

HIGH SCHOOLS.



HILE staying in one of our cathedral cities, I was persuaded by a friend to visit the High School there.

When the proposal was made to me, I naturally said—

“What is to be seen there more than in other girls’ schools? and shall I be allowed to walk in on a visit of inspection?”

My friend replied that any one may visit these schools, provided the head-mistress gives her consent, which is, I believe, rarely denied.

As we walked to the school, she told me much which interested me greatly in High Schools; and thinking that perhaps others may be as ignorant as I was of the great work these schools are doing for our girls, I write this paper, hoping it may not be unacceptable.

On reaching the High School—a large and handsome building, originally the private house of a wealthy family—we found the head-mistress perfectly willing to let us go all over the school, and listen to any of the classes we liked.

This lady—a most sensible and highly-educated woman, whose charming and refined manner won upon me greatly—told us the school had now over 150 girls from seven to twenty years of age. They were divided into six forms, the first being the lowest. The head-mistress’s office—into which we were shown—was a most charming little sanctum. Her secretary sat there writing. I understand that each head-mistress really requires a secretary, as the correspondence alone is very voluminous, and all school accounts are sent regularly to the London Council.

After admiring the office, we crossed a lofty hall, and were shown a large empty room, which we were told was used for prayers, assembling and dismissing the girls, also for drilling, class-singing, lunch, and dinner; for this last the girls living at a distance stayed, either bringing their own dinners, or having them from the school housekeeper at a very moderate charge.

Leaving this room, we went across the hall again to a class-room, which I at first thought was empty also, so quiet was it; but I caught the tone of a pleasant voice speaking, and on entering I found there a class of thirty-six girls. They had each a separate desk, which I thought an excellent plan. These desks had seats with backs attached to them, a support much

needed by growing girls. In the desk each girl kept her books, &c.; there was also a place for a slate, an ink-well, and a pen-tray.

I admired these nice-looking desks excessively—I believe they are called “Swedish desks.” Here they were placed in rows, so that the mistress of the class could pass up and down each row, pausing by any girl who required particular attention.

The mistress was then giving a lesson on physical geography, in which the girls were evidently greatly interested. I did not see among the whole thirty-six one listless or idle face.

I stayed half an hour in this room, listening to the lesson, in which I became quite interested too, so graphically and clearly was every part of it given—the black-board being constantly used for illustrations.

I was told this mistress, though very strict, was much loved by her pupils. The order and attention of her class struck me as really wonderful. On her desk were four vases of lovely flowers, which I afterwards found were favourite offerings from pupil to teacher.

I was quite sorry to leave this happy class, and follow the head-mistress to another room, where I found a smaller class of older girls—none looking younger than sixteen.

The mistress here stood on her raised platform in front of her desk, the black-board beside her, the chalk in her hand, her whole soul evidently given up to an arithmetical problem, which she appeared to feel her girls had not quite mastered.

I was astonished when I found what advanced work they were doing, and evidently enjoying.

The mistress of this branch of education—so often neglected by girls—is, I was told, specially strong on this subject; and when I heard of the honours and certificates she had gained in it, I felt my respect for High School teachers considerably increased.

There being no more class-rooms down-stairs, I was led by my kind guide up a broad staircase, to a large room at the end of a corridor, where I found a German class was being given. Here, as everywhere else, I could but notice the interested and happy faces of the girls, and the extremely lady-like, competent air of the mistress. The order was perfect; but of course among elder girls this is not remarkable.

The mistress of the class looked so very young that I was quite struck by the thorough and masterly manner with which she handled her difficult subject. I heard afterwards that she had spent some years in Germany studying the language. She also had a high Cambridge certificate.

Leaving the German reluctantly (for I was quite in love with the little mistress, she looked so charming that I quite longed to have a chat with her), we went into an adjoining room, whence came the tones of a manly voice. “The sixth form is having a science lecture,” I was informed. We went in. Here was evidently deep interest. The mistress of the class

was absent, as this was the hour for the professor's lecture.

Here I made only a short stay, but left, thinking how good it was that girls could now obtain such excellent mental training, and how much there was to be learnt of the hidden forces of this wonderful world.

The head-mistress said how pleased their master was with the clearness and comprehensiveness the girls displayed in this study.

After this a literature class filled me with admiration, and I thought how wisely and well each subject was taught.

