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HONOUR

about anything else, and I cannot hope to do better than my fellow amateurs. I have written about Holt because I was there and therefore have known it from the inside, but any other school would have done as well. If I have criticized certain things, it is not because I think Holt is worse than other schools — in many respects it is probably considerably in advance of them — but because at a time like the present when the world into which our young emerge is bound to be a very difficult one, it is particularly important that they should get the best start we can give them, and too many suggestions are better than none. I offer mine for what they are worth.

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[Kettering]

BY H. E. BATES

IN a recent and well-known novel the principal male character — hardly a hero — is in the early part of the book a master at a newly-built grammar-school in the Midlands; the author has sketched-in the school, the common-room and the raw provincial town deftly and realistically — so well, in fact, that when I read the book I had no difficulty in recognizing the school as my own, the town as the one to which I had travelled by the early morning train for five years and the common-room as the one to which I had so often gone with a miserable sense of sickness and doom.

Looking back I find it hard to disentangle and arrange in comprehensible order the whole impressions of those years. But I remember the beginning, the first day, well enough. I am not quite sure, but I dare say my mother had bought me a new suit, ready-made, and that I had been made to clean my boots the night before, and to see that my season-ticket was safe in my waistcoat pocket. My parents were decidedly not well off and they were no doubt very pleased and proud when I won a scholarship entitling me to the benefits of higher education. I dare say they may have had vague and happy dreams of my becoming a cashier in a bank or a traveller in leather or

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perhaps even a school teacher, and I did not tell them that I had already decided to become a farmer, or failing that, a professional footballer. Even if I had told them I dare say they would not have minded. They were very proud of me. My grandfather was even prouder. It was he who was a farmer. 'The boy's a masterpiece!' he would say, taking off my cap. 'Look at his head! There's a head for you! There's something else in that head besides ticks.' No wonder that I too wanted to become a farmer. With a head like that it was hard for me to believe that I could benefit much from a higher education.

In truth I was very sick and very nervous when the first day arrived. I had been very happy at an elementary school, where life was crude and exciting and where there was no homework and no punishment except the cane. The school was in the heart of the roughest quarter of a raw industrial town. Almost every day there would be ructions, and those ructions had rules as strict as the laws governing a Greek tragedy. They would begin with the schoolmaster questioning a boy and this would be followed by the boy cheeking the schoolmaster and this by the boy being called to the front of the class. The second act began with the boy refusing to obey and this would be followed by the schoolmaster seizing the boy by the scruff of his neck and dragging him out and producing the cane. After that the boy would be ordered to hold out his hand. He would hold it out, the schoolmaster would raise his cane, the cane would descend, the boy whipping his hand safely behind his back as the

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stroke fell. At that point the schoolmaster would lose his temper. Up would go the cane and come down again in a mad smash on the boy's shoulders. The boy, whimpering with rage, would kick the master's shins until the bone rang hollow. This sublime and sensational drama would go on until, as though warned by some telegraphic magic, the boy's mother would appear, rolling up her blouse-sleeves, to avenge her offspring. The fury of the tiger defending its young is a mild emotion beside the fury with which a shoemaker's wife of 1910 would defend her son. And I have never been able to swallow, since that time, the notion that women were altogether the passive and gentler half of humanity.

Life at the elementary school had therefore been very vigorous and sensational. It would, I knew, be very different at the grammar-school. I had not read the school-stories of popular writers for nothing. I knew very well that the masters would wear black gowns and possibly mortar-boards too. The prefects would have studies in which they fried sausages and drank beer on the quiet in the middle of the night and those boys whose parents were a little better off would wear Eton collars and the little black jackets my grandfather called bum-starvers. I should have to learn Latin and French and a new kind of English in which words like cads and rotters, and expressions like bally bounders and beastly fellows, played a large part. Life was going to be on a higher plane altogether. I was prepared for that. What worried me was that a preparatory course in a crude industrial elementary

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school was hardly the best sort of training for this new educational flight. I was very nervous and my stomach kept turning watery and sick. If I had any consolation at all it was the memory of my grandfather's words.

The first day was a great shock. In the train a sinister gentleman with a club-foot and very black eyebrows and a dark smear of moustache asked me my name, my mother's name, my father's name, what my father did, whether I smoked, ordered me to call him sir, and then proceeded to knock me flat on my back in the carriage seat, leap on top of me and chastise my behind with a ruler. When he had finished I stood up and he knocked me down again. It was rather like the fight with the pale young gentleman in *Great Expectations*. When I recovered I was dusty and dishevelled and the sandwiches my mother had packed up for my dinner were squashed. Even so I was the neatest and best dressed boy in the carriage — so much so that I felt conspicuous. As though thinking this too another boy proceeded to knock me down, and a great many feet trampled on me and my behind was belted with a leather strap from the carriage window.

It was a severe, but not an extreme shock. I clung to my illusions. Life was going to be higher and different — there was no possible doubt of that. Horseplay and belting new boys' behinds was all very well out of school, but I knew that life in the school itself was going to be extremely serious and high-minded. I believe I hoped it was going to be aristocratic too.

