THE KITE

By W. Somerset Maugham

Summary

Samuel Sunbury, a lawyer’s clerk is a little man. He lives in London suburb with his wife. The wife is active and dominating. They live a quiet life and Mrs. Sunbury manages the entire show. They have a child called Herbert. He is an intelligent young man. From the very beginning he is good at figures and as soon as he is old enough, his parents send him to work with a firm of accountants. He works well and beings to earn a good sum by the time he is twenty-one years old.

Being the only son, his parents love him very much. Mrs. Sunbury dominates him just as she is used to dominate her husband. Things go on like that for a long time. He brings all his salary to his mother and she gives him money for conveyance and small allowance as pocket money. Even as a man he behaves like a model child, being never disobedient or independent in anything that he is asked to do.

The family follows a strict routine, for weeks, days as well as Sundays. It is usual for them to go out on Saturdays for a puff of wind. In the common, the local people fly kite on Saturday afternoon. One day when Herbert is only seven years old, he asks his mother to get him a kite. She finds that there is no harm in that and gives him one on his next birthday. Herbert is too young to be able to fly the kite for himself, so his father does the same Herbert holds the cord and enjoys tug of the soaring kite. This rouses a passion for kites in Samuel also.

By and by they become the family of kite fliers; they go to the common on Saturday evenings and fly kites as a family hobby. Even Mrs. Sunbury holds the string for a while to feel the pull and tug of the kite on her fingers. From small kites they go on to bigger ones. In the meantime Herbert goes on growing old till he is twenty-one.

On his twenty-first birthday his father and mother give him some very nice presents. Samuel expresses the opinion it is high time to think that one day Herbert would get married and would then go away from them. But Mrs. Sunbury rules out the possibility because she thinks that her son should not
marry before he is thirty five. She thinks that it is only at that age that a man is sensible enough to get married, and to choose for himself. But she soon finds that things are not happening her way. Herbert begins to go out after dinner. She does not like it, but her husband convinces her that the young man is old enough to be given that liberty and she does not object to it.

One day Herbert tells her after dinner that he has invited a girl to tea on the next day. Now it is customary for a boy to invite a girl to his house only when he is seriously thinking of marrying her. In this way he gives his parents an opportunity to form an opinion about the girl, and she, too, can see for herself the people with whom she would have to deal if she married the boy. So this announcement makes it clear to Mrs. Sunbury that Mr. Sunbury's opinion is right and boy is going to launch himself on a matrimonial adventure. She did not like it, and after questioning him for some time, she agreed to receive the girl, but not without apprehensions.

The next day she arranges the tea in the best possible manner. It is to be served in the best crockery, and in the drawing room. Herbert goes and brings his friend to the house. Mrs. Sunbury welcomes her with full formality. She does not like the girl because she hates make up and fashionable clothes, whereas this girl is wearing both. Moreover she thinks that Betty, the girl, is her rival for the affection of Herbert. She makes the girl feel as uncomfortable as possible, and they part with nothing but deep dislike for each other.

Herbert goes to escort the girl home. On the way she begins to weep because she feels deeply insulted by the mother of Herbert. To compensate her for that, Herbert gets engaged to her then and there. When he comes home he has a scene with his mother and he tells her that he is engaged to girl. This upsets Mrs. Sunbury and she tells him that happen what may, she will not let Betty come to her home.

Herbert and his mother are no more good friends. He tells her one day that he is going to marry Betty, and has rented a house where they would settle after their marriage. This is a shock for the old woman, who expects better treatment and conduct from her son. But Mrs. Sunbury finds herself quite helpless in the matter. Herbert marries Betty and goes away from the house of parents. From then onwards he and his mother are no more speaking terms. Samuel is, however, quite friendly with his son and they chat when they go to town for work on the same train.

