

The Interpreter.

CHAPTER VI.

SCHOOL.

In one of the pleasant valleys of sweet Sumner-shire stands a large red-brick house that bears unmistakably impressed on its exterior the title 'School.' You would not take it for a 'hall,' or an hospital, or an almshouse, or anything in the world but an institution for the rising generation, in which the ways of the wide world are so successfully imitated that, in the qualities of foresight, cunning, duplicity, and general selfishness, the boy may indeed be said to be 'father to the man.' The house stands on a slope towards the south, with a trim lawn and carefully-kept gravel drive, leading to a front door, of which the steps are always clean and the handles always bright. How a ring at the door-bell used to bring all our hearts into our mouths. Forty boys were we, sitting grudgingly over our lessons on the bright summer forenoons, and not one of us but thought that ring might possibly announce a 'something' for him from home. Home! what was there in the world, that it should call up such visions of happiness, that it should create such a longing, sickening desire to have the wings of a dove and flee away, that it should make the present such a blank and comfortless reality? Why do we persist in sending our children so early to school? A little boy, with all his affections developing themselves, loving and playful and happy, not ashamed to be fond of his sisters, and thinking mamma all that is beautiful and graceful and good, is to be torn from that home which is to him an earthly Paradise, and transferred to a place of which we had better not ask the urchin his own private opinion. We appeal to every mother—and it is a mother who is best capable of judging for a child—whether her darling returns to her improved in her eyes after his first half-year at school. She looks in vain for the pliant, affectionate disposition that a word from her used to be capable of moulding at will, and finds instead a stubborn self-sufficient spirit that has been called forth by harsh treatment and intercourse with the mimic world of boys; more selfish and more conventional, because less characteristic than that of men. He is impatient of her tenderness now, nay, half ashamed to return it. Already he aspires to be a man, in his own eyes, and thinks it manly to make light of those affections and endearments by which he once set such store. The mother is no longer all in all in his heart, her empire is divided and weakened, soon it will be swept away, and she sighs for the white-truck days when her child was fondly and entirely her own. Now, I cannot help thinking the longer these days last the better. Anxious parent, what do you wish your boy to become? A successful man in after life?—then rear him tenderly and carefully at first. You would not bit a colt at two years old; be not less patient with your own flesh and blood. Nature is the best guide, you may depend. Leave him to the woman on his strength is established and his courage high, and when the metal has assumed shape and consistency, to the forge with it as soon as you will. Hardship, buffetings, adversity, all these are good for the youth, but, for Heaven's sake, spare the child.

Forty boys are droning away at their desks on a bright sunny morning in June, and I am sitting at an old oak desk, begrimed and splashed with the inkshed of many generations, and hacked by the knives of idler after idler for the last fifty years. I have yet to learn by heart some two score lines from the *Æneid*. How I hate Virgil whilst I bond over those dog-eared leaves and that uncomfortable desk. How I envy the white curtains of which I have just got a glimpse as he soars away into the blue sky—for no terrestrial objects are visible from our school-room window to distract our attention and interfere with our labors. I have already surpassed him in fancy over the lawn, and the garden, and the high whitethorn fence into the meadow beyond—how well I know the deep glades of that copse for which I am making, how I wish I was on my back

peated the whole forty lines to myself without missing a word; but, alas! when I stood again on the step which led up to the dreaded desk, and gave away the book into those uncompromising hands, and heard that stern voice with its 'Now, sir, begin,' my intellects forsook me altogether, and while the floor seemed to rock under me, I made such blunders and confusion of the chief's oration to the love-sick queen, as drove March to the extremity of tether which he was pleased to call his patience, and drew upon myself the dreaded condemnation I had fought so hard to escape.

'Remain in, sir, till perfect, and repeat to Mr. Manners, without a mistake—Mr. Manners, will you be kind enough to see, without a mistake. Boys, (with another rap of the cane) school's up.' March looks his desk with a bang, and retires. Mr. Manners puts on his hat. Forty boys burst instantaneously into tumultuous uproar, forty pairs of feet scuffle along the dusty boards, forty voices break into song and jest and glee, forty spirits are emancipated from the prison-house into freedom and air and sunshine—forty, all save one.

So again I turn to the *infandum Regina jubes*, and sit me down and cry.

