

## THE TERCENTENARY OF COMENIUS'S VISIT TO ENGLAND, 1592-1671.

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THE great Educator's own training was mainly in the school of hardship. Reading and writing he learned probably from his parents, and the knowledge of the Bible. In early boyhood he lost both father and mother. Through the neglect or worse of his guardians it was not till he was sixteen that he got his first taste of the Latin tongue. It was a bitter taste. He was old enough by that time to see the utter wrongness of the way they taught him Latin, making him learn by heart, in Latin, all the rules of the grammar before he knew the meaning of a single word. "By the goodness of God," he writes, "that taste bred such a thirst in me that I ceased not from that time, by all means and endeavours, to labour for the retrieving of my lost years ; and not only for myself, but for the good of others also. Therefore, I was continuously full of thoughts for the finding of some means whereby more might be influenced with the love of learning, and whereby learning itself might be made more compendious, both in the matter of charge and cost, and of the labours belonging thereto." He saw, in effect, what he was meant to do in life, and the rest of his life was spent in doing it.

He studied at Herborn and at Heidelberg. Like other poor students he travelled on foot. At Herborn he was under J. H. Alsted, a most notable and inspiring teacher, with whom he still corresponded long after ; he writes what we should call the Foreword to *The Great Didactic*. Of his Heidelberg days we know nothing except that he bought a manuscript of Copernicus—a hint that he had already a glimpse of the new light that was dawning, not through scholastic windows.

At the age of twenty-two he had still two years before ordination in the Moravian ministry, known in those days as the Bohemian Brethren or *Unitas Fratrum*. For these two years he took charge of a Moravian school and seized the opportunity to put into practice the new ideas that were ripening in his mind. Scholars in those days held in slight account the language of the common folk, as being no proper vehicle of literature. Comenius loved it, and saw how through contempt it was losing its purity. He wrote for his pupils an easier grammar and a Czech dictionary. In 1618, at the age of twenty-seven, he married and settled down as Pastor at Fulneck, acting at the same time as supervisor of the school. But unhappily that same year saw the outbreak of the Thirty Years War. In 1620 the Protestants were defeated at the White Mountain and their chief leaders were executed at Prague. Fulneck was plundered and burned. Comenius lost his books and everything he had. His wife and two children were swept away by an epidemic. All the waves and the billows went over him. For over thirty years he ate the bread of exile. As Michelet says: "He lost his country and found his country, which was the world".

Finding a refuge with the Count of Leszno (Lissa) in Poland, he addressed himself to writing the first treatise which set the Science of Education on its proper basis, *The Great Didactic*. It begins, as the Scottish Catechism begins, and every book on the science of education should begin, with the question: What is the chief end of man? Education had failed disastrously. It had to make a new start. Here it is: "Man is the highest Absolute and the most excellent of things created. The ultimate end of man is beyond this life. This life is but a preparation for eternity." He begins not with the fall of man and the doctrine of our total depravity, but with man's Divine origin and Divine destiny. In these days high authorities tell us that the end of education is to adapt man to his environment. If that is the true view, if it is the business of school to adapt our children to our present environment, what is the use of schools at all? Men can go to the Devil fast enough, without any lessons. Which is right, the horizontal way of thinking or the vertical? Everything depends upon our answer.

*The Great Didactic* is dedicated to the Rulers of the State and the Church. Education cannot be left to private initiative. The child has a right as a citizen, and as a member of the Church, to education. The State and the Church must provide it. The whole of *The Great Didactic* may be described as the Charter of Childhood, set forth in explicit terms. All children are to be "educated in common." Comenius will have no higher education reserved strictly for what we call the higher classes. He will not have any exclusion of girls. Nor does he exclude those whom we call savages. The Moravians have been known from the first as a great missionary Church. When unable to reach the slaves on the sugar plantations by any other means, their missionaries had themselves sold as slaves. We must make disciples, i.e. learners of all nations and schools must go hand in hand with the Gospel. "Add to your faith virtue and to your virtue knowledge." The combination of "Godliness and good learning" dates back to St. Peter.

