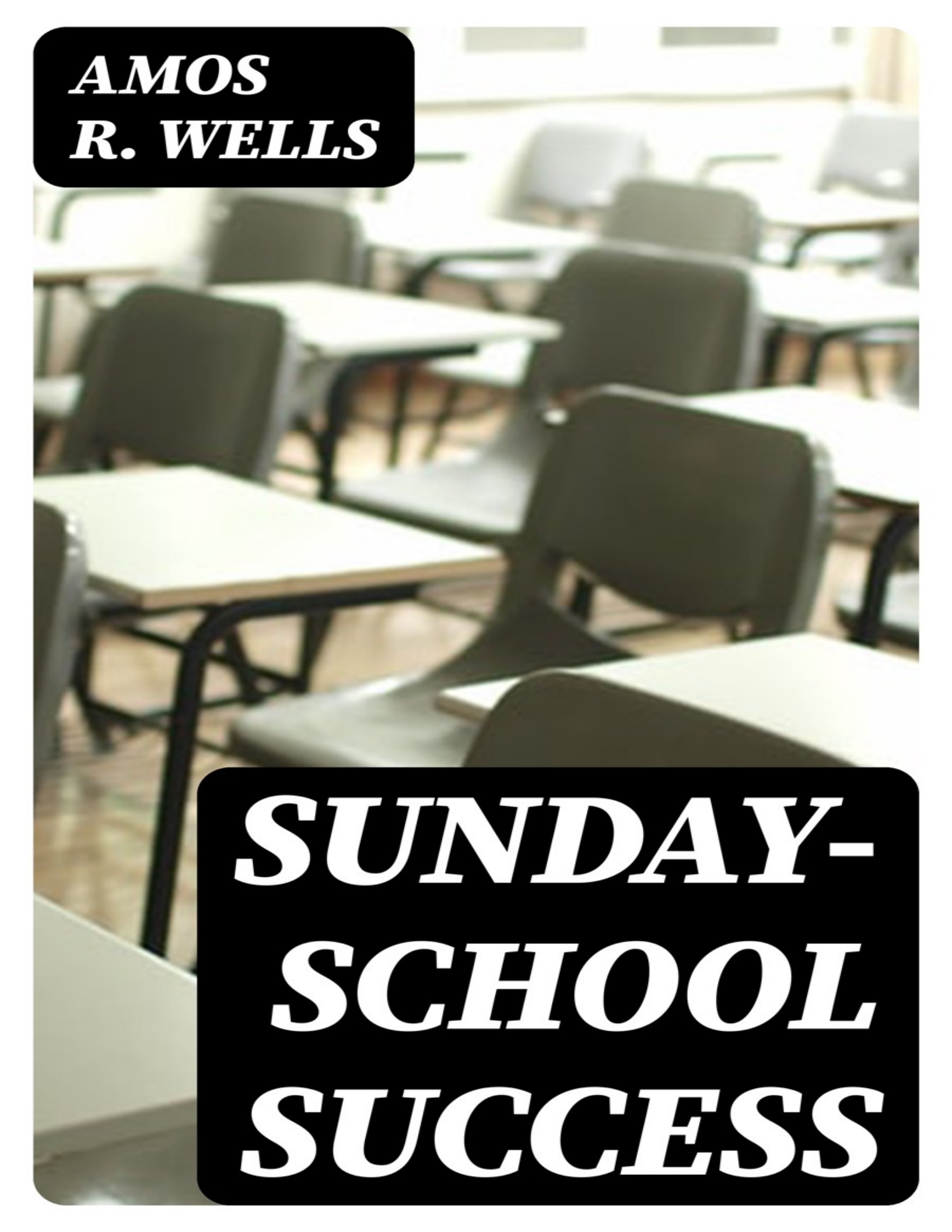




***AMOS
R. WELLS***

***SUNDAY-
SCHOOL
SUCCESS***



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Amos R. Wells

Sunday-School Success

**A Book of Practical Methods for Sunday-School
Teachers and Officers**

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Preface

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In these pages I have described the methods of the most successful teachers and Sunday-schools I have known. While a large part of the book is the direct fruit of my own experience in Sabbath and secular schools, it sets forth, as every teacher will understand, what I have learned from my failures rather than from my successes.

Though the volume has something to say on all the great Sunday-school problems, it does not pretend to be a complete manual; indeed, who could prepare one on so stupendous a theme? If it justifies its appearance among the admirable treatises already published for Sunday-school workers, it will be because it presents with frankness the methods found helpful by an average teacher, who never had charge of a large school or a large class, but in district school, small college, and small Sunday-school has struggled with the practical problems of a teacher, and in some of them at least, like Sentimental Tommy, has "found a way."

