

Two Gentlemen of Boston

Usually [the] homeward journey from school was a dignified process; it was decidedly fitting that thirteen-year-old ranking scholars of the eighth grade graduating class should have occasion for serious conversation. The closing half-hour of school, devoted to the consideration of "Gems from History and Literature," always left Arthur and Morton in a contemplative mood and ready for serious debates on the lives and deeds of Napoleon and King Arthur and Marmion* and all the others.

From my shaded seat on the porch I could see them from the time they left the school yard all the way up the tree-bordered street, and as I watched the straight, manly little figures, I took delight in imagining the course of their absorbed conversation, and in observing the companionship which seemed to promise so much in the way of mutual benefit and pleasure.

They were so markedly different in outward characteristics! There was always something happening to separate Arthur's blouse and trousers, or to snap his garters, and in the midst of the most intense discussion even of so vital a question as to "which you'd rather be the greatest orator in the world or the greatest football player in the world"—it was always necessary for him to make some clothing adjustment; to Arthur, clothes

Source: *Opportunity* 3 (January 1926): 12-13.

*Marmion: from the poem of the same name by Sir Walter Scott, published in 1808 and set in the early sixteenth century, about an English nobleman whose reputation as a brave knight was spotless (Frank Northen Magill, *Cyclopedia of Literary Characters* [New York: Harper and Row, 1963]).

at best, were only necessary accompaniments, and at worst, impediments to the pursuit of happiness; but these lapses from dignity and solemnity in the daily conversational intercourse of the two boys, were more than redeemed by Morton, who at thirteen years of age, reflected an indelible impress of three years contact with foreign salons—the reaction of an only child, accompanying parents of social and literary aspirations in their old-world journeyings. No intriguing considerations of “Horatius at the Bridge,”* could be great enough to upset the poise with which Morton would at once readjust a garter which dared to begin a false move.

Today, however, the approach of the boys was distinctly out of form—it was not that there [were] attendants, to the number of eight or ten; very often their debates were extended to include followers, who gave more life and vigor to the scene and the occasions by supplementing their points with side whacks at shrubbery and high leaps at curbs. I was used to this variation from the usual, but today the formation was entirely out of the ordinary, one striking feature being that the comrades walked apart and silent, the followers compact and in earnest conversation. As the groups drew near, I was startled by the sudden realization of what the scene meant. Without doubt Morton, the dilettante, and Arthur, the dreamer, had disagreed, had gone so far in the disagreement as to fight, and had had a bloody fight at that! There was no sign of belligerency in their attitudes, they walked quietly and apart; characteristically, Morton had restored his clothes to some order—his Norfolk jacket was tightly buttoned to hide the dust and mud left on the blouse from its contact with the earth, but his scratched and bleeding knuckles couldn't be hidden in his efforts to cover a blackening eye with a very grimy handkerchief. Arthur was frankly dishevelled, and seemed utterly indifferent to the fact that he was without hat or tie; his face carried some slight intensification of its inclination toward griminess, which for racial reasons, was never as readily discernible as upon his friend Morton; his lack of bruises and general bearing indicated quite clearly that he had been the victor in the fray.

I was rather sorry that I had disclosed myself by an involuntary move toward the approaching group, for it at once became evident to me that

*A reference to Horatius Cocles, a Roman who is said to have held back the Etruscans from the wooden Sublican Bridge until it could be demolished, and who then, despite his wounds, swam across the Tiber to safety (*Oxford Classical Dictionary* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949]).

Morton had intended to pass without stopping (what more natural). On seeing me, however, he stopped and with the courtesy that was so charming and so marked an attribute, he tried to drag his cap from his disfigured head. "It's all right, Mrs. Allen," he said, "*merely* a little difference of opinion," and replacing his cap, he swung down the road alone, leaving me to recover, before turning to those who were left, the poise which the approach and his speech had rather upset.

I turned to my son who was evidently suffering under the disadvantage of having a "smooth talker" get in his work first. "I'll fight anybody that attacks my good name," he volunteered, with great emphasis, and then with the evident desires to level up intellectually in the eyes of the cortege, "he who steals my purse" he began, and stopped short, whether from some budding sense of good taste, or from the realization that a hint to his meaning was all that was necessary to his followers, it was not clear, but he began to edge toward the screen door in silence.

It was plain that he had decided to say no more—Morton had offered no explanation, made no accusations—attempted no defense. Should he, Arthur, take advantage of the absence of his companion to make out a case for himself? I read in a flash their code, and was convinced that any explanation of the affair would have to come from others. I was clearly out of it, how [to] force the confidence of these gentlemen? How was it possible to chide a man for defending his good name? How call to order men who are adjusting "a mere difference of opinion" in their own way? The dignity of thirteen years must be sustained, its obligations respected, its ethics acknowledged. I accepted my evident limitations and confined myself to a meek suggestion to Arthur that it would be well to "bathe his hands in sulphur-naphthal solution." The round-eyed caravan dissolved, as Arthur passed through the screen door. I settled myself with more complacency than I felt to think over the situation. It was all so unlooked for! The companionship had been so smooth, so complementary, and then too, boys now-a-days were not in the habit of disfiguring each other as in the old days—what could have ruffled Arthur's good temper and thrown Morton out of his natural poise sufficiently to bring about a bloody row?

