

A Drama of Youth

By Richard Middleton

For some days school had seemed to me even more tedious than usual. The long train journey in the morning, the walk through Farringdon Meat Market, which æsthetic butchers made hideous with mosaics of the intestines of animals, as if the horror of suety pavements and bloody sawdust did not suffice, the weariness of inventing lies that no one believed to account for my lateness and neglected homework, and the monotonous lessons that held me from my dreams without ever for a single instant capturing my interest—all these things made me ill with repulsion. Worst of all was the society of my cheerful, contented comrades, to avoid which I was compelled to mope in deserted corridors, the prey of a sorrow that could not be enjoyed, a hatred that was in no way stimulating. At the best of times the atmosphere of the place disgusted me. Desks, windows, and floors, and even the grass in the quadrangle, were greasy with London soot, and there was nowhere any clean air to breathe or smell. I hated the gritty asphalt that gave no peace to my feet and cut my knees when my clumsiness made me fall. I hated the long stone corridors whose echoes seemed to me to mock my hesitating footsteps when I passed from one dull class to another. I hated the stuffy malodorous class-rooms, with their whistling gas-jets and noise of inharmonious life. I would have hated the yellow fogs had they not sometimes shortened the hours of my bondage. That five hundred boys shared this horrible environment with me did not abate my sufferings a jot; for it was clear that they did not find it distasteful, and they therefore became as unsympathetic for me as the smell and noise and rotting stones of the school itself.

The masters moved as it were in another world, and, as the classes were large, they understood me as little as I understood them. They knew that I was idle and untruthful, and they could not know that I was as full of nerves as a girl, and that the mere task of getting to school every morning made me physically sick. They punished me repeatedly and in vain, for I found every hour I passed within the walls of the school an overwhelming punishment in itself, and nothing made any difference to me. I lied to them because they expected it, and because I had no words in which to express the truth if I knew it, which is doubtful. For some reason I could not tell them at home why I got on so badly at school, or no doubt they would have taken me away and sent me to a country school, as they did afterwards. Nearly all the real sorrows of childhood are due to this dumbness of the emotions; we teach children to convey facts by means of words, but we do not teach them how to make their feelings intelligible. Unfortunately, perhaps, I was very happy at night with my story-books and my dreams, so that the real misery of my days escaped the attention of the grown-up people. Of course I never even thought of doing my homework, and the labour of inventing new lies every day to account for my negligence became so wearisome that once or twice I told the truth and simply said I had not done it; but the masters held that this frankness aggravated the offence, and I had to take up anew my tiresome tale of improbable calamities. Sometimes my stories were so wild that the whole class would laugh, and I would have to laugh myself; yet on the strength of this elaborate politeness to authority I came to believe myself that I was untruthful by nature.

The boys disliked me because I was not sociable, but after a time they grew tired of bullying me and left me alone. I detested them because they were all so much alike that their numbers filled me with horror. I remember that the first day I went to school I walked round and round the quadrangle in the luncheon-hour, and every boy who passed stopped me and asked me my name

and what my father was. When I said he was an engineer every one of the boys replied, "Oh! the man who drives the engine." The reiteration of this childish joke made me hate them from the first, and afterwards I discovered that they were equally unimaginative in everything they did. Sometimes I would stand in the midst of them, and wonder what was the matter with me that I should be so different from all the rest. When they teased me, repeating the same questions over and over again, I cried easily, like a girl, without quite knowing why, for their stupidities could not hurt my reason; but when they bullied me I did not cry, because the pain made me forget the sadness of my heart. Perhaps it was because of this that they thought I was a little mad.

Grey day followed grey day, and I might in time have abandoned all efforts to be faithful to my dreams, and achieved a kind of beast-like submission that was all the authorities expected of notorious dunces. I might have taught my senses to accept the evil conditions of life in that unclean place; I might even have succeeded in making myself one with the army of shadows that thronged in the quadrangle and filled the air with meaningless noise.