A large number of these chapters have appeared in the "Sunday-school Times," and others in the "Sunday-school Journal" of the Methodists, the "Pilgrim Teacher" of the Congregationalists, the "Westminster Teacher" of the Presbyterians, the "Baptist Teacher," and the "Golden Rule."

I am grateful to these periodicals for permission to include this material in my book.

Amos R. Wells.

BOSTON, September, 1897.

Sunday-School Success

Chapter I

The Teacher's Crown

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In one of those dreams which are truer than waking there passed before me a long line of the Sunday-school teachers I have known. One after the other they appeared—those that had taught my childish lips to repeat the Bible words, those that had led my youth into the opening glories of the International Lessons, those that had put to rest the rising doubts of the young man and clinched his faith to the Rock of ages; those, also, of less blessed memory, whom I knew in early or later years, that had done none of these things, but other good things not so good.

And I noted in astonishment, as each came into view, that all were decked with diverse crowns. I had not looked long before I saw that these crowns were not arbitrary and artificial, but sprung from the very substance of the character of each. They had all received their reward, but according to their deeds.

First came a teacher whom I remembered merely as an eloquent talker. His words were deftly chosen, his sentences smoothly formed. His teaching was a charming harangue, bright with metaphor, flashing with sparkling parables. I loved to listen to him. I was as proud of him as he was of himself. To be sure, the only good thing he ever did for me was to inspire in me the vain desire to become an equally eloquent talker, but yet I was sorry he had not received a nicer crown. It looked very beautiful, as if it were thickly

studded with lovely pearls richly iridescent in the sun; but when he came near I saw that each pearl was a little bubble swollen from a reservoir within. These bubbles were bursting all over the crown, fresh ones ever taking their place. It was a very pretty sight, yet a very trivial crown, and I was sorry for him.

There were several worthy teachers in the line whom I remembered as careful instructors in Bible history. They had every date at tongue's end, knew the order of the books and their contents, the relationships of the prominent characters to each other, all details of place and customs. They could repeat Bible verses by the yard, and gave prizes for such feats of unreasoning memory. They were mechanical, but thorough and useful. They had taught me how to dig into the Bible and study it as hard as I would study calculus. I was grateful to them for this, though they did no more, and so was rather sorry to observe their frail crowns. They were all of paper, neatly folded and plaited, and as I came nearer I saw that each crown was made up of leaves of the Bible.

I saw there also two or three teachers who had always taught with a sad countenance, teaching, not because they loved to teach, but because it was their duty to. "These," I thought, "will be joyful, now that their distasteful task is over and their reward has come"; but when I could see their faces clearly they looked mournful as ever. Their crowns were ebon black, pointed with little urns and lined with crape, and they often shifted them, pressing their hands gloomily to their brows, as if the crowns were very ill fitting and uncomfortable. They wore them with a martyr's air.

There were several teachers whom I remembered with gratitude because they had been so careful, in teaching, to emphasize always the fundamental doctrines of Christianity. These doctrines were the warp and woof of the solid fabric of their lessons. Over and over, in the same set phrases, they pressed those great truths, until, strive as one would, one could never forget them. But they never taught me the relation between these blessed doctrines and my own life. For years the formulas they had taught me remained for me mere words. And so I was not at all surprised to find their symbolic crowns solid and rich, but not attractive, for they were thickly set with jewels in the rough. Here and there, from beneath the incrusting stone, some magnificent gem would flash out, but the beauty and splendor of most of them were hidden.

In my fantastic dream I saw another, who had been a good teacher and a very poor one by turns. His piety and zeal were subject to great fluctuations, and a Sunday's teaching from him, carefully thought out, full of wise helpfulness, would be followed by a fortnight or more of questions read out of a question-book, lifeless and mechanical. I was prepared, therefore, to understand the meaning of his crown, which bore many beautiful gems, but these gems gave intermittent light, flashing out for a moment with most brilliant hues, then suddenly growing dull and dark.

One alone of all I saw in my strange dream wore a looking-glass crown. He had done his Sunday-school teaching, I had always feared, for the praise of men, to be seen of them. His attitude, his pompous words and gestures,

irresistibly suggested to me always the posturing of an actor before a looking-glass. And so his crown was all a mirror—clear, bright, beautiful, but mirroring a looking-glass soul.

