

A Great Teacher-Pioneer:

Sanderson of Oundle

I. SANDERSON THE MAN

OF all the men I have met—and I have now had a fairly long and active life and have met a very great variety of interesting people—one only has stirred me to a biographical effort. This one exception is F. W. Sanderson for many years the headmaster of Oundle School. I think him beyond question the greatest man I have ever known with any degree of intimacy, and it is in the hope of conveying to others something of my sense not merely of his importance but of his peculiar genius and the rich humanity of his character, that I am setting out to write about him. He was in himself a very delightful mixture of subtlety and simplicity, generosity, adventurousness, imagination and steadfast purpose, and he approached the general life of our time at such an angle as to reflect the most curious and profitable lights upon it. To tell his story is to reflect upon all the main educational ideas of the last half century and to revise our conception of the process and purpose of the modern community in relation to education. For Sanderson had a mind like an octopus, it seemed always to have a tentacle free to reach out beyond what was already held, and his tentacles grew and radiated further and further. Before his end he had come to a vision of the school as a centre for the complete reorganization of civilized life.

I knew him personally only during the last eight years of his life; I met him for the first time in 1914 when I was proposing to send my sons to his school. But our thoughts and interests drew us very close to one another, I never missed an opportunity of meeting and talking to him, and I was the last person he spoke to before his sudden death. He was sixty-six years of age when he died. Those last eight years were certainly the richest and most productive of his whole career; he grew most in those years; he travelled furthest. I think I saw all the best of him. It is, I think, no disadvantage to have known him only in his boldest and most characteristic phase. It saves me from confusion between his maturer and his earlier phases. He was a much stratified man. Phrases took him and held him for a time and then gave place to other phrases. A careful student of his work would be able to tell within a year or so, the date of anything he wrote or said, because of these fossil-like indications. He had grown steadfastly all his life, he had shaken off many habitual inhibitions and freed himself from once necessary restraints and limitations. He would go discreet-

ly while his convictions accumulated and then break forward very rapidly. He had a way of leaving people behind, and if I had fallen under his spell earlier, I too might have been left far behind. He was, I recall, a rock-climber; he was a mental rock-climber also and though he was very wary of recalcitrance, there were times when his pace became so urgent that even his staff and his own family were left tugging, breathless and perplexed, at the rope.

Out of a small country grammar-school he created something more suggestive of those great modern teaching centres of which our world stands in need than anything else that has yet been attempted. By all ordinary standards the Oundle School of his later years was a brilliant success; it prospered amazingly, there was an almost hopeless waiting-list of applicants; boys had to be entered five years ahead; but successful as it was, it was no more than a sketch and demonstration of the great schools that are yet to be. I saw my own sons get an education there better than I had ever dared hope for them in England, but from the first my interest in the intention and promise of Oundle went far beyond its working actualities. And all the educational possibilities that I had hitherto felt to be unattainable dreams, matters of speculation, things a little too extravagant even to talk about in our dull age, I found being pushed far towards realization by this bold, persistent, humorous and most capable man.

Let me first try to give you a picture of his personality as he lives in my memory. Then I will try to give an account of his beginnings, as far as I have been able to learn about them, and so we will come to our main theme, Sanderson contra Mundum, the schoolmaster who set out to conquer the world. For, as I shall show, that and no less was what he was trying to do in the last years of his life.