But one evening when I reached home I saw by the faces of the grown-up people that something had upset their elaborate precautions for an ordered life, and I discovered that my brother, who had stayed at home with a cold, was ill in bed with the measles. For a while the significance of the news escaped me; then, with a sudden movement of my heart, which made me feel ill, I realised that probably I would have to stay away from school because of the infection. My feet tapped on the floor with joy, though I tried to appear unconcerned. Then, as I nursed my sudden hope of freedom, a little fearfully lest it should prove an illusion, a new and enchanting idea came to me. I slipped from the room, ran upstairs to my bedroom and, standing by the side of my bed, tore open my waistcoat and shirt with clumsy, trembling fingers. One, two, three, four, five! I counted the spots in a triumphant voice, and then with a sudden revulsion sat down on the bed to give the world an opportunity to settle back in its place. I had the measles, and therefore I should not have to go back to school! I shut my eyes for a minute and opened them again, but still I had the measles. The cup of happiness was at my lips, but I sipped delicately because it was full to the brim, and I would not spill a drop.

This mood did not last long. I had to run down the house and tell the world the good news. The grown-up people rebuked my joyousness, while admitting that it might be as well that I should have the measles then as later on. In spite of their air of resignation I could hardly sit still for excitement. I wanted to go into the kitchen and show my measles to the servants, but I was told to stay where I was in front of the fire while my bed was moved into my brother's room. So I stared at the glowing coals till my eyes watered, and dreamed long dreams. I would lie in bed for days, all warm from head to foot, and no one would interrupt my pleasant excursions in the world I preferred to this. If I had heard of the beneficent microbe to which I owed my happiness, I would have mentioned it in my prayers.

Late that night I called over to my brother to ask how long measles lasted. He told me to go to sleep, so that I knew he did not know the answer to my question. I lay at ease tranquilly turning the problem over in my mind. Four weeks, six weeks, eight weeks; why, if I was lucky, it would carry me through to the holidays! At all events, school was already very far away, like a nightmare remembered at noon. I said good-night to my brother, and received an irritated grunt in reply. I did not mind his surliness; tomorrow when I woke up, I would begin my dreams.

When I found myself in bed in the morning, already sick at heart because even while I slept I could not forget the long torment of my life at school, I would lie still for a minute or two and try to concentrate my shuddering mind on something pleasant, some little detail of the moment that seemed to justify hope. Perhaps I had some money to spend on a holiday to look forward to; though often enough I would find nothing to save me from realising with childish intensity the greyness of the world in which it was my fate to move. I did not want to go out into life; it was dull and cruel and greasy with soot. I only wanted to stop at home in any little quiet corner out of everybody's way and think my long, heroic thoughts. But even while I mumbled my hasty breakfast and ran to the station to catch my train the atmosphere of the school was all about me, and my dreamer's courage trembled and vanished.

When I woke from sleep the morning after my good fortune, I did not at first realise the extent of my happiness; I only knew that deep in my heart I was conscious of some great cause for joy. Then my eyes, still dim with sleep, discovered that I was in my brother's bedroom, and in a flash the joyful truth was revealed to me. I sat up and hastily examined my body to make sure that the rash had not disappeared, and then my spirit sang a song of thanksgiving of which the refrain was, "I have the measles!" I lay back in bed and enjoyed the exquisite luxury of thinking of the evils that I had escaped. For once my morbid sense of atmosphere was a desirable possession and helpful to my happiness. It was delightful to pull the bedclothes over my shoulders and conceive the feelings of a small boy who should ride to town in a jolting train, walk through a hundred kinds of dirt and a hundred disgusting smells to win to prison at last, where he should perform meaningless tasks in the distressing society of five hundred mocking apes. It was pleasant to see the morning sun and feel no sickness in my stomach, no sense of depression in my tired brain. Across the room my brother gurgled and choked in his sleep, and in some subtle way contributed to my ecstasy of tranquillity. I was no longer concerned for the duration of my happiness. I felt that this peace that I had desired so long must surely last for ever.

