

## A FRENCH SCHOOL IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

**J**EAN Francois Marmontel remotely recalls our Pepys. It is true that his memoirs, from which the following account of his school days are culled, are not a diary, and were written late in life for his children's benefit. But they give a vivid picture of his times, from his peasant home life (after all, not so wretched as might be expected from Victorian literature), through school, college, a brief and 'distasteful' ecclesiastical career as a tonsured abbè, and the intrigues, amorous and otherwise, of Parisian life. He writes charmingly as a man of letters, but his confessions are no less candid than those of our Samuel. The spirit of the times made any watering down for his children's eyes quite superfluous. He was the friend of Voltaire and Madame de Pompadour, and his office of Perpetual Secretary to the French Academy brought him into contact with all who were worth knowing. He was never in the first rank of literature, but was 'successful in all styles.' He attained to European celebrity chiefly through his *Belisaire*, a work deprecating the use of carnal weapons in spiritual warfare. The book was fortunate enough to incur the wrath of the Doctors of the Sorbonne, who drew up an 'indculus' of twenty-seven condemned propositions. Voltaire christened the list 'indculus ridiculus,' and, in conjunction with others, succeeded in making the learned Doctors appear exceedingly foolish.

In spite of his moral obliquity, Marmontel stands out as a likeable, and in some ways, admirable character. He was a loyal 'pal' (it will be noticed that

### *A French School in the Eighteenth Century*

all his troubles at school were caused by fealty to his comrades or class), a most devout son and relation, for in his direst straits he maintained or subsidised numerous members of his family. Having prefaced this much, it may be taken for granted that his account of his school life gives an entirely candid and truthful representation.

At the age of eleven he was sent to a small Jesuit college at Mauriac, where he remained for six years. In this school there was a system of 'houses,' kept by worthy artizans and their wives. Each pupil provided his own supply of food weekly. In Marmontel's case, two or three pounds of beef, a rye loaf, some bacon, and a small cheese—all the provisions were handed over to the 'bourgeoise' or good wife of the house, and all shared alike in them. If any delicacy were sent for some festal occasion, the name of the recipient was concealed, and all partook of the treat. The good wife provided fire, light, and vegetables for twenty-five sous per month for each boarder! The cost of Marmontel's maintenance at Mauriac, exclusive of clothes, amounted to 80 or 100 francs per year. It is to be presumed that his education was gratuitous, as there is no mention of school fees. The 'distinctive feature of the school was the maintenance of discipline by the pupils themselves.' In the houses, which took about six boarders, boys from all classes worked together at the same table. The lazy and unruly ones soon became bored by the enforced stillness and silence, and usually reformed. Habits of neatness, care for clothes, stationery and books, and economy in general were insisted on. Stupid and backward boys were helped and encouraged by the seniors. The one unpardonable crime was slackness. Sometimes a whole house became infected by the disease. It was then ostracised by the other houses, and parents were warned not to send

## *Blackfriars*

their sons there. It was thus in the interests of the 'bourgeois' to have no idler in his house; boys were often sent away for inattention to lessons.

Games and sports took a secondary place, but they were not wanting. In winter on the ice and snow, and at other times in the country, there were races, expeditions, boxing, wrestling and quoits. The younger boys caught cray fish in the brooks, while the seniors fished for trout and eel. After the harvest quail were netted. On the return journey fields of green peas were raided. Although 'the boys would not have stolen a pin,' it was part of their code that 'eating was not stealing.'

One can only gather from Marmontel's silence that moral problems, such as trouble us, were non-existent, for he would not have failed to mention any scandal. He was no pietist, or friend of the Society of Jesus, in spite of the many kindnesses he received from its members. He shares Pascal's views on that subject. We may therefore conclude that he had no ulterior object in speaking of the benefits of the religious atmosphere in the school, and in particular of the help to morality afforded 'by a frank and humble confession of the most secret faults each month.' The aim of the school teaching was a sound classical education, and it does not appear that the eighteenth century would have anything to learn from us with regard to method. *Belles Lettres*, the native tongue and literature, held a prominent place. Marmontel appears to have received an exceptional amount of private tuition and help from his masters, but any boy who managed to work his way through the school, in spite of stiff examinations for promotion, and the rigorous discipline of the houses, would leave, if not a gentleman in the society sense, at least a scholar with habits which would stand him in good stead in life.

