

Comrades in Arms

George Gissing

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Luncheon hour was past, and the tide of guests had begun to ebb. From his cushioned corner, his familiar seat in the restaurant, Wilfrid Langley kept an observant eye upon chatting groups and silent solitaries who still lingered at the tables near him. In this quiet half-hour, whilst smoking a cigarette and enjoying his modest claret, he caught the flitting suggestion of many a story, sketch, gossipy paper. A woman's laugh, a man's surly visage, couples oddly assorted, scraps of dialogue heard amid the confused noises everywhere the elements of drama, to be fused and minted in his brain. Success had multiplied his powers a hundredfold; success and the comforts that came with it savoury meats, wine, companionship. No one was dependent upon him no one restrained his liberty; he lived where he chose, and how he chose. And for all that his age fell short of thirty something seemed to him amiss in the bounty of the gods.

A figure was moving in his direction; he looked up from a moment's reverie, to see a woman seat herself at the opposite side of his table. A laugh of pleased recognition; a clasp of hands.

'Thought I might find you here,' said Miss Childerstone. She turned to the waiter. 'Roast mutton-potatoes bread. And soda-water.'

'Soda!' Langley exclaimed in surprise. 'That's where you women make a mistake. You need a stimulant.'

'Thanks, old man; I am better acquainted with my needs than you are. Here's something for you.'

She threw an evening paper at him saying, 'Page seven.' Langley opened it, and his eyes sparkled with pleasure. A notice of his new book; three-quarters of a column; high laudation, as he saw immediately.

'Yours ?' he asked.

'Take it without questions, and be thankful you're not slated.'

'It is yours. Don't I know the fine Roman hand? Irony in the first sentence.' He read in silence for a few minutes, then gave his companion a look of warm gratitude. 'You're a good sort.'

Miss Childerstone was drinking deep of her soda-water. Neither plain nor pretty, she had noticeable features, a keen good-humoured eye, an air of self-possession and alertness. She dressed well, with a view to the fitness of things. Her years were in the fourth decade.

She began to eat, but, it seemed, with little appetite.

'I've had a headache since yesterday. I should like to go to bed and lie there for a week. But there's my stuff for Tomlinson. Don't feel like it, I tell you.'

'I see now that you look out of sorts. Yes, you look bad. I tell you what couldn't I scrawl something that would do for Tomlinson?'

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She looked at him, and smiled.

'I dare say you could. Any rubbish you want to shoot somewhere. The truth is, I don't think I'm equal to it. No, I can't eat. Thump! thump! on the back of the head.'

They discussed the literary business in question, and Langley undertook to supply the article due from his friend to a weekly paper. It must be posted to-night. Miss Childerstone, abandoning the scarcely touched food, rested her head upon her hands for a few moments.

'I've done something I'm proud of,' she said at length, 'and I may as well have the satisfaction of telling you. My sister has just gone off to Natal, to be married there. I provided her outfit, paid her passage, and gave her fifty pounds. All off my own bat, old boy! Not bad, is it?'

'Your sister? Why, you never told me she was going to be married.'

'No. It wasn't quite certain all along. Two years ago she engaged herself to a man who was going out yonder a man of no means, and not quite up to her mark, I thought. (I must eat something; I'll try the potatoes.) A very decent sort of fellow handsome, honest. Well, she's been in doubt, off and on. (Are these potatoes bad? Or is it my taste that's out of order?) She stuck to her teaching, poor girl, and had a pretty dull time of it. In the end, I made up my mind that she'd better go and get married. There couldn't be any doubt about the man's making her a good husband; I read his letters, and liked them. Good, plodding, soft-hearted sort of creature; not at all a bad husband for Cissy. Better than the beastly teaching, anyway. So she's gone.'

'That's a disappointment to me,' said Langley. 'I hoped to meet her some day. And you promised I should.'

'Yes but I altered my mind.'

'What do you mean? You didn't wish me to meet her?'

