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978-1-108-06635-8 - Schools for Girls and Colleges for Women: A Handbook of Female Education Chiefly Designed for the Use of Persons of the Upper Middle Class

Charles Eyre Pascoe

Excerpt

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SCHOOLS FOR GIRLS AND COLLEGES FOR WOMEN.

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY.

THE purpose with which I have undertaken the preparation of this little work has not been altogether devoid of self-interest. Like many other parents of limited means, I have reason to know, that not the least anxious moments of a father's life are those when the time has come for making choice of schools for the children. The word "children" I use advisedly, believing, in common with others, elementary education to be the common basis of intelligence and culture, and demanding, therefore, as earnest consideration from heads of families as education in the higher form, when the children have grown to be young men and women. In a book recently published, I ventured to direct attention to the Foundation benefits within reach of boys at our greater Public Schools. The attempt was therein made to point the way by which a clever boy, conscientious, painstaking, and apt to learn, might both become a present help to his parents by relieving them, in a measure, of his school expenses, and afterwards advance himself to, and at, the University. It

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has not been without some mistrust of my ability to deal satisfactorily with the subject of Girls' Schools that I have entered upon the present work. In the case of the boys, I had the irreproachable testimony of centuries of splendid tradition to guide me to the selection I made of schools which were entitled to the confidence of parents. In the present instance no such ample authority was at my command ; and I have had to rely, almost wholly, upon personal inquiry and research to establish the claim of each school to its place in the following pages. If such an attestation of the value of the facts herein collected be worth anything, I may be permitted to say, that this handbook will be my own trusty counsellor and guide in planning and furthering the education of my own children. Already—while, indeed, I was engaged in writing its first chapter—the book has proved of service ; for it has led me to discover that the Primary Schools of the State, with their numerous appliances, trained teachers, and system of independent inspection, offer to the children of the humbler ranks advantages which those above them in the social scale cannot command. What the precise result of this will be as regards the coming generation it would be venturesome to predict ; but one effect must surely be—unless, at least, new vigour can be infused into our voluntary educational machinery—that the foremost places in the battle of life will no longer belong to those whose birth used to be supposed to ensure their position. The recognition of this in the case of the girls is less general, perhaps, than in that of the boys ; but happily there is a livelier and increasing interest being shown in the whole matter of female education by women themselves, which indicates that they are awakening to wants which must be attended to and supplied.

How immediate and pressing is the necessity for some

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well-devised and comprehensive scheme of Elementary and Secondary education for the daughters of persons “to middle fortune born,” may possibly be gathered from a statement of my own experiences in searching for primary instruction for a little girl. I happen to reside in a populous western suburb of London, whose inhabitants, for the purposes of my story, may be classified as follows :—(1) the wealthy, who live in very noticeable mansions on the hill-side; (2) the well-to-do, consisting of prosperous professional men, merchants, and others, occupying comfortable villa residences on the plain; (3) a subordinate class—in point of numbers far exceeding the other two classes put together—composed of thrifty tradesfolk, clerks, and their fellows, striving hard, and mostly with gratifying success, to pay their way, and, we may surmise, looking forward hopefully to promotion to the hill-side by and by. Occasionally, while strolling about the thoroughfares of this outskirt of London, I have ventured an opinion with myself as to where the younger members of the families of these people are educated. At holiday seasons I have not unfrequently noticed the natty hat and well-cut jacket of Eton and Harrow in the neighbourhood of the mansions, and, therefore, conjecture that their owners, so far as their sons are concerned, support the Great Schools of England. At times I have thought that I could trace something of the youthful athleticism and sturdy independence of Rugby and Marlborough in the aspect of the lads whom I meet in the vicinity of the villa residences of the plain. And from a daily experience of some years in travelling to and from town, I can testify to the countenance given by my neighbours, the thrifty clerks and liberal-minded tradesfolk, to the excellent public day-schools of London, whereof King’s and University College Schools offer very sufficient examples. So far, I feel able to give fair account of the

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place of education of the boys of my neighbourhood ; but when I turn to the girls I am, figuratively speaking, nowhere. I take it for granted, however, that the mansions on the hill-side shelter competent governesses, and therefore pass them by. The owners of the villa residences, doubtless, also find suitable means for the daily instruction of their daughters. My curiosity, not to say wonder, is excited to know where the girls of the less prosperous inhabitants of this populous western London suburb procure their education. If the experiences of these good people in seeking for an eligible school has been anywise like my own, then I fear my curiosity is destined to remain unsatisfied, until such time as public opinion shall have pronounced in favour of systematized education for girls of the Middle classes, and a public school shall have been founded in my neighbourhood as the natural outcome of this beneficent and much-to-be-desired action.

