

The Inglenook.

Preferring One Another.

BY W. SCOTT KING.

In the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love. Tennyson tells us. And we may add to ourselves that in the summer or early autumn that same young man's fancy turns to thoughts of holidays. It is of a young man and his holidays that I am about to tell this story—a young man, by the way whose birthplace was not in my own fancy, but in the far more substantial locality of a village in Surrey. But in order to explain his very unusual conduct, it is necessary to go back twelve months before this question of his holiday arose. I have called him young, but perhaps the reader is in a newspaper office, or has the honor of being a deacon of some church, consequently will consider my hero middle-aged when I announce his age to be thirty-five. Some few years before, he had experienced Tennyson's spring, and had brought home, to the cottage where he and his mother lived, a young wife. His mother was old, and entirely dependent upon her son. The position which her son occupied in the village, though one of average remunerativeness, was not such as admitted of any other than great economy if the two ends were to be made to meet. Fortunately for the young man's generous intentions concerning his mother, his young wife's heart was as self-denying as his own, and she bore the strain—for strain it was—keeping three on a salary scarce large enough for two with ready cheerfulness. Now, whether it was through advancing age which is apt to bring more blindness than one, or from any other cause, I cannot say; but the young man's mother hardly realized the burden even her small needs laid upon the shoulders of her son and daughter-in-law. She was grateful indeed for all they did; but that they had to deny themselves to do it, somehow or another, did not occur to her. And yet, as this story will show, and indeed is written for the express purpose of showing, she was the least selfish of old women in the world. But now a crisis came along in the form of a fourth mouth to be daily filled, and the happy but sorely perplexed young father and mother took earnest counsel together as to what was now to be done. And, incredible as it may sound in dull, worldly ears, the pinch of the situation lay just here.

"We can't go on living like this any longer," said the young man. "We must get away to London."

"Yes, dear," agreed his wife.

"Do you know why?" he asked, half smiling.

"Of course I do. You mean Granny will find out now that we have to give things up for her sake, and of course she must find out."

The young man kissed the shrewd little woman standing before him, and replied, "That's it exactly—we must go away where she can't see."

Accordingly to London they went, not only to try and get better wages, if possible, but so that the shadow of the great city might obscure from those keen old eyes the domestic economies which providing for her entailed. And of the thousand and one reasons and motives which every day take men and women to London, I have never

heard of one more noble. Would that the shadows of the great city were never called upon to cover up conduct less heroic!

Knowing that bloom goes off the fruit of sacrifice when that sacrifice is made known, other reasons were suggested to the old lady for their flight. In fact, so skillfully were they suggested that they almost overdid themselves, leaving Granny with the amusingly inaccurate notion that great wealth was in store for them in mighty London.

"Never mind," laughed the two, "if only she never guesses." And guess Granny never did.

Before their arrival in London the young man had secured a position a trifle better than the one he had occupied in the village; but, that is the way of city wages, when balanced by city prices for house room and food they shrank to just a little less than the village income.

"But she'll never think it," they told each other, and so were happy. Every Saturday afternoon the young man procured a postal order at the neighboring office and sent it to that Surrey village, and every Monday brought a letter of gratitude in return.

One Monday, about six months later, a letter came which caused mingled consternation and merriment at the little breakfast table. She had missed them sorely, Granny said, and had been lonesome, so lonesome indeed, that she had sought the society of another widow who lived but a few doors away, and who had no rich son in London to send her things. "And so, my dears, you will be pleased to know, I am sure, that after I have cashed your postal order on Monday mornings, I generally go round and take her a little tea and sugar and such like, and stay and have a chat with her to while away the time."

The two fairly laughed aloud, and even baby cooed at this amazing joke. Towards the end of the week it was no unusual thing for them to go without sugar and sometimes tea themselves so that the postal order might be as large as possible, and here was their innocent old Granny actually handing on some of it to yet another in distress! "She thinks we are well off," they exclaimed when they had done laughing, "and yet we need the tea and sugar more ourselves." But the very last thing that entered the gay hearts of these two optimists was to cut the postal down, or let the cat of poverty out of the bag of concealment. "We do it to give the old dear pleasure," said the wife, "and if it gives her more pleasure to give it away than use it herself—why, then our purpose is answered, isn't it, dear?" And she lifted a cup of sugarless tea to her lips.

Londoners take no notice of each other as they hurry to the city in the morning, and never waste a moment in speculating why this man looks glum or his neighbor on the bus smiling. Had they sought the reason of the comical smile which played round the lips of the young man that morning and continued to play there throughout the day, they would have been surprised at the cause they would have discovered. He was smiling at the idea of his mother imagining there was any one in greater need of sugar in his tea than himself.

"Bless her dear old blind heart!" he murmured.

And July came, and with it a suffocating heat which drove all who could afford it, and many who couldn't, down to the sea.

"You can take your week's holiday after the fourteenth," the manager had said to him as he put on his coat to go home.

"Thank you," and he left the shop wondering what he ought to do. Two pictures rose before him as he crossed the bridge that unites the two halves of the great city. One was of a rather pale but happy face pressed close to a much smaller but likewise pale but happy face much like it—the faces of his wife and child. The other picture was of the Post Office round in the next street, where two or three pounds of his own lay in waiting for the hour of need. Yes, he would apply for withdrawal form on the thirteenth, and they should all three go and smell the sea.

"A letter from Granny," cried his wife as he entered his home. "I've opened it, and she said there is an excursion for a week to Margate, and she wonders whether you could spare her the money to go—only two pounds—as the village is going, and she wants to see the sea once before she dies, she says. Have we got it, dear? I should so like her to go—we may not have her much longer."

For once—just for once the smile did not come at the call. In fact, a shade—just a tiny shade—of disappointment passed over the young man's face.

"We're got it," he said slowly; "but—" "That settles it," said his wife promptly. "Granny shall go to Margate with the others, poor old dear!"

And Granny did.

When the 15th came round and his holiday began, there was much exercise of ingenuity in planning and much economy in carrying out little inexpensive, or rather non-expensive walks in Hyde Park, bus rides to Putney, and tramps to Wimbledon Common. But though an enormous amount of gusto was put into these home-made holidays, as the week drew towards its end the heat increased, the parade of enjoying them had to be abandoned, and each Spartan confessed to the other that the smell of the sea would be simply heavenly. The young man stopped, and by lovely coincidence opposite to them faced the gaudy boardings bright with alluring illustrations of Brighton Promenade, Black Pavilion, and Margate Sands, and beneath them announcements of day excursions for heart-kindlingly small fares. As I say, the young man stopped, and an idea flashed into his mind.

"Sophie!" he exclaimed, "do you know what we'll do? Granny is at Margate; her week is not up till Monday. Let us go down by that half-crown excursion for the day on Saturday and take her by surprise. We can scrape it out of the next two weeks, can't we?"

"Easily," responded Sophie, conscious that no one could do that sort of thing better than herself. "Now, let us go home; I'm too excited to go any further."

Saturday came and brought as glorious a day as any day excursionist could desire. And with merry hearts the three hurried to Victoria Station and started for Margate. On arriving there their plan was this. Sophie should go to Granny's lodgings, while her husband took the baby to the sands, here they would await them. Granny's surprise and delight were unbounded—a delight, albeit, that would have suffered instant extinction had she possessed the least notion that her own holiday was being enjoyed at the price of her son and daughter's.

But a surprise and delight rarer in kind