

CHAPTER III

The Fiftieth Anniversary

"I WONDER what happened to those who did not graduate."

The remark was made at the fiftieth reunion of my high school graduating class, after someone had come up with the statistic that only one hundred and twenty out of an original entering class of nearly four hundred had made the grade.

"I wonder," said another, "what happened to the boys who got out of grammar school and never entered high."

This started a round of reminiscing. "One fellow I remember well," said an eminent and retired doctor. "He never got through grammar school and was kicked out when he reached the age of fourteen. He went to work as a tail-boy on a truck. I met him again about nine years later, when I hung out my shingle. He came in to see me for some minor ailment. After I treated him he pulled out a roll of bills and nonchalantly dropped a two-dollar bill, which, by the way, was the only fee I received that day. He told me he had a fleet of trucks and was doing fine."

"That reminds me of a pal I had in the first year of high school," said another. "He dropped out and went to work as a messenger in a bank. When I got out of college

eight years later I went to work at the same bank, at the bottom, of course. This fellow, having had eight years of experience behind him, was designated to teach me the ropes. I envied him. To be sure, I made up the gap in a couple of years and eventually got ahead of him, but I remember thinking at the time that I had wasted eight years getting an education."

And so it went. One told of a boy who went into construction work, after dropping out of school, became a union leader and a politician of note. Another drop-out worked his way up the contracting ladder, another became a junkman of affluence. Not all of them, of course, achieved prominence or built up a competence, but in that respect they were no different from those who graduated from high school or even college.

"We were," said an old graduate, "a self-selective group. Out of the many thousands who got through grammar school less than four hundred entered high school. Why? Well, maybe our parents urged us, maybe we had an inner compulsion for an education. At any rate, after we got into high school we had to make the grade or get out. There was no watering down of the courses for those who had no stomach for learning."

"The point is," chimed in another, "those who dropped out were not downgraded, socially or industrially, for their inability to master Latin or English composition. It was generally accepted as a fact that some were educable and others were not. I went to high school and to college, but a brother of mine, to my father's disappointment, decided against an education and went to work in a jewelry store. When he

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died, a few years ago, he left an estate worth nearly a million."

"That's right," resumed the philosopher. "The fact that a boy was not a book-learner was not held against him. He might be intelligent enough for business, but his mind was not attuned to abstractions. And, as many of us know, he got a head start in business which put many of us at a competitive disadvantage when we entered the arena some four or eight years later. Maybe our education helped us win out in the long run, maybe it did not. At any rate, we were the educable and the others were not, and that's all there was to it."

They were talking of a value that obtained a half century ago, before democracy took over the educational system. Even this high school, which was the first to be set up in the City of New York, later to become the Borough of Manhattan, was something of a concession to the democratic spirit. Before its advent, those who felt the need of an education enrolled in the College of the City of New York, which gave what was held to be a "tough" five year course leading to a bachelor's degree. This high school was intended to extend the opportunity of an education to a wider audience. And, to appeal to a wider audience, its curriculum contained a course in bookkeeping, as an elective over Latin or Greek.

But, aside from that concession to the democratic spirit which was creeping into the field of education long before Professor John Dewey gave the democratic spirit a philosophy, the high school hung on to standards. One had to meet those standards or get out. In mathematics, a subject that gave me much trouble, we began with algebra and

ended up with trigonometry. In English, four years of it, we started with a discussion of the Sir Roger de Coverly Papers, went from there into the novels of George Eliot, and ended up with Macbeth and Burke's Speech on Conciliation with America; all the while we were drilled in rhetoric and composition. We had plenty of homework, plenty of writing to do, and almost weekly competitive tests in every subject. One had to have an inclination for learning to get by. And the diploma handed the boy when he got through—meaning he had passed his examinations—signified that he had mastered his subjects with some degree of proficiency. He had made the grade, as an individual and entirely on his own.

An instance of how standards have come down was inadvertently provided by the current principal of the high school, at this same reunion. To have some fun with these oldsters, he brought in and distributed among us the examination papers in English that had recently been submitted to the graduating class. Could we answer the questions? Of course we could not; for the questions dealt with modern books, which few of us had read. The principal had hardly enjoyed his laugh at our expense when someone fired this question at him: Can your graduating class give an outline of Burke's Speech on Conciliation? Another asked whether the boys could write on the meaning of the knocking-on-the-gate scene in Macbeth? These had been questions put to us in our College Entrance Board examinations. A third fellow remarked that the question papers were mere guessing games, since they called for true-or-false checks for answers, and one who had not read the books could probably check half the questions correctly. "When we took our ex-

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ams fifty years ago, every question called for an answer that entailed the writing of at least a sentence, and most of them needed a full page." The principal sheepishly admitted that our schooling in English had been far more intensive than the present students receive.

