

A Victim of Circumstances

George Gissing

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A Victim of Circumstances

I

In the summer of 1869, an artist, whose wanderings had led him far into rural England, rambled one sunny morning about the town of Glastonbury. Like all but a very few Englishmen, he cared little for the ancient history of his land: Avalon was a myth that did not speak to his imagination, and the name of Dunstan echoed but faintly for him out of old school books. His delight was in the rare quaint beauty of the noiseless streets, in the ruined abbey with its overgrowth, its great elms, its smooth sward where sheep were nibbling, and in the exquisite bits of homely landscape discoverable at every turn. He would have liked to remain here for several days, but in the evening he must needs journey on.

After a mid-day meal at the inn which was built for the use of pilgrims four hundred years ago, he turned his steps towards a spot it still behoved him to visit, though its associations awoke in him but a languid curiosity. This was Wirrall Hill, a little grassy ascent just outside the town — famous for ages throughout Christendom as the place of the Holy Thorn, the budding staff set by Joseph of Arimathæa when he landed from his voyage. A thorn is still preserved on the summit: having considered it with a smile, the artist threw himself upon the grass, and gazed at what interested him much more, the scene spread before his eyes.

Opposite lay Glastonbury, its red-roofed houses (above them the fine old towers of St. John and St. Benedict) clustered about the foot of that high conical hill called the Tor, which with its ruined church beacons over so many miles of plain. Northward the view was bounded by the green Mendips, lovely in changing lights and shadows.

In the west, far upon a flat horizon, glimmered is the Severn Sea. White lines of road marked the landscape in every direction; the willow-bordered rhines — great trenches to save the fields from flood wound among crops or cattled pasturage; and patches of rich brown showed where peat was stacked. A scene perfect in its kind, so ancient, peaceful, dream-inspiring.

He was awakened from reverie by the sound of voices. At a short distance stood two children, a little boy and a still smaller girl, doubtless brother and sister: they had just caught sight of the stranger, and were looking at him with frank, wide eyes, their talk suspended by his presence. Our friend (he was a bachelor of fifty) did not care much for very young people, but this small couple were more than usually interesting; he thought he had never seen such pretty children. They were dressed very simply, but with a taste which proved that they did not belong to working folk; their faces, too, had nothing in common with those of little rustics, but were delicately featured, remarkably intelligent, toned in softest cream colour. The boy (perhaps seven years old) wore a tunic and knickerbockers, and carried a wand higher than himself; the girl, a year younger, who had golden curly locks, and a red sash about her waist, held in her arms the tiniest of terrier pups.

"How do you do?" cried the artist, in the friendliest voice he could command, nodding to them. "Here's a comfortable place; come and sit down."

They hesitated, but only for a moment. Then the boy advanced, and the girl followed more timidly. After a few rather awkward attempts the artist drew them into conversation. Their wits corresponded to their faces; when he spoke of the hill on which they were sitting, he found that the boy knew all about its history.

"Joseph of Arimathæa," said the youngster, with perfect pronunciation of the long word, "had eleven companions. Father is painting them."

"Painting them? What! your father is a painter?"

"Yes," the boy answered proudly. "Like Michael Angelo and Raphael."

"Now that's a curious thing. I am a painter too!"

They examined him keenly, the little girl allowing her puppy to escape, so that in a few moments she had to run away after it.

"Are you an historical painter?" inquired the boy with much earnestness.

"No. Landscape only."

"Oh!"

The tone was of disappointment.

"What is your father's name? Perhaps I have heard of him."

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"Horace Miles Castledine," was the reply, again uttered proudly.

The artist averted his face and kept silence for a moment.

"Mine is Godfrey Banks," he said at length; "not such a nice name as your father's."

"No, not so nice. But it isn't a bad name. I like Godfrey. And are you famous?"

"Some people like my pictures."

"But are you really famous — like my father is going to be?"

"I am afraid not."

"But you are very old, you know," said the lad. "Father is only thirty — quite young for an artist. When he gets as old as you, he'll be famous all through the world — like Michael Angelo."

"I'm very glad to hear that. Where does your father live?"

"Just down there — not far. Shall I take you to see him and tell him you're a painter?"

"That would be very kind, yes, I would like to go."

The artist had made up his mind that he must not leave Glastonbury without visiting this most notable of its inhabitants, a man who, in the year 1869, was engaged on an historical painting — subject, "The Landing of Joseph of Arimathæa in Britain" — and who plainly had the habit of declaring before his offspring that in a few years his fame would circle the earth.

Addressing his companion as "Murie" — which probably meant Muriel — the youngster announced that they would return home forthwith, and with many signs of delight he led the way. Banks held his hand to the little girl, who accepted it very sweetly; with her other arm she enfolded the puppy. And thus they moved forward.

In less than a quarter of an hour the guide pointed to his father's dwelling. It was one of a row of simple cottages, old and prettily built; in the small garden were hollyhocks, sunflowers, tall lilies, and other familiar flowers blooming luxuriantly, and over the front of the house trailed a vine. A delightful abode in certain moods, no doubt; but where could be the studio?

The artist took from his pocket a visiting card.

"I will stay here," he said, "until you have given that to your father, and asked if I may be allowed to see him."