At school, therefore, the shock was even greater. The school was newly built, of fresh red brick, not at

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all beautiful, and stood in a large asphalt playground. It was a little grander, but not much, than the school I had left. There were no quadrangles and no vast playing-fields of lovely grass with avenues of quiet elms. Inside there was a prevailing odour of floor-polish. The class-rooms seemed very like the class-rooms I had always known. The masters certainly wore black gowns but none of them had mortar-boards and none of the boys wore bum-starvers. I noticed that there were very few masters. It was the year 1916, a few months later than the opening chapters of the novel I have mentioned, and the masters who had become soldiers had been replaced by what I can only describe as females. These creatures were divided into two classes: the repressed and terrified, and the masculine and horsey. The subject they taught automatically became the subjects I hated. Looking back now, I know that, under other conditions, they would have been the subjects I should naturally have loved.

I was of course a clever boy. Hadn't I won a scholarship and hadn't my grandfather pointed out the extraordinary size of my head? Hadn't I diddled the elementary school-teachers with catchy questions about the magnetic pole and the lost tribes of Israel? There was no doubt that in due course I should become something very much out of the ordinary, such as a school-teacher. It was as good as settled.

It was a singular blow for me therefore when I began to come out very much nearer the bottom of the class than the top. My knowledge of the old subjects seemed utterly inadequate and all the new ones

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bewildered me. I began to be very unhappy. I wanted in particular to learn French, so that when I went to stay on my grandfather's farm I could dazzle him and whoever else might be listening by referring to the ripening wheat and the old mare in a foreign language. 'The boy's a masterpiece. Speaks French, if you'll believe me. Now let Harry hear you say, "The old nag wants a mite o' bread"', in the French lingo. Go on.' That was the sort of thing I wanted to bring off. That was the point to which my so-called education had brought me. It had not only made me swollen-headed but had turned the values of things completely upside down. What I ought to have done, and I see it clearly now, was to have gone to the French master and dazzled him by saying: 'Sky looks a bit thick in the clear, master. Don't you think we ought to get that bit o' barley knocked down? We don't want to be in the cart,' which would have been much more of a foreign language to him than French was to the men in the farm.

Looking back, I see this language master very clearly now. At that time he was almost the only master left in the school: he was extremely fat and soft-fleshed and I can hear him now speaking in a voice, which grew shriller as he grew more angry. No doubt he was very clever: he had letters after his name and wore a pretty pink-lined hood to his gown on speech days. But what did he teach us? It took him weeks to make us see what we ought to have seen in a few hours.

Some of the women were even worse. Those who

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were not as sour as crabs were often aggressive and ill-tempered. Anything masculine was either to be feared or despised. They, too, like the French master, taught us nothing. Only one woman, perhaps, afforded us any real education: she was a finely made but not good-looking woman, and she would stand before the class and caress her large breasts slowly backwards and forwards with her fingertips and tell us at the same time that in a right-angled triangle the sum of the squares on the two sides adjacent to the right-angle was equal to the square on the remaining side.

I begin to see now why I was so unhappy. For the first three years in that school I was not educated but repressed and the atmosphere was strained and abnormal. No doubt the war was responsible. As for my illusions, my fancies that life would be higher, different, and perhaps more aristocratic, they had all, very early on, been dissipated. Not only were there no boarders and thus no studies in which prefects would fry their midnight sausages, but we were, for the most part, the sons of lower-class people, shopkeepers, poor clergymen, shoemakers, engineers, commercial-travellers and so on, and almost all of us spoke the crude bastard dialect of that Midland district. Not that we thought of ourselves like that. The higher education had made us feel that we were very much above ourselves.

So I arrived at the fifth form and the age of fifteen without being much better off, except in self-conceit, than when I had begun. I could hardly have asked

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for a bed in French, I don't think I had read a novel of Dickens, I detested poetry, and though I could prove Pythagoras I didn't properly know the functions of my own body. But I was a good footballer and a fast sprinter.

I believe I still thought of becoming a professional footballer or a farmer or perhaps both when the war ended and the masters began to drift back again and replace the females. But I longed most of all to leave the place and never see it again. I was very sensitive and quick to be hurt, and the war-time masters and mistresses, as though considering that a defect, seemed to detest me.

Then, quite suddenly, a miracle took place. Going back for the autumn term of 1919 we found that the English mistress — a Scotswoman — had been replaced by a young infantry officer who had come home from France without several of his fingers and with his face atrociously mutilated and his legs and arms stiff from wounds. He proceeded to knock us, mentally, all of a heap. Suckled at the vinegary breasts of those repressed and impossible mistresses, we could hardly appreciate at first his tone of quiet, almost melancholy understanding. I remember that, as he set us an essay on Shakespeare, he seemed very tired. 'Don't tell me he was born in 1564. I know that. And don't tell me he wrote *Macbeth*. I know that too.' He treated us with extreme detachment but with extreme kindness, and we were very much impressed.

I particularly was impressed, and I believe I showed

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it by writing an essay on Shakespeare without mentioning Shakespeare. At any rate the new master was pleased with it. Foolish as it may seem, I date my literary career from that moment. Within a few weeks I was writing my first poems and short stories, I knew a good deal of English poetry by heart, and life began suddenly to be higher and different in a way that I had never suspected. I no longer wanted to be a professional footballer, though later I very nearly became one, but an author.

