

Plea for the Three R's in Modern Education

(By Hon. Thomas L. James.)

IT IS quite true that there has been marked progress along educational lines in the United States within the past few decades, but it is also quite true that the results of the present educational system of the United States (and this includes public schools, private schools, colleges and universities) is far from satisfactory, from the business and commercial point of view.

It is all very well to declare with the voice of one crying in the wilderness that education should not be considered solely as a means of amassing wealth or of earning a living. I agree to this. It is entirely proper to encourage general culture among those who have to make their own way in the world. I say amen to any plan of mental training that will spread sound culture everywhere. But the plans which include attempts to rear the superstructure of culture before the foundation stones thereof are laid are harmful alike to the individual schooled under them and to the nation as a whole. They impair his personal efficiency and they lower the general standard.

Matter of Figures.

Some who read these lines will think I am old-fashioned when I say that "nature study," freehand drawing, wood carving, clay modeling and a lot of the "subjects" to which so much attention is paid nowadays in our public schools should be rigidly subordinated to matters that are more practical, so far as the great majority of the pupils are concerned. In fact, none of these things, in my judgment, should be extensively "taken up" by the great mass of public school children until after they are well and thoroughly grounded in such essential things as spelling, handwriting, the construction of simple, direct English sentences, and the elementary operations of arithmetic.

Not long ago a bright-looking lad, under 18, applied for a job in a retail shop on one of the cross streets in New York. "Where have you been to school?" asked the shopkeeper.

"Public schools; graduated from grammar school No. —," replied the lad.

"I like your looks," continued the shopkeeper, "and I want a boy. It's only a matter of figures. Now, if eggs are 31 cents a dozen, how many can you sell for 25 cents?"

The boy couldn't answer and he didn't get the job, though he had spent years in the public schools of the greatest city of the western hemisphere. This boy, you will observe, was wholly unfitted to grapple with the simplest practical problems. Hundreds, yes, thousands, of such stories might be told, despite the vast amounts (larger, by the way, than are so spent in proportion to school population by any other city on earth) which the city of New York devotes annually to the education of its boys and girls.

You may say that the pupil with artistic ability, who has latent talents that will enable him with proper training to make beautiful pictures, to model graceful statuary, to become a finished musician, or to write thrilling romances, does not need to be able to "do sums" in mental arithmetic and has no call to worry about such petty things as the price of eggs. Suppose this is granted, the fact remains that only an infinitesimal percentage of the boys and girls of this age, or any other, have in them exceptional artistic, musical or literary possibilities. And even if every one of them by training could be taught to paint like Raphael, to model like Phi-

lias, to compose and play like Liszt or to write like Dickens, still only a few could find a market for their wares, while the remainder would have to make their way along old-fashioned, humdrum lines in spite of their genius.

Some Curious Letters.

The number of youngsters graduated from our public schools and colleges, too, I am forced to say, who cannot write clear, concise and readable letters is much larger than the number who have not mastered the simplest rules of arithmetic. And here I can give examples from more direct personal observation. The financial institution with which I am connected requires written applications from all who desire to enter its employment, and these letters are kept on file. Here is one of them, from one of them who has been trained in two colleges, besides, presumably, in the common schools. It will be noted, too, that part of his schooling was obtained outside New York, and I mention this in order to show that not all the inadequate schooling of the age can be charged to the metropolis.

Sirs: Applying for admission into your employment, I wish to state that I have never been in business, being to school at college in Maryland, and in New York. My father's position is a bridge carpenter on the railroad. I live at — and refer to — and yours respectfully,

This letter gives no information whatever that would be of value in determining the young man's fitness for a place as bank clerk. It does not even tell his age, and, besides, it is badly composed. I am sure the most ardent opponents of "sordidness" in education will agree with me that this young man's training in the elementary subjects has been sadly neglected; that so far as rendering him capable of making a demonstration that he "has an education" it is an utter failure.