When he comes to state clearly the principles of reform, Comenius justifies each step by the analogy of Nature. He was in his way a disciple of Bacon, only it was by the way of analogy, not of induction. The basis of reform is exact order. The easy must come first, then the difficult. It must proceed from the general to the particular, from the simple to the complex, from the concrete to the abstract. Again, "Each individual creature not only suffers itself to be led easily in the direction which its nature finds congenial, but is actually impelled towards the desired goal, and suffers pain if any obstacle be interposed." This education shall be conducted without blow, rigour or compulsion, as gently and pleasantly as possible, and in the most natural manner. "Just as a living body grows without any straining or forcible extension of the limbs—since, if food, care and exercise are properly supplied, the body grows and becomes strong, gradually, imperceptibly, and of its own accord—the mind, too, grows by proper nutriment and exercise, not by being stretched upon the rack." These are commonplaces to-day. They were in flat contradiction to all the practice of Comenius's contemporaries. To us they are as obvious as the Ten Commandments, but the whole Decalogue was broken in every school session by the pre-Comenius teachers.

So much for the start. He then plans the course as a whole, stage by stage, beginning with *schola materni gremii*, years one to six, the vernacular school, six to twelve, the Latin school, twelve to eighteen, and, last, the University.

The school must find room for *things* as well as words. It was senseless to learn mere words. Children must learn Nature, including their own bodies. They must learn mathematics, history, geography, civics, drawing, music. They must have physical training. This suggests an overcrowded curriculum. But Comenius was too practical a teacher to make this mistake. By adopting the right method for Latin and postponing that language until the twelfth year, he can ensure a worthwhile result in a two-years' course, instead of which the old method, with seven years, produced a result which was not worth while. Latin could not be excluded. It was the *lingua franca* of learning. But when it plunged the learner into the new language by making him learn by heart all the rules of grammar, all the declensions and conjugations and the prepositions with the cases they govern, and learn all this in Latin without understanding a word, it was a method suitable possibly for teaching parrots but not for intelligent creatures. It was the method by which Frederick Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury, was taught by his mother, but then she knew no Latin, and that was possibly the reason why the pre-Comenius teachers followed the method so faithfully. Comenius saw that a language can be learned only by using it, and he set himself to compose groups of sentences by means of which the learner would acquire vocabulary as rapidly as possible. He called his textbook *Janua linguarum reserata* (the gate of language unbarred). But the position of Latin was under Comenius definitely the second place; its function was to teach knowledge of things. That was the main aim. Latin was indispensable, not in itself, but because without it there was no knowledge of the positive sciences. By his Latin sentences the learner of Latin was acquiring knowledge of his natural environment and of himself. When the pupil had learned the whole of his *Janua* he had an outline as it were of an encyclopædia of knowledge about the world in which he lived. He had more, he had a clue by which he could follow up the pursuit of knowledge

for himself. (It is interesting to note that Thomas Arnold did something of the same kind. He set the Rugby boys to read Guizot's *History of Civilisation*, and a French botany book. He, too, was not above killing two birds with one stone.)

The outstanding feature of the Comenius School was that it dealt with things. It appealed to the senses. The plural is important. Object lesson appeal to hearing, sight and touch. All Helen Keller's education was by touch. The sense of touch was the only way to get through to her imprisoned soul: "verba sine rebus putamina sunt sine nucleo, vagina sine gladio, umbra sine corpore". But there are obvious limitations. You cannot introduce a tiger into your classrooms, even a stuffed specimen. You must have a picture. Comenius was not happy till he had an edition of *Janua* illustrated with woodcuts. It was printed at Nuremberg and called *Orbis pictus*. The boy Goethe rejoiced in that book. Probably it was the first illustrated book ever published specially for children. At any rate it was the first Children's Encyclopædia. The *Janua* gave also precepts of health, manners, and moral behaviour, much as did the copy-books of our own schooldays.

