Hornung Ernest William

Some Persons Unknown

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KENYON'S INNINGS

I

Kenyon had been more unmanageable than usual. Unsettled and excitable from the moment he awoke and remembered who was coming in the evening, he had remained in an unsafe state all day. That evening found him with unbroken bones was a miracle to Ethel his sister, and to his great friend John, the under-gardener. Poor Ethel was in charge; and sole charge of Kenyon, who was eleven, was no light matter for a girl with her hair still down. Her brother was a handful at most times; to-day he would have filled some pairs of stronger hands than Ethel's. They had begun the morning together, with snob-cricket, as the small boy called it; but Kenyon had been rather rude over it, and Ethel had retired. She soon regretted this step; it had made him reckless; he had spent the most dangerous day. Kenyon delighted in danger. He had a mania for walking round the entire premises on the garden wall, which was high enough to kill him if he fell, and for clambering over the greenhouses, which offered a still

more fascinating risk. Not only had he done both this morning, he had gone so far as to straddle a gable of the house itself, shrieking good-tempered insults at Ethel, who appealed to him with tears and entreaties from the lawn below. Ethel had been quite disabled from sitting at meat with him; and in the afternoon he had bothered the gardeners, in the potting-shed, to such an extent that his friend John had subsequently refused to bowl to him. In John's words Master Kenyon had been a public nuisance all day – though a lovable one – at his very worst he was that. He had lovable looks, for one thing. It was not the only thing. The boy had run wild since his young mother's death. There were reasons why he should not go to school at present. There were reasons why he should spend the long summer days in the sunshine, and open only the books he cared about, despite the oddity of his taste in books. He had dark, laughing eyes, and a face of astonishing brightness and health: astonishing because (as he said) his legs and arms were as thin as pipe-stems, and certainly looked as brittle. Kenyon was indeed a delicate boy. He was small and delicate and weak in everything but spirit. "He has the spirit," said John, his friend, "of the deuce and all!"

Ethel forgave easily, perhaps too easily, but then she was Kenyon's devoted slave, who cried about him half the night, and lived for him, and longed to die for him. Kenyon had toned himself down by tea-time, and when he sought her then as though nothing had happened, she was only too thankful to catch his spirit. Had she reminded him of his behaviour on the roof and

elsewhere, he would have been very sorry and affectionate; but it was not her way to make him sorry, it was her way to show an interest in all he had to say, and at tea-time Kenyon was still full of the thing that had excited and unsettled him in the morning. Only now he was beginning to feel in awe, and the schoolroom tea had never been a seemlier ceremony.

These children seldom sat at table with their father, and very, very seldom listened for the wheels of his brougham as they were listening to-night. In the boy's mind the sound was associated with guilty apprehensions and a cessation of all festivities. But to-night Mr. Harwood was to bring back with him one of Kenyon's own heroes, one of the heroes of his favourite book, which was not a storybook. It has been said that Kenyon's literary taste was peculiar; his favourite book was *Lillywhite's Cricketers' Guide*; the name of the great young man who was coming this evening had figured prominently in recent volumes of *Lillywhite*, and Kenyon knew every score he had ever made.

"Do you think he'll talk to us?" was one of the thousand questions which Ethel had to answer. "I'd give my nut to talk to him! Fancy having C. J. Forrester to stay here! I've a sort of idea the governor asked him partly to please me, though he says he's a sort of relation. I only wish we'd known it before. Anyhow, it's the jolliest thing the governor ever did in his life, and a wonder he did it, seeing he only laughs at cricket. I wish he'd been a cricketer himself, then he'd kick up less row about the glass; thank goodness I haven't broken any to-day! I say, I

wish C. J. Forrester'd made more runs yesterday; he's certain to have the hump."

Kenyon had not picked up all his pretty expressions in the potting-shed; he was intimate with a boy who went to a public school.

"How many did he make?" Ethel asked.

"Duck and seven. He must be sick!"

"I shouldn't be surprised if he thinks far less about it than you do, Ken. It's only a game; I don't suppose he'll mind so very much."

"Oh, no, not at all; it's only about the swaggerest county match of the season," scathed Kenyon, "and they only went and let Notts lick! Besides, the *Sportsman* says he was out to a miserable stroke second innings. Where did I see the *Sportsman?* Oh, John and I are getting it from the town every day; we're going halves; it comes to John, though, so you needn't say anything. What *are* you grinning at, Ethel? Ah, you're not up in real cricket. You only understand snob."

Kenyon was more experienced. The public school boy hard by had given him an innings or two at his net, where Kenyon had picked up more than the rudiments of the game and a passion for *Lillywhite*. He had learnt there his pretty expressions, which were anything but popular at home. Mr. Harwood was a man of limited patience, with a still more limited knowledge of boys. He frightened Kenyon, and the boy was at his worst with him. A very sensitive man, of uncertain temper, he could not get on with his

children, though Ethel was his right hand already. It was a secret trouble, an unacknowledged grief, to hard lonely Mr. Harwood. But it was his own fault; he knew that; he knew all about it. He knew too much of himself, and not enough of his children.

You could not blame Kenyon – Mr. Harwood would have been the last to do so – yet it was dreadful to see him so impatient for his father's return, for perhaps the first time in his life, and now only for the sake of the stranger he was bringing with him; to see him peering through the blind at this stranger, without so much as glancing at his father or realising that he was there; to hear him talking volubly in the drawing-room after dinner (when the children came down) to a very young man whom he had never seen before; and to remember how little he ever had to say to his own father. Ethel felt it – all – and was particularly attentive to her father this evening. That peculiar man may also have felt it, and the root of Ethel's attentions into the bargain; for he was very snubbing to her. He never showed much feeling. Yet it *was* to please Kenyon that Mr. Harwood had pressed Forrester to look him up, and not by any means (though this had been his way of putting it to his young kinsman, whom he scarcely knew) to cheer his own loneliness.

The cricketer was a sunburnt giant, disappointingly free from personal lustre, and chiefly remarkable for his hands. He had an enormous hand, and when it closed like jaws over Kenyon's little one, this suffering student could well understand his *Lillywhite* characterising C. J. Forrester as "a grand field, especially in the

country." They talked cricket together from the first moment, and until Kenyon said good-night. Upstairs he told Ethel that so far they had got no further than the late match against Notts; that Forrester had described it "as if he'd only *seen* the thing;" and that she was quite right, and C. J. was far less cut up at the result than he was. It was Kenyon's county which had been trounced by Nottinghamshire, and he went so far as to affirm that C. J. Forrester's disappointing form had directly contributed to the disaster, and that he deserved to lose his place in the team. This, however, was but a drop of bravado in the first flood of enthusiasm for C. J.

Mr. Harwood watched and heard the frank, free, immediate intercourse between Kenyon and the visitor. He had never known Kenyon so bright and animated – so nearly handsome. The boy was at his best, and his best was a revelation to Mr. Harwood, who had never in his life had a real conversation with Kenyon such as Forrester was having now. He had talked *to* Kenyon, that was all. As he sat grimly listening, with Ethel snubbed to silence, he may have felt a jealous longing to be his small son's friend, not merely his father; to interest him, as this complete stranger was doing, and he himself honestly interested; to love openly, and be openly loved. The man was self-conscious enough to feel all this, and to smile as he rose to look at the clock, and saw in the mirror behind it no trace of such feeling in his own thin-lipped, whiskered face. At nine the children said good-night, of their own accord, knowing better than to stay a minute over their

time. Mr. Harwood kissed them as coldly and lightly as usual; but surprised them with a pleasantry before they reached the door.

"Wait, Kenyon. Forrester, ask him your average. He'll tell you to a decimal. He knows what he calls his *Lillywhite* by heart."

Kenyon looked extremely eager, though Mr. Harwood's tone struck Forrester as a little sarcastic.

"You've been getting it up!" the cricketer said knowingly to Kenyon.

"I haven't," declared Kenyon, bubbling over with excitement.

"You needn't ask him your own," Ethel added, quite entering into it. "He knows them all."

"Oh, we'll have mine," said Forrester, who felt slightly ridiculous but much amused. "What was it for the 'Varsity – my first year?"

Kenyon had to think. That was three years ago, before he had known much about cricket; but he had read up that year's *Lillywhite*– he read as many old *Lillywhites* as he could borrow – and he answered in a few moments:

"Nineteen point seven."

"You *have* been getting it up!" cried Forrester.

Kenyon was beaming. "No, I haven't – honestly I haven't! Ask Ethel!"

"Oh, it's genuine enough," said Mr. Harwood; "it's his accomplishment – one to be proud of, isn't it? That'll do, Kenyon; good-night, both of you."

The door closed.

"*He's* one to be proud of," said Forrester pointedly, a vague indignation rising within him. "A delightful little chap, I call him! And he *was* right to a decimal. I never heard of such a fellow!"

"He's cricket mad," said Mr. Harwood. "I'm glad you like him."

"I like him immensely. I like his enthusiasm. I never saw so small a boy so keen. Does he play?"

"Not properly; he's not fit to; he's rather delicate. No, it's mostly theory with Kenyon; and I'm very much afraid he'll bore you. You mustn't let him. Indeed I fear you'll have a slow time all round; but, as I told you, there's a horse to ride whenever you want him."

