

Life of a Schoolmaster in Belgium

By Ivan Louis

I WAS smoking a pipe with M. Lheureux. M. Lheureux is the schoolmaster in the little village of X. He is in his forties and his greeting is as simple as it is friendly. One feels at once that he is a man matured by experience; and certainly twenty years' continuous contact with the most varied types of people have given him the chance to observe, to reflect, and to inquire into the secrets of the human heart. But although his hair is greying, M. Lheureux remains young: living continually among children, cut off in school hours from our material worries, he still has the unspoilt fire of youthful enthusiasm within him although it burns with a more tranquil flame.

A pleasant smile makes the Schoolmaster's features look younger whenever he speaks of his student days. He has happy memories of the Training College. There, from 15 to 19, in an atmosphere of hard work, he acquired the essentials of general culture and professional knowledge; there he began to understand the importance, the nobility of his task; there his adolescent's restless eagerness encountered the man he was to take as his model: M. Lheureux recalls with feeling the memory of the French master or the instructor in educational method.

Brought up in the calm but somewhat close atmosphere of the residential college, the young master was afterwards to make the acquaintance of a sterner school: the army. His military service gives M. Lheureux the chance to strengthen his character (must he not be strong among the weak?), to smooth off the rough corners, to practice devotion to duty.

At last M. Lheureux lays down his rifle and his boots with relief. He is eager to devote his life to children between the ages of 6 and 12. He wonders anxiously where he will carry out his mission. What surroundings will provide him with the opportunity to give the best of himself? M. Lheureux consults the newspapers, his training college, the inspectors. Gradually, the enthusiastic young teacher is going to acquire a new companion hitherto almost unknown to him: the virtue of patience. He gets his first opportunity. He must bestir himself, write, meet with disappointments before finding a temporary post — for there are very few who obtain permanent employ-

ment at once. M. Lheureux will therefore teach in several schools: two weeks here, two months there, and these changes will present many problems to be wisely dealt with. The spirited young man will grow wiser and more adaptable and will work out his own methods among the many from which he can choose.

Finally, a good opportunity occurs. Armed with his diploma, recommendations gathered from here, there and everywhere, M. Lheureux begins his round of the communal council of X. This requires great tact. The people whose votes he is seeking are peasants, but they are shrewd and not easily duped by appearances; fine speeches hardly affect them; they want a man who will make men of their sons. So the applicant waits in fear and trembling for the reply to the application he has worded with such care.

At X., where M. Lheureux is finally allowed to settle, the children of the village and the neighboring hamlets attend a little co-educational, one-teacher school. In winter, a fine big stove provides gentle warmth for numb fingers; in the good weather, flower-beds, rambler roses and a model garden make the surroundings cheerful for the country-children. The classroom is filled with flowers; its walls are decorated with maps and pictures reflecting the healthy, happy activity of a veritable bee-hive where each works according to his ability.

Many questions are on the tip of my tongue.

"Am I right in thinking, M. Lheureux, that the tasks given to present-day school-children are very different from those we had to do thirty years ago?"

My companion smiles. I am not the first, he says, to put that question to him. Belgian primary teaching has undergone profound changes since the appearance of the new study plan in 1936. It faithfully reflects the ideas of Dewey, Claparede and, above all, of our great educationalist, Decroly. It especially emphasizes the need for interest as the standard relationship between the subject and the object; it preaches the value of surroundings able to make education "a drawing-out and not a putting-in." To this end it requires that teaching should be based in the first instance on environment and that it should fit in with the evolution of the child's thinking pro-