*From Shakespeare, Iago, in *Othello*, act 3, scene 3: "Good name in man and woman, dear my lord, / Is the immediate jewel of our souls; / Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing: / 'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands. / But he that filches from me my good name / Robs me of that which not enriches him / And makes me poor indeed."

Only the day before, Morton had graciously accepted an invitation to stay to lunch, being largely influenced, I have no doubt, by the sight of the hot biscuits which were being taken from the oven as he came through the kitchen; he had conditioned his acceptance, however, upon the loan of a clean collar. We had sat at the table in the peace and contentment that accompany a satisfactory meal, eaten in congenial company. We had dallied over the meal even longer than it took the boys to demolish two large pans of biscuits with accompaniments; the day was warm and Morton was waiting for a telephone call. He began talking of France, his parents were going over again in a few weeks. "You ought to go to Paris, Art," he said, "why couldn't you send him over to join us, Mrs. Allen?" He tossed this remark casually, as he gracefully broke open another biscuit. "I'd rather go to Canada and raise silver foxes," Arthur had turned to say. "Well, if you came to Paris you would see where Napoleon lived—will you excuse me, Mrs. Allen, if I see what time it is, you know I have my violin lesson at two o'clock."

After so large and cordial an invitation, and so intimate an afternoon, it gave me some surprise to find that the friends at their very next meeting had engaged in battle.

The growth of their intimacy had been of great interest to me. In the big American public schools, democracy is most truly demonstrated in the freedom with which children make and develop friendships. Even the guiding hands of parents cannot always be effective here. Arthur and Morton were neighbors, but the fact of their difference in race kept the families apart as far as social contact is concerned; Arthur being the only one of his kind in the neighborhood, the children generally had played in and out of each other's houses. Not being dependent on close social contact, and entirely unconcerned about it, the limiting of social recognitions to courteous outdoor exchanges between us parents was entirely acceptable to me.

I had at first hesitated at encouraging the close companionship between Arthur and Morton which loomed inevitable. American standards of simplicity had been too strongly bred in me to accept whole-heartedly the polish with which Morton literally shone; still Arthur, with his inherited indifference to externals, could stand quite a little working upon, and I not only realized the benefits that Morton would bring Arthur, but also those that Morton would receive; in fact, I felt sure Morton had the advantage. Morton was never, as Arthur, so absorbed in a book that he overlooked offering a chair when necessary, but, although I worried and

grieved over my young barbarian who would bring to the table along with his immaculate young guest a pair of hands that never should have left the cellar, yet I could not but warm to the fact that he had forgotten himself in seeing that his pets received their daily attention, and on time.

In the days that followed the battle, I kept "a weather eye" open for any hint or suggestion that would enlighten me as to its cause. There was some estrangement, Morton's missionary zeal had received a set-back, the two boys did not walk together on the homeward journey, neither [was] there any interchange of visits—it was impossible for them to keep entirely apart, their interests were too close—but there was a barrier and as I watched them in the week that followed, I became convinced that the barrier had been raised principally from the outside.

The time was drawing near for Morton's family to start upon the European trip and I was still in the dark. My enlightenment came suddenly, however.

I was at my kitchen window making out a batch of cookies that were great favorites with the young literati; two classmates of the duelling pair were lying upon the grass beneath the window and their voices came up to me. "Art and Mort had a fight last week, when you were absent." "Gee, I never saw Mort get into a fight." "Naw, he didn't want to this time, but Art made him!" "Who licked?" "O, Art." "Did he make his nose bleed?" "Yes, and blacked his eye!" "Gee, wish I'd been there," and, after a pause, "what'd they fight about?" "Well," with deliberation, "Mort attacked Art's good name, I'd fight for my good name, wouldn't you—Mort tried to talk out of it but all the fellas were on Art's side!"

"Sure, I'd fight for my good name—did he call him a liar?"

"Worse than that, he went to the guild and he had to report his good deed, and he said he had been 'elevating a little colored boy!'"

"'Elevating a little colored boy!' Gee, wish I'd been there—is that your dog—come on" and two pair of legs went scurrying across the lawn.

A little later, Morton came in with Arthur. "We're leaving tonight, Mrs. Allen, and I came to bid you good-bye and to wish you a very pleasant summer," and the little hand was extended with its usual grace. Our young Chesterfield* sailed for Europe three days later, leaving more questions in my mind than before. What had been his reaction from the fight? In his

*A reference to the son of Chesterfield, Philip Dormer Stanhope, fourth Earl of Chesterfield, a statesman and man of letters. Wrote "Letters to His Son" that render a classic portrait of an eighteenth-century gentleman (*Benet's Reader's Encyclopedia* [New York: Harper and Row, 1987]).

relations with Arthur, how much had he been influenced by adults? What were the parents' reactions? Were they possibly those of the rebuffed missionaries who only feel pity that the heathen do not know what is good for them? As for my little son—I never discussed the matter with him, I felt he had shown himself wiser than I. With instinctive wisdom, he had sensed a situation to which I was blind, and had met that situation adequately. I had not recognized the "patronizing pose," neither would I have had the directness and courage to reduce it to its lowest terms and deal it the "knock out" blow.