And now, closing the long procession, who are these I see? A thrice-blessed band, to me ever sacred. There is the cheery little matron whose brisk kindliness gave charm to my introduction into Sunday-school life. There is the quiet and low-voiced lady whose gentle teachings carried me many a step toward my Saviour. There is the thoughtful and saintly woman whose prayers for the school-boy went up, I know, night and morning; whose urgings were so earnest, brave, and wise. And there is the noble-hearted man, familiar with a young collegian's perplexities, sympathetic as a woman, trustful as a hero, strong and uplifting in word and friendly deed. I see them all, and from their glorified heads a wonder shining, a crown of light, beautiful as the love-gleam from a mother's eye. And every one of the crowding star-points of those crowns is for a life won to the happy service of the Master.

As I gazed with tear-dimmed eyes at the dear vision, an angel stood at my side and asked me, "What are all these thou hast seen?" "Forms," I answered, "of Christ's teachers I have met; of my own teachers, these last, all crowned as they have taught." "Yes," answered the angel, "but you have seen more than that. You have seen among them the crown you yourself will wear when your teaching days are over. Which shall it be?"

Chapter II

Who Should Teach in the Sunday-School?

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The Master, who loves little children, stood in the Sunday-school door and cried to all that came up, "Who will teach my children about me?" And they all with one consent began to make excuse.

The preacher passing by said with conviction, "I have my sermons to preach, and Sunday-school work distracts my thought from them." Then answered the Master: "Crucify your pride in words, and seek the glory of deeds. This is your true sermon, to bring me close to human hearts. Thus did I most gladly preach, when on earth, to small classes and not to throngs. Thus should my ministers most gladly preach, face to face, one to half a dozen. You have many pulpits more effective than the elegantly furnished one to which you mount by three steps. They are the bedside, the wayside, the prayer-meeting table, the Sunday-school chair. Lovest thou me? Feed my lambs."

The teacher, when invited, shook his head with a sigh. "I teach all the week, and I am so tired! Why should I not rest on Sunday?" Then answered the Master: "The truest rest is a little change in work. Your Sunday-school and day-school will invigorate each other. It is I who have given you the sweet power of leading young lives. Should you not use it in leading them to me? Have you not seen how teaching your

scholars in holy things the first day of the week draws them closer to you in your secular teaching of the other days? Do you not rejoice in the opportunity this work gives you to get an insight into your scholars' characters and mold them more directly than by the roundabout route of grammar and geography? Indeed, if I excuse any from my Sunday-school, you, to whom I have intrusted in especial measure the teaching gift, must not be the one."

The business man rejected the proposal with emphasis, saying: "As a matter of course, Sunday-school teaching is quite out of my line. My days are kept in close contact with dull matter, with cloth and coal and wood and iron. I have no time for books, except day-books and ledgers. My mechanical, routine business quite unfits me for religious teaching." To that the Master replied, smiling kindly: "I was a carpenter, my son, but holy thoughts kept pace with my plane, and firm conclusions were clinched with my hammer. And at evening, work done, I found time for prayer and meditation and calling young children about me to talk with them. Your contact with men and things makes you one of the most valuable of Sunday-school teachers. What parables are acted all around you, in nature, in your work, in the lives of your helpers! What illustrations lie heaped up in your business experience, ready to your hand! Most of these young people in my Sunday-school will choose some business like yours. How happy for them, then, if they could have you to tell them beforehand of its perils, strengthen them for its difficulties, point them the road to success and true happiness! No; I can better miss preacher and teacher from my Sunday-school than you men of affairs."

Then came the care-worn housewife. "Master," said she, "I am perplexed and troubled about many things. My days, and often my nights, are crowded with a woman's myriad unheralded tasks. The children are ever with me. Why need I go to Sunday-school to teach them? Why not each home the mother's Sunday-school?" "Why not each home the prayer-meeting?" the Master asked her. "There come from numbers an interest, a help and inspiration, which you cannot get in the holiest family circle, and which you dare not miss. And what of the little ones whose mothers are less faithful than you? Have you no love to spare for them? I have implanted in the very nature of you mothers my most earnest call to Sunday-school teaching. What is it? The greatest love of little children."