cesses which move from the concrete to the abstract, from the particular to the general, from syncretism to synthesis by way of analysis. A child's mind is at first only at home on the sensory-motory level: "Homo faber," as Bergson put it; then it moves gropingly towards the plane of verbal intelligence or discourse: "Homo sapiens," to quote the same philosopher. Curiosity, fed by the active observation of reality, gradually extends towards that which is not directly accessible in time and space; little by little, the work of association in time and space will play an increasingly important role and an ever greater call will be made on documentation. Such a method necessarily relies on the child: it takes account of his experience, his language. From another point of view, the school is the pupil's home: he is interested in its decoration, in the smooth running of all its parts: library, orchestra, garden, discipline. With this in mind, the pupils are entrusted with duties which give them responsibilities and call on their initiative. Much more could be said about this. Collaboration among pupils (which was once regarded as a minor crime!) is now urged and hence team-work, school cooperative activities. All forms of self expression are very much encouraged: pupils' meetings, a school printing press, inter-school exchanges, free drawing. Noteworthy, too, is the famous global method of teaching reading, which is only workable in such an environment as the one all too briefly outlined above.

Another question comes naturally to mind. "How can the class be organized so as to provide spiritual food for pupils varying so greatly in age and, hence, in all other respects?"

When I left the Training College, M. Lheureux tells me, I would have been hard put to answer you: practice, ability and much application are needed to run a one-teacher school smoothly. For a long time, a rather over-simplified solution was accepted: pupils were divided into four groups: first year, second year, third and fourth, fifth and sixth. In the light of what we now know of children's psychological development, it would often be better to divide the classes as follows: first year, second and third, fourth and fifth, sixth. It goes without saying that a hard and fast rule in this matter might do much harm: sometimes one solution must be adopted, sometimes another. It is clear that an object lesson for different years or a text drawn up collectively will not be used in the same way in the second as in the third year. The development of this idea would require a long dissertation and what has been said here hardly does more than broach the question.

Another vital problem, continues M. Lheureux, is the art of keeping everyone both busy and interested. The two cannot be separated without causing disorder and lack of discipline — unless the master becomes

a policeman. This last contingency would be fatal to the moral training of the children: they would not accept it willingly but would merely pay token homage to authority. One of the major concerns of the master of a one-teacher school is to put everyone happily to work. With this aim in view, a good teacher will make every effort to provide his pupils with a library within their grasp; used by all, it has a great importance for pupils of the fourth, fifth and sixth grades, whose mental development demands inquiries reaching beyond their immediate experience. The school printing shop will give everyone, especially the youngest, innumerable opportunities to learn such things as order, dexterity, taste and spelling; through group work and exchanges it will provide useful chances for social training. Again, we should note the numerous questionnaires drawn up by the master for his pupils; fortunately, duplicators have been introduced into each class-room. The questionnaires or syllabuses serve to guide the inexperienced pupil preparing dictation or a history, geography, grammar or reading lesson. Thanks to the syllabus, one can even find a whole class at work on the same object lesson: the teacher talks with the little ones, the bigger pupils, either alone or in groups, carry out research or make measurements, guided by the master's far-seeing presence in the form of the questionnaire. We also have card-indexes. These enable quick students to broaden their culture or go on with independent research while the slower pupils go methodically over a lesson which they have not fully understood. In the same way, a number of carefully-chosen educational games play a useful part, particularly at the lower level, in the "education to measure" which Clapardé valued. It will be seen that the master at a one-teacher school resorts to a modified Daltonian method. As the pupil grows up, more and more is left to his initiative and more independent work is asked of him. Is this not an ideal preparation for life?

"But to organize the class activities for the day must demand a great deal of work from you, M. Lheureux?"

"It must be admitted that our profession requires disinterestedness as much as idealism. The same pupils will be there for six years so it is useless to go on using the old centers of interest: new ones are needed or, at any rate, the old ones must be presented in a new form. Careful preparation is therefore necessary each day. Nor is this daily work enough by itself: the pupil's interest must be taken into account. They sometimes ask excellent questions which make the work take an unexpected turn. The teacher who does not want to find himself completely at a loss must keep abreast of culture: he must read, think and keep himself well-informed if he is not to fall into a mere routine."