I had gone late to school, but I was a backward child in everything save my proficiency in modern languages. I had never known a mother, and the little education I had acquired was picked up in a desultory manner here and there during my travels with my father, and afterwards in a gloomy old library at Alton Grango, his own place in the same county as Mr. March's school. My father had remained abroad till his affairs made it imperative that he should return to England, and for some years we lived in seclusion at Alton, with an establishment that even my boyish penetration could discover was reduced to the narrowest possible limits. I think this was the idlest period of my life. I did no lessons, unless my father's endeavor to teach me painting, an art that I showed year after year less inclination to master, could be called so. I had but few ideas, yet they were very dear ones. I adored my father; on him I lavished all the love that would have been a mother's right; and having no other relations—none in the world that I cared for, or that cared for me, even nurse Nettich having remained in Hungary—my father was all-in-all. I used to wait at his door of a morning to hear him wake and go away quite satisfied without letting him know. I used to watch him for miles when he rode out, and walked any distance to meet him on his way home. To please him I would even mount a quiet pony that he had bought on purpose for me, and dissemble my terrors because I saw they annoyed my kind father. I was a very shy, timid, and awkward boy, shrinking from strangers with a fear that was positively painful, and liking nothing so well as a huge arm-chair in the gloomy oak-wainscoted library, where I would sit by the hour reading old poetry, old plays, old novels, and wandering about till I lost myself in a world of my own creating, full of beauty and romance, and all that ideal life which we must perforce call nonsense, but which, were it reality, would make this earth a heaven. Such was a bad course of training for a boy whose disposition was naturally too dreamy and imaginative, too deficient in energy and practical good sense. Had it gone on I must have become a madman; what is it but madness to live in a world of our own? I shall never forget the break-up of my dreams, the beginning, to me, of hard practical life.

I was coiled up in my favorite attitude, buried in the depths of a huge arm-chair in the library, and devouring with all my senses and all my soul the pages of the *Morte d'Arthur*, that most voluminous and least instructive of romances, but one for which, to my shame be it said, I confess to this day a sneaking kindness. I was gazing on Queen Guenover, as I pictured her to myself, in scarlet and ermine and pearls, with raven hair plaited over her queenly brow, and soft violet eyes, looking kindly down on mailed Sir Lancelot at her feet. I was holding Arthur's helmet in the forest, as the frank, handsome, stalwart monarch bent over a sparking rill and cooled his sunburnt cheeks, and laved his chestnut beard, whilst the sunbeams flickered through the green leaves and played upon his gleaming corslet and his armour of proof. I was feasting at Camelot

taskmasters and satirical playfellows, early hours, regular discipline, Latin and Greek, and, worst of all, a continual bustle and a life in a crowd.

There were two peculiarities in my boyish character which, more than any others, unfitted me for baffling with the world. I had a morbid dread of ridicule, which made me painfully shy of strangers. I have on many an occasion, stood with my hand on the lock of a door, dreading to enter the room in which I heard strange voices, and then, plunging in with a desperate effort, have retired again as abruptly, covered with confusion, and so nervous as to create in the minds of the astonished guests a very natural doubt as to my mental sanity. The other peculiarity was an intense love of solitude. I was quite happy with my father, but if I could not enjoy his society, I preferred my own to that of any other mortal. I would take long walks by myself—I would sit for hours and read by myself—I had a bedroom of my own, into which I hated even a servant to set foot—and perhaps the one thing I dreaded more than all besides in my future life was, that I should never, never, be alone.

How I prized the last few days I spent at home; how I gazed on all the well known objects as if I should never see them again; how the very chairs and tables seemed to bid me good bye like old familiar friends. I had none of the lively anticipations which most boys cherish of the manliness and independence arising from a school-life; no long vistas of cricket and foot-ball, and fame in their own little world, with increasing strength and stature, to end in a tailed coat, and even whiskers! No, I hated the idea of the whole thing. I expected to be miserable at Everdon, and, I freely confess, was not disappointed.

CHAPTER VII.

PLAY.

Dinner was over, and play-time begun for all but me, and again I turned to the *infandum Regina jubes*, and sat me down to cry.

A kind hand grimed with ink was laid on my shoulder, a pair of soft blue eyes looked into my face, and Victor De Rohan, my former playfellow, my present fast friend and declared 'chum,' sat down on the form beside me, and endeavored to console me in distress.