And then came up two young people, a youth and a maiden, and said to the Master: "We are too young. We have had as yet no wonderful experience. We know nothing of death, of disease, of great sorrows, of heavy responsibilities. We are not wise in these high matters. We do not understand theology. We cannot teach." "Why," answered the Master, "neither do my little ones in the Sunday-school want to know about death or disease or heavy responsibilities. I would not have them taught what you think of as theology. But you are wiser than they. You see beyond their little worries and mysteries. Help them to your own measure of grace and strength, and as you teach and they grow, will not you grow, too, for further teaching ever? No, my young man and maid, with your ardent and fresh-hearted zeal; you can come very close to my little children, and I cannot spare you from my Sunday-school."

Long stood the Master there by the door of the Sunday-school, and many were those whom he called to the work, and many excuses were made. One pleaded ignorance. "But," gently questioned the Master, "have you a mind, to learn?" One urged timidity. "But I will be with you," said the Master. "There are others who can do it better," insisted one. "Will you not get them to do it, then?" begged the Master. "And if they will not do it, then you will be the best, and cannot refuse."

It was not long before a strong little group stood by the Master's side, ready for service, and as the regular teachers of the school came up, the Lord of whom they taught received them lovingly, or sadly turned them back. As hard-faced, unsympathetic Mr. Grim would enter—he whom all the children fear and elders do not love; he to whom a boy is only the necessary inconvenient early stage of a man, of promise only as he can commit to memory Bible verses—when he would enter the Master turned him back. "You must not teach my children," said the blessed One, "until you become as a little child."

He barred out also Mr. Brainy, whose ideal recitation is an argument, and whose scholars are far more familiar with points of skeptical controversy than with the Bible. He would not admit Miss Tangent, whose sole preparation for the lesson is the culling from her book of extracts of choice sentiments, pretty fables, and striking bits of verse of mysterious relevancy, which she recites for her scholars' admiration, and makes them learn. He turned back also Mrs. Scold, with her sharp tongue and cold eyes. He rejected Mrs.

Job, who taught only from a sense of duty, and only with a long face.

But ah, the warm smile, the eager greeting, with which the Master welcomed the school's workers! There was Jack Manly, who had not waited for the desire to begin teaching, but had seen the need and filled it, not knowing how soon and largely the love for the work would come and grow. There was Lucy Gentle, who did not feel able to teach, yet considered, not her ability, but the need, knowing that duty is measured rather by the seeing eye than by the feeble hand. There was Mrs. Patient, who had hesitated to begin the work because of her ignorance of the Bible, but who by quiet and faithful study for her class had become a wise and thorough scholar of the Word. There was old Squire Greatheart, who taught a group of full-grown men and women whom he had gathered into a class when they were boys and girls, and had led ever since in hard study of God's Book.

There were many others whom the Master received, of many varied talents, for the Sunday-school can use a wide range of powers; but all were alike in consciousness of their weakness compared with the greatness of their task, in willingness to resign their work to any better able who could be got to take it, in gladness to go on with it if their betters would not assume it, relying for success on the God of it. Their credentials were that they saw the need of the work, that they saw their own unfitness to do it, that they knew their fitness and power were assured when God assigned the task.

Thus the Master chose his teachers and blessed them; and though there was no genius there, no mighty mind, no trained skill, but only humble readiness to serve, he poured out on them the fullness of his love and power, and they left the Sunday-school room ever bearing precious sheaves.

That is the end of my parable. Oh that all might know, as we, dear fellow-teachers, know it, the joy of our Sunday-school ministry! Then superintendents would have no search to find teachers, no trouble to keep them. Then to the enlarging band of teachers would come a constantly enlarging band of scholars, and all together would soon bring the multitudes of the world into the host of the redeemed.



Chapter III

Preparing the Lesson

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Some teachers think that preparing the lesson is merely the loading of a cannon with powder, that it may go off with a big bang in the presence of admiring scholars. And the more powder, the bigger bang. So they load up with scintillating similes, and pretty parables, and striking stories.

Other teachers have set up some historical or theological or ethical target-board off at a distance from their class, and load their cannon with ball, that their scholars may see how accurate is their aim and how fairly they can hit the bull's-eye. So they prepare a mass of facts and figures, arguments and evidences.

But the wise teacher rejects *in toto* the cannon notion. He sees in each lesson a ledge of that grand mountain of life—of Christ-serving, strong life—up to which he must lead his little band, on which he must plant their feet so firmly that they may not slip back during the six days' interval, but may be ready for the next fair terrace, and the next.

So the wise teacher, in preparing the lesson, knows that he must first reach that ledge himself; must repeat the journey over and over until he has learned the easiest way for little feet; must make ladders with rounds close together; must spread sand on slippery places and stretch ropes along the edge of the cliff. He, too, lays in supplies of stories and pretty parables, not, however, in the form of powder, to

make a show, but (if this is not too severe a twist of the simile) as dainty food to keep the young travelers fresh and hearty. He, too, has facts and figures and arguments and evidences, not, however, as cannon-balls, but in the shape of iron bridges and railings and ropes, that the way may be solid and safe.