"Richard III." was being dissected and explained, and my respect for Shakespeare, the mistress of the class, and Mr. Abbott, whose "Shakespearian Grammar" was used, increased amazingly.

"Now," said my guide, "you must see our little ones. They are such dear little things! Mademoiselle is now giving them their French lesson."

In this room, which was exceedingly light, airy, and lofty, and struck me as looking particularly bright, the walls being painted a pale blue, was a large class of tiny children—such happy-looking, dear little mites!

It was evident they were having a "good time" over their lessons. Mademoiselle was endeavouring to get up a little French conversation, telling each eager little creature to have something ready to say to her when her turn came.

"It must not be 'Donnez-moi' anything ever again, jamais; I am tired of that, quite," she was saying as we came into the room.

Saying good-bye to the little ones, I was next taken to the cloak-room, where there was a goodly array of hats and cloaks; no disorder or confusion, though, for each peg was numbered, with the umbrella and boot stand pertaining to it.

The lavatories were next inspected and admired, and then I was taken back to the office by the head-mistress, who was now, after receiving my warmest thanks, about to say farewell, telling me it was her hour to give a Scripture lesson in the third form.

"Scripture!" I remarked. "I have so often heard it said that no 'religion' was taught in the High Schools."

"Indeed," the lady replied gravely, "it is a great mistake, though, I am aware, a common one. Holy Scripture is taught in all the High Schools; it rests with the parents whether or not the girls enjoy that teaching. How could we train our girls to the high standard we aim at without it?"

"It is, I believe, general (as here) for the head-mistress to take all the Scripture herself. I am sure you will see it is wiser, as with so many mistresses—we have eight on our regular staff—each one taking the Scripture in her own class, and doubtless having her own views on matters of doctrine, the girls could not but be confused with so many teachers on the subject.

"The girls do not attend the school on either Saturday or Sunday, so that I have no opportunity of seeing that the orthodox collect, chapter, and hymn is learnt. Perhaps this is how the mistake has arisen; but a mistake, and a great one, it is to suppose that there is no religious teaching."

In answer to some questions she went on to say, "In other ways the High Schools are much misunderstood. By some people they are believed to be just a remove higher than National Schools, and so children are withheld by foolish parents who think the schools are not grand enough. By many, however, this foolish prejudice has been overcome, and in our schools we now have the daughters of professors, church dignitaries, solicitors, doctors, bankers—in fact, all grades are represented, within a just limit, of course; and those who desire the advantages of a public school, a thorough sound education, with good discipline, for their daughters, send them to us, our terms coming within the reach of all.

"I have never heard any parent complain of bad results from the mixture of classes.

"All the girls behave quietly and well while in school. No talking is allowed, except in recreations; if it were, I believe no harm would result, as I invariably notice that 'like likes like,' and the quiet, lady-like girls keep together, while the rougher and less polished are helped and suppressed by the mistresses.

"The love and respect the girls here have for their mistresses is a real help and incentive to them to do well; every one who knows anything of the school is quite struck by it.

"Parents who wish it could always bring their girls to and fetch them from the school, so that no acquaintance need be made. The standard of work is very high. Besides the Cambridge examination, and the examination at the end of each term, the Council of Education send their examiner to inspect the school thoroughly, both mistresses and pupils, of which examination there is a printed report. 'The Girls' Public Day School Company' has done a great work for English girls, placing the means of obtaining a sound education within the reach of all. The company has, I believe, established twelve schools in large towns, where they have only to be known to be valued.

"When we see such names as Mrs. Grey, Miss Shirreff, Lady Stanley of Alderley, Mr. Green, the well-known historian, Mr. Roundell, and many others, on the general committee, we feel sure we may entrust the education of our girls to such able hands, and see them grow up into sensible, well-informed women, capable of doing their work in the world, whatever it may be, well and helpfully; and that the vulgar, uneducated girls, only able to jingle a few dance tunes in bad time on the piano, who cannot write a letter of any length without numerous errors in grammar, spelling, and expression, who can sing sentimental songs to which no true lover of music can bear to listen for five minutes, will cease to be a disgrace to womanhood.

"It is their education as girls, or rather their want of it, which has caused so much to be said and written of women's incapacity; but, surely, better days have dawned, common sense has stepped in, and, as a great agent for good, 'The Girls' Public Day School Company' deserves our warmest gratitude and respect for the great want it has supplied." B. P.