"Does the boy ride?"

"He's not allowed to. Then we have a very respectable club in the town, where I can tuck you up and make you comfortable any time you like to come down. Only don't, for your own sake, encourage Kenyon to be a nuisance; he doesn't require very much encouragement."

"My dear sir, we're too keen cricketers to bore each other; we're going to be tremendous friends. You don't mean to say he bores *you?* Ah, with the scores, perhaps; but you must be awfully proud of having such a jolly little beggar; I know *I* should be! I'd make a cricketer of him. If he's as keen as this now, in a few years' time – "

"You smoke, Forrester? We'll go into the other room."

Mr. Harwood had turned away and was putting out the lights.

II

Long before breakfast next morning – while the lawns were yet frosted with dew and lustrous in the level sunlight – Kenyon Harwood and C. J. Forrester, the well-known cricketer, met and fraternised. Kenyon and John had always spoken of Forrester as "C. J."; and when Kenyon let this out, it was arranged, chiefly by C. J. himself, who was amused and pleased, that Kenyon should never call him anything else. Mr. Harwood, at breakfast, rather disapproved of the arrangement, but it was hardly a matter for the paternal ukase. Meanwhile Kenyon had personally conducted C. J. round the place, and had most impressively introduced him (in the potting-shed) to John, who looked so proud and so delighted as to put a head even on Kenyon's delight and pride. C. J. was charmed with John; but he was less enthusiastic about a bricked quadrangle, in front of the gardener's and coachman's cottages, with wickets painted on a buttress, where Kenyon was constantly indulging in small cricket – notably in the dinner-hour of John, who bolted his food to come out and bowl to him. The skilled opinion of C. J. was not in favour of "snob," as played by Kenyon with a racket and a soft ball.

"He says a racket is bad for you," Ethel understood from Kenyon (to whom it was a very serious matter); "makes you play with a crooked bat, and teaches you to spoon. So there's an end to snob! But what do you think? He's going to take me into the town

to choose a decent bat; and we're going in for regular practice on the far lawn – John and all – if the governor lets us. C. J.'s going to coach me. Think of being coached by C. J. Forrester!"

"Father is sure to let you," said Ethel; and certainly Mr. Harwood did not say no; but his consent was coldly given, and one thing he stipulated almost sternly.

"I won't have Kenyon run. I shall put a stop to it if he does. It might kill him."

"Ah, he has told me about that." Forrester added, simply, "I am so sorry!"

Kenyon, in fact, in explaining the system of scoring at snob – a most ingenious system – had said:

"You see, I mayn't run my runs. I know the boundaries don't make half such a good game, but I can't help it. What's wrong? I'm sure *I* can't tell you. I've been to heaps of doctors, but they never say much to me; they just mess about and then send you back to the room where you look at the papers. Mother used to take me to London on purpose, and the governor's done so twice. It's my hip, or some rot. It's a jolly bore, for it feels all right, and I'm positive I *could* run, and ride, and go to school. Blow the doctors!"

"But obey them," C. J. had said, seriously; "you should go in for obeying orders, Kenyon."

They got the bat. It was used a great deal during those few days, the too few days of C. J.'s visit; and was permitted to repose in C. J.'s cricket-bag, cheek by jowl with bruised veterans

that had served with honour at Lord's and at the Oval. Kenyon was very mindful of those services, and handled the big bats even more reverently than he shook his hero's hand. They lent themselves to this sort of thing more readily than C. J. did. Small doubt that Kenyon – at all events at first – would have had his hero a trifle more heroic than the Almighty had made him. There was nothing intrinsically venerable in his personality, as there might have been. He was infinitely more friendly than Kenyon had dreamt of finding him; he was altogether nicer; but he did lack the vague inexpressible distinction with which the boy's imagination invested the heroes of *Lillywhite's Guide*.

That summer was the loveliest of its decade, and Kenyon made the most of it. He had never before seemed so strong, and well, and promising. For the first time in his life his really miserable little body seemed equal – at moments – to his mighty spirit; and the days of C. J. were the brightest and happiest he had ever known. In that jolly, manly companionship the unrealised want of an intensely masculine young soul was insensibly filled. Hard, perhaps, to fill it so completely for so short a time: the cricketer's departure was so soon at hand! As it was he had put it off some days, because he liked Kenyon with an extraordinary liking. But he was wanted at the Oval on the last Thursday in July; his play with Kenyon and John (though John was a rough natural bowler) could by no stretch of imagination be regarded as practice for an important county match; he decided to tear himself away on the Tuesday morning.

He had been with them only a week, but the Harwoods had bitten deep into his life, a life not wholly consecrated to cricket. Forrester had definite aspirations, and some very noble intentions; and he happened to possess the character to give this spiritual baggage some value, in his case. Also he had a kind heart, which Kenyon had completely won. He liked Ethel; but one could not merely like Kenyon, with his frail little frame and his splendid spirit. Ethel, however, was very sweet; her eyes were like Kenyon's in everything but their sadness, as deep and lustrous, but so often sad. Her love for Kenyon was the most pathetic thing but one that Forrester had ever seen. The more touching spectacle was that of the father of Ethel and Kenyon, who seemed to have very little love for his children, and to conceal what he had. He was nice enough to Forrester, who found him a different being at the club, affable, good-natured, amusing in his sardonic way. He talked a little to Forrester about the children, a very little, but enough to make Forrester sincerely sorry for him. He was sorrier for Mr. Harwood than for Ethel or for Kenyon himself. He pitied him profoundly on Kenyon's account, but less because the boy might never live to grow up, than because, as Forrester read father and son, there would never be much love to lose between them. As for Kenyon, there was a chance for him yet: even the family doctor declared that he had never been so well as he was now. His vitality – his amazing vitality – seemed finally to upset a certain pessimistic calculation. His trouble might never become a greater trouble than it had been already; and this summer it had

been no trouble at all, his very limp was no longer noticeable. He might yet go to school; and Forrester himself was going to start a small boys' school the following summer, in partnership with an older man, in one of the healthiest spots in the island. St. Crispin's had been spoken of for Kenyon. Kenyon himself spoke of little else during Forrester's last day or two. To go to school at St. Crispin's was now the dream of his life.

"I am sorry we told him about it," Mr. Harwood said, gloomily. "He may never be able to go there; he may never again be so well as he is now; all the summer it has seemed too good to last!"

Forrester, for his part, thought it good for the boy to have things to look forward to, thought that, if he could go, the change of life and climate might prove the saving and making of him. Beyond this, he honestly hoped for the best (whereas Mr. Harwood seemed to look for the worst), and expressed his hope – often a really strong one – with all possible emphasis.

He carries with him still some intensely vivid impressions of this visit, but especially of the last day or two, when the weather was hotter than ever – despite one splendid shower – and Kenyon if anything more alert, active and keen. He remembers, for example, how Ethel and Kenyon and he tore to an outlying greenhouse for shelter from that shower, or rather how he carried Kenyon. In the greenhouse, accompanied by a tremendous rattle of rain on the sloping glass, Kenyon sang them "Willow the King," the Harrow cricket song, which Tommy Barnard, the boy

with the cricket-net, had taught Kenyon among less pretty things. Clear through the years Forrester can hear Kenyon's jolly treble, and Ethel's shy notes, and his own most brazen bass in the chorus; he even recollects the verse in which the singer broke down through too strong a sense of its humour: —

> "Who is this?" King Willow he swore,
> "Hops like that to a gentleman's door?
> Who's afraid of a Duke like him?
> Fiddledeedee!" says the monarch slim.
> "What do you say, my courtiers three?"
> And the courtiers all said "Fiddledeedee!"

But his last evening, the Monday evening, C. J. Forrester remembers best. They had an immense match – double-wicket. The head gardener, the coachman, John (captain) and the butler made one side; Forrester, Kenyon, Ethel (Kenyon insisted) and T. Barnard (home early, *æger*) were the other. "It's Gentlemen and Players," John said with a gaping grin; and the Players won, in spite of C. J., who, at the last, did all he knew, for Kenyon's sake.

It was a gorgeous evening. The sun set slowly on a gaudy scene; the wealth of colour was almost tropical. The red light glared between the trees, their crests swayed gently against the palest, purest amber. Mr. Harwood looked on rather kindly with his cigar; and the shadow of his son, in for the second time, lay along the pitch like a single plank. Ethel was running for him, and it was really exciting, for there were runs to get; it was the last

wicket; and Kenyon, to C. J.'s secret sorrow, and in spite of C. J.'s distinguished coaching, was not a practical cricketer. Yet he was doing really very well this evening. They did not bowl too easily to him, he would not have stood that; they bowled very nearly their best; but Kenyon's bat managed somehow to get in the way, and once he got hold of one wide of his legs, and sent it an astonishing distance, in fact over the wall. Even Mr. Harwood clapped his hands, and Forrester muttered, "That's the happiest moment of his life!" Certainly Kenyon knew more about that leg-hit ever afterwards than he did at the moment, for, it must be owned, it was a fluke; but the very next ball Kenyon was out – run out through Ethel's petticoats – and the game was lost.

"Oh, Ethel!" he cried, his flush of ecstasy wiped out in an instant. "I could have run the thing myself!"

