

THE SCHOOLMASTER AND THE EMPIRE

Sec. 1

"If Youth but Knew" is the title of a book published some years ago, but still with a quite living interest, by "Kappa"; it is the bitter complaint of a distressed senior against our educational system. He is hugely disappointed in the public-school boy, and more particularly in one typical specimen. He is--if one might hazard a guess--an uncle bereft of great expectations. He finds an echo in thousands of other distressed uncles and parents. They use the most divergent and inadequate forms of expression for this vague sense that the result has not come out good enough; they put it contradictorily and often wrongly, but the sense is widespread and real and justifiable and we owe a great debt to "Kappa" for an accurate diagnosis of what in the aggregate amounts to a grave national and social evil.

The trouble with "Kappa's" particular public-school boy is his unlit imagination, the apathetic commonness of his attitude to life at large. He is almost stupidly not interested in the mysteries of material fact, nor in the riddles and great dramatic movements of history, indifferent to any form of beauty, and pedantically devoted to the pettiness of games and clothing and social conduct. It is, in fact, chiefly by his

style in these latter things, his extensive unilluminated knowledge of Greek and Latin, and his greater costliness, that he differs from a young carpenter or clerk. A young carpenter or clerk of the same temperament would have no narrower prejudices nor outlook, no less capacity for the discussion of broad questions and for imaginative thinking. And it has come to the mind of "Kappa" as a discovery, as an exceedingly remarkable and moving thing, a thing to cry aloud about, that this should be so, that this is all that the best possible modern education has achieved. He makes it more than a personal issue. He has come to the conclusion that this is not an exceptional case at all, but a fair sample of what our upper-class education does for the imagination of those who must presently take the lead among us. He declares plainly that we are raising a generation of rulers and of those with whom the duty of initiative should chiefly reside, who have minds atrophied by dull studies and deadening suggestions, and he thinks that this is a matter of the gravest concern for the future of this land and Empire. It is difficult to avoid agreeing with him either in his observation or in his conclusion. Anyone who has seen much of undergraduates, or medical students, or Army candidates, and also of their social subordinates, must be disposed to agree that the difference between the two classes is mainly in unimportant things--in polish, in manner, in superficialities of accent and vocabulary and social habit--and that their minds, in range and power, are very much on a level. With an invincibly aristocratic tradition we are failing altogether to produce a leader class adequate to modern needs. The State is light-headed.

But while one agrees with "Kappa" and shares his alarm, one must confess the remedies he considers indicated do not seem quite so satisfactory as his diagnosis of the disease. He attacks the curriculum and tells us we must reduce or revolutionise instruction and exercise in the dead languages, introduce a broader handling of history, a more inspiring arrangement of scientific courses, and so forth. I wish, indeed, it were possible to believe that substituting biology for Greek prose composition or history with models and photographs and diagrams for Latin versification, would make any considerable difference in this matter. For so one might discuss this question and still give no offence to a most amiable and influential class of men. But the roots of the evil, the ultimate cause of that typical young man's deadness, lie not at all in that direction. To indicate the direction in which it does lie is quite unavoidably to give offence to an indiscriminatingly sensitive class. Yet there is need to speak plainly. This deadening of soul comes not from the omission or inclusion of this specific subject or that; it is the effect of the general scholastic atmosphere. It is an atmosphere that admits of no inspiration at all. It is an atmosphere from which living stimulating influences have been excluded from which stimulating and vigorous personalities are now being carefully eliminated, and in which dull, prosaic men prevail invincibly. The explanation of the inert commonness of "Kappa's" schoolboy lies not in his having learnt this or not learnt that, but in the fact that from seven to twenty he has been in the intellectual shadow of a number of good-hearted, sedulously respectable conscientiously manly, conforming, well-behaved men, who never, to the knowledge of their pupils and the public, at any rate,

think strange thoughts do imaginative or romantic things, pay tribute to beauty, laugh carelessly, or countenance any irregularity in the world. All erratic and enterprising tendencies in him have been checked by them and brought at last to nothing; and so he emerges a mere residuum of decent minor dispositions. The dullness of the scholastic atmosphere the grey, intolerant mediocrity that is the natural or assumed quality of every upper-class schoolmaster, is the true cause of the spiritual etiolation of "Kappa's" young friend.

Now, it is a very grave thing, I know, to bring this charge against a great profession--to say, as I do say, that it is collectively and individually dull. But someone has to do this sooner or later; we have restrained ourselves and argued away from the question too long. There is, I allege, a great lack of vigorous and inspiring minds in our schools. Our upper-class schools are out of touch with the thought of the time, in a backwater of intellectual apathy. We have no original or heroic school-teachers. Let me ask the reader frankly what part our leading headmasters play in his intellectual world; if when some prominent one among them speaks or writes or talks, he expects anything more than platitudes and little things? Has he ever turned aside to learn what this headmaster or that thought of any question that interested him? Has he ever found freshness or power in a schoolmaster's discourse; or found a schoolmaster caring keenly for fine and beautiful things? Who does not know the schoolmaster's trite, safe admirations, his thin, evasive discussion, his sham enthusiasms for cricket, for fly-fishing, for perpendicular architecture, for boyish traits; his

timid refuge in "good form," his deadly silences?

