GEORGE GISSING

THE HOUSE OF COBWEBS AND OTHER STORIES

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Gissing G.

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Содержание

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THE WORK OF GEORGE GISSING

AN INTRODUCTORY SURVEY

'Les gens tout à fait heureux, forts et bien portants, sont-ils préparés comme il faut pour comprendre, pénétrer, exprimer la vie, notre vie si tourmentée et si courte?'

MAUPASSANT.

In England during the sixties and seventies of last century the world of books was dominated by one Gargantuan type of fiction. The terms book and novel became almost synonymous in houses which were not Puritan, yet where books and reading, in the era of few and unfree libraries, were strictly circumscribed. George Gissing was no exception to this rule. The English novel was at the summit of its reputation during his boyish days. As a lad of eight or nine he remembered the parts of *Our Mutual Friend* coming to the house, and could recall the smile of welcome with which they were infallibly received. In the dining-room at home was a handsomely framed picture which he regarded with an almost idolatrous veneration. It was an engraved portrait of Charles Dickens. Some of the best work of George Eliot, Reade, and Trollope was yet to make its appearance; Meredith and Hardy were still the treasured possession of the few; the reigning models during the period of Gissing's adolescence were probably Dickens and Trollope, and the numerous satellites of these great stars, prominent among them Wilkie Collins, William Black, and Besant and Rice.

Of the cluster of novelists who emerged from this school of ideas, the two who will attract most attention in the future were clouded and obscured for the greater period of their working lives. Unobserved, they received, and made their own preparations for utilising, the legacy of the mid-Victorian novel—moral thesis, plot, underplot, set characters, descriptive machinery, landscape colouring, copious phraseology, Herculean proportions, and the rest of the cumbrous and grandiose paraphernalia of *Chuzzlewit, Pendennis*, and *Middlemarch*. But they received the legacy in a totally different spirit. Mark Rutherford, after a very brief experiment, put all these elaborate properties and conventions reverently aside. Cleverer and more docile, George Gissing for the most part accepted them; he put his slender frame into the ponderous collar of the author of the *Mill on the Floss*, and nearly collapsed in wind and limb in the heart-breaking attempt to adjust himself to such an heroic type of harness.

The distinctive qualities of Gissing at the time of his setting forth were a scholarly style, rather fastidious and academic in its restraint, and the personal discontent, slightly morbid, of a self-conscious student who finds himself in the position of a sensitive woman in a crowd. His attitude through life was that of a man who, having set out on his career with the understanding that a second-class ticket is to be provided, allows himself to be unceremoniously hustled into the rough and tumble of a noisy third. Circumstances made him revolt against an anonymous start in life for a refined and educated man under such conditions. They also made him prolific. He shrank from the restraints and humiliations to which the poor and shabbily dressed private tutor is exposed—revealed to us with a persuasive terseness in the pages of *The Unclassed, New Grub Street, Ryecroft*, and the story of *Topham's Chance.* Writing fiction in a garret for a sum sufficient to keep body and soul together for the six months following payment was at any rate better than this. The result was a long series of highly finished novels, written in a style and from a point of view which will always render them dear to the studious and the book-centred. Upon the larger external rings of the book-reading multitude it is not probable that Gissing will ever succeed in impressing himself. There is an

absence of transcendental quality about his work, a failure in humour, a remoteness from actual life, a deficiency in awe and mystery, a shortcoming in emotional power, finally, a lack of the dramatic faculty, not indeed indispensable to a novelist, but almost indispensable as an ingredient in great novels of this particular genre.[1] In temperament and vitality he is palpably inferior to the masters (Dickens, Thackeray, Hugo, Balzac) whom he reverenced with such a cordial admiration and envy. A 'low vitality' may account for what has been referred to as the 'nervous exhaustion' of his style. It were useless to pretend that Gissing belongs of right to the 'first series' of English Men of Letters. But if debarred by his limitations from a resounding or popular success, he will remain exceptionally dear to the heart of the recluse, who thinks that the scholar does well to cherish a grievance against the vulgar world beyond the cloister; and dearer still, perhaps, to a certain number of enthusiasts who began reading George Gissing as a college night-course; who closed *Thyrza* and *Demos* as dawn was breaking through the elms in some Oxford quadrangle, and who have pursued his work patiently ever since in a somewhat toilsome and broken ascent, secure always of suave writing and conscientious workmanship, of an individual prose cadence and a genuine vein of Penseroso:—

'Thus, Night, oft see me in thy pale career…
Where brooding Darkness spreads his jealous wings,
And the night-raven sings.'

Yet by the larger, or, at any rate, the intermediate public, it is a fact that Gissing has never been quite fairly estimated. He loses immensely if you estimate him either by a single book, as is commonly done, or by his work as a whole, in the perspective of which, owing to the lack of critical instruction, one or two books of rather inferior quality have obtruded themselves unduly. This brief survey of the Gissing country is designed to enable the reader to judge the novelist by eight or nine of his best books. If we can select these aright, we feel sure that he will end by placing the work of George Gissing upon a considerably higher level than he has hitherto done.

The time has not yet come to write the history of his career—fuliginous in not a few of its earlier phases, gathering serenity towards its close,—finding a soul of goodness in things evil. This only pretends to be a chronological and, quite incidentally, a critical survey of George Gissing's chief works. And comparatively short as his working life proved to be—hampered for ten years by the sternest poverty, and for nearly ten more by the sad, illusive optimism of the poitrinaire—the task of the mere surveyor is no light or perfunctory one. Artistic as his temperament undoubtedly was, and conscientious as his writing appears down to its minutest detail, Gissing yet managed to turn out rather more than a novel per annum. The desire to excel acted as a spur which conquered his congenital inclination to dreamy historical reverie. The reward which he propounded to himself remained steadfast from boyhood; it was a kind of *Childe Harold* pilgrimage to the lands of antique story—

'Whither Albano's scarce divided waves
Shine from a sister valley;—and afar
The Tiber winds, and the broad ocean laves
The Latian coast where sprang the Epic War.'

Twenty-six years have elapsed since the appearance of his first book in 1880, and in that time just twenty-six books have been issued bearing his signature. His industry was worthy of an Anthony Trollope, and cost his employers barely a tithe of the amount claimed by the writer of *The Last*

[1] The same kind of limitations would have to be postulated in estimating the brothers De Goncourt, who, falling short of the first magnitude, have yet a fully recognised position upon the stellar atlas.

Chronicle of Barset. He was not much over twenty-two when his first novel appeared.[2] It was entitled *Workers in the Dawn*, and is distinguished by the fact that the author writes himself George Robert Gissing; afterwards he saw fit to follow the example of George Robert Borrow, and in all subsequent productions assumes the style of 'George Gissing.' The book begins in this fashion: 'Walk with me, reader, into Whitecross Street. It is Saturday night'; and it is what it here seems, a decidedly crude and immature performance. Gissing was encumbered at every step by the giant's robe of mid-Victorian fiction. Intellectual giants, Dickens and Thackeray, were equally gigantic spendthrifts. They worked in a state of fervid heat above a glowing furnace, into which they flung lavish masses of unshaped metal, caring little for immediate effect or minute dexterity of stroke, but knowing full well that the emotional energy of their temperaments was capable of fusing the most intractable material, and that in the end they would produce their great, downright effect. Their spirits rose and fell, but the case was desperate, copy had to be despatched for the current serial. Good and bad had to make up the tale against time, and revelling in the very exuberance and excess of their humour, the novelists invariably triumphed.

To the Ercles vein of these Titans of fiction, Gissing was a complete stranger. To the pale and fastidious recluse and anchorite, their tone of genial remonstrance with the world and its ways was totally alien. He knew nothing of the world to start with beyond the den of the student. His second book, as he himself described it in the preface to a second edition, was the work of a very young man who dealt in a romantic spirit with the gloomier facts of life. Its title, *The Unclassed,*[3] excited a little curiosity, but the author was careful to explain that he had not in view the *déclassés* but rather those persons who live in a limbo external to society, and refuse the statistic badge. The central figure Osmond Waymark is of course Gissing himself. Like his creator, raving at intervals under the vile restraints of Philistine surroundings and with no money for dissipation, Osmond gives up teaching to pursue the literary vocation. A girl named Ida Starr idealises him, and is helped thereby to a purer life. In the four years' interval between this somewhat hurried work and his still earlier attempt the young author seems to have gone through a bewildering change of employments. We hear of a clerkship in Liverpool, a searing experience in America (described with but little deviation in *New Grub Street*), a gas-fitting episode in Boston, private tutorships, and cramming engagements in 'the poisonous air of working London.' Internal evidence alone is quite sufficient to indicate that the man out of whose brain such bitter experiences of the educated poor were wrung had learnt in suffering what he taught —in his novels. His start in literature was made under conditions that might have appalled the bravest, and for years his steps were dogged by hunger and many-shaped hardships. He lived in cellars and garrets. 'Many a time,' he writes, 'seated in just such a garret (as that in the frontispiece to *Little Dorrit*) I saw the sunshine flood the table in front of me, and the thought of that book rose up before me.' He ate his meals in places that would have offered a way-wearied tramp occasion for criticism. 'His breakfast consisted often of a slice of bread and a drink of water. Four and sixpence a week paid for his lodging. A meal that cost more than sixpence was a feast.' Once he tells us with a thrill of reminiscent ecstasy how he found sixpence in the street! The ordinary comforts of modern life were unattainable luxuries. Once when a newly posted notice in the lavatory at the British Museum warned readers that the basins were to be used (in official phrase) 'for casual ablutions only,' he was abashed at the thought of his own complete dependence upon the facilities of the place. Justly might the author call this a tragi-comical incident. Often in happier times he had brooding memories of the familiar old horrors—the foggy and gas-lit labyrinth of Soho—shop windows containing puddings and pies kept hot by steam rising through perforated metal—a young novelist of 'two-and-twenty or

[2] Three vols. 8vo, 1880 (Remington). It was noticed at some length in the *Athenoeum* of June 12th, in which the author's philosophic outlook is condemned as a dangerous compound of Schopenhauer, Comte, and Shelley. It is somewhat doubtful if he ever made more for a book than the £250 he got for *New Grub Street*. £200, we believe, was advanced on *The Nether World,* but this proved anything but a prosperous speculation from the publisher's point of view, and £150 was refused for *Born in Exile*.

[3] Three vols., 1884, dedicated to M.C.R. In one volume 'revised,' 1895 (preface dated October 1895).

thereabouts' standing before the display, raging with hunger, unable to purchase even one pennyworth of food. And this is no fancy picture,[4] but a true story of what Gissing had sufficient elasticity of humour to call 'a pretty stern apprenticeship.' The sense of it enables us to understand to the full that semi-ironical and bitter, yet not wholly unamused passage, in *Ryecroft*:—

> 'Is there at this moment any boy of twenty, fairly educated, but without means, without help, with nothing but the glow in his brain and steadfast courage in his heart, who sits in a London garret and writes for dear life? There must be, I suppose; yet all that I have read and heard of late years about young writers, shows them in a very different aspect. No garretteers, these novelists and journalists awaiting their promotion. They eat—and entertain their critics—at fashionable restaurants, they are seen in expensive seats at the theatre; they inhabit handsome flats—photographed for an illustrated paper on the first excuse. At the worst, they belong to a reputable club, and have garments which permit them to attend a garden party or an evening "at home" without attracting unpleasant notice. Many biographical sketches have I read during the last decade, making personal introduction of young Mr. This or young Miss That, whose book was—as the sweet language of the day will have it—"booming"; but never one in which there was a hint of stern struggles, of the pinched stomach and frozen fingers.'

In his later years it was customary for him to inquire of a new author 'Has he starved'? He need have been under no apprehension. There is still a God's plenty of attics in Grub Street, tenanted by genuine artists, idealists and poets, amply sufficient to justify the lamentable conclusion of old Anthony à Wood in his life of George Peele. 'For so it is and always hath been, that most poets die poor, and consequently obscurely, and a hard matter it is to trace them to their graves.' Amid all these miseries, Gissing upheld his ideal. During 1886-7 he began really to *write* and the first great advance is shown in *Isabel Clarendon*.[5] No book, perhaps, that he ever wrote is so rich as this in autobiographical indices. In the melancholy Kingcote we get more than a passing phase or a momentary glimpse at one side of the young author. A long succession of Kingcote's traits are obvious self-revelations. At the beginning he symbolically prefers the old road with the crumbling sign-post, to the new. Kingcote is a literary sensitive. The most ordinary transaction with uneducated ('that is uncivilised') people made him uncomfortable. Mean and hateful people by their suggestions made life hideous. He lacks the courage of the ordinary man. Though under thirty he is abashed by youth. He is sentimental and hungry for feminine sympathy, yet he realises that the woman who may with safety be taken in marriage by a poor man, given to intellectual pursuits, is extremely difficult of discovery. Consequently he lives in solitude; he is tyrannised by moods, dominated by temperament. His intellect is in abeyance. He shuns the present—the historical past seems alone to concern him. Yet he abjures his own past. The ghost of his former self affected him with horror. Identity even he denies. 'How can one be responsible for the thoughts and acts of the being who bore his name years ago?' He has no consciousness of his youth—no sympathy with children. In him is to be discerned 'his father's intellectual and emotional qualities, together with a certain stiffness of moral attitude derived from his mother.' He reveals already a wonderful palate for pure literary flavour. His prejudices are intense, their character being determined by the refinement and idealism of his nature. All this is profoundly significant, knowing as we do that this was produced when Gissing's worldly prosperity was at its nadir. He was living at the time, like his own Harold Biffen, in absolute solitude, a frequenter of pawnbroker's shops and a stern connoisseur of pure dripping, pease pudding ('magnificent pennyworths at a shop in Cleveland Street, of a very rich quality indeed'), faggots and

[4] Who but Gissing could describe a heroine as exhibiting in her countenance 'habitual nourishment on good and plenteous food'?

[5] *Isabel Clarendon*. By George Gissing. In two volumes, 1886 (Chapman and Hall). In reviewing this work the *Academy* expressed astonishment at the mature style of the writer—of whom it admitted it had not yet come across the name.

saveloys. The stamp of affluence in those days was the possession of a basin. The rich man thus secured the gravy which the poor man, who relied on a paper wrapper for his pease pudding, had to give away. The image recurred to his mind when, in later days, he discussed champagne vintages with his publisher, or was consulted as to the management of butlers by the wife of a popular prelate. With what a sincere recollection of this time he enjoins his readers (after Dr. Johnson) to abstain from Poverty. 'Poverty is the great secluder.' 'London is a wilderness abounding in anchorites.' Gissing was sustained amid all these miseries by two passionate idealisms, one of the intellect, the other of the emotions. The first was ancient Greece and Rome—and he incarnated this passion in the picturesque figure of Julian Casti (in *The Unclassed*), toiling hard to purchase a Gibbon, savouring its grand epic roll, converting its driest detail into poetry by means of his enthusiasm, and selecting Stilicho as a hero of drama or romance (a premonition here of *Veranilda*). The second or heart's idol was Charles Dickens—Dickens as writer, Dickens as the hero of a past England, Dickens as humorist, Dickens as leader of men, above all, Dickens as friend of the poor, the outcast, the pale little sempstress and the downtrodden Smike.

In the summer of 1870, Gissing remembered with a pious fidelity of detail the famous drawing of the 'Empty Chair' being framed and hung up 'in the school-room, at home'[6] (Wakefield).