Ethel was dreadfully grieved, and showed it so unmistakably that Kenyon, shifting his ground, turned hotly to an unlucky groom who had been standing umpire.

"I don't believe she *was* out, Fisher!" he exclaimed more angrily than ever. Mr. Harwood snatched his cigar from his mouth; but C. J. forestalled his interference by running up and taking Kenyon by the arm.

"My dear fellow, I'm surprised at you! To dispute the umpire! I thought you were such a sportsman? You must learn to take a licking, and go out grinning, like a man."

Kenyon was crushed – by his hero. He stammered an apology, with a crimson face, and left the lawn with the sweetness of that

leg-hit already turned in an instant to gall. And there was a knock at Forrester's door while he was dressing for dinner, and in crept Kenyon, hanging his head, and shut the door and burst into tears.

"Oh, you'll never think the same of me again, C. J.! A nice fellow you'll think me, who can't stand getting out – a nice fellow for your school!"

C. J., in his shirt and trousers, looked down very tenderly on the little quivering figure in flannels. Kenyon was standing awkwardly, as he sometimes would when tired.

"My dear old fellow, it was only a game – yet it was life! We live our lives as we play our games; and we *must* be sportsmen, and bide by the umpire's decision, and go out grinning when it's against us. Do you see, Ken?"

"I see," said Kenyon, with sudden firmness. "I have learnt a lesson. I'll never forget it."

"Ah, you may learn many a lesson from cricket, Kenyon," said C. J. "And when you have learnt to play the game – pluckily – unselfishly – as well as you can – then you've learnt how to live too!" He was only saying what he has been preaching to his school ever since; but now he says that no one has ever attended to him as Kenyon did.

Kenyon looked up with wet, pleading eyes. "Then – you will have me at St. Crispin's?"

But C. J. only ruffled the boy's brown hair.

III

A variety of hindrances prevented Forrester from revisiting Kenyon's father until August in the following year, when he arrived in the grey evening of a repulsive day. As before, he came straight from the Nottingham match; he had started his school, but was getting as much cricket as he could in the holidays. It was raining heavily when he jumped out of the carriage which had been sent to meet him. Mr. Harwood shook his hand in the cold twilight of the hall. House and host seemed silent and depressed. Forrester looked for Kenyon – for his hat, for some sign of him – as one searches for a break in the clouds.

"Where's the boy?" was his first question. "Where's Kenyon?"

"Kenyon? In bed."

"Since when?"

"The beginning of last month."

Forrester looked horrified; his manner seemed to irritate Mr. Harwood.

"Surely I wrote and told you; have you forgotten? I wrote to say he couldn't come last term, that he had fallen off during the winter, and was limping badly. Didn't you get the letter? But you did; you answered it."

"Yes, yes. I know all that," said Forrester, still bewildered. "I answered, and you never answered me. Then the term came on, and you don't know what it was. I had all my time taken up, every

moment. And I have been playing cricket ever since we broke up. But – the truth is, I've been having the most cheerful letters from Kenyon all the time!"

"That's it; he *is* cheerful."

"He never said he was in bed."

"You weren't to know of it on any account. But I thought you would be prepared for it."

"Not with those letters. I can hardly believe it. Will he – won't he be able – "

"No, never; but you will find him as keen about it as ever, and as mad on cricket. He tells me, by the way, you've been doing great things yesterday – in fact I read him the report – and he's wild with delight about it. Come up and see him. You'll get another ovation."

Forrester nodded, setting his teeth. While they were conversing Ethel had entered the hall, shaken hands with him, and vanished up the shallow stairs, leaving the hall more gloomy than before. He remembered this presently; also that Ethel, in a single year, seemed changed from a child to a woman. But at the time he could see one thing only, a vision, a memory. The peculiar sadness in Mr. Harwood's tones, the tenderness which was still untender, though very different from last year's note, was yet to strike him. He could think only of Kenyon as he best remembered him, playing cricket with a sunburnt face, ardent, triumphant, angry, penitent, ashamed – and of Kenyon as he dreaded to look upon him now.

Mr. Harwood stopped on the stairs.

"I wish you could help me in one thing, Charlie. He is still counting on your school, and now he can never go. He needn't know this; but could you – I do so wish you could make him think less about it!"

Forrester coloured a little. "I wish I could," he said, thoughtfully; "and perhaps I can, for somehow I myself am less anxious to have him than I was last year. I have often been thankful he wasn't one of the boys this last term. I couldn't have borne to pitch into him as I have had to pitch into most of them. When I was here before I only looked on the pleasant side of it all… Yes, I can tell him there's another side."

Kenyon looked a great length as he lay stretched out in bed; he seemed to have grown a good deal. His thin face was flushed with anticipation; his fine eyes burnt eagerly; he had heard the wheels in the wet gravel under his window, and C. J.'s voice in the hall and on the stairs. A thin white arm lay over the counterpane, the fingers clasping a newspaper. As Forrester entered, with a trepidation of which he was ashamed, the thin arm flourished the newspaper wildly.

"Well played, sir!" thundered Kenyon from his pillow, "Your score won the match; come and shake hands on it!"

Forrester, who had certainly troubled the Nottingham bowlers this time, was more taken aback than he had ever been on the cricket-field where astonishing things do happen. He went to the bedside and sat down there, and pressed the small boy's slender

hands; but he had not a thing to say.

"The *Sportsman*," continued Kenyon, beating the bed with that paper, "says it was a fine display of cricket, and that you're in splendid form just now. So you are. Look what you did against Surrey! Do you remember how that match came *after* Notts last year, and you left here to play in it? I'm glad it was the other way round this season; and oh, I say, how glad I am you've come!"

"Dear old boy! But – look here – don't you think you might have told me you were like this, old fellow?"

Kenyon tossed his head on the pillow.

"I couldn't. It was too sickening. Besides, I thought – "

"Well?"

"You mightn't be awfully keen to come, you know."

"You needn't have thought that, Kenyon. I can't believe you did think it."

"Well, I won't swear that I did. Anyhow I didn't want you to know before you must – for lots of reasons."

Forrester let the reasons alone: he could divine one of them: the boy had hoped to be up and well before he came. Forrester wondered whether that hope held yet, and if it did, whether he honestly could share it any longer. He looked at Kenyon as he confronted this question: the flush of pleasure and excitement had subsided from the young wan face, which had now an unhealthy pallor. His face had been the best thing about Kenyon last year, the thing that inspired confidence and faith. Forrester strove to talk more cricket. Kenyon had a hundred pet cricketers,

his favourites and friends on paper, whom he spoke of by their initials and knew intimately on the cricket-fields of his fancy, as formerly he had known and spoken of C. J. himself. C. J. tried to tell him of those he had met lately; but the young fellow was all distraught, he could not think of the right men, and took the newspaper to his assistance.

"So John still gets you the *Sportsman!*"

"No, John doesn't."

"You don't mean that he's left?"

"Rather not! He comes up to see me every day; the governor fetches him; and it's the governor who brings me the *Sportsman*."

"Really?"

"Yes, and *Cricket* and the *Field*, and all the other papers that you see all over the shop."

"It's too dark to see all over the shop," said Forrester, throwing the *Sportsman* aside. "I call it very good of your father, though."

"He *is* good. He's awfully good to me since I've been lying-up, the governor. He sits with me a lot, and reads and talks to me; he reads awfully well. But he doesn't understand much about cricket, doesn't care for it. He reads me the full account of the play when I've looked at the score; but I'd as soon read them to myself if it wasn't for offending him. You see, he can't be interested, though he says he is. I should think he'd be very glad if you did it for him – if you would."

Forrester was thinking. Mr. Harwood had left him alone with Kenyon, hardly entering the room himself; he had turned

away with a look which Forrester happened to see, but failed to understand. Now he had a clue: perhaps Kenyon had greeted him as he never greeted his father, that father who by the boy's own showing was trying at the last to be his friend. The thought troubled Forrester. He had been touched by a something in Mr. Harwood's manner, in the hall, on the stairs, and still more by what Kenyon had just told him; he was pleased with Kenyon's evident appreciation of his father's kindness; but – there were more buts than he could sort or separate now and here. What he did feel instantly, and acutely, was a premonition of involuntary intervention, on his own part, between father and child. In his difficulty he pushed the long brown hair from Kenyon's forehead, and looked gently into the eager eyes.

"We'll see, old fellow," he said at last; "your father mightn't quite like it, I think; and of course, as you say, you must take care not to offend him. Stick to that, Kenyon; always be good to your father and Ethel."

"They're awfully good to me, certainly," said Kenyon, with a sigh. "Dear old Ethel! Have you seen her with her hair up, C. J.?"

"I just saw her in the hall; she is quite grown up."

"She's a brick… Do you really think the governor would mind – you reading the cricket, I mean? It *must* bore him, no matter what he says; how can it help doing?"

"It might bore him to read it to himself; it may delight him to read it to you."

Kenyon turned his cheek to the pillow, and stared at the dismal

evening sky. No doubt he was wondering, in his small way, if he was a very ungrateful, unnatural son; and trying to account for it, if it was so; and wishing he were comfortably certain it was not so.

"Besides," added Forrester, "I shall not be able to stay many days, you know." Indeed it seemed to him that he had better not stay; but Kenyon's eyes were on him in a twinkling.