There are some teachers that do not study at all. It is as if a will-o'-the-wisp should undertake to guide one on an important journey. Those teachers are going they know not whither, over they know not what road, for what purpose they have not the slightest idea, and land always in a bog.

Emphatically, the teacher that is not always climbing himself will leave his class on a very dead level indeed. He should be reaching down and pulling them up, but he is soon compelled to stand where they are and push, and ends with believing his "level best" to lie along the smooth road of the easy-going valley.

The teacher who ceases to grow ceases to teach. That is why a Sunday-school lesson cannot be crammed. That is why preparation for it must extend all through the week. Growth cannot be ordered offhand. It comes from Father Time's shop, and he is a deliberate workman. You will lose your hold on your class if each Sunday hour does not begin with you a little above them, and end with them at your level. This advance cannot be won Saturday night, or during the space between the first and second bells for Sunday-school. Such a spasmodic leap ahead will leave you too much out of breath even to tell them to come on.

Dropping metaphor, of which we may have had too much, there are several substantial reasons why the

Sunday-school preparation should extend over the seven days of the week. Thus only can you utilize in the Master's work odd bits of time, your Bible on the bureau while you dress, in your hands on the street-cars or while you wait for the meat to be cooked. There are many Bible verses which should be carefully committed to memory in connection with each lesson, as the teacher's best reliance for commentary and inspiration. These verses should be running through our heads as we run on all our six-day tasks, and should sing themselves to all our labor-tunes. But chiefly, it is only in this way that we can accumulate hints, and grow into the truths of the lesson by experience. With the lesson theme for a nucleus, it is astounding to see what a wealth of illustration, of wise and helpful comment, each day's living thrusts upon us. Every event is a picture of some truth which needs only a sensitive plate to be photographed forever. That sensitive plate is a mind which is studying that particular truth.

How much time do you spend in studying your Sunday-school lesson? You see that no true teacher can answer that question, any more than the poet can tell how long he is in writing his poem. This is the inspirational part of the teacher's work, and not the mechanical part, and his brooding will have issue of life just in proportion as the Holy Spirit dwells in his heart. But along with this lofty work must go lower processes, of which it is far easier to speak. I mean those lower processes which alone we are likely to call "studying." Permit me to lay down a programme for the study of a Sunday-school lesson.

To begin with, let it be always with pencil in hand. You have seen iron filings scattered in rough confusion over a sheet of glass. And then, when the magnet was placed beneath, you have seen those ugly bits of metal dance into the daintiest designs, fairy curves and most symmetrical figures. Such a delightful magnet is a pencil or a pen for all the disordered thoughts and fancies of our brains. Next to the Bible, the Sunday-school teacher's inseparable companion should be a lead-pencil.

What book is nearest you while you study your lesson? Teachers may be classified finally by their answers to that question. Is it the commentary, the atlas, the Bible dictionary, the concordance, the question-book, or the Bible? If the commentary, your comments will fall fruitless to the ground. If the atlas, your class will wander nowhither. If the Bible dictionary, your diction will have no issue in deed. If the concordance, your class will know little from you of that concord which passes understanding. If the question-book, the value of all your study is at least questionable. No; let me emphasize this statement: *Not a single lesson help should be touched until everything possible to be learned about the lesson from the Bible directly has been learned.*

For this you will need two Bibles at least, one to be kept open at the lesson, one to turn back and forth in pursuit of references and information. The first must be a King James reference Bible; the second, the noble translation of Victoria's reign. Thus furnished, read the lesson. As you read, examine your mind. What questions assail it? Those moments are full of matter. Those questions are the clues to the lesson labyrinth. Those perplexities constitute your

programme. "I wonder where this place is?" you will say to yourself. "Who was this man, and what was his past history, that he did this deed? What does this odd phrase mean? Is that sentiment a just one? Is that act a model for us modern folk?"

As these difficulties come up in your slow and thoughtful reading, jot them down, and the resultant half-sheet of scribbling means half the work accomplished. But hold! Did you read through a child's eye as well as your own? Did you read in the plural number? If not, you must read the lesson once more, with a poet's imagination noting this time the difficulties which you strode easily over, but which would soon trip up little feet. When you write down such points on your paper, underscore them. And underscore them again. A vast deal of preparation for teaching is fruitless because it is made in the singular number.