'The probability was you'd have unsettled her. She never knew a man of your sort. She might have fallen in love with you.'

Miss Childerstone spoke in a matter-of-fact voice; her smile could not have been less ambiguous. Langley, gazing at her with surprise, exclaimed at length:

'Well? And why not?'

'Why not? Oh, my dear boy, I would do a good deal for you, but I couldn't indulge your vanity in that direction. I'm fond of my little sister.'

'Of course you are. And why shouldn't I have been? Describe her to me.'

'Fair pretty five-and-twenty. An old-fashioned girl, with all sorts of beliefs that would exasperate you. The gentlest creature! Vastly too patient, too good. Will make an ideal housewife and mother.'

Langley smote the table with his fist.

'But you're describing the very girl I want to find, and can't! How absurdly you have behaved! And she's gone to the end of the earth to marry a man she doesn't care about this is too ridiculous! Why, I want to marry, and the difficulty is to find such a girl as this. I shall never forgive you.'

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His companion looked searchingly at him, with mocking lips.

'Bosh !' she replied.

'It isn't! I'm desperately serious.'

'In any case, I wouldn't have let her marry you. You've been too frank with me. I know you too well. Of course, I like you, because you're likeable as a comrade-in-arms. We've fought the battle together, and done each other a good turn now and then. But you're very young, you know. You have money in your pocket for the first time, and by-the-bye, I heard about that supper at Romano's. How much did it cost you?'

'Oh, ten or fifteen pounds I've forgotten.'

He said it with a touch of bravado, his smile betraying pleasure that the exploit had become known.

'Precisely. And your Dulcinea of the footlights Totty, Lotty what's her name? was there. My dear boy, you mustn't marry for another ten years. It would spoil you. You're only just beginning to look round the world. Go ahead; enjoy yourself; see things; but don't think of marrying.'

'I think of it perpetually.'

The other moved an impatient hand.

'I can't talk. My head is terrible. I must go home.'

'You've been working yourself to death to provide for your sister. And very likely made her miserable, after all.'

'Mind your own business. Where's the waiter? Call him, will you? I'm turning blind and deaf; and I don't know what.'

'I shall take you home,' said Langley, rising.

'You can put me into a cab, if you like.'

She looked very ill, and Langley kept glancing at her with uneasiness as they went together from the restaurant. His resolve to see her safely home was not opposed. In the hansom they exchanged few words, but Langley repeated his promise to do the bit of literary work for her editor. 'To-morrow morning,' he added, 'I shall come and ask how you are. Send for a doctor if you're no better by night.'

His own rooms were in the same district, that of Regent's Park, and after leaving Miss Childerstone he went off to perform the task he had undertaken no difficult matter. Though it was holiday time with him just now, he spent the whole evening in solitude, more discontented than usual. The post brought him news that the first edition of his book was sold out. Satisfactory, but it gave him no particular delight. He had grown used to think of himself as one of the young men whom the public run after, and his rooted contempt for the public made him suspicious of his own merits. Was he not becoming vulgarised, even personally? That supper the other night, in honour of the third-rate actress, when every one got more or less drunk pah! These dreary lodgings, which no expenditure could make homelike. A home that was what he wanted. Confound Miss Childerstone! That sister of hers, now steaming away to Natal

At twelve o'clock next day he called on his friend, and was asked to wait in her sitting-room. He had been here only once or twice; to-day the room seemed more uncomfortable than on former occasions, and Langley

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wondered how a woman could live amid such surroundings. But was Miss Childerstone to be judged as a woman? For seven or eight years she had battled in the world of journalism, and with a kind of success which seemed to argue manlike qualities. Since he had known her, these last three years, she seemed to have been growing less feminine. At first he had thought of her with the special interest which arises from difference of sex; now he rarely, if ever, did so. He liked her, admired her, and could imagine her, in more natural circumstances, a charming woman. If, as was probable, her sister resembled her in all the good points

She came in, and her appearance startled him. She wore a dressing-gown; her hair was tossed into some sort of order; illness unmistakable blanched her face. Without offering to shake hands, she tumbled on to the nearest chair.

