CHAPTER XVI.

IN WHICH MR. MIDDLETON READS A STORY, AND EXCITES MUCH INTEREST.

IT was now early in December. Time, who treats us as we treat him, had flown swiftly and pleasantly for our little friends. An unbroken round of play and study had developed both mind and body. For many, many days not a single serious unpleasantness had marred the general good-feeling. With the departure of Peters, a local golden age seemed to have dawned. Richards had become one of the foremost boys in good. He had given up his former friends, and was now constantly in the company of the best and most promising students. And to our young friends in particular, with whom he had become intimate, he proved to be an acquisition. It soon appeared that he was a boy of much general information. For his age he had read much. But this, in fact, had been at the root of many of his faults. He had not been carefully watched over at home; and, following his bent, had given much of his time to reading cheap, sensational, juvenile stories, which, without being always ill-intentioned or positively bad, hold up to their readers false ideals of beauty and of heroism. There are many earnest and generous-natured boys who, without even perceiving it, are led astray through such writings. The harm is rarely

done with the perusal of a single volume, or even of a second or a third: it is the joint result of many.

One day Richards brought Mr. Middleton a cheap, paper-covered book, asking him whether he considered it fit reading.

"I never saw any harm in it myself, sir," said Richards, frankly. "But since late events, I've come to think that my judgment isn't so good on such subjects."

"Thank you, Richards," said Mr. Middleton. "I am glad to see that you are in so earnest a temper. You are probably right in doubting. I think, on the face of it, that this book is far more dangerous than you can imagine at present. However, I shall examine it more carefully, and give you an honest criticism."

The book was an account of a boy's adventures at school and elsewhere. It was written in a crisp, clipped style, and represented the hero as a lad of sixteen, who feared nothing, who was witty, inventive, full of animal spirits, and, in short, possessed apparently of every quality capable of awakening the enthusiasm of young readers.

It failed, however, to awaken Mr. Middleton's sympathy, and on the following day, towards the end of class, he said: "I am going to read you a little story."

There was a buzz of enthusiasm, and a great shifting of positions. It is impossible for the average boy, while in the class-room, to hear the announcement of a story with equanimity. Every one brightens up, and adjusts himself to what he considers to be the most receptive attitude. Those

in the back seats are quite wretched unless allowed to move towards the front; while those in front wish to get yet nearer the teacher's desk. All crowd together, as far as the professor will admit, and glance sternly at any luckless youth who may chance to cough or make the least undue noise. There is a wondrous fascination for youngsters in a story. All boys are idealists.

"*Conticuere omnes, intentique ora tenebant.*" And Mr. Middleton began his reading. It was a chapter from the book which Richards had given him. The school which the hero attended was to have its yearly picnic. One of the professors, who spoke broken English and was the butt of all the scholars, had signified his intention of attending on horseback, but possessing no equestrian skill, was very anxious to obtain a suitable steed. Here the funny hero came to the rescue. He persuaded the professor that he knew just what kind of a horse would suit him; then went to a livery stable and hired the most villainous nag in the establishment. Of course a great many ludicrous adventures follow; and the professor simply succeeds in escaping with life and limb. As Mr. Middleton reads of the professor's predicament, all the boys seem amused, while many laugh heartily. Percy, the only exception, appears to be pained.

"So you laugh, do you?" said the teacher, throwing down the book. "Well, what are you laughing at?"

The smiles vanished under Mr. Middleton's serious glance. Everybody began to wonder whether there had not been some mistake in their approbation.

"I ask again, why did you laugh? There must be some reason. You don't laugh when a sum in fractions is explained. You don't laugh at the Latin verbs. Why did you laugh just now?"

"I think," said Harry Quip, who was seldom puzzled for an answer, "we laughed because the story is written so funnily."

"That's good," said the prefect. "I am glad that you have a reason. So, then, it seems the story is funnily told. But now I ask, is the story itself really funny?"

The class knit its brows. This was a hard question.

Suddenly Percy's hand went up.

"Well, Percy."

"It seems to me, Mr. Middleton, that the story itself is really not funny, but is made to appear so by the author's manner of treating it."

"That's a very good answer indeed. You are quite right. The story itself is very sad. And now, boys, let me tell you what you have been laughing at: you have been laughing at the rowdyish actions of a rowdy."

The boys gazed at each other in a dazed fashion.

"But don't think I am angry or disappointed with you," pursued Mr. Middleton. "You are too young as yet to perceive the underside of such things at once. Just as a skilled counterfeiter can palm off his false money on many ordinary grown people, and on very intelligent children, so a writer may cause boys to accept as really good what is, in point of fact, utterly vile."

Richards, who had given every word his utmost attention, here raised his hand.

"Well, Charlie?"

"Please, Mr. Middleton, show us how that story is bad. I began to see in a dim sort of way that what you say is true, but nothing is very clear to me."

