

A Literary Coincidence.

BY E. W. HORNING.

LT 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 underneath the plated kettle on the breakfast table.

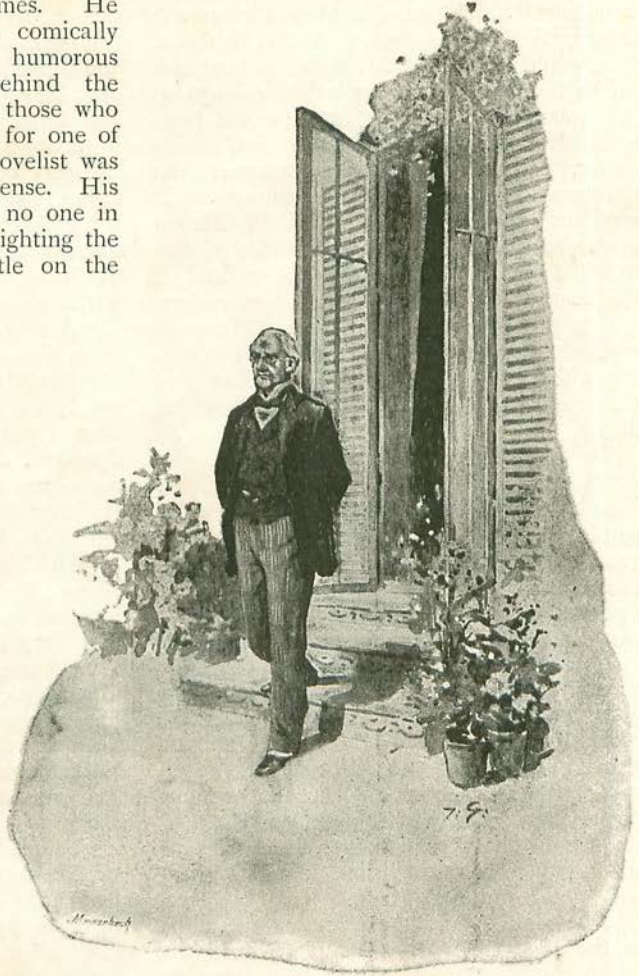
"Has Miss Ida not come down yet?"

"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 distinctly a 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 type-write his manuscript, and correct his proofs, and peel the stamps from the inclosed 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



"HE PASSED OUT INTO THE FRESH AIR."

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, clean 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 two thousand words of fiction were 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 this 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, and 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 mantel-piece 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 that were filled with the liveliest contrition, and making a mental note of the little black crescents beneath them.

"Father, dear, 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 harmonized 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——"

"Oh? How dreadful!"

"In his ninety-sixth 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; to whom he addressed no more remarks, except to thank her, rather more tenderly than usual, for moving his

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 bent 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 type-written 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



"HE THANKED HER MORE TENDERLY THAN USUAL."

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 his chair 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, when she wished to see them, in the afternoon, and to dine out at moderate intervals. For five-and-thirty years she had been Wolff Mason's guardian angel. On her

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 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 type-written 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 slower fortnight I never spent in my life. There wasn't a single decent library in the place, nor a man in the hotel who knew more than the mere alphabet of whist. Why do you remind me of it, my love?"

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

"Look here, my dear, 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 *Overman*. You were so short and sharp with him, you see, that you never even got hold of his name properly."

"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 have been. He had more idea of whist than any of the others, which is saying precious little. But his proposal was a piece of confounded impertinence, and I told him so!"

"I am sorry you told him so, Wolff," Mrs.

Mason said, 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," Mrs. Mason said, calmly. "It was the purest accident. Ida bowed—indeed, so did I—and he took off his hat, but no one stood still or spoke. Ida is troubled because he looked extremely wretched; I, too, 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 this 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 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 dark 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 sweet, 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 seaside; 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, I wish you wouldn't try, my dear; I make a point of never doing so—that's why I don't live over the shop."

