Fate and the Apothecary

George Gissing

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'Farmiloe. Chemist by Examination.' So did the good man proclaim himself to a suburb of a city in the West of England. It was one of those pretty, clean, fresh−coloured suburbs only to be found in the west; a few dainty little shops, everything about them bright or glistening, scattered among pleasant little houses with gardens eternally green and all but perennially in bloom every vista ending in foliage, and in one direction a far glimpse of the Cathedral towers, sending forth their music to fall dreamily upon these quiet roads. The neighbourhood seemed to breathe a tranquil prosperity. Red−cheeked emissaries of butcher, baker, and grocer, order−book in hand, knocked cheerily at kitchen doors, and went smiling away; the ponies they drove were well fed and frisky, their carts spick and span. The church of the parish, an imposing edifice, dated only from a few years ago, and had cost its noble founder a sum of money which any churchgoing parishioner would have named to you with proper awe. The population was largely female, and every shopkeeper who knew his business had become proficient in bowing, smiling, and suave servility.

Mr. Farmiloe, it is to be feared, had no very profound acquaintance with his business from any point of view. True, he was 'chemist by examination,' but it had cost him repeated efforts to reach this unassailable ground, and more than one pharmaceutist with whom he abode as assistant had felt it a measure of prudence to dispense with his services. Give him time, and he was generally equal to the demands of suburban customers; hurry or interrupt him, and he showed himself anything but the man for a crisis. Face and demeanour were against him. He had exceedingly plain features, and a persistently sour expression; even his smile suggested sarcasm. He could not tune his voice to the tradesman note, and on the slightest provocation he became, quite unintentionally, offensive. Such a man had no chance whatever in this flowery and bowery little suburb.

Yet he came hither with hopes. One circumstance seemed to him especially favourable: the shop was also a post−office, and no one could fail to see (it was put most impressively by the predecessor who sold him the business) how advantageous was this blending of public service with commercial interest; especially as there was no telegraphic work to make a skilled assistant necessary. As a matter of course, people using the post−office would patronise the chemist; and a provincial chemist can add to his legitimate business sundry pleasant little tradings which benefit himself without provoking the jealousy of neighbour shopmen. 'It will be your own fault, my dear sir, if you do not make a very good thing of it indeed. The sole and sufficient explanation of of the decline during this last year or two is my shocking health. I really have not been able to do justice to the business.'

Necessarily, Mr. Farmiloe entered into negotiation with the postal authorities; and it was with some little disappointment that he learnt how very modest could be his direct remuneration for the responsibilities and labours he undertook. The Post−Office is a very shrewdly managed department of the public service; it has brought to perfection the art of obtaining maximum results with a minimum expenditure. But Mr. Farmiloe remembered the other aspect of the matter; he would benefit so largely by this ill−paid undertaking that grumbling was foolish Moreover, the thing carried dignity with it; he served his Majesty, he served the nation. And ha, ha! how very odd it would be to post one's letters in one's own post−office. One might really get a good deal of amusement out of the thought, after business hours. His age was eight−and−thirty. For some years he had pondered matrimony, though without fixing his affections on any particular person. It was plain, indeed, that he ought to marry. Every tradesman is made more respectable by wedlock, and a chemist who, in some degree resembles a medical man, seems especially to stand in need of the matrimonial guarantee. Had it been feasible,

Mr. Farmiloe would have brought a wife with him from the town where he had lived for the past few years, but he was in the difficult position of knowing not a single marriageable female to whom he could address himself with hope or with self−respect. Natural shyness had always held him aloof from reputable women; he felt that he could not recommend himself to them he who had such an unlucky aptitude for saying the wrong word or keeping silence when speech was demanded. With the men of his acquaintance he could relieve his sense of awkwardness and deficiency by becoming aggressive; in fact, he had a reputation for cantankerousness, for pugnacity, which kept most of his equals in some awe of him, and to perceive this was one solace amid many discontents. Nicely dressed and well−spoken and good−looking women above the class of domestic servants he worshipped from afar, and only in vivacious moments pictured himself as the wooer of such a superior being.

It seemed as though fate could do nothing with Mr. Farmiloe. At six−and−thirty he suffered the shock of learning that a relative an old woman to whom he had occasionally written as a matter of kindness (Farmiloe could do such things) had left him by will the sum of £600. It was strictly a shock; it upset his health for several days, and not for a week or two could he realise the legacy as a fact. Just when he was beginning to look about him with a new air of confidence, the solicitors who were managing the little affair for him drily acquainted him with the fact that his relative's will was contested by other kinsfolk whom the old woman had passed over, on the ground that she was imbecile and incapable of conducting her affairs. There followed a law−suit, which consumed many months and cost a good deal of money; so that, though he won his ease, Mr. Farmiloe lost all satisfaction in his improved circumstances, and was only more embittered against the world at large.