"How many?" he asked, almost with a gasp.

"A week at the outside; it's the Lancashire match the week after next."

Again Kenyon turned, and his sharp profile looked sharper than before against the pillow. "Of course you must play against Lancashire – and make your century," he said, with such a hollow heartiness that, first-class cricketer as he was, and few as were his present opportunities for first-class cricket, C. J. instantly resolved to cancel all remaining engagements.

Kenyon went on:

"I'm hoping to get up, you know, before long. Surely I've been here long enough? It's all rot, *I* say, keeping you in bed like this; you get as weak as a cat. I believe the governor thinks so too. I know they're going to have a doctor down from London to see me. If he lets me get up, and you come back after you've made that century, we might have some more cricket, mightn't we? I'd give anything to have some before the term begins. I want another of those leg-hits! I say, they think I might be able to go to St. Crispin's next term, don't they?"

Forrester remembered. "I don't know. You might be able, perhaps."

"Why do you say it like that?"

"Shall I tell you, old fellow? I'm not quite so keen on having you as I was a year ago. Stop! I'll tell you why. I didn't realise what it would be like. I rather fancied I should have a dozen Kenyons, and that Kenyon at school would be a saint: which was absurd, old fellow. I thought I should never, never, never lose my temper with you. Absurd again! We talked, you and I, of what we knew nothing about; *I* know something now; and it isn't all skittles and beer, Kenyon. Listen: there wasn't a fellow in the school I didn't punish time after time. Punish is a jolly word, isn't it? It would have been nice for us both, wouldn't it, my punishing you? Kenyon, there were two fellows I had to swish! You understand? I felt thankful you weren't there. I don't any longer feel that I want you there. I'd rather some other man kept you in, Kenyon, and licked you, old fellow, when you needed it." The truth is, Forrester had long had all this on his mind; as he uttered the last of it, he almost forgot why he had spoken now, and what Mr. Harwood had said on the stairs.

Kenyon lay very still, watching the darkling sky split in two by the window-sashes. He had dreamed of that school so often, he had looked forward to it so long. It was hard suddenly to stop looking forward, to have no more happy imaginary school-days from this moment forth; but if the real ones could never have been so happy, then he should feel thankful; and in any case

there was less immediate necessity to be up and well, which in itself was a relief. It was sensibly darker, however, when Kenyon spoke, and once more his tone was a little forced.

"I suppose you're right. I'm glad you've told me this, C. J. I'm not so keen now, though I *have* been counting… I suppose I couldn't even have called you C. J., eh?"

"No, you'd have had to 'sir' me."

"Indeed, sir! Then I'm thankful I'm not going, sir! There's the gong, sir, yes, sir, you must go and dress, sir! The governor'll bring you up with him to say good-night. And to-morrow – I've heaps of things to tell you to-morrow, C. J. I'll think of 'em all night – sir!"

There were tears on his eyelashes, nevertheless; but the room was now really dark; his friend could not see.

IV

Forrester's disquieting apprehension of intrusion on his part, of that cruel intervention from which he shrank, was not for long a vague sensation. Mr. Harwood himself defined it, and with startling candour, that very evening after dinner.

Forrester had described the latter part of his chat with Kenyon, the part arising from something Mr. Harwood had said on the stairs, and from that other thing which had long been in his own mind. "I wouldn't have Kenyon, now I know what it is like," he had averred, with all the earnestness he had employed upstairs.

"You wouldn't get him," said Mr. Harwood, in sad irony. "He will never be well enough, Bodley is sure, to go to school."

"Is Dr. Bodley a very good man?"

"He is a very good doctor in ordinary, so to speak; but Kenyon's case is not exactly ordinary. Bodley is getting down a London man, a specialist, for a consultation. Kenyon knows about it."

"Yes, he thought it was to see whether he might get up."

"Whether there is the least chance of his ever getting up, as a matter of fact. I don't myself think he ever will. There is some hopeless disease of the hip. An operation is the only chance, and you know what a faint one."

"I'm glad I'm here!" Forrester involuntarily exclaimed; and it was at this that Mr. Harwood had pierced him with his eye and

spoken his mind.

"I am glad too," said he, slowly; "yet I am sore – God knows how sore!"

The young man moved in his chair, but did not rise. Mr. Harwood held him with his eye. Forrester leant his elbow on the table, his head against his palm, and met that bitter, pitiable, yearning gaze.

"I am glad because Kenyon wanted you so much; sore, because he wanted *you* so much. Look at the reception he gave you, ill as he is! *I* never make him like that. I might have left him for weeks, alone with Ethel and the servants, and he wouldn't have welcomed me so. Yet I am always with the boy. I do everything for him. I have been another man to him, Charlie, since you were here last year. You taught me a lesson. I don't know whether to like you or hate you for it. You taught me to be my boy's friend – at any rate to try. It wasn't easy. We tired each other – we always did – we always may. We irritate each other too: he *will* seem frightened and fight shy of me. I suppose I deserve it – God knows! We have understood each other better, we have tired each other less – I am sure – since he has been up yonder. But all the time, mark you, he has been looking forward to your coming – to going to your school in the end. About that he has talked incessantly – as if it were the one thing to get better for – and about you. You're his hero, he worships you; I am only his father. You are everything to him…"

Forrester was inexpressibly shocked and moved. "You are

mistaken, believe me you are!" he cried earnestly. "He has been telling me already how good you are to him, of all you do for him."

"Ah! he is a good boy; he is very grateful. He always says 'Thank you' – to me! Heaven, how I wish he'd forget that sometimes! But no; it was in those little things that I was continually finding fault with him, and now it's his turn. He has a special manner for me. He thinks before he speaks when he speaks to me. And I see it all! Why, I stand outside the door, and hear him talking to Ethel, and when I open it his very key changes. With you it's a hundred times worse. With you – God help me!" cried Harwood, with a harsh laugh, "I'm like a child myself … jealous of you … for winning what I never tried nor deserved to win."

He wiped the moisture from his face, and sat cold and still.

"I'll go to-morrow!" said Forrester, hoarsely.

"You will do nothing of the kind," retorted the other in his normal voice. "You will stay as long as you like – and Kenyon needs you."

V

C. J. was early abroad next morning – as once before. The weather had cleared up in the night. Sunlight and dew did just what they had done that other morning of yester-year. Sounds and scents were the same now as then. So Forrester tried to imagine it *was* then, and to conjure Kenyon to his side. But Kenyon lay in bed behind yonder blind on the sunny side of the house, and his friend wandered desolate over last year's ground. He looked into the flagged yard where painted wickets still disfigured a certain buttress: he was sorry he had thrown cold water on "snob." On the lawn he saw other wickets, which no man had pitched, and worn places that had long been green. There was the peach-house, with the sun gleaming where once the rain had beaten an accompaniment to "Willow the King." He could hear the song – he can hear it still. Then he met John, who was visibly inconvenienced; and returning to the house, he found Ethel on the steps. She looked very fresh and beautiful, but the young man's heart was in the room upstairs, where her heart was also. A common bond of sadness drew them insensibly together. They remained there, very silent, till the gong sounded within.

Something that Mr. Harwood told him, a letter in his hand, as they sat down to breakfast, caused Forrester to run upstairs the moment they rose. Kenyon received him with grateful eyes, but with a very slight salute this morning. Sunshine flooded the

room, even to the edge of the bed. Things invisible in the dusk of the previous evening caught the strong light and the eye now – the bottles, the graduated glasses, the bed-table, the framed photograph of Kenyon's mother hanging on the screen. And Kenyon himself, with the sun clasping his long brown hair, and filling the hollows of his pinched face, was a more distinct and a much more pitiful figure this morning.

"You know what's going to happen to-day, C. J.?"

"The doctors are coming – the one from London. Your father told me just before breakfast."

"Call them the umpires," said Kenyon in a queer tone. "Say they're going to give me in or out!"

Forrester made no remark. Kenyon lay watching him.

"You're perfectly right, C. J. I thought of that before. I thought of it in the night. I had time to think plenty, last night!"

"Couldn't you sleep?"

"Not a wink in the night. I've slept a little since daylight."

"Were you – you were in pain, Kenyon!"

"Don't speak of it," said Kenyon, grimly. "It was so bad that I didn't care what happened to me; and I don't care now, when I remember it. I'm thankful the doctors are coming this morning – I mean the umpires. Anything's better than last night over again. I've felt nothing like it before."

"And you never will again, old fellow! I know you won't. They'll see to that!"

"Will they?" Kenyon made a wistful pause. "So I thought up to

last night: I thought they'd get me up and out again. In the night I gave up thinking so. I lay here, C. J., and asked only to be put out of my misery. I never had such a bad night before – nothing like. I've had my bad ones, but I used to grin and bear it, and think away of St. Crispin's, and you, and the fellows. But last night – "

"Well?" said C. J. in a hard voice. His heart had smitten him.

"Well, you'd made me give up the idea of St. Crispin's, you know. Don't look like that – it's just as well you did. Only I hadn't it to think about in the night. I missed it."

