

The Storyteller.

A LITERARY EXPERIMENT.

PENNISON was hard up. There was no getting over that fact. He had realised it in all its sternness for the last three days, since his landlady, who was the first to recognise it, had given him formal notice.

Three months previously he had proclaimed himself a free man by spurning an office stool and, with a meagre war-chest saved from the wages of clerkly degradation, started his revolt against the despotism of Fact, under the banner of Literature. But now facts, hungering for his downfall, were clutching him in a remorseless grip.

Now, for a whole fortnight he had lived upon his eloquence, but even his persuasive powers acting upon Mrs. O'Grady's susceptible Irish heart could not prevent a reduction of rations. For that was the inner meaning of her announcement that Pennison should provide his own dinners in future. Thereupon he remembered having read in an encyclopædia that two light meals a day are amply sufficient for a man of sedentary occupation. Three was undoubtedly sheer extravagance. So he converted his usual dinner hour into a recreation time and took walking exercise.

Mr. Pennison was a young man who hated not his fellows, but he had little sympathy with their aims. He had cultivated the aloofness of a man of thought who is above the mere toilers. He had pitied them delving for golden dross, poor slaves of bread and butter. So, in his attempted development, he had made the mistake of considering the material side of life as quite immaterial.

He had ideals, if not ideas. But these ideals were so lofty that he had but reached out towards them from afar, and had never grasped them and the guerdon of £. s. d. which attends upon the success of noble effort. In other words, he used up so much nervous energy in the contemplation of his ideals that he was unable to translate them into print. They were so bewilderingly numerous that they got entangled in his brain, and, in fact, became as great a nuisance as a warren of antipodean rabbits.

He had sent some of his dreams 'on the rounds,' but the net result was the waste of postage stamps.

Pennison, like so many men of genius, loved originality for its own sake. He would not copy current styles, but dreamed of founding a New School of Fiction which should leave the Kailyard in the background. He was convinced that he could turn out the cheap and nasty stuff which other novelists spun out at so much per thousand words, but his fastidious soul revolted from the task. He had indeed become an unconscious exponent of the Brahminic doctrine of the glory of the contemplative life.

As he smoked the last crumbs of tobacco, which he had obtained by turning out the linings of his pockets, the bitter thought of his great ideal School of Fiction floated before his mind, and as he mentally repeated the magic formula, 'A School of Fiction,' the idea took another shape with all the kaleidoscopic rapidity of his great imagination. 'Why not an Academy of Fiction? How often had not serio comic magazine writers suggested a school for teaching the art of telling stories. How many writers were actually in print who knew not the rudiments of their profession? How many were there, if properly instructed, had the capacity for making a livelihood by the pen?

Pennison had found his life-work at last. He need not turn out the wretched stories that were mechanically written and idly read. But there was no loss of dignity in imparting to others the rudiments of a profession that might be made respectable if his methods were adopted. He would impart ideas. His pupils would work them out and save him much drudgery, and the next generation would hail him—the teacher—as the founder of the new School of Fiction.

Few commercial enterprises, however worthy, can be started without a little capital. So Pennison fumbled in his pockets and ransacked every corner of his diggings. The ore accumulated in his delvings amounted to 1s 7½d. He also had 3½d in stamps.

The firm of Pennison was clearly limited, but the subscribed capital was sufficient for the issue of the preliminary prospectus—an advertisement in the *Literary Daily*. The firm had some difficulty in keeping the announcement within the limits imposed by their financial condition, but at length it read thus: 'Author of *Amity* gives tuition in fiction. Easy payments. X, 391, *Literary Daily*.

With the fivepence remaining in hands the firm had a grand inaugural banquet of trine and cowheel. Then the managing director returned to the humble apartment which was to be his on sufferance until the end of the week, and went to bed to await developments.

When a man—not to mention his landlady—has made up his mind that he will not have breakfast or luncheon, it is good for him to rest. So Pennison rested in bed until the evening of the next day, trying to think out the details of his project, but unfortunately consecutive thought is not always possible upon an empty stomach. At dusk he stole out to the newspaper office, and, to his surprise, there were no less than sixteen answers to his advertisement. All the replies, he noted with some misgivings, were from ladies. However, he consoled himself by a rapid calculation, which showed him that with sixteen pupils at a minimum rate of £2 per month his income was now nearly £200 per annum, with prospects besides.

He must explain matters to his landlady at once. His first move was to ask for pen and ink. This gave him an opening for a glowing explanation of his aims and prospects, which he followed up by an application for the loan of sixteen pence for postage. Pennison was impulsive, if not energetic, and he sat down and dashed off sixteen copies of the following circular for his sixteen fair correspondents:—

'Dear Madam,—I shall be pleased to have the honour of an interview with you to-morrow at 11 o'clock a.m. at my chambers, 144 Little Went street.