To the grown-up folk who came to see us during the day—the doctor, certain germ-proof unmarried aunts, truculently maternal, and the family itself—my brother's case was far more interesting than mine because he had caught the measles really badly. I just had them comfortably; enough to be infectious, but not enough to feel ill, so I was left in pleasant solitude while the women competed for the honour of smoothing my brother's pillow and tiptoeing in a fidgeting manner round his bed. I lay on my back and looked with placid interest at the cracks in the ceiling. They were like the main roads in a map, and I amused myself by building little houses beside them—houses full of books and warm hearthrugs, and with a nice pond lively with tadpoles in the garden of each. From the windows of the houses you could watch all the traffic that went along the road, men and women and horses, and best of all, the boys going to school in the morning—boys who had not done their homework and who would be late for prayers. When I talked about the cracks to my brother he said that perhaps the ceiling would give way and fall on our heads. I thought about this too, and found it quite easy to picture myself lying in the bed with a smashed head, and blood all over the pillow. Then it occurred to me that the plaster might smash me all over, and my impressions of Farringdon Meat Market added a gruesome vividness to my conception of the consequences. I always found it pleasant to imagine horrible things; it was only the reality that made me sick.

Towards nightfall I became a little feverish, and I heard the grown-ups say that they would give me some medicine later on. Medicine for me signified the nauseous powders of Dr. Gregory, so I pretended to be asleep every time any one came into the room, in order to escape my destiny, until at last some one stood by my bedside so long that I became cramped and had to

pretend to wake up. Then I was given the medicine, and found to my surprise that it was delicious and tasted of oranges. I felt that there had been a mistake somewhere, but my head sat a little heavily on my shoulders, and I would not trouble to fix the responsibility. This time I fell asleep in earnest, and woke in the middle of the night to find my brother standing by my bed, making noises with his mouth. I thought that he had gone mad, and would kill me perhaps, but after a time he went back to bed saying all the bad words he knew. The excitement had made me wide awake, and I tossed about thinking of the cracked ceiling above my head. The room was quite dark, and I could see nothing, so that it might be bulging over me without my knowing it. I stood up in bed and stretched up my arm, but I could not reach the ceiling; yet when I lay down again I felt as though it had sunk so far that it was touching my hair, and I found it difficult to breathe in such a small space. I was afraid to move for fear of bringing it down upon me, and in a short while the pressure upon my body became unbearable, and I shrieked out for help. Some one came in and lit the gas, and found me looking very foolish and my brother delirious. I fell asleep almost immediately, but was conscious through my dreams that the gas was still alight and that they were watching by my brother's bedside.

In the morning he was very ill and I was no longer feverish, so it was decided to move me back into my own bedroom. I was wrapped up in the bedclothes and told to sit still while the bed was moved. I sat in an armchair, feeling like a bundle of old clothes, and looking at the cracks in the ceiling which seemed to me like roads. I knew that I had already lost all importance as an invalid, but I was very happy nevertheless. For from the window of one of my little houses I was watching the boys going to school, and my heart was warm with the knowledge of my own emancipation. As my legs hung down from the chair I found it hard to keep my slippers on my stockingless feet.

III

There followed for me a period of deep and unbroken satisfaction. I was soon considered well enough to get up, and I lived pleasantly between the sofa and the fireside waiting on my brother's convalescence, for it had been settled that I should go away with him to the country for a change of air. I read Dickens and Dumas in English, and made up long stories in which I myself played important but not always heroic parts. By means of intellectual exercises of this kind I achieved a tranquillity like that of an old man, fearing nothing, desiring nothing, regretting nothing. I no longer reckoned the days or the hours, content to enjoy a passionless condition of being that asked no questions and sought none of me, nor did I trouble to number my journeys in the world of infinite shadows. But in that long hour of peace I realised that in some inexplicable way I was interested in the body of a little boy, whose hands obeyed my unspoken wishes, whose legs sprawled before me on the sofa. I knew that before I met him, this boy, whose littleness surprised me, had suffered ill dreams in a nameless world, and now, worn out with tears and humiliation and dread of life, he slept, and while he slept I watched him dispassionately, as I would have looked at a crippled daddy-long-legs. To have felt compassion for him would have disturbed the tranquillity that was a necessary condition of my existence, so I contented myself with noticing his presence and giving him a small part in the pageant of my dreams. He was not so beautiful as I wished all my comrades to be, and he was besides very small; but shadows are amiable play-friends, and they did not blame him because he cried when he was teased and did not cry when he was beaten, or because the wild unreason of his sorrow made him find cause for tears in the very fullness of his rare enjoyment. For the first time in my life it seems to me I saw

this little boy as he was, squat-bodied, big-headed, thick-lipped, and with a face swept clean of all emotions save where his two great eyes glowed with a sulky fire under exaggerated eyebrows. I noticed his grimy nails, his soiled collar, his unbrushed clothes, the patent signs of defeat changing to utter rout, and from the heights of my great peace I was not sorry for him. He was like that, other boys were different, that was all.