Even in those days, every mother was certain that her son was destined to become a lawyer or a doctor, and every father was intent on preparing him for a "better chance" in life than he had had. However, it was conceded that the school authorities would decide whether he was capable of absorbing the disciplines, and their verdict was final. And if the decision was against his educability, he went out into the world to try his luck there. Nor was there any stigma attached to him because of his ineducability; after all, Carnegie had had no schooling, and several Presidents, to say nothing of Congressmen, had made the grade without benefit of formal education. Common sense supported the Jeffersonian formula of selecting for higher learning those who gave evidence of a capacity for it; the rest were, as he put it, "rubbish."

But, that was long before democracy got the upper hand and did away with this concept of the educable elite. This was inevitable. With education a governmental enterprise, and with every parent a voter, the voice of the people had to be heard. And that voice insisted on the educability of their offspring, no matter what the school authorities thought about it, and demanded of the democratically-elected politicians that they provide the facilities. So, high schools proliferated and colleges followed suit, until, at long last, it has become necessary for a boy or girl to sport a degree in order to make his or her way at jobs where education would be

a handicap. Not only that, but attendance at school has been made compulsory until the sixteenth, and in some states until the eighteenth, birthday, regardless of any interest in learning, and the current trend is to subsidize the "rubbish" through college. Everybody has to be educated.

This democratic ideal is commendable and one wishes it could be realized. But, nature enters an interposition: some children simply do not have the capacity to absorb the "best that has been thought and said in this world," and no matter how long they are exposed to this cultural stuff it does not rub off on them. They may be quick-witted, far more so than are the educable, and capable of mastering the practical affairs of life, but find the disciplines incomprehensible and boring. In their early years, when the faculties of memory and imitation are most pronounced, they can, by constant reiteration, learn the fundamentals—figuring, reading and expressing simple ideas in words. But, when it comes to analysis and synthesis, to the intellectual pursuits, they find the going hard and resent any attempt to compel them to engage in them. Nature simply has not given them the equipment.

However, the democratic spirit recognizes no natural law of differentiation in individual capacities. It rests its case on the assumption that all men are born equal and proceeds to prove it by the device of re-defining education. In the early part of the century some remnants of the classical tradition remained, in which education was held to be a process of mental training, the object being to develop the mind of the student to the full extent of its capacities; it was an individual experience, unrelated to any group, and intended to bring the best to the top. There was, to be sure, some la-

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tent hope that the educated would be able to make their way in the world of affairs, especially if they entered the professions, but the disciplines were not designed with any such utilitarian motive in mind; the high school courses, to say nothing of college curricula, were geared to the educable. But this was inconsistent with democratic egalitarianism. So, the educators, influenced by the rising voice of the demos, altered the definition of education: it became a process of utilitarian training, purely functional in character, and designed to bring about intellectual uniformity. If Latin were too difficult for some to encompass, give them a course in automobile driving in its stead; if mathematics proved tedious, substitute a course in home economics; after all, a mastery of Latin will not prove useful in their later life, and how many will ever make use of trigonometry? Above all, every student must be taught the art of getting along with his fellow students, so that all would have a full measure of the democratic spirit; individual excellence must be discouraged. Furthermore it makes no difference what is learned, so long as the student makes his daily appearance in class, week in and week out, year in and year out, until the compulsory limit is arrived at—and a diploma is accorded him. Then all will be educated, and equally.

Whether or not the ideas of Dr. Dewey were instrumental in bringing about this change of values in education is difficult to say; in all likelihood, the real cause was the democratic spirit which had got hold of the country during the latter part of the nineteenth century, and Dr. Dewey just came along at the propitious moment to give the egalitarian urge the respectability of a philosophy; if it hadn't been he, somebody else would have propounded the same or

similar ideas. It was time for a change. The idea of compulsory education for all youngsters in the rudiments of learning was rooted in Thomas Jefferson's formula, but it was not until the post-Civil War period that it blossomed in the sunshine of populism and in the rain of socialism. Even then, compulsory education was limited to imparting what every normal child is capable of mastering—the three R's. The general idea was to equip every potential citizen with the tools necessary for the discharge of his duties as a citizen, with which intellectualism has nothing to do. But then the notion of the infinite perfectibility of man through education kept gnawing at the heart of democracy, and this, fermented by the idea that all men are of equal capacities, gave rise to a demand for wider educational opportunities. If everybody were equally educated, so ran the litany, everybody would be able to reach the heights, economically, socially and, perhaps, culturally. And so came the Land Grant colleges, to feed which with fodder came an increase in the number of high schools, and junior high schools and junior colleges for those not able to meet the transition from lower to higher learning, and ultimately, an increase in the age of compulsory elementary training; in this last the democrats were aided by the unionists, who were anxious to keep the labor market free of apprentices as long as possible.

