

Peculiar Children I Have Met.

BY MAX O'RELL.



FROM 1876 to 1884 I was a master of St. Paul's School, to-day the foremost classical school of England. Whether I should boast of it or not, I do not know.

In England, the schoolmaster stands about on the lowest step of the social ladder, and even if he be the master of one of the great public schools, he obtains practically the same recognition in society that the poor drudge of an usher receives. In France the schoolmaster is a professional man of high standing, and Alphonse Daudet boasts of having been one. Many of our Academicians, Ambassadors, and Ministers have been schoolmasters.

In Holland people touch their hats when they pass a schoolmaster. In Italy the teaching profession is often embraced by the members of the nobility. But, in England, to have been a schoolmaster is well-nigh having a stain on one's character; and when an English critic, in Great Britain or the British Colonies, has wished to be particularly offensive in his remarks about my work and myself, he has thrown it at my face.

I once asked, through the English Press, "What's the matter with schoolmasters? Is there any opprobrium attached to that profession? If so, why?"

This brought about many answers. "Charles Dickens is the cause of it," said some. The

British public saw in Wackford Squeers the typical schoolmaster. "Because teaching is the worst paid of all professions," replied others. Another reason given was that, in the eyes of the public, the schoolmaster is a man who canes little boys, which is not a very dignified occupation. And so on.

Well, I consider things from a rather French point of view. For eight years of my life I was a schoolmaster, and I am rather inclined to be proud of it. I was happy though a schoolmaster; I received a respectable salary; I never used a cane in my life except as a companion in my walks; and felt that I was a useful member of society.

I loved my boys, big or small, clever or stupid; they respected me, and, judging from the expression of their faces when they gathered round me, I believe that their respect for me was mingled with affection. And if a man has any sense of humour and de-

lights in studying human nature, is there in the world for him a better field of observation than the schoolroom? Is there anything more interesting than the struggle for victory between a man and forty or fifty dear young boys full of life and mischief?

I loved them all, and the more wicked they were the more I loved them. I never objected to any, except perhaps the few who aimed at being perfect, especially those who succeeded in their efforts.



"I LOVED MY BOYS."

I must confess, however, to having had a weakness for younger boys. No doubt the work was more interesting in the advanced classes; but a room full of boys from eleven to twelve or thirteen years of age seldom failed to afford me an opportunity to use my glasses with profit.

To watch a young rascal using his ingenuity to shirk his work or avoid detection of a breach of discipline, was a great source of amusement to me. To overhear his remarks about me; to listen to his repartees; to read his "essays"; to admire his resolution to do his work well by writing the first two lines of his exercise with his best hand, and to realize how soon he got tired of it by seeing signs of flagging on the third line; to listen to him swaggering about his social standing—all that made life worth living.

What dear little snobs I met who were not much over ten years of age! What early training they must have had at home! Peculiar children are, as a rule, children of peculiar fathers and mothers—especially mothers.

Once a lady wrote to the head-master:—

"Dear Sir,—It is our intention to place our boy under your care; but before we do so, we should like to know what the social standard of your school is."

The head-master was equal to the occasion. He replied:—

"Dear Madam,—So long as your boy behaves well, and his fees are paid regularly, no inquiry will be made about his antecedents."

And it is something worth hearing, that swaggering of little English boys about their social standing. First the young heirs to titles, then the sons of the gentry, the sons of professional men, the sons of merchants, the sons of clerks, all these are sets perfectly distinct.

"I say, what do you think I have heard?" I once overheard a little boy of ten say to a young schoolfellow. "You know Brown? Well, I have heard to-day that his father keeps a store!"

This seemed to take away the breath of the other little boy; he was staggered, and grew pale with amazement.

"You don't say so!" he ejaculated. "I thought he was a gentleman." And the two young society boys separated with a grave, high hand-shake.

