of the "new" education.

"From the first day, I was upset. This was new, all right. It was so new that I was lost.

"When you, Prof. Aesop, started our class in guidance by asking what we had been doing and what were our problems, I was bewildered. I thought that eminent professors knew everything without being told. Then, when you went on to help us work out ways of finding information and doing things for ourselves, I was still more amazed. Where were the lectures, the assignments, the prescribed readings, the classroom recitations? We were just getting together to talk things over informally. When would the tests begin?

"I got a thrill from small group meetings in which we carried out special projects. At the same time, because we were so free, and so unused to having our opinions respected, I began to wish for more routine.

"It went on this way all through the six weeks. I would be excited by what went on around me and what was said and the encouragement to strike out for myself. Then I would be worried for fear it was wrong, or even that it was right and that I might have to go back to the school and try it, only to meet more active hostility than before.

"I had four weeks at home after the workshop, and one day I saw that I might go back to my job and try a new way. It would be through asking for help, rather than asserting my own ideas."

"And—?" I asked.

"And I did. And it worked. Another English teacher and a social science teacher and I talked things over at my house one night and agreed to try some new ideas. We figured out how to help each other in many ways. We began to meet regularly on Friday nights. We had pot-luck suppers, talked things over, and even sang and played games.

"We invited other teachers from time to time. The group got larger, and one of our guests, the head of my department, asked me to edit the school bulletin for the city system and put into it suggestions grown from my own work, as well as seeking out new ideas being practiced in other classes and in other schools.

"Through the department head I was released from two classes to do my editing and to visit schools. It gave only a little time, but it was enough to make new contacts, and at the end of the year we had a citywide teachers council which was discussing curriculum changes."

"So there was a way?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, "there was a way. Not by telling people what I wanted them to do, but by asking people what could be done."



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