He shut his eyes: he *had* been thinking of St. Crispin's, but not in the old way, no longer as within his reach. Ideals are not shattered so easily by hearsay, and St. Crispin's was heaven to Kenyon still, though now he might not enter in. Well, one would rather never get there than find heaven imperfect too. And Kenyon, had he been older, would have appreciated his blessedness in being permitted to lay down this ideal unsubstantiated and as good as new; for not C. J., but experience only, could have razed so solid a castle in the air; C. J. had only lifted the drawbridge against Kenyon forever.

But Forrester was thinking of the night before.

"My dear fellow, you speak as though school were the only thing you had to live for!"

"Well, it was the thing I wanted to get better for," replied Kenyon, frankly; "one of the things anyhow. Of course I want to be up and out here as well. I love this dear old place!"

"Do you want to get strong only for your own sake?" Forrester

could not help saying, gently. "Do you never think of Ethel, of your father? I am sure you do!"

Kenyon coloured.

"Don't, old fellow! It's hard to think of anybody but yourself when you're laid up in bed for weeks and weeks. But Ethel knows that I do sometimes think about her; and that reminds me, C. J.; I was going to ask you to play tennis with her, or take her out for a ride, or something. She wants to come out of her shell. And then the governor, he's so decent to me now, of course I'd like to get better for his sake too. I think he'd make less fuss about the windows now – I'd like to break another and see! But it's no good pretending I'm as sorry for them as for myself, I *can't* be."

"You are very honest," said Forrester, looking kindly into the great bright eyes. "I wish all my fellows were as brave and honest as you!"

"I'm not so brave. You don't know what I've gone through up here alone in the night, apart from the pain. I've been thinking about – it. C. J., I don't know, now, that I'm going to get better at all. I pray to, and I try to, but I don't know that I am. I say, don't hook it! I daren't say it very loud. You're the first I've said it to at all. It only came to me last night … and it does seem hard lines. Look at the sun! With the window open like this, and your eyes shut, it's almost as good as lying out on the grass. Dear old place!.. Why *have* you hooked it? What are you looking out of the window for? They can't be coming yet!"

But they were, as it happened, though that was not why

Forrester had risen; nor had he answered when Kenyon heard the wheels.

"What a bother, C. J.! There was something else I meant to tell you; must you scoot? Then come up after the umpires have been, and tell me what they say – yourself. You sha'n't go till you promise!"

VI

When C. J. returned, the sun shone into the room no more; it was afternoon.

Kenyon was very white.

"Well?"

"Kenyon, they don't know!"

"But they're still in the house. Why haven't they gone? What are they waiting for? Tell me, C. J. You said you'd tell me!"

"Poor old Kenyon – dear old fellow!" faltered Forrester. "I promised to tell you, I know I did, and downstairs they've asked me to. Now you'll never feel it, Kenyon. They're going to do something which may make you better. You – you'll be put to sleep – you'll never feel a thing!"

"When is it to be?"

"This afternoon – very soon."

Kenyon drew a hard breath.

"You've got to be in the room, C. J.!"

"Very well, if they will let me. But you'll never know, Kenyon – you'll know nothing at all about it!"

"They *must* let you. You've got to hold my hand right through, whether I feel anything or not. See?"

"My dear boy! My brave old fellow!"

"It's a bargain?"

"I'd better go and ask them now."

"Hold on a bit. How you do like to do a bolt! I wish this hadn't come so soon … there was so much I'd got to tell you … all what I thought of in the night. You know the game we had, the night before you went, last summer? John would call it Gentlemen and Players; poor old John! I remember every bit of it – especially that leg-hit. It was sweet!. Well, when Ethel got run out, and our side lost – ah! I thought you'd remember – I played the fool, and you told me not to grumble at the umpire's decision. You said life was like cricket, and I mustn't dispute the umpire, but go out grinning – "

"I didn't mean that, Kenyon! You know I didn't! I never thought – "

"Perhaps not, but I did in the night; and I'm thinking of it now, C. J., I'm thinking of nothing else!"

VII

Kenyon had rallied: nearly a week had passed. It had done no good, but it had not killed him.

The afternoon was hot, and still, and golden. The window of Kenyon's room was wide open; it had been wide open every day. Below, on the court beyond the drive, Forrester and Ethel were playing at playing a single. Kenyon had rallied so surprisingly, and had himself begged them to play. He could not hear them, he was asleep; it was a pity; but he was sleeping continually. Mr. Harwood sat by Kenyon in the deep arm-chair. He had sent the nurse to lie down in her room. The afternoon, though brilliant, was still and oppressive.

How long he slept! Mr. Harwood seldom took his eyes from the smooth white forehead, whiter than usual under its thatch of brown hair. It was damp also, and the hair clung to it. Mr. Harwood would smooth back the hair, and actually not wake Kenyon with the sponge. His untrained fingers were grown incredibly light and tender. He would stand for minutes when he had done this, gazing down on the pale young face with the long brown locks and lashes. They were Kenyon's mother's eyelashes, as long and as dark. When Mr. Harwood raised his eyes from the boy, it was to gaze at her photograph on the screen. Kenyon in his sleep was extremely like her. The eyes in the portrait were downcast a little; they seemed to rest on Kenyon, to beckon him.

The voices of Ethel and Forrester, never loud, were audible all the time. And Mr. Harwood was glad to hear them. He did not want those two up here. He would not have Forrester up here any more; only Kenyon would. It was Forrester who had held the child's unconscious hand during the operation, and until Kenyon became sensible, when "C. J." was the first sound he uttered. There had been too much Forrester all through, much too much since the operation. It was Kenyon's doing, and Kenyon must have all his wishes now. It was not Forrester's fault. Mr. Harwood knew this, and hated Kenyon's friend the more bitterly for the feeling that another man would have loved him.

How Kenyon slept! How strange, how shallow, his breath seemed all at once! Mr. Harwood rose again, and again smoothed the long hair back from the forehead. The forehead glistened: and this time Kenyon awoke. There was a dim unseeing look in his eyes. He held out a hand, and Mr. Harwood grasped it, dropping on his knees beside the bed.

"Stick to my hand. Never let go again. Remember what you told me? *I* do – I'm thinking of it now!"

Mr. Harwood did not remember telling him any one thing. He was kneeling with his back to the window. Kenyon's sentences had come with long intervals between them, and accompanied by the most loving glances his father had ever received from him. The father's heart throbbed violently. Perhaps he realised that his boy was dying; he was more acutely conscious that Kenyon and he were alone together, and that childish love and trust had come

at last into the dear, dying eyes. He had striven so hard to win this look – had longed for it of late with so mighty a longing! And at the last it was his. What else was there to grasp?

Kenyon began to murmur indistinctly – about cricket – about getting out. Mr. Harwood leant closer to catch the words, and to drink deeper while he could of the dim loving eyes. But there came suddenly a change of expression. Kenyon was silent. And Mr. Harwood never knew why.

In the garden they heard the cry, and sped into the house, and up the stairs and into the room, warm from their game. They opened the door and stood still; for they saw Kenyon as none ever had seen him before, with his face upon his father's shoulder, and a smile there such as Forrester himself had never won.

A LITERARY COINCIDENCE

It was twenty-five minutes past eight, and a fine October morning, when Mr. Wolff Mason, the popular novelist and editor of *Mayfair*, emerged from the dressing-room of his house in Kensington and came downstairs dabbing his chin with his clean pocket-handkerchief. The day had begun badly with the man of letters, whose boast it was that he had shaved for upwards of forty years without cutting himself anything like forty times. He entered the dining-room with a comically rueful expression on his kindly humorous face, and with a twitching behind the spectacles which would have led those who knew him best to prick their ears for one of the delightful things which the novelist was continually saying at his own expense. His face fell, however, when he found no one in the room but the maid who was lighting the wick beneath the plated kettle on the breakfast table.

"Has Miss Ida not come down yet?"

"Not that I know of, sir. Shall I go and see?"

"Oh, never mind, never mind," said the novelist, cursorily examining the letters on his plate, and opening none of them. "Well, upon my word, I don't know what has come over Ida," he added to himself, as he undid the fastenings of the French window which led down iron steps into the little London garden behind the house. "Yesterday morning she ran it pretty fine. The day before she was a good minute late. Of course she may be in

time yet, but I do wish I could teach her to be five minutes early for everything, as I am. Ida is worse than either of her sisters in this respect; and she began by being the best of the three."

Wolff Mason sighed as he thought of his daughters. The two elder ones were married and settled, very comfortably, it is true; but if Ida followed their example, what on earth was to become of her unfortunate father? Who was to typewrite his manuscript, and correct his proofs, and peel the stamps from the enclosed envelopes of the people who wrote for the novelist's autograph? No, he could not do without Ida at any price; and Mr. Mason shook his head as he passed out into the fresh air and down the iron steps into the garden. He did more: he shook his daughters, and all creatures of mere flesh and blood, quite out of his mind.

For it was Wolff Mason's habit to spend five minutes in the garden, every morning before breakfast, when it was fine; and when it was not, to walk round the breakfast table four-and-twenty times. That filled the five minutes which he always spent in the exclusive company of the characters of his current novel. He had been heard to say that he did his day's work in those five minutes; that at the office, where he worked at his novel all the morning, he had only to sit with his pen in his hand for three hours, and fifteen hundred words of fiction was the inevitable result. That part was purely mechanical, the novelist said. He had really written it in the five minutes before breakfast. It is not generally known, however, how curiously Wolff Mason delighted in humorous depreciation of his own work and methods. One

would have liked his critics to hear him on the subject; they took his writings so very much more seriously than he did himself, that they little dreamt how highly their clever elaborate reviews entertained the philosophic object of their censure. It was an open secret that Wolff Mason professed a wholesome and unaffected disregard for posterity and the critics; but if the books that delighted two generations are forgotten by a third, their writer will certainly be remembered as the most charming talker, the kindest-hearted editor, and the most methodical man of letters of his day.

