

The Schoolmaster

John Jay Chapman

(*The Atlantic Monthly*, May 1916)

The School, not the College, is the hearthstone of education. The heads of private schools in America must take charge of the cultivation of the country if we are to have cultivation. You cannot make an educated man of a boy whose passion for education begins at eighteen, any more than you can make a violinist of one whose interest in music begins at eighteen. It is the first- and second-formers who are important. You must give the keys of life to the young. The American Rhodes Scholars have, with a few distinguished exceptions, made a lamentable showing at Oxford. This is because they were competing against men who had had good teaching since they were eight years old.

The headmasters of our private schools are the natural custodians of the sacred fire; and it happens that the headmasters of our private schools are to-day among the most competent and serious men in America. They are enthusiasts and missionaries by nature, and their contact with the young tends to ennoble them, as contact with the young always does. The human side of education, which often gets lost in a college, is strong in a school; and the domestic and religious elements, without which literature cannot exist, are a part of the natural atmosphere of a school. This human heat shows in the cheeks of our schoolmasters. It is this heat which must be preserved and passed on to the universities, if we are to have a robust learning in America. The little flames must never go out in the children. The lowest classes ought to be taught by the highest ability; for if a child is once headed right, he can be entrusted to any competent guide. The great teacher, the man of genius, must be used at the start.

Our headmasters, with all their good qualities, labor under certain disabilities which are terrible and are well known. A school is a kingdom, and a headmaster spends most of his time in administration. There is a kind of greatness that comes out of good administration; but its nature is almost

antipodal to the nature of scholarship. As a fountain of inspiration, your administrator will be apt to run dry unless he is a great man. Moreover the schoolmaster is always more or less a slave to public sentiment. The public imposes upon him his curriculum, and bids him prepare boys for college. His school is a little spindle in the vast mill of national habit and of contemporary thought. The errors and prejudices of the age are recorded on his bulletin board and in his mind; in ten thousand ways he and his school are rolled over in the waves of society.

The great American public, when it began to awaken to the idea of higher education, conceived of the colleges as the imaginative seat of the Muses. It began building up our universities. It built great altars for the fire, trusting that the fire would descend. But fire rises. Fire comes from small tinder-boxes and little, trifling matches. Our public does not know this; and thus the schoolmaster is subjected to the college boards: he must teach what they require.

Now it happens that the colleges are peculiarly hampered through their subjection to public opinion in the form of Alumni Associations, The American college is the creature of its Alumni – that is to say, the creature of the consolidated prejudices of half-educated persons in the previous generation. Suggest any reform in education to a college – The Alumni Suggest any such change as the introduction of honor-degrees and pass-degrees – The Alumni! The Alumni Associations of our colleges are the great clog upon American education. A school, on the contrary, has no such incubus as a college has; for a headmaster is a kind of god, and the school Alumni Associations have hitherto been harmless social bodies. I admit that they must always represent a danger because they represent money and endowment – money which will be advanced only if the prejudices of the donors are respected.

We see then that our schoolmaster lives in subjection to colleges, which, in turn, have been governed according to the prejudices of ignorant people. These conditions are not permanent: they are transitory. They represent an equilibrium of things which has existed during an era of house-building. They are changing rapidly to-day with the advance of intelligence and of the courage that goes with intelligence.

It is already time for our schoolmasters to assume the lead, and to dictate to the colleges. These men have lived under the shadow of the age, and it is impossible for them in one moment to get rid of the idea that college is the goal. The recent change in the system of admissions to college has lifted a great weight from our schoolmasters, and laid a terrible ghost which used to keep both boys and masters rigid with fear. Nevertheless, the masters are somewhat preoccupied with the marks of their boys in college, and I suppose this is inevitable. Yet marks are a small part of college and a misleading part of education. Every master has under his own hands the living ambitions, the young possibilities of scholarship; and he should content himself with making scholars of his boys and then sending them out into the world, merely warning them against the chill of the world, and bidding them keep their faith alive while they pass through the valley of the shadow of college.

Instead of doing this they often adore the false gods of the universities. The distortion of our schoolmasters' imagination can be traced immediately to the power of an illiterate public, which conceives that universities, not schools, are the seat of education, and which has put the schoolmaster in chains. It says: 'We want our boys to go to college'; it says: 'Of course there must be schoolmasters to prepare the boys.' The illiterate public – by which I mean all America – does not know that four years of good schooling are more valuable for any boy than a whole lifetime of college. The schoolmasters themselves do not realize this. When they find it out, being men of character and force, and very much more in earnest than the college boards, they will rearrange their own curricula, and will persuade the colleges to accept the new régime.

The defect of American education is diffuseness. The children are bothered and confused by being dragged across the surfaces of too many studies in a day. All of our schools, both public and private, and all our universities and colleges, suffer from this same national vice, which is a vice in the American character, a weakness in our temperament. It ought to be met and corrected in every field of life. In the field of organized education it can be most readily dealt with in the private school, because here is the most plastic region of education. Any single headmaster can, if he will, disregard

public opinion, introduce a sensible arrangement of studies, and thereby set up in his school that intellectual concentration which the country lacks. To do this he will have to brave the colleges and the parents. He will have to brave his own boys, who will come to him with circulars in their hands and tears in their eyes, saying, 'Please, sir, this is what we want.' He may console himself, on the other hand, by remembering that any well-trained lad, if trained in defiance of our current system, will find nothing to terrify him in any American college, nor indeed in the national life which follows it.

