Peptonised Education

Written by PIERROT in London.

One of the most remarkable changes in England is the change in the methods of education. School, once at its worst a synonym for all that was dullest and most repellent in forced instruction, has become to a grown-up mind a medium for delightful causeries and fascinating lectures. To a grown-up mind, one writes advisedly; for one fails to detect signs that the young idea is any more fascinated by French taught by coloured pictures and conversation, or geography instilled by means of diagrams of the school playground, than by the old drilling at French verbs, and lists of the rivers of India. The fact is that these things, like new toys, quickly lose their first charm, and are finally placed on the same terms of blase satiation as their predecessors.

The fact is that children tend to hate anything that in a wide sense is useful. I have satisfied myself of that over and over again. To expect to turn work into play is as wise as to expect to turn pain into pleasure. A boy likes it all the less because he believes that you are playing him false for your own ends. That's where I think the modern schoolmaster is making a mistake—and that's where, I believe, the wily schoolmaster is finding scope for some very remunerative quackery. I know a little girl who attends a school priding itself on the child's play of its decimals who cannot add six to nine without counting on her fingers; while her knowledge of the principles of any one subject is almost infinitesimal.

Without condemning much that is admirable in the new education, it must be admitted that there were some admirable points in the old. And the thoroughness of its ground-work was its best achievement. The new schoolmaster aims too much at ornament and superficial knowledge of a multiplicity of subjects, rather than at the fundamental training of the mind, which began to be neglected at least a decade ago.

Of course, there are other reasons than increased attractiveness for the reasonable simplification of a subject; and the greatest is economy of time. No sane man would return to the old method of teaching foreign languages—by which one left school knowing them, despite long years of teaching, no better than after a few months of practice on the direct or natural method. It is only reasonable to suppose that one best learns a foreign language as one learns one's own, by listening and by trying to talk. But no economy of time ought to entail a real sacrifice of training in the foundations of a subject. And that seems to be the evil in modern English education as well as in that by the colonies.

It seems to me that the difficulties of a schoolboy at school should be relatively on a par with the intellectual problems that will confront him in later life. But, as things seem to be drifting, I believe that the result will be a generation of people utterly averse to serious reading and even serious thinking. It seems almost as if the next generation would spend its time in explaining what should be the obvious to an enlightened mind.

At present there is little attempt to follow the French example of teaching ethics in the State schools, although a beginning is being made in this direction. It seems to be difficult to drive it into people's heads that the mission of education is twofold—a fitting for practical function, and an adaptation to social requirements. It has barely been perceived by the mass of the people that school should involve as much the training of a good citizen as the provision of an efficient worker. Indeed, even more so; for what the State undertakes should always be with a view to the State's direct advantage. And when one knows the hideously sordid surroundings of a vast proportion of the children of England, the need for idealism in education becomes painfully apparent. If it is not taught at school, it will remain untaught anywhere else.

It is inevitable, without question, that there must be constant changes in education, for nothing can remain unchanged in a changing world—in a world in which the spirit of change is gaining strength and accelerating at a rate based on geometrical progression. The child to-day looks out on an earth, that from the intellectual point of view is utterly different from the earth of a hundred years ago. No more is he fettered and clamped to a corner of a town or a village. He lives amid kaleidoscopic change, amid wonders, and his mind embraces the globe, where once it struggled to realise a county. Steam, electricity and petrol, once the wonder of cities, are now the commonplace of the village; a trip to London means less than a journey to a remote market-town meant to our grandfathers; and there is hardly a child of ten in the depths of Cornwall but has seen hundreds of motor-cars dashing along the peaceful lanes. And when the education of life has so changed, it must follow that the education of the school will change too.

One is not surprised amid this vast material transformation to find that the functions of the school tend increasingly to be of a narrowly practical and specialist character. The "modern side" of a school provides a commercial training narrow enough to satisfy the most fastidious of merchants. Perhaps it is not recognised sufficiently that schools, besides keeping pace with what is best in civilised progress, have also to resist what is worst. One of the most evil symptoms of material advancement is the growing superficiality and contempt for that which is not immediately apparent. It should be, but is not, the business of schools to correct this by a study of principle and underlying theory. The teaching of modern life makes for the idealisation of the present; the teaching of the school is the best means of emphasizing the need for a regard for the future.

But at every turn in the road of ideal progress we are met by one unideal obstacle, that of Competition, which seems to be ever blocking our way, and sending us on sidetracks which lead us to endless material and intellectual waste. So it is in education. To enable us to pursue the highest ideals we should need nothing short of a sort of commercial disarmament of the nations. For competition requires not the absolute ideal in education or in anything else, but the breeding of monstrous types having the fitness to survive in a commercial world. That is where the shoe pinches, and that is where we have to make what is perhaps a fatal concession. For if commercial competition bids us breed anarchical monsters under penalty of destruction, breed them we must at the sacrifice of all ideals.

Bicycles at £4 4/-.

Mr. Alfred Du Cros, who presided over the Swift Cycle Company's meeting at Coventry last month, said that the large majority of the British public no longer had sufficient money to indulge in cycles.

Price-cutting had been very prevalent, and makers were brought face to face with the necessity of having to sell bicycles at prices which were the lowest ever reached in the history of cyclemaking.

Machines were now being offered as low as four guineas apiece.