> 'Not without awe did I see the picture of the room which was now tenantless: I remember too, a curiosity which led me to look closely at the writing-table and the objects upon it, at the comfortable round-backed chair, at the book-shelves behind. I began to ask myself how books were written and how the men lived who wrote them. It is my last glimpse of childhood. Six months later there was an empty chair in my own home, and the tenor of my life was broken.
>
> 'Seven years after this I found myself amid the streets of London and had to find the means of keeping myself alive. What I chiefly thought of was that now at length I could go hither or thither in London's immensity seeking for the places which had been made known to me by Dickens.
>
> 'One day in the city I found myself at the entrance to Bevis Marks! I had just been making an application in reply to some advertisement—of course, fruitlessly; but what was that disappointment compared with the discovery of Bevis Marks! Here dwelt Mr. Brass and Sally and the Marchioness. Up and down the little street, this side and that, I went gazing and dreaming. No press of busy folk disturbed me; the place was quiet; it looked no doubt much the same as when Dickens knew it. I am not sure that I had any dinner that day; but, if not, I daresay I did not mind it very much.'

The broad flood under Thames bridges spoke to him in the very tones of 'the master.' He breathed Guppy's London particular, the wind was the black easter that pierced the diaphragm of Scrooge's clerk.

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[6] Of Gissing's early impressions, the best connected account, I think, is to be gleaned from the concluding chapters of *The Whirlpool*; but this may be reinforced (and to some extent corrected, or, here and there cancelled) by passages in *Burn in Exile* (vol. i.) and in *Ryecroft*. The material there supplied is confirmatory in the best sense of the detail contributed by Mr. Wells to the cancelled preface of *Veranilda*, touching the 'schoolboy, obsessed by a consuming passion for learning, at the Quaker's boarding-school at Alderley. He had come thither from Wakefield at the age of thirteen—after the death of his father, who was, in a double sense, the cardinal formative influence in his life. The tones of his father's voice, his father's gestures, never departed from him; when he read aloud, particularly if it was poetry he read, his father returned in him. He could draw in those days with great skill and vigour—it will seem significant to many that he was particularly fascinated by Hogarth's work, and that he copied and imitated it; and his father's well-stocked library, and his father's encouragement, had quickened his imagination and given it its enduring bias for literary activity.' Like Defoe, Smollett, Sterne, Borrow, Dickens, Eliot, 'G.C.' is, half involuntarily, almost unconsciously autobiographic.

> 'We bookish people have our connotations for the life we do not live. In time I came to see London with my own eyes, but how much better when I saw it with those of Dickens!'

Tired and discouraged, badly nourished, badly housed—working under conditions little favourable to play of the fancy or intentness of the mind—then was the time, Gissing found, to take down Forster and read—read about Charles Dickens.

> 'Merely as the narrative of a wonderfully active, zealous, and successful life, this book scarce has its equal; almost any reader must find it exhilarating; but to me it yielded such special sustenance as in those days I could not have found elsewhere, and lacking which I should, perhaps, have failed by the way. I am not referring to Dickens's swift triumph, to his resounding fame and high prosperity; these things are cheery to read about, especially when shown in a light so human, with the accompaniment of so much geniality and mirth. No; the pages which invigorated me are those where we see Dickens at work, alone at his writing-table, absorbed in the task of the story-teller. Constantly he makes known to Forster how his story is getting on, speaks in detail of difficulties, rejoices over spells of happy labour; and what splendid sincerity in it all! If this work of his was not worth doing, why, nothing was. A troublesome letter has arrived by the morning's post and threatens to spoil the day; but he takes a few turns up and down the room, shakes off the worry, and sits down to write for hours and hours. He is at the sea-side, his desk at a sunny bay window overlooking the shore, and there all the morning he writes with gusto, ever and again bursting into laughter at his own thoughts.'[7]

The influence of Dickens clearly predominated when Gissing wrote his next novel and first really notable and artistic book, *Thyrza*.[8] The figure which irradiates this story is evidently designed in the school of Dickens: it might almost be a pastel after some more highly finished work by Daudet. But Daudet is a more relentless observer than Gissing, and to find a parallel to this particular effect I think we must go back a little farther to the heroic age of the *grisette* and the tearful *Manchon de Francine* of Henri Murger. *Thyrza*, at any rate, is a most exquisite picture in half-tones of grey and purple of a little Madonna of the slums; she is in reality the *belle fleur d'un fumier* of which he speaks in the epigraph of the *Nether World*. The *fumier* in question is Lambeth Walk, of which we have a Saturday night scene, worthy of the author of *L'Assommoir* and *Le Ventre de Paris* in his most perceptive mood. In this inferno, amongst the pungent odours, musty smells and 'acrid exhalations from the shops where fried fish and potatoes hissed in boiling grease,' blossomed a pure white lily, as radiant amid mean surroundings as Gemma in the poor Frankfort confectioner's shop of Turgenev's *Eaux Printanières.* The pale and rather languid charm of her face and figure are sufficiently portrayed without any set description. What could be more delicate than the intimation of the foregone 'good-night' between the sisters, or the scene of Lyddy plaiting Thyrza's hair? The delineation of the upper middle class culture by which this exquisite flower of maidenhood is first caressed and transplanted, then slighted and left to wither, is not so satisfactory. Of the upper middle class, indeed, at that time, Gissing had very few means of observation. But this defect, common to all his early novels, is

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[7] See a deeply interesting paper on Dickens by 'G.G.' in the New York *Critic*, Jan. 1902. Much of this is avowed autobiography.

[8] *Thyrza: A Novel* (3 vols., 1887). In later life we are told that Gissing affected to despise this book as 'a piece of boyish idealism.' But he was always greatly pleased by any praise of this 'study of two sisters, where poverty for once is rainbow-tinted by love.' My impression is that it was written before *Demos*, but was longer in finding a publisher; it had to wait until the way was prepared by its coarser and more vigorous workfellow. A friend writes: 'I well remember the appearance of the MS. Gissing wrote then on thin foreign paper in a small, thin handwriting, without correction. It was before the days of typewriting, and the MS. of a three-volume novel was so compressed that one could literally put it in one's pocket without the slightest inconvenience.' The name is from Byron's *Elegy on Thyrza*.

more than compensated by the intensely pathetic figure of Gilbert Grail, the tender-souled, book-worshipping factory hand raised for a moment to the prospect of intellectual life and then hurled down by the caprice of circumstance to the unrelenting round of manual toil at the soap and candle factory. Dickens would have given a touch of the grotesque to Grail's gentle but ungainly character; but at the end he would infallibly have rewarded him as Tom Pinch and Dominie Sampson were rewarded. Not so George Gissing. His sympathy is fully as real as that of Dickens. But his fidelity to fact is greater. Of the Christmas charity prescribed by Dickens, and of the untainted pathos to which he too rarely attained, there is an abundance in *Thyrza*. But what amazes the chronological student of Gissing's work is the magnificent quality of some of the writing, a quality of which he had as yet given no very definite promise. Take the following passage, for example:—

> 'A street organ began to play in front of a public-house close by. Grail drew near; there were children forming a dance, and he stood to watch them.
>
> Do you know that music of the obscure ways, to which children dance? Not if you have only heard it ground to your ears' affliction beneath your windows in the square. To hear it aright you must stand in the darkness of such a by-street as this, and for the moment be at one with those who dwell around, in the blear-eyed houses, in the dim burrows of poverty, in the unmapped haunts of the semi-human. Then you will know the significance of that vulgar clanging of melody; a pathos of which you did not dream will touch you, and therein the secret of hidden London will be half revealed. The life of men who toil without hope, yet with the hunger of an unshaped desire; of women in whom the sweetness of their sex is perishing under labour and misery; the laugh, the song of the girl who strives to enjoy her year or two of youthful vigour, knowing the darkness of the years to come; the careless defiance of the youth who feels his blood and revolts against the lot which would tame it; all that is purely human in these darkened multitudes speaks to you as you listen. It is the half-conscious striving of a nature which knows not what it would attain, which deforms a true thought by gross expression, which clutches at the beautiful and soils it with foul hands.
>
> The children were dirty and ragged, several of them barefooted, nearly all bare-headed, but they danced with noisy merriment. One there was, a little girl, on crutches; incapable of taking a partner, she stumped round and round, circling upon the pavement, till giddiness came upon her and she had to fall back and lean against the wall, laughing aloud at her weakness. Gilbert stepped up to her, and put a penny into her hand; then, before she had recovered from her surprise, passed onwards.'—(p. 111.)

This superb piece of imaginative prose, of which Shorthouse himself might have been proud,[9] is recalled by an answering note in *Ryecroft*, in which he says, 'I owe many a page to the street-organs.'

And, where the pathos has to be distilled from dialogue, I doubt if the author of *Jack* himself could have written anything more restrainedly touching or in a finer taste than this:—

> 'Laughing with kindly mirth, the old man drew on his woollen gloves and took up his hat and the violin-bag. Then he offered to say good-bye.
>
> "But you're forgetting your top-coat, grandad," said Lydia.
>
> "I didn't come in it, my dear."
>
> "What's that, then? I'm sure *we* don't wear such things."

[9] I am thinking, in particular, of the old vielle-player's conversation in chap. xxiii. of *John Inglesant*; of the exquisite passage on old dance music—its inexpressible pathos—in chap. xxv.

She pointed to a chair, on which Thyrza had just artfully spread the gift. Mr. Boddy looked in a puzzled way; had he really come in his coat and forgotten it? He drew nearer.

"That's no coat o' mine, Lyddy," he said.

Thyrza broke into a laugh.

"Why, whose is it, then?" she exclaimed. "Don't play tricks, grandad; put it on at once!"

"Now come, come; you're keeping Mary waiting," said Lydia, catching up the coat and holding it ready.

Then Mr. Boddy understood. He looked from Lydia to Thyrza with dimmed eyes.

"I've a good mind never to speak to either of you again," he said in a tremulous voice. "As if you hadn't need enough of your money! Lyddy,

Lyddy! And you're as had, Thyrza, a grownup woman like you; you ought to teach your sister better. Why, there; it's no good; I don't know what to say to you. Now what do you think of this, Mary?"

Lydia still held up the coat, and at length persuaded the old man to don it. The effect upon his appearance was remarkable; conscious of it, he held himself more upright and stumped to the little square of looking-glass to try and regard himself. Here he furtively brushed a hand over his eyes.

"I'm ready, Mary, my dear; I'm ready! It's no good saying anything to girls like these. Good-bye, Lyddy; good-bye, Thyrza. May you have a happy Christmas, children! This isn't the first as you've made a happy one for me."'—(p. 117.)

The anonymously published *Demos* (1886) can hardly be described as a typical product of George Gissing's mind and art. In it he subdued himself rather to the level of such popular producers as Besant and Rice, and went out of his way to procure melodramatic suspense, an ingredient far from congenial to his normal artistic temper. But the end justified the means. The novel found favour in the eyes of the author of *The Lost Sir Massingberd*, and Gissing for the first time in his life found himself the possessor of a full purse, with fifty 'jingling, tingling, golden, minted quid' in it. Its possession brought with it the realisation of a paramount desire, the desire for Greece and Italy which had become for him, as it had once been with Goethe, a scarce endurable suffering. The sickness of longing had wellnigh given way to despair, when 'there came into my hands a sum of money (such a poor little sum) for a book I had written. It was early autumn. I chanced to hear some one speak of Naples—and only death would have held me back.'[10]

The main plot of *Demos* is concerned with Richard Mutimer, a young socialist whose vital force, both mental and physical, is well above the average, corrupted by accession to a fortune, marrying a refined wife, losing his money in consequence of the discovery of an unsuspected will, and dragging his wife down with him,—down to *la misère* in its most brutal and humiliating shape. Happy endings and the Gissing of this period are so ill-assorted, that the 'reconciliations' at the close of both this novel and the next are to be regarded with considerable suspicion. The 'gentlefolk' in the book are the merest marionettes, but there are descriptive passages of first-rate vigour, and the voice of wisdom

[10] See *Emancipated*, chaps. iv.-xii.; *New Grub Street*, chap, xxvii.; *Ryecroft*, Autumn xix.; the short, not superior, novel called *Sleeping Fires*, 1895, chap. i. 'An encounter on the Kerameikos'; *The Albany*, Christmas 1904, p. 27; and *Monthly Review*, vol. xvi. 'He went straight by sea to the land of his dreams—Italy. It was still happily before the enterprise of touring agencies had fobbed the idea of Italian travel of its last vestiges of magic. He spent as much time as he could afford about the Bay of Naples, and then came on with a rejoicing heart to Rome—Rome, whose topography had been with him since boyhood, beside whose stately history the confused tumult of the contemporary newspapers seemed to him no more than a noisy, unmeaning persecution of the mind. Afterwards he went to Athens.'

is heard from the lips of an early Greek choregus in the figure of an old parson called Mr. Wyvern. As the mouthpiece of his creator's pet hobbies parson Wyvern rolls out long homilies conceived in the spirit of Emerson's 'compensation,' and denounces the cruelty of educating the poor and making no after-provision for their intellectual needs with a sombre enthusiasm and a periodicity of style almost worthy of Dr. Johnson.[11]

After *Demos*, Gissing returned in 1888 to the more sentimental and idealistic palette which he had employed for *Thyrza*. Renewed recollections of Tibullus and of Theocritus may have served to give his work a more idyllic tinge. But there were much nearer sources of inspiration for *A Life's Morning*. There must be many novels inspired by a youthful enthusiasm for *Richard Feverel*, and this I should take to be one of them. Apart from the idyllic purity of its tone, and its sincere idolatry of youthful love, the caressing grace of the language which describes the spiritualised beauty of Emily Hood and the exquisite charm of her slender hands, and the silvery radiance imparted to the whole scene of the proposal in the summer-house (in chapter iii., 'Lyrical'), give to this most unequal and imperfect book a certain crepuscular fascination of its own. Passages in it, certainly, are not undeserving that fine description of a style *si tendre qu'il pousse le bonheur à pleurer*. Emily's father, Mr. Hood, is an essentially pathetic figure, almost grotesquely true to life. 'I should like to see London before I die,' he says to his daughter. 'Somehow I have never managed to get so far…. There's one thing that I wish especially to see, and that is Holborn Viaduct. It must be a wonderful piece of engineering; I remember thinking it out at the time it was constructed. Of course you have seen it?' The vulgar but not wholly inhuman Cartwright interior, where the parlour is resolved into a perpetual matrimonial committee, would seem to be the outcome of genuine observation. Dagworthy is obviously padded with the author's substitute for melodrama, while the rich and cultivated Mr. Athel is palpably imitated from Meredith. The following tirade (spoken by the young man to his mistress) is Gissing pure. 'Think of the sunny spaces in the world's history, in each of which one could linger for ever. Athens at her fairest, Rome at her grandest, the glorious savagery of Merovingian Courts, the kingdom of Frederick II., the Moors in Spain, the magic of Renaissance Italy—to become a citizen of any one age means a lifetime of endeavour. It is easy to fill one's head with names and years, but that only sharpens my hunger.' In one form or another it recurs in practically every novel.[12] Certain of the later portions of this book, especially the chapter entitled 'Her Path in Shadow' are delineated through a kind of mystical haze, suggestive of some of the work of Puvis de Chavannes. The concluding chapters, taken as a whole, indicate with tolerable accuracy Gissing's affinities as a writer, and the pedigree of the type of novel by which he is best known. It derives from Xavier de Maistre and St. Pierre to *La Nouvelle Héloïse,*—nay, might one not almost say from the *pays du tendre* of *La Princesse de Clèves* itself. Semi-sentimental theories as to the relations of the sexes, the dangers of indiscriminate education, the corruptions of wretchedness and poverty in large towns, the neglect of literature and classical learning, and the grievances of scholarly refinement in a world in which Greek iambic and Latin hexameter count for nothing,—such form the staple of his theses and tirades! His approximation at times to the confines of French realistic art is of the most accidental or incidental kind. For Gissing is at heart, in his bones as the vulgar say, a thorough moralist and sentimentalist, an honest, true-born, downright ineradicable Englishman. Intellectually his own life was, and continued to the last to be, romantic to an extent that few lives are. Pessimistic he may at times appear, but this is almost entirely

[11] An impressive specimen of his eloquence was cited by me in an article in the *Daily Mail Year Book* (1906, p. 2). A riper study of a somewhat similar character is given in old Mr. Lashmar in *Our Friend the Charlatan*. (See his sermon on the blasphemy which would have us pretend that our civilisation obeys the spirit of Christianity, in chap, xviii.). For a criticism of *Demos* and *Thyrza* in juxtaposition with Besant's *Children of Gibeon*, see Miss Sichel on 'Philanthropic Novelists' (*Murray's Magazine*, iii. 506-518). Gissing saw deeper than to 'cease his music on a merry chord.'

