JACQUES BONHOMME.

By MAX O'RELL, Author of "Jonathan and His Continent," "John Bull and His Island," "John Bull's Daughters," Etc.

I—THE FRENCH AT SCHOOL.

How Mental Pabulum Is Forced Upon the Young Gaul with Very Little Amusement—A Poor Preparation for Life's Duties.

Our dear parents in France are fond of telling their children that there are no days so happy in life as school days.

After I had tasted what school life really was I can well remember that I formed a very poor idea of what awaited me beyond the school gates.

My opinion is that when French parents have made up their minds to send a boy 10 years old to a lycee till he is 20, they have sentenced him to something very near, in severity, to ten years' penal servitude.

Winter and summer the French schoolboy rises at 5 in the morning; or, rather, he is supposed to do so. The first bell rings at 5 a. m., to tell him he is to get up; a second one rings at 5:25, to inform him that in five minutes he must be down; and a third bell, at 5:30, enjoins him to leave the dormitory. Of course he rises at 5:25, puts on his clothes with prodigious rapidity, gives himself a dry polish, a la Squeers, with a towel, or more often with his knuckles, and is quite ready at 5:30 to go down to the study room. From this you will easily infer that a pint of water goes a long way in a dormitory of sixty French boys. In the study room, under the supervision of an usher, called pion, and of whom I shall have more to say by and by, he prepares his lessons for the professors till 7:50. Breakfast is ready at 8. Considering what the menu of this repast consists of, I have always wondered how it could take the cook so long to get it ready. During the free ten minutes that precede breakfast time, a few boys go and have a wash. These go by the name of aristos (aristocrats).

The three meals of the day bear the grand names of breakfast, dinner and supper. Breakfast consists of a plate of soup and a large piece of bread. Most boys keep chocolate or jam, or buy some of the porter, to eat with their bread. At 8:30 they have to be in their respective class rooms with their masters. The class lasts two hours, after which they return to the study room to prepare until 12 for the afternoon class. From 12 to 1 they dine and play. Both these words would convey to an English mind a meaning that it has not in French.

The dinner generally consists of stews and vegetables, swimming in mysterious sauces. The bread is ad libitum. When a boy has finished his piece he holds up his hand as a sign he is ready for another. A man holding a basket full of cut loaves is stationed in such a position as will allow him to fill all those pairs of empty hands as fast as they are put up. He flings, the boys catch; it is quite a dexterous game, I assure you. If a boy misses the piece intended for him, his neighbor not infrequently catches and pockets it, partly as a precaution against possible pangs of hunger before the next meal, partly for the love of disobeying the rules, one of which enacts that no food shall be pocketed. The drink is called abondance, and is made up of a good tablespoonful of wine in a decanter of water.

As for play, it has to take place in a more or less large yard, surrounded by high walls, very much like a prison walk. Not a tree, not a blade of grass to be seen; a mere graveled yard, nothing more. There the boys walk two by two, or in larger groups—the big ones talking politics, and smoking cigarettes inside their coats, while the usher is at a distance; the little ones indulging in a game of top or marbles in one of the corners. At 1 o'clock they are to be in their places in the study room till 2, when it is time to go to the afternoon class, which lasts till 4 o'clock. On leaving the masters, to be immediately handed over to the ushers, they each receive at 4 a piece of bread, which they are allowed to eat in the yard with whatever relish they may possess, or wish to buy of the porter. They play till 5:30, when they return to the study room to do their lessons for the following day.

At 8 o'clock supper is ready. To this, like to all their other meals, they go two by two, after having previously all formed into ranks in the yard. The supper consists of boiled beef, or a course or two of vegetables; sometimes an apple or a few cherries, according to the season, brighten the not very festive board. In my time cherries were the most popular dessert; after having refreshed the inner boy, it provided him with missiles, which were turned to good account on the spot when the usher had his back turned. For drink, the mixture as before. After this frugal repast the boys repair, two by two, to their respective dormitories. Those who care to indulge in a little washing may do so before going to bed, so as to be clean the following day. I say "those who care," for never will an usher make a remark to a French boy over 12 (when he is no longer under the supervision of a matron) because he is dirty, not even in the refectory. Provided he has a cravat on, nobody will scold him for having a dirty neck. If cleanliness is next to godliness, the French schoolboy is most ungodly.