I had great admiration for the ingenuity of boys with a conscience; the one, for instance, who, when he was not quite sure whether it was the second or the third exercise he had to do, did neither, "for fear of doing the wrong one"; the one who did not do his work at home, "because grandmamma died last night"; also the one who explained the

great number of mistakes to be found in his home-work by pleading, "Papa will help me."

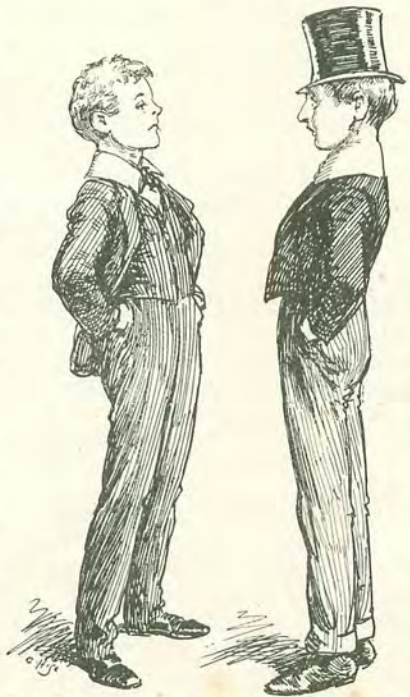
I pass over the one "who had a bad headache last night," and brought a letter from his mother to that effect; the one who did his exercise, but lost it; the one "who knew his lesson," but could not say it; and many others who made excuses that failed to "pay," and will never have a chance of making a living otherwise than by honesty—which is the easiest way, after all.

One, however, I cannot pass over is that ingenious boy who, when he is not quite sure whether the plural of *égal* is *égals* or *égaux*, makes a blot of the word's ending. But what is this boy compared to the one who, being asked for

the plural of *égal*, said "Two gals"?

I always objected to mothers' pets. They might be exemplary, admirable at home; but in spite of their irreproachable linen and their hair parted in the middle, they were, as a rule, very objectionable at school. They had a blind confidence in their mothers, and were taught at home never to trust anybody else. When you made a statement before them, they looked at you suspiciously, as much as to say: "I'll ask mother if all that is right."

These mothers would write to me every day to explain what geniuses their boys were,



"I HAVE HEARD TO-DAY THAT HIS FATHER KEEPS A STORE!"

and how lucky I ought to feel to have to deal with them. These letters were full of hints on teaching and of advice on the subject. Sometimes they contained an invitation to dinner. Much as you love boys, when you have been with them five hours a day, you do not rush for invitations to meet them at dinner.

Among my recollections I will give you a few translations that show great ingenuity on the part of the perpetrators.

A boy, reading from a play that was being translated at sight in class, came across the phrase: *Calmes-vous, Monsieur*. He naturally translated this by "Calm yourself, sir." I said to him: "Now, don't you think this is a little stiff? Couldn't you give me something a little more colloquial; for instance, what you would say yourself in a like case?"

The boy reflected a few seconds and said: "Keep your hair on, old man."

Another having to translate: *Mon frère a raison et ma sœur a tort*, came out with: "My brother has raisins and my sister has tart."

Ingenuity that amounts to genius is shown in the two following cases:—

A boy was asked to give the derivation of the French word *tropique*. His answer was: "It comes from the French word *trop*, which means *too much*, *heat* understood, and *ique*, from the Latin *hic* (*here*), that is: 'It is too hot here.'"

Another, being asked the origin of the word *dimanche*, answered: "It comes from *di* (twice) and *mancher* (to eat), because you generally have two meals on that day."

If boys are remarkable in the way they put French into English, they are still more wonderful in the way they put English into French. When they translate French into English, they do not use the English that serves them to express their thoughts at home with their parents, brothers, and sisters, or at school with their masters or comrades; the English they use is a special article kept for the purpose. And when you remark to them that there is no sense in what they have written, they seem to be of your opinion; but the fault is not with them, it is with the French text that has no sense for them.

When they translate English into French, it is with the help of that most treacherous friend of boys, the dictionary. When several French words are given for one English word, the lazy ones take the first, always; the indifferent ones take any—one is as good as another; the shrewd boys always take the last, to make you believe that they have been

carefully through the whole list, and have made a choice only after long and mature reflection.