Two or three minutes elapsed; and when the boy reappeared, it was in the company of a singular looking man. This person (one would have judged him less than thirty) had a short, slim figure, and a large head with long, beautiful hair, almost as golden as that of his younger child. He wore a dressing-gown, which had once been magnificent, of blue satin richly worked; time had faded its glories, and it showed a patch here and there. On his feet were slippers, erst of corresponding splendour; but they, too, had felt the touch of the destroyer, and seemed ready to fall to pieces. His neck was bare. The features of the man lacked distinction; one felt that they were grievously out of keeping with such original attire, that they suggested the most respectable of everyday garments. A small perky nose, lips and chin of irreproachable form and the kindest expression, blue eyes which widened themselves in a perpetual endeavour to look inspired — that was all one cared to notice, save, perhaps, the rare delicacy of his complexion.

He came quickly forward, smiling with vast gratification.

"Mr. Banks, you do me a great honour! Pray come in! My wife is unfortunately from home; she would have been overjoyed!"

His voice was quite frank and pleasant; the listener had prepared himself for some intolerable form of euphemism, and felt an agreeable surprise.

They entered, and went first of all into a tiny sitting-room, gracefully furnished. Castledine could not conceal his excitement; for here was one of the first artists of the day, a man really to be revered, coming — if only by chance — to inspect his work and utter words of encouragement! He kept up a dancing movement round three sides of the table whilst his visitor spoke ordinary civilities.

"My studio," he explained at length, "is upstairs. I have very little convenience, but for the present it must do. The picture I am engaged upon I should like to have undertaken on a larger scale; but that couldn't be managed."

"My little friend here," replied the artist, "has told me what the subject is."

"Yes — yes!" said Castledine, breathlessly. "But of course he couldn't explain the principles on which I work. I must tell you, first of all, Mr. Banks, that I have had no academic instruction. I trust you don't think that is fatal?"

"Fatal? Surely not."

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"I was married — I am happy to say — very early; at two and twenty, in fact." He blushed a little. "At that time I lived in Lincolnshire; I was in business. But from boyhood I had studied drawing — quite seriously, I assure you; so much so, that I passed the South Kensington examinations." He pointed to a framed certificate on the wall. "I even went in for anatomy — seriously you know. In anatomy I feel pretty sound. At my marriage I was able to get a little more leisure; we went to Paris and to the Netherlands, and it was then I determined to become a painter. I didn't feel altogether justified — as a married man — in abandoning business, but I managed to give a good half of each day to serious work — really serious. Then we decided to go to London for a year or two, and I studied independently at the National Gallery. The figure was to be my forte; I had understood that from the first; I worked very seriously from the life — made quite a vast number of the most thorough studies. I haven't wholly neglected landscape, but I should be ashamed to speak to you what I have done in that direction. All the time, I still gave attention to — to my business; but at last it was clear to me that I must take a bold step — the step inevitable to every serious artist — and give myself entirely to painting. So, two years ago, we came to live here, and I began my studies for what I hope may be a — a work one needn't feel ashamed of."

"You chose the place because of its quietness?"

"I must explain to you." He still moved dancingly about the table, forgetting even to ask his visitor to be seated. "From boyhood I have felt very strongly that artists have never paid sufficient attention to the early history of England. It seemed to me that this was a great field for any man with true enthusiasm. My wife — who sympathises with me in most things — encourages this idea. She has a great delight in the history of the English Church, and on one of our holidays we came down here to see Wells and Glastonbury. Then it was that I conceived the thought I am now trying to work out on canvas. I felt that I couldn't do better than work on the very spot — in this atmosphere of antiquity."

"I understand."

"But I must explain. It will occur to you — what about costumes and that kind of thing? Here my principle comes in. It seems to me that our modern painters attach far too much importance to these accessories. Now we know that the great men cared very little about them — that is to say, about antiquarian details. They painted boldly, intent upon the subject — the human interest — the human figure. I am trying to follow them. Of course I avoid grotesque improprieties, but otherwise I allow my imagination free play. No one really knows how Joseph of Arimathea and his companions were dressed; I have devised costumes which seem to me appropriate."

He spoke hurriedly, watching the listener's face as if he dreaded a sign of disapproval. But Godfrey Banks was all courteous attention.

"Of course I used models. There is one man who sits for me often — a very fine fellow. And I — but perhaps you will come upstairs."

"Gladly."

Castledine intimated to his children that they were to remain below; then he led the way to the upper storey, and into a back room — lighted from the north indeed, but with obstruction of trees, and through a small window. Fastened upon the wall opposite this window was a canvas of about eight feet by five, covered with figures in various stages of advancement, some little more than outlined. Impossible for the painter to get more than two good paces away from his picture. A deal table and two chairs were the only furniture, but every free bit of wall was covered with small canvases and drawings on paper.

"Not much convenience, as I said," remarked Castledine, with nervous glances, his whole frame breathing tremulous eagerness. "But men have done serious things, you know, under difficulties. I hope before long to get a skylight; that would be a vast improvement."

"Yes," murmured the other, absently.

He was regarding the great picture. One glance had sufficed to confirm his worst fears; the thing had neither execution nor promise. It was simply an example of pretentious amateurism: no drawing, no composition, no colour, not even a hint of the imaginative faculty. In grouping the figures about Joseph (who watched the instantaneous budding of his pilgrim's staff) Castledine seemed to have been influenced by a recollection of Raphael's "Feed my Sheep" cartoon; the drapery, at all events, was Raphaellesque. What remark could be made that would spare the painter's feelings, and yet not be stultifying to the critic?

"It ought really to be seen from farther off," panted Castledine, whose heart was already sinking as he read the countenance of his judge.

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"Yes. And wouldn't it perhaps have been wiser to take a smaller canvas — under the circumstances? You have set yourself a task of extreme difficulty."

"The difficulty inspires me," said the other, but this time with feigned animation. He had fully expected an admiring utterance of some kind as soon as ever his companion's eyes fell on the picture; but the silence was not caused by awe, and could mean nothing but dissatisfaction.