This urgency for more educational facilities for more people manifested itself long before Dr. Dewey appeared on the scene. It was inherent in the assumptions of democracy. And yet, traditions die hard; up until the advent of Dr. Dewey education in the United States, though under constant fire from the democrats, maintained its standards; this was largely due to the fact that the teachers, trained in

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the tradition, could not easily give it up. After all, education is a process of transmitting values, and the values acquired by the instructors during their youth will be the ones they transmit to their students. Even though the instructors, being by nature idealists, were succumbing to the alluring phrases of democracy, they nevertheless in their functional capacity held on to the aristocratic values in which they had been inculcated. The high school I attended had a faculty of that sort, and its regimen was severe.

Then came Dr. Dewey with his new values in education. Its primary purpose, he held, was not to develop the intellectual capacities of the individual, but rather to prepare him to take his proper place in his social environment; the curriculum must be designed to fit that end. The student should not be required to meet any given standards, but the standards should be accommodated to the student. In fact, he maintained, since there is no absolute truth, standards are meaningless, and education should concentrate on the instrumental facts of life, on the functional disciplines.

This the democrats in education were quite prepared to accept. His formula enabled them to hurdle the barrier to their urgency, the natural differences in individual capacities; it gave them the open sesame to the cave of egalitarianism. Everybody could be taught basket weaving, typing and the social graces, and if such functional subjects were introduced into the curriculum, to the exclusion of rhetoric and algebra, then everybody would be equally educated. If the purpose of education is social adjustment, then individual excellence must be minimized or discouraged, and the ideal of democracy—the egalitarian society—will be

achieved. Thus education, under the impact of Deweyism, took on a new value. This came about after I had left high school, indeed after I had graduated from college, but as I look back now I see how the germ of this new value took root in the democratic spirit which pervaded the country before I was born. Given this spirit, the change was inevitable, and Dr. Dewey's notions gave it the fillip it needed.

The more democracy the more governmental intervention. That is because the mob cannot tolerate excellence and, having political power in their hands, will use it to reduce the educable to their own level. The new value in education must be traced to the introduction of tax-supported, compulsory education during the nineteenth century; that was the beginning. To be sure, for a long time private schools, especially colleges, held on to the traditional disciplines and standards, catering to the educable elite, and by example influenced the character of public schooling. But the mob, being in the majority, and having the power of government in its hands, could not be forever gainsaid. It whittled away resistance to its demands until at long last education took on a new character; it no longer sought out the best minds for development but became a means of effecting egalitarianism.

With the democratic spirit in the ascendancy, the end result of this change in educational values can be predicted: the State will provide education for all, even through college, and will as a consequence dictate what will be taught and how. The taxing body will prescribe the courses and the courses will be designed to meet the requirements of the taxing body. Everybody will be educated, though not quite equally, since that is incompatible with the nature of

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things. But, attendance at high school, at any rate, will be compulsory and everybody will get a diploma, signifying satisfactory attendance; but some high schools will prepare its students for farming and industrial occupations, others for scientific pursuits, others for service in the government, and so on. This distribution of students will be made by governmental experts in education, according to psychological tests of one kind or another. So, too, with what will euphemistically be called "higher education." It will be well regimented. To be sure, some will get an education in spite of this democratic system; that is because they are by nature the intellectually curious; but they will be the minuscule minority of non-conformists, impelled by some inner urge to pursue their own ways in silence and obscurity.

It is characteristic of old age to hold on to the values of its youth, to laud the "good old days" to the disparagement of the present or the future. So, to me, the new value in education seems to be a deterioration. But, change is inevitable, and who can say with finality that the old was better than the new? I am inclined toward the idea of selectivity (which was more in vogue during the nineteenth century than it was when I was educated), but perhaps the new concept of mass education has virtues all its own. At any rate, the alchemy of adjustment is always at work, and as the present generation accommodates itself to the idea of egalitarianism in education, so will the coming generation make its peace with education by the State. And the present generation, when it grows old, will find fault with the new and will look back on the "good old days" with nostalgia. Everything goes "forward"—particularly in a democracy.