[12] Sometimes, however, as in *The Whirlpool* (1897) with a very significant change of intonation:—'And that History which he loved to read—what was it but the lurid record of woes unutterable! How could he find pleasure in keeping his eyes fixed on century after century of ever-repeated torment—war, pestilence, tyranny; the stake, the dungeon; tortures of infinite device, cruelties inconceivable?'—(p. 326.)

on the surface. For he was never in the least blasé or ennuyé. He had the pathetic treasure of the humble and downcast and unkindly entreated—unquenchable hope. He has no objectivity. His point of view is almost entirely personal. It is not the *lacrimae rerum*, but the *lacrimae dierum suorum*, that makes his pages often so forlorn. His laments are all uttered by the waters of Babylon in a strange land. His nostalgia in the land of exile, estranged from every refinement, was greatly enhanced by the fact that he could not get on with ordinary men, but exhibited almost to the last a practical incapacity, a curious inability to do the sane and secure thing. As Mr. Wells puts it:—

> 'It is not that he was a careless man, he was a most careful one; it is not that he was a morally lax man, he was almost morbidly the reverse. Neither was he morose or eccentric in his motives or bearing; he was genial, conversational, and well-meaning. But he had some sort of blindness towards his fellow-men, so that he never entirely grasped the spirit of everyday life, so that he, who was so copiously intelligent in the things of the study, misunderstood, blundered, was nervously diffident, and wilful and spasmodic in common affairs, in employment and buying and selling, and the normal conflicts of intercourse. He did not know what would offend, and he did not know what would please. He irritated others and thwarted himself. He had no social nerve.'

Does not Gissing himself sum it up admirably, upon the lips of Mr. Widdowson in *The Odd Women*: 'Life has always been full of worrying problems for me. I can't take things in the simple way that comes natural to other men.' 'Not as other men are': more intellectual than most, fully as responsive to kind and genial instincts, yet bound at every turn to pinch and screw—an involuntary ascetic. Such is the essential burden of Gissing's long-drawn lament. Only accidentally can it be described as his mission to preach 'the desolation of modern life,' or in the gracious phrase of De Goncourt, *fouiller les entrailles de la vie*. Of the confident, self-supporting realism of *Esther Waters*, for instance, how little is there in any of his work, even in that most gloomily photographic portion of it which we are now to describe?

During the next four years, 1889-1892, Gissing produced four novels, and three of these perhaps are his best efforts in prose fiction. *The Nether World* of 1889 is certainly in some respects his strongest work, *la letra con sangre*, in which the ruddy drops of anguish remembered in a state of comparative tranquillity are most powerfully expressed. *The Emancipated*, of 1890, is with equal certainty, a *réchauffé* and the least successful of various attempts to give utterance to his enthusiasm for the *valor antica*—'the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome.' *New Grub Street*, (1891) is the most constructive and perhaps the most successful of all his works; while *Born in Exile* (1892) is a key-book as regards the development of the author's character, a *clavis* of primary value to his future biographer, whoever he may be. The *Nether World* contains Gissing's most convincing indictment of Poverty; and it also expresses his sense of revolt against the ugliness and cruelty which is propagated like a foul weed by the barbarous life of our reeking slums. Hunger and Want show Religion and Virtue the door with scant politeness in this terrible book. The material had been in his possession for some time, and in part it had been used before in earlier work. It was now utilised with a masterly hand, and the result goes some way, perhaps, to justify the well-meant but erratic comparisons that have been made between Gissing and such writers as Zola, Maupassant and the projector of the *Comédie Humaine*. The savage luck which dogs Kirkwood and Jane, and the worse than savage—the inhuman—cruelty of Clem Peckover, who has been compared to the Madame Cibot of Balzac's *Le Cousin Pons*, render the book an intensely gloomy one; it ends on a note of poignant misery, which gives a certain colour for once to the oft-repeated charge of morbidity and pessimism. Gissing understood the theory of compensation, but was unable to exhibit it in action. He elevates the cult of refinement to such a pitch that the consolations of temperament, of habit, and of humdrum ideals which are common to the coarsest of mankind, appear to elude his observation. He does not

represent men as worse than they are; but he represents them less brave. No social stratum is probably quite so dull as he colours it. There is usually a streak of illusion or a flash of hope somewhere on the horizon. Hence a somewhat one-sided view of life, perfectly true as representing the grievance of the poet Cinna in the hands of the mob, but too severely monochrome for a serious indictment of a huge stratum of our common humanity. As in *Thyrza*, the sombreness of the ground generates some magnificent pieces of descriptive writing.

> 'Hours yet before the fireworks begin. Never mind; here by good luck we find seats where we can watch the throng passing and repassing. It is a great review of the people. On the whole, how respectable they are, how sober, how deadly dull! See how worn-out the poor girls are becoming, how they gape, what listless eyes most of them have! The stoop in the shoulders so universal among them merely means over-toil in the workroom. Not one in a thousand shows the elements of taste in dress; vulgarity and worse glares in all but every costume. Observe the middle-aged women; it would be small surprise that their good looks had vanished, but whence comes it they are animal, repulsive, absolutely vicious in ugliness? Mark the men in their turn; four in every six have visages so deformed by ill-health that they excite disgust; their hair is cut down to within half an inch of the scalp; their legs are twisted out of shape by evil conditions of life from birth upwards. Whenever a youth and a girl come along arm-in-arm, how flagrantly shows the man's coarseness! They are pretty, so many of these girls, delicate of feature, graceful did but their slavery allow them natural development; and the heart sinks as one sees them side by side with the men who are to be their husbands….
>
> On the terraces dancing has commenced; the players of violins, concertinas, and penny whistles do a brisk trade among the groups eager for a rough-and-tumble valse; so do the pickpockets. Vigorous and varied is the jollity that occupies the external galleries, filling now in expectation of the fireworks; indescribable the mingled tumult that roars heavenwards. Girls linked by the half-dozen arm-in-arm leap along with shrieks like grotesque maenads; a rougher horseplay finds favour among the youths, occasionally leading to fisticuffs. Thick voices bellow in fragmentary chorus; from every side comes the yell, the cat-call, the ear-rending whistle; and as the bass, the never-ceasing accompaniment, sounds the myriad-footed tramp, tramp along the wooden flooring. A fight, a scene of bestial drunkenness, a tender whispering between two lovers, proceed concurrently in a space of five square yards. Above them glimmers the dawn of starlight.'—(pp. 109-11.)

From the delineation of this profoundly depressing milieu, by the aid of which, if the fate of London and Liverpool were to-morrow as that of Herculaneum and Pompeii, we should be able to reconstruct the gutters of our Imperial cities (little changed in essentials since the days of Domitian), Gissing turned his sketch-book to the scenery of rural England. He makes no attempt at the rich colouring of Kingsley or Blackmore, but, as page after page of *Ryecroft* testifies twelve years later, he is a perfect master of the *aquarelle*.

> 'The distance is about five miles, and, until Danbury Hill is reached, the countryside has no point of interest to distinguish it from any other representative bit of rural Essex. It is merely one of those quiet corners of flat, homely England, where man and beast seem on good terms with each other, where all green things grow in abundance, where from of old tilth and pasture-land are humbly observant of seasons and alternations, where the brown roads are familiar only with the tread of the labourer, with the light wheel of the farmer's gig, or the rumbling of the

> solid wain. By the roadside you pass occasionally a mantled pool, where perchance ducks or geese are enjoying themselves; and at times there is a pleasant glimpse of farmyard, with stacks and barns and stables. All things as simple as could be, but beautiful on this summer afternoon, and priceless when one has come forth from the streets of Clerkenwell.

* * * * *

> 'Danbury Hill, rising thick-wooded to the village church, which is visible for miles around, with stretches of heath about its lower slopes, with its far prospects over the sunny country, was the pleasant end of a pleasant drive.'—(*The Nether World*, pp. 164-165.)

The first part of this description is quite masterly—worthy, I am inclined to say, of Flaubert. But unless you are familiar with the quiet, undemonstrative nature of the scenery described, you can hardly estimate the perfect justice of the sentiment and phrasing with which Gissing succeeds in enveloping it.

Gissing now turned to the submerged tenth of literature, and in describing it he managed to combine a problem or thesis with just the amount of characterisation and plotting sanctioned by the novel convention of the day. The convention may have been better than we think, for *New Grub Street* is certainly its author's most effective work. The characters are numerous, actual, and alive. The plot is moderately good, and lingers in the memory with some obstinacy. The problem is more open to criticism, and it has indeed been criticised from more points of view than one.

> 'In *New Grub Street*,' says one of his critics,[13] 'Mr. Gissing has endeavoured to depict the shady side of literary life in an age dominated by the commercial spirit. On the whole, it is in its realism perhaps the least convincing of his novels, whilst being undeniably the most depressing. It is not that Gissing's picture of poverty in the literary profession is wanting in the elements of truth, although even in that profession there is even more eccentricity than the author leads us to suppose in the social position and evil plight of such men as Edwin Reardon and Harold Biffen. But the contrast between Edwin Reardon, the conscientious artist loving his art and working for its sake, and Jasper Milvain, the man of letters, who prospers simply because he is also a man of business, which is the main feature of the book and the principal support of its theme, strikes one throughout as strained to the point of unreality. In the first place, it seems almost impossible that a man of Milvain's mind and instincts should have deliberately chosen literature as the occupation of his life; with money and success as his only aim he would surely have become a stockbroker or a moneylender. In the second place, Edwin Reardon's dire failure, with his rapid descent into extreme poverty, is clearly traceable not so much to a truly artistic temperament in conflict with the commercial spirit, as to mental and moral weakness, which could not but have a baneful influence upon his work.'

This criticism does not seem to me a just one at all, and I dissent from it completely. In the first place, the book is not nearly so depressing as *The Nether World*, and is much farther removed from the strain of French and Russian pessimism which had begun to engage the author's study when he was writing *Thyrza*. There are dozens of examples to prove that Milvain's success is a perfectly normal process, and the reason for his selecting the journalistic career is the obvious one that he has

[13] Dolman in *National Review*, vol. xxx.; cf. *ibid*., vol. xliv.

no money to begin stock-broking, still less money-lending. In the third place, the mental and moral shortcomings of Reardon are by no means dissembled by the author. He is, as the careful student of the novels will perceive, a greatly strengthened and improved rifacimento of Kingcote, while Amy Reardon is a better observed Isabel, regarded from a slightly different point of view. Jasper Milvain is, to my thinking, a perfectly fair portrait of an ambitious publicist or journalist of the day—destined by determination, skill, energy, and social ambition to become an editor of a successful journal or review, and to lead the life of central London. Possessing a keen and active mind, expression on paper is his handle; he has no love of letters as letters at all. But his outlook upon the situation is just enough. Reardon has barely any outlook at all. He is a man with a delicate but shallow vein of literary capacity, who never did more than tremble upon the verge of success, and hardly, if at all, went beyond promise. He was unlucky in marrying Amy, a rather heartless woman, whose ambition was far in excess of her insight, for economic position Reardon had none. He writes books to please a small group. The books fail to please. Jasper in the main is right—there is only a precarious place for any creative litterateur between the genius and the swarm of ephemera or journalists. A man writes either to please the hour or to produce something to last, relatively a long time, several generations—what we call 'permanent.' The intermediate position is necessarily insecure. It is not really wanted. What is lost by society when one of these mediocre masterpieces is overlooked? A sensation, a single ray in a sunset, missed by a small literary coterie! The circle is perhaps eclectic. It may seem hard that good work is overwhelmed in the cataract of production, while relatively bad, garish work is rewarded. But so it must be. 'The growing flood of literature swamps every thing but works of primary genius.' Good taste is valuable, especially when it takes the form of good criticism. The best critics of contemporary books (and these are by no means identical with the best critics of the past and its work) are those who settle intuitively upon the writing that is going to appeal more largely to a future generation, when the attraction of novelty and topicality has subsided. The same work is done by great men. They anticipate lines of action; philosophers generally follow (Machiavelli's theories the practice of Louis XI., Nietzsche's that of Napoleon I.). The critic recognises the tentative steps of genius in letters. The work of fine delicacy and reserve, the work that follows, lacking the real originality, is liable to neglect, and *may* become the victim of ill-luck, unfair influence, or other extraneous factors. Yet on the whole, so numerous are the publics of to-day, there never, perhaps, was a time when supreme genius or even supreme talent was so sure of recognition. Those who rail against these conditions, as Gissing seems here to have done, are actuated consciously or unconsciously by a personal or sectional disappointment. It is akin to the crocodile lament of the publisher that good modern literature is neglected by the public, or the impressionist's lament about the great unpaid greatness of the great unknown—the exclusively literary view of literary rewards. Literature must be governed by over-mastering impulse or directed at profit.

But *New Grub Street* is rich in memorable characters and situations to an extent unusual in Gissing; Biffen in his garret—a piece of genre almost worthy of Dickens; Reardon the sterile plotter, listening in despair to the neighbouring workhouse clock of St. Mary-le-bone; the matutinal interview between Alfred Yule and the threadbare surgeon, a vignette worthy of Smollett. Alfred Yule, the worn-out veteran, whose literary ideals are those of the eighteenth century, is a most extraordinary study of an *arriéré*—certainly one of the most crusted and individual personalities Gissing ever portrayed. He never wrote with such a virile pen: phrase after phrase bites and snaps with a singular crispness and energy; material used before is now brought to a finer literary issue. It is by far the most tenacious of Gissing's novels. It shows that on the more conventional lines of fictitious intrigue, acting as cement, and in the interplay of emphasised characters, Gissing could, if he liked, excel. (It recalls Anatole France's *Le Lys Rouge*, showing that he, too, the scholar and intellectual *par excellence*, could an he would produce patterns in plain and fancy adultery with the best.) Whelpdale's adventures in Troy, U.S.A., where he lived for five days on pea-nuts, are evidently semi-autobiographical. It is in his narrative that we first made the acquaintance of the American phrase now so familiar about literary

productions going off like hot cakes. The reminiscences of Athens are typical of a lifelong obsession —to find an outlet later on in *Veranilda*. On literary *réclame*, he says much that is true—if not the whole truth, in the apophthegm for instance, 'You have to become famous before you can secure the attention which would give fame.' Biffen, it is true, is a somewhat fantastic figure of an idealist, but Gissing cherished this grotesque exfoliation from a headline by Dickens—and later in his career we shall find him reproducing one of Biffen's ideals with a singular fidelity.