As Banks's look strayed in embarrassment, it chanced to light upon the little table by the window. There lay a water-colour drawing, still fixed on the board but seemingly finished, the colour box open beside it. He moved a step nearer, for the drawing struck him as of interest. It was a bit of local landscape, a rendering of just such a delightful motive as had held his attention again and again, through the day. For quite two minutes he examined it gravely, Castledine, with an air of mortified abstraction, glancing from him to the canvas.

"And yet," exclaimed the artist suddenly, turning round, "you spoke slightly of your endeavours in landscape!"

Castledine seemed not to understand the remark; his delicate cheek grew warm; his eyes fell for a moment, then turned absently to the drawing.

"You think ——" he began, stammeringly.

"Can you show me anything else of this kind?" Banks inquired, with a smile.

It was no novelty in his experience that a man of marked aptitude for one line of work should hold with obstinate blindness to another, in which he could do nothing effectual; but here seemed to be a very curious instance of such perversity. Again he scrutinised the water-colour. And whilst he did so Castledine took from a portfolio that was leaning against the wall some half-dozen similar drawings. In silence he handed these to the artist, who regarded them one after another with unmistakable pleasure.

"You think they're worth something, Mr. Banks?"

"They seem to me really very good," replied the critic, as one who weighs his words.

It was on his lips to add: "Did you really do these?" but Castledine's silence seemed to make the question as needless as it would have been uncivil.

"If I may venture to offer counsel," he continued, "I should say, go in for this kind of thing with all your energy."

"You — you don't care for my picture — I'm afraid ——"

"I feel that it would be very unjust to speak unfavourably of it. In so small a studio it's simply impossible to face the demands of such work — hard enough under any conditions, But these water-colours — my dear sir, how can you have been so doubtful of their merit? Have you never shown them to any one?"

"Never."

"Will you give me one of them in exchange for a thing of my own, which I would send you?"

"With great pleasure; choose which you like."

"It shall be this, then."

Castledine was so plainly chagrined by the slighting of his great work that the artist sought to console him with more effusive praise of the drawings than he would otherwise have felt justified in offering. Imperfections were obvious enough to his practised eye. The things would not stand beside a David Cox or a Copley Fielding, but there was a promise of uncommon excellence. No ordinary amateur could by any degree of perseverance have obtained the happy effects which characterised this pencil. After all, Castledine's artistic fervour meant something. He had gone shockingly astray, but it was not too late to hope that he would cultivate his true faculty with fine results.

They conversed for half an hour, then Banks made known the necessity he was under of quitting Glastonbury early that evening, and with much friendliness prepared to take his leave. Downstairs he was met by the children; he tapped the girl's glossy head with the rolled drawing and said to her father:

"It was a happy chance that brought these little people to me up on the hill. No one had ever more appropriate guides to an artist's house."

Castledine beamed with sincere pleasure.

"They are healthy," he said, catching up the child in his arms, "that's a great thing."

So the visitor went his way, musing and wondering.

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"What's that in his hand?" asked the boy, as he stood watching at the door. "Have you given him something, father?"

"Yes. A little drawing he wished to take. Come, we must get tea."

There was no servant in the cottage. A neighbour's daughter came to do occasional rough work, but all else was seen to by Mrs. Castledine. That lady had gone this morning to Wells, on no very agreeable errand; the circumstances of the family were straitened, and a pressing need for ready money obliged her to sell a gold watch which was lying by. Her husband seemed the natural person to do business of this kind, but his time was too valuable. Mrs. Castledine had insisted on going herself, and she would not be back for another hour or two.

With his children Castledine was usually a model father, full of joke and song and grotesque playfulness: tender as a woman, yet not foolishly indulgent. But the visit of the distinguished artist had a grievous effect upon him; whilst boiling the kettle and laying the tea things he grew silent and gloomy. His nerves were disordered; he broke a cup, and fretted over the accident. Presently the little ones could not get from him a word or a smile. He drank some tea, bade the boy guard his sister, and went upstairs.

To reappear again in a few minutes. He could not remain in one place. The sight of his picture caused him acute misery, gradually changing to resentment, and when he came in sight of the water-colour by the window, he turned sharply away.

A well-dressed lad of sixteen knocked at the front-door.

"You weren't able to come for my drawing-lesson, Mr. Castledine?" he said, when the longhaired man presented himself.

"Upon my word! I entirely forgot it!" was the despondent reply. "Someone just called at the time."

The excuse was invalid, for Castledine ought to have gone for the lesson half-an-hour before Banks's arrival. But he had in truth forgotten all about his engagement. With a promise to come on the morrow, he dismissed his pupil, and strayed about the house more dismally than ever.

At length Mrs. Castledine returned.

She was not handsome, but had a face of far nobler stamp than her husband's — a warm, animated face, with kind eyes and the lips of motherhood, infinitely patient. In entering she looked both tired and excited. The first thought was for her children; she caught them both in her arms, kneeling down to them, and bathed her face in their curls. Then —

"Where's father? Upstairs?"

"Yes," replied the boy; "and he won't play with us because he's got a headache, and a landscape painter has been to see him — not a very famous painter — Godfrey Banks."

"What are you talking about, darling? Godfrey Banks has been here? Sit down quietly, and I'll go and see father."

She hurried up the crazy little staircase, and threw open the door of the studio.

"Horace! have you a headache, dear? What's this that the children tell me? Has Godfrey Banks really been to see you?"

"Yes."

"But what's the matter? Did he ——?"

She checked herself, glancing uneasily at the great picture.

