

THE TEACHER

(Some reflections prompted by an article in the Winter number of THE USE OF ENGLISH, and entitled 'The Non-G.C.E. Examination', by R. G. H. Andrews)

by

R. J. HARRIS

Chartesey Secondary School

THE LATEST name in my list of enquiries concerning the deserving poor is that of Mr. Blank, a teacher of English in a Secondary Modern School, as it is still called except on Speech Day. This worthy man had taken his Degree in one of the older Universities, and had achieved 'a reasonable success'. No, he was not a specialist, but after all in a sense we were all specialists, we were all teachers of English. He had been slighted professionally, as is commonly the case, both by those more and by those less qualified than himself. He was not married, for in his young days the salary had not risen to that, and now he seemed to have lost the wish to found a family. The school was his family. Yes, the holidays were a great compensation.

Questioned about his work, he conceded that his own habits of pedagogy, and a remoteness originating in his Oxbridge days, did lack immediacy and power to command his pupils' attention. He often asked himself if he was grappling with the really pressing needs of his pupils, who were more anxious to fill in football coupons and betting slips than to write essays in the style of Elia, his own whimsical choice of a model. Since not all his pupils brought in their homework, he was spared the total exhaustion of marking, and used the time thus gained to advantage in reading up-to-date professional articles on the teaching of English; for it was never too late to learn. One article particularly had affected him, and on this it would be best to let him speak for himself, for he was sensitive to interruptions.

Yes, (he said), it reflected much of the best modern practice, being very free of the humbug of any assumed concern with the aims and principles of education. He had at first taken for irony the author's blunt and direct advocacy of the lower-standard examination as the necessary mould for the English lesson. But he had soon realised his own error, and the error of the traditional methods of teaching. He noted the faults made by candidates at the non-G.C.E. examinations and instanced by Mr. Andrews as critical to

success or failure. These were such as the inability to obey instructions; the incorrect spelling of such words as to, too, or two; failure to copy; incorrect use of the apostrophe showing possession, and of the signs " and ?; confusion of 'Yours faithfully' and 'Yours sincerely'; omission of the address from the head of a letter; bad handwriting—a sorry total, not excused by the genial 'faux pas' of writing personal notes to the examiner.

How much less serious—and yet he had failed to eliminate them—were the faults of his own pupils! Mr. Andrews' candidates wrote too much—'a short composition is required'; his own wrote too little. The candidates could not spell, and disregarded certain conventions of punctuation; his own pupils, though not innocent of these faults, added others of their own. Their compositions were often inconsequential, the material thin, unimportant, irrelevant. They failed to connect, to develop, or to set in due relation the ideas they might have. His pupils were not widely read; some indeed did not get much pleasure from reading or even from the theatre—this he attributed to his own conservative tastes and to the distance from the stage of any seats they could afford. They did not know much about literature or life; they did not wish to know; and they were convinced that they knew all that needed to be known. They were lamentably unable to control a social situation by speech, and when out of his hearing relied overmuch, he feared, on fisticuffs interpolated with the principal obscene word of the language. Their very silence could be barren when it was not embarrassing, being simply the interval between noises. He wished he could adopt the new methods, but feared he was too set in his ways, which were alas extremely time-devouring. He read and introduced important books to his classes; discussed what was happening and what should happen in the world, in this being often contradicted, he admitted; took the children to the theatre, even to one or two badly punctuated plays at Stratford (Avon) and Stratford (Bow); encouraged the writing of stories, articles, plays, and letters usually begging—in these his pupils never forgot the address. One boy had produced a poem which he had allowed the teacher to insert, anonymously, in the form magazine.

Yet in all this he confessed he was a mere dilettante. Mr. Andrews' successful colleague was able 'in addition to his normal teaching'—not, he noticed, in subtraction from it, as would have been his case—to set every day at least two questions from past examination papers, and mock-examination followed mock-examination for weeks on end in that dedicated classroom. Clearly, the candidates had stamina and single-mindedness which his own pupils lacked. He had since confirmed the success of these methods in an enquiry of a younger colleague of a scientific turn of mind. This gentleman had ninety-five per cent success with his candidates, a rather better

standard than that of the First Time School of Motoring. His procedures were if anything a refinement on those of Mr. Andrews. He too set a mock-examination every day, but timed it to finish five minutes after the dinner-bell. This ensured a prompt conclusion. Bells rang every twenty minutes, both to accustom candidates to the distractions which will be found in every exam room, and to assist a scientific side-investigation into the measurement of salivation. Each candidate received a slight electric shock, ingeniously transmitted through the magnetised writing-paper, if his pen erred in any conventional spelling. The candidates were, of course, fastened to their seats, but by light chains only, and the seats—lest any misguided humanist be indignant—were padded, like the walls. This same highly proficient instructor—for this would seem to be a more suitable word than teacher—had once achieved a hundred per cent success in the G.C.E. with non-G.C.E. candidates. One of his brighter candidates had been discovered perusing a purloined copy of the ensuing year's paper. His teacher felt in duty bound to confiscate this, pointing out gently as he did so the selfishness of retaining such a document for oneself alone; for he never missed an opportunity to broaden by a moral precept or even by a reference to literature the slightly circumscribed horizon of the preparation room.

No, he did not expect to be able to change at his age. Most of his own pupils passed their examinations, but he wondered if in doing so they were not taking an unfair advantage of others who could not read or write and yet were fully as deserving of a certificate. Fortunately, as Mr. Andrews had said, 'many more candidates pass these examinations than fail, and they do give the average secondary modern pupil something to aim at—sometimes acting as a stepping stone to G.C.E.'

Although the generality of the profession was underpaid, he himself expressed satisfaction with his salary, for not only did he receive an allowance which was sufficient to pay his fare to school, but on two days a week the Headmaster allowed him to supervise the boys at dinner, and so to obtain a free meal—a great benefit. But it was, he felt, time for him to give up to more agile minds the teaching of the subject called English. It was not easy to adapt oneself to the competitiveness and the simplicity of modern teaching. Yes, he looked forward to retirement, or a Headship.

Did it occur to this worthy man, as it occurred to the interviewer, that the antecedents of 'they' in the sentence quoted from Mr. Andrews suffered perhaps more than his modern colleagues realised—being first struck down, and then trampled underfoot? If it did, this would explain his reluctance to continue actively teaching; but he was too gentlemanly, or too uncertain of himself, to say as much. He stooped courteously into the common-room, leaving behind him a thin cloud of chalk dust.