

FIRST YEAR AT HARROW

Sir Winston S. Churchill

I had scarcely passed my twelfth birthday when I entered the inhospitable regions of examinations, through which for the next seven years I was destined to journey. These examinations were a great trial to me. The subjects which were dearest to the examiners were almost invariably those I fancied least. I would have liked to have been examined in history, poetry and writing essays. The examiners, on the other hand, were partial to Latin and mathematics. And their will prevailed. Moreover, the questions which they asked on both these subjects were almost invariably those to which I was unable to suggest a satisfactory answer. I should have liked to be asked to say what I knew. They always tried to ask what I did not know. When I would have willingly displayed my knowledge, they sought to expose my ignorance. This sort of treatment had only one result; I did not do well in examinations.

This was especially true of my Entrance Examination to Harrow. The Headmaster, Mr. Welldon, however, took a broadminded view of my Latin prose: he showed discernment in judging my general ability. This was the more remarkable, because I was found unable to answer a single question in the Latin paper. I wrote my name at the top of the page. I wrote down the number of the question 'I'. After much reflection I put a bracket round it thus '(I)'. But thereafter I could not think of anything connected with it that was either relevant or true. Incidentally there arrived from nowhere in particular a blot and several smudges. I gazed for two whole hours at this sad spectacle: and then merciful ushers collected my piece of foolscap with all the others and carried it up to the Headmaster's table. It was from these slender indications of scholarship that Mr. Welldon drew the conclusion that I was worthy to pass into Harrow. It is very much to his credit. It showed that he was a man capable of looking beneath the surface of things: a man not dependent upon paper manifestations. I have always had the greatest regard for him.

In consequence of his decision, I was in due course placed in the third, or lowest, division of the Fourth, or bottom. The names of the new boys were printed in the School List in alphabetical order and as my correct name, Spencer-Churchill, began with an 'S', I gained no more advantage from the alphabet than from the wider sphere of letters. I was in fact only two from the bottom of the whole school; and these two, I regret to say, disappeared almost immediately through illness or some other cause.

I continued in this unpretentious situation for nearly a year. However, by being so long in the lowest form I gained an immense advantage over the cleverer boys. They all went on to learn Latin and Greek and splendid things like that. But I was taught English. We were considered such dunces that we could learn only English. Mr. Somervell—a most delightful man, to whom my debt is great—was charged with the duty of teaching the stupidest boys the

most disregarded thing – namely, to write mere English. He knew how to do it. He taught it as no one else has ever taught it. Not only did we learn English parsing thoroughly, but we also practised continually English analysis. Mr. Somervell had a system of his own. He took a fairly long sentence and broke it up into its components by means of black, red, blue and green inks: Subject, Verb, Object, Relative Clauses, Conditional Clauses, Conjunctive and Disjunctive Clauses! Each had its colour and its bracket. It was a kind of drill. We did it almost daily. As I remained in the Third three times as long as anyone else, I had three times as much of it. I learned it thoroughly. Thus I got into my bones the essential structure of the ordinary British sentence – which is a noble thing. And when in after years my school-fellows who had won prizes and distinction for writing such beautiful Latin poetry and pithy Greek epigrams had to come down again to common English, to earn their living or make their way, I did not feel myself at any disadvantage. Naturally I am biased in favour of boys learning English. I would make them all learn English; and then I would let the clever ones learn Latin as an honour, and Greek as a treat. But the only thing I would whip them for is not knowing English. I would whip them hard for that.

NOTES

Words Explained:

inhospitable :	uninviting
invariably :	always
fancied :	liked
partial :	had a taste for
display :	make a show of
expose :	let light on, bring to view
broad-minded :	liberal
discernment :	understanding
reflection :	thought
relevant :	to the point
smudge :	dirty mark
usher :	door-keeper
slender :	thin, small, poor
unpretentious :	unassuming
dunce :	fool
components :	forming parts of something
structure :	form

pithy :	short, keeping to the point, full of force
epigrams :	short, pointed sayings
bias :	have a tendency to favour
treat :	thing that gives great pleasure

ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS

1. The writer says that the examiners ask questions which students cannot answer and not those which they can answer. Is the complaint just?
2. What sort of questions are asked by your examiners?
3. Why did not Churchill do well in examinations?
4. How did he do his Latin paper?
5. Churchill was taught English at Harrow and not Latin and Greek. Was it a gain or loss?
6. What good did his three years stay at Harrow do him?
7. In after years how did the knowledge of English stand him in good stead?
8. Write an appreciation or criticism of Churchill's views in regard to the study of Latin, Greek and English and their value in earning a living.