"Well, you see, I don't think he knows much about historical painting. I suspect he was put out by the originality of the thing, if the truth were told."

"Perhaps so," murmured his wife, in a tone which betrayed anxiety, but no sceptical disposition regarding the work discussed. She asked for particulars of the visit; and when this was talked over, Castledine inquired what success she had had at Wells. At once her face changed to a sly good-humour; she opened her little handbag, searched in it mysteriously for a moment, then laid upon the table a sovereign.

"You don't mean to say that's all?" cried her husband.

Smiling, she brought forth a second sovereign, a third, a fourth — and so on till she had displayed the sum of

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ten guineas. Finally, there appeared the gold watch which she held triumphantly aloft. Castledine was amazed, and demanded what it all meant.

"Listen, and you shall hear. You remember our reading in the paper the other day about Mr. Merriman of Wells, and his fine collection of pictures?"

Castledine nodded, gazing at her in painful suspense.

"Thinking and thinking," she continued, "of all sorts of ways of getting money, I made up my mind to try something which was perhaps hopeless, yet it seemed to me worthy trying. I resolved to go to this Mr. Merriman and show him two of my water-colours."

She broke off, alarmed by her husband's look.

"You think I did wrong, Horace?"

"No, no. Go on! What happened?"

"I went to his house, and he was very kind indeed — a most courtly gentleman. And I showed him the sketches — saying they were by a friend of mine. I didn't dare to say I had done them myself, lest he should think them worthless before he had really looked at them."

Her modesty was exquisite; she spoke with perfect good faith and simplicity.

"And what do you think? He liked them so much that he offered to give me five guineas for each, at once. And he said he would take more, if my friend had any to dispose of!"

"Then you told him they were yours?" asked Castledine in an uncertain voice.

"No, not even then. I had a pleasure, then, in keeping the secret. He was discretion itself; didn't ask a single troublesome question, not even my name. And I have been thinking all the way home how good it would be for you to know him! Don't you think so? If we told him the truth about the water-colours, and then got him to look at your picture, mightn't it be of great advantage to you?"

Castledine smiled in a sickly way, murmuring assent.

The children's voices calling impatiently put an end to the talk. Castledine said that he would have a walk before dark, to see if he could get rid of his headache; and having made himself rather more like a man of this world, he went forth.

He was in sore perplexity and travail of spirit. What in the name of common sense had possessed him to tell that silent lie to Godfrey Banks? For the present, perchance, no harm would come of it; but sooner or later what he had done must almost certainly be discovered by his wife, if not by other people.

For, in their serious need, how was it possible to neglect a promising source of income? Here were two men, both excellent judges, who declared the water-colours of value. Yet he had never suspected it. The fact was, his wife's work had been growing better and better by gradual stages, the result of her great patience; this progress he ignored, taking it for granted that she was still at the same point in art as at the time of their marriage, when she drew and coloured not much better than the schoolgirl with a pretty taste in that kind of thing. She spoke too humbly of her attempts, and assented so cheerfully to all his views of what was worth doing in art. But for a strong vein of artistic faculty in her composition, she must long ago have been discouraged and have given up even amusing herself with sketching from nature. Castledine was quite incompetent to direct her, or to estimate what she did. Convinced that his own genius would display itself in grand subjects on big canvases, he had got into the habit of slighting all work of modest aim and dimensions. Now and then, asked to look at some drawing which his wife had finished, he said: "Pretty — very pretty"; and she, who was the real artist, bowed her head to the dictum of the pretender, in whose future, by force of love, she firmly believed.

Evil promptings came into his mind. He felt a preposterous jealousy. Yes, that was why he had allowed Banks to think him the artist of the *Is* water-colours; he could not bear to become altogether insignificant, subordinate even to his wife. Had the great picture received a modicum of praise, he could have told the truth about the little drawings. But self-esteem held his tongue, and minute after minute went by — and the lie was irrevocable, or seemed so.

He wandered some distance into the country, and did not return home till an hour after sunset.

His wife was waiting anxiously. Long ago the children lay in bed. She was alone, and troubled because of the strange way in which her joyful news had been received. Being a woman of clear enough judgment in most things, she divined the astonishing truth that her husband was a little envious of the success that had come to her, whilst he laboured year after year without a gleam of encouragement. How was such feeling so compatible with

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the love she always recognised in him? But men were singular beings, especially those blest or cursed with genius.

Castledine entered silently, fatigued and miserable. Wisely, his wife did not constrain him to talk. She set his accustomed supper of warm bread and milk before him, and waited patiently. When he had eaten, he allowed his hand to be taken and caressed; and of a sudden remorseful tenderness subdued him.

"Hilda, I have behaved like a blackguard ——"

"Nonsense, dear!"

"Oh, but wait! I'm going to tell you something disgraceful. I can't look you in the face, but I must tell you."

He began to unburden his conscience. With red cheeks, burning ears, and eyes like those of a dog conscious of wrong-doing, he half explained how he had been led into deceit. Yet did not tell the whole truth; could not, though aware that what he concealed was the better part of his excuse. He found it impossible to avow that Banks had not a word of commendation for the big picture. Partly to relieve his confusion, and in part because she was really anxious, before discussing the other matter, to know the judgment of such a man as Banks on the work with which all their hopes were connected, Hilda asked:

"But what did he say that so discouraged you?"

"Oh, he didn't discourage me," replied her husband, with nervous impatience. "He talked about the difficulties I must be finding — in such a little studio, you know. I could see that he didn't quite trust himself to speak decidedly about figure painting. He has never done anything but landscape, and so it was natural. He didn't discourage me in the least!"