Now, when I look back on the utterly useless and dreary years preceding that simple miracle, I begin to feel almost furious — furious with the repressed females with their provincialism and their petty feminine jealousies, with the school itself, its newness, its unnecessary attempts at conformation with public school standards, the constant talk of tradition and the honour and good name of the school, with the little personal tyrannies, with the examination system, with the whole complete system that enslaves masters and boys alike by its insidiously foolish rules and conventions. When I first read Shaw's jibes at the scholastic system of this country I was inclined to be shocked; not until this moment, on looking them up again, did I realize how true they are.

And so, in 1919, I began to feel my feet, or more truly my spirit. My position in the form consequently began to deteriorate and I got into the bad books of the headmaster. But I was alive and I felt extremely spirited and happy. I began to feel also an utter contempt for rules and regulations. What had I

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gained from them? In four years by doing as I was told and thinking as I was supposed to think, I had learned nothing. My Latin was atrocious, my French ludicrous, my chemistry quite childish. And the fault was not my own. Most of the masters, products of the same system to which I was being subjected, were hopeless, teaching by rule of thumb without a spark of intuition or imagination. They seemed disillusioned and bored, and no doubt they were underpaid. One or two of them were extremely young and undeveloped and one of them was old enough to have been my grandfather.

I see this old man very clearly now, without any effort of imagination. He was the Latin master, but at odd times he taught Scripture too. He was a short, rather portly man, with a bald head and a stiff white beard, altogether a trifle Teutonic in appearance. He was really a charming old man. He was a little deaf, he had some sort of defect, possibly a partial cataract, in one eye, and the lids of his eyes seemed to be stuck to his face by small dabs of greyish-pink putty. He suffered from indigestion and perhaps because of it he fasted once a week, I think on Thursdays, and once or twice a term he was seized with an attack of jaundice, his skin turning the sickly yellow colour of some over-ripe pear. We baited him unmercifully and inexorably, so much so that as I look back I could almost weep for the part I played in that unthinking cruelty.

There is no sort of trick known to schoolboys that we did not play on him. We used to sit occasionally

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with lighted candles on the seats of the desks, so that the whole room was filled with a soft effulgence and an acrid stink. I am to this day very good at blowing out a candle quickly and snuffing its smoking wick with my fingers. We translated Virgil from a common crib, making realistic mistakes and asking trickily innocent questions at the more embarrassing moments. But it was during the lessons in Holy Scripture that life became, in our eyes, worth living: for then we could derive much pleasure from asking for some greater light on the history of Bathsheba or some explanation of Saul's strange action in appropriating the foreskins of his enemies. To our minds, such is the damnable state of education in general and of sexual education in particular, all that seemed very clever.

And so I learnt nothing of Latin and very little of the richest prose in my own language, though very occasionally the beautiful sonority of the prose of Isaiah or Ruth would touch me very deeply. The old man forgave me my hopelessness at Latin, but not my neglect of the Scriptures. He saw in me, for some reason, the makings of a writer. 'Ah, Bates, Bates, you with your gifts,' he said to me once, when my marks in Scripture were no more than nine per cent and my marks in literature nearer a hundred, 'You above all, should combine the two.' It is a sad reflection on his scholarship and his labours that that is the only thing I ever remember his having taught me.

Indeed, looking back, I don't remember anything that was taught me at that establishment of higher education, unless it is simple arithmetic, which I

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suppose I knew before I went there, and the foundations of what I know of English literature. Yet I passed examinations with honours, gaining illustrious commendation in subjects that have since been of not the slightest use to me and which I have now forgotten. I suppose, if I could ask them, the majority of my contemporaries there have forgotten them too. This is a strange reflection on the whole prevailing system of education, a system which, in its general tendency and effect, I think an absurd and useless one now, and which I rather think I thought just as absurd and useless fifteen years ago. At any rate when the headmaster took me aside and for almost the first time in five years spoke to me like a human being and asked me if I wouldn't seriously consider becoming a schoolmaster, I refused like a shot.

Thirty years before they had asked my father the same question. And he had answered exactly as I had done, but with the addition of a comment which does him the greatest credit. 'All very well,' he said in effect, 'but I've got my living to earn.'

I must have recalled this, consciously or unconsciously, when I also refused, and I must have had as a further reason for refusal the beginnings of my contempt for schools and scholarship. That refusal seems to me now one of the most sensible acts of my life. For at any age when I should have still have been in the sixth form I was doing something that another fifty years at the school could not have taught me; I was trying to observe and study human character and human relationships and to put my first impres-

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sions about those things on paper. In another year or two, when I might still have been under the dominion of schoolmasters disguised as professors (professing what? I sometimes wonder) I had taught myself enough about human psychology and the art of writing to be able to write my first novel and destroy it and write another. Whatever the merits of the books themselves may have been, I was free — I had escaped. I was doing at last what I wanted to do, and not, as I had been doing for so many years, what I had been told to do and what I had been told was best for me.

It was not, indeed, until I left the school that my education began.