'I am, Madam, your obedient servant,

'PETER PENNISON.'

At 10 o'clock next morning he realised that it was rather awkward that he had not fixed a separate time for each reception. He had been calculating how he should dispose of his first year's earnings. He would have to get a book-case, a modern writing-desk, a typewriter, and perhaps a blackboard. For the present, however, he was content to prevail upon Mrs O'Grady to let him have the accommodation of her drawing-room, with the provision of seven extra nondescript chairs.

He walked up and down his room re-reading the sixteen replies to his advertisement solemnly, as a lawyer reads a brief. His first idea was that he had better go out of town at once; his second, that his first was utterly impossible. He must stand and face them like a man and a professor of literature.

He derived some courage from a small boy's shrill whistling underneath his window that Tyrtæan air, 'Let 'em all come!' Yes he could, no doubt, set them all to work simultaneously in a class. It is one of human nature's inconsistencies that in the most serious moments flashes of unbidden humour will arise. But Pennison did not reflect upon this great truth, for he had grown up away from the humanizing influences of female relatives and so had absolutely no sense of the ridiculous. He took himself and his work very seriously at all times.

There was a hope still. Women, he knew from the books, were unpunctual, so that they might not all come together. But, again, literature told him they were talkative. From his own slender experience since he had got in arrears with his rent he was able to corroborate the results of psychological research by independent investigation. It was not improbable that valuable time would be lost if he could not succeed in keeping his pupils well in hand.

At ten minutes to eleven he was awakened to the stern realities of his position by a loud knocking at the door. Yes, they were undoubtedly unpunctual. He heard his landlady usher one or more persons into the drawing-room.

'They are before their time,' said Pennison to himself. 'Let them cool their heels!'

By 11.20 a.m. fifteen other consecutive knockings had roused the echoes of the dingy street and almost shattered Pennison's nerves, but he had not yet 'gone below.'

He was growing hysterical, and hummed a bar of the 'Marseillaise' to keep his courage up. He felt himself old in philosophy, but he was not indeed old in years, and now he felt himself very young—overpoweringly, absurdly young—as he opened the door of the little sitting-room and cast a nervous glance around what appeared to be a tossing sea of bonnets and petticoats. He had heard of a 'mother's meeting' and had a dim conception that he had somehow blundered into such a function. He felt like a parliamentary candidate about to make his maiden election speech.

He had never been a ladies' man, and had never felt his deficiencies in this respect so keenly before, as the crowd of ladies rose with a rustling of skirts and nodding of plumes, and, to the accompaniment of sundry little coughings and murmurings, said—just like an operatic chorus, Pennison thought—'Oh, Mr Pennison!' or words to that effect.

Pennison remained for some seconds inarticulate. Then he bowed all round, and another of his good ideas occurred to him. It was impossible to interview them thus collectively. He must ask them to come into the back parlour one at a time. He appealed to the principle of priority, but as eleven ladies emphatically protested their claims, he withdrew the suggestion that had proved such an apple of discord, only, however, to blunder into a more awkward position, by falling back on the age principle. 'Seniores priores, as the ancients had it,' said Pennison. Not a single lady made a move, but they indulged in a cross-fire of looks that boded ill for the future harmony of the gathering.

Fortunately after having suggested that they should toss for places, or, as he hastily added, draw lots for precedence, it occurred to the professor to suggest that they should bring some specimens of their work next day. By this means he got rid of nine of them and arranged hours for their attendance. The other seven had brought examples which they should like him to examine.

He took them and promised to look over them. Three others then departed, but the remaining four were not to be so cheated of an interview.

There was a little boy, Pennison noted, now that the room was being cleared, a very untidy little boy with a very big head and unkempt hair. This youth was with a fat, vulgar woman. There was also a thin, pale, weak-minded looking female with her daughter, a miniature replica of herself.

The latter lady advanced upon Pennison and told her story. 'She's always readin' novels,' said the mother, 'to improve her mind,' she says. An' it's nigh time she was able to aim her bread. Sometimes I thinks she's a prodigy, an' sometimes I thinks she's a young idjet,' said the bewildered mama. 'I am sure I don't know what on earth to do with her. Girls is a nuisance.'

The daughter spoke up for herself without any diffidence and with a simper which had a most disconcerting effect upon Pennison. She felt sure after a month or so's training she could write as well as the author of *From Kitchen to Kingdom*, whose great serial, 'The Parlourmaid Princess,' was at present running in the *Cornflower Magazine*. Had Mr Pennison read it? No, he had not. Well, she would bring him all the back numbers when she came to take her first lesson next day. Then the little boy and his mama came on.

'That boy, Mr. Pennison,' said the lady. 'My eldest, sir, eleven last Febewary. His father, the poor dear man, was in the po'try line. Used to do po'try for boot shops and tea houses and such. So