The Elixir

George Gissing

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In 1886, I chanced to be spending a few weeks in a manufacturing town in the Midlands. I was engrossed in business which allowed me little leisure, and which brought me into contact with only two or three of the townsfolk; of local story and gossip I knew next to nothing. One evening, as I took the air in a ramble along the main streets, my eye was caught by a movement of people towards a public building. I discovered that a political meeting was about to be held, and idle curiosity took me into the Hall. Home Rule was the topic of the day; Mr. Gladstone's Home Rule Bill had set the town in a ferment, and Conservative feeling was eager to utter itself from a crowded platform. Speeches neither good nor bad consumed as much time as I cared to give to this kind of entertainment; I wished to get away, and was calculating the chances of doing so without annoyance to myself or others, when an excited murmur among the assembly caused me to look with interest at the new speaker who was just rising. A tall, handsome, middle−aged man, dark−eyed, dark−bearded, his face flushed, and a fine energy in his attitude as he began to speak a very different type from those I had been observing. The first notes of his voice affected me oddly; I seemed to know the man, to have heard him talk, and yet I could not altogether attach any memory to his features.

"Who is that?" I whispered to my neighbour.

"Mr. Orgreave don't you know?"

"Manufacturer?"

"Yes. Stood for the Radicals at last election and got beaten."

Mr. Orgreave was making a remarkably good speech, and that in spite of the groans, hisses, angry outcries, which punctuated his periods. He had evidently come to beard the Conservative lion in its den; he enjoyed the tumult his oratory aroused; his eyes flashed with the joy of battle, and his voice rose triumphant over the noisy wrath of the meeting. No political speech I ever heard gave me so much pleasure. The man was on fire with his conviction, and flung out his defiances right gloriously. All the time, I kept wondering who it was that in voice at all events he so much resembled. The result of his harangue was uproar, ending in mere chaos. Somewhere about midnight I struggled out of the howling and hustling crowd, and found my way home. And the next day I kept bursting into laughter over the recollection of that speech and its consequences.

I was very busy. Mr. Orgreave passed out of my mind.

Shortly after my return to London, chance brought me into the company of an interesting man whom I had lost sight of for a good many years. His name was Holland; we had known each other slightly, in our salad days, and coming together with new causes for interest in each other's lives, we talked much of old times and old acquaintances.

"I wonder," said Holland once, after a fit of musing, "what became of Shacklewell. You knew Shacklewell? Yes, of course you did".

"Shacklewell! It's long since I thought of him. You probably knew him much better than I did."

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"Shacklewell! It's long since I thought of him. You probably knew him much better than I did."

"At one time we were very thick. Dead long since, no doubt. Probably dead in a hospital. The kind of fellow bound to go under."

I pondered my memories, and there arose before me a man of four−and−twenty, handsome, well−built, meant for healthy and long life, but ruined by his passions. A clever fellow, furiously ambitious, but never likely to do anything, so little had he of patience or self−management. Of his circumstances I remembered nothing.

"Poor, wasn't he?"

"Chronically hard up," replied Holland. "If he's alive, he owes me a good many sovereigns. I found him one day in bed, scarcely able to move for want of food. 'Why didn't you let me know?' I asked. And he said that he had come to a decision; he would go to bed, and lie there, and if nobody came with help, he would just quietly starve to death. He was capable of it, too. Tremendous force of will in that fellow, but the kind of will that was no use to him. Yet I always felt that it only needed the right circumstances to make him as good and capable a man as any living."

I shook my head.

"Did you ever know a case of redemption by change of circumstances? — I mean, of a man like Shacklewell, an out−and−outer."

"Perhaps not. And then, it wasn't only money he wanted. He was mad about women."

"Vice? or romance?"

"Why, I think the latter," Holland replied. "I can't be quite sure, and at that time of life one doesn't distinguish very carefully, but I never thought of him as vicious. Of course he took what was offered, and I remember one or two nasty scrapes; I believe he got into the Divorce Court among other things. But no; I think he had the ideal before him, the romantic ideal. Did you ever hear him read love−poetry? It was rather fine: I've often thought of it. If he could have married the right woman — but there was no chance of that, no chance".

We brooded.

"Who were his people?"

"Oh, very obscure, I imagine; he never spoke of them. I don't know where he came from, or where he had got his education. Shouldn't wonder if he was somebody's illegitimate son, cut adrift with a little money, to go to the devil. Poor chap, he's there, no doubt".

"You never heard of him after you left England?"