The object lesson led naturally to manual occupation, which is more than manual training. It is training also of eye, of patience, and of intellect. Mind tells the hand what it is to do and the work of the hand suggests problems to the mind. It is this wholesome reaction between mind and occupation that makes manual work also a form of liberal training. The Spens report prescribes a new Technical High School on the same level as the Language High School as a place of liberal education.

One other feature of the Comenian School. He sees the educative value of play. Elders can do much, yet children of the same age and the same manners and habits can do more. "When they talk and play together," says Comenius, "they sharpen each other more effectually. . . . It is better to play than to be idle, for during play the mind is intent on some object which often sharpens the abilities." "Children ought to be accustomed to an active life and perpetual employment." These are extracts, not from Froebel, but from Comenius's *School of Infancy*.

This leads to the greatest of all his reforms, the reform of discipline. Even in infancy his precept is "Act reasonably with a reasonable creature." The great indictment against medieval teachers was that they acted as executioners dealing with criminals. Daily and hourly they whipped the offending Adam out of them, and the result was a loathing on the part of scholars against the whole educational process. There is no reference to schools, or schoolmasters in Shakespeare which does not express hatred. The schoolboy "creeps like a snail unwillingly to school." How could it be otherwise when the birch was regarded as the tree of knowledge. Latin took up practically eight hours a day. And yet after, in many cases, ten years of this daily drudgery the great majority could not speak Latin or write Latin nor read a Latin book. Why? Because the method was perverse; so perverse that Lubinus says some wicked malign spirit "must have invented it." "Mere scullions," he says, "and camp followers can learn two or three foreign languages in as many years." The words are taken from the preface to his edition of the Greek Testament. "The schools," said Comenius, "were not *officinae hominum sed carnificinae*—not factories of men but slaughterhouses." It was the greatest of all services Comenius rendered to education that he showed up the utter futility of this barbarism, thought out the better way, and showed the right spirit of reform. He went to Nature. He asks, What is her way? What does life need for growth? Life, both vegetable and animal, needs sunlight, sun-heat. It needs rain and occasional thunder. Given these, the response is inevitable. So children respond to gentleness, cheerfulness, a dash of humour, and an occasional thunderstorm. He has no scheme of prizes appealing to their acquisitive instinct, no examinations appealing to their competitive instinct. The art of arts is to guide men—*τεχνή τεχνῶν ἀνθρώπων ἄγειν*—not to coerce. In this gentler discipline as in Latin Comenius "unbars the gate."

On the whole, what impresses one most in him, what draws out one's heart to him is his Universality. He is a member of what was probably the smallest of all the branches of the Christian Church, and certainly it was the most bitterly persecuted, for at the treaty of Westphalia which brought to an end the Thirty

Years War, there was toleration for all other Protestants but not for the Bohemian Brothers. But his outlook is the widest, his love is for all men. He has all the time, what Ruysbroeck the meditative calls, "a widespreading love to all in common." When Comenius came to London just 300 years ago, he met there in Hartlib's circle John Winthrop the younger, son of the Massachusetts Governor. They had much talk about the native Red Indians. Comenius sketched out for him a whole plan, not only for converting the Indians, but bringing them through education into the full status of Christian civilisation. Dr. R. Y. Young has written a book on this visit to London, setting out in full the documentary evidence with necessary annotations. The result was that Winthrop took back with him Comenius's text-books and in the newly founded Harvard College in Cambridge, Massachusetts, there was a substantially built Hostel for fifty Indian students. Note that Harvard College was built of timber, but the Hostel of brick. More about the London group presently.