"Ruddy" and "jolly" are the adjectives that come first to mind when I think of describing him. He had been a slender energetic young man his early photographs witness; but long before I met him he had become plump and energetic, with a twinkling appreciation for most of the good things of life. His complexion had a reddish fairness; he had well-modelled features, thick eyebrows and a thick moustache touched with gray, and he wore spectacles through and over and beside which his active eyes took stock of you. About his eyes were kindly wrinkles and generally I remember him always as smiling—often with a touch of roguery

in the smile. Quick movements of his head caused animating flashes of his glasses. He was carrying a little too much body for his heart and that made him short of breath. His voice was in his chest, there was a touch of his native Northumbria in his accent and he had a habit of speaking in incomplete sentences with a frequent use of the interrogative form. His manner was confidential; he would bend towards his hearer and drop his voice a little. "Now what do you think of —?" he would say, or "I've been thinking of —" so and so. At times his confidential manner became endearingly suggestive of a friendly conspirator. This, as yet, he seemed to say, was not for too careless a publication. You and he understood, but those other fellows,—they were difficult fellows. It might not be practicable to attempt everything at once.

That reservation, that humorous discretion is very essential in my memory of him. It is essential to the whole educational situation of the world. He was an exceptionally bold and creative man and he was a schoolmaster, and that is perhaps as near as one can come to a complete incompatibility of quality and conditions. In no part of our social life is dull traditionalism so powerfully entrenched as it is in our educational organization. We have still to realize the evil of mental heaviness in scholastic concerns. We take, very properly, the utmost precautions to exclude men and women of immoral character not only from actual teaching but also from any exercise of educational authority. But no one ever makes the least objection to the far more deadly influences of stupidity and unteachable ignorance. Our conceptions of morality are still grossly physical. The heavier and slower a man's mind seems to be, the more addicted he is to intellectual narcotics, the more people trust him as a schoolmaster. He will "stay put."

A timid obstructiveness is the atmosphere in which almost all educational effort has to work and schoolmasters are denied a liberty of thought and speech conceded to every other class of respectacle men. They must still be mealy-mouthed about Darwin, fatuously conventional in politics and emptily orthodox in religion. If they stimulate their boys they must stimulate as a brass trumpet does without words or ideas. They may be great leaders of men—provided they lead backwards or nowhither. Sanderson in his latter days broke into unexampled freedom, but for the greater part of his life he was—like most of his profession—"wading hips-deep in fools," and equally resolved to work out his personal impulse and retain the great opportunities that the governing body of Oundle School had, almost unwittingly, put into his hands. He was therefore not only a great revolutionary but something of a Vicar of Bray. A large part of the amusing

subtlety of his personality was the result of the balanced course he had to pursue. In all he did, in all he said, he was feeling his way. No other schoolmaster—and there must be many a rebellious heart lying still in the graves of dead schoolmasters and many a stifled rebel in the schoolrooms of today—no other schoolmaster has ever felt his way so discreetly, so far and, at last, so triumphantly.

I remember as a very characteristic thing that he said one day when I asked for his opinion of a particularly progressive and hopeful addition to his board of governors;—"He does not know much about schools yet but he will learn. Oundle will teach him." And in his last great lecture, he flung out a general "aside"—that lecture was full of astonishing "asides": "I turned round on the boys and the parents;" he said;—"both are my business."

Never was schoolmaster so emancipated as he in his latter years from the ancient servility of the pedagogue. Not for him, the handing on of mellow traditions and genteel gestures of the mind, not for him the obedient administration of useful information to employer's sons by the docile employee. He saw the modern teacher in university and school plainly for what he has to be, the anticipator, the planner and the foundation-maker of the new and greater order of human life that arises now visibly amidst the decaying structures of the old.

H. G. WELLS.

(To be continued)

Any Woman

When there is nothing left but darkness
And the day is like a leaf
Fallen onto sodden grasses,
You have earned a subtle grief.

Never let them take it from you,
Never let them come and say:
Night is made of black gauze; moonlight
Blows the filmy dark away.

You have a right to know the thickness
Of the night upon your face,
To feel the inky blue of nothing
Drift like ashes out of space.

You have a right to lift your fingers
And stare in pity at your hands
That are the exquisite frail mirrors
Of all the mind misunderstands.

Your hand, potent in portrayal,
Falls of its own weight to rest
In a quiet curve of sorrow
On the beating of your breast.

HAZEL HALL.