



CUORE



Edmondo De Amicis



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OCTOBER

FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL


Monday, 17th

Today is the FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL. These three months of vacation in the country have passed like a dream. This morning my mother conducted me to the Baretto schoolhouse to have me enter for the third elementary course: I was thinking of the country and went unwillingly. All the streets were swarming with boys: the two book-shops were thronged with fathers and mothers who were purchasing bags, portfolios, and copy-books, and in front of the school so many people had collected, that the beadle and the policeman found it difficult to keep the entrance disencumbered. Near the door, I felt myself touched on the shoulder: it was my master of the second class, cheerful, as usual, and with his red hair ruffled, and he said to me:—

“So we are separated forever, Enrico?”

I knew it perfectly well, yet these words pained me. We made our way in with difficulty. Ladies, gentlemen, women of the people, workmen, officials, nuns, servants, all leading boys with one hand, and holding the promotion books in the other, filled the anteroom and the stairs, making such a buzzing, that it seemed as though one were entering a theatre. I beheld again with pleasure that large room on the ground floor, with the doors leading to the seven classes, where I had passed nearly every day for three years. There was a throng; the teachers were going and coming. My schoolmistress of the first upper class greeted me from the door of the classroom, and said:—

“Enrico, you are going to the floor above this year. I shall never see you pass by any more!” and she gazed sadly at me. The director was surrounded by women in distress because there was no room for their sons, and it struck me that his beard was a little whiter than it had been last year. I found the boys had grown taller and stouter. On the ground floor, where the divisions had already been made, there were little children of the first and lowest section, who did not want to enter the class-rooms, and who resisted like donkeys: it was necessary to drag them in by force, and some escaped

from the benches; others, when they saw their parents depart, began to cry, and the parents had to go back and comfort and reprimand them, and the teachers were in despair. 

My little brother was placed in the class of Mistress Delcati: I was put with Master Perboni, up stairs on the first floor. At ten o'clock we were all in our classes: fifty-four of us; only fifteen or sixteen of my companions of the second class, among them, Derossi, the one who always gets the first prize. The school seemed to me so small and gloomy when I thought of the woods and the mountains where I had passed the summer! I thought again, too, of my master in the second class, who was so good, and who always smiled at us, and was so small that he seemed to be one of us, and I grieved that I should no longer see him there, with his tumbled red hair. Our teacher is tall; he has no beard; his hair is gray and long; and he has a perpendicular wrinkle on his forehead: he has a big voice, and he looks at us fixedly, one after the other, as though he were reading our inmost thoughts; and he never smiles. I said to myself: "This is my first day. There are nine months more. What toil, what monthly examinations, what fatigue!" I really needed to see my mother when I came out, and I ran to kiss her hand. She said to me:—

"Courage, Enrico! we will study together." And I returned home content. But I no longer have my master, with his kind, merry smile, and school does not seem pleasant to me as it did before.

OUR MASTER

Tuesday, 18th

My new teacher pleases me also, since this morning. While we were coming in, and when he was already seated at his post, some one of his scholars of last year every now and then peeped in at the door to salute him; they would present themselves and greet him:—

"Good morning, Signor Teacher!" "Good morning, Signor Perboni!" Some entered, touched his hand, and ran away. It was evident that they liked him, and would have liked to return to him. He responded, "Good morning," and shook the hands which were extended to him, but he looked at no one; at every greeting his smile remained serious, with that perpendicular wrinkle on his brow, with his face turned towards the window, and staring at the roof of the house opposite; and instead of being cheered by these

greetings, he seemed to suffer from them. Then he surveyed us attentively, one after the other. While he was dictating, he descended and walked among the benches, and, catching sight of a boy whose face was all red with little pimples, he stopped dictating, took the lad's face between his hands and examined it; then he asked him what was the matter with him, and laid his hand on his forehead, to feel if it was hot. Meanwhile, a boy behind him got up on the bench, and began to play the marionette. The teacher turned round suddenly; the boy resumed his seat at one dash, and remained there, with head hanging, in expectation of being punished. The master placed one hand on his head and said to him:—

“Don't do so again.” Nothing more.

Then he returned to his table and finished the dictation. When he had finished dictating, he looked at us a moment in silence; then he said, very, very slowly, with his big but kind voice:—

“Listen. We have a year to pass together; let us see that we pass it well. Study and be good. I have no family; you are my family. Last year I had still a mother: she is dead. I am left alone. I have no one but you in all the world; I have no other affection, no other thought than you: you must be my sons. I wish you well, and you must like me too. I do not wish to be obliged to punish any one. Show me that you are boys of heart: our school shall be a family, and you shall be my consolation and my pride. I do not ask you to give me a promise on your word of honor; I am sure that in your hearts you have already answered me ‘yes,’ and I thank you.”