To method and to habit, indeed, the novelist had been a slave all his literary life. This he admitted quite freely. On the other hand, he argued that as his habits were all good ones in themselves (with the possible exception of that ounce of tobacco which he managed to consume daily), while his methods produced a not wholly unsuccessful result, the slavery suited him very well. Certainly it was good to be five minutes early for everything, and to start most things as the clocks were striking. The dining-room clock struck the half-hour after eight as Mr. Mason re-entered and shut the French window behind him. He had thought out the half-chapter for that day with even more than his customary minute prevision. This was all very good indeed. It was bad, however, that he should find himself now quite alone in the room, with the hot plates and the bacon growing cold, the kettle steaming furiously over the thin blue flame, and no Ida to make the tea.

Mr. Mason took up his position with an elbow on the mantelpiece and one foot to the fire, and stared solemnly at the clock. It was a worse case than yesterday. Two, three, four minutes passed. Then there was a rustle in the hall; light, quick footsteps ran across the room, and a nervous little hand was laid upon the novelist's shoulder. In another instant he was looking down into great dark eyes filled with the liveliest contrition, and making a mental note of the little black crescents underneath.

"Dear father, can you forgive me?"

"I'll try to, my dear, since you look so – penitent."

He had been about to say "pale." As he kissed the girl's cheek, its pallor was indeed conspicuous. As a rule she had the loveliest colour, which harmonised charmingly with the sweet clear brown of her eyes and hair. Ida Mason was in fact a very beautiful and graceful girl, but lately she had grown thin and quiet, and the salt was gone out of her in many subtle ways which did not escape the spectacles of that trained observer, her father. Mr. Mason glanced over the *Times* while his tea was being made, and knew all that was in it before his cup was poured out, the bacon on his plate, and the toast-rack set within easy reach of his hand.

"A singularly dull paper," said he, as he flung it aside and Ida sat down.

"Yes?"

"It is absolutely free from news. At this time of year there's more fun in the papers that lend themselves to egregious contributions from the public. I see, however, that Professor

Palliser died last night – "

"How dreadful!"

"In his ninety-third year," added Mr. Mason, dryly, to his own sentence.

"I'm afraid I was thinking of someone else," said Ida lamely.

"Of me, my dear? Then I *will* take another piece of sugar, if you don't object. The fact is, you didn't give me any at all. No, that's the salt!"

Ida laughed nervously. "I am so stupid this morning! Please forgive me, dear father."

"I hope there is nothing the matter?"

"Nothing at all."

"That's right. I fear that the religious novel is to have a most undesirable vogue. The *Times* reviews three in one column. We have to thank 'Robert Elsmere' for this."

"And 'Humphry Ward, Preacher,'" suggested Ida.

The novelist arched his eyebrows and bent forward over his plate. "Exactly," said he, after a slight pause. He did not look at his daughter. Otherwise he would have seen that she was eating nothing, and that her eyes were full of tears. It was plain to him, however, that for some reason or other, into which it was not his business to inquire, it would be unkind to press further conversation upon Ida, whom he merely thanked more affectionately than usual for moving his plate and for pouring out his second cup of tea. Over breakfast the novelist always took half an hour precisely. The clock was striking nine when he rose

from the table and went upstairs to take leave of his wife.

Mrs. Mason was a sweet, frail woman of sixty, who for years had breakfasted in her own room. Without being actually an invalid, she owed it to her quiet mornings upstairs that she was still able to see her friends in the afternoon, and to dine out at moderate intervals. For five-and-thirty years his wife had been Wolff Mason's guardian angel. On her wedding-day she had been just as proud of her unknown bridegroom as she was now of the celebrated *littérateur*, and had loved the stalwart young fellow of eight-and-twenty only less dearly than the white old man of sixty-three. He found her with her tea and toast growing cold on the bed-table at her side; she was reading Ida's typewritten copy of the novel upon which he himself was then engaged.

"My dear Wolff," Mrs. Mason exclaimed, greeting her husband with the enthusiastic smile which had inspired and consoled him in the composition of so many works of fiction, "I am delighted with these last chapters! You have never done better: you might have written the love scenes thirty years ago. But you look put out, dear Wolff. Have they been stupid downstairs?"

"We are all stupid to-day, including my dear wife if she really thinks much of my love scenes. I cut myself shaving, to begin with. Then Ida was late for breakfast – four long minutes late – and for the third time this week. I *am* put out, and it's about Ida. It is not only that she is late, but there are rings under her eyes, and she forgets the sugar in your tea, and when you ask for it hands

you the salt, and when you speak to her she answers inanely. She pulled a long face when I told her that Professor Palliser died last night, though the poor dear old gentleman has been on a public death-bed these eighteen months. She came a fearful howler over a book which she herself has read, to my knowledge, within the last fortnight. For the life of me I can't think what ails her."

"Can you not?"

Mrs. Mason had put down the typewritten sheets, and lay gazing at her husband with gentle shrewdness in her kind eyes.

"No, I cannot," said the novelist, defiantly.

"Have you quite forgotten Saltburn-by-the-Sea?"

"I am certainly doing my best to forget it, my dear; a deadlier fortnight I never spent in my life. Not a decent library in the place, nor a man in the hotel who knew more than the mere alphabet of whist! Why remind me of it, my love?"

"Because that's what ails Ida. She is suffering from the effects of Saltburn-by-the-Sea."

"My dear Margaret, I simply don't believe it!"

"But I know it, Wolff. Do listen to reason. Dear Ida has told me everything, and I am sorry to say she is very sadly in love."

"In love with whom?" cried the novelist, who had been pacing up and down the room, after the manner of his kind, but who stopped now at the foot of the bed, to spread his hands out eloquently. "With that young Overton?"

"With that young Over*man*. You were so short and sharp with him, you see, that you never even mastered his name."

"I was naturally short and sharp with a young fellow whom she had only seen two or three times in her life – once on the pier, once in the gardens, once or twice about the hotel. It was a piece of confounded presumption! We didn't even know who or what the fellow was!"

"He put you in the way of finding out, and you said you didn't want to know."

"No more I did," said Wolff Mason.

"You liked him well enough before he proposed to Ida."

"That may be. He had more idea of whist than any of the others, which is saying precious little. But his proposal was a piece of infernal impertinence, and I told him so."

"I am sorry you told him so, Wolff," said Mrs. Mason softly. "However, the affair is quite a thing of the past. You put a stop to it pretty effectually, and I daresay it was for the best. Only it is right you should know that young Overman and Ida met in Oxford Street yesterday, and that she has not slept all night for thinking about him."

"The villain!" cried Wolff Mason, excitedly. "I suppose he asked her to run away with him?"

"They did not speak. I was with Ida," said his wife. "It was the purest accident. Ida bowed – indeed, so did I – and he took off his hat, but no one stopped or spoke. Ida is troubled because he looked extremely wretched; even I can see his eyes now as they looked when we passed him. However, as I say, you put a stop to the matter, and they must both get over it as best they can. I

have never blamed you, I think. It *was* very premature, I grant you. My only feeling has been that, as a writer of romance all your days, you showed remarkably little sympathy with a pair of sufficiently romantic young lovers!"

"My dear, I choose to keep romance in its proper place – between the covers of my books. I have more than enough of it there, I can assure you, if I could afford to consult my own taste."

"You can't put in too much of it to suit mine. Your love-story has been the strong point in all your novels, Wolff, and it is still. This new one is of your very best in that respect. I foresee a sweet scene in the boat-house."

"I am in the middle of it now," the novelist said, complacently.

"I have visions of the old general turning up when she is in his arms. I do hope you won't let him, Wolff."

"How well you know my work, my love! The general came in and caught them just before I wiped my pen yesterday. It ended the chapter very nicely. I was in good form at lunch."

"And what is going to happen to-day?"

"Can you ask? The general blusters. George behaves like a gentleman, and scores all down the line, for the time being."

"But surely she is allowed to marry him in the end?"

"She always is, my dear, in my books."

Mrs. Mason cast upon her husband a fixed look which turned slowly into a sweet, grave smile. He was still standing at the foot of the bed, but now he was leaning on the brass rail, with his hands folded quietly, and a good-humoured twinkle in his eyes.

Whatever he might say about his own books at the club, he enjoyed chatting them over with his wife as keenly as in the dear early days when his first book and their eldest daughter appeared simultaneously. He had forgotten Ida for the moment, and the pleasant though impossible young man at the sea-side; but Mrs. Mason did not mean that moment to be prolonged.

"Ah," said she, "in your books! Twice you have allowed the heroine to marry the hero in your life too."

"I was under the impression, my dear, that we were talking about my books."