Statistics being wearisome to the generality of readers, I guard myself against employing them here. In their place, I must ask the reader to accept of the assurance that I have been at all needful pains to confirm the truth of the following statement. In the suburb where I reside there are not less than a thousand persons, able, and doubtless willing to pay for a good Day-school for Girls, who are at present without one. Under existing circumstances, all these good people are thrown upon the resources of the neighbourhood for their daughters' education ; and these failing are driven to seek for instruction for them elsewhere. An opinion of the nature and extent of the available means for female education within reach of the Middle-class inhabitants of my district, may be formed from a consideration of the following few particulars gleaned from prospectuses of existing day-schools within its boundaries. At present there are eight

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such schools offering education to persons of the Middle classes. Their respective proprietors (with one exception) claim, each one for her school, first, that it is "Select," and therefore of special value or excellence in the true meaning of the term ; and next that it is an "Establishment" set apart for the education and bringing-up of "Young Ladies." Let us show no disposition to quibble about words, but at once admit these expressions to mean, in a scholastic sense, that only the children of persons of reasonable propriety are acceptable to the several Head-mistresses of these—I may be pardoned for using the phrase—elegant receptacles of learning. We will now proceed to consider the advantages the schools offer to girls in the way of education.

School A "provides a sound English education." It gives instruction in "English literature, with special attention to composition, and reading, ancient and modern history, physical geography with mapping, English grammar and analysis," to day-scholars for eight guineas the school year. Drawing, music, Latin, German, and calisthenic exercises are charged for extra ; and a parent who indulges in these subjects of study for his daughter must pay an additional six guineas a year, and some ten guineas more if she venture upon the luxury of "Finishing Masters."

School B "bestows the utmost care on the cultivation of the minds of its pupils," and to this end finds it desirable to divide its scholastic year into four terms. It asks the scarce remunerative sum, one would think, of four guineas per annum for the instruction of day-scholars, and charges extra for "pianoforte," singing, drawing, "use of the globes," German, French, painting, and (very properly) for instruction in "the art of moulding flowers out of wax." A matter of 10*l.* per annum would, however, cover the expenses of instruction in all these desirable accomplishments.

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School C desires “to render the acquirement of knowledge as attractive as possible ; also to ensure a thorough understanding of the same.” Its course of general study comprises “all the essentials requisite to the formation of a superior English education, including Biblical knowledge, mediæval and modern history, geography, grammar, arithmetic, drawing, French, German,” &c. Ancient history, it may be noted, finds no place in the curriculum of School C, whose pupils may be supposed, therefore, to be *au fait* with the history of the world prior to the period of the Middle Ages. All subjects but English are charged for in this “School for Young Ladies” as “extras.”

School D exhibits, as its ordinary course of study, “scripture history, the grammar, analysis, composition, and literature of the English language, political and physical geography, map-drawing, history, and arithmetic.” It devotes special attention to instrumental music, singing, drawing, French, and German ; and for the whole course of instruction, both ordinary and special, asks but the modest fee of 18*l.* per school year.

School E makes every effort to ensure a thorough knowledge of the subjects it proposes to teach, and “as far as possible to excite in the pupils themselves a sense of pleasure in their work, regard being had to their individual capacity and state of health.” Its course of study is comprehensive, not to say solid, ranging from the three R’s in elementary instruction to Physical Science and Political Economy in the higher parts of education. Only music is set down as an extra at this school, whose fees, in the aggregate, amount to 20*l.* per annum.

Schools F, G, and H offer no less tempting inducements to parents of moderate means, with the additional privilege that they may pay, if they are so disposed, some 50 per cent.

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in addition to the ordinary school fees for tuition by “Finishing Masters.” As a matter of fact, in neither of the school prospectuses under notice are the names of these “Finishing Masters” given, so that it is impossible to determine whether their instruction is worth paying for or not. Probably, however, few parents would begrudge this increased outlay if, in return for it, they could but see the end of their daughters’ education.

Being in the position of a generous contributor to the rates of my district, I cannot conscientiously ask for the admission of my child to the School Board school. In this respect, it may be remarked in passing, the tradesman who supplies me with my morning’s newspapers has a considerable advantage over me. He is a fairly prosperous, thrifty, and civil shopkeeper, deriving a present competence from the pleasant, and, we may trust, profitable callings of news-agent and tobacconist, with an income in addition arising from the wholesome occupation of rural postman. He would seem to have claims on the sympathy of the School Board, and his children, young and old, I am pleased to be able to say, are being educated under its admirable control. I will not weary the reader, nor make confession of my own helplessness and poverty, by setting forth the many ways in which I find the little fellow in high-lows and corduroy, who daily knocks at my door to deliver newspapers, is out-distancing my little girl in grappling with the intricacies of Elementary education. This, however, merely by the way. Not having the right of entry to the School Board schools of my neighbourhood, I am, perforce, obliged to select one from among those eight “Establishments for Young Ladies” whose prospectuses have been brought under review. At one of these schools, then—it matters not at which—my little daughter, aged six and a half years, is at present receiving