Sometimes they are right; as a rule they are wrong. When they are right, Providence alone has to be thanked for it; and it will be so as long as modern languages are taught through the eyes with the help of books, instead of being taught through the mouth and ears without the help of any books, for a couple of years at any rate.

The home is, no less than the school, a fine field of observation. Who could or would imagine a home that is not more or less ruled by children? Victor Hugo once said that he recognised and bowed to one tyranny only, that of children; but "that tyranny," he added, "I proclaim."

Don't talk to me of children who meekly knock at the door as if they were afraid somebody might hear them. Give me those who will soon let you hear another knock if the door is not opened at once. These know they are wanted at home; they know that the moment they are in, they will not hear you say, "Hush! hush!" or "Be quiet, you must not make any noise," but will be allowed the freedom of the house and not be restrained. They know they can say or do what they please, and they will tell you all their little secrets and become open and sincere.

Never will you see the round faces of these little home-rulers grow long and sad. Their eyes will beam with joy and happiness. Whenever I hear parents complain that their children "run" the house, I tell them that it is quite right they should. The best-ordered houses are ruled by little girls from two to five years of age.

I once arrived in a Washington house at half-past seven. I was invited to dinner. On entering the hall, I was received by a little girl three years old and her brother aged five.

The little girl immediately opened her arms and offered me a kiss. This done, she produced a birthday book, and asked me to put my name in it, which, of course, I did on the spot. When I entered the drawing-room, I was told that a few minutes before my arrival the following conversation was overheard in the hall:—

"When he comes, I'll ask him for his autograph," said the little boy to his sister.

"He won't give it to you," she replied, "but he will give it to me."

"Why to you, and not to me?" suggested the little boy.

"Because, when he arrives, I'll let him take a kiss," she said, "and that'll do it."

And this little queen of the house, you see, knew her power already. She just had the proper measure of it. I do not know any pretty little lady three years old who would not get all she wished in return for a kiss.

But let us return to the schoolroom, and examine a few peculiar children, and for that matter I do not think that a schoolroom in England very much differs from a schoolroom in France, in America, or anywhere else. The *genus* boy is pretty well the same all the world over, no better than he should be—a boy.

On the first row, desirous to be near you, is the painstaking, industrious boy who takes in all you say, has a blind confidence in you, and is never caught chatting. He is dull, but well meaning—a respectable boy. He is careful to the extreme. His books are covered with brown paper or American cloth, and when he has finished with them, they are so tidy, so clean, that they have the same market value as they had when he bought them second-hand. He writes his rough copies on the back of old exercises, and invariably wipes his pen when he has done with it.

Near him is the deaf boy—a trial this one, especially if he is deaf of one ear only. He always turns this one to you, and has a pretext for having "not quite heard" what you said when you mentioned what the home-work would be.

Not far off is the sneak, who edifies you by his most exemplary conduct. He is an insult to the rest of the class. Turn your head away for a moment, however, and you will seldom fail to find him at fault. So long as you face the boys, his eyes are directed on you.

Next are sitting side by side two brothers; they are quiet. I always placed brothers next to each other. Brothers will quarrel, but seldom want to have a quiet chat together. A little farther behind is Master Whirligig, who, at the end of the term, will be able to tell you the exact number of flies that passed through the room.