"Very good. Now let us consider what the substance of the story is. Here we have, to begin with, an awkward man, but still a teacher, and consequently entitled to the respect of the students. He wishes to ride to a picnic. The hero, knowing that the teacher is no horseman, promises to procure him a gentle horse. He promises in all seeming sincerity. He lies. The story, then, is founded on a lie. What does the hero actually do? He hires a veritable spit-fire. Now, will some one please answer me this question? Suppose a man utterly ignorant of even the rudiments of horsemanship undertakes to mount a dangerous animal under the impression that it is quiet and tame, what will happen? What do you say, Sommers?"

"The chances are that he'll be killed."

"And you, Percy?"

"Oh dear! I can't bear to think of it."

"And you, Playfair?"

"Well, if he weren't killed, at least there'd be a good many chances to nothing that he'd be hurt—get his leg or his arm broken, anyhow."

"Just so. He might be killed—that is possible. But it would certainly be extraordinary if he were to come off unhurt. In planning a trick, we have no right to trust our victim's escaping serious evil through extraordinary chances. Now this jolly hero, who, according to the story, is wise enough to be responsible for his actions,—and old enough

too, being sixteen,—deliberately, or at least recklessly, and for the sake of a laugh, imperils the limbs, if not the life, of a human being, of one who is over him and certainly entitled to his respect."

The boys looked at each other: how the face of the story had already changed!

"This brings me back to the lie," resumed Mr. Middleton after a short pause. "It was a lie told concerning a very serious matter. It was a lie the telling of which might result, in its after-effects, in a broken arm or leg, in long sickness, or even in death. Such a lie is indicative of gross thoughtlessness; it is unworthy of any story-book hero.

"And further, what is the result and object of this joke? Its object is to bring ridicule and insult upon a teacher, upon one who takes the place, in a certain sense, of parents. Its result is to subject him to all manner of indignities, to cause a crowd of boys to scoff and jeer at a man who, whatever his short-comings may have been, was still entitled to their respect and obedience."

"But, Mr. Middleton," Harry Quip inquired, "how was it we didn't notice these things ourselves? We all thought it was simply a funny story, and saw no great harm in it; now, of course, we see it differently."

"The reason is simple enough, Harry. The author quite cleverly smooths over the real evil. In a counterfeit bill only a sharp and practised eye can detect the fraud. Now that you are young, many things which are wrong may escape you in such a story. In fact, to analyze such a passage as I have just read supposes in a boy a power of reasoning which, as a rule, is developed later on in

life. What is true of this book is true of thousands of the like publications. They are written in such a way as to catch the young imagination; but their effect in the long run is to cause boys unconsciously to admire what is ignoble and sinful. I have known boys to read these books for a time, and not be corrupted. But they were warned of the danger betimes. Such reading indulged in continually cannot fail of distorting all that is truly noble in the best disposition."

Mr. Middleton spoke at some length on this point. His words produced a decided effect. Richards and Sommers, in particular, entered into a solemn agreement between themselves to give up the dime-novel *et id genus omne* for good and all.

But the prefect's words effected even more. It set the boys to looking up good books; and here Percy proved himself of real service. The amount he had read was indeed great, and so careful had his mother been in the selection of his books that, by a certain acquired delicacy of taste, he could now detect what was vile in juvenile literature, and perceive what was true and beautiful. He it was of the entire class who had understood at once the underlying baseness of the picnic story.

Under his direction, Tom, Harry, and a number of their classmates set about reading the choicest books for the young. So regular were they in their method that their proceedings were virtually equivalent to a junior literary academy. Of a cold December recreation-day, they would, with permission, assemble in a class-room, and discuss with pleasure and profit their readings. Even Richards' former misdirected pursuits in this line proved to be

of some use. He brought up for discussion many of the incidents he had read, and, with the nobler ideals which their present course of reading and the prefect's instructions had given them, these young blue-stockings were quick to recognize the deformity of such writings.

In short, while Percy had been transformed by his friends into something of a true boy, with a true boy's love for out-door sports, they, in turn, following the law of action and reaction, had been transformed by him into lovers of books. He had received much, but he had given more.

Since his first introduction to the reader, our little friend has changed not a little. His face has become fuller. But pretty as it formerly was in its delicacy and refinement, it is now beautiful in its rosy healthfulness. He is, if anything, a trifle stouter too. But his hands! Ah! Tom Playfair would now think twice before asking Percy to strike him straight from the shoulder. Percy, under Tom's special direction and training, has been using boxing-gloves very regularly for several weeks, and, in addition, his hands have been hardened by continued exercise, his legs have been developed with much running; his whole constitution, in fine, has been built up and strengthened by plenty of open-air life. He is still the same little gentleman, but he is more.

A brook may run smoothly enough for a time; but it will surely come sooner or later upon obstacles. So life cannot slip by without troubles; even the best are not exempted.

Percy, just two days before Christmas, met with an adventure which came very nigh—

But let us give it the benefit of a separate chapter.