And if we do not find him a refreshing and inspiring person, and his mind a fountain of thought in which we bathe and are restored, is it likely our sons will? If the schoolmaster at large is grey and dull, shirking interesting topics and emphatic speech, what must he be like in the monotonous class-room? These may seem wanton charges to some, but I am not speaking without my book. Monthly I am brought into close contact with the pedagogic intelligence through the medium of three educational magazines. A certain morbid habit against which I struggle in vain makes me read everything I catch a schoolmaster writing. I am, indeed, one of the faithful band who read the Educational Supplement of the Times. In these papers schoolmasters write about their business, lectures upon the questions of their calling are reported at length, and a sort of invalid discussion moves with painful decorum through the correspondence column. The scholastic mind so displayed in action fascinates me. It is like watching a game of billiards with wooden cushes and beechwood balls.

Sec. 2

But let me take one special instance. In a periodical, now no longer living, called the Independent Review, there appeared some years ago a very curious and typical contribution by the Headmaster of Dulwich, which I may perhaps use as an illustration of the mental habits which seem inseparably associated with modern scholastic work. It is called

"English Ideas on Education," and it begins--trite, imitative, undistinguished--thus:

"The most important question in a country is that of education, and the most important people in a country are those who educate its inhabitants. Others have most of the present in their hands: those who educate have all the future. With the present is bound up all the happiness only of the utterly selfish and the thoughtless among mankind; on the future rest all the thoughts of every parent and every wise man and patriot."

It is the opening of a boy's essay. And from first to last this remarkable composition is at or below that level. It is an entirely inconclusive paper, it is impossible to understand why it was written; it quotes nothing it says nothing about and was probably written in ignorance of "Kappa" or any other modern contributor to English ideas, and it occupied about six and a quarter of the large-type pages of this now vanished Independent Review. "English Ideas on Education"!--this very brevity is eloquent, the more so since the style is by no means succinct. It must be read to be believed. It is quite extraordinarily non-prehensile in quality and substance nothing is gripped and maintained and developed; it is like the passing of a lax hand over the surfaces of disarranged things. It is difficult to read, because one's mind slips over it and emerges too soon at the end, mildly puzzled though incurious still as to what it is all about. One perceives Mr. Gilkes through a fog dimly thinking that Greek has something vital to do

with "a knowledge of language and man," that the classical master is in some mysterious way superior to the science man and more imaginative, and that science men ought not to be worried with the Greek that is too high for them; and he seems, too, to be under the odd illusion that "on all this" Englishmen "seem now to be nearly in agreement," and also on the opinion that games are a little overdone and that civic duties and the use of the rifle ought to be taught. Statements are made--the sort of statements that are suffered in an atmosphere where there is no swift, fierce opposition to be feared; they frill out into vague qualifications and butt gently against other partially contradictory statements. There is a classification of minds--the sort of classification dear to the Y.M.C.A. essayists, made for the purposes of the essay and unknown to psychology. There are, we are told, accurate unimaginative, ingenious minds capable of science and kindred vulgar things (such was Archimedes), and vague, imaginative minds, with the gift for language and for the treatment of passion and the higher indefinable things (such as Homer and Mr. Gilkes), and, somehow, this justifies those who are destined for "science" in dropping Greek. Certain "considerations," however, loom inconclusively upon this issue--rather like interested spectators of a street fight in a fog. For example, to learn a language is valuable "in proportion as the nation speaking it is great"--a most empty assertion; and "no languages are so good," for the purpose of improving style, "as the exact and beautiful languages of Rome and Greece."

Is it not time at least that this last, this favourite but threadbare

article of the schoolmaster's creed was put away for good? Everyone who has given any attention to this question must be aware that the intellectual gesture is entirely different in highly inflected languages such as Greek and Latin and in so uninflected a language as English, that learning Greek to improve one's English style is like learning to swim in order to fence better, and that familiarity with Greek seems only too often to render a man incapable of clear, strong expression in English at all. Yet Mr. Gilkes can permit this old assertion, so dear to country rectors and the classical scholar, to appear within a column's distance of such style as this:

"It is now understood that every subject is valuable, if it is properly taught; it will perform that which, as follows from the accounts given above of the aim of education, is the work most important in the case of boys--that is, it will draw out their faculties and make them useful in the world, alert, trained in industry, and able to understand, so far as their school lessons educated them, and make themselves master of any subject set before them."

This quotation is conclusive.

