

John Lang



Raymond

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Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4066338089526

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[CHAPTER I.](#)

[CHAPTER II.](#)

[CHAPTER III.](#)

[CHAPTER IV.](#)

[CHAPTER V.](#)

[CHAPTER VI.](#)

[CHAPTER VII.](#)

[CHAPTER VIII.](#)

[CHAPTER IX.](#)

[CHAPTER X.](#)

[CHAPTER XI.](#)

[CHAPTER XII.](#)

[CHAPTER XIII.](#)

[THE END](#)

CHAPTER I.

[Table of Contents](#)

IT was a sad day for Henry Raymond, when, at ten years of age, he quitted, for the first time, his parents' roof for the public grammar-school at Belford-upon-Thames. Being her only surviving child, and, as such, brought up by his mother with great tenderness, he deeply felt the shock of separation from her; and, as the post-chaise rattled along the high western road, his father, who accompanied him, had no little difficulty in keeping up his son's spirits, whose young heart quite sunk within him at the idea of the weeks and months that might elapse before he should again see his mother. Nor is this grief to be wondered at; for the change from home to school, where he has to "rough it" every hour of his life, is, to a susceptible and delicately-nurtured child, as painful and startling a one as it is possible to conceive. All is so repulsive—so unlike what he has been used to! The sky-blue milk, with the tiny penny roll for breakfast; the half-cold leg of fat Leicestershire mutton, washed down with indifferent swipes, for dinner; the thick wedge of stale bread, and Lilliputian allowance of the cheapest cheese, for supper; the loud ringing of the school bell in the morning, that rouses you from a dream of home to the drudgery of syntax and prosody; the awful master, with his cane and birch, cast-iron visage, and thundering voice; the tyrannical fagging system; the confinement on long winter evenings to the dim-lit, uncarpeted hall, where you have to fight for a seat by the fireside; the hard bed, shared perhaps with a bigger boy, who doubles the bolster

under his own head, borrows your share of the sheets and blankets, and kicks you out if you are so unreasonable as to remonstrate;—all these, to say nothing of various minor miseries, have a most blighting effect on the feelings of a young and sensitive boy; and Henry Raymond felt them so acutely, that, for nearly a fortnight after the return of his father to London, not a night passed but his pillow was wet with tears.

But youth's sorrows, like April showers, are transitory; and in the course of a month Henry had become tolerably well reconciled to his lot. Being endowed with a quick apprehension and retentive memory, his school tasks were not the bugbears to him that they are to those of more limited capacity. He mastered them, when he pleased, with facility, and consequently soon grew into favour with his masters; while, at the same time, he won "golden opinions" from his class-fellows by his frankness, his good-humour, and his readiness to assist them in their exercises. As his constitution, though sound, was delicate, he did not enter with much avidity into the usual sports of boyhood; but, when the hours of study were over, he would wander alone the ruins of an abbey which bordered the playground, and there seat himself, with some favourite volume in his hand, or else remain behind in the school-room, poring over the books in the well-stored library. In this way he got through the plays of Shakspeare and Beaumont and Fletcher, books of voyages and travels, biographies, histories, and translations of history without number. But his favourite reading was that which appeals to the imagination. Poetry, in particular, exercised quite a spell over him; and the effect

thus produced, at a time when the mind is most susceptible of impressions, though its softening and elevating influence was for a while disturbed, was never afterwards eradicated. Such were the occupations of young Raymond's leisure hours. His classical studies were pursued with equal zest; for the head master, who was a consummate judge of character, and was impressed with a favourable opinion of his capacity, took great pains to call forth his energies; so that, by the time he reached his sixteenth year, he had become an excellent Latin scholar, and no mean proficient in the glorious literature of Greece.

In the spring of the ensuing year a severe calamity befell him in the loss of his mother, who had long been in a declining state of health, and died when he was at home for the Easter holidays. As he took this bereavement deeply to heart, the elder Raymond, whose mind—though not usually accessible to the tenderer emotions—was also much disturbed by it, resolved on a change of scene for himself and son; and accordingly they crossed over to the Continent, traversed a great portion of France, Switzerland, and Italy, mixing as much as possible in society, especially at Paris, Florence, and Lausanne, at each of which places they remained nearly two months; and returned home to London shortly after Christmas, when Henry was immediately sent back to school.

From this period a striking change took place in his character. He was no longer the quiet, studious contemplative boy he had hitherto been; for foreign travel—which has always, in youth, such a sudden quietening effect on the faculties—had invigorated and given a more worldly

tone to his intellect, taught him self-confidence by enlarging the sphere of his observation, and furnished him with that tact and self-possession, which, when accompanied by a buoyant and generous spirit, are always prime favourites in the social circles. So was his physical nature less improved. His countenance, wont to wear a languid and relaxed expression, was now replete with energy; his dark eye sparkled with animation, and his tall, well-proportioned figure, braced by constant rambles among the Swiss mountains, showed that he was capable of undergoing much toil.