"Never. I remember our last meeting. Shacklewell was drunk, poor old boy, and talked wildly. He asked me, among other suggestive questions, whether a man mightn't turn pirate somewhere in the Pacific, and so get enough to begin life with! And he talked about some woman — somebody else's wife, of course — who had offered him a thousand pounds, which, of course, he refused. I never knew what to believe of those stories, but I think he was capable of refusing even a thousand pounds; I never saw a trace of the cad in him! Well, we said good−bye, and promised to write to each other. I did write, after a year, but the letter came back through the office. And no one has ever been able to give me news of Shacklewell."

I think it must have been nearly three months after this conversation that Holland and I found ourselves dining together at the National Liberal Club, guests of a friend of ours whom it is needless to name, an excellent fellow — politician, poet and many another thing — who was never so happy as when he played host at a sumptuous board. The party happened to be rather a large one, a score at least; it celebrated some forgotten occasion. Arriving early, I was at once presented to a man whom I really felt glad to meet, no other than my eloquent defender of Home Rule, Mr. Orgreave. He looked at me, I thought, with peculiar intentness, and pressed my hand very cordially. Encouraged by this behaviour, I told him that, in a way, I had already made his acquaintance: the story amused him vastly, and he laughed as hearty a laugh as ever I heard. After five minutes' talk, my interest in the man grew to a strong liking. He, on his side, seemed to have a corresponding feeling, and when he merrily

suggested that I should run down to the borough he yet hoped to represent, and support him on the platform at another noisy meeting, I answered that I would certainly do so.

Holland was one of the last to arrive; a minute or two afterwards we had taken our seats at table, where I was glad to find that I had Orgreave for a neighbour. Just opposite was Holland. He, I soon noticed, seemed to be paying particular attention to my new friend, listening to all he said, and often gazing fixedly at him. Once or twice our eyes met, and in Holland's I saw such a strange look, such an expression of puzzlement and uneasiness, that I wondered what was the matter with him. No sooner did we rise after dinner than I stepped towards him; he, I found, was making still more eagerly for me; he caught my arm and drew me aside.

"Who was that on your left hand?" he asked, abruptly and earnestly.

"A man called Orgreave; wealthy manufacturer down at ——, a delightful fellow."

"Good God! I would have sworn it was Shacklewell."

As the words fell from his lips, I experienced the strangest sensation. At once I knew of whose voice it was that Orgeave's reminded me; of course it was the voice of that half−forgotten fellow, Shacklewell. And the laugh — yes, that, too, was Shacklewell's. All this I imparted to Holland, who, whilst we talked, still kept his eyes on Orgreave.

"It's the most extraordinary resemblance I ever knew", he murmured. "The beard, of course, makes a difference, but if one could imagine Shacklewell with ten years of prosperity behind him. And, do you know what?" He lowered his voice. "That man keeps eyeing us in a very queer way; indeed he does. Hanged if I don't ask Ned to introduce me, and have a talk with him".

This he did; with the result that, when I parted from him that night, he could think and speak of but one subject; the astounding resemblance, blended with curious differences, of Orgreave and the lost Shacklewell.

"I didn't like to ask if he had a relative of that name. It might be a sore point. But I shall certainly be driven to do it if I meet him again."

Two days later I had a note from Holland. It ran somehow thus:

"Dear G ——, it is Shacklewell, no other than Shacklewell, the very Shacklewell we used to know. If it hadn't been I should have puzzled myself into Bedlam. I met him last night, at another dinner, and afterwards, with a queer look, he asked me if I would go and have a smoke with him at his hotel. An astounding story! You shall hear all I know of it when we meet"

That event happened speedily, and I learnt the outlines of Shacklewell's adventures. But better was when I heard the story from his own lips, six months afterwards. The old acquaintance and the new friendship had by that time blended; I was staying at the man's house, knew his wife and children, and felt thoroughly at home with him. Over our pipes by the fireside, he unbosomed himself.

"By the bye," was his first remark tending thitherwards, "I don't think I owe you any money, A do I?"

"Money?"

"From fifteen years ago, I mean." His smile did me good. "I owed Holland a few pounds, and I've paid them. But I don't think I ever had the impudence to borrow from you."

I reassured him.

"I never cadged and sponged, thank heaven." He spread his hands over the fire. "Holland, and one or two other fellows, could afford to keep a poor devil going. You can't think how difficult I find it to revive that part of my life. I mean that it's gone so misty and remote. Yet I force myself to think it back now and then, just because gratitude is a good thing. On the day when I forget to feel grateful to my wife, I shall be pretty near the end of all things."

I knew that he could never mention his wife without a softening of the voice. There was an odd glistening in his eyes as he spoke of her now.