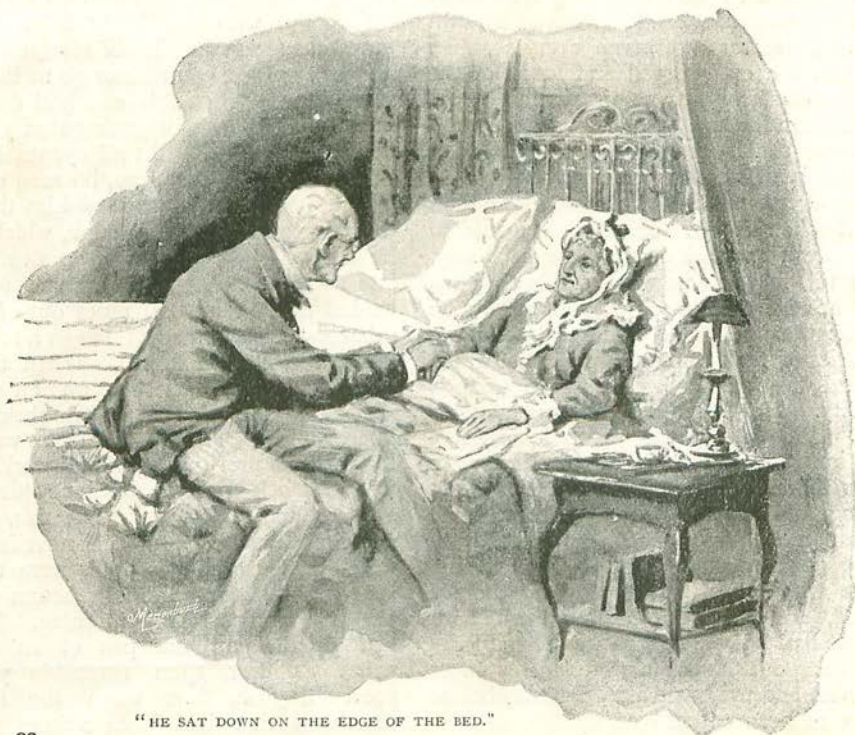
"Wolff, Wolff, say that sort of thing at the club! With me you can afford to be sincere. Why, you have put Ida's hair and eyes into every book you have written since she grew up. The things don't clash. If you borrow from Ida for your books, I think you ought to be prepared to pay her back out of your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

There were moments when Wolff Mason realized 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 pulled out his watch again, and replaced it very hurriedly in his waistcoat pocket.

"My love, I really must be going."

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

The novelist came round to the bedside and sat down for a few moments on the edge of it. During those few moments two frail, worn, thin hands were joined together, and



"HE SAT DOWN ON THE EDGE OF THE BED."

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 minutes 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. She was saying:—

"Mind you don't make the General too unhuman, Wolff, or I shall be disappointed in him and in you too."

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 every evening. That was the exaggerated statement of the lady journalists who wrote paragraphs about Wolff Mason for the evening papers, but who had never shaken hands with him in their lives. 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 each way.

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 full now as he drove towards the City. 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. That 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 by no means delightful to the kind-hearted gentleman who held it the whole duty of a novelist to make people laugh. He could not get those two pairs of dear eyes, so like each other in every look, out of his head, which was full of everything but his work when he climbed the stairs 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, too.

On a little table under the window were arranged the long envelopes and cylinders of manuscripts which had arrived since the day before. Wolff Mason lit a cigarette, and examined the packets without opening them. He always began his official day like this, tossing aside the less interesting-looking mis-sives for his weekly "clean sweep," and leaving on the little table work enough for the afternoon—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. As a rule, it was some time before they 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 hopes 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 was wet on an illegible symbol 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 spun agreeable yarns in good English, but when the half-hour struck 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 put down his first pipe, took up his second, 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

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 novelistic portion of his brain became suddenly submerged by the editorial; and the editor informed himself, with a characteristic chuckle of self-depreciation, that the new man's story would in any event amuse him more than his own was doing at the moment. At any rate he would try it. He had broken so many rules already during the morning, 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 unpretentious business-like little 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, as he put the story down on his desk, he said, sadly:—

"Not free from merit—anything but free—



"THE NOVELIST WAS IN TROUBLE."

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 boathouse 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, and 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 just 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

yet it won't do! This is a young man with a 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 one more of the set of unusual acts which were destined to stamp the day in the memory of a *littérateur* 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 against 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 intervention 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 intervention 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 come rather painfully under his notice that morning in Kensington.

Another matter worried the writer when the clock struck one and he found himself mechanically wiping the pen that had inscribed only some twelve hundred and fifty words that morning instead of the regulation two thousand. 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 to 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*, who, indeed, was voted, by common consent, to possess 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 human, sympathetic touches 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* notepaper, 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.

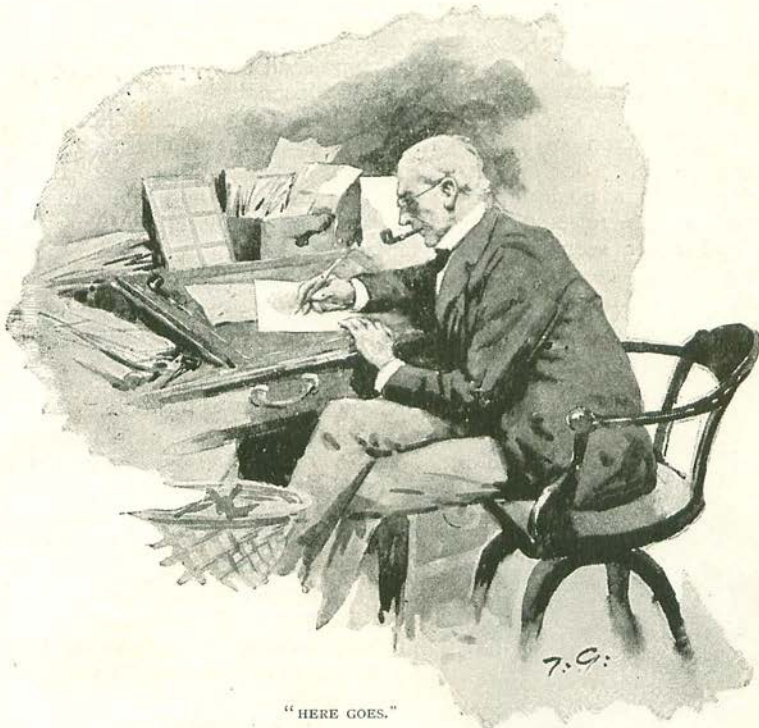
"Confound the fellow," he cried at last, "I'll treat him as a friend! The chances are he'll turn and rend me; but here goes."