This change in Raymond's constitution induced a corresponding one in his tastes and pursuits. A love of reading ceased to form the predominant feature of his character—though he still read hard by fits and starts—for his high animal spirits required ruder stimulants than books could furnish him with; and his chief object of ambition now was to excel his colleagues in all athletic, out-of-door exercises. He would be *aut Cæsar aut Nullus*—that is to say, cock of the walk or nothing—the best cricketer, skater, boxer, &c., in the whole school; and the pre-eminence for which he thirsted was at length conceded to him, though not without many a severe struggle; for a public school is an epitome of the great world, where no distinction is to be gained except by unflinching courage and continuous energy, and against a host of jealous competitors.

CHAPTER II.

[Table of Contents](#)

The Belford playground formed a sort of table-land, which swelled gradually up from an extensive range of meadows, through which flowed the Thames, and was terminated at one end by the old-fashioned school-house, and on the other by some monastic ruins, and an artificial green mound, round which ran a brick wall with a broad dry ditch at its base. On this mound stood three magnificent elm-trees, and from its summit—as, indeed, from every other part of the elevated playground a splendid view was commanded of the neighbouring country, and particularly of some high chalk cliffs, which rose precipitously from the river, in the immediate vicinity of a picturesque village about three miles distant from Belford. From the beauty and convenience of its site—it was just on the outskirts of the town, and must originally have formed part of the abbey gardens—this playground, or rather the portion of it nearest the ruins, was a frequent resort of the lower classes of Belford; and fairs, twice a year, were held on it, infinitely to the annoyance of the boys, who considered it as their own exclusive property. Numerous, in consequence, were their quarrels with the "snobs"—as they pertly styled the invaders—and on all these occasions, on one of which he achieved the high honour of a broken head, Raymond was ever foremost to distinguish himself.

One autumnal afternoon when, the day's tasks at an end, the boys were all out on the playground, a fellow, well known by the appropriate nickname of Don Rat, came

among them with a bundle of stout ash-sticks under his arm. This genius picked up a precarious subsistence by going about the country selling ballads, and fruit, and walking-sticks; and when this sort of business was slack, by "snapping up," like Autolycus, "unconsidered trifles." Scamp though he was, he was something of a favourite with the school, for he was fond of mischief, which he loved disinterestedly for its own sake, sang a capital song, and was no small proficient in mimicry. On his approach, many of the boys, among whom was Raymond, hurried up to have a chat with him, when he informed them—for he was an inveterate newsmonger, and knew all the gossip of the neighbourhood—that it was the intention of the townsmen on the morrow evening to have a cricket-match on the playground.

"Are you sure of that, Don?" enquired Raymond.

"Cock sure, sir; I heerd some on 'em a discoursing on the affair, as I were passing along the market-place last Wednesday night."

"Humph," replied Henry, sententiously, "then we must pitch into them, gents—that's all."

"Yes, yes," said one of Raymond's ardent admirers and imitators, a young fellow by name Jenkins, "we must lick the snobs off."

"That's easier said nor done," observed Don Rat.

"Nonsense," rejoined Henry, "a dozen of us are a match for a hundred of them."

"May be so; howsomever it's no affair of mine;" and having so said, and disposed of a great portion of his cudgels, at his own, by no means modest, valuation, Don

Rat shuffled off the playground, with the intention, if possible, of getting rid of the remainder of his stock among the belligerents of his own order.

The next day being a half-holyday, there was ample time for preparation. Raymond, as commander-in-chief, assembled all his disposable forces, consisting of about a hundred and twenty boys ranging from fourteen to eighteen years of age, in the centre of the playground; appointed Jenkins standard-bearer, and was proceeding to enforce on his troops the necessity of their keeping close together in action, when loud shouts were heard, and presently a mob of cricketers came round the corner from the town. The moment the boys caught sight of them, they gave three stunning cheers, which, reaching the head-master's ears, he threw up his study window, and seeing at a glance how matters stood, called his pupils about him, and severely remonstrated with them on their audacity in disobeying his repeated injunctions, by attempting to pick a quarrel with the townsmen. He was going on in this strain, when Raymond, who was one of his favourites, and was apt to presume on it, apprehensive that the glorious fun would be spoiled, took advantage of an observation let fall by the doctor, to the effect that, if they persisted in their design to assault the mob, they would most assuredly be given in charge—to shout with his utmost force of lungs—"Gents, the doctor says we may charge—hurrah!"

"Hurrah for the charge!" chorused the youngsters, flourishing their cudgels above their heads, and instantly precipitated themselves in a compact phalanx on the enemy, some of whom were busy pitching the wickets, while