Here is another letter of application, more specific in some ways, but decidedly of the sort that causes the judicious would-be employer to grieve. I say "would-be employer" because it is true that bankers, merchants, manufacturers, even "soulless corporations," are quite as anxious to get good employes as men out of work are to get good jobs:

Gentlemen: Enclosed you will find my application. I wish to state I am twenty (27) years of age, and would like to receive a salary of \$12.00 per week at start, as I am at present holding a situation which pays me \$15.00 per week,

but the only objection I find is that it is not steady employment.

Remember, I can furnish the best of references from the time I left school until the present day. Any kind of a position will be satisfactory to me, providing I receive steady work. Thanking you in advance for your kindness, I am, yours sincerely,

This young man says he can, but does not "furnish the best of references." He says in one place that he is "twenty" and immediately afterward that he is "(27) years of age." He does not give his business experience. His English is inexcusably bad. And his handwriting, like the handwriting of the other young man whose letter I

ble were allowed to leave school with the unformed handwriting that is so common among our people of all sorts at the present time.

Why, even in our own bank the number of clerks who can write a good, clear, legible hand is ridiculously small. It is simply impossible to get employes who can write handsomely, and from what I am told this is true of most banks, both in New York and elsewhere. Indeed, I hardly need be told the facts in this matter by anybody. I see much correspondence written by bank employes, even in this day of the typewriter's almost universal use, and nine-tenths of the handwriting that comes before me is unpleasant to the eye, and much of it is positively illegible.

I have heard it said that the typewriter is responsible for the bad handwriting of the present younger generation, but this cannot be true. In spite of the prevalence of the writing machine, the families that do not possess one are very much in the preponderance. Anyway, were the subject of handwriting given the prominence it deserves in the "public schools, the handwriting of the pupil would be formed in spite of the typewriter. Its very prevalence should make the authorities the more insistent upon first-class chirographical instruction in the schools.

I remember very well the good natured ridicule that used to be poured out in print upon the copy books of other days and the goody, goody sentiments of the lines, but their abandonment has cost too much. I remember very well also the beginning of the "anti-copy book movement," if I may so term it. This began with the young women who started in some years ago to acquire what they termed the "English hand." The characters thus affected are long, cramped, sprawling and irregular, and their production has cost thousands of fair creatures much pain and trouble and worry of mind, with the net result of illegibility, ugliness and the utter ruination of much good writing paper.

Current Contempt for Spelling.

In the old days, too, we gave much time and attention to spelling. We had written spelling lessons and oral spelling lessons, and the spelling school, held on specific evenings, in which the grown-ups took active part, were a regular feature every winter.

But now the "word method" has come

in. Children are taught to recognize each word by its general appearance, without regard to its component parts. I have heard teachers speak with elation of pupils who had actually gone through school without knowing the order of the letters of the alphabet, "spelling" as we understood it in my younger days. Those who believe in the "word method" declare that pupils educated under the new plan spell quite as well in actual practice as those who were educated under the method of yesterday; but, so far as I can judge, the facts do not warrant the declaration, and my view of the matter is borne out by the observation of many of my friends.

An editor of my acquaintance, for instance, showed me the other day a manuscript on a technical subject by an expert on that subject, who was also a graduate of a standard university and had passed through the best technical school in his line. The article was admirable as an exposition of the subject, but its English was labored, unwieldy—in some instances positively ungrammatical—and the whole was disfigured with many errors of spelling. As to the handwriting of the expert I cannot speak, since the manuscript was done on the typewriter. The errors in spelling were his own, however, for he had learned to "use the machine" and had "pounded the stuff out" with his own hands.

As a horrible example of "spelling as she is sometimes spelt" I am going to add a letter of indorsement which I received the other day, though it is only fair to say that I do not know whether the writer was an old or a young man, a product of the schools as they are or as they were:

Dear Sir: this will entroduce my friend — aney thing you can do for him I will apreat it very much.

I have none him for years an upright and onest man. Yours verry truly,

Public Schools Improving.