One day Mr. Sunbury tells Herbert that he and Mrs. Sunbury are continuing with their hobby of kite flying. He even adds that by then his wife has learnt to fly the
kite and runs with it to give it wind to make it rise. This is news for the young who has not touched a kite after his marriage. His enthusiasm is roused once again and he goes to the common next Saturday to see the spot in which he used to participate in the days gone by Mr. and Mrs. Sunbury see him standing among the on-lookers, but do not show any interest in him.

Herbert is in the sport once again he goes to the common, even the next Saturday, and watches his parents flying their box-kite. This time his mother offers to let him fly the kite, which he goes. He even goes with them to their house to take a cup of tea and to discuss the design of the very big kite which they want to get built. He is late and has to coin excuses to satisfy his wife about this delay in returning home.

But he goes out again the next Saturday. Betty begins to suspect that there is something more than what he has told her, and she thinks that kite-flying is at the back of it all. So she follows him to the common, and finds him flying the kite of his mother and father. Mrs. Sunbury tells Herbert that Betty is spying on him. He too, sees her, but does not care. When he returns home Betty is very angry, and there is a scene. She refuses to go to pictures with him that evening. Weather is bad for kite-flying on the next two Saturdays and there is no quarrel between the husband and the wife on that issue.

Next Saturday she tells him not to go for kite-flying but he insists, especially so because his father has indirectly instigated him to come and he has made a promise. There is quarrel between the husband and the wife, and Betty tries to block his way to the door. This she can not do and he throws her on a bed, and stalks out of the room. She shouts after him that if he goes away like that, he will have to go away for good. Herbert does not pay heed to it.

When he returns home in the evening, Betty is reading a paper. She quietly tells him that she has packed up his things and that he can leave at once. He does not care, and carries his suitcase and paper packet out of the house. He goes to his father’s house, and tells his mother that he is back once again. She welcomes him, and sets him up in the room where he used to live before his marriage. Herbert feels very comfortable in the house. His wife is not a good cook; therefore the food cooked by her mother tastes fine. The life is quite and more satisfying too. He starts going to his office with his father as before.

On Friday Herbert receives his salary, so that evening Betty goes to Mr. Sunbury’s house and rings the bell. Mrs. Sunbury knows that Betty would come for the salary that day, and she goes to the door and settles the matter with her. Betty wants to get into the house to see her husband, but she does not let her
do it. She pays her 35 shillings as her allowance, and tells her to move off. Betty is much disappointed but there is nothing that she can do.

One day Betty goes to railway station and accosts Herbert there. Mr. Sunbury is with Herbert, but she wants to talk to him alone. Herbert tells her to say whatever she wants to say in the presence of his father. She thereupon requests him to come back to her house; but he refuses to do so. She even tells him that she would not object his flying the kite, but he tells her that he is more comfortable where he is, would not live with her anymore.

One day Herbert goes to the shed to see their huge kite, which they have received only a short while previously, and comes back shouting that its has been hacked to pieces. He knows that Betty must have done it out of spite and he wants to go and strangulate her for it. But his parents keep him back. Mr. Sunbury goes to make inquiries from Betty and informs his wife and son that Betty has admitted having done it. Herbert is very angry about it and tells them that he would not send her anymore money.

On next Friday she does not receive her postal order, and goes to see Herbert, but he does not open the door. She takes to going there almost every evening, and ringing the bell till the inmates are almost mad with the noise. One day she even breaks a sitting room window by throwing a stone at it. She goes to the railway station to wait for Herbert but he refuses to talk to her. She even writes abusive post card to him at his office address.

At last she lodges a complain with the magistrate that her husband is not paying her maintenance. He calls Herbert and tries to affect reconciliation between them. But Herbert refuses to live with her at any cost. At last the magistrate orders him to pay her 25 shillings a week, for her maintenance. This he refuses to do and is imprisoned. He remains in prison for a long time without paying her the sum stipulated and enjoys the pleasure of thinking how much she must have been suffering on account of the non payment of maintenance.