> 'Picture a woman of middle age, wrapped at all times in dirty rags (not to be called clothing), obese, grimy, with dishevelled black hair, and hands so scarred, so deformed by labour and neglect, as to be scarcely human. She had the darkest and fiercest eyes I ever saw. Between her and her mistress went on an unceasing quarrel; they quarrelled in my room, in the corridor, and, as I knew by their shrill voices, in places remote; yet I am sure they did not dislike each other, and probably neither of them ever thought of parting. Unexpectedly, one evening, this woman entered, stood by the bedside, and began to talk with such fierce energy, with such flashing of her black eyes, and such distortion of her features, that I could only suppose that she was attacking me for the trouble I caused her. A minute or two passed before I could even hit the drift of her furious speech; she was always the most difficult of the natives to understand, and in rage she became quite unintelligible. Little by little, by dint of questioning, I got at what she meant. There had been *guai*, worse than usual; the mistress had reviled her unendurably for some fault or other, and was it not hard that she should be used like this after having *tanto, tanto lavorato*! In fact, she was appealing for my sympathy, not abusing me at all. When she went on to say that she was alone in the world, that all her kith and kin were *freddi morti* (stone dead), a pathos in her aspect and her words took hold upon me; it was much as if some heavy-laden beast of burden had suddenly found tongue and protested in the rude beginnings of articulate utterance against its hard lot. If only we could have learnt in intimate detail the life of this domestic serf[14]! How interesting and how sordidly picturesque against the background of romantic landscape, of scenic history! I looked long into her sallow, wrinkled face, trying to imagine the thoughts that ruled its expression. In some measure my efforts at kindly speech succeeded, and her "Ah, Cristo!" as she turned to go away, was not without a touch of solace.'

In 1892 Gissing was already beginning to try and discard his down look, his lugubrious self-pity, his lamentable cadence. He found some alleviation from self-torment in *David Copperfield*, and he determined to borrow a feather from 'the master's' pinion—in other words, to place an autobiographical novel to his credit. The result was *Born in Exile* (1892), one of the last of the three-volume novels,—by no means one of the worst. A Hedonist of academic type, repelled by a vulgar intonation, Gissing himself is manifestly the man in exile. Travel, fair women and college life, the Savile club, and Great Malvern or the Cornish coast, music in Paris or Vienna—this of course was the natural milieu for such a man. Instead of which our poor scholar (with Homer and Shakespeare and Pausanias piled upon his one small deal table) had to encounter the life of the shabby recluse in London lodgings—synonymous for him, as passage after passage in his books recounts, with incompetence and vulgarity in every form, at best 'an ailing lachrymose slut incapable of effort,' more often sheer foulness and dishonesty, 'by lying, slandering, quarrelling, by drunkenness, by brutal vice, by all abominations that distinguish the lodging-letter of the metropolis.' No book exhibits more naïvely the extravagant value which Gissing put upon the mere externals of refinement. The following scathing vignette of his unrefined younger brother by the hero, Godfrey Peak, shows the ferocity with

[14] Here is a more fully prepared expression of the very essence of Biffen's artistic ideal.—*By the Ionian Sea*, chap. x.

which this feeling could manifest itself against a human being who lacked the elements of scholastic learning (the brother in question had failed to give the date of the Norman Conquest):—

> 'He saw much company and all of low intellectual order; he had purchased a bicycle and regarded it as a source of distinction, or means of displaying himself before shopkeepers' daughters; he believed himself a moderate tenor and sang verses of sentimental imbecility; he took in several weekly papers of unpromising title for the chief purpose of deciphering cryptograms, in which pursuit he had singular success. Add to these characteristics a penchant for cheap jewellery, and Oliver Peak stands confessed.'

The story of the book is revealed in Peak's laconic ambition, 'A plebeian, I aim at marrying a lady.' It is a little curious, some may think, that this motive so skilfully used by so many novelists to whose work Gissing's has affinity, from Rousseau and Stendhal (*Rouge et Noire*) to Cherbuliez (*Secret du Précepteur*) and Bourget (*Le Disciple*), had not already attracted him, but the explanation is perhaps in part indicated in a finely written story towards the close of this present volume.[15] The white, maidenish and silk-haired fairness of Sidwell, and Peak's irresistible passion for the type of beauty suggested, is revealed to us with all Gissing's wonderful skill in shadowing forth feminine types of lovelihood. Suggestive too of his oncoming passion for Devonshire and Western England are strains of exquisite landscape music scattered at random through these pages. More significant still, however, is the developing faculty for personal satire, pointing to a vastly riper human experience. Peak was uncertain, says the author, with that faint ironical touch which became almost habitual to him, 'as to the limits of modern latitudinarianism until he met Chilvers,' the sleek, clerical advocate of 'Less St. Paul and more Darwin, less of Luther and more of Herbert Spencer':—

> 'The discovery of such fantastic liberality in a man whom he could not but dislike and contemn gave him no pleasure, but at least it disposed him to amusement rather than antagonism. Chilvers's pronunciation and phraseology were distinguished by such original affectation that it was impossible not to find entertainment in listening to him. Though his voice was naturally shrill and piping, he managed to speak in head notes which had a ring of robust utterance. The sound of his words was intended to correspond with their virile warmth of meaning. In the same way he had cultivated a habit of the muscles which conveyed an impression that he was devoted to athletic sports. His arms occasionally swung as if brandishing dumb-bells, his chest now and then spread itself to the uttermost, and his head was often thrown back in an attitude suggesting self-defence.'

Of Gissing's first year or so at Owens, after leaving Lindow Grove School at Alderley,[16] we get a few hints in these pages. Like his 'lonely cerebrate' hero, Gissing himself, at school and college, 'worked insanely.' Walked much alone, shunned companionship rather than sought it, worked as he walked, and was marked down as a 'pot-hunter.' He 'worked while he ate, he cut down his sleep, and for him the penalty came, not in a palpable, definable illness, but in an abrupt, incongruous reaction and collapse.' With rage he looked back on these insensate years of study which had weakened him just when he should have been carefully fortifying his constitution.

The year of this autobiographical record[17] marked the commencement of Gissing's reclamation from that worst form of literary slavery—the chain-gang. For he had been virtually chained to the

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[15] See page 260.

[16] With an exhibition gained when he was not yet fifteen.

[17] Followed in 1897 by *The Whirlpool* (see p. xvi), and in 1899 and 1903 by two books containing a like infusion of autobiographical experience, *The Crown of Life*, technically admirable in chosen passages, but sadly lacking in the freshness of first-hand, and *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, one of the rightest and ripest of all his productions.

desk, perpetually working, imprisoned in a London lodging, owing to the literal lack of the means of locomotion.[18] His most strenuous work, wrung from him in dismal darkness and wrestling of spirit, was now achieved. Yet it seems to me both ungrateful and unfair to say, as has frequently been done, that his subsequent work was consistently inferior. In his earlier years, like Reardon, he had destroyed whole books—books he had to sit down to when his imagination was tired and his fancy suffering from deadly fatigue. His corrections in the days of *New Grub Street* provoked not infrequent, though anxiously deprecated, remonstrance from his publisher's reader. Now he wrote with more assurance and less exhaustive care, but also with a perfected experience. A portion of his material, it is true, had been fairly used up, and he had henceforth to turn to analyse the sufferings of well-to-do lower middle-class families, people who had 'neither inherited refinement nor acquired it, neither proletarian nor gentlefolk, consumed with a disease of vulgar pretentiousness, inflated with the miasma of democracy.' Of these classes it is possible that he knew less, and consequently lacked the sureness of touch and the fresh draughtsmanship which comes from ample knowledge, and that he had, consequently, to have increasing resort to books and to invention, to hypothesis and theory.[19] On the other hand, his power of satirical writing was continually expanding and developing, and some of his very best prose is contained in four of these later books: *In the Year of Jubilee* (1894), *Charles Dickens* (1898), *By the Ionian Sea* (1901), and *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1903); not far below any of which must be rated four others, *The Odd Women* (1893), *Eve's Ransom* (1895), *The Whirlpool* (1897), and *Will Warburton* (1905), to which may be added the two collections of short stories.

Few, if any, of Gissing's books exhibit more mental vigour than *In the Year of Jubilee*. This is shown less, it may be, in his attempted solution of the marriage problem (is marriage a failure?) by means of the suggestion that middle class married people should imitate the rich and see as little of each other as possible, than in the terse and amusing characterisations and the powerfully thought-out descriptions. The precision which his pen had acquired is well illustrated by the following description, not unworthy of Thomas Hardy, of a new neighbourhood.

> 'Great elms, the pride of generations passed away, fell before the speculative axe, or were left standing in mournful isolation to please a speculative architect; bits of wayside hedge still shivered in fog and wind, amid hoardings variegated with placards and scaffoldings black against the sky. The very earth had lost its wholesome odour; trampled into mire, fouled with builders' refuse and the noisome drift from adjacent streets, it sent forth, under the sooty rain, a smell of corruption, of all the town's uncleanliness. On this rising locality had been bestowed the title of "Park." Mrs. Morgan was decided in her choice of a dwelling here by the euphonious address, Merton Avenue, Something-or-other Park.'

Zola's wonderful skill in the animation of crowds has often been commented upon, but it is more than doubtful if he ever achieved anything superior to Gissing's marvellous incarnation of the jubilee night mob in chapter seven. More formidable, as illustrating the venom which the author's whole

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[18] 'I hardly knew what it was to travel by omnibus. I have walked London streets for twelve and fifteen hours together without even a thought of saving my legs or my time, by paying for waftage. Being poor as poor can be, there were certain things I had to renounce, and this was one of them.'—*Ryecroft*. For earlier scenes see *Monthly Review*, xvi., and *Owens College Union Mag*., Jan. 1904, pp. 80-81.

[19] 'He knew the narrowly religious, the mental barrenness of the poor dissenters, the people of the slums that he observed so carefully, and many of those on the borders of the Bohemia of which he at least was an initiate, and he was soaked and stained, as he might himself have said, with the dull drabs of the lower middle class that he hated. But of those above he knew little…. He did not know the upper middle classes, which are as difficult every whit as those beneath them, and take as much time and labour and experience and observation to learn.'—'The Exile of George Gissing,' *Albany*, Christmas 1904. In later life he lost sympathy with the 'nether world.' Asked to write a magazine article on a typical 'workman's budget,' he wrote that he no longer took an interest in the 'condition of the poor question.'

nature had secreted against a perfectly recognisable type of modern woman, is the acrid description of Ada, Beatrice, and Fanny French.

> 'They spoke a peculiar tongue, the product of sham education and a mock refinement grafted upon a stock of robust vulgarity. One and all would have been moved to indignant surprise if accused of ignorance or defective breeding. Ada had frequented an "establishment for young ladies" up to the close of her seventeenth year: the other two had pursued culture at a still more pretentious institute until they were eighteen. All could "play the piano"; all declared—and believed—that they "knew French." Beatrice had "done" Political Economy; Fanny had "been through" Inorganic Chemistry and Botany. The truth was, of course, that their minds, characters, propensities, had remained absolutely proof against such educational influence as had been brought to bear upon them. That they used a finer accent than their servants, signified only that they had grown up amid falsities, and were enabled, by the help of money, to dwell above-stairs, instead of with their spiritual kindred below.'

The evils of indiscriminate education and the follies of our grotesque examination system were one of Gissing's favourite topics of denunciation in later years, as evidenced in this characteristic passage in his later manner in this same book:—

> 'She talked only of the "exam," of her chances in this or that "paper," of the likelihood that this or that question would be "set." Her brain was becoming a mere receptacle for dates and definitions, vocabularies and rules syntactic, for thrice-boiled essence of history, ragged scraps of science, quotations at fifth hand, and all the heterogeneous rubbish of a "crammer's" shop. When away from her books, she carried scraps of paper, with jottings to be committed to memory. Beside her plate at meals lay formulae and tabulations. She went to bed with a manual, and got up with a compendium.'

The conclusion of this book and its predecessor, *The Odd Women*,[20] marks the conclusion of these elaborated problem studies. The inferno of London poverty, social analysis and autobiographical reminiscence, had now alike been pretty extensively drawn upon by Gissing. With different degrees of success he had succeeded in providing every one of his theses with something in the nature of a jack-in-the-box plot which the public loved and he despised. There remained to him three alternatives: to experiment beyond the limits of the novel; to essay a lighter vein of fiction; or thirdly, to repeat himself and refashion old material within its limits. Necessity left him very little option. He adopted all three alternatives. His best success in the third department was achieved in *Eve's Ransom* (1895). Burrowing back into a projection of himself in relation with a not impossible she, Gissing here creates a false, fair, and fleeting beauty of a very palpable charm. A growing sense of her power to fascinate steadily raises Eve's standard of the minimum of luxury to which she is entitled. And in the course of this evolution, in the vain attempt to win beauty by gratitude and humility, the timid Hilliard, who seeks to propitiate his charmer by ransoming her from a base liaison and supporting her in luxury for a season in Paris, is thrown off like an old glove when a richer *parti* declares himself. The subtlety

[20] *The Odd Women* (1893, new edition, 1894) is a rather sordid and depressing survey of the life-histories of certain orphaned daughters of a typical Gissing doctor—grave, benign, amiably diffident, terribly afraid of life. 'From the contact of coarse actualities his nature shrank.' After his death one daughter, a fancy-goods shop assistant (no wages), is carried off by consumption; a second drowns herself in a bath at a charitable institution; another takes to drink; and the portraits of the survivors, their petty, incurable maladies, their utter uselessness, their round shoulders and 'very short legs,' pimples, and scraggy necks—are as implacable and unsparing as a Maupassant could wish. From the deplorable insight with which he describes the nerveless, underfed, compulsory optimism of these poor in spirit and poor in hope Gissing might almost have been an 'odd woman' himself. In this book and *The Paying Guest* (1895) he seemed to take a savage delight in depicting the small, stiff, isolated, costly, unsatisfied pretentiousness and plentiful lack of imagination which cripples suburbia so cruelly.—See *Saturday Review*, 13 Apr. 1896; and see also *ib.*, 19 Jan. 1895.

of the portraiture and the economy of the author's sympathy for his hero impart a subacid flavour of peculiar delicacy to the book, which would occupy a high place in the repertoire of any lesser artist. It well exhibits the conflict between an exaggerated contempt for, and an extreme susceptibility to, the charm of women which has cried havoc and let loose the dogs of strife upon so many able men. In *The Whirlpool* of 1897, in which he shows us a number of human floats spinning round the vortex of social London,[21] Gissing brings a melodramatic plot of a kind disused since the days of *Demos* to bear upon the exhausting lives and illusive pleasures of the rich and cultured middle class. There is some admirable writing in the book, and symptoms of a change of tone (the old inclination to whine, for instance, is scarcely perceptible) suggestive of a new era in the work of the novelist—relatively mature in many respects as he now manifestly was. Further progress in one of two directions seemed indicated: the first leading towards the career of a successful society novelist 'of circulating fame, spirally crescent,' the second towards the frame of mind that created *Ryecroft*. The second fortunately prevailed. In the meantime, in accordance with a supreme law of his being, his spirit craved that refreshment which Gissing found in revisiting Italy. 'I want,' he cried, 'to see the ruins of Rome: I want to see the Tiber, the Clitumnus, the Aufidus, the Alban Hills, Lake Trasimenus! It is strange how these old times have taken hold of me. The mere names in Roman history make my blood warm.' Of him the saying of Michelet was perpetually true: 'J'ai passé à côté du monde, et j'ai pris l'histoire pour la vie.' His guide-books in Italy, through which he journeyed in 1897 (*en prince* as compared with his former visit, now that his revenue had risen steadily to between three and four hundred a year), were Gibbon, his *semper eadem*, Lenormant (*la Grande-Grèce*), and Cassiodorus, of whose epistles, the foundation of the material of *Veranilda*, he now began to make a special study. The dirt, the poverty, the rancid oil, and the inequable climate of Calabria must have been a trial and something of a disappointment to him. But physical discomfort and even sickness was whelmed by the old and overmastering enthusiasm, which combined with his hatred of modernity and consumed Gissing as by fire. The sensuous and the emotional sides of his experience are blended with the most subtle artistry in his *By the Ionian Sea*, a short volume of impressions, unsurpassable in its kind, from which we cannot refrain two characteristic extracts:—

> 'At Cotrone the tone of the dining-room was decidedly morose. One man—he seemed to be a sort of clerk—came only to quarrel. I am convinced that he ordered things which he knew that the people could not cook, just for the sake of reviling their handiwork when it was presented. Therewith he spent incredibly small sums; after growling and remonstrating and eating for more than an hour, his bill would amount to seventy or eighty centesimi, wine included. Every day he threatened to withdraw his custom; every day he sent for the landlady, pointed out to her how vilely he was treated, and asked how she could expect him to recommend the Concordia to his acquaintances. On one occasion I saw him push away a plate of something, plant his elbows on the table, and hide his face in his hands; thus he sat for ten minutes, an image of indignant misery, and when at length his countenance was again visible, it showed traces of tears.'—(pp. 102-3.)

