



EDUCATION AND THE WORKING MAN.

By LEONARD NOBLE.



THE enormous strides that the question of education has taken of late years among the working classes, cannot fail to have attracted the attention of even the most casual student of men and things. As is invariably the case with any conspicuous progress that has been made, or any visible reformation that has taken place, this improved order of things has been accompanied by loud cries from those who have yet to be convinced that this progress is for the general good. Many men who have never doubted the enormous value of higher education when applied to their own individual cases

and their own class, will yet question whether we are not running a risk that we are not justified in running, when we offer to the working classes the same advantages adapted to the peculiarities of their requirements. We often hear it stated that in our grandfathers' times better workmen could be found who could neither read nor write, than it is possible to find now among those who have the advantages of the three R's, and this degeneration is invariably attributed to that broad-backed scapegoat "education," nor is any attempt made to ascertain whether this falling off may or may not be traced to some entirely different source. Whether education is to the advantage, or the detriment of the working classes, is a question that the working man has taken entirely into his own hands by simply saying, "I will have education myself and will see that my children have it."

If those who are so ready to cry down education and who deplore the enormous strides it is making—a rapidly decreasing minority, I hope and believe—were to look nearer home and study the men they actually come in contact with, I think they would find more than enough to convince them that their fears are groundless, and that education tends to the ultimate good of the working man. Do we not almost invariably find among the working classes in London, that the best, and by that I mean the most useful, man we employ, is, in nine cases out of ten, the best all-round man too, if we take the trouble to find out? When "off duty" he is probably, to begin with, well educated, and he is trying to be better educated, then perhaps he is secretary to one or two slate-clubs or helping-hand societies, he is thrifty, his cottage or lodgings will be found neat and clean; if a young man he is sure to belong to some cricket or cycling club, and you may be quite sure that on Sunday afternoons he and his wife and "the kids" will turn out for their walk as smart and neat as any you will come across. We are too much in the habit of not sufficiently estimating all these good points. Because they are brought out and developed in his own time, and not in ours, we are inclined to think they are no concern of ours, and we give no further consideration to them. I believe the encouragement of these good qualities is as much the concern of his employer as it is to the man's own interest and advantage, and quite as much so as the way in which he does his work. When we see on the one hand that the most conscientious workman is also to be found among those who most thoroughly carry out all their home duties, we cannot shut our eyes to the link between the two higher qualities of the man's better nature, especially as we are equally sure to find, on the other hand, that the man who does his work in the most slovenly fashion is the man who has none of the home duties to perform, and, were circumstances to thrust them on him, would do them in the same

slovenly fashion as he does his work. Surely then it is to our own interests to encourage the man in his attempt to improve himself, even if we can find no higher motive to induce us to do so. It will be at best a difficult matter for him, notwithstanding the immense assistance and increased opportunities that are now being offered him. It is all very well for those whose time is their own to say there is nothing very creditable in a man's joining a class at some polytechnic school for one or two evenings during the week. It is sometimes urged that his only alternative to spending his evening in probably a small and crowded room, is to spend it in the public-house. A statement more wide of the mark has rarely been uttered, and only tends to show the speaker's complete ignorance of the real nature of the man he is dealing with. The man who is honestly trying to improve his condition and education is not so utterly destitute of resource in himself that the public-house is the only recreation open to him during his spare time. He has plenty of other occupations and engagements for his leisure, and he is giving up a great deal when he voluntarily sacrifices one or two of his short evenings during the week, to endeavour to improve himself. He knows however the value of the sacrifice, makes it coolly and deliberately, and, if he is really the man I am trying to describe, does not shrink from it or think of turning back, but cheerfully smother any regrets that may rise for congenial occupations and pleasures which he has thought fit to relinquish, innocent though they may have been, while probably not improving. And some of us are trying to put obstacles in this man's endeavour, or if not going so far as that, perhaps are throwing cold water on it, by *not* doing anything to help him, which after all amounts to almost the same thing. Many advocates of technical education are to be found who will assist the cause they have at heart to the exclusion of almost all other branches of education. They cannot however really be separated, and he who wants the one must take the others, and the courses that are now being put forward by the working-men's colleges of the present day must be taken as stepping-stones towards technical education. A great point will have been gained if only a few of those who urge the importance of this can be won over to see the difficulty of separating the two forms.

From every point of view that the caviller can look at the question, if he looks at it honestly and straight in the face, I maintain he can only find one answer. Let him come and pay a visit to one of the large working-men's colleges, and see if, after what he sees there, he can find it in his heart to deprecate in the slightest degree the energy which the working man is using to educate himself, or the opportunities that are there being offered him by those who know, or at any rate, thoroughly believe in, the value of the movement. At most of these colleges I believe the lowest age at which a student is admitted is seventeen or eighteen, and I have known a case of a father piteously appealing for the enrolment of his son, who he admitted was under the age, but as he was "nearly seventeen," he hoped an exception might be made. The son's age, on inquiry, proved to be just over sixteen; the father had not confined himself strictly to the truth, but surely this was a "good lie," as Tom Sawyer's aunt once described a very white one of his, told to save her some unnecessary anxiety on his account.