Sec. 3

I am haunted by a fear that the careless reader will think I am writing against upper-class schoolmasters. I am, it is undeniable, writing

against their dullness, but it is, I hold, a dullness that is imposed upon them by the conditions under which they live. Indeed, I believe, could I put the thing directly to the profession--"Do you not yourselves feel needlessly limited and dull?"--should receive a majority of affirmative responses. We have, as a nation, a certain ideal of what a schoolmaster must be; to that he must by art or nature approximate, and there is no help for it but to alter our ideal. Nothing else of any wide value can be done until that is done.

In the first place, the received ideal omits a most necessary condition. We do not insist upon a headmaster or indeed any of our academic leaders and dignitaries, being a man of marked intellectual character, a man of intellectual distinction. It is assumed, rather lightly in many cases, that he has done "good work," as they say--the sort of good work that is usually no good at all, that increases nothing, changes nothing, stimulates no one, leads no whither. That, surely, must be altered. We must see to it that our leading schoolmasters at any rate must be men of insight and creative intelligence, men who could at a pinch write a good novel or produce illuminating criticism or take an original part in theological or philosophical discussion, or do any of these minor things. They must be authentic men, taking a line of their own and capable of intellectual passion. They should be able to make their mark outside the school, if only to show they carry a living soul into it. As things are, nothing is so fatal to a schoolmaster's career as to do that.

And closely related to this omission is our extreme insistence upon what we call high moral character, meaning, really, something very like an entire absence of moral character. We insist upon tact, conformity, and an unblemished record. Now, in these days, of warring opinion, these days of gigantic, strange issues that cannot possibly be expressed in the formulae of the smaller times that have gone before, tact is evasion, conformity formality, and silence an unblemished record, mere evidence of the damning burial of a talent of life. The sort of man into whose hands we give our sons' minds must never have experimented morally or thought at all freely or vigorously about, for example, God, Socialism, the Mosaic account of the Creation, social procedure, Republicanism, beauty, love, or, indeed, about anything likely to interest an intelligent adolescent. At the approach of all such things he must have acquired the habit of the modest cough, the infectious trick of the nice evasion. How can "Kappa" expect inspiration from the decorous resultants who satisfy these conditions? What brand can ever be lit at altars that have borne no fire? And you find the secondary schoolmaster who complies with these restrictions becoming the zealous and grateful agent of the tendencies that have made him what he is, converting into a practice those vague dreads of idiosyncrasy, of positive acts and new ideas, that dictated the choice of him and his rule of life. His moral teaching amounts to this: to inculcate truth-telling about small matters and evasion about large, and to cultivate a morbid obsession in the necessary dawn of sexual consciousness. So far from wanting to stimulate the imagination, he hates and dreads it. I find him perpetually haunted by a ridiculous fear

that boys will "do something," and in his terror seeking whatever is dull and unstimulating and tiring in intellectual work, clipping their reading, censoring their periodicals, expurgating their classics, substituting the stupid grind of organised "games" for natural, imaginative play, persecuting loafers--and so achieving his end and turning out at last, clean-looking, passively well-behaved, apathetic, obliterated young men, with the nicest manners and no spark of initiative at all, quite safe not to "do anything" for ever.

I submit this may be a very good training for polite servants, but it is not the way to make masters in the world. If we English believe we are indeed a masterful people, we must be prepared to expose our children to more and more various stimulations than we do; they must grow up free, bold, adventurous, initiated, even if they have to take more risks in the doing of that. An able and stimulating teacher is as rare as a fine artist, and is a thing worth having for your son, even at the price of shocking your wife by his lack of respect for that magnificent compromise, the Establishment, or you by his Socialism or by his Catholicism or Darwinism, or even by his erroneous choice of ties and collars. Boys who are to be free, masterly men must hear free men talking freely of religion, of philosophy, of conduct. They must have heard men of this opinion and that, putting what they believe before them with all the courage of conviction. They must have an idea of will prevailing over form. It is far more important that boys should learn from original, intellectually keen men than they should learn from perfectly respectable men, or perfectly orthodox men, or perfectly nice

men. The vital thing to consider about your son's schoolmaster is whether he talked lifeless twaddle yesterday by way of a lesson, and not whether he loved unwisely or was born of poor parents, or was seen wearing a frock-coat in combination with a bowler, or confessed he doubted the Apostles' Creed, or called himself a Socialist, or any disgraceful thing like that, so many years ago. It is that sort of thing "Kappa" must invert if he wants a change in our public schools. You may arrange and rearrange curricula, abolish Greek, substitute "science"--it will not matter a rap. Even those model canoes of yours, "Kappa," will be wasted if you still insist upon model schoolmasters. So long as we require our schoolmasters to be politic, conforming, undisturbing men, setting up Polonius as an ideal for them, so long will their influence deaden the souls of our sons.