The unconscious paganism that lingered in tradition, the half-obscured names of the sites celebrated in classic story, and the spectacle of the white oxen drawing the rustic carts of Virgil's time—these things roused in him such an echo as *Chevy Chase* roused in the noble Sidney, and made

[21] The whirlpool in which people just nod or shout to each other as they spin round and round. The heroine tries to escape, but is drawn back again and again, and nearly submerges her whole environment by her wild clutches. Satire is lavished upon misdirected education (28), the sluttishness of London landladies, self-adoring Art on a pedestal (256), the delegation of children to underlings, sham religiosity (229), the pampered conscience of a diffident student, and the *mensonge* of modern woman (300), typified by the ruddled cast-off of Redgrave, who plays first, in her shrivelled paint, as procuress, and then, in her naked hideousness, as blackmailer.

him shout with joy. A pensive vein of contemporary reflection enriches the book with passages such as this:—

> 'All the faults of the Italian people are whelmed in forgiveness as soon as their music sounds under the Italian sky. One remembers all they have suffered, all they have achieved in spite of wrong. Brute races have flung themselves, one after another, upon this sweet and glorious land; conquest and slavery, from age to age, have been the people's lot. Tread where one will, the soil has been drenched with blood. An immemorial woe sounds even through the lilting notes of Italian gaiety. It is a country, wearied and regretful, looking ever backward to the things of old.'— (p. 130.)

The *Ionian Sea* did not make its appearance until 1901, but while he was actually in Italy, at Siena, he wrote the greater part of one of his very finest performances; the study of *Charles Dickens*, of which he corrected the proofs 'at a little town in Calabria.' It is an insufficient tribute to Gissing to say that his study of Dickens is by far the best extant. I have even heard it maintained that it is better in its way than any single volume in the 'Man of Letters'; and Mr. Chesterton, who speaks from ample knowledge on this point, speaks of the best of all Dickens's critics, 'a man of genius, Mr. George Gissing.' While fully and frankly recognising the master's defects in view of the artistic conscience of a later generation, the writer recognises to the full those transcendent qualities which place him next to Sir Walter Scott as the second greatest figure in a century of great fiction. In defiance of the terrible, and to some critics damning, fact that Dickens entirely changed the plan of *Martin Chuzzlewit* in deference to the popular criticism expressed by the sudden fall in the circulation of that serial, he shows in what a fundamental sense the author was 'a literary artist if ever there was one,' and he triumphantly refutes the rash daub of unapplied criticism represented by the parrot cry of 'caricature' as levelled against Dickens's humorous portraits. Among the many notable features of this veritable *chef-d'oeuvre* of under 250 pages is the sense it conveys of the superb gusto of Dickens's actual living and breathing and being, the vindication achieved of two ordinarily rather maligned novels, *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Little Dorrit*, and the insight shown into Dickens's portraiture of women, more particularly those of the shrill-voiced and nagging or whining variety, the 'better halves' of Weller, Varden, Snagsby and Joe Gargery, not to speak of the Miggs, the Gummidge, and the M'Stinger. Like Mr. Swinburne and other true men, he regards Mrs. Gamp as representing the quintessence of literary art wielded by genius. Try (he urges with a fine curiosity) 'to imagine Sarah Gamp as a young girl'! But it is unfair to separate a phrase from a context in which every syllable is precious, reasonable, thrice distilled and sweet to the palate as Hybla honey.[22]

Henceforth Gissing spent an increasing portion of his time abroad, and it was from St. Honorè en Morvan, for instance, that he dated the preface of *Our Friend the Charlatan* in 1901. As with *Denzil Quarrier* (1892) and *The Town Traveller* (1898) this was one of the books which Gissing sometimes went the length of asking the admirers of his earlier romances 'not to read.' With its prefatory note, indeed, its cheap illustrations, and its rather mechanical intrigue, it seems as far removed from such a book as *A Life's Morning* as it is possible for a novel by the same author to be. It was in the South of France, in the neighbourhood of Biarritz, amid scenes such as that described in the thirty-seventh chapter of *Will Warburton*, or still further south, that he wrote the greater part of his last three books, the novel just mentioned, which is probably his best essay in the lighter ironical vein to which his

[22] A revised edition (the date of Dickens's birth is wrongly given in the first) was issued in 1902, with topographical illustrations by F.G. Kitton. Gissing's introduction to *Nickleby* for the Rochester edition appeared in 1900, and his abridgement of Forster's *Life* (an excellent piece of work) in 1903 [1902]. The first collection of short stories, twenty-nine in number, entitled *Human Odds and Ends*, was published in 1898. It is justly described by the writer of the most interesting 'Recollections of George Gissing' in the *Gentleman's Magazine,* February 1906, as 'that very remarkable collection.'

later years inclined[23], *Veranilda*, a romance of the time of Theodoric the Goth, written in solemn fulfilment of a vow of his youth, and *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, which to my mind remains a legacy for Time to take account of as the faithful tribute of one of the truest artists of the generation he served.

In *Veranilda* (1904) are combined conscientious workmanship, a pure style of finest quality, and archaeology, for all I know to the contrary, worthy of Becker or Boni. Sir Walter himself could never in reason have dared to aspire to such a fortunate conjuncture of talent, grace, and historic accuracy. He possessed only that profound knowledge of human nature, that moulding humour and quick sense of dialogue, that live, human, and local interest in matters antiquarian, that statesmanlike insight into the pith and marrow of the historic past, which makes one of Scott's historical novels what it is—the envy of artists, the delight of young and old, the despair of formal historians. *Veranilda* is without a doubt a splendid piece of work; Gissing wrote it with every bit of the care that his old friend Biffen expended upon *Mr. Bailey, grocer*. He worked slowly, patiently, affectionately, scrupulously. Each sentence was as good as he could make it, harmonious to the ear, with words of precious meaning skilfully set; and he believed in it with the illusion so indispensable to an artist's wellbeing and continuance in good work. It represented for him what *Salammbô* did to Flaubert. But he could not allow himself six years to write a book as Flaubert did. *Salammbô*, after all, was a magnificent failure, and *Veranilda*,—well, it must be confessed, sadly but surely, that *Veranilda* was a failure too. Far otherwise was it with *Ryecroft*, which represents, as it were, the *summa* of Gissing's habitual meditation, aesthetic feeling and sombre emotional experience. Not that it is a pessimistic work,—quite the contrary, it represents the mellowing influences, the increase of faith in simple, unsophisticated English girlhood and womanhood, in domestic pursuits, in innocent children, in rural homeliness and honest Wessex landscape, which began to operate about 1896, and is seen so unmistakably in the closing scenes of *The Whirlpool*. Three chief strains are subtly interblended in the composition. First that of a nature book, full of air, foliage and landscape—that English landscape art of Linnell and De Wint and Foster, for which he repeatedly expresses such a passionate tendre,[24] refreshed by 'blasts from the channel, with raining scud and spume of mist breaking upon the hills' in which he seems to crystallise the very essence of a Western winter. Secondly, a paean half of praise and half of regret for the vanishing England, passing so rapidly even as he writes into 'a new England which tries so hard to be unlike the old.' A deeper and richer note of thankfulness, mixed as it must be with anxiety, for the good old ways of English life (as lamented by Mr. Poorgrass and Mark Clark[25]), old English simplicity, and old English fare—the fine prodigality of the English platter, has never been raised. God grant that the leaven may work! And thirdly there is a deeply brooding strain of saddening yet softened autobiographical reminiscence, over which is thrown a light veil of literary appreciation and topical comment. Here is a typical *cadenza*, rising to a swell at one point (suggestive for the moment of Raleigh's famous apostrophe), and then most gently falling, in a manner not wholly unworthy, I venture to think, of Webster and Sir Thomas Browne, of both of which authors there is internal evidence that Gissing made some study.

> 'I always turn out of my way to walk through a country churchyard; these rural resting-places are as attractive to me as a town cemetery is repugnant. I read the names upon the stones and find a deep solace in thinking that for all these the fret and the fear of life are over. There comes to me no touch of sadness; whether it be a little child or an aged man, I have the same sense of happy accomplishment; the

[23] It also contains one of the most beautiful descriptions ever penned of the visit of a tired town-dweller to a modest rural home, with all its suggestion of trim gardening, fresh country scents, indigenous food, and homely simplicity.—*Will Warburton*, chap. ix.

[24] 'I love and honour even the least of English landscape painters.'—*Ryecroft.*

[25] 'But what with the parsons and clerks and school-people and serious tea-parties, the merry old ways of good life have gone to the dogs—upon my carcass, they have!'—*Far from the Madding Crowd.*

> end having come, and with it the eternal peace, what matter if it came late or soon? There is no such gratulation as *Hic jacet*. There is no such dignity as that of death. In the path trodden by the noblest of mankind these have followed; that which of all who live is the utmost thing demanded, these have achieved. I cannot sorrow for them, but the thought of their vanished life moves me to a brotherly tenderness. The dead amid this leafy silence seem to whisper encouragement to him whose fate yet lingers: As we are, so shalt thou be; and behold our quiet!'—(p. 183.)

And in this deeply moving and beautiful passage we get a foretaste, it may be, of the euthanasia, following a brief summer of St. Martin, for which the scarred and troublous portions of Gissing's earlier life had served as a preparation. Some there are, no doubt, to whom it will seem no extravagance in closing these private pages to use the author's own words, of a more potent Enchanter: 'As I close the book, love and reverence possess me.'

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Whatever the critics may determine as to the merit of the stories in the present volume, there can be no question as to the interest they derive from their connection with what had gone before. Thus *Topham's Chance* is manifestly the outcome of material pondered as early as 1884. *The Lodger in Maze Pond* develops in a most suggestive fashion certain problems discussed in 1894. Miss Rodney is a re-incarnation of Rhoda Nunn and Constance Bride. *Christopherson* is a delicious expansion of a mood indicated in *Ryecroft* (Spring xii.), and *A Capitalist* indicates the growing interest in the business side of practical life, the dawn of which is seen in *The Town Traveller* and in the discussion of Dickens's potentialities as a capitalist. The very artichokes in *The House of Cobwebs* (which, like the kindly hand that raised them, alas! fell a victim to the first frost of the season) are suggestive of a charming passage detailing the retired author's experience as a gardener. What Dr. Furnivall might call the 'backward reach' of every one of these stories will render their perusal delightful to those cultivated readers of Gissing, of whom there are by no means a few, to whom every fragment of his suave and delicate workmanship 'repressed yet full of power, vivid though sombre in colouring,' has a technical interest and charm. Nor will they search in vain for Gissing's incorrigible mannerisms, his haunting insistence upon the note of 'Dort wo du nicht bist ist das Glück,' his tricks of the brush in portraiture, his characteristic epithets, the *dusking* twilight, the *decently ignoble* penury, the *not ignoble* ambition, the *not wholly base* riot of the senses in early manhood. In my own opinion we have here in *The Scrupulous Father*, and to a less degree, perhaps, in the first and last of these stories, and in *A Poor Gentleman* and *Christopherson*, perfectly characteristic and quite admirable specimens of Gissing's own genre, and later, unstudied, but always finished prose style.

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But a few words remain to be said, and these, in part at any rate, in recapitulation. In the old race, of which Dickens and Thackeray were representative, a successful determination to rise upon the broad back of popularity coincided with a growing conviction that the evil in the world was steadily diminishing. Like healthy schoolboys who have worked their way up to the sixth form, they imagined that the bullying of which they had had to complain was become pretty much a thing of the past. In Gissing the misery inherent in the sharp contrasts of modern life was a far more deeply ingrained conviction. He cared little for the remedial aspect of the question. His idea was to analyse this misery as an artist and to express it to the world.

One of the most impressive elements in the resulting novels is the witness they bear to prolonged and intense suffering, the suffering of a proud, reserved, and over-sensitive mind brought into constant

contact with the coarse and brutal facts of life. The creator of Mr. Biffen suffers all the torture of the fastidious, the delicately honourable, the scrupulously high-minded in daily contact with persons of blunt feelings, low ideals, and base instincts. 'Human cattle, the herd that feed and breed, with them it was well; but the few born to a desire for ever unattainable, the gentle spirits who from their prisoning circumstance looked up and afar, how the heart ached to think of them!' The natural bent of Gissing's talent was towards poetry and classical antiquity. His mind had considerable natural affinity with that of Tennyson.[26] He was passionately fond of old literature, of the study of metre and of historical reverie. The subtle curiosities of Anatole France are just of the kind that would have appealed irresistibly to him. His delight in psychological complexity and feats of style are not seldom reminiscent of Paul Bourget. His life would have gained immeasurably by a transference to less pinched and pitiful surroundings: but it is more than doubtful whether his work would have done so.