"But I am thinking about Ida. You needn't look at the clock, Wolff. You know very well that you never leave the house before ten minutes past, and it isn't five past yet. You may look at your watch if you like, but you will see that my clock is, if anything, fast. I say that you raised no opposition in the case of either Laura or Hetty."

"Didn't I?" exclaimed the novelist with a grim chuckle. "By Jove, I did my worst! If that wasn't very bad you must remember that we knew all about Charles and Macfarlane. It wasn't like young Overton. By Jove, no!"

"Young Overman's is better romance," murmured Mrs. Mason.

"Therefore, it is worse real life. I do wish you would see with me that the two things clash if you try to bring them together. Frankly, my dear, I wish you wouldn't try. I make a point of never doing so – that's why I don't live over the shop."

"Wolff, Wolff, say that sort of thing at your club! With me you can afford to be sincere. Why, you have put Ida's hair and eyes into every book you have written since she grew up. The things don't clash. If you borrow from Ida for your books, I think you ought to be prepared to pay her back out of your books too, and allow her to live happily ever after, like all the rest of your heroines."

There were moments when Wolff Mason realised that the one-sided game of letters has a bad effect on the argumentative side of a man's mind. The present was one. He looked again at his watch, and replaced it very hurriedly in his waistcoat pocket.

"My dear, I really must be going."

"One minute more – just one," pleaded Mrs. Mason, and her voice was as soft as ever it had been thirty years ago. "I want your hand, Wolff!"

The novelist came round to the bedside and sat down for a few moments on the edge. During those few moments two frail, worn, thin hands were joined together, and Wolff Mason's spectacles showed him a moisture in his wife's eyes – not tears, but a shining film which only made them more lovely and sweet and kind. That film had come over them in the old days when they were both young and he had told her of his love. On very rare occasions he had described it in the eyes of his dark-eyed heroines, and never without a hotness in his own. He rose suddenly. His hand was pressed.

"You will reconsider it, Wolff?"

"My dear, she is our last."

"My love, we have each other!"

Some moments later, when Wolff Mason had closed the door behind him, he had to open it again to hear what it was that his wife was calling after him.

"Mind you don't make the general *too* inhuman, Wolff, or I shall be so disappointed in you both!"

The novelist laughed. So did his wife. The secret of their complete happiness was not love alone. It was love and laughter.

Nevertheless, Wolff Mason drove to the office of the *Mayfair Magazine* in a less literary frame of mind than he either liked or was addicted to at this early hour of the day. It is not true that the novelist constructed all his stories in the hansom which deposited him in Paternoster Row at a quarter to ten every morning, and in front of his own door at a quarter-past seven in the evening. That was the invention of the lady journalists who wrote paragraphs about Wolff Mason for the evening papers – those paragraphs his old-world soul abhorred. It is a fact, however, that he liked to get out of his hansom with more ideas than he had taken into it. He made it a rule to think only of his work on the drive in.

But this morning he was breaking all his rules: he had cut himself with his razor; he had left the house five minutes late, owing to a series of little domestic scenes of which his head was still full. And how he hated scenes outside his books! He treated the psychological moments in his own life as lightly, indeed, as in his novels, but the former worried him. This morning he had

kissed Mrs. Mason with all the exuberance of a young man, and on coming downstairs, and finding Ida waiting for him with his tall hat and overcoat nicely brushed, and his gloves warmed on both sides, he had kissed her too, and so fondly as to bring out the same film on her sweet eyes as he had produced a few minutes before in those of her mother.

To begin the day by making people cry was peculiarly odious to the kind-hearted gentleman who held it the whole duty of a novelist to make people laugh; and those two pairs of dear eyes, so like each other in every look, duly accompanied him to the orderly, tobacco-scented room, where he edited *Mayfair* and wrote his own books. The clock on the chimney-piece stood at ten minutes to ten. He was five minutes late at this end also.

On a little table under the window lay the long envelopes and the cylinders of manuscript which had arrived since the day before. Wolff Mason lit a cigarette, and examined the packets without opening them. Thus he invariably began his official day, tossing aside the less interesting-looking missives for his weekly "clean sweep," and leaving on the little table work enough for the afternoon, mostly the work of previously accepted contributors, whose handwriting was familiar to the editor. These were the people who gave the trouble, the people who had sent in a good thing once. Not all of them did it twice.

The editor recognised this morning on one of the long envelopes the superscription of a most promising contributor who had done it thrice, but who had lately failed as many times in

succession. Wolff Mason had never known a valued contributor go to the bad at such a pace; but this one had done such merry work in the beginning that there was hope for him still. At all events he could write, and must therefore be read carefully. The editor would have read him there and then, in the hope of a laugh, which he felt he needed, had he not been five minutes late as it was. At three minutes to ten he loaded four brier-wood pipes out of a stone tobacco-jar, set three of them in a row on his desk, and lit the fourth. When the hour struck the ink stood thick on certain symbols at the top of a clean sheet of unlined foolscap, and Wolff Mason was glancing over his previous morning's work.

The clock on the chimney-piece had a quiet, inoffensive tick, but this, and an occasional squeal from the novelist's pipe, which was exceedingly foul, were the only sounds within the editorial sanctum between ten and half-past that morning. The ink had dried upon the pen of as ready a writer as ever told agreeable stories in good English; at the half-hour all that had been written was the heading of the new chapter, and the number of the page (with a ring round it) in the right-hand top corner. Some ten minutes later Wolff Mason took up his second pipe, lit it, and began to write. He wrote for an hour, more rapidly and less gracefully than was his wont. Then he flung down his pen, lit the third pipe, and blew clouds of smoke against the square of blue framed by the upper sashes of the double window on his right. The novelist was in trouble. The best character in his book, the old general, was failing him sadly in the hour of need.

It was necessary to the plot that this hearty, weather-beaten warrior should make a complete brute of himself in the boat-house on discovering his only daughter in the embrace of the young poet who inhabited cheap chambers in Mitre Court when he was at home. But the general had treated the poet as his own son hitherto, had taken his daughter to tea at the Mitre Court chambers, had himself invited their interesting tenant down to his country house for change of air; and he refused to be so inconsistent. It was a case of inventing something disreputable (afterwards to be disproved) against the poet; the general must only now have heard of it to justify his ordering his guest off the premises as the plot demanded. It was necessary and easy, but undeniably conventional, and it distressed the novelist, because he had not foreseen this contingency in the garden before breakfast. Moreover, for some reason or other, he felt his inventive faculty to be at its lowest vitality to-day. He did not ask himself what the reason was. He had at least got back to the world of fiction, and whatever their effects, the domestic scenes of the early morning were entirely forgotten.

He was aware, however, that this morning he was breaking all his rules. He was about to invent in the room where it was his practice only to write down what he had invented elsewhere. He got up and paced the room in order to do so, and this was another rule broken, for he very seldom stirred from his chair between ten o'clock and one. And now, as he walked, Wolff Mason's eye was caught by the packet from that promising contributor who could

write so amusingly when he liked; the creative portion of his brain gave sudden way to the editorial; and the editor informed himself, with a characteristic chuckle of self-depreciation, that the new man's story would in any case amuse him more than his own was doing at the moment. At all events he would try it. He had broken so many rules already that he caught up the interesting envelope with a certain recklessness, and having lighted his fourth pipe, sat down to read manuscript as calmly as though it were three o'clock in the afternoon instead of the middle of his sacred working morning.

The story, which was quite short, was accompanied by the unpresuming business-like note which this contributor always forwarded with his literary offerings. It was called "A Good Father," which was not a very good title, but the editor prepared to give it his "careful consideration," in accordance with the pledge embodied in his printed notice to contributors. He pushed his spectacles on to his forehead and began to read with the manuscript held close to his nose. Over the third leaf his fine, thoughtful forehead became scored with furrows; on the fifth he exclaimed "Ha!" Half way through the story he muttered "Upon my word!" and a little later, "A most remarkable coincidence." Then his face lost its interested look under the gathering clouds of disappointment, and he finished reading with a brow awry.

"Not free from merit – anything but free – yet it won't do! This is a young man with a naturally sweet sense of humour, but something has embittered him since he first began to send me his

stories. I wish I knew what! He is the most disappointing person I have had to deal with for many a day; a writer after my own heart, which he is half breaking with his accursed childish cynicism!"

The genuine character of the editor's regrets was obvious (to himself) from the fact that all his observations were made aloud. He very seldom caught himself in the act of soliloquy; it was yet another of the several irregularities which were destined to stamp this day in the memory of one who notoriously lived and worked by routine. The matter of the unacceptable story, however, suggested an entry in the commonplace book in which he was accustomed to accumulate raw material for future use. He felt happier when he had jotted down a note or two anent the cynicism of the modern young author and his lamentable liking for unhappy endings. The story he had just read ended shockingly, and all owing to the unnatural obduracy of an impossible parent, the "Good Father" of the cynical title. Otherwise it was a very good story indeed. The coincidence, however, was quite remarkable. Paternal opposition was the rock on which Wolff Mason's own pen had split that morning. But his old general was not going to run him into an unhappy ending – not he! He turned to that irate personage with positive relief, and saw his way more clearly after the ten minutes he had spent in the company of a much more terrible specimen of the same class. What he did not see was the full force of the coincidence which had caused him to exclaim aloud. It was a double one; but the man of letters lived a double life, and in the atmosphere of

fiction had forgotten those unpleasant facts which had compelled his attention earlier in the day.