And then on a day fear returned to my heart, and my newly discovered Utopia was no more. I do not know what chance word of the grown-up people or what random thought of mine did the mischief; but of a sudden I realised that for all my dreaming I was only separated by a measurable number of days from the horror of school. Already I was sick with fear, and in place of my dreams I distressed myself by visualising the scenes of the life I dreaded—the Meat Market, the dusty shadows of the gymnasium, the sombre reticence of the great hall. All that my lost tranquillity had given me was a keener sense of my own being; my smallness, my ugliness, my helplessness in the face of the great cruel world. Before I had sometimes been able to dull my emotions in unpleasant circumstances and thus achieve a dogged calm; now I was horribly conscious of my physical sensations, and, above all, of that deadly sinking in my stomach called fear. I clenched my hands, telling myself that I was happy, and trying to force my mind to pleasant thoughts; but though my head swam with the effort, I continued to be conscious that I was afraid. In the midst of my mental struggles I discovered that even if I succeeded in thinking happy things I should still have to go back to school after all, and the knowledge that thought could not avert calamity was like a bruise on my mind. I pinched my arms and legs, with the idea that immediate pain would make me forget my fears for the future; but I was not brave enough to pinch them really hard, and I could not forget the motive for my action. I lay back on the sofa and kicked the cushions with my feet in a kind of forlorn anger. Thought was no use, nothing was any use, and my stomach was sick, sick with fear. And suddenly I became aware of an immense fatigue that overwhelmed my mind and my body, and made me feel as helpless as a little child. The tears that were always near my eyes streamed down my face, making my cheek sore against the wet cushion, and my breath came in painful, ridiculous gulps. For a moment I made an effort to control my grief; and then I gave way utterly, crying with my whole body like a little child, until, like a little child, I fell asleep.

When I awoke the room was grey with dusk, and I sat up with a swaying head, glad to hide the shame of my foolish swollen face amongst the shadows. My mouth was still salt with tears, and I was very thirsty, but I was always anxious to hide my weakness from other people, and I was afraid that if I asked for something to drink they would see that I had been crying. The fire had gone out while I slept, and I felt cold and stiff, but my abandonment of restraint had relieved me, and my fear was now no more than a vague unrest. My mind thought slowly but very clearly. I saw that it was a pity that I had not been more ill than I was, for then, like my brother, I should have gone away for a month instead of a fortnight. As it was, everybody laughed at me because I looked so well, and said they did not believe that I had been ill at all. If I had thought of it earlier I might have been able to make myself worse somehow or other, but now it was too late. When the maid came in and lit the gas for tea she blamed me for letting the fire out, and told me that I had a dirty face. I was glad of the chance to slip away and wash my burning cheeks in cold water. When I had finished and dried my face on the rough towel I looked at myself in the glass. I looked as if I had been to the seaside for a holiday, my cheeks were so red!

That night as I lay sleepless in my bed, seeking for a cool place between the sheets in which to rest my hot feet, the sickness of fear returned to me, and I knew that I was lost. I shut my eyes tightly, but I could not shut out the vivid pictures of school life that my memory had stored up

for my torment; I beat my head against the pillow, but I could not change my thoughts. I recalled all the possible events that might interfere with my return to school, a new illness, a railway accident, even suicide, but my reason would not accept these romantic issues. I was helpless before my destiny, and my destiny made me afraid.