The compulsion of the twin monsters Bread and Cheese forced him to write novels the scene of which was laid in the one milieu he had thoroughly observed, that of either utterly hideous or shabby genteel squalor in London. He gradually obtained a rare mastery in the delineation of his unlovely *mise en scène*. He gradually created a small public who read eagerly everything that came from his pen, despite his economy of material (even of ideas), and despite the repetition to which a natural tendency was increased by compulsory over-production. In all his best books we have evidence of the savage and ironical delight with which he depicted to the shadow of a hair the sordid and vulgar elements by which he had been so cruelly depressed. The aesthetic observer who wanted material for a picture of the blank desolation and ugliness of modern city life could find no better substratum than in the works of George Gissing. Many of his descriptions of typical London scenes in Lambeth Walk, Clerkenwell, or Judd Street, for instance, are the work of a detached, remorseless, photographic artist realising that ugly sordidness of daily life to which the ordinary observer becomes in the course of time as completely habituated as he does to the smoke-laden air. To a cognate sentiment of revolt I attribute that excessive deference to scholarship and refinement which leads him in so many novels to treat these desirable attributes as if they were ends and objects of life in themselves. It has also misled him but too often into depicting a world of suicides, ignoring or overlooking a secret hobby, or passion, or chimaera which is the one thing that renders existence endurable to so many of the waifs and strays of life. He takes existence sadly—too sadly, it may well be; but his drabs and greys provide an atmosphere that is almost inseparable to some of us from our gaunt London streets. In Farringdon Road, for example, I look up instinctively to the expressionless upper windows where Mr. Luckworth Crewe spreads his baits for intending advertisers. A tram ride through Clerkenwell and its leagues of dreary, inhospitable brickwork will take you through the heart of a region where Clem Peckover, Pennyloaf Candy, and Totty Nancarrow are multiplied rather than varied since they were first depicted by George Gissing. As for the British Museum, it is peopled to this day by characters from *New Grub Street*.

There may be a perceptible lack of virility, a fluctuating vagueness of outline about the characterisation of some of his men. In his treatment of crowds, in his description of a mob, personified as 'some huge beast purring to itself in stupid contentment,' he can have few rivals. In tracing the influence of women over his heroes he evinces no common subtlety; it is here probably that he is at his best. The *odor di femmina*, to use a phrase of Don Giovanni's, is a marked characteristic of his books. Of the kisses—

'by hopeless fancy feigned On lips that are for others'—

[26] In a young lady's album I unexpectedly came across the line from *Maud*, 'Be mine a philosopher's life in the quiet woodland ways,' with the signature, following the quotation marks, 'George Gissing.' The borrowed aspiration was transparently sincere. 'Tennyson he worshipped' (see *Odd Women*, chap. i.). The contemporary novelist he liked most was Alphonse Daudet.

there are indeed many to be discovered hidden away between these pages. And the beautiful verse has a fine parallel in the prose of one of Gissing's later novels. 'Some girl, of delicate instinct, of purpose sweet and pure, wasting her unloved life in toil and want and indignity; some man, whose youth and courage strove against a mean environment, whose eyes grew haggard in the vain search for a companion promised in his dreams; they lived, these two, parted perchance only by the wall of neighbour houses, yet all huge London was between them, and their hands would never touch.' The dream of fair women which occupies the mood of Piers Otway in the opening passage of the same novel, was evidently no remotely conceived fancy. Its realisation, in ideal love, represents the author's *Crown of Life*. The wise man who said that Beautiful Woman[27] was a heaven to the eye, a hell to the soul, and a purgatory to the purse of man, could hardly find a more copious field of illustration than in the fiction of George Gissing.

[Footnote 27: With unconscious recollection, it may be, of Pope's notable phrase in regard to Shakespeare, he speaks in his last novel of woman appearing at times as 'a force of Nature rather than an individual being' (*Will Warburton*, p. 275).]

Gissing was a sedulous artist; some of his books, it is true, are very hurried productions, finished in haste for the market with no great amount either of inspiration or artistic confidence about them. But little slovenly work will be found bearing his name, for he was a thoroughly trained writer; a suave and seductive workmanship had become a second nature to him, and there was always a flavour of scholarly, subacid and quasi-ironical modernity about his style. There is little doubt that his quality as a stylist was better adapted to the studies of modern London life, on its seamier side, which he had observed at first hand, than to stories of the conventional dramatic structure which he too often felt himself bound to adopt. In these his failure to grapple with a big objective, or to rise to some prosperous situation, is often painfully marked. A master of explanation and description rather than of animated narrative or sparkling dialogue, he lacked the wit and humour, the brilliance and energy of a consummate style which might have enabled him to compete with the great scenic masters in fiction, or with craftsmen such as Hardy or Stevenson, or with incomparable wits and conversationalists such as Meredith. It is true, again, that his London-street novels lack certain artistic elements of beauty (though here and there occur glints of rainy or sunset townscape in a half-tone, consummately handled and eminently impressive); and his intense sincerity cannot wholly atone for this loss. Where, however, a quiet refinement and delicacy of style is needed as in those sane and suggestive, atmospheric, critical or introspective studies, such as *By the Ionian Sea*, the unrivalled presentment of *Charles Dickens*, and that gentle masterpiece of softened autobiography, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (its resignation and autumnal calm, its finer note of wistfulness and wide human compassion, fully deserve comparison with the priceless work of Silvio Pellico) in which he indulged himself during the last and increasingly prosperous years of his life, then Gissing's style is discovered to be a charmed instrument. That he will *sup late*, our Gissing, we are quite content to believe. But that a place is reserved for him, of that at any rate we are reasonably confident. The three books just named, in conjunction with his short stories and his *New Grub Street* (not to mention *Thyrza* or *The Nether World*), will suffice to ensure him a devout and admiring group of followers for a very long time to come; they accentuate profoundly the feeling of vivid regret and almost personal loss which not a few of his more assiduous readers experienced upon the sad news of his premature death at St. Jean de Luz on the 28th December 1903, at the early age of forty-six.

ACTON,
February 1906.

A CHRONOLOGICAL RECORD

1880. Workers in the Dawn. 1884. The Unclassed. 1886. Isabel Clarendon. 1886. Demos. 1887. Thyrza. 1888. A Life's Morning. 1889. The Nether World. 1890. The Emancipated. 1891. New Grub Street. 1892. Born in Exile. 1892. Denzil Quarrier. 1893. The Odd Women. 1894. In the Year of Jubilee. 1895. The Paying Guest. 1895. Sleeping Fires. 1895. Eve's Ransom. 1897. The Whirlpool. 1898. Human Odds and Ends: Stories and Sketches. 1898. The Town Traveller. 1898. Charles Dickens: a Critical Study. 1899. The Crown of Life. 1901. Our Friend the Charlatan. 1901. By the Ionian Sea. Notes of a Ramble in Southern Italy. 1903. Forster's Life of Dickens—Abridgement. 1903. The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft. 1904. Veranilda: a Romance. 1905. Will Warburton: a Romance of Real Life. 1906. The House of Cobwebs, and other Stories.

[Of notices and reviews of George Gissing other than those mentioned in the foregoing notes the following is a selection:—*Times*, 29 Dec. 1903; *Guardian*, 6 Jan. 1904; *Outlook*, 2 Jan. 1904; *Sphere*, 9 Jan. 1904; *Athenaeum*, 2 and 16 Jan. 1904; *Academy*, 9 Jan. 1904 (pp. 40 and 46); New York *Nation*, 11 June 1903 (an adverse but interesting paper on the anti-social side of Gissing); *The Bookman* (New York), vol. xviii.; *Independent Review*, Feb. 1904; *Fortnightly Review*, Feb. 1904; *Contemporary Review*, Aug. 1897; C.F.G. Masterman's *In Peril of Change*, 1905, pp. 68-73; *Atlantic Monthly*, xciii. 280; *Upton Letters*, 1905, p. 206.]

THE HOUSE OF COBWEBS

It was five o'clock on a June morning. The dirty-buff blind of the lodging-house bedroom shone like cloth of gold as the sun's unclouded rays poured through it, transforming all they illumined, so that things poor and mean seemed to share in the triumphant glory of new-born day. In the bed lay a young man who had already been awake for an hour. He kept stirring uneasily, but with no intention of trying to sleep again. His eyes followed the slow movement of the sunshine on the wall-paper, and noted, as they never had done before, the details of the flower pattern, which represented no flower wherewith botanists are acquainted, yet, in this summer light, turned the thoughts to garden and field and hedgerow. The young man had a troubled mind, and his thoughts ran thus:—

'I must have three months at least, and how am I to live?… Fifteen shillings a week—not quite that, if I spread my money out. Can one live on fifteen shillings a week—rent, food, washing?… I shall have to leave these lodgings at once. They're not luxurious, but I can't live here under twenty-five, that's clear…. Three months to finish my book. It's good; I'm hanged if it isn't! This time I shall find a publisher. All I have to do is to stick at my work and keep my mind easy…. Lucky that it's summer; I don't need fires. Any corner would do for me where I can be quiet and see the sun…. Wonder whether some cottager in Surrey would house and feed me for fifteen shillings a week?… No use lying here. Better get up and see how things look after an hour's walk.'

So the young man arose and clad himself, and went out into the shining street. His name was Goldthorpe. His years were not yet three-and-twenty. Since the age of legal independence he had been living alone in London, solitary and poor, very proud of a wholehearted devotion to the career of authorship. As soon as he slipped out of the stuffy house, the live air, perfumed with freshness from meadows and hills afar, made his blood pulse joyously. He was at the age of hope, and something within him, which did not represent mere youthful illusion, supported his courage in the face of calculations such as would have damped sober experience. With boyish step, so light and springy that it seemed anxious to run and leap, he took his way through a suburb south of Thames, and pushed on towards the first rising of the Surrey hills. And as he walked resolve strengthened itself in his heart. Somehow or other he would live independently through the next three months. If the worst came to the worst, he could earn bread as clerk or labourer, but as long as his money lasted he would pursue his purpose, and that alone. He sang to himself in this gallant determination, happy as if some one had left him a fortune.

In an ascending road, quiet and tree-shadowed, where the dwellings on either side were for the most part old and small, though here and there a brand-new edifice on a larger scale showed that the neighbourhood was undergoing change such as in our time destroys the picturesque in all London suburbs, the cheery dreamer chanced to turn his eyes upon a spot of desolation which aroused his curiosity and set his fancy at work. Before him stood three deserted houses, a little row once tenanted by middle-class folk, but now for some time unoccupied and unrepaired. They were of brick, but the fronts had a stucco facing cut into imitation of ashlar, and weathered to the sombrest grey. The windows of the ground floor and of that above, and the fanlights above the doors, were boarded up, a guard against unlicensed intrusion; the top story had not been thought to stand in need of this protection, and a few panes were broken. On these dead frontages could be traced the marks of climbing plants, which once hung their leaves about each doorway; dry fragments of the old stem still adhered to the stucco. What had been the narrow strip of fore-garden, railed from the pavement, was now a little wilderness of coarse grass, docks, nettles, and degenerate shrubs. The paint on the doors had lost all colour, and much of it was blistered off; the three knockers had disappeared, leaving indications of rough removal, as if—which was probably the case—they had fallen a prey to marauders. Standing full in the brilliant sunshine, this spectacle of abandonment seemed sadder, yet less ugly, than it would have looked under a gloomy sky. Goldthorpe began to weave stories about

its musty squalor. He crossed the road to make a nearer inspection; and as he stood gazing at the dishonoured thresholds, at the stained and cracked boarding of the blind windows, at the rusty paling and the broken gates, there sounded from somewhere near a thin, shaky strain of music, the notes of a concertina played with uncertain hand. The sound seemed to come from within the houses, yet how could that be? Assuredly no one lived under these crazy roofs. The musician was playing 'Home, Sweet Home,' and as Goldthorpe listened it seemed to him that the sound was not stationary. Indeed, it moved; it became more distant, then again the notes sounded more distinctly, and now as if the player were in the open air. Perhaps he was at the back of the houses?

On either side ran a narrow passage, which parted the spot of desolation from inhabited dwellings. Exploring one of these, Goldthorpe found that there lay in the rear a tract of gardens. Each of the three lifeless houses had its garden of about twenty yards long. The bordering wall along the passage allowed a man of average height to peer over it, and Goldthorpe searched with curious eye the piece of ground which was nearest to him. Many a year must have gone by since any gardening was done here. Once upon a time the useful and ornamental had both been represented in this modest space; now, flowers and vegetables, such of them as survived in the struggle for existence, mingled together, and all alike were threatened by a wild, rank growth of grasses and weeds, which had obliterated the beds, hidden the paths, and made of the whole garden plot a green jungle. But Goldthorpe gave only a glance at this still life; his interest was engrossed by a human figure, seated on a campstool near the back wall of the house, and holding a concertina, whence, at this moment, in slow, melancholy strain, 'Home, Sweet Home' began to wheeze forth. The player was a middle-aged man, dressed like a decent clerk or shopkeeper, his head shaded with an old straw hat rather too large for him, and on his feet—one of which swung as he sat with legs crossed—a pair of still more ancient slippers, also too large. With head aside, and eyes looking upward, he seemed to listen in a mild ecstasy to the notes of his instrument. He had a round face of much simplicity and good-nature, semicircular eyebrows, pursed little mouth with abortive moustache, and short thin beard fringing the chinless lower jaw. Having observed this unimposing person for a minute or two, himself unseen, Goldthorpe surveyed the rear of the building, anxious to discover any sign of its still serving as human habitation; but nothing spoke of tenancy. The windows on this side were not boarded, and only a few panes were broken; but the chief point of contrast with the desolate front was made by a Virginia creeper, which grew luxuriantly up to the eaves, hiding every sign of decay save those dim, dusty apertures which seemed to deny all possibility of life within. And yet, on looking steadily, did he not discern something at one of the windows on the top story—something like a curtain or a blind? And had not that same window the appearance of having been more recently cleaned than the others? He could not be sure; perhaps he only fancied these things. With neck aching from the strained position in which he had made his survey over the wall, the young man turned away. In the same moment 'Home, Sweet Home' came to an end, and, but for the cry of a milkman, the early-morning silence was undisturbed.

Goldthorpe pursued his walk, thinking of what he had seen, and wondering what it all meant. On his way back he made a point of again passing the deserted houses, and again he peered over the wall of the passage. The man was still there, but no longer seated with the concertina; wearing a round felt hat instead of the straw, he stood almost knee-deep in vegetation, and appeared to be examining the various growths about him. Presently he moved forward, and, with head still bent, approached the lower end of the garden, where, in a wall higher than that over which Goldthorpe made his espial, there was a wooden door. This the man opened with a key, and, having passed out, could be heard to turn a lock behind him. A minute more, and this short, respectable figure came into sight at the end of the passage. Goldthorpe could not resist the opportunity thus offered. Affecting to turn a look of interest towards the nearest roof, he waited until the stranger was about to pass him, then, with civil greeting, ventured upon a question.

'Can you tell me how these houses come to be in this neglected state?'

The stranger smiled; a soft, modest, deferential smile such as became his countenance, and spoke in a corresponding voice, which had a vaguely provincial accent.

'No wonder it surprises you, sir. I should be surprised myself. It comes of quarrels and lawsuits.'

'So I supposed. Do you know who the property belongs to?'

'Well, yes, sir. The fact is—it belongs to me.'

The avowal was made apologetically, and yet with a certain timid pride. Goldthorpe exhibited all the interest he felt. An idea had suddenly sprung up in his mind; he met the stranger's look, and spoke with the easy good-humour natural to him.

'It seems a great pity that houses should be standing empty like that. Are they quite uninhabitable? Couldn't one camp here during this fine summer weather? To tell you the truth, I'm looking for a room—as cheap a room as I can get. Could you let me one for the next three months?'

The stranger was astonished. He regarded the young man with an uneasy smile.

'You are joking, sir.'

'Not a bit of it. Is the thing quite impossible? Are all the rooms in too bad a state?'

'I won't say *that*,' replied the other cautiously, still eyeing his interlocutor with surprised glances. 'The upper rooms are really not so bad—that is to say, from a humble point of view. I—I have been looking at them just now. You really mean, sir—?'