'I'll help you, Egerton,' said the warm-hearted lad; 'say it to me; March is a beast, but Manners is a good fellow; Manners will hear you now, and we shall have our half-holiday after all.'

'I can't, I can't,' was my desponding reply. 'Manners won't hear me, I know, till I am perfect, and I never can learn this stupid sing-song story. How I hate Queen Dido—how I hate Virgil. You should read about Guenver, Victor, and King Arthur. I'll tell you about them this afternoon,' and the tears came again into my eyes as I remembered there was no afternoon for me.

'Try once more,' said Victor; 'I'll get Manners to hear you; leave it to me; I know how to do it. I'll ask Ropsley.' And Victor was off into the playground ere I was aware, in search of this valuable auxiliary.

Now, Ropsley was the mainspring round which turned the whole of our little world at Everdon. If an excuse for a holiday could be found, Ropsley was entreated to ask the desired favor of March. It a quarrel had to be adjusted, either in the usual course of ordeal by battle, or the less decisive method of arbitration, Ropsley was invited to see fair play. He was the king of our little community. It was whispered that he could spar better than Manners, and construe better than March. He was certainly a more perfect linguist—as indeed I could vouch for from my own knowledge—than Schwartz, who came twice a week to teach us a rich German-French. We saw his boots were made by Hohy, and we felt his coats could only be the work of Stultz, for in those days Poole was not, and we were perfectly willing to believe that he wore a scarlet hunting coat in the Christmas holidays, and had visiting cards of his own. In person he was tall and slim, with a pale complexion, and wavy, soft brown hair, without being handsome,

schoolroom, where I still sat desponding at my desk, and Ropsley followed him.

'What's the matter, Vere?' he asked, in a patronizing tone, and calling me by my Christian name, which I esteemed a great compliment. 'What's the matter?' he repeated; 'forty lines of Virgil to say; come, that's not much.'

'But I can't learn it,' I urged. 'You must think me very stupid; and if it was French, or German, or English, I should not mind twice the quantity, but I cannot learn Latin, and it's no use trying.'

The older boy sneered; it seemed so easy to him with his powerful mind to get forty lines of hexameters by heart. I believe he could have repeated the whole *Æneid* without book from beginning to end.

'Do you want to go out to-day, Vere?' said he.

I clasped my hands in supplication, as I replied, 'Oh! I would give anything to get away from this horrid schoolroom, and shirk out with Victor and Bold.'

The latter, be it observed, was a dog in whose society I took great delight, and whom I kept in the village, at an outlay of one shilling per week, much to the detriment of my personal fortune.

'Very well,' said the great man; 'come with me to Manners, and bring your book with you.'

So I followed my deliverer into the playground, with the *infandum Regina* still weighing heavily on my soul.

Manners, the usher, was playing cricket with some dozen of the bigger boys, and was in the act of 'going for a sixer.' His coat and waistcoat were off, and his shirt-sleeves tucked up, disclosing his manly arms bared to the elbow; and Manners was in his glory, for, notwithstanding the beard upon his chin, our usher was as very a boy at heart as the youngest robin in the lower class. A dandy, too, was Manners, and a weight of an imaginative turn of mind, which chiefly developed itself in the harmless form of bright visions for the future, teeming with romantic adventures, of which he was himself to be the hero. His past he seldom dwelt upon. His aspirations were military—his ideas extravagant. He was great on the Peninsula and Lord Anglesey at Waterloo; and had patent boxes in his high-heeled boots that only required the addition of heavy clanking spurs to complete the illusion that Mr. Manners ought to be a cavalry officer. Of his riding he spoke largely; but his proficiency in this exercise we had no means of ascertaining. There were two things, however, on which Manners prided himself, and which were a source of amusement to the robins by whom he was surrounded:—these were, his personal strength, and his whiskers; the former quality was encouraged to develop itself by earnest application to all manly sports and exercises; the latter ornaments were cultivated and enriched with every description of 'nutrifier,' 'regenerator,' and 'unguent,' known to the hair-dresser or the advertiser. Alas! without effect proportioned to the perseverance displayed; two small patches of fluff under the jaw-bones, that showed to greatest advantage by candle light, being the only evidence of so much pains-taking and cultivation thrown away.