As a rule most of the men who avail themselves of the working-men's colleges do so as soon as they have reached the lowest age at which their admission is possible. This is but another proof, if any were required, of their eagerness to better their condition. At that age a youth of the working classes enjoys the greatest liberty he will probably ever know. He has outgrown the home of his childhood, and though he may be as fond of it as most youths in his class are, and though his parents strive their hardest to keep unbroken as long as possible the old family circle they have made and loved so well, still, neither they nor he can deny that it is not the same as it has been; he is stepping on to the threshold of his life, home has not the same control, though the affection on both sides may be as strong as it ever has been, and, for good or ill, he must obey his natural instincts. He must take the inevitable plunge into the stream of life, to sink or swim.

When, therefore, a youth is himself so willing and anxious even to take advantage of such help as is offered him, it is a bold man who will come forward and say one word that may tend to lead him in the opposite direction. No one, I feel sure, would do this knowingly, but is it not almost as culpable to do the same indirectly, by withholding approval of the educational movement of the day?

Looking at the question again from a rather higher point of view, and putting aside the fact that by elevating the condition of the working man by means of education, we are ensuring to ourselves a better workman, should we not be justified in our action by the benefit we confer on the man himself? Education is no charity, no trifling dole that gives the recipient some temporary enjoyment or a little luxury that he could very well do without. It means the opening to him of new worlds of thought, expediency, and resource. It teaches him to utilize to their fullest whatever capability or genius he may have, in whatsoever directions they may lie. It shows him how to extend to their fullest extent his opportunities, his money, and his home, and above all, how to bring up his children in such a way that they and generations unborn may reap the full benefit of his initiatory endeavours. It means the enlargement of all his higher faculties, the fuller appreciation of the beauties, dignity, and scope of life, and a larger, broader view of all the questions of the day, coupled with a greater toleration of deficiencies in others. That last quality alone should be sufficient to induce us to extend him this boon, for with that toleration may come, and probably will, the strengthening of all the bonds that we cling to, even to the exclusion of others; I mean that with a gentler toleration of deficiencies and delinquencies in others will come love, charity, manliness, pity, tenderness, and all that tends to draw us to a higher life.

The bettering of the conditions under which the poor live is one of the leading questions of the day, and one that it is often thought will be fully answered when a thorough and wholesale improvement of their dwellings is brought about. The education of the working classes is in my opinion hardly inferior in importance, for with better education must come the improvement in housing that so much is now being done to bring about. As education increases we shall see the wretched courts and alleys that are now such a disgrace to our civilization disappearing to make room for larger and more sanitary dwellings, which will probably be also more ornamental. The enlargement of his mind will open a man's eyes to the squalor and wretchedness of the surroundings he has so often to put up with now, and which he has hitherto tolerated, and even been thought to be content with, for the simple reason that he has never known anything better.

At most of the working-men's colleges there are also to be found recreation rooms, and perhaps the majority of the classes that men and boys are now joining are the offshoots of working-men's clubs. Consequently from the fact that education and recreation are so often found together under the same roof many do not hesitate to say that the reason for the classes being so freely taken up is only owing to the fact that at these institutions they can spend a more pleasant evening than they otherwise could if they did not join the classes. A little inquiry will soon satisfy the most sceptical that this is not the case. It would be a very extreme case to find a man voluntarily giving up one evening a week, and putting upon himself an engagement that is irksome to him, for the sake of a few games of bagatelle and draughts, for it is not as if he would find many others in the same position as himself, making the class a secondary consideration to the amusement. Even supposing the opposite were the case, and the bribe of amusement were deliberately held out to a man in order to induce him to join the classes, would a great deal of harm be done? Would not the end justify the means? No one, I feel sure, will really grudge the man his few hours of innocent recreation, as an accompaniment of an honest endeavour, and a very hopeful one too, to put it within his power to do a good that it is impossible to estimate for himself, his children, and his employer.

There are very many who are ready to cavil at and deplore the enormous strides that education is making among the working classes. Some even do not hesitate to say more harm is being done than good, and that working men of the present day ought to be quite content with the conditions and surroundings of life that their fathers before them found more than sufficient to supply them with all they needed. This condition of moral stagnation has never been offered to, much less accepted by, the upper classes, so it is difficult to see why it should be thought quite sufficient for the lower classes, or why the alternative, even in a proportionate form, and adapted to their needs, should be withheld from them. If even a cursory inspection were made by those who would hinder the present progress, into the way in which the work is being done and the success that has already attended it, I feel sure they would find more than enough to convince them that their anxiety is quite without foundation and their fears needless.