A JUNIOR MANUAL OF FRENCH COMPOSITION
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PREFACE

Ever since our Manual of French Composition appeared in 1914, teachers have asked us for an easier book, introductory to it and leading from the very beginnings up to the standard of the School Certificate Examinations. What has delayed us is the extreme difficulty of making ‘easy’ anything that relates to French Composition.

The problem confronting us from the outset was twofold: Where could we find English simple enough to afford boys and girls in the lower classes in schools a reasonable chance of turning it into correct French? And how could we reduce to a minimum the very considerable mass of grammatical and linguistic information which Composition presupposes? It would assuredly have demanded little effort to translate passages of easy French into easier English, offer them as material for elementary Composition and preface them with extensive remarks on French Grammar, Syntax and Idiom. But that would not have been helpful either to teachers or to examination candidates. Retranslation is a useful enough exercise, up to a certain point. But it is one which beginners can perfectly well practise for themselves, and it is not Composition. In English which has been translated from French the form remains essentially French, and the difficulties are not those which arise in the passages of genuine English set in the School Certificate Examinations. All parts of Grammar, Syntax and Idiom do not directly affect Composition. Of those parts which do, some, but only some, can be taught within the time available. We have therefore had to solve our twofold problem by other methods.

Confining ourselves in the main to passages of
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original English, we have simplified them by omissions and adaptations which do not alter their essentially English character. Experience having shown us that the greatest number of easy constructions and ordinary words are provided in Fairy Tales, Anecdotes and Stories intended primarily for young people, we have drawn largely upon these, adding to them such passages from standard or contemporary authors as could, by being shorn of difficult phrases, technical vocabulary and certain literary graces, be brought within the powers of beginners in French Composition. Since one never can tell what a passage will produce until it has been actually tried and a ‘fair copy’ written, we have selected from the very large number of pieces set in Examinations in which we have taken part those which proved the most interesting and the most instructive.

This varied material, nearly all of which has stood the test of actual experience, we have graded in four Sections. Sections I and II contain no passages beyond the standard of Matriculation and First School Certificate; Sections III and IV lead up to that of the University Entrance, Scottish Leaving Certificate, etc., and the various Higher School Certificate Examinations. We have added notes—but sparingly, to avoid two dangers. When notes are withheld, the very necessary hints in the Introduction are apt to be ignored. Very numerous notes, on the other hand, lead to dull and mechanical work, and the continual reference they impose on the learner soon degenerates from mental training to physical exercise in turning over the pages. All the passages in Sections I and II, but only alternate passages in Sections III and IV, are therefore provided with a strictly limited number of references, by page and paragraph, to essential matters discussed in the
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Introduction. The nature of these matters is indicated in each case, so that the learner need not set off in quest of information which he already possesses.

The grammatical and linguistic Introduction we have reduced to practicable dimensions, thus: We assume that those who use this book have already been through a French Course and have learned those elements of Grammar and Vocabulary without which it is premature to begin Composition. Our Introduction is neither a concise French Grammar nor a miniature French Dictionary, but a memorandum of those rules and facts which as teachers and examiners we have found to be the most important in elementary French Composition. In particular we have made a determined effort to deal once for all with the difficulties of Gender and Tense and the construction after Verbs.

We have resolutely brushed aside all extraneous matter. At the Junior stage the prime essential is that the French used should be sound and correct. Style will come in due course, and its main element will always be correctness. Our ambition here is not to discuss the minutiae of French style, but to halve the number of grave errors in French made annually in the School Certificate Examinations. That number, in the aggregate, runs into astronomical figures. Composition books vary, Examiners come and go, but the errors remain. Yet the fantastic total is made up by the same errors recurring over and over again. When classified, they are seen to be extraordinarily persistent, but surprisingly limited. In fact they are all enumerated and discussed in our short Introduction. Whoever masters it will not indeed have learned French, for that is the work of a lifetime, but at least he will send in papers which will not become one mass of blue pencil marks, and he will have placed his
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future studies in French upon a firm basis. Sound knowledge of a language and success in examinations coincide more closely than some critics would have us believe.

After thus treating the subject from its negative, or realist, side, we show in four Model Lessons how to construct a piece of correct French prose. These Model Lessons form an integral part of this book, and discussion of the points raised in them is not always repeated elsewhere.

In short, we have dealt honestly—and, we hope, clearly—with the long-standing and difficult problem of French Composition at the School Certificate stage.

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