'Why on earth did you get up?' Langley exclaimed. 'Have you seen a doctor?'

'No; but I think you shall go and fetch someone,' she answered, hoarsely and faintly. 'Did you send the stuff to Tomlinson?'

'Oh yes, and forged your signature. Go back to bed; I'll '

'Wait a minute. I want to ask you I haven't any money '

The change from her wonted vigour of speech and bearing was very painful to the young man. Money? Why, his purse was hers. In his pocket he had only a few sovereigns, but he would go to the bank straightway.

'Three or four pounds will do,' she replied. 'I don't know any one else I care to ask. Borrowing isn't in my line, you know. I could sell or pawn some things but I haven't the strength to get about.'

Langley stepped towards her and put coins into her hand.

'What is it?' he asked, gravely. 'A fever of some kind?'

'I'm not feverish at least I don't think so. Fearful head. Look chalky, don't I?'

'You do. Go back to bed at once, and leave things to me.'

'You're a good fellow, Wilfrid.'

'Pooh!'

'I feel so wretchedly weak and I hate to feel weak I '

She suddenly turned her head away; and Langley was horrified to hear her sob. He moved for a moment about the room, as if in search of something; but it only served to hide his embarrassment. Then Miss Childerstone stood up, and went quickly away.

In half an hour's time the necessary assistance had been procured. Nervous collapse, said the man of medicine; overwork, and so on. Langley, finding that no one in the house could act as bedside attendant, obtained the services of a nurse. He did not see his friend again, but had a message from her that she was 'all right;' he might call the next day, if he liked.

He paid the call as early as ten o'clock, and had a talk with the nurse, who could give but an indifferent report.

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'If I write a few lines for her, can she read them?' he asked.

Yes, she could read a letter. So Langley sat down at the table, and tried to find something to say. To his surprise, he wrote with the utmost difficulty; words would not come. 'Dear Miss Childerstone, I feel sure that a little rest and nursing will soon . . . ' Oh, that was insufferably childish. He bit his pen, and stared at the books before him: novels and plays, heaped newspapers, a volume or two of an encyclopædia, annuals, and dictionaries. She had no instinct of order; she lived from day to day, from hand to mouth. Her education must be very defective. On the moral side, no doubt, she was sound enough, but a woman should have domestic virtues.

What was he doing? Abusing his friend just when she lay helpless, and this defeat of her splendid strength the result of toil on a sister's behalf! He tore the sheet of paper and began anew. 'Dear Bertha' why not? she now and then called him 'Wilfrid' 'don't trouble your head about anything. I have nothing to do, and to look after you will give me pleasure. Is there anyone you would like to communicate with? Consider me absolutely at your service time, money, anything. I will call morning and evening. Cheer up, dear old chum! You must go away as soon as possible; I'll get lodgings for you.'

And so on, over another page, in the hearty comrade tone which they always used to each other. The nurse, summoned by a light tap, handed this note to her patient, and in a few minutes she brought back a scrap of paper, on which was feebly scrawled in pencil, 'Good old boy. All right.'

It was the last he saw of Bertha Childerstone's handwriting for more than a month. Daily he called twice. What the nurse, doctor, and landlady thought of his relations with the invalid he would not trouble to conjecture. He met all current expenses, which amounted to not very much. And the result of it was that the sick woman became an almost exclusive subject of his thoughts; his longing to speak again with her grew intense.

One day in July, as he stepped as usual into the parlour, thinking to wait there for the nurse, his eye fell upon a figure sitting in the sunlight. A pale, thin face, which he scarcely recognised, greeted him with a smile, and a meagre hand was held out to him.

'Up? Oh, that's brave!'

He hurried forward and clasped her hand tightly. They gazed at each other. Langley felt a thrill in his blood, a dimness about his eyes, and before he knew what he was doing he had given and received a kiss.

'No harm,' said Miss Childerstone, laughing with a look of confusion. 'Honi soit qui mal y pense!'