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."



"HERE GOES."

The good editor breathed more freely when he had got this little letter off his mind, and had addressed it to Evan Evans, Esq., 17, Cardigan Mansions, Kensington, W., and fastened up 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 I am about to write down I may never be allowed to print. 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 his last trump on his partner's thirteenth card. I have 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, save 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 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 cabman, a sharp turn to the left, some easy driving along a

quiet street, and the cab 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?"



"IS MR. EVANS AT HOME?"

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 nice little 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, please, 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 was 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 seaside, he would never have concealed the identity of Jack Overman with Evan Evans. His remembrance of the old man's hardness upon a young one was forced to the back of his mind by 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.

"That was, indeed, most 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 said, firmly. "So I felt, and one must write as one feels."

"Must you?" said the veteran novelist, smiling blandly into the boyish, eager 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 mantelpiece. Suddenly he pushed his spectacles on to his forehead and thrust his head close to a framed portrait, which had a piece of stamp-paper stuck upon the glass so as completely to cover the face. But the name was in print underneath upon the mount.

"May I ask, young man," inquired Mr. Mason, a minute later, 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, or did you?"

"He did."

"Really, I should like to know why!"

"Well, then, he bought me your photograph when you were accepting my stories; and he hid it because he said——"

"Well, what did he say?"

"He talked rot."

"Out with it!"

"He said you'd certainly live |to hide it yourself on my account. I'm afraid that he unduly admires my stuff. He's a fellow who is full of sympathy——"

"And not free from humour—by no means free!" cried Mr. Mason, laughing at the top of his voice (as he had never, never laughed at Saltburn-by-the-Sea). "But seriously, you are ending your later stories far too sadly. To come back to your last one—though I'm afraid it's coming back to you. I rejected it, and then, as I was driving home, I thought you would perhaps alter it, if I called and asked you before you sent it elsewhere. Don't you think you could soften your good father—just at the end?"

"I couldn't," said the young fellow, with a candid stare; but his eyes fell under the cool, kindly scrutiny of the elderly man, who continued gazing at the well-shaped head, on which the hair was perhaps a trifle long and untidy. For once that day Wolff Mason was the equal of the occasion, and he had known it from the first moment of entering. The occasion, moreover, was the very one to which he would have desired to rise.

"Why couldn't you, my dear fellow?"

"Because it isn't life."

"Are you so sure that you know life?"

"I know it as I find it," said the young fellow, bitterly; and there was a pause.

"Well, at any rate, you know that I like your stories."

"I am thankful to hear it."

"I want to accept them——"

"You are very kind."

"As many of them as ever you can write, and some day a long novel. I believe in you."

"Oh, sir, you are more than kind—to a private in the army of which you yourself are the Commander-in-Chief!"

"My good Overton, why on earth didn't you tell me you were that three months ago? Not that you're a private at all."

Two frail hands were laid on the young man's shoulders. It was the private receiving his epaulettes. He answered quickly:—

"My other name isn't Overton. It's *Overman*; but you don't want to know it, whatever it is. You said it wasn't your concern!"

"Ah, well, but the man who is to make the name famous is becoming my very grave concern. You should have let me know that you were in the service, my boy."

"Not when I was such a raw recruit! The Commander-in-Chief was more likely to fraternize with a civilian."

"Confound the boy," cried Wolf Mason, "but you were perfectly right!"

"Then it was your magazine that I was writing for—you were the one man in England who could help me on—the whole situation was so liable to misconstruction!"

"It was—it was. And you never brought me an introduction nor asked for an interview, nor wrote me a single superfluous line!"

"I wanted you to accept my stuff," said the young fellow, smiling.

But behind his spectacles the editor's eyes sparkled for an instant with something more

than human kindness. He had made the grand discovery of his editorial life. He had discovered the ideal contributor, and for the moment he could only think of him as a young man of letters. Now, however, his right hand had found its way into that of young Overman, as he said, with a comic solemnity:—

"Look here, Overton, I was five minutes late in leaving the house this morning. For once in a way I don't mind if I'm five minutes late in getting back. I think that all you need do is to shave, though Ida might prefer you in another pair of bags and slippers. You can't improve upon that Norfolk jacket—but—but you and I must have another talk about the end of your story!"



"YOU AND I MUST HAVE ANOTHER TALK ABOUT THE END OF YOUR STORY!"