What we need is depth. Depth can be imparted through the teaching of anything. It can be imparted through Latin grammar, through handwriting, through carpenter work, through arithmetic or history. The one element required is time. Depth cannot be imparted quickly, or in many subjects at once. Leisure is necessary, – a slowing down, a taking of things, not easily, but slowly, determinedly, patiently, – as if there were plenty of time and nothing else counted. This is the road to rapid and brilliant work, and there is no other. The smallest children should be set on this road, and guided and governed and helped and slaved over by the best of your masters, One subject understood means the world mastered. My friend, Frederick Mather of Yale, puts the thing as follows: –

'If one of our small colleges should, after the manner of the English colleges, devote itself to a few old-fashioned subjects, such as Latin and Greek, and some kind of History and Philosophy, and should really teach these things, its graduates would soon be so famous and so eminent. that banks and railroads would be clamoring for them at the college doors.'

The epigram summarizes the present needs in American education.

The schoolmaster who begins to meet this need must not think he can help matters by getting up an association and writing circulars about it. Associations and circulars are the enemy. They are the very vernacular of diffuse, shallow, pretentious American haste. They are the symbol of a cowardice that fears to act alone, and of an ignorance that thinks numbers add to spiritual power. Our passion for getting up associations is a bad symptom of intellectual feebleness. Every trade and profession among us, every interest and prejudice, every aspiration, hypothesis, or question about

a question, has a gang of club members at its back. The fashionable mothers get up societies to determine what plays their children shall see during the holidays. I know of one woman who was not able to decide whether she should give a rubber ring and a coral to her teething child, or should leave him to nature and the thumb. She accordingly formed a society. It is called the Ring and Coral Association and meets twice a month; and it has recently split into two organizations through the secession of the anti-ring-and-coralites. By means of these two societies any mother may to-day escape the mental anguish of making a decision for herself upon this teething matter.

In the case before us, namely, in the question of getting a child to think deeply and reason accurately, the whole matter is a personal one. You must find some well-developed intellect, set it in contact with your child and allow them both time to do good work. This is the essential thing, and it thing that any schoolmaster not only can do, but must do alone.

The problem of doing good always resolves itself into giving something that people don't want. Nobody among us wants education, or has any use for accurate thought. We want colleges, degrees, lists of studies, bills of fare, associations, prospectuses, reports, numbers, loyalty, success; but never depth. By the time the children of eleven are sent to school they have been taught to despise depth and can be counted upon to kick against it instinctively. Parents corrupt their children; and if it were not for this we should have the millennium to-morrow. In corrupting their children parents speak with the authority of the great world.

And this leads us back to the greatness which is demanded of a schoolmaster; because he must be a part of the great world in order to meet the malign influence of the great world which that world sends into his school with every infant that comes to him. He must be a public man with the authority of a public man, as well as a scholar with the authority of a scholar. I know of no more hopeful sign in our recent history than the reverence which is beginning to be felt for leading schoolmasters. This reverence is clouded by fashion, and padded out by false loyalty, and made odious by wealth; but

it represents, nevertheless, a sincere understanding of the part which these men play in the life of the nation.

I have spoken of the headmasters of our important private schools, because they are the key-logs in the great dam of our education. The whole system includes our public schools and our high-schools and primary schools, and is a vast and rigid structure – a coalescence of academies. The system is vast by reason of our hundred million inhabitants, and rigid by reason of the uniformity of our population. It has, during the last forty years, undergone the process of being steadily standardized. This process we cannot regret, because the standards have, as a whole, been raised, and because the development was inevitable. Nevertheless, i sad to think that our schools and colleges east and west, north and south, teach the same things. It will be more wholesome when California shall turn out a local type of cultivated man, and when a Williams College man or a Union College man shall have an independence and a flavor of his own. Such an outcome must be sought only through natural law. It cannot be manufactured: it must come by growth, It will arrive as the result of a general increase in cultivation, in which every educational influence in the world has a share. The point I make here is that to bring cultivated men into contact with the young is the most visible and obvious way of assisting natural law. The headmasters in private schools have more freedom of action than any other officers in the hierarchy of education. The headmaster must emancipate himself. But this is not enough. He must set free his under-masters. How idle it is to expect a competent man to take the post of assistant master under the present system – which bids him banish from his work all that gives dignity and sanctity to the teacher. You cannot induce good men to stick at an occupation which will turn them into dry drudges if they do their work conscientiously. We have here no mere question of salary, but a question of temperament. The headmasters, then, must give scope to the talents of their younger assistants. They must rearrange their whole school system with this end in view. Time and leisure must be so allowed for, that the teachers may become the friends and intellectual guides of the boys. Whatever sacrifice of present aims and current arrangements may be involved, that sacrifice must be made.

The public schools will follow – at no great distance perhaps – in the wake of the private schools. For this whole school-world is a web and a garment without seam. If you disentangle a knot in any part of it, the relaxation will be felt in every fibre of the web. I am quite confident that our public-school system is to-day full of men who mourn over the fact that they have no chance to give the best of themselves to their pupils. A diffuse and senseless curriculum is prescribed by law and lived up to by commissioners.

The whole situation is merely the outcome of deficient general education, The country has been so populous that there were not teachers enough. The ignorant and the half-educated had to be drafted into the service, for the emergency required them. All honor be to all the men who have aided in our great struggle! They have given the best that was in them and we have needed every man. Our laws have been drawn by men whose education was superficial and whose conceptions were crude. All honor be to these men! They did their best. Education, education, was the cry. But we did not know what education was. We conceived of it as lying in subjects; whereas education does not lie in subjects, but in persons. To-day, after vast effort, after much necessary and valuable wallowing, we have made a great discovery, – and not a day passes without more men finding it out, – namely, that we want wise men who shall operate, as it were, like seed; that such men cannot be miraculously multiplied; that all we can do is to revere and treasure those we have, and permit them to inspire others; for only thus can the nation be enlightened.