And then, perhaps I was half asleep or fond with fear, I leapt out of bed and stood in the middle of the room to meet life and fight it. The hem of my nightshirt tickled my shin and my feet grew cold on the carpet; but though I stood ready with my fists clenched I could see no adversary among the friendly shadows, I could hear no sound but the drumming of the blood against the walls of my head. I got back into bed and pulled the bedclothes about my chilled body. It seemed that life would not fight fair, and being only a little boy and not wise like the grown-up people, I could find no way in which to outwit it.

IV

My growing panic in the face of my imminent return to school spoilt my holiday, and I watched my brother's careless delight in the Surrey pine-woods with keen envy. It seemed to me that it was easy for him to enjoy himself with his month to squander; and in any case he was a healthy, cheerful boy who liked school well enough when he was there, though of course he liked holidays better. He had scant patience with my moods, and secretly I too thought they were wicked. We had been taught to believe that we alone were responsible for our sins, and it did not occur to me that the causes of my wickedness might lie beyond my control. The beauty of the scented pines and the new green of the bracken took my breath and filled my heart with a joy that changed immediately to overwhelming grief; for I could not help contrasting this glorious kind of life with the squalid existence to which I must return so soon. I realised so fiercely the force of the contrast that I was afraid to make friends with the pines and admire the palm-like beauty of the bracken lest I should increase my subsequent anguish; and I hid myself in dark corners of the woods to fight the growing sickness of my body with the feeble weapons of my panic-stricken mind. There followed moments of bitter sorrow, when I blamed myself for not taking advantage of my hours of freedom, and I hurried along the sandy lanes in a desolate effort to enjoy myself before it was too late.

In spite of the miserable manner in which I spent my days, the fortnight seemed to pass with extraordinary rapidity. As the end approached, the people around me made it difficult for me to conceal my emotions, the grown-ups deducing from my melancholy that I was tired of holidays and would be glad to get back to school, and my brother burdening me with idle messages to the other boys—messages that shattered my hardly formed hope that school did not really exist. I stood ever on the verge of tears, and I dreaded meal-times, when I had to leave my solitude, lest some turn of the conversation should set me weeping before them all, and I should hear once more what I knew very well myself, that it was a shameful thing for a boy of my age to cry like a little girl. Yet the tears were there and the hard lump in my throat, and I could not master them, though I stood in the woods while the sun set with a splendour that chilled my heart, and tried to drain my eyes dry of their rebellious, bitter waters. I would choke over my tea and be rebuked for bad manners.

When the last day came that I had feared most of all, I succeeded in saying goodbye to the people at the house where I had stopped, and in making the mournful train journey home without disgracing myself. It seemed as though a merciful stupor had dulled my senses to a mute acceptance of my purgatory. I slept in the train, and arrived home so sleepy that I was allowed to

go straight to bed without comment. For once my body dominated my mind, and I slipped between the sheets in an ecstasy of fatigue and fell asleep immediately.

Something of this rare mood lingered with me in the morning, and it was not until I reached the Meat Market that I realised the extent of my misfortune. I saw the greasy, red-faced men with their hands and aprons stained with blood. I saw the hideous carcasses of animals, the masses of entrails, the heaps of repulsive hides; but most clearly of all I saw an ugly sad little boy with a satchel of books on his back set down in the midst of an enormous and hostile world. The windows and stones of the houses were black with soot, and before me there lay school, the place that had never brought me anything but sorrow and humiliation. I went on, but as I slid on the cobbles, my mind caught an echo of peace, the peace of pine-woods and heather, the peace of the library at home, and, my body trembling with revulsion, I leant against a lamp-post, deadly sick. Then I turned on my heels and walked away from the Meat Market and the school for ever. As I went I cried, sometimes openly before all men, sometimes furtively before shop-windows, dabbing my eyes with a wet pocket-handkerchief, and gasping for breath. I did not care where my feet led me, I would go back to school no more.

I had played truant for three days before the grown-ups discovered that I had not returned to school. They treated me with that extraordinary consideration that they always extended to our great crimes and never to our little sins of thoughtlessness or high spirits. The doctor saw me. I was told that I would be sent to a country school after the next holidays, and meanwhile I was allowed to return to my sofa and my dreams. I lay there and read Dickens and was very happy. As a rule the cat kept me company, and I was pleased with his placid society, though he made my legs cramped. I thought that I too would like to be a cat.