

An Appreciation of Henry Robinson King (1855-1935) by Geoffrey O'Hanlon MC (1885-1975), Assistant Master at Sherborne School, 1908-1945, taken from *The Shirburnian*, November 1935:

To the eyes of the latest arrival on the staff in September, 1908, Mr King was already a venerable figure. Once seen you took him for granted as an essential part of the School and its buildings, themselves fair and grey and ancient. You classed him with Westcott and Wildman and Hodgson, and imagined they had been there since the foundation. You were told of a still more ancient race of which Charles Scott was the sole visible survivor, representing that formidable bearded group which hands in the Masters' Common Room. These might be a myth, but those four were alive and real. After a few weeks, while you gained a knowledge of what they had done, and a great record it was, you gained also a knowledge of what they were; and if later years gave a deeper understanding, the immediate process was full of happy interest. You learnt that one of H.R.K.'s weaknesses was to send little notes to his colleagues, written on a bit of foolscap in minute fine writing: "Dear \_\_, I do not like your trousers, Yrs, H.R.K." Those were the days of caps and gowns, and flannel bags were a recent innovation. Not that he was himself the mould of fashion, an honour generally assigned to Charles Hodgson. But it was significant of the notice he took. He was interested in the junior staff, and entertained them, in more senses than one. It was in his house that they learnt the generous temper, and that wit which would suddenly launch out in the most unexpected and alarming, even shattering, sallies on the most unexpected and intimate subjects. He also had a great store of anecdotes, many in the dialect of Westmorland, which he narrated with infectious pleasure. He could disarm by mild humour. A senior colleague kept sending up for reprobation, week after week, the bad work of a boyo in his house: bored with the tedious succession H.R.K. finally wrote back: "Dear \_\_, I see no merit in these performances." But not all was seen with a humorous eye, and when occasion served his censure was direct, short and final. Another delight of his was to arrange marriages for the staff; and suggestions might be made under strange circumstances. Once outside the Wesleyan School, when polling was on, a junior master stood in the rain waiting for his turn to go in. From Abbeylands came out H.R.K. in the familiar Ulster; and from under the umbrella this unheralded address: "I'm going to ask an odd question. Why don't you marry? Look at all those \_\_ girls, well bred, well educated, nice looking. I can't think why you don't...!" It is a question whether any of his proposals by suggestion every came off. On holidays he was full of activity, striding the hills and enjoying the weather, fair or foul: and the exhilaration seemed to quicken his pawky humour which vented itself in letters to his friends, chiefly about his children, in the most whimsical description of their characteristics. He could assume a detachment, and criticize them impersonally as "funny little corks," an affectation paralleled by his feigned contempt for the athletic distinctions of his House when he apologized for the "vulgar display" of cups in the dining room. There was no affectation in his love of his boys, and their death in the war, as those of W.M. Robertson and Jack Barnes, stabbed him to the heart. To his House's honour and integrity he was most sensitive, extending his care even to the pavement outside, which from time to time he might be seen scouring with a bucket. He liked cold water and frequented the bath. If it rained he would carry an umbrella from the shelter to the edge. In Scotland and in the Lakes he would bathe before breakfast, and go one further than all the rest in soaping himself all over first, in the presence of the high hills. Loathing motor cars and distrusting all drivers, he once submitted to be taken to Clifton in a not too modern Rover. After taking a peculiarly affectionate farewell to his family, and asking what he was to do in case the driver fainted, he flung himself despairingly into the seat and started reciting Wordsworth: and to more Wordsworth he treated the streets of Bristol on the return journey. Instead, he kept far more perilously to his bicycle. Himself once an athlete, he would come down to the Field for matches, leaving his machine at Freeman's shop. After a decent interval he would say: "Do you think anyone would see me if I sneaked off?" And to his loved country he would go, across the pitch and the Lower, with his trouser clips already doing their duty, a figure as easily distinguishable as that of Charles Hodgson with his green sunshade at a cricket match.

Of H.R.K. in form I cannot speak except by report; but without disrespect to my own masters I could well wish to have passed through Paradise and Paradise Lost into Paradise Regained, where one boy strayed and was allowed to stay for five terms; and from there to have passed on to Wildman and Westcott. Only a dullard would not have applauded James Rhoades' House Supper verse.