Then, no sooner had he purchased his business, than he learnt from smiling neighbours that he had paid considerably too much for it. His predecessor, beyond a doubt, would have taken very much less had, indeed, been on the point of doing so just when Mr. Farmiloe appeared. This kind of experience is a trial to any man. It threw Mr. Farmiloe into a silent rage, with the result that two or three customers who chanced to enter his shop declared that they would never have anything more to do with such a surly creature.

And now began his torment a form of exasperation peculiar to his dual capacity of shopkeeper and manager of a post−office. All day long he stood on the watch for customers literally stood, now behind the counter, now in front of it, his eager and angry eyes turning to the door whenever the steps of a passer−by sounded without. If the door opened his nerves began to tingle, and he straightened himself like a soldier at attention. For a moment he suffered an agony of doubt. Would the person entering turn to the counter or to the post−office? And seldom was his hope fulfilled; not one in four of the people who came in was a genuine customer; the post−office, always the post−office. A stamp, a card, a newspaper wrapper, a postal−order, a letter to be registered anything but an honest purchase across the counter or the blessed tendering of a prescription to make up. From vexation he passed to annoyance, to rage, to fury; he cursed the post−office, and committed to eternal perdition the man who had waxed eloquent upon its advantages.

Of course, he had hired an errand−boy, and never had errand−boy so little legitimate occupation. Resolved not to pay him for nothing, Mr. Farmiloe kept him cleaning windows, washing bottles, and the like, until the lad fairly broke into rebellion. If this was the sort of work he was engaged for he must have higher wages; he wasn't over strong and his mother said he must lead an open−air life that was why he had taken the place. To be bearded thus in his own shop was too much for Mr. Farmiloe, he seized the opportunity of giving his wrath full swing, and burst into a frenzy of vilification. Just as his passion reached its height (he stood with his back to the door) there entered a lady who wished to make a large purchase of disinfectants. Alarmed and scandalised at what was going on, she had no sooner crossed the threshold than she turned again, and hurried away. Her friends were not long in learning from her that the new chemist was a most violent man, a most disagreeable person the very last man one could think of doing business with.

The home was but poorly furnished, and Mr. Farmiloe had engaged a very cheap general servant, who involved him in dirt and discomfort. It was a matter of talk among the neighbouring tradesmen that the chemist lived in a beggarly fashion. When the dismissed errand−boy spread the story of how he had been used, people jumped to the

conclusion that Mr. Farmiloe drank. Before long there was a legend that he had been suffering from an acute attack of delirium tremens.

The post−office, always the post−office. If he sat down at a meal the shop−bell clanged, and hope springing eternal, he hurried forth in readiness to make up a packet or concoct a mixture; but it was an old lady who held him in talk for ten minutes about rates of postage to South America. When, by rare luck, he had a prescription to dispense (the hideous scrawl of that pestilent Dr. Bunker) in came somebody with letters and parcels which he was requested to weigh; and his hand shook so with rage that he could not resume his dispensing for the next quarter of an hour. People asked extraordinary questions, and were surprised, offended, when he declared he could not answer them. When could a letter be delivered at a village on the north−west coast of Ireland? Was it true that the Post−Office contemplated a reduction of rates to Hong−Kong? Would he explain in detail the new system of express delivery? Invariably he betrayed impatience, and occasionally he lost his temper; people went away exclaiming what a horrid man he was!

'Mr. What's−your−name,' said a shopkeeper one day, after receiving a short answer, 'I shall make it my business to complain of you to the Postmaster−General. I don't come here to be insulted.'

'Who insulted you?' returned Farmiloe like a sullen schoolboy.

'Why, you did. And you are always doing it.'

'I'm not.'

'You are.'

'If I did' terror stole upon the chemist's heart 'I didn't mean it, and I I'm sure I apologise. It's a way I have.'

'A damned bad way, let me tell you. I advise you to get out of it.'

'I'm sorry '

'So you should be.'

And the tradesman walked off; only half appeased.

Mr. Farmiloe could have shed tears in his mortification, and for some minutes he stood looking at a bottle of laudanum, wishing he had the courage to have done with life. Plainly he could not live very long unless things improved. His ready money was coming to an end, rents and taxes loomed before him. An awful thought of bankruptcy haunted him in the early morning hours.

The most frequent visitor to the post−office was a well−dressed, middle−aged man, who spoke civilly, and did his business in the fewest possible words. Mr. Farmiloe rather liked the look of him, and once or twice made conversational overtures, but with no encouraging result. One day, feeling bolder than usual, the chemist ventured to speak what he had in mind. After supplying the grave gentleman with stamps and postal−orders, he said, in a tone meant to be conciliatory

'I don't know whether you ever have need of mineral waters, sir?'

'Why, yes, sometimes. My ordinary tradesman supplies them.'

'I thought I 'd just mention that I keep them in stock.'

'Ah thank you '

'I've noticed,' went on the luckless apothecary, his bosom heaving with a sense of his wrongs, 'that you 're a pretty large customer of the post−office, and it seems to me' he