

They had, however, one great difference. Jack was a lady's man and Guy, emphatically, wasn't. Jack, in spite of his friend's chaff, fell in love periodically about every six months, but he never got fairly settled; partly because he couldn't afford anyone's bills but his own, and partly because his affections were subject to such fluctuations.

Also the rôle of the petted, immensely popular bachelor suited him well, and he was in no hurry to become a Benedick.

On the evening in question he had been trying to persuade Guy to accompany him to an ice carnival, but the latter proved immovable, and finally Jack went off alone.

He was gone three hours, and during that time Guy only moved once, and that was to take a turn round the room in order to stretch his legs.

While so doing, his attention was arrested by a letter in a bold well-formed hand-writing, which had just arrived by the evening post for Jack.

The writing struck him as being rather unique, and he picked it up carelessly in order to examine it more closely, and read the post-mark.

"From his sister," he surmised, and then, tossing it down on the table, he once more threw himself into the easy chair, planted his feet on the mantel-piece and proceeded to consider which horse he had better back for the Lincoln Handicap.

When Jack came in he was still cogitating, sleepily, so he took up his letter and read it without disturbing him. He then took the easy chair opposite and leaned back a little wearily.

Guy regarded him lazily for a moment and then remarked, "You looked bored, old chap, what's wrong? Wasn't the fair one affable to-night, or have you been and gone and popped and now regret it?"

Jack blew two or three smoke rings and made no reply.

"Surely you've never let another fellow cut you out?" continued Guy in the same bantering tone.

"Stop humbugging," remarked Jack moodily, "I've got a bad headache."

Guy laughed. "By-the-way," he continued, breaking off suddenly; "have you read your letter? I nearly saved you the trouble, as the writing interested me sufficiently to rouse my curiosity. I concluded by the post-mark it was from your sister."

"Yes, it is from Madge." He paused a moment, then added, "her letters get more and more unsatisfactory. I don't know what to make of her, but she seems to be getting in a queer way."

"How?" asked Guy, with interest.

"I hardly know. She might be setting up as a professional cynic for one thing."

"I should think that's because she reads such odd books. Does she treat you to quotations?"

"She scarcely says anything," replied Jack, disconsolately; "but it's as plain as a pikestaff that she's awfully miserable. She doesn't think life's worth living, and all that kind of thing."

Guy got up and took a turn round the room, with his hands in his pockets.

"Isn't she rather silly not to try and

make the best of a bad job and look forward to jollier times coming?" he suggested.

"That's just what I tell her," replied Jack, "but she only looks away and says nothing. As for arguing with her, she's much too clever for me, I simply don't know where I am in ten minutes. You see, as she's always thinking, she's got all her ideas and reasons at her finger ends, while I can only say what occurs at the moment."

Guy smiled good-naturedly. "I can imagine you don't shine," he said; "I wonder you ever attempt it."

"I don't often, I generally just get her worked up a bit and then let her talk. It's fine to hear her; she ought to have been a man, eloquence is wasted in a woman."

"It's a good thing there are none of the fair sex at hand to hear that," remarked Guy; "it would be as much as your life was worth; but I say, why can't you get your sister up to town?"

"Because it's impossible. She's only nineteen, so she can't please herself yet, and the mater won't hear of it. She'll be all right when she's twenty-one. Look here, Guy, suppose we run down and see them all? What do you say to coming next week? We can play golf if we can't do anything else; there's some good links about three miles off, and we can easily get a trap. Yes," he continued, getting up with a sudden brightening of his face, "we'll go at once and get back in time for the height of the season. We can just put in two weeks."

"Steady on a minute," interrupted Guy, stopping in his walk. "What about the dog show; I meant to send old Bimbo, and I shall want to be here at the time."

"Oh, hang Bimbo, he's got two prizes, what more does he want? You'll only ruin him, he's quite conceited enough already."

"But he's just at his best; why not put off Cumberland for ten days?"

"Because we shall be so late back. Bring Bimbo to see Madge, she'll admire him enough for anyone, she's fond of dogs."

"What will your mater say?"

"Oh, she'll only call him an ugly brute, and wonder how a sane man can make such a fuss of a mere dog, but that won't hurt you."

"Oh, all right!" said good-natured Guy, "I'm ready when you are. Perhaps as you say, another prize would be injurious to his character, and he certainly does give himself airs."

Accordingly their departure was settled for the following Tuesday, and feeling much easier in his mind, Jack took himself off to bed.

The inmates of the Manor House were at breakfast when Madge received Jack's letter, announcing their coming visit. She read it through quietly without expressing any surprise, then, folding it up remarked casually, "Jack is coming on Tuesday."

"Jack coming!" exclaimed Mrs. Harcourt, while Mr. Harcourt looked over the top of his paper and made the same remark.

"What an extraordinary boy he is," continued the former. "What's put it into his head to come now?"

"Nothing particular," answered Madge coldly, while she carefully peeled the shell off her egg. "He is bringing his friend."

The girl's off-hand manner annoyed her step-mother, and her face clouded as she snapped, "Oh, he is, is he? I suppose he doesn't consider it worth while to inquire if it is quite convenient to me."

"And his friend's dog," continued Madge slowly, taking a spoonful of her egg.

"I can't do with a dog here, it's absurd. Jack must be mad," exclaimed Mrs. Harcourt, with growing exasperation. "He knows I abhor the brutes. It will be all over my flower-beds in no time. I must write and tell him I won't have it; if his friend can't leave it he may stay away."

"It is to sleep in Mr. Fawcett's bedroom," went on Madge unmoved, reaching a piece of toast and proceeding leisurely to butter it.

"Sleep in the house indeed! I know better. It may sleep at the bottom of the pond if they like, but it shan't sleep in the house. Do you hear, James, Jack's friend is bringing a great dog, which he wishes to have in his bedroom? Of course you will put your foot down at such proceedings; if you don't I shall."

"The dog won't hurt me," replied Mr. Harcourt, turning over his paper and beginning another column; "but of course if it is disagreeable to you, you have only to tell Jack."

"Only to tell Jack indeed," she sneered. "A lot of notice he would take of that."

"The dog will require Spratt's biscuits to eat, with lights twice a week, and a soft mat to lie on. No one is to tamper with it, as it is rather fierce, and the flower-beds are to be wired round," went on Madge, still leisurely eating her breakfast.

The sudden piece of good news had somewhat enlivened her, and for the first time for months she dropped her usual manner of haughty indifference to one of assumed carelessness, and condescended to tease her step-mother.

"What unheard-of nonsense!" exclaimed that lady with intense indignation. "I'll soon show Master Jack and his friend who is mistress here. I'll have no dogs pampered in my house. I shall write immediately after breakfast and undeceive him, if he thinks he is going to do just whatever he likes here," and she forthwith departed to execute her intentions.

Mr. Harcourt soon followed her, and Madge, putting on her hat strolled out into the spring sunshine. The glad news in her letter, caused a little stray sunbeam to creep into her eyes and stay there, although it was many a month since the last had died away.

They used not to be so rare, but then hardening influences had somewhat changed her lately.

Nor long ago her beautiful eyes were varied with wistful, defiant, hard and sometimes even merry expressions.