"Did he like the attitude of Joseph?"

"Yes, he liked that. I saw he was impressed by that," stammered Castledine; "and the grouping in general, and the scheme of colour. Don't think for a moment, Hilda, that he discouraged me. But what a blackguard you must think me to go and ——"

She kept silence.

"I shall write to Banks," he continued, "and make a clean breast of it. I can't help what he thinks. He shall know that I deceived him."

"But, Horace, you say you didn't actually tell him that the drawings were your work ——?"

"No. I only allowed him to suppose it."

"Then why need you do anything at all?"

He glanced at her, and Hilda's eyes fell, a slight colour mantling in her cheeks.

In the first moment she had felt ashamed of what he had done, and very uneasy about the position in which it placed them. The shame still troubled her, but she deemed it so impossible for Horace to go through the humiliation of confessing a lie — the consequence of which might even be a lasting detriment to him — that in a flash her mind had contrived how to cloak the deception by continuing it. What woman has the courage to bid her husband face a mortifying ordeal in the cause of truth, especially when the result of such ordeal will be to glorify herself at his expense? Of a sudden her countenance changed; she laughed, and began to speak as if the matter were trifling.

"Now, what a good thing that I didn't tell Mr. Merriman! Let the drawings go without a name. No, no; better still! They shall be signed 'H. Castledine'; that's my name, and yours as well!"

Hope began to brighten the listener's face, but for very decency he made a show of resistance.

"I can't allow it, Hilda! I've suffered too much already for cheating you of your praise. And think, we shall be only too glad to sell as many drawings as you can make. How is it possible to keep up such a deception for ever?"

"For ever?" she laughed with mirthful mockery. "As if we should be long in difficulties! Why, you will have finished your picture in a few months, and then we shall have no more trouble. You don't imagine that these little sketches are really important enough to be talked about? Let us sell as many as we can; they won't please for very long, and in a year or two no one will remember them."

"But it's a monstrous shame ——"

"Nonsense! Now go on steadily with your work, and let me draw away whilst the summer lasts. We'll send some of the sketches to London, and see if dealers will buy them. And, you know, Mr. Merriman has promised to take more of them. As if it mattered, Horace! Husband and wife are one, I hope!"

And so, in spite of her conscience, Hilda settled the question. On the morrow, Castledine forced himself to

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resume painting with a semblance of confident zeal. The ten guineas would go a long way, and with their help he was soon able to believe that Godfrey Banks knew less than nothing about the higher walks of art.

He prided himself upon the slowness with which he worked. "All great works of art," he was wont to say, "take a long time." It often happened that he sat through a whole morning merely gazing at his canvas; Leonardo, he reminded Hilda, had the same habit. This mental labour exhausted him, and, for a day or two after, he found it necessary to read novels, or wander with his children about the fields. Of late he had been earning a little money as a teacher of drawing; but this employment was degrading; it always made him incapable of handling a brush for the next twenty-four hours.

About a week after the visit of the landscape painter, there arrived the drawing promised in exchange for that he took away. Of course it was a delightful bit of work. Castledine remarked, "Pretty — very pretty," and paid no more attention; but Hilda kept it before her for days, studying and profiting by its masterly characteristics.

The water-colours sent up to London were readily sold. With this resource before her, Hilda was relieved from any necessity of applying again to Mr. Merriman. Conducting business by correspondence, Horace could sign himself simply "H. Castledine," and needed not to state that he was the artist. But one day towards the end of October a carriage stopped before the house, and Hilda, at the window, was alarmed by seeing the connoisseur from Wells alight and approach. She rushed upstairs to her husband, spoke a few words of agitated surprise, and ran down again to answer the knock at the door.

Mr. Merriman was past middle age, lean, tall, grave of aspect. On seeing Hilda, he for an instant looked puzzled; it was plain that he remembered her. But without reference to their former meeting, he explained, in very pleasant tones, that he wished to see Mr. Castledine, of whom he had recently heard in a conversation with Mr. Godfrey Banks the painter. Leaving him in the parlour, Hilda again hurried upstairs.

"You must come!" she whispered, trying her best to look as if she enjoyed the joke. "Mr. Banks has sent him here. He knew me again. You must say that I took the water-colours to sell without your knowledge."

"But how can I ——?"

"Of course you can, for it's the truth. Say you had thought very little of them — were absorbed in your great picture, and that we were dreadfully short of money just then. Do, do be careful!"

Mr. Merriman stayed for more than an hour. Less conscious than Banks, he did not allow himself to be struck dumb by the sight of "Joseph of Arimathæa," but found something to say which, though it meant little enough, was balm to Castledine's feelings. Naturally, however, he kept conversation as much as possible to the subject of water-colours. Horace had little difficulty in following his wife's instructions; when he told the story of Hilda's visit to Wells, the connoisseur showed himself relieved from an embarrassment.

"I had made up my mind," he said, "that the lady was herself the artist, though it was difficult to account for her not being willing to admit it. When Banks happened to bring out the drawing you gave him, I recognised the workmanship at once, but something of the mystery still remained. I'm not sure," he added, laughing, "that I didn't begin to think of larceny."

Horace joined in the laugh with great heartiness, and thereupon Mrs. Castledine was summoned up to the studio. Mr. Merriman repeated his laudation of the water-colours, and appeared so taken up with them that only at the moment of leaving was he obliged to invent a few more phrases for Joseph and the Holy Thorn. To these words Hilda listened eagerly, and they sufficed to inspirit her. When the visitor was gone, she talked exultantly about the painting, and, with her husband's help, avoided a syllable of reference to the imposture which had again been successfully practised.