Another instance of his Catholicity. It came later. A patron called Lewis de Geer has engaged him and provided him with others to help him in the reorganisation of the schools of Sweden and the provision of new text-books. He is by this time the Chief Bishop of the Bohemian Brothers. He is invited as such to attend a conference to discuss the possibility of healing the great breach between the Catholic Church and the Reformed Churches. He informs his patron and says he feels he must go. "No," says de Geer, "I am paying you to provide text-books for Swedish schools and I expect you to stick at your job." There we have the contrast. Lewis de Geer was a wholesale trader, but he has what Aristotle calls the retail dealer's mind. Similarly, our English Mulcaster considers at length how the number of educated people is to be kept down. It is still a typically English attitude. Do they not ask in the Clubs even to-day: "Where in the world are we going to get our kitchen maids with all this education?" Comenius's *Didactic* insists on the Universality of education. The school is a place where all children are to be taught all subjects with all thoroughness (*ubi omnes omnia omnino doceantur*).

Bacon, "the first of the Moderns," found the Universities of

Europe too narrow for the new philosophy. They were in reality not much more than professional schools for the Law and the Church. Solomon's House that Bacon dreamed of in *New Atlantis* for the generating and propagating of the new Sciences must have a wider scope. "The condition and endowment must be such as may content the ablest man to appropriate his whole labour and continue his whole age in that function and attendance." This was the same idea which in a form less fantastic but more business-like possessed the mind and caught the enthusiasm of Comenius. He thought of knowledge in terms as wide as the world. He foresaw a great new accession to the sum of human knowledge, far more than any single mind could cope with. This sum of knowledge he called *Pansophia*. How was this new mass of knowledge to be classified and all its channels to be co-ordinated? When he talked this over with Hartlib and his circle of friends in London, Dr. Williams, Bishop of Lincoln (shortly to be Archbishop of York), the Hon. Robert Boyle, John Pym, one of the leaders of Parliament, John Selden, and others, he found eager response. They saw the need of some Central Authority, a kind of G.H.Q. to plan the campaign against Ignorance and prevent overlapping and confusion. What a chaos of terminological inexactitude there was sure to be if it were not taken in hand. This Central Authority he called the *Pansophic College*. His London friends thought he was the man to shoulder this Atlas-like world burden. It so happened that the Government had on its hands the College of Chelsea. It was founded and endowed by the last will and testament of a Dean. But there were disputed points and lawyers were not missing their chance. The idea of Parliament was to appropriate the whole foundation for carrying out the new scheme for the growth of Natural Science. But the Civil War broke out. Comenius had to leave England after nine months' stay. Not having any other source of income, he had to accept the task assigned him by his patron aforesaid, Lewis de Geer. That task was the reorganisation of the schools of Sweden and the preparation of the necessary text-books. It was a bitter disappointment to Comenius. He thought that his work for the schools was so far completed that others could well carry it out on the right lines. His text-books were



used in more than half the schools of Europe, and translated into eighteen different languages. His *Great Didactic* had been written eighteen years before and had put education for the first time on a scientific basis. To go back to the thorny and tedious business of writing text-books cost him an effort. But he bowed to necessity. "Limits we did not set condition what we do." It is more than probable that this involved a great loss to humanity. We cannot say. But at any rate the talks in London did not dissolve altogether into thin air. They had their issue in 1662 when the Royal Society received its charter and the leading men of science found a common centre. The foundation of similar societies in Paris and Berlin and in other countries started a great system of mutual correspondence, a correspondence carried on in war as well as in peace. But the World University is not yet. Rabindranath Tagore and Mr. Brenchara Branford, with his *Mundaneum*, have cherished the dream. When I saw something of Columbia University in New York, with its thirty-six thousand graduates yearly of all nations and tongues, I thought of Comenius. I hope they will be thinking of him at this Centenary. He made the great renunciation, and it redounds to his moral greatness that he did not break out into self-pity or any Byronic outburst against the injustice of Providence. He went on writing and teaching to the end. The number of his publications is over one hundred and twenty-seven, most of them written in Latin.

In the last of his writings, *Unum Necessarium*, he writes, "I thank God I have been all my life a man of aspirations . . . for the longing after good, however it spring up in the heart, is always a rill flowing from the fountain of all good—from God." A memorable word from a memorable man! The great teacher had learned *the* great lesson.