

The Failure

by James Hilton, 1900-1954

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WHEN Mr. Plender, aged fifty, became a clerk at Murdock's he told nobody that twenty-five years before he had actually written a novel. And yet this was, and always would be, the central fact in his life, though his pride in it was subtly compounded with shame at his subsequent decline in the world. It was not only that he had failed—the best people did that sometimes; it was that he, personally, was a failure. He knew it. At thirty he had been able to deny it; at forty there had been perhaps a shadow of doubt; but at fifty there could be no doubt at all. Luckily it was not hard to preserve an incognito at Murdock's. Nobody there had ever heard of »The Wind in the Rushes«; indeed, nobody at Murdock's seemed at all interested in books of any kind.

At fifty-five Mr. Plender was still incognito, and still, moreover, a clerk with the same rank and salary. Many of the staff openly ridiculed him, and all, from the office-boy upward, treated him as of no account. He did not play golf; he never used slang; he had no obvious pastimes or enthusiasms; in short, he was an old fogey.

And then one morning came young Snaith, the first new member of the staff since Plender himself. Snaith was a shy, bright-faced, eager-eyed, almost girlish-looking youngster in his early twenties, and at the end of his first day, as he passed Mr. Plender in the porch, he said, „Good night, sir.“ Possibly he mistook him for somebody important. But it was the first mark of respect that anybody had shown Mr. Plender for years, and even the likelihood that it had been due in part to a misapprehension could not take away all its power. Plender warmed to it. That night he dreamed dreams of a deep friendship springing up between himself and young Snaith, a friendship as of a father for a youngest son.

The very next day fate seemed to play into his hands, for during the lunch interval he saw young Snaith studying a typed manuscript, and a casual inquiry elicited the rather shy answer, „Oh, it’s only a story I’ve written. I try—sometimes, you know—to get things in the papers.“

„Really?“ exclaimed Mr. Plender, his heart beating wildly within him. „Do you? Now that’s extremely interesting. I—I wonder if I could—help you—at all. I do—I have done—just a little in that line myself.“ But he added warningly: „I wouldn’t tell any of the others if I were you. They’d only scoff.“

He asked Snaith to tea in his rather dingy furnished rooms. In a conspicuous place on his bookshelves was his own private copy of »The Wind in the Rushes«. The boy—for he thought of him merely as a boy—had promised to bring along some of his work, and he intended to go over it with him, making suggestions and giving general literary advice. And then, as a final sensation, he would tell him his own strange secret—about the novel that was the one solitary achievement of his life. He waited for that moment as a starved man waits for a meal. Somebody would respect him at last; somebody would be interested in him—would not think him so ordinary and humdrum and insignificant.

Snaith came, bringing his manuscript, and as soon as Mr. Plender began to look at it he perceived that it was very bad indeed. He was quite frank. „You’ve a long way to travel yet, my lad. This“—he patted the manuscript as benevolently as years before a hopeful publisher had patted his—„this shows undoubted promise, but more than that I should not care to affirm. To begin with, you must avoid the cliché. You should never write such phrases as ‘by dint of an almost superhuman effort’ and ‘fell with a sickening thud.’ And, in general, I think there is far too much action in your work and not enough psychology. Of course, no doubt I am rather old-fashioned.“ He paused, smiling, and reached down »The Wind in the Rushes«. „Now here’s a little thing of my own which I published—oh, quite a number of years ago. I will lend it to you, and perhaps when you read it you will see more clearly what I mean. Especially the chapter entitled »Nymphs and Fauns«. Only please don’t show or mention it to any of the office people. They have no interest in literature.“ He added softly: „You—and I—are in a different world.“

A week later Snaith returned the book with a vague and slightly embarrassed „Very nice. Awfully good of you to lend it me.“

„Not at all,“ murmured Mr. Plender. „Oh, not at all. I hope it may have helped you in your own work. Had any luck yet?“

„Not yet.“

Mr. Plender smiled. „Ah well, as I said, you have a long way to travel yet. Keep at it—keep at it. And come to me whenever you want any help.“

But young Snaith did not come to Mr. Plender for help, nor did the friendship prosper as the latter had hoped. And one morning Mr. Plender arrived at the office to find Snaith surrounded by a crowd. He had had a story accepted by the Purple Magazine, and was telling everybody about it. And they, the Philistines, were shouting, „Splendid!“ and „Congrats, old man!“

„I am very pleased,“ Mr. Plender forced himself to say. „Though I am afraid I don't know the—er—the Purple Magazine.“ But nobody took any notice of him; perhaps nobody even heard him.

A fortnight later Murdock sent for him. „Ah, Plender—I shall want you to manage Snaith's work for a short time, till we get somebody else.“

„Why—is he leaving?“

„Leavin'? I should jolly well think he's not! I'm givin' him a chance as my private secretary. Enterprisin' young feller—deserves encouragement. Had a story in some magazine the other day—damned good, I thought it. Interestin' hobby, and profitable. Everybody ought to have some sort of a hobby. You ought to, Plender.“

Mr. Plender to-day, at the age of sixty, can reflect that his unfavorable opinion of Snaith's literary capacities was quite correct. The story in the Purple Magazine was a mere fluke, and anyhow, as deputy-head of Murdock's, Snaith has not the time, even if he had the desire, for story-writing. When he sees Plender now he would not dream of calling him „Sir“; he just nods curtly and says, „Morning, Plender.“ His own private opinion—also correct—is that Plender is a failure.