At that moment the beadle entered to announce the close of school. We all left our seats very, very quietly. The boy who had stood up on the bench approached the master, and said to him, in a trembling voice:—

“Forgive me, Signor Master.”

The master kissed him on the brow, and said, “Go, my son.”

AN ACCIDENT

Friday, 21st

The year has begun with an accident. On my way to school this morning I was repeating to my father these words of our teacher, when we perceived that the street was full of people, who were pressing close to the door of the schoolhouse. Suddenly my father said: “An accident! The year is beginning badly!”

We entered with great difficulty. The big hall was crowded with parents and children, whom the teachers had not succeeded in drawing off into the class-rooms, and all were turning towards the director's room, and we heard the words, "Poor boy! Poor Robetti!"

Over their heads, at the end of the room, we could see the helmet of a policeman, and the bald head of the director; then a gentleman with a tall hat entered, and all said, "That is the doctor." My father inquired of a master, "What has happened?"—"A wheel has passed over his foot," replied the latter. "His foot has been crushed," said another. He was a boy belonging to the second class, who, on his way to school through the Via Dora Grossa, seeing a little child of the lowest class, who had run away from its mother, fall down in the middle of the street, a few paces from an omnibus which was bearing down upon it, had hastened boldly forward, caught up the child, and placed it in safety; but, as he had not withdrawn his own foot quickly enough, the wheel of the omnibus had passed over it. He is the son of a captain of artillery. While we were being told this, a woman entered the big hall, like a lunatic, and forced her way through the crowd: she was Robetti's mother, who had been sent for. Another woman hastened towards her, and flung her arms about her neck, with sobs: it was the mother of the baby who had been saved. Both flew into the room, and a desperate cry made itself heard: "Oh my Giulio! My child!"

At that moment a carriage stopped before the door, and a little later the director made his appearance, with the boy in his arms; the latter leaned his head on his shoulder, with pallid face and closed eyes. Every one stood very still; the sobs of the mother were audible. The director paused a moment, quite pale, and raised the boy up a little in his arms, in order to show him to the people. And then the masters, mistresses, parents, and boys all murmured together: "Bravo, Robetti! Bravo, poor child!" and they threw kisses to him; the mistresses and boys who were near him kissed his hands and his arms. He opened his eyes and said, "My portfolio!" The mother of the little boy whom he had saved showed it to him and said, amid her tears, "I will carry it for you, my dear little angel; I will carry it for you." And in the meantime, the mother of the wounded boy smiled, as she covered her face with her hands. They went out, placed the lad comfortably in the carriage, and the carriage drove away. Then we all entered school in silence.

THE CALABRIAN BOY

Saturday, 22nd

Yesterday afternoon, while the master was telling us the news of poor Robetti, who will have to go on crutches, the director entered with a new pupil, a lad with a very brown face, black hair, large black eyes, and thick eyebrows which met on his forehead: he was dressed entirely in dark clothes, with a black morocco belt round his waist. The director went away, after speaking a few words in the master's ear, leaving beside the latter the boy, who glanced about with his big black eyes as though frightened. The master took him by the hand, and said to the class: "You ought to be glad. To-day there enters our school a little Italian born in Reggio, in Calabria, more than five hundred miles from here. Love your brother who has come from so far away. He was born in a glorious land, which has given illustrious men to Italy, and which now furnishes her with stout laborers and brave soldiers; in one of the most beautiful lands of our country, where there are great forests, and great mountains, inhabited by people full of talent and courage. Treat him well, so that he shall not perceive that he is far away from the city in which he was born; make him see that an Italian boy, in whatever Italian school he sets his foot, will find brothers there." So saying, he rose and pointed out on the wall map of Italy the spot where lay Reggio, in Calabria. Then he called loudly:—

"Ernesto Derossi!"—the boy who always has the first prize. Derossi rose.

"Come here," said the master. Derossi left his bench and stepped up to the little table, facing the Calabrian.

"As the head boy in the school," said the master to him, "bestow the embrace of welcome on this new companion, in the name of the whole class—the embrace of the sons of Piedmont to the son of Calabria."

Derossi embraced the Calabrian, saying in his clear voice, "Welcome!" and the other kissed him impetuously on the cheeks. All clapped their hands. "Silence!" cried the master; "don't clap your hands in school!" But it was evident that he was pleased. And the Calabrian was pleased also. The master assigned him a place, and accompanied him to the bench. Then he said again:—

"Bear well in mind what I have said to you. In order that this case might occur, that a Calabrian boy should be as though in his own house at

Turin, and that a boy from Turin should be at home in Calabria, our country fought for fifty years, and thirty thousand Italians died. You must all respect and love each other; but any one of you who should give offence to this comrade, because he was not born in our province, would render himself unworthy of ever again raising his eyes from the earth when he passes the tricolored flag."