This brings me to that one of the elementary studies that were made so much of in the public schools that I knew as a boy, which was placed first in the proverbial list of the "three R's"—reading. In the old days the "reading exercises" were first in the order of classes and the pupils were taught enunciation, pronunciation, distinctness and expression. You have to listen for half a minute only to the average young man of 20 or thereabouts to know that reading alone had small place in the public schools' routine for him. I am happy to learn, though, that this art is again receiving more attention in the schools, and that in some cities it is being taught with more intelligence than ever before.

In conclusion, then, I wish to say that for all the flaws I have seen in the practical workings of the public school system I am by no means of the opinion that there is no improvement therein. On the contrary, I believe it is better, more thorough and more progressive on the whole than it has ever been in the past.

But in their eagerness for "general culture," so called; for "universal art education," for "variety and novelty and breadth," the authorities have temporarily neglected—I am sure the neglect is only temporary—the solid and deep foundations upon which only can true cultivation, real breadth be builded. For one I shall be glad when there is less dissection, less modeling, less wood carving in our public schools and more real, downright hard work devoted to the three R's of other days—readin', 'ritin' and 'rithmetic.



HON. THOMAS L. JAMES AT HIS DESK.

have copied, is ragged, labored and unattractive to the eye.

Wretched Handwriting.

Now, I have a permanent quarrel with the modern school authorities practically everywhere because of their inexcusable neglect of the art of handwriting.

When I was of school age we were obliged to learn to write at least legibly. We had "copybooks" with engraved "copies" printed at the head of each page. We were required to devote a certain space of time each day to imitating these copies, which were really beautiful specimens of chirographical skill. Many of us were not able to attain to the beautiful in our own handwriting, but none save the really incorrig-

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Gleanings From the Story Tellers' Pack

HERE was an old neighbor of mine down in Kentucky," said Representative Wheeler of that state to the Washington Post, "who went out west. When he came back he was very much impressed with the fact that the Indians, to quote his own words, 'were powerful fond of whisky.'

"How did you find that out?" I asked him.

"Well," he said, "there was an old chief out there who offered me everything he had for a pint of whisky. He offered me his blanket, then his saddle and bridle, and finally his pony, if I would only give him my pint flask."

"Did you let him have it?" I asked.

"No, indeed," was the emphatic reply. "I only had one pint left."

Once upon a time, relates the New York World, Senator Depew and Mark Twain were fellow passengers on a trip across the ocean. One night a dinner was given and Twain was called upon for a speech. He made a number of characteristically humorous remarks and then sat down, amid applause. Mr. Depew was next called upon.

"Mr. Clemens and I exchanged speeches before dinner," he said, "and he has delivered mine. His is so bad that I won't disgrace him by repeating it." Then Mr. Depew sat down, while everybody laughed.

The next morning, while Mr. Clemens was pacing the deck, an Englishman came up to him.

"Mr. Clemens," he said, "I always thought that Mr. Depew was a smart man, but that speech of his which you delivered

last night was certainly the worst I ever heard.

Secretary of War Root was on his way to Southampton recently, reports the New York Times, when a farmer edged into the seat and began telling the cabinet member how to run the government.

When the citizen's supply of criticisms began to run low Mr. Root asked:

"What is your occupation?"

"Poultry farmer," was the reply.

"Do you know how many eggs each of your hens lays?"

"Why, no," confessed the man.

"Well, the man who looks after my chickens knows how much work each hen does. If he didn't I'd discharge him for not knowing his business. If a hen doesn't produce fifteen eggs a month it's a loss to keep it. Now, my friend, doesn't it strike you that after you have learned your own business so well that I can't give you points on it, then would be the proper time for you to come and teach me how the government ought to be run?"

The pride of James Gordon Bennett, the elder, in the great newspaper he had built up was proverbial, and he had a particular aversion to anything that savored of disrespect on the part of his employes when speaking of its contents.

One of his editorial writers ventured to compliment him one morning on the general character of that day's issue, says Youth's Companion.

"There was a lot of good stuff in the paper this morning, Mr. Bennett," he said.