Of his muscular powers, however, it hoveled us to speak with reverence. Was it not on record in the annals of the school that when the 'King of Naples,' our dissipated pieman, endeavored to justify by force an act of dishonesty by which he had done Timmins minor out of half-a-crown, Manners stripped at once to his shirt-sleeves, and 'went in' at the Monarch with all the vigor and activity of some three-and-twenty summers against threescore. The Monarch, a truculent old ruffian, with a red neckcloth, half-boots, and one eye, fought gallantly for a few rounds, and was rather getting the best of it, when, somewhat unaccountably, he gave in, leaving the usher master of the field. Ropsley, who gave his friend a knee, *secundum artem*, and urged him with frequent injunctions, to 'fight high,' attributed this easy victory to the forbearance of their antagonist, who had an eye to future trade and mercantile profits; but Manners, whose account of the battle I have heard more than once, always scouted this view of the transaction.

'He went down, sir, as if he was shot,' he would say, doubling his arm, and showing

as to how we spent half-holidays between one o'clock and seven; and many a glorious ramble we used to have during those precious six hours in all the ecstasy of freedom—a word understood by none better than the schoolboy. A certain difference was, however, exacted to the regulations of the establishment; by a sort of tacit compact, it seemed to be understood that our code was so far Spartan as to make, not the crime, but the being 'found out,' a punishable offence, and boys were always supposed to take their chance. If seen in the act of escaping, or afterwards met by any of the masters in the surrounding country, we were liable to be flogged; and to do March justice, we always were flogged, and pretty soundly, too. Under these circumstances, some little care and circumspection had to be observed in starting for our rambles. Certain steps had been made in the playground wall, where it was hidden from the house by the stem of a fine old elm, and by dropping quietly down into an orchard beyond—an orchard, be it observed, of which the fruit was always plucked before it reached maturity—and then stealing along the back of a thick, high hedge, we could get fairly away out of sight of the school windows, and so make our escape.

Now, on the afternoon in question we had planned an expedition in which Victor and I, and my dog Bold had determined to be principal performers. Of the latter personage in the trio I must remark, that no party of pleasure on which we embarked was ever supposed to be perfect without his society. His original possessor was the 'King of Naples,' whom I have already mentioned, and who, I conclude, stole him, as he appeared one day tied to that personage by an old cotton handkerchief, and looking as woe-begone and unhappy as a retriever puppy of some three months old, torn from his mamma and his brothers and sisters, and the comfortable kennel in which he was brought up, and transferred to the tender mercies of a drunken, poaching, dog-stealing ruffian, was likely to feel in so false a position. The 'King' brought him into our playground on one of his last-selling visits, as a specimen of the rarest breed of retrievers known in the West of England. The puppy seemed so thoroughly miserable, and looked up at me so piteously, that I forthwith asked his price, and after a deal of haggling, and a consultation between De Rohan and myself, I determined to become his purchaser, at the munificent sum of one sovereign, of which ten shillings (my all) were to be paid on the spot, and the other ten, to remain, so to speak, on mortgage upon the animal, with the further understanding that he should be kept at the residence of the 'King of Naples,' who in consideration of the regular payment of one shilling per week, bound himself to feed the same and complete his education in all the canine branches of plunging, diving, fetching and carrying, on a system of his own, which he briefly described as 'fast-rate.'

With a deal of prompting from Manners, I got through my forty lines; and he shut the book with a good-natured smile as Ropsley threw down the bat he had been wielding so skillfully, and put on his coat.

'Come and lunch with me at 'The Club,' said he to Manners, whom he led completely by the nose; 'I'll give you Dutch cheese, and sherry and soda-water, and a cigar. Hie, Vere, you ungrateful little ruffian, where are you off to? I want you.'

I was making my escape as rapidly as possible at the mention of 'The Club,' a word which we younger boys held in utter fear and detestation, as being associated in our minds with much perilous enterprise and gratuitous suffering. The Club consisted of an old bench in a retired corner of the playground, on the trunk of which Ropsley had caused a comfortable seat to be fashioned for his own delectation; and here, in company with Manners and two or three senior boys, it was his custom to sit smoking and drinking curious compounds, of which the ingredients, being contraband, had to be fetched by us, at the risk of corporal punishment, from the village of Everdon, an honest half-mile journey at the least.

Ropsley tendered a large cigar to Manners, lit one himself, settled his long limbs comfortably on the seat, and gave me his orders.

'One Dutch cheese, three bottles of straw