Hardly was the Calabrian seated in his place, when his neighbors presented him with pens and a print; and another boy, from the last bench, sent him a Swiss postage-stamp.

MY COMRADES

Tuesday, 25th

The boy who sent the postage-stamp to the Calabrian is the one who pleases me best of all. His name is Garrone: he is the biggest boy in the class: he is about fourteen years old; his head is large, his shoulders broad; he is good, as one can see when he smiles; but it seems as though he always thought like a man. I already know many of my comrades. Another one pleases me, too, by the name of Coretti, and he wears chocolate-colored trousers and a catskin cap: he is always jolly; he is the son of a huckster of wood, who was a soldier in the war of 1866, in the squadron of Prince Umberto, and they say that he has three medals. There is little Nelli, a poor hunchback, a weak boy, with a thin face. There is one who is very well dressed, who always wears fine Florentine plush, and is named Votini. On the bench in front of me there is a boy who is called "the little mason" because his father is a mason: his face is as round as an apple, with a nose like a small ball; he possesses a special talent: he knows how to make a hare's face, and they all get him to make a hare's face, and then they laugh. He wears a little ragged cap, which he carries rolled up in his pocket like a handkerchief. Beside the little mason there sits Garoffi, a long, thin, silly fellow, with a nose and beak of a screech owl, and very small eyes, who is always trafficking in little pens and images and match-boxes, and who writes the lesson on his nails, in order that he may read it on the sly. Then there is a young gentleman, Carlo Nobis, who seems very haughty; and he is between two boys who are sympathetic to me,—the son of a blacksmith-ironmonger, clad in a jacket which reaches to his knees, who is pale, as though from illness, who always has a frightened air, and who never laughs;

and one with red hair, who has a useless arm, and wears it suspended from his neck; his father has gone away to America, and his mother goes about peddling pot-herbs. And there is another curious type,—my neighbor on the left,—Stardi—small and thickset, with no neck,—a gruff fellow, who speaks to no one, and seems not to understand much, but stands attending to the master without winking, his brow corrugated with wrinkles, and his teeth clenched; and if he is questioned when the master is speaking, he makes no reply the first and second times, and the third time he gives a kick: and beside him there is a bold, cunning face, belonging to a boy named Franti, who has already been expelled from another district. There are, in addition, two brothers who are dressed exactly alike, who resemble each other to a hair, and both of whom wear caps of Calabrian cut, with a peasant's plume. But handsomer than all the rest, the one who has the most talent, who will surely be the head this year also, is Derossi; and the master, who has already perceived this, always questions him. But I like Precossi, the son of the blacksmith-ironmonger, the one with the long jacket, who seems sickly. They say that his father beats him; he is very timid, and every time that he addresses or touches any one, he says, "Excuse me," and gazes at them with his kind, sad eyes. But Garrone is the biggest and the nicest.

A GENEROUS DEED

Wednesday, 26th

It was this very morning that Garrone let us know what he is like. When I entered the school a little late, because the mistress of the upper first had stopped me to inquire at what hour she could find me at home, the master had not yet arrived, and three or four boys were tormenting poor Crossi, the one with the red hair, who has a dead arm, and whose mother sells vegetables. They were poking him with rulers, hitting him in the face with chestnut shells, and were making him out to be a cripple and a monster, by mimicking him, with his arm hanging from his neck. And he, alone on the end of the bench, and quite pale, began to be affected by it, gazing now at one and now at another with beseeching eyes, that they might leave him in peace. But the others mocked him worse than ever, and he began to tremble and to turn crimson with rage. All at once, Franti, the boy with the repulsive face, sprang upon a bench, and pretending that he was carrying a basket on each arm, he aped the mother of Crossi, when she used to come to

wait for her son at the door; for she is ill now. Many began to laugh loudly. Then Crossi lost his head, and seizing an inkstand, he hurled it at the other's head with all his strength; but Franti dodged, and the inkstand struck the master, who entered at the moment, full in the breast.

All flew to their places, and became silent with terror.

The master, quite pale, went to his table, and said in a constrained voice:—

“Who did it?”

No one replied.

The master cried out once more, raising his voice still louder, “Who is it?”

Then Garrone, moved to pity for poor Crossi, rose abruptly and said, resolutely, “It was I.”

The master looked at him, looked at the stupefied scholars; then said in a tranquil voice, “It was not you.”