"You marvel at the change in me, don't you? The change in me myself, apart from circumstances. The elixir, my dear fellow — the elixir!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean happiness. That's what transformed me, gave me a new life, a clean soul! In my case there was no other salvation. My ideal woman, and a solid income. Pretty large demands, I'm aware; but it was my destiny, you see. I'm the one man in a million who gets what he wants, and, having got it, I had drunk the elixir of life. I don't maintain that it's a fine type of character, but it's mine. On the one hand, death blaspheming in a gutter; on the

other, a life of health and splendid happiness, with philosophy enough to face the end. No third possibility in my case. And here you see me."

I looked at him well, and I confess I envied him.

"One ought to believe in God, I suppose. The truth is, I do, in a way. Only I can't see why I was so guided. What led me half across England in those days of despair, fifteen years ago? My wife believes in the good old Providence, and I shall end by thinking the same."

"Come, tell me about it. You were tramping?"

"It was a morning of summer, not long after Holland went to India. I got up, and asked myself how I was going to eat that day. A bedroom at a shilling a night, paid for in advance; my luggage — a comb, a tooth−brush, and a little bundle of under−clothing. I owned nothing else in the world, and hadn't a farthing in my pockets.

"I went out, and walked along the streets. It was me, I suppose, but I can't realize it I was close on madness. It had to be death, I thought, and I couldn't decide on the manner of it; I had arguments with myself. The river was best; I walked eastward, aiming at the docks.

"Somewhere, in a decent street, a faintness came over me, and I had to sit down on a doorstep. Presently the door opened, and a woman came out, a young, pretty woman. 'What's the matter?' she asked. 'Hunger,' I said — in fact I hadn't eaten much for two or three days. As soon as she heard that, she took out her purse, and offered me sixpence; and I accepted it, thanking her. What's more, I bought food.

"After eating, I strolled on, doubtful about the river. I believe it was that woman's good and pretty face that did it — made me think of all I was going to lose. I must have said to myself, 'By heaven! I'll have another try.' I stopped at a stationer's shop with the idea of asking if they knew of any employment. But in the window was an open number of the Illustrated London News — open at a picture called "The Tramp." A picture of a jolly, ragged fellow, eating bread and cheese on the grass, in a lovely bit of lane — at that moment the most alluring picture I ever saw. And I said to myself, 'Go on the tramp! Go out into the fields and lanes and beg a crust, and sleep under the hedge, and, after a day or two, see how life looks'. And I started straight away — right off into open Essex, and somehow feeling better than for a long time. Yes, I can get back that feeling — the wonderful hope that shot up in me. I do believe in Providence; I can't help!"

He looked at me with wide eyes, marvelling at his own story; and I felt the thrill which is sometimes communicated by a passionate speaker.

"I tramped, and I begged, and I was alive a week after. Alive and well. I felt as if I was making for some point — some definite goal. Yet I never thought of the>o ad; I just went straight forward, and, queer thing, many a time I was in great spirits, enjoying the glorious country, picking flowers, singing songs. It happened to be superb weather. I had a bathe now and then, and felt it did me good. I remember once, when I was stripped, looking at my strong, shapely limbs, and saying to myself that I couldn't have been made to die like a scrofulous East−end cripple. Every day I had more faith in life. When I begged at a cottage door, I must have looked and spoken as if I were doing the people a favour by asking them for bread. I grew arrogant in a sense of liberty and hopefulness! Wasn't it all strange?

"I got a long way north; as far as — well, as far as a village not a mile from here. That day I hadn't been able to beg much food; towards night I felt very hungry. Wandering through fields, I came to a little gate that opened into an orchard; beyond I could see the roof of a house, not large, but something more than a cottage. Apples tempted me; I thought I would risk it, and take one or two which no one would ever miss. The place seemed quiet enough, no one was likely to come into the orchard at that moment. I opened the wicket, I plucked three apples, I turned back; and there on the outer side of the gate, a girl was standing — a lady.

"'Do you want someone?' she asked.

"'No, I have been stealing apples'.

"Those were the very words. I answered them without thought. I had to say just those words and no others.

"She looked at me in astonishment. Of course there was an incongruity between my accent and my appearance. She looked at me and I at her. I didn't think her beautiful — until she smiled. She was about three−and−twenty, nicely dressed. Just the hair, just the complexion I loved in a woman. And when she smiled, I had something come over me.

"'Why do you steal apples?' she asked — an exquisite voice.

"'Because I'm hungry! I've tried to beg food, but have had no luck to−day.'

"'You don't speak like a beggar.'

"'No, I wasn't born to it.'

"I could see she wanted to go past me, and I came out into the field, and moved a little away. When she was on the orchard side of the gate she spoke again.

"'If you are in want, go round to the front door of this house and ask to see Mr. Littlestone'.