"Stuff!" exclaimed the editor. "Stuff? What do you mean?"

"I mean the—the matter on the editorial

page," replied the other, somewhat taken aback.

"Then say so," rejoined his chief, with a frosty gleam in his eye. "If you value your job, young man, never call anything that goes into the New York Herald 'stuff' again as long as you live!"

Anent the almost total extinction of the great bears that a few years ago made Wall street trading a thing of such vigor and picturesqueness, relates the New York Times, a conversation on the Stock exchange floor a few days ago contained a story of James R. Keene and Washington E. Connor, when they were two of the most noted bull baiters of the street.

At the time spoken of Connor was the guest of Mr. Keene at the latter's country place. The two were walking over the fine grounds in the early evening admiring the beauties of the early twilight scene and incidentally talking business now and then.

Suddenly Keene grasped his friend's arm and pointed to the moon that was majestically soaring up into the heavens and mantling the earth in a silvery sheen.

"Beautiful moon rising there," said the host.

"Yep," replied Mr. Connor, and then in a fit of abstraction added: "But it's too high, Keene; too high!"

A gentleman, whose liberality in no way corresponded to his means, found one day that there was some remainder ale in his cellar almost spoiling, and decided to get rid of it without delay, relates the New Yorker.

The next morning when he was remembering over his estate he came across a

party of workmen. Addressing the man in charge, he ostentatiously presented the ale to the men and said they could go and fetch it as they liked.

A few days afterward he happened to meet the foreman again, and immediately proceeded to extract from him in some way a suitable acknowledgment of the bounty recently bestowed.

"Well, William," said the donor, with the air of a man who had granted an unspeakable favor, "did you and your men have that ale?"

"Oh, yes, sir, thank you, we had it," was the reply.

"That's right, and how did you like it?" said the gentleman, desiring a warmer expression of gratitude.

"Oh, sir it was just the thing for us," was the rather vague response.

"Ha, that'll do, then. But what do you mean by 'just the thing'?"

"Well, sir," said Williams, "if it 'ad been a little better we shouldn't 'ad it, and if it 'ad been a little worse we couldn't 'ad a dranked it."

An effort of one of John B. Gough's tours of the west was to arouse his converts to a political movement in favor of prohibition and in several states the politicians began to give consideration to the cry. The distillers and liquor dealers are said to have been so frightened that they employed men to follow the lecturer, sit among the audience and endeavor to confound him with questions. He had worked a Topeka, Kan., audience up to a fine pitch of excitement, and, in his effective manner cried:

"Temperance! Temperance!! Temperance!!! It will mean money in your

pocket, clothes on your back, happiness in your home, and God in your heart!"

Up leaped one of the paid interrupters and shouted to the audience:

"Money in our pockets! Why, fellow-citizens, follow this man's ideas and we'll be all in the poorhouse! Think of the fields of tasseled corn that stretch on every side! Whisky is made from corn. We sell millions of dollars' worth of corn to the whisky makers. Stop the manufacture of whisky, and what'll we do?"

Then turning to Gough, he went on:

"You, Mr. Smarty—what'll we do? Tell us, if prohibition comes, what'll we do with our corn?"

"Raise more hogs, my friend," replied Gough, without a second's hesitation—"raise more hogs!"

"Did you ever hear a goat swear?" asked General Parker of New Jersey, quotes the Washington Post. He represents, by the way, the district in which the rifle range at Sea Girt is situated.

"Over at the rifle range one day," said General Parker, "there was a team from Georgia, which had with them a colored boy and a goat as mascots. The boy was dressed in brilliant uniform and the goat had a fuzzy tail. Along came a rifleman who belonged to a rival team.

"I'll give you a nickel for one of your buttons," he said to the boy, and the trade was made. Then the rifleman, plucking some hairs from the goat's tail, rubbed them on the button. 'Now,' he said, 'I have hoodooed your team. You will never win the Hilton trophy.'

"The colored boy burst into tears and the goat said 'D-a-a-am-n' just as plainly as anything you ever heard in your life."