'I'm quite in earnest, I assure you,' cried Goldthorpe cheerily. 'You see I'm tolerably well dressed still, but I've precious little money, and I want to eke out the little I've got for about three months. I'm writing a book. I think I shall manage to sell it when it's done, but it'll take me about three months yet. I don't care what sort of place I live in, so long as it's quiet. Couldn't we come to terms?'

The listener's visage seemed to grow rounder in progressive astonishment; his eyes declared an emotion akin to awe; his little mouth shaped itself as if about to whistle.

'A book, sir? You are writing a book? You are a literary man?'

'Well, a beginner. I have poverty on my side, you see.'

'Why, it's like Dr. Johnson!' cried the other, his face glowing with interest. 'It's like Chatterton!—though I'm sure I hope you won't end like him, sir. It's like Goldsmith!—indeed it is!'

'I've got half Oliver's name, at all events,' laughed the young man. 'Mine is Goldthorpe.'

'You don't say so, sir! What a strange coincidence! Mine, sir, is Spicer. I—I don't know whether you'd care to come into my garden? We might talk there—'

In a minute or two they were standing amid the green jungle, which Goldthorpe viewed with delight. He declared it the most picturesque garden he had ever seen.

'Why, there are potatoes growing there. And what are those things? Jerusalem artichokes? And look at that magnificent thistle; I never saw a finer thistle in my life! And poppies—and marigolds—and broad-beans—and isn't that lettuce?'

Mr. Spicer was red with gratification.

'I feel that something might be done with the garden, sir,' he said. 'The fact is, sir, I've only lately come into this property, and I'm sorry to say it'll only be mine for a little more than a year—a year from next midsummer day, sir. There's the explanation of what you see. It's leasehold property, and the lease is just coming to its end. Five years ago, sir, an uncle of mine inherited the property from his brother. The houses were then in a very bad state, and only one of them let, and there had been lawsuits going on for a long time between the leaseholder and the ground-landlord—I can't quite understand these matters, they're not at all in my line, sir; but at all events there were quarrels and lawsuits, and I'm told one of the tenants was somehow mixed up in it. The fact is, my uncle wasn't a very well-to-do man, and perhaps he didn't feel able to repair the houses, especially as the lease was drawing to its end. Would you like to go in and have a look round?'

They entered by the back door, which admitted them to a little wash-house. The window was over-spun with cobwebs, thick, hoary; each corner of the ceiling was cobweb-packed; long, dusty filaments depended along the walls. Notwithstanding, Goldthorpe noticed that the house had a water-

supply; the sink was wet, the tap above it looked new. This confirmed a suspicion in his mind, but he made no remark. They passed into the kitchen. Here again the work of the spider showed thick on every hand. The window, however, though uncleaned for years, had recently been opened; one knew that by the torn and ragged condition of the webs where the sashes joined. And lo! on the window-sill stood a plate, a cup and saucer, a knife, a fork, a spoon—all of them manifestly new-washed. Goldthorpe affected not to see these objects; he averted his face to hide an involuntary smile.

'I must light a candle,' said Mr. Spicer. 'The staircase is quite dark.'

A candle stood ready, with a box of matches, on the rusty cooking-stove. No fire had burned in the grate for many a long day; of that the visitor assured himself. Save the objects on the window-sill, no evidence of human occupation was discoverable. Having struck a light, Mr. Spicer advanced. In the front passage, on the stairs, on the landing, every angle and every projection had its drapery of cobwebs. The stuffy, musty air smelt of cobwebs; so, at all events, did Goldthorpe explain to himself a peculiar odour which he seemed never to have smelt. It was the same in the two rooms on the first floor. Through the boarded windows of that in front penetrated a few thin rays from the golden sky; they gleamed upon dust and web, on faded, torn wall-paper and a fireplace in ruins.

'I shouldn't recommend you to take either of *these* rooms,' said Mr. Spicer, looking nervously at his companion. 'They really can't be called attractive.'

'Those on the top are healthier, no doubt,' was the young man's reply. 'I noticed that some of the window-glass is broken. That must have been good for airing.'

Mr. Spicer grew more and more nervous. He opened his little round mouth, very much like a fish gasping, but seemed unable to speak. Silently he led the way to the top story, still amid cobwebs; the atmosphere was certainly purer up here, and when they entered the first room they found themselves all at once in such a flood of glorious sunshine that Goldthorpe shouted with delight.

'Ah, I could live here! Would it cost much to have panes put in? An old woman with a broom would do the rest.' He added in a moment, 'But the back windows are not broken, I think?'

'No—I think not—I—no—'

Mr. Spicer gasped and stammered. He stood holding the candle (its light invisible) so that the grease dripped steadily on his trousers.

'Let's have a look at the other,' cried Goldthorpe. 'It gets the afternoon sun, no doubt. And one would have a view of the garden.'

'Stop, sir!' broke from his companion, who was red and perspiring. 'There's something I should like to tell you before you go into that room. I—it—the fact is, sir, that—temporarily—I am occupying it myself.'

'Oh, I beg your pardon, Mr. Spicer!'

'Not at all, sir! Don't mention it, sir. I have a reason—it seemed to me—I've merely put in a bed and a table, sir, that's all—a temporary arrangement.'

'Yes, yes; I quite understand. What could be more sensible? If the house were mine, I should do the same. What's the good of owning a house, and making no use of it?'

Great was Mr. Spicer's satisfaction.

'See what it is, sir,' he exclaimed, 'to have to do with a literary man! You are large-minded, sir; you see things from an intellectual point of view. I can't tell you how it gratifies me, sir, to have made your acquaintance. Let us go into the back room.'

With nervous boldness he threw the door open. Goldthorpe, advancing respectfully, saw that Mr. Spicer had not exaggerated the simplicity of his arrangements. In a certain measure the room had been cleaned, but along the angle of walls and ceiling there still clung a good many cobwebs, and the state of the paper was deplorable. A blind hung at the window, but the floor had no carpet. In one corner stood a little camp bed, neatly made for the day; a table and a chair, of the cheapest species, occupied the middle of the floor, and on the hearth was an oil cooking-stove.

'It's wonderful how little one really wants,' remarked Mr. Spicer, 'at all events in weather such as this. I find that I get along here very well indeed. The only expense I had was for the water-supply. And really, sir, when one comes to think of it, the situation is pleasant. If one doesn't mind loneliness —and it happens that I don't. I have my books, sir—'

He opened the door of a cupboard containing several shelves. The first thing Goldthorpe's eye fell upon was the concertina; he saw also sundry articles of clothing, neatly disposed, a little crockery, and, ranged on the two top shelves, some thirty volumes, all of venerable aspect.

'Literature, sir,' pursued Mr. Spicer modestly, 'has always been my comfort. I haven't had very much time for reading, but my motto, sir, has been *nulla dies sine linea*.'

It appeared from his pronunciation that Mr. Spicer was no classical scholar, but he uttered the Latin words with infinite gusto, and timidly watched their effect upon the listener.

'This is delightful,' cried Mr. Goldthorpe. 'Will you let me have the front room? I could work here splendidly—splendidly! What rent do you ask, Mr. Spicer?'

'Why really, sir, to tell you the truth I don't know what to say. Of course the windows must be seen to. The fact is, sir, if you felt disposed to do that at your own expense, and—and to have the room cleaned, and—and, let us say, to bear half the water-rate whilst you are here, why, really, I hardly feel justified in asking anything more.'

It was Goldthorpe's turn to be embarrassed, for, little as he was prepared to pay, he did not like to accept a stranger's generosity. They discussed the matter in detail, with the result that for the arrangement which Mr. Spicer had proposed there was substituted a weekly rent of two shillings, the lease extending over a period of three months. Goldthorpe was to live quite independently, asking nothing in the way of domestic service; moreover, he was requested to introduce no other person to the house, even as casual visitor. These conditions Mr. Spicer set forth, in a commercial hand, on a sheet of notepaper, and the agreement was solemnly signed by both contracting parties.

On the way home to breakfast Goldthorpe reviewed his position now that he had taken this decisive step. It was plain that he must furnish his room with the articles which Mr. Spicer found indispensable, and this outlay, be as economical as he might, would tell upon the little capital which was to support him for three months. Indeed, when all had been done, and he found himself, four days later, dwelling on the top story of the house of cobwebs, a simple computation informed him that his total expenditure, after payment of rent, must not exceed fifteenpence a day. What matter? He was in the highest spirits, full of energy and hope. His landlord had been kind and helpful in all sorts of ways, helping him to clean the room, to remove his property from the old lodgings, to make purchases at the lowest possible rate, to establish himself as comfortably as circumstances permitted. And when, on the first morning of his tenancy, he was awakened by a brilliant sun, the young man had a sensation of comfort and satisfaction quite new in his experience; for he was really at home; the bed he slept on, the table he ate at and wrote upon, were his own possessions; he thought with pity of his lodging-house life, and felt a joyous assurance that here he would do better work than ever before.

In less than a week Mr. Spicer and he were so friendly that they began to eat together, taking it in turns to prepare the meal. Now and then they walked in company, and every evening they sat smoking (very cheap tobacco) in the wild garden. Little by little Mr. Spicer revealed the facts of his history. He had begun life, in a midland town, as a chemist's errand-boy, and by steady perseverance, with a little pecuniary help from relatives, had at length risen to the position of chemist's assistant. For five-and-twenty years he practised such rigid economy that, having no one but himself to provide for, he began to foresee a possibility of passing his old age elsewhere than in the workhouse. Then befell the death of his uncle, which was to have important consequences for him. Mr. Spicer told the story of this exciting moment late one evening, when, kept indoors by rain, the companions sat together upstairs, one on each side of the rusty and empty fireplace.

'All my life, Mr. Goldthorpe, I've thought what a delightful thing it must be to have a house of one's own. I mean, really of one's own; not only a rented house, but one in which you could live

and die, feeling that no one had a right to turn you out. Often and often I've dreamt of it, and tried to imagine what the feeling would be like. Not a large, fine house—oh dear, no! I didn't care how small it might be; indeed, the smaller the better for a man of my sort. Well, then, you can imagine how it came upon me when I heard—But let me tell you first that I hadn't seen my uncle for fifteen years or more. I had always thought him a well-to-do man, and I knew he wasn't married, but the truth is, it never came into my head that he might leave me something. Picture me, Mr. Goldthorpe—you have imagination, sir—standing behind the counter and thinking about nothing but business, when in comes a young gentleman—I see him now—and asks for Mr. Spicer. "Spicer is my name, sir," I said. "And you are the nephew," were his next words, "of the late Mr. Isaac Spicer, of Clapham, London?" That shook me, sir, I assure you it did, but I hope I behaved decently. The young gentleman went on to tell me that my uncle had left no will, and that I was believed to be his next-of-kin, and that if so, I inherited all his property, the principal part of which was three houses in London. Now try and think, Mr. Goldthorpe, what sort of state I was in after hearing that. You're an intellectual man, and you can enter into another's mind. Three houses! Well, sir, you know what houses those were. I came up to London at once (it was last autumn), and I saw my uncle's lawyer, and he told me all about the property, and I saw it for myself. Ah, Mr. Goldthorpe! If ever a man suffered a bitter disappointment, sir!'

He ended on a little laugh, as if excusing himself for making so much of his story, and sat for a moment with head bowed.

'Fate played you a nasty trick there,' said Goldthorpe. 'A knavish trick.'

'One felt almost justified in using strong language, sir—though I always avoid it on principle. However, I must tell you that the houses weren't all. Luckily there was a little money as well, and, putting it with my own savings, sir, I found it would yield me an income. When I say an income, I mean, of course, for a man in my position. Even when I have to go into lodgings, when my houses become the property of the ground-landlord—to my mind, Mr. Goldthorpe, a very great injustice, but I don't set myself up against the law of the land—I shall just be able to live. And that's no small blessing, sir, as I think you'll agree.'

'Rather! It's the height of human felicity, Mr. Spicer. I envy you vastly.'

'Well, sir, I'm rather disposed to look at it in that light myself. My nature is not discontented, Mr. Goldthorpe. But, sir, if you could have seen me when the lawyer began to explain about the houses! I was absolutely ignorant of the leasehold system; and at first I really couldn't understand. The lawyer thought me a fool, I fear, sir. And when I came down here and saw the houses themselves! I'm afraid, Mr. Goldthorpe, I'm really afraid, sir, I was weak enough to shed a tear.'

They were sitting by the light of a very small lamp, which did not tend to cheerfulness.

'Come,' cried Goldthorpe, 'after all, the houses are yours for a twelvemonth. Why shouldn't we both live on here all the time? It'll be a little breezy in winter, but we could have the fireplaces knocked into shape, and keep up good fires. When I've sold my book I'll pay a higher rent, Mr. Spicer. I like the old house, upon my word I do! Come, let us have a tune before we go to bed.'

Smiling and happy, Mr. Spicer fetched from the cupboard his concertina, and after the usual apology for what he called his 'imperfect mastery of the instrument,' sat down to play 'Home, Sweet Home.' He had played it for years, and evidently would never improve in his execution. After 'Home, Sweet Home' came 'The Bluebells of Scotland,' after that 'Annie Laurie'; and Mr. Spicer's repertory was at an end. He talked of learning new pieces, but there was not the slightest hope of this achievement.

Mr. Spicer's mental development had ceased more than twenty years ago, when, after extreme efforts, he had attained the qualification of chemist's assistant. Since then the world had stood still with him. Though a true lover of books, he knew nothing of any that had been published during his own lifetime. His father, though very poor, had possessed a little collection of volumes, the very same which now stood in Mr. Spicer's cupboard. The authors represented in this library were either English

classics or obscure writers of the early part of the nineteenth century. Knowing these books very thoroughly, Mr. Spicer sometimes indulged in a quotation which would have puzzled even the erudite. His favourite poet was Cowper, whose moral sentiments greatly soothed him. He spoke of Byron like some contemporary who, whilst admitting his lordship's genius, felt an abhorrence of his life. He judged literature solely from the moral point of view, and was incapable of understanding any other. Of fiction he had read very little indeed, for it was not regarded with favour by his parents. Scott was hardly more than a name to him. And though he avowed acquaintance with one or two works of Dickens, he spoke of them with an uneasy smile, as if in some doubt as to their tendency. With these intellectual characteristics, Mr. Spicer naturally found it difficult to appreciate the attitude of his literary friend, a young man whose brain thrilled in response to modern ideas, and who regarded himself as the destined leader of a new school of fiction. Not indiscreet, Goldthorpe soon became aware that he had better talk as little as possible of the work which absorbed his energies. He had enough liberality and sense of humour to understand and enjoy his landlord's conversation, and the simple goodness of the man inspired him with no little respect. Thus they got along together remarkably well. Mr. Spicer never ceased to feel himself honoured by the presence under his roof of one who—as he was wont to say—wielded the pen. The tradition of Grub Street was for him a living fact. He thought of all authors as struggling with poverty, and continued to cite eighteenth-century examples by way of encouraging Goldthorpe and animating his zeal. Whilst the young man was at work Mr. Spicer moved about the house with soundless footsteps. When invited into his tenant's room he had a reverential demeanour, and the sight of manuscript on the bare deal table caused him to subdue his voice.