III

In one sense Hilda Castledine did not underestimate her work; for the last year she had been conscious of great improvements, and at times it disappointed her that Horace seemed not to recognise this advance. She had explained his indifference by humbly admitting to herself that after all she remained an amateur — the kind of person especially distasteful to artists of strong individuality. But this excuse was no longer valid; her work had a market value, and that owing to no sensational qualities, to no passing fancy of the public, but in virtue of simple merits which make their claim felt wherever men are capable of recognising true art. When it was necessary to speak of the matter with her husband, she still used a slighting tone; but her eyes were opened, and she saw, among other things, that Horace had either been insincere with her or was lacking in judgment. This consciousness became a fixed trouble, and blended with the self-reproach due to the falsehood she had undertaken to support.

That perfect harmony which had reigned in the little household was gravely disturbed. Castledine could no longer work; when he shut himself into the studio it was only because he grew ashamed of open idling. He knew that Mr. Merriman's encouragement meant nothing; Banks's silent criticism sank deeper into his mind. A process of disillusion was hastened by the moral imbroglio into which he had slipped. In spite of conceit, he was anything but a man of lax principles; prior to that hapless day of Banks's visit he had never been guilty of grave untruth. But, as generally happens, harassment of material cares had weakened his character and prepared him for yielding to temptation. Already he had begun to regard his picture with secret uneasiness, to weary of the great task; left to himself he would probably have abandoned Joseph of Arimathæa and, in face of financial trials, either have seriously taken up the profession of drawing master, or have returned to his old business. Now he could neither renounce his labour nor pursue it. A sense of shame constantly haunted him — shame at being supported by his wife, shame at taking the credit due to her, shame at his own futility. Even the hours spent with his children were spoiled; he no longer had that pure joy in their affection which used to be the best element of his life.

It was significant that Hilda had ceased to sit with him in the studio. When working at home, she retired to her bedroom — not venturing to use the parlour lest her occupation should be observed. Even from the children she began to conceal, as far as possible, her artistic pursuits; they might speak to strangers, and, worse still, they might in future years conceive suspicions affecting their father's honesty. Every day she said to herself that the life of falsehood to which she was committed must not last long.

That she was living thus resulted from her own lack of firmness; it was she who had withheld Horace from an avowal of his fault. She admitted it, lamented it, and understood the disastrous results for which she was responsible. At the same time she blamed Horace — even though her heart loathed and utterly rejected the idea of doing so.

Her faith in him had suffered a blow from which it would not recover. This, too, she did her best to deny; but no effort enabled her to talk with him of his work as formerly. She saw that on his side there existed a corresponding unwillingness; this relieved her from a painful endeavour, but otherwise only intensified the moral disease she had contracted.

One natural result of her artistic success was the development of an ambition which hitherto had taken only the lowliest forms. Formerly she cared for no approval but her husband's, and when even this was denied she could recompense herself with happiness of home. Now it cost her a continual struggle to repress the impulses which signified that she was something more than wife and mother. Her gifts had ripened; a long, patient apprenticeship was over, and but for unfriendly circumstances she would have hastened to enlarge her experience amid nobler scenes. The simple lowland landscape no longer satisfied her. Of this, however, she must not speak, must not even think. Had she not doomed her art to eventual sterility? Impossible to continue for a lifetime secretly producing work which admirers and purchasers would attribute to Horace. Even if her nature were equal to the strain, it was obvious that discovery and disgrace must sooner or later befall the perpetrators of so singular a fraud.

In seeking to defend Horace from the results for puerile falsehood, she had sacrificed a future rich in the happiest possibilities for herself, her husband and her children.

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Mr. Merriman invited them to spend a day with him at Wells, that they might see his pictures. The children would accompany them. All arrangements were made, and a fine morning summoned them to set forth early; but at the last moment Hilda declared that she did not feel well enough to go.

For several days she had been troubled with a cold caught in damp fields; it seemed better, but a sleepless night had dispirited her, and she could not endure the thought of practising deceit in return for their friend's kindness.

"My head is too bad," she professed, when Horace went to speak with her in private.

"That's a pretence," was his impatient answer.

"Why couldn't you say before that you had rather not go?"

"You will be far more at ease without me, Horace."

He turned away, with difficulty refraining from an outburst of anger. It was very rarely indeed that they spoke to each other in any voice but that of affection; at present, both felt irritable, and desired to be apart. Horace moved towards the door, but perverse feeling got the upper hand with him.

"If this is how you are going to behave," he exclaimed suddenly, "why did you prevent me from having done with lies when I wished to?"

They could not face each other. Hilda trembled from head to foot, and her tongue retorted in spite of her will:

"Why did you make it necessary for me to save you from shame?"

He hastened out of the room and out of the house. Hearing the front door close, Hilda all but sprang forward to recall him. The children, running in with anxious questions, helped her to resist the impulse.

"Mother isn't well enough to go, my darlings," she said, taking them in her arms. "Father must go alone, and you shall stay to keep me company."

She shed a few tears, but presently commanded herself, and turned to the common duties of the house. Evidently Horace had gone. There was a fear in her mind lest he should resolve on some act of expiation — such as confessing his fault to Mr. Merriman: but it seemed unlikely; he had not enough force of character. The depreciatory thought afflicted her; she spent a day of struggle with her emotions, and determined that this first scene of discord should also be the last. Rather than the peace of their home should be marred, she would support every trial. On his return, Horace should find her with the old face of tender welcome. It was she who had done the worse wrong; she must atone for it by self-denial, by cheerful devotion, and hope that some escape from the consequences of their weakness might soon be discoverable.