But the young man could not recover himself. He was kneeling by the chair in which she reclined, and still kept her hand, whilst he quivered as if with fever.

'I'm so glad I wanted so to see you Bertha . . . '

'Hush! Don't be sentimental, old man. It's all right.'

He pressed her hand to his lips. She abandoned it for a moment, then firmly drew it back.

'Tell me all the news.'

'I know of nothing, except that I . . . '

He had lost his head. Bertha seemed to him now not only a woman, but beautiful and sweet and an object of passionate desire. He touched her hair, and stammered incoherencies.

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'Wilfrid' she spoke in the old blunt way 'don't make a fool of yourself. Go a yard or two away, there's a good boy. If not, I hobble back into the other room. Remember that I can't stand excitement.'

Eyes averted, he moved away from her.

'I had a letter from Cissy this morning '

'I don't want to hear of it,' he interrupted pettishly. 'She was the cause of your illness.'

Miss Childerstone pursued in the same tone.

' Posted at Cape Town. Very cheerful. She was enjoying the voyage, and looking forward to its end in a reasonable and happy way. We did the right thing. There's a letter, too, from the expectant lover; a good letter; you may see it if you like.'

Common-sense came at length to Wilfrid's support. He sat down, crossed his legs, and talked, but without looking at his companion.

'I owe you a lot of money,' said Bertha.

'Rubbish! When can you go away? And what place would you prefer?'

'I shall go next week to the seaside. Anywhere near. Some place where there are lots of people. I was dead, and am alive again; I want to feel the world buzzing round.'

'Very well. Choose a place, and I'll go after rooms for you.'

'No, no. I can do all that by letter. By-the-bye, I've been hearing from Tomlinson. He's a better sort of fellow than I supposed. What do you think? He sent me a cheque for five-and-twenty pounds on account, he says.'

Langley kept his head down, and muttered something.

'I suppose somebody or other has been pitching him a doleful story about me. It took a long time before people missed me; now they're beginning to write and call.'

'Yes you have a great many friends '

'Heaps of them! Now, goosey, don't hang your head. The fact of the matter is, we oughtn't to have met just yet. There's an artificial atmosphere about an invalid. You're not to come again till I send for you you hear that?'

'As you please,' answered Langley, shamefaced, but no longer petulant. And he stayed only a few minutes after this. At parting, their eyes did not meet.

That night he wrote a letter, the inevitable letter, page upon page, strictly according to precedent. When two days had brought no answer, he wrote again, and this time elicited a short scrawl.

'Goosey, goosey gander! I don't like the style of these compositions; it isn't up to your later mark. Go and see Totty Lotty what's her name? I mean it; you want the tonic of such society. And pray, what work are you doing? Come to-morrow at three and tell me.'

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He would have liked to refuse the invitation, but had fallen into so limp a state that there was no choice save to go and be tortured. Miss Childerstone looked better.

'I pick up very quickly,' she said. 'In the early days, before I knew you, I had a worse floorer than this, and astonished everyone by the way I came round. Well, what are you doing?'

'Nothing much,' the young man replied carelessly.

She pondered a little, then laughed.

'Now isn't it an odd thing, how far we were from knowing each other? I misunderstood you; I did indeed; as it goes without saying that you quite misunderstood me. I didn't think you could have written those letters.'

'I'm not ashamed of them.'

A certain quiet manliness in the words had its effect upon Miss Childerstone. She smiled, and regarded him kindly.

'Nor need you be, my dear boy. For my part, I'm considerably proud of them; I shall store them up and read them in years to come when they have a value as autographs. But I suppose you had purposely misled me, with your random talk. If I had known yes, if I had known I don't think I should have let Cissy go to Natal.'

'Stop that nonsense,' said Langley, 'and answer me a plain question. Is it hopeless? or can't you make up your mind yet?'

'I have made up my mind since receiving your letters.'

'Before, you were in doubt?'