On Thursday he gets a holiday—that is to say, that no class is held; but he has to be in the study room the whole morning and evening. In the afternoon he goes for a walk. Here again an Englishman would not understand, without some explanation, what is meant by the French schoolboy's walk. The college is divided into big, middle and small boys. Each division is formed into ranks, and thus, two by two, accompanied by ushers, the boys are marched through the streets. Silence is compulsory while in town, and the ranks are not to be broken until the little battalion has reached the country. There they can play, walk or sit on the grass, under the eyes of the ushers, for an hour or two, when the ranks are formed again and they are marched back to what I have no hesitation in calling their barracks, not to say their prison. On Sundays, the boy who has his parents or guardian in town is allowed to go home for the day if he is not kept in for one of those thousand and one petty offenses invented at pleasure by the ushers and their supporters.

On leaving school, on Sunday morning, he receives an exeat, on which the hour of his departure is marked, and the parents are to write on it at what time he has reached home. He has to be back at school at 10 p. m., punctually, and again his parents have to write on the exeat at what time he left their house. He generally returns on Sunday night in a comatose state, and the home fare tells sadly on the work he does on Mondays. He gets fewer holidays than the more fortunate British schoolboy; two months in the summer, two or three days at the beginning of the year, and a week or ten days at Easter. Such is the happy life that boys lead in French public schools. Fortunately there is a great deal of gay philosophy in the French mind, and the close friendship that springs up between the schoolboys and their esprit de corps help them to endure this secluded life of hardship and privation.

Now let us consider the influence this kind of life has on the French boy's character, what work he does at school, and who are the men that look after him. Shut in by the high walls of his prison, the poor French schoolboy is only too prone to compare himself to the different classes of society which he considers persecuted—that is, the inferior classes; and he shows his sympathy with them by adopting the ideas of an ignorant democracy, and by often expressing them in language which would be repugnant to his dignity if he were free. Poor little fellows! When they can evade the porter's vigilance, and run across the road to buy a pennyworth of sweets, they feel like perfect heroes of romance. On their return, their schoolfellows flock round them to sniff a little of the fresh and free air that is brought inside the walls. If the young scamps are punished for their escapade, they bear it like champions of liberty who have fought for the good cause, and are looked up to by their comrades as martyrs and heroes.

Under the circumstances, it is not surprising that they should now and then show a spirit of rebellion. Suppose, for instance, that some privilege which the pupils have long enjoyed and looked upon as their right has been withdrawn rightly or wrongly, no matter which. In such a case as this English schoolboys would hold a meeting, probably presided over by one of their masters, and they would draw up a petition, which they would send to the head master. But in French schools meetings are prohibited. What will the boys do then? As I have described elsewhere, they will probably retire to a dormitory, there to sulk and protest. They will erect barricades, lock the doors, victual the intrenchments for a few hours and prepare for a struggle.

Rebellion has wonderful charms for them; they are insurgents, therefore they are heroes. Don't ask them whether their cause is good or bad. This matters little; it will be sanctified by the revolution; the main thing is to play at the "sovereign people." These hot headed youths will stand a siege as earnestly as if they were defending their native soil against the Prussians. Dictionaries, inkstands, boots, bedroom furniture, such are the missiles that are pressed into service in the glorious battle of liberty. But alas for youthful valor! It all fades before the pleadings of an empty stomach; the struggle has to be abandoned, the citadel forsaken, the arms laid down. The misguided ones are received back into the fold, to be submitted to stricter discipline than ever; the heroic instigators of the little fete are in the end restored to the tender care of their mammas, or, in other words, expelled from the school.