### *A French School in the Eighteenth Century*

The scrapes into which Marmontel fell are perhaps the most illuminating part of his school reminiscences. He was generally head of his class—an honour conferring the right to wear a medal, but entailing certain responsibilities. In the absence of the form master, which took place at certain regular times, the head boy was in charge, and was furnished with a defaulter's sheet on which it was his duty to report misconduct. Marmontel determined to allow a reasonable amount of liberty; this soon 'degenerated into licence.' To the delight of all, head boy included, a genius was discovered who gave performances of *La Bourrée*, the Auvergnat dance. This includes many leaps and bounds, and the boys were shod with iron! On one occasion the noise attracted the attention of the form master, who came into the class only to find the lads absorbed in their studies, and the chief culprit, with especially innocent expression, intent on his books. The defaulter's sheet was demanded, and produced—a blank! As no culprits could be found, impositions for the whole class were set to Marmontel. He got into trouble a second time for writing an essay for a boy who was engaged on the more important task of preparing a feast for his friends.

The third scrape ended Marmontel's school career prematurely, but gloriously. Some damage having occurred to a neighbouring clock, various boys mounted the tower to inspect, and were wrongfully accused of having caused the mischief. Marmontel, who by that time had reached the dignity of a sixth form boy, or rhetorician, was asked if he had gone up the tower, which he did not deny. He received a summons to the prefect's, or second master's room, where he found the accused drawn up in line with the terrible 'corrector' or lictor standing beside the master. Jean Francois was told to take his place in

## *Blackfriars*

the line, and the corrector began his fell work. Our rhetorician at once made up his mind that he would not submit to such indignity, and while the victims 'were struggling in the hands of the executioner,' he made a bolt for the door, crying 'Civis Romanus sum.' The Prefect pursued him and caught him by the coat tail, which remained a trophy in his hands as the door was slammed in his face. Marmontel fled to his class room, whither the Form Master had not yet arrived, and delivered a Ciceronian oration. 'Save me, my friends, from the hand of the madman who is pursuing us! It is my honour and yours that is at stake! This unjust and violent man has nearly insulted me and you, through me, by the unheard of outrage of having me branded with a whip! He did not even deign to name my offence, but I gathered from the cries of the poor children who were being flayed that it had to do with a clock. You know, my friends, that my real crime has been that I have never betrayed a comrade to please him. No doubt he will soon be here to ask you to give me into his clutches. I know what you will answer. But if you were cowards enough to yield to him, I would sell my honour and my life dearly, aye my life, for I would rather die than live dishonoured! Far be this thought from me! I know that you will not submit to the yoke. In a month the term ends, and with it our school days. What difference will a month make? Let us finish to-day. From now we are free. The arrogant, the cruel, the fierce man is confounded.'

'Yes,' cried the indignant auditors. 'Closure! Vacation!'

'Let us,' said Marmontel, 'swear on this altar' (for there was one handy) 'before going out of the classroom, that we will never set foot in it again.'

After the oath had been taken, Marmontel continued:

'We are not going away like fugitive slaves. Let

### *A French School in the Eighteenth Century*

not the Prefect say that we have run away. Our retreat must be made with decency and in order. I propose that to make it more honourable, we mark it by an act of religion. This class room is a chapel. Let us give thanks in a solemn Te Deum for having kept the goodwill and esteem of our masters.'

All stood round the altar, and one with a stentorian voice intoned the hymn, which was taken up by fifty voices. It can be imagined what was the astonishment of the whole school at this sudden concert. The form master was the first to arrive. The Prefect next, and the Head himself advanced with gravity to the door, which was shut and only opened on the conclusion of the Te Deum. Then, ranged in a semi-circle, they awaited the onslaught, physical or verbal. 'What is the meaning of all this din?' said the Prefect, coming into their midst. 'What you call a din, Reverend Father, is only an act of thanksgiving for having finished our school course without falling into your hands.' He threatened dire penalties and predicted all sorts of ill for Marmontel's future. The Head, more gently, tried to persuade them to get back to work, but all was in vain. The sixth downed tools and marched forth with flying colours!

Some weeks later Jean Francois paid a visit to the College as an act of courtesy. He was received with open arms, and departed with excellent testimonials, which he was too proud to produce before he had passed a brilliant entrance examination at the University.

Such was school life in France almost on the eve of the Revolution. Surprisingly modern in many ways. Certainly the lot of the boys was happier than that of their English contemporaries. The eternal boy shows through the foreign atmosphere, though it would be difficult to imagine the final act in an English Public School.

E. J. W. MAITLAND.