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Elementary instruction. Her schoolfellows range in age from seven to sixteen years, and, in point of the social standing of their parents, are, in the true democratic meaning, her equals. In fact, the “Young Ladies’ School” at which my child attends, is a distinct, and I was about to add triumphant, refutation of the oft-repeated assertion that the children of, let us say, for example, Mrs. Smith, wife of Captain Smith, retired officer of the army, have no sympathies or pursuits in common with the children of Mrs. Brown, whose husband supplies Mrs. Smith with groceries. I make mention of this matter only to show that in my neighbourhood, at least, we have practically overcome one of the great objections ordinarily urged against Public Day-schools for Girls—to wit, that class prejudices would thwart their usefulness. In our Establishments for Young Ladies, we have, in reality, no class distinctions, the word “Select” printed on the school circulars being used simply as a serviceable, and, I am bound to add, very taking decoy in the general interests of education. So far, then, it may be said that the Middle-class Private schools which I and my less prosperous neighbours support, are in alliance with those of the School Board. Both merge their claims to social pre-eminence in a common effort to distribute instruction among the million. When, however, I turn to the quality of the education that each class of school provides, and examine the methods followed by each in imparting it, I am obliged to confess—as far as my experience allows me to form an opinion—that the Middle-class Day-schools of my neighbourhood and those of the School Board are greatly at variance. I find, in the one case, no satisfactory guarantee as to the qualifications of teachers; unsuitable accommodation provided for scholars; a tendency towards showy superficiality as regards results; a neglect of proper rudimentary

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instruction according to approved methods ; an absence of thoroughness and foundation in the subjects taught ; a general lack of system from end to end of the school course ; and no independent examination of pupils. In the case of the other, I notice very sufficient guarantees afforded as to the competency of teachers ; admirable school buildings ; great care bestowed on elementary education from the beginning ; systematized instruction given to children according to their age, capabilities, and needs ; due attention paid to such matters as drawing, singing, and physical exercise as part of the school curriculum ; healthy emulation encouraged among the scholars ; and last, not least, independent inspection by well-qualified examiners. One illustration must suffice as to the method of instruction followed in the school at which my little daughter attends. Fifteen or twenty girls, of ages varying as already stated, are herded in one small room, and taught "the various branches of an English education" to the tune of a piano ! The reader may smile ; but I can assure him that I am guilty of no exaggeration. The jingle of a practising piano, thrummed upon incessantly through the hours of school-work, has accompanied my child's lisps of the vowels and consonants. And, for aught I know, she may have engaged daily in the twofold occupation of keeping time with her feet to a polka-mazurka, while spluttering out the harmonious parts of ab, eb, ib, ob, and ub.

"But have you no redress?" I am asked ; "surely you can remove your child to another school?" My reply to these questions is that the educational resources of my neighbourhood at present afford me no prospect of redress. I have been at some pains to inquire into the management and efficiency of the other Day-schools for girls within reach, and, on the whole, I may safely say there is not a pin's choice

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lying between them. There is, in fact, no alternative between the School Board schools and a school whose charges amount in the aggregate to something in excess of one hundred pounds a year. To the former I am precluded from sending my child, because, providentially in one sense, unfortunately in another, I am not quite poor enough ; and for the present I am all too poor to be able to avail myself of the advantages offered by the latter. Then what is the remedy to be proposed? I confess that I should like to see established, in every town of a certain population, say of 4000 inhabitants and upwards, a Public Day-school for Middle-class Girls, under proper authority and supervision. I am not quite sure but that, in any scheme proposed for the founding of such schools, I would substitute for "proper" the word public. Considering that "there are nearly a million more females than males in Great Britain and Ireland"—as the *Times*,* in a very able leading article, discussing the subject of women's employment, the other day, pointed out—there does not seem to be any reason why the State, or the action of local bodies, should not do for Girls whatever it is desirable to do for Boys. I would create, then, in every large town a school for girls the counterpart of the excellent "City of London School" for boys, whose object is (I quote from its prospectus) "to furnish a liberal and useful education for the sons of respectable persons who are engaged in professional, commercial, or trading pursuits, without the necessity of removing them from the care and control of their parents." The cost of this "liberal and useful education" is set down in the school's prospectus at 10*l.* 10*s.* per annum, and the only extra fee is for instruction in drawing, which is charged for at the rate of "14*s.* per term." It might savour of snobbishness to dwell upon the several

* *Times*, November 13, 1878.