"I watched her away through the trees, and then I did what she had told me. A servant showed me into a dining−room, and there came a pleasant old fellow, with cheeks like the apples I had in my pocket, and began to question me. Will you believe, that, ten minutes after, we were sitting in his library debating the doctrine of Determinism! I had said something which touched a sensitive point in him; he stood for the freedom of the will, and took me into his study to read me a passage from Coleridge! I didn't give way, and my independence seemed to please him.

"'Well', he said, at length; 'and where does the law of causation indicate that you shall sleep tonight?'

"My hearty laugh flattered him, I suppose, and he held out some money — half a sovereign.

"'There! go to the inn and make yourself a bit more presentable, and — if it has been so fore−ordained — come to−morrow morning at ten and ask to see me.'

"Next day I told him everything. The story bewildered him a little, and now and then he didn't look very pleased. But in the end he said that, if I really wanted to support myself, he thought he could get me something to do in the neighbouring town. My whole mind was so changed that I eagerly accepted his offer, anything, I said, any sort of work that gave a man a chance in the world. So he sent me into the town to call on a friend of his, a manufacturer, And in a day or two I was sitting on a stool doing the kind of work I had been accustomed to years before, and which I thought I would die rather than begin again."

At this point, he gave me a sketch of his life before I had ever known him. Needless to repeat the details, but they filled a gap in my understanding of his history, and made what followed somewhat more credible.

"Just a year after — the very anniversary of the day on which I stole the apples — I was married. I can't say that I ever felt a surprise at what had happened to me. The second time I went to Mr. Littlestone's (to tell him that I had got a place) I saw again the girl who had met me in the orchard, and I said to myself 'There is my wife'. To anyone else the thought would have seemed lunacy; but I knew. One thing I couldn't I foresee", he added, laughing, "was that I should begin the new life with a new name."

"Miss Orgreave had no male relatives?" I remarked.

"Nor female either. Old Littlestone, when I staggered him with the news that she had consented to be my wife, told me of the provision in her father's will, that whoever married her should take the name of Orgreave. It mattered nothing tome; in fact, I was glad of it — glad to shake off the last bit of my old self. When I heard how wealthy I was going to be, I smiled carelessly — never was such a philosopher! Having won the ideal woman, a huge host of money seemed only a natural appendage, the kind of thing one might have expected to follow."

I mused a little, then said:

"I won't, of course, ask you how you won your wife. But perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me whether your position had improved at all before the wooing began."

Shacklewell (or Orgreave) gave one of his joyous laughs.

"Devil a bit! I earned twenty−five shillings a week all through the year. As a matter of fact — there's no reason why I shouldn't tell you — all my love−making was done through the post. Like my impudence, wasn't it? I wrote to Miss Orgreave ten days after I got my place as clerk. No answer. I wrote a second time. Answer: Three lines. I wrote every week — every three days — every day! I shouldn't wonder if! they were the best love−letters man ever! composed. Some day I shall ask my wife to let me see them again. I remember saying in one of them something like this: 'Now if I were a girl in your position, I should be tempted by the chance of working a sort of miracle. Here's a man, crazy with love of you, one of the few men to whom a woman's love is the crown of all things. He has been down into hell — and narrowly escaped staying there. He has known all along that his only hope lay in the wild possibility of his attaining happiness. Leave him in his poverty and his misery, and he would sink, choked at last in mud. Lift him out of it, and he would become a man, clean, strong and joyous. Doesn't the thought tempt you? You have the elixir of life; won't you give me a draught of it, and watch the miracle that follows?' Well, it might have been buncombe, you know, but it wasn't I meant it from my soul, and she knew that I meant it, and she had faith in her power. And here you see me!"

Yes, I saw him, and admired him, and thought him the one favourite of fortune I had ever known. He lived with such gusto that to come near him was to imbibe something of his joy in life. He imparted vigour to all with whom he talked. Of the woman to whom he owed everything (save the inborn capacity for happiness), I shall only say that one divined in her his fit companion; before others she was reserved and a trifle shy, but her few soft words always carried excellent sense, and her beautiful eyes had, at moments, a glow which fascinated. That she was more than proud of her husband, one saw whenever they were together; all his aims were hers, and hers all his gallant enthusiasms. They had three children at that time ——

I am writing of spring−time, 1887. Much has happened since then. When I called on Mrs. Orgreave a year ago, her daughter walked with me to the churchyard, where two boys and their father lie in the same grave.

"My mother is sad sometimes," she said, "but never gloomy, never embittered by her sorrows. She has a wonderful belief in happiness, and lives only to procure it for as many as she can. She often says: 'Let people know happiness if it is only for one day'. And my father used to say the same".

"He had reason for his faith."

"I know. Not long ago I read the story of his life, which he wrote in the last year."

"I heard it once from his own lips," I said.