Castledine was back again at four in the afternoon. He came in anxious and shamefaced, not ill-tempered. The reception that awaited him, though not unlooked for, brought tears to his eyes.

"A letter has come for you," said Hilda, when they had exchanged words of forgiveness.

"Who's this from, I wonder?"

It proved to be an offer of the post of drawing-master at a boarding-school in the neighbourhood. This was no surprise, for the father of Horace's pupil had already suggested the possibility of his filling a position left vacant at the summer holidays. The demand upon his time would be only two hours a week, and the payment of corresponding slightness.

"I shall take it," he announced with an air of resignation. "Curious that this should come today; I have a promise of two other private pupils. On the way home I met Mr. Brownson, and he recommended me to call on a friend of his who had two little girls to be taught drawing. I shall take that too."

And with a sigh he stared at the ceiling.

The Mr. Brownson in question was their only acquaintance at Glastonbury. They had known him for a month or two. People of education who choose (or are compelled) to live in a peasant's cottage, will never have any difficulty in avoiding intercourse with the better class folk of their neighbourhood; an anomalous position is a safeguard against the attentions of country society. But for this isolation, Hilda could hardly have entertained the thought of passing off her own drawings as her husband's. It looked now as if their connections were likely to extend; and herefrom might result new anxieties.

"I have something else to tell you," said Castledine, presently, in a tone that suggested grave deliberation.

"For the present — just for the present only — I think I shall put the 'Joseph' aside."

Hilda listened breathlessly; she could find nothing to say, and after a short silence her husband proceeded —

"The fact of the matter is, I have attempted something — not beyond my strength, but impossible in my

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situation. There's no finishing a picture of that size in such a studio. Merriman thinks I have done wonders — all things considered. But miracles are not in my power. I must wait till we have a larger house."

"I am sure that is wise," Hilda murmured, consolingly.

"If you really think so, that settles it. For the present, 'Joseph' must stand aside. I shall get a small canvas, and begin at the 'King Alfred.' Won't that be better? I mentioned the thing to Merriman, and he seemed to be much interested. But I tell you what, Hilda: it's not only a larger studio that I need; I'm afraid I'm rusting in this out-of-the-world place."

"Yes — I too have had that fear," she assented with much readiness. "I am sure it would be better for you to be in a town — if we could only manage it!"

"We must plan it somehow. Yes, I am decidedly rusting; that's the explanation of the dull, tired feeling I have had for a long time. The fact of the matter is, if I can't live by my painting, I must be content to give up a part of each day to lessons. It's a wretched necessity, but then it's better than having to give up art altogether, — isn't it? If I had to do that, it would be all over with me, you know."

He looked at her very gravely, a pathetic wrinkle on his brow.

Hilda made up her mind that the project of leaving Glastonbury should be carried out, and before very long. But for what had befallen, the lanes and fields and watercourses in their autumnal colouring would have afforded her calm delight, and have supplied infinite material for her pencil. But that was all over; she feared the thoughts that were suggested by every favourite nook or view. The renunciation on which she had resolved, if possible at all, would only be so amid strange surroundings — all the better if remote from natural beauty. In a town she might perhaps forget the misery of frustrated impulses.

Horace procured the small canvas, and transferred to it the outlines of a drawing which he had prepared and laid aside more than a year ago. But he got no further than this. Distaste for the subject speedily assailed him; he mooned about his little room or slipped away in truancy, or else declared that the skies were too gloomy for painting, and amused himself with his children. Hilda had entirely ceased her water-colour work, and no remark on the subject ever passed between them. Meanwhile, she was corresponding with a married sister who lived in the north, trying to discover if Horace could hope for employment as teacher in that town. The undertaking seemed feasible. She succeeded, moreover, in borrowing a sum of money to meet the expenses of removal and settlement. Thereupon it was decided that they should quit Glastonbury at Christmas.

Castledine brightened wonderfully at the prospect of change. He began to talk as in the old days, of great achievements that lay before him. Again he assured his little boy and girl that some day their father's name would be rumoured to the ends of the earth — "Like those of Michael Angelo and Raphael." He resumed the satin dressing-gown, of late discarded and began to make what he called anatomical studies, in charcoal, on huge sheets of paper. The packing of his "Joseph of Armiathæa" occupied him for many days; so precious a canvas must not be exposed to risk in the removal.

And as for his wife, she seemed to have recovered the sweet and placid patience which was always her characteristic. No one divined what lay beneath her tender smile, with its touch of sadness — least of all Horace himself. No one knew of the long sleepless nights when she wept silently over a glorious hope that had come only to vanish. She had her moments of rebellion, but subdued herself by remembering that her own weakness was to blame for these sorrows. An artist no longer, however her artistic soul might revolt, the duties of wife and mother must suffice for all her energies, and supply all her happiness.

Then she packed away her colours and sketchbooks — it was once for all. She never drew again and never again looked at the accumulated work which was her preparation for a futile success.

IV

In the bar parlour of one of those comfortable little inns (not hotels, and still less gin-shops) which are yet discoverable if you seek far enough from London, destroyer of all simple ease, three men were sitting. It was New Year's Eve. At this hour, past ten o'clock, the streets of the market town had fallen into stillness; the house itself was very quiet, only an occasional laugh, or a voice raised in seasonable greeting, came from the bar. For more than five minutes the three men had kept silence. Two sat by the fire, with long clay pipes in hand, and glasses reachable on the mantelpiece; they were middle-aged, and by their dress seemed to be well-doing tradesmen. The third leaned back in a corner, his arms crossed, his head bent; he too wore broadcloth, but it had seen more than fair service. His plain and not very intelligent face declared an uneasy mind, and thin straggling hair of unusual length heightened the woe-begone effect of his general appearance.