Then live, O King, for ever and IV A. For a junior master the corresponding experience was the Duffers. And what a unique Society that was! Coming from Rugby where a similar society existed, presided over by a not too senior master and composed of a dozen decorous members of the VIth, I was entirely unprepared for the catholic appearance of the Duffers. All ages and both sexes were there, and knitting needles too. One was only saved from complete abasement by the absence of the Headmaster: and I always admired the nerve and courage of any boy who would open his mouth in the presence of such an array of dignitaries and their ladies. There were many notable papers. But the sort of gala night was the last meeting of each term, when a play of Shakespeare was read, with an interval for a stand-up supper. Cards of the cast were printed, not always quite complete, but it was understood that any adventurous person filled the gap. Sometimes parts were duplicated or stolen. He was very keen that everyone should con his part beforehand, and himself coached boys. But sometimes the staff disappointed, and a wife's hairpin might be requisitioned, for the culprit silently and with guilty glances to cut the accusing page. These evenings were a delight, evening dress and all. More terrifying by far were the command performances at the Girls' School. H.R.K. would drag a whole array of colleagues, on a half-holiday, decently attired, to support the male parts, while Miss Mulliner and he led the company. Fortified by tea you processed into the arena like early Christian martyrs. The girls rose, Miss Mulliner sat down: silence followed: Miss Hoyle read the stage directions, and the play began. Fifteen or more rebellious ushers, fingering their cigarette cases for unsatisfied relief, waited nervously for their cues, hopelessly imprisoned in that zereba of serried ranks between them and the doors, until the last full stop. Then came the hand-clapping and escape. No one but H.R.K. could have brought his colleagues to the scratch. One was happier in the Duffers. There the central figure was Mr King: he was the Duffers, and the rest were but trimmings. You knew at once that he loved all good literature and revered it: and that he wished to let others into those secrets of happiness which he himself enjoyed. His was no lip-service. Literature was a part of him and radiated from him. He had a world of friends that only became ours by reading not with a critical spirit only but with a human and loving heart. Apart from the deep influence of religion and friendship upon him, it was this and his insatiable love of Nature in all her moods that gave him his lovable humanity. He had a hearty and outspoken detestation of the cheap and vulgar and tawdry: and a sorrowing contempt, or impatient anger for those who in his later days appeared to him to demand that all that was interesting should be made funny. It wounded him to make fun of noble things. But this intensity was saved from the impression of extravagance by the rich humour, always so near the surface, that played readily on its appropriate subject, and made you chuckle and feel happy, and never hurt. He would have found congenial company with Charles Lamb, and Lamb with him.

In 1908 he had just started committing to memory that amazing number of lines, some ten thousand – rather more than all Vergil's Aeneid – which at one time he had on the tip of his tongue. It was his reading or recitation rather than his written papers that delighted his audiences. He was at his best in dramatic pieces such as Browning's "My Last Duchess," or dialect pieces from Barnes. But he was always admirable, and it became almost a passion. He recited in his own form, and in other people's forms, especially on St. George's Day, when he just invaded you. Abbeylands had the full benefit on Sunday evenings, and its' very walls must know the Christmas Carol. He recited in the country to the fields and sky, and talked poetry like St Francis to the birds: a scholar gipsy, without the scholar gipsy's interruptions from noisy riders in charr-a-banc, who mocked the quaint figure when they surprised him chanting by some country gate, Shakespeare or Milton or Shelley or Keats or Dickens or Thackeray or Stevenson.

The last memory of him in the Duffers is also the most poignant. For when he retired from his long inimitable control, the Duffers presented him with an edition of Dickens: and he as though, like Sophocles, to prove his powers unabated, recited with a certain grandeur and intensity of feeling the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 146<sup>th</sup> Sonnets of Shakespeare.

*That time of year thou may'st in me behold  
When yellow leaves, or none, or few do hang  
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,  
Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.  
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day*

*As after sunset fadeth in the west,  
Which by and by black night doth take away,  
Death's second self, the glowing of such fire,  
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,  
As the death-bed whereon he must expire,  
Consum'd with that which it was nourish'd by.  
This thou perceives, which makes thy love more strong,  
To love that well which thou must leave err long.  
Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth,  
Press'd by those rebel powers that thee array,  
Why dost thou pine within and suffer dearth,  
Painting thy outward walls so costly gay?  
Why so large cost, having so short a lease,  
Dost thou upon thy fading mansion spend?  
Shall worms, inheritors of this excess,  
Eat up thy charge? Is this thy body's end?  
Then, soul, live thou upon thy servant's loss,  
And let that pine to aggravate thy store;  
Buy terms divine in selling hours of dross;  
Within be fed, without be rich no more:  
So shalt thou feed on Death, that feeds on men,  
And Death once dead, there's no more dying then.*