Corporal punishment is banished from all schools in France. If a master were to strike a boy, the odds are ten to one that the boy would defend himself, and threaten the master with the first object—inkpot or book—he could lay his hand on. Boys are punished by means of long and weary impositions. If boarders, they are kept in on Sundays, and thus prevented from going home. This is a terrible punishment. When they seem incorrigible they are expelled. And for a boy to be expelled from a French lycee is no light matter; for the doors of all the others are closed to him, and the faculties may even refuse to allow him to stand as a candidate for the university degrees. His prospect in life may be ruined forever; for in France a man who is neither B. A. nor B. Sc. cannot study medicine or the law; he cannot enter the military schools, or be a candidate for any of the government posts at home or abroad. Business is the only opening left to him.

From the time table that I have given at the beginning, it will be easily inferred that, if the French schoolboy plays less than the British one, he works much more. But with what results? The classes in French lycees contain from eighty to a hundred boys. They are generally composed of some ten pupils of extraordinary capacities or industry, of about twenty who follow the lectures with some profit, of twenty more who follow them anyhow, and of thirty, forty, and even sometimes fifty poor boys, neglected, forgotten, who do and learn nothing, and are mere wall flowers. They are all promoted by seniority—that premium still given in France to stupidity, as M. Leon Say once remarked in the French senate. I remember schoolfellows of eighteen and nineteen in the highest form who did not know their declensions. Boys may be attentive or not, as they please—that is their business. Provided they do not disturb the peace, nothing more is required of them in the upper forms. They may even go to sleep, and the master will seldom take the trouble to wake them up. If the boy is not likely to do honor to his teaching, he does not think it worth his while to concern himself about him.

With such large classes as I have described, boys cannot and do not receive individual attention from the masters, who deliver lectures to them, but certainly do not give them lessons. With the amount of work that clever and industrious boys go through, each class turns out at the end of the year at least ten splendid scholars. As for the rest, you see twenty good average boys, twenty poor ones, and from thirty to fifty hopeless ignoramuses. Each class has to go through a course prescribed by the minister of public instruction, and no master has a right to read a book with his pupils, not even the passage of a book, that is not down on the ministerial programme. A professor who carried his interest in his pupils the length of introducing a new book in his class would probably have his zeal rewarded with a mastership in the college of some little out of the way town in France, or perhaps in Algeria. By this governmental system of fuss and intrusion, it is not only the talent of the pupil that is stifled, but it is also the talent of the master that is hampered.

What is to be admired in French schools is that the boys get on very well with one another. Friendship sprung up at school often lasts a lifetime.

The boys stick by each other to such a point that, rather than tell on an offender, they will all allow themselves to be punished for his offense, even though the punishment should amount to the much dreaded detention on Sunday.

The hero of the French collegien is the top boy of the class—not the quickest runner or the best athlete. The dunce is the only comrade he despises. A boy who has carried off a prize at the great Sorbonne examination is for him the object of an unlimited admiration, and he feels inclined to lift his cap when he passes near him.

The head of the college is called proviseur. He does no teaching. He represents high authority—that is to say the government. He is a saluting machine. He stands in the middle of the quadrangle as the boys proceed to their respective class rooms. All take off their caps as they pass before the mighty potentate. The proviseur does not know personally more than ten or twenty of the thousand boys trusted to his care. The work and discipline of the college are under the supervision of a censor. The masters, most of whom are ex-scholars of the celebrated Ecole Normale Superieure, are eminent men, but they never mix with the boys out of school hours. They are much respected by their pupils, in whom admiration for talent is innate. The ushers, or pions, are mere watch dogs. They see that the boys are silent in the study rooms, the refectory and the dormitory. They are ignorant, ill bred outcasts, whom the boys despise from the bottom of their hearts.

When a French boy leaves school at 19 he is supposed to be prepared for a public part.