'Just a wee bit. Partly, I suppose, because of my weakness. I like you so much, and I have such hopes of your future it was tempting. But No!'

Langley looked at her with eyes of thwarted passion.

'What do you mean? Just because I have really and honestly fallen in love with you '

'Just so,' she interrupted, 'and shown yourself as I didn't know you. I like you as much as ever more, perhaps. I more than half wish I could bring Cissy back again. You would have suited each other very well. And yet, it would have been an unkindness to you, however kind to her. It meant, for you, a sinking into the comfortable commonplace. You are too young for marriage. I had rather see you in any kind of entanglement. That longing for domesticity gave me a shudder. It's admirable, but it's the part of you that must be outgrown. Oh, you are so much more respectable than I thought.'

She broke off; laughing.

'And you mean to say,' exclaimed Wilfrid, 'that if I could have given proof of blackguardism you might have been inclined to marry me?'

Miss Childerstone laughed uncontrollably.

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'Oh, how young you are! No, I shouldn't have married you in any case. I might have promised to think about it. I might have promised to do it; but when the time came via! Dear boy, I don't want to marry. Look at this room, dirty and disorderly. This is all the home I care for. Conceivably, I might marry a man with a big income, just for the sake of a large life. But it's only just conceivable. In poverty and anything you or I can count upon would be poverty I prefer the freedom of loneliness.'

'You imagine I should lay any restraint upon you?'

Again she broke into laughter.

'I have a pretty good theoretical knowledge of what marriage means. Unfortunately, one can't experiment.'

Langley turned from her, and stared gloomily.

'Look here,' said his companion. 'In a few days I think I shall be strong enough to go away, and I shall not tell you where I'm going. Let us say good-bye, and see each other again when we're both recovered. In the meantime, live and work. Give fifteen-pound suppers, if you like. Anything to keep your thoughts off domesticity. Cultivate blackguardism' her voice rang mirthfully. 'Then we shall get back to the old footing.'

'Never!'

'Well, that's as you please. I should like it, though.'

He left her, and determined neither to write nor to call again. In a day or two the former resolve was broken; he wrote at greater length than ever. When the silence that followed became unendurable, he went to the house, but only to learn that Miss Childerstone had left that morning.

For the mere sake of talking about her, he spent the evening with people who had known his friend for a long time. They, it appeared, were ignorant of her movements.

'Gone as war correspondent, I shouldn't wonder,' said a young man; and the laughter of the company appreciated his joke.

'Oh, she really is too mannish,' remarked a young matron. 'I suppose you study her as a curiosity, Mr. Langley?'

'We're great chums,' Wilfrid answered with a laugh.

'Well, at all events we needn't bid you beware,' jested the lady.

On reaching home, late, he found in his sitting-room an object which greatly puzzled him; it was a large and handsome travelling-bag, new from some shop. By what mistake had it got here? He examined it, and found a ticket bearing his name and address. Then, turning to the table, he saw a letter, the address in a well-known hand.

'DEAR OLD MAN, I shall not offer to pay back the money you have spent upon me, but I'm sending a present, one of the useful order. Yours in camaraderie,
'B. C.'

After a day or two of brooding he saw the use of Bertha's gift, and for a month the travelling-bag did him good service.

He and she had long been back in town, and were again tugging hard at the collar, before they met. It was a

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miserable day of November, and amid sleet, fog, slush, they came face to face on the pavement of the roaring Strand. Their umbrellas had collided, and as they shook hands the hurrying pedestrians bumped them this way and that.

'All right again?' asked Bertha merrily.

'Quite,' was the stalwart reply. 'Come somewhere and talk.'

'Can't. Appointment in ten minutes.'

'Move on, please!' shouted a policeman. 'Mustn't stop the way.'

'Lunch at the old place to-morrow?' said Wilfrid hurriedly.

'Yes. Two o'clock.'

Each plodded on, and Langley had no cardiac tremor as he thought of Miss Childerstone. For all that for all that he could not forget that he had kissed her lips.