And, after a moment: “The culprit shall not be punished. Let him rise!”

Crossi rose and said, weeping, “They were striking me and insulting me, and I lost my head, and threw it.”

“Sit down,” said the master. “Let those who provoked him rise.”

Four rose, and hung their heads.

“You,” said the master, “have insulted a companion who had given you no provocation; you have scoffed at an unfortunate lad, you have struck a weak person who could not defend himself. You have committed one of the basest, the most shameful acts with which a human creature can stain himself. Cowards!”

Having said this, he came down among the benches, put his hand under Garrone's chin, as the latter stood with drooping head, and having made him raise it, he looked him straight in the eye, and said to him, “You are a noble soul.”

Garrone profited by the occasion to murmur some words, I know not what, in the ear of the master; and he, turning towards the four culprits, said, abruptly, “I forgive you.”

MY SCHOOLMISTRESS OF THE UPPER FIRST

Thursday, 27th

My schoolmistress has kept her promise which she made, and came to—

day just as I was on the point of going out with my mother to carry some linen to a poor woman recommended by the Gazette. It was a year since I had seen her in our house. We all made a great deal of her. She is just the same as ever, a little thing, with a green veil wound about her bonnet, carelessly dressed, and with untidy hair, because she has not time to keep herself nice; but with a little less color than last year, with some white hairs, and a constant cough. My mother said to her:—

“And your health, my dear mistress? You do not take sufficient care of yourself!”

“It does not matter,” the other replied, with her smile, at once cheerful and melancholy.

“You speak too loud,” my mother added; “you exert yourself too much with your boys.”

That is true; her voice is always to be heard; I remember how it was when I went to school to her; she talked and talked all the time, so that the boys might not divert their attention, and she did not remain seated a moment. I felt quite sure that she would come, because she never forgets her pupils; she remembers their names for years; on the days of the monthly examination, she runs to ask the director what marks they have won; she waits for them at the entrance, and makes them show her their compositions, in order that she may see what progress they have made; and many still come from the gymnasium to see her, who already wear long trousers and a watch. To-day she had come back in a great state of excitement, from the picture-gallery, whither she had taken her boys, just as she had conducted them all to a museum every Thursday in years gone by, and explained everything to them. The poor mistress has grown still thinner than of old. But she is always brisk, and always becomes animated when she speaks of her school. She wanted to have a peep at the bed on which she had seen me lying very ill two years ago, and which is now occupied by my brother; she gazed at it for a while, and could not speak. She was obliged to go away soon to visit a boy belonging to her class, the son of a saddler, who is ill with the measles; and she had besides a package of sheets to correct, a whole evening’s work, and she has still a private lesson in arithmetic to give to the mistress of a shop before nightfall.

“Well, Enrico,” she said to me as she was going, “are you still fond of your schoolmistress, now that you solve difficult problems and write long

compositions?" She kissed me, and called up once more from the foot of the stairs: "You are not to forget me, you know, Enrico!" Oh, my kind teacher, never, never will I forget thee! Even when I grow up I will remember thee and will go to seek thee among thy boys; and every time that I pass near a school and hear the voice of a schoolmistress, I shall think that I hear thy voice, and I shall recall the two years that I passed in thy school, where I learned so many things, where I so often saw thee ill and weary, but always earnest, always indulgent, in despair when any one acquired a bad trick in the writing-fingers, trembling when the examiners interrogated us, happy when we made a good appearance, always kind and loving as a mother. Never, never shall I forget thee, my teacher!

IN AN ATTIC

Friday, 28th

Yesterday afternoon I went with my mother and my sister Sylvia, to carry the linen to the poor woman recommended by the newspaper: I carried the bundle; Sylvia had the paper with the initials of the name and the address. We climbed to the very roof of a tall house, to a long corridor with many doors. My mother knocked at the last; it was opened by a woman who was still young, blond and thin, and it instantly struck me that I had seen her many times before, with that very same blue kerchief that she wore on her head.

"Are you the person of whom the newspaper says so and so?" asked my mother.

"Yes, signora, I am."

"Well, we have brought you a little linen." Then the woman began to thank us and bless us, and could not make enough of it. Meanwhile I espied in one corner of the bare, dark room, a boy kneeling in front of a chair, with his back turned towards us, who appeared to be writing; and he really was writing, with his paper on the chair and his inkstand on the floor. How did he manage to write thus in the dark? While I was saying this to myself, I suddenly recognized the red hair and the coarse jacket of Crossi, the son of the vegetable-pedler, the boy with the useless arm. I told my mother softly, while the woman was putting away the things.

"Hush!" replied my mother; "perhaps he will feel ashamed to see you giving alms to his mother: don't speak to him."