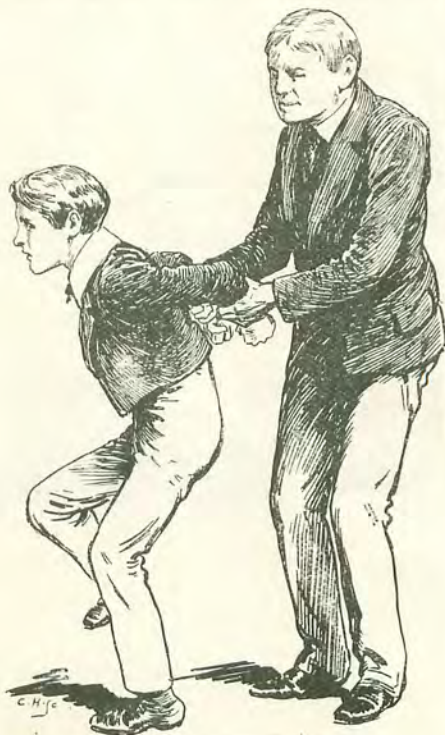
Close by is a pet boy of mine. He is smeared with ink all over. He holds his pen with his five fingers gathered together, and dips the whole right to the bottom of the inkstand, withdrawing it dripping. He sniffs ink, licks it, loves it; he would dive into it if he could. On Monday morning, fresh from home and a good Sunday scouring, he is lovely: a pair of bright eyes, sweet, yet

manly, beaming over with intelligence and mischief.

Is it possible that I am speaking of recollections now more than fifteen years old, and that I met this boy in England a few weeks ago, a captain in the artillery, a beautiful man, 6ft. high, broad-shouldered, every inch a man and a gentleman?

Not far from this charming boy is my pet aversion, the bully, not the bright, mischievous, unruly young rascal that you love, but the dull, heavy, frowning, sulky bully. This one hides from you as much as he can. He is never anxious to be asked questions. He is modest, and tries to escape notice. He hopes that if he does not disturb your peace you will not disturb his. He never shows any jealousy towards any boy who gives you right answers. His look is one of perfect indifference, and his schooldays will be remembered by the number of pants he will have worn out on school benches.

This boy is the terror of the playground,



"THE TERROR OF THE PLAYGROUND."

where he takes his revenge of the class-room. The little boys are afraid of him and have to bribe him with marbles, cakes, and chocolate into neutrality, if not into acts of kindness towards them.

There is the diffident boy who thinks that every question you ask is a "catch," and always keeps on guard. Near him is the confident one who, before he has heard the question, holds up his hand to show you he is ready to answer it. He is always helplessly wrong.

There is also the boy who spends his time trying to catch you at fault. He constantly raises objections to your statements, hoping to discover inconsistencies in them. You explain to him why he is wrong and *you* are right. He acknowledges the truth of what you say. But he is not cured. He hopes to be more fortunate next time. This boy is perhaps the most disagreeable to deal with. Your work is thankless. He can never feel sympathy for you, or gratitude for your attentions to him.

But of all the people engaged in teaching, I think the examiner is the one who gets most amusement out of the profession. His work consists in asking questions and receiving answers—especially receiving answers.

A School Board examiner once asked a class of young girls to say what coastguards were. A little girl answered: "English commerce is honest, but French commerce is not. The English Channel is infested by French pirates, and our good Queen is obliged, at her own expense, to keep men who watch all night to see that the wicked French pirates don't land while it is dark."

An examiner in the French language having

asked, in his paper, why *silence* was the only French word ending in *ence* that was of the masculine gender, received the following reply: "Because it is the only thing that women cannot keep."

I repeat it, a man with a happy disposition and a sense of humour, a man fond of children and of an observing turn of mind, may be extremely happy as a schoolmaster. And if one of the greatest sources of happiness is usefulness—and I hold it is the greatest of all—teaching will afford ample scope for satisfaction in this respect.

If you have, say, eighty boys in a class-room, you have eighty different characters to study, and it is your duty to study them all. It is interesting, and will repay you.

You owe special treatment to every one of your young patients. The disease from which they suffer, ignorance, is the same with them all, but their intellectual constitution will demand different physics. I have known boys, declared hopeless by some masters, soon develop great abilities under the care of other masters.

You should be firm, but kind to all, discriminating, diplomatic, painstaking, and ever searching. The class-room is a hospital where cheerfulness, kindness, and devotion will perform as many wonders as cleverness and science.

If you do not think so, let me advise you never to become, or to remain, schoolmasters.