The weeks went by, and Goldthorpe's novel steadily progressed. In London he had only two or three acquaintances, and from them he held aloof, lest necessity or temptation should lead to his spending money which he could not spare. The few letters which he received were addressed to a post-office—impossible to shock the nerves of a postman by requesting him to deliver correspondence at this dead house, of which the front door had not been opened for years. The weather was perfect; a great deal of sunshine, but as yet no oppressive heat, even in the chambers under the roof. Towards the end of June Mr. Spicer began to amuse himself with a little gardening. He had discovered in the coal-hole an ancient fork, with one prong broken and the others rusting away. This implement served him in his slow, meditative attack on that part of the jungle which seemed to offer least resistance. He would work for a quarter of an hour, then, resting on his fork, contemplate the tangled mass of vegetation which he had succeeded in tearing up.

'Our aim should be,' he said gravely, when Goldthorpe came to observe his progress, 'to clear the soil round about those vegetables and flowers which seem worth preserving. These broad-beans, for instance—they seem to be a very fine sort. And the Jerusalem artichokes. I've been making inquiry about the artichokes, and I'm told they are not ready to eat till the autumn. The first frost is said to improve them. They're fine plants—very fine plants.'

Already the garden had supplied them with occasional food, but they had to confess that, for the most part, these wild vegetables lacked savour. The artichokes, now shooting up into a leafy grove, were the great hope of the future. It would be deplorable to quit the house before this tuber came to maturity.

'The worst of it is,' remarked Mr. Spicer one day, when he was perspiring freely, 'that I can't help thinking of how different it would be if this garden was really my own. The fact is, Mr. Goldthorpe, I can't put much heart into the work; no, I can't. The more I reflect, the more indignant I become. Really now, Mr. Goldthorpe, speaking as an intellectual man, as a man of imagination, could anything be more cruelly unjust than this leasehold system? I assure you, it keeps me awake at night; it really does.'

The tenor of his conversation proved that Mr. Spicer had no intention of leaving the house until he was legally obliged to do so. More than once he had an interview with his late uncle's solicitor, and each time he came back with melancholy brow. All the details of the story were now familiar to him;

he knew all about the lawsuits which had ruined the property. Whenever he spoke of the ground-landlord, known to him only by name, it was with a severity such as he never permitted himself on any other subject. The ground-landlord was, to his mind, an embodiment of social injustice.

'Never in my life, Mr. Goldthorpe, did I grudge any payment of money as I grudge the ground-rent of these houses. I feel it as robbery, sir, as sheer robbery, though the sum is so small. When, in my ignorance, the matter was first explained to me, I wondered why my uncle had continued to pay this rent, the houses being of no profit to him. But now I understand, Mr. Goldthorpe; the sense of possession is very sweet. Property's property, even when it's leasehold and in ruins. I grudge the ground-rent bitterly, but I feel, sir, that I couldn't bear to lose my houses until the fatal moment, when lose them I must.'

In August the thermometer began to mark high degrees. Goldthorpe found it necessary to dispense with coat and waistcoat when he was working, and at times a treacherous languor whispered to him of the delights of idleness. After one particularly hot day, he and his landlord smoked together in the dusking garden, both unusually silent. Mr. Spicer's eye dwelt upon the great heap of weeds which was resulting from his labour; an odour somewhat too poignant arose from it upon the close air. Goldthorpe, who had been rather headachy all day, was trying to think into perfect clearness the last chapters of his book, and found it difficult.

'You know,' he said all at once, with an impatient movement, 'we ought to be at the seaside.'

'The seaside?' echoed his companion, in surprise. 'Ah, it's a long time since I saw the sea, Mr. Goldthorpe. Why, it must be—yes, it is at least twenty years.'

'Really? I've been there every year of my life till this. One gets into the way of thinking of luxuries as necessities. I tell you what it is. If I sell my book as soon as it's done, we'll have a few days somewhere on the south coast together.'

Mr. Spicer betrayed uneasiness.

'I should like it much,' he murmured, 'but I fear, Mr. Goldthorpe, I greatly fear I can't afford it.'

'Oh, but I mean that you shall go with me as my guest! But for you, Mr.

Spicer, I might never have got my book written at all.'

'I feel it an honour, sir, I assure you, to have a literary man in my house,' was the genial reply. 'And you think the *work* will soon be finished, sir?'

Mr. Spicer always spoke of his tenant's novel as 'the work'—which on his lips had a very large and respectful sound.

'About a fortnight more,' answered Goldthorpe with grave intensity.

The heat continued. As he lay awake before getting up, eager to finish his book, yet dreading the torrid temperature of his room, which made the brain sluggish and the hand slow, Goldthorpe saw how two or three energetic spiders had begun to spin webs once more at the corners of the ceiling; now and then he heard the long buzzing of a fly entangled in one of these webs. The same thing was happening in Mr. Spicer's chamber. It did not seem worth while to brush the new webs away.

'When you come to think of it, sir,' said the landlord, 'it's the spiders who are the real owners of these houses. When I go away, they'll be pulled down; they're not fit for human habitation. Only the spiders are really at home here, and the fact is, sir, I don't feel I have the right to disturb them. As a man of imagination, Mr. Goldthorpe, you'll understand my thoughts!'

Only with a great effort was the novel finished. Goldthorpe had lost his appetite (not, perhaps, altogether a disadvantage), and he could not sleep; a slight fever seemed to be constantly upon him. But this work was a question of life and death to him, and he brought it to an end only a few days after the term he had set himself. The complete manuscript was exhibited to Mr. Spicer, who expressed his profound sense of the privilege. Then, without delay, Goldthorpe took it to the publishing house in which he had most hope.

The young author could now do nothing but wait, and, under the circumstances, waiting meant torture. His money was all but exhausted; if he could not speedily sell the book, his position would be

that of a mere pauper. Supported thus long by the artist's enthusiasm, he fell into despondency, saw the dark side of things. To be sure, his mother (a widow in narrow circumstances) had written pressing him to take a holiday 'at home,' but he dreaded the thought of going penniless to his mother's house, and there, perchance, receiving bad news about his book. An ugly feature of the situation was that he continued to feel anything but well; indeed, he felt sure that he was getting worse. At night he suffered severely; sleep had almost forsaken him. Hour after hour he lay listening to mysterious noises, strange crackings and creakings through the desolate house; sometimes he imagined the sound of footsteps in the bare rooms below; even hushed voices, from he knew not where, chilled his blood at midnight. Since crumbs had begun to lie about, mice were common; they scampered as if in revelry above the ceiling, and under the floor, and within the walls. Goldthorpe began to dislike this strange abode. He felt that under any circumstances it would be impossible for him to dwell here much longer.

When his last coin was spent, and he had no choice but to pawn or sell something for a few days' subsistence, the manuscript came back upon his hands. It had been judged—declined.

That morning he felt seriously unwell. After making known the catastrophe to Mr. Spicer—who was stricken voiceless—he stood silent for a minute or two, then said with quiet resolve:

'It's all up. I've no money, and I feel as if I were going to have an illness. I must say good-bye to you, old friend.'

'Mr. Goldthorpe!' exclaimed the other solemnly; 'I entreat you, sir, to do nothing rash! Take heart, sir! Think of Samuel Johnson, think of Goldsmith—'

'The extent of my rashness, Mr. Spicer, will be to raise enough money on my watch to get down into Derbyshire. I must go home. If I don't, you'll have the pleasant job of taking me to a hospital.'

Mr. Spicer insisted on lending him the small sum he needed. An hour or two later they were at St. Pancras Station, and before sunset Goldthorpe had found harbourage under his mother's roof. There he lay ill for more than a month, and convalescent for as long again. His doctor declared that he must have been living in some very unhealthy place, but the young man preferred to explain his illness by overwork. It seemed to him sheer ingratitude to throw blame on Mr. Spicer's house, where he had been so contented and worked so well until the hot days of latter August. Mr. Spicer himself wrote kind and odd little letters, giving an account of the garden, and earnestly hoping that his literary friend would be back in London to taste the Jerusalem artichokes. But Christmas came and went, and Goldthorpe was still at his mother's house.

Meanwhile the manuscript had gone from publisher to publisher, and at length, on a day in January—date ever memorable in Goldthorpe's life—there arrived a short letter in which a certain firm dryly intimated their approval of the story offered them, and their willingness to purchase the copyright for a sum of fifty pounds. The next morning the triumphant author travelled to London. For two or three days a violent gale had been blowing, with much damage throughout the country; on his journey Goldthorpe saw many great trees lying prostrate, beaten, as though scornfully, by the cold rain which now descended in torrents. Arrived in town, he went to the house where he had lodged in the time of comparative prosperity, and there was lucky enough to find his old rooms vacant. On the morrow he called upon the gracious publishers, and after that, under a sky now become more gentle, he took his way towards the abode of Mr. Spicer.

Eager to communicate the joyous news, glad in the prospect of seeing his simple-hearted friend, he went at a great pace up the ascending road. There were the three houses, looking drearier than ever in a faint gleam of winter sunshine. There were his old windows. But—what had happened to the roof? He stood in astonishment and apprehension, for, just above the room where he had dwelt, the roof was an utter wreck, showing a great hole, as if something had fallen upon it with crushing weight. As indeed was the case; evidently the chimney-stack had come down, and doubtless in the recent gale. Seized with anxiety on Mr. Spicer's account, he ran round to the back of the garden and tried the door; but it was locked as usual. He strained to peer over the garden wall, but could discover nothing that threw light on his friend's fate; he noticed, however, a great grove of dead,

brown artichoke stems, seven or eight feet high. Looking up at the back windows, he shouted Mr. Spicer's name; it was useless. Then, in serious alarm, he betook himself to the house on the other side of the passage, knocked at the door, and asked of the woman who presented herself whether anything was known of a gentleman who dwelt where the chimney-stack had just fallen. News was at once forthcoming; the event had obviously caused no small local excitement. It was two days since the falling of the chimney, which happened towards evening, when the gale blew its hardest. Mr. Spicer was at that moment sitting before the fire, and only by a miracle had he escaped destruction, for an immense weight of material came down through the rotten roof, and even broke a good deal of the flooring. Had the occupant been anywhere but close by the fireplace, he must have been crushed to a mummy; as it was, only a few bricks struck him, inflicting severe bruises on back and arms. But the shock had been serious. When his shouts from the window at length attracted attention and brought help, the poor man had to be carried downstairs, and in a thoroughly helpless state was removed to the nearest hospital.

'Which room was he in?' inquired Goldthorpe. 'Back or front?'

'In the front room. The back wasn't touched.'

Musing on Mr. Spicer's bad luck—for it seemed as if he had changed from the back to the front room just in order that the chimney might fall on him—Goldthorpe hastened away to the hospital. He could not be admitted to-day, but heard that his friend was doing very well; on the morrow he would be allowed to see him.

So at the visitors' hour Goldthorpe returned. Entering the long accident ward, he searched anxiously for the familiar face, and caught sight of it just as it began to beam recognition. Mr. Spicer was sitting up in bed; he looked pale and meagre, but not seriously ill; his voice quivered with delight as he greeted the young man.

'I heard of your inquiring for me yesterday, Mr. Goldthorpe, and I've hardly been able to live for impatience to see you. How are you, sir? How are you? And what news about the *work*, sir?'

'We'll talk about that presently, Mr. Spicer. Tell me all about your accident. How came you to be in the front room?'

'Ah, sir,' replied the patient, with a little shake of the head, 'that indeed was singular. Only a few days before, I had made a removal from my room into yours. I call it yours, sir, for I always thought of it as yours; but thank heaven you were not there. Only a few days before. I took that step, Mr. Goldthorpe, for two reasons: first, because water was coming through the roof at the back in rather unpleasant quantities, and secondly, because I hoped to get a little morning sun in the front. The fact is, sir, my room had been just a little depressing. Ah, Mr. Goldthorpe, if you knew how I have missed you, sir! But the *work*—what news of the *work*?'

Smiling as though carelessly, the author made known his good fortune. For a quarter of an hour Mr. Spicer could talk of nothing else.

'This has completed my cure!' he kept repeating. 'The work was composed under my roof, my own roof, sir! Did I not tell you to take heart?'

'And where are you going to live?' asked Goldthorpe presently. 'You can't go back to the old house.'

'Alas! no, sir. All my life I have dreamt of the joy of owning a house. You know how the dream was realised, Mr. Goldthorpe, and you see what has come of it at last. Probably it is a chastisement for overweening desires, sir. I should have remembered my position, and kept my wishes within bounds. But, Mr. Goldthorpe, I shall continue to cultivate the garden, sir. I shall put in spring lettuces, and radishes, and mustard and cress. The property is mine till midsummer day. You shall eat a lettuce of my growing, Mr. Goldthorpe; I am bent on that. And how I grieve that you were not with me at the time of the artichokes—just at the moment when they were touched by the first frost!'

'Ah! They were really good, Mr. Spicer?'

'Sir, they seemed good to *me*, very good. Just at the moment of the first frost!'

A CAPITALIST

Among the men whom I saw occasionally at the little club in Mortimer Street,—and nowhere else,—was one who drew my attention before I had learnt his name or knew anything about him. Of middle age, in the fullness of health and vigour, but slenderly built; his face rather shrewd than intellectual, interesting rather than pleasing; always dressed as the season's mode dictated, but without dandyism; assuredly he belonged to the money-spending, and probably to the money-getting, world. At first sight of him I remember resenting his cap-à-pie perfection; it struck me as bad form—here in Mortimer Street, among fellows of the pen and the palette.

'Oh,' said Harvey Munden, 'he's afraid of being taken for one of us. He buys pictures. Not a bad sort, I believe, if it weren't for his snobbishness.'

'His name?'

'Ireton. Has a house in Fitzjohn Avenue, and a high-trotting wife.'

Six months later I recalled this description of Mrs. Ireton. She was the talk of the town, the heroine of the newest divorce case. By that time I had got to know her husband; perhaps once a fortnight we chatted at the club, and I found him an agreeable acquaintance. Before the Divorce Court flashed a light of scandal upon his home, I felt that there was more in him than could be discovered in casual gossip; I wished to know him better. Something of shyness marked his manner, and like all shy men he sometimes appeared arrogant. He had a habit of twisting his moustache nervously and of throwing quick glances in every direction as he talked; if he found some one's eye upon him, he pulled himself together and sat for a moment as if before a photographer. One easily perceived that he was not a man of liberal education; he had rather too much of the 'society' accent; his pronunciation of foreign names told a tale. But I thought him good-hearted, and when the penny-a-liners began to busy themselves with his affairs, I felt sorry for him.

Nothing to his dishonour came out in the trial. He and his interesting spouse had evidently lived a cat-and-dog life throughout the three years of their marriage, but the countercharges brought against him broke down completely. It was abundantly proved that he had *not* kept a harem somewhere near Leicester Square; that he had *not* thrown a decanter at Mrs. Ireton. She, on the other hand, left the court with tattered reputation. Ireton got his release, and the weekly papers applauded.

But in Mortimer Street we saw him no more. Some one said that he had gone to live in Paris; some one else reported that he had purchased an estate in Bucks. Presently he was forgotten.

Some three years went by, and I was spending the autumn at a village by the New Forest. One day I came upon a man kneeling under a hedge, examining some object on the ground,—fern or flower, or perhaps insect. His costume showed that he was no native of the locality; I took him for a stray townsman, probably a naturalist. He wore a straw hat and a rough summer suit; a wallet hung from his shoulder. The sound of my steps on crackling wood caused him to turn and look at me. After a moment's hesitation I recognised Ireton.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.