Another matter worried the writer when the clock struck one, and he found himself mechanically wiping the pen that had inscribed some twelve hundred and fifty words only instead of the regulation fifteen hundred. He felt humbled by a sense of failure most mortifying at his age, and though he put away his papers and went off to the club as usual, he was not in his customary spirits, and the younger novelists who listened for his good things, in order to repeat them to their friends, heard nothing worth taking home with them that day. One of the latter, indeed, broached very deftly the subject of Wolff Mason's books; but the veteran treated the subject with unnatural seriousness, was aware of the unnaturalness himself, and left the club before his time in an evil humour. And evil humours were the greatest rarity of all with the editor of the *Mayfair*, whom common consent credited with the most charming personality in literary London.

By two-thirty he was back in the editorial chair; the first of a newly-loaded set of pipes was in full blast under his nose, and the remaining contents of the little table under the window were being dealt with carefully and in turn. Not one of them proved to be of any use at all. In each case this kind-hearted man felt it his duty to pen a considerate little letter explaining the reason of rejection in the present instance, and encouraging the unsuccessful contributor to further effort. It is amazing,

indeed, and little known, what a talent Wolff Mason had for the composition of kindly little notes of this nature; he made even the rejected love him, for his heartening words, and for the sympathy and humour with which he tempered disappointment to his tender young contributors.

Last of all this afternoon he returned to "A Good Father," and glanced over it again with a sigh. Then he took a sheet of *Mayfair Magazine* note-paper, and scrawled the date and "Dear Sir." There he stopped. After a few moments' hesitation, the spoilt sheet was dropped into the waste-paper basket, and a new note begun with "My" thrown in before the "Dear Sir." But the editor paused again.

"Confound the fellow," he cried at last, "I'll treat him as a friend! The chances are he'll turn and rend me; but here goes."

The note that was eventually written and posted ran as follows: —

> "Dear Mr. Evan Evans, – I think that 'A Good Father' is excellent, but on the whole it does not strike me as being in your best style – which is capital. If I may be permitted to make an unofficial observation, you will, I think, pardon the expression of an old man's regret that a writer with a real sense of humour, like yourself, should subordinate it to what strikes one as an alien melancholy. If you would only write as cheerfully as you did some time back, I should be spared the disappointment of returning your MS., which I

shall never do without peculiar and personal regrets.

"Yours very truly,

"Wolff Mason."

The good editor breathed more freely when he had got this letter off his mind, and had addressed it to Evan Evans, Esq., 17, Cardigan Mansions, Kensington, W., and closed the envelope with his own hand and tongue. It was his last act at the office that day. As he tossed the letter into one basket, and the rejected manuscript into another, the clock on the chimney-piece struck the half-hour after four. And at half-past four in the afternoon, summer and winter, seed-time and harvest, with the annual exception of a hateful holiday at some such place as Saltburn, the editor of the *Mayfair Magazine* returned to his club to play whist for an hour and a half precisely, with three kindred spirits as methodical and as enthusiastic as himself.

But this was the exceptional day which proved every rule of Wolff Mason's most ruly life by causing him to break each of them in turn. He played his cards towards evening as amateurishly as he had chosen his phrases in the forenoon. Now what is about to be written down may never be believed. But at five-thirty-three, by the card-room clock, Wolff Mason, who was more eminent among the few as a whist-player than as a writer of novels, put the last trump on his partner's thirteenth card. One has it on unimpeachable authority. A few minutes later the rubber came to an end, and, instead of playing out time, as the custom was with this sporting quartette, the novelist complained

of a slight faintness (which explained everything) and left the club twenty minutes before six for the first time for many years.

One of the other three saw him into his hansom. He said that the air entirely revived him. It might have done so, if there had ever been anything the matter with him. He ailed nothing, however, beyond extreme and cumulative mortification; and the four winds of heaven, chasing each other round his temples as he drove westward, could not have blown that cobweb out of his respected head.

He could no longer feel surprised at anything that he might do, or say, or think. Somewhere in the neighbourhood of the park he managed to think upon Evan Evans's latest story, now on its way back to that uneven contributor, and it seemed only natural that the shrewdest, most experienced magazine-editor in London should question the wisdom of his late decision in a way that would have made him laugh on any other occasion. He did not laugh now. The optimist of letters was in an incredibly pessimistic mood, in which the story he had refused seemed to him an ideal one for the magazine. He thought of his valued and most promising contributor, Evan Evans, of the manuscript now on its way back to him, of the possible effect of the rejection of so good a story upon a sensitive young man with a knowledge of other markets. Then he thought of this contributor's address, which was quite close to his own, and of the twenty minutes which he had in hand owing to his premature departure from the club. A word on the spur to the cab-man, a sharp turn to the left,

some easy driving along a quiet street, and the hansom pulled up before the respectable portals of Cardigan Mansions, Nos. 11-22, whereof the stout attendant in uniform came forward and threw back the panels.

In another minute Wolff Mason was pressing the electric bell outside No. 17 on the second floor, and reflecting, with a qualm, that he was about to intrude upon a rejected contributor whom he had never seen – a truly startling reversal of a far too common editorial experience of his own. An elderly servant opened the door.

"Is Mr. Evans at home?"

"Mr. Hevans, sir?"

The servant looked as vacant as a woman need.

"Mr. Evan Evans," said the editor, distinctly, and with a smile as it struck him that there was no occasion in the world for him to leave his name. But a light had broken over the crass face of the elderly door-opener.

"Oh, I know, sir! He *is* in. Will you step this way?"

There was no drawing back now. Mr. Mason stepped boldly across the threshold, and the door closed behind him. In the very narrow passage the servant squeezed by him, and paused with her fingers on the handle of a door upon the right-hand side.

"What name shall I say, sir?"

"Mr. Wolff Mason."

A moment later the novelist-editor found himself standing in a more charming study than he himself owned to that day. It

was all books and pictures, and weapons and pretty curtains, and comfortable chairs and handy tables. A good fire was burning, and on the right of it was a desk so placed that the writer looked out into the room as he sat at his work. The writer was sitting there now. He was a very young man, with a pipe in his mouth and a pen in his hand, and as he leant forward with the utmost eagerness, and the light of his writing-lamp fell full upon his youthful face, Wolff Mason had not the slightest difficulty in recognising Ida's presumptuous suitor of Saltburn-by-the-Sea.

"How do you do, Mr. Mason?" the young fellow said, coming forward with his hand frankly outstretched; but the other hesitated before taking it in his.

"Am I speaking to Mr. Evan Evans?"

"That is the name I – write stories under."

"Exactly. Your other name is not my concern. I don't seek to know it, Mr. Evans."

The editor was smiling grimly, but his gloved hand was now extended. Now, however, that of the young man went coolly into his trousers' pocket as he looked his visitor steadily in the face. They were grey flannel trousers, with yellow slippers at one end of them and a Norfolk jacket at the other. The editor's smile had turned to a look of interest.

"I called to see you about a little story, Mr. Evans."

"You have done me a very great honour, sir. Won't you sit down? Do you find it warm? Shall I open the window?"

"Not at all, not at all. I won't detain you a moment, and I won't

sit down in one of your chairs, because they look comfortable, and I am stiff – though you wouldn't think it from my breaking in upon you like this, would you?"

Having shown very plainly that it was not his intention to recognise any former acquaintance, and seeing his young host take the cue from him in a way that struck him as at once manly and gentlemanly, Mr. Wolff Mason was now behaving in his own most charming fashion, which was very charming indeed to a young unknown beginner from a favourite old author whose name had been a household word for a quarter of a century at least. The beginner felt that if he had gauged the character of Wolff Mason correctly, when they first met at the sea-side, he would never have concealed the identity of Jack Overman with Evan Evans. But all thought of the old man's hardness upon a young one perished in an overwhelming sense of the great editor's kindness towards his utterly unknown contributor.

"I'll stand here, if I may, with my back to your fire. I looked in about the very clever little story you sent me yesterday."

The young author's face brightened till it quivered, but his words were all unworthy.

"How awfully kind of you!"

"Not at all, my dear sir. I was passing close to you, on my way home, and I was bothering about your story. I admire your work, but I don't altogether admire this story. My dear fellow, it ends too sadly altogether!"

"No other ending was possible," the young man declared. "So

I felt, and one must write as one feels."

"Must one?" said the veteran, smiling blandly into the boyish earnest face. "Surely all things are possible to him who writes – unless, to be sure, he takes himself seriously!"

This, however, was not very seriously said, for Wolff Mason had turned round and was peering at the photographs on and over the mantel-piece. Suddenly he pushed up his spectacles and thrust his head close to a framed portrait, with a piece of stamp-paper stuck upon the glass to hide the face, but with the name in print underneath upon the mount.

"May I ask, young man," inquired Mr. Mason, as he favoured his contributor with a very comical stare, "why you have my photograph on the wall, in the first place; and, in the second, why the deuce you cover up my face?"

"You must ask the man who lives with me. He may come in any moment now."

"Did he do it?"

"I'm ashamed to say he did."

"Upon my word I should like to know why!"

"Well, sir, he bought me your photograph when you were accepting my stories; and he hid your face because he said – "

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.