The next stage in our lesson study will be to answer our questions. Points in regard to antecedents and motives will be answered by the chapters intervening between the last lesson and this. Those should next be read. Many difficulties concerning customs and laws will be cleared up by parallel passages and the references of your reference Bible. Those same references will collate for you helpful utterances on the ethical problems of the passage. Comparatively few people know, by the way, how nearly a reference Bible allows one to dispense with the Bible dictionary, Bible index, concordance, and commentary. I am continually astonished to see how few are the questions which may be asked about a passage that the Bible itself does not answer if closely scrutinized.

"But all this is a waste of time," you object. "In the lesson helps all of these points are stated and discussed, fully, methodically, concisely. Others have done this work for me, anticipating all my difficulties. Why need I repeat their labor?" Surely not merely to be original. There's too much original work crying to be done to waste a moment in duplicating unnecessarily work already done for us. But the Bible study cannot be done for you. It must end in familiarity with the Bible, in appreciation of it, in a wide-awake understanding of the problems it presents, to be obtained in no way except by original work. If difficulties are solved before we have felt them to be difficulties, if customs and phrases are explained before we have discovered the need of an explanation, and places located before we fall to groping after them, it is the old story of "light won, light lost." And so I wish to repeat that the one proper commencement of study of a Bible lesson is the Bible, and the Bible, and the Bible; once to note our own questions, once to imagine our scholars' questions, and once, in large measure, here, there, and everywhere, concordance, index, references, and atlas at our elbow, to answer, if it may be, from the Book itself all the questions it has raised.

And when this is done, even if every question has been answered, open arms to the commentaries and the lesson helps, the wisest and richest you can find, and as many as you have time for. Why? Because twenty heads are better than one; because the Hebrew and Greek and travel and debate and experience and insight and spirituality of our best thinkers will suggest new points of view, add a world of illustration, may even upset some of your conclusions.

Stand sturdily, however, in the presence of these learned doctors. You will be tempted to throw away your own honest results and adopt their wise and brilliant homilies. If you do, your class will laugh at you, or yawn. You will be giving them, not your life, but your rhetoric. These helps are for inspiration, not respiration and circulation. They are for hints toward originality, not hindrances. They are useful in strengthening your own thought, vivifying your own feeling, confirming your own conclusions, opening new vistas for your own exploration, suggesting methods for your own practice.

If these two lines of preparation have been faithfully carried out, you will by this time have accumulated a mass of material which will be confusing, and the third step is to reduce it to order. Long practice has convinced me of the utility of the plan of writing out questions. Whether these questions are used in the class or not, they clarify the subject marvelously, and the mere drill of writing them adds fifty per cent. to the teaching power of the instructor. When I began trying it, I was astonished to see how many thoughts which seemed to me quite promising and bright could not be approached by the interrogative mood. I wanted to lead up to this simile, that illustration, this theory, that pretty idea. I would soon find that my questions refused to lead up to them naturally. Why? Simply because these fancies answered no query likely to rise, solved no difficulty likely to suggest itself, and were mere adventitious decorations wherewith I had been accustomed to load my Sunday-school teaching, to show off.

My attempt at formulating questions soon taught me, too, that I had been indulging in monologue. I found it unexpectedly difficult to frame a question—one, that is, which required the scholar to do some thinking to answer. I discovered that I had been in the habit of propounding "yes" and "no" queries, merely as excuses for five-minute orations.

Then, too, when I began to put down in black and white just what I expected to put into that precious half-hour, I wondered what I had been doing with it hitherto. By my previous methods two or three little notions would keep me going through the whole thirty minutes; but ideas do shrink so when you put them on paper with a question-mark at the end! It is wonderful how many questions can be asked and answered in half an hour. I gained a new conception of the value of time, and of the teaching value of study hours.

In writing out these questions, then, the first thing to be thought of is that consideration with which a good teacher will begin his lesson, but a poor teacher will close: "What is the main teaching of the lesson?"—as important, this "main teaching," as the compass to the sailor. What particular characteristic of God's noblemen is this lesson to strengthen in my scholars? Every teacher should know the power which is given by an ultimatum; by a decision, that is, as to the one thing which, no matter what else it wins or fails to win, that lesson must accomplish. Is it to make my boys and girls more truthful, more brave, more cheery, more trusting? Whatever the point be, about that shall cluster the questions, the illustrations, the arguments. Countries, customs, times, history, shall be only its framework. There