One of his companions turned to look at him, and said in a friendly voice:

"Rather quiet to-night, Mr. Castledine?"

He nodded and sighed, but made no other answer.

"Let's hope that 1890 will treat us better than 1889 has done," continued the other, cheerfully. "Won't do, you know, to begin the New Year in low spirits. Never meet trouble half-way."

Castledine let his arms fall, looked into his empty glass, and said in a husky voice:

"I've had a shock to-day."

"Sorry to hear that. How was it?"

The third man had turned his head in curiosity. For a moment Castledine glanced from one to the other, seeming to hesitate; then he changed his position, stroked his stubbly chin, coughed, and began to speak with an air of impressiveness.

"I went to call upon Sir William Barnard."

A pause invited the hearers to look surprised or respectful.

"I have no personal acquaintance with him, but I had my reasons for thinking that he might be disposed to recommend me a pupil or two. It isn't my habit, you know, to trouble people with this kind of application, but just at present I have to stir myself. Things are dull in my profession."

"Like in every other," remarked the man hitherto silent.

"I fear so. Well, Sir William was at home, and he received me without a minute's delay. I explained to him who I was and what I wanted. He looked at me with a good deal of interest and said, 'Mr. Castledine, your name is familiar to me. Are you a landscape-painter?' I answered that in days gone by I had done a little work of that kind, and he looked still more interested. 'I see from your card,' he said, 'that your first initial is H. Now I have two little water-colours, bits of Somerset landscape, which I prize very highly, and they are both signed H. Castledine. Are they your work, I wonder?' 'Yes, Sir William,' I answered, 'I have no doubt they are.' At that he was really delighted, and asked me at once to come into Lady Barnard's boudoir and look at the drawings. And there they hung, my work of just twenty years ago!"

His voice sank mournfully. He shook his head, sighed, and watched the faces of the listeners, who knew not what to say.

"I'm a victim of circumstances," he continued in a moment, "if ever man was. It puzzles you, no doubt, that I should once have done great things, and yet at my age, only fifty, be nothing but an obscure drawing master. You don't understand the artist's nature. You can't imagine how completely an artist is at the mercy of circumstances."

Assuredly the worthy men had but slight understanding of these things. They exchanged a glance, muttered "Ah!" and still listened.

"I told my story to Sir William, and he was deeply moved — deeply moved. He said he would exert himself to be of use to me."

"Well, that means a good deal, I should think," said one of the hearers. "It ought to have cheered you up."

"Perhaps so; but you don't know what it meant is to be reminded of power and reputation that are gone for ever. When I did those two little water-colours, any one would have said that I had a brighter future than most artists then living. Landscape wasn't really my strong point. I was an Historical painter. I lived at Glastonbury, in

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Somerset; an out-of-the-way place, if you like; but even there I was sought out by great artists. The late Godfrey Banks — you have heard of him, I hope? — one of the greatest men in the English school, called upon me one day, just to see a picture I was engaged upon. He was astonished at finding me in a little cottage, with nothing but a tiny back bedroom for a studio. 'How's this, Mr. Castledine?' he said; 'how can you work under such conditions as these?' 'You may well ask, Mr. Banks,' I replied. 'Circumstances, circumstances. Can't afford anything better at present.' He was shocked and angry. You must understand that an artist's reputation doesn't always mean money. My little water-colours sold for just enough to keep me and my family alive; but my great work had to be done very slowly — very slowly. Banks was delighted with what I showed him — a great picture, filling all one side of the room; but it almost brought tears to his eyes to think I should be labouring against such terrible odds."

"Didn't he help you?" was asked.

"Help me, my dear sir? How could he? An artist cannot go round with a hat soliciting alms. He could only hope that my great picture might soon be finished, and sold for a satisfactory price. But it was never to be finished!"

"Why not?"

"It's very difficult to explain an artist's obstacles. But, from the first, circumstances were against me. I married at two-and-twenty — a rash, indeed a fatal, step. I encumbered myself with a wife and family (though the best wife and the sweetest children that man ever had) at an age when I ought, above everything, to have been independent — free to travel, to study. Already I had overtaxed my health in working at art when circumstances compelled me to earn a living in other ways. And whilst at Glastonbury my strength and spirits were so completely shattered that — well, well, I don't like to speak of it. Would you believe that my poor wife had to go and sell her watch to provide us with food? That," he added, quickly, "was before I had found out that my water-colours would sell. I thought so little of them. And now two of them are hanging in Lady Barnard's boudoir, together with a Millet and a Turner and other masterpieces! Yes, a victim of circumstances, if ever man was!"

His companions kept a sympathetic silence.

"We left Glastonbury; but ill-luck followed us. I had to toil as a drawing master, and before long my artistic faculty deserted me — crushed out by hard circumstances. Four years later my wife died — of a fever she caught in dirty lodgings at the seaside. The noblest wife that ever man had!" A tear ran down his cheek. "I was left with the two children — a boy and a girl. My son would have been a great painter. At twelve years old he had done astonishing things. But he died at fourteen, after a dreadful illness — poor, dear little lad! And my poor, dear little girl married a blackguard — a blackguard, who took her off to the colonies, and makes her life so miserable that I dread to have a letter from her, though she does her best to put a good face on things, poor child! All of us, victims of circumstances."

He stood up, turned aside to blow his nose and wipe his cheeks, and began to move towards the door. Before going forth, he faced his companions again, and said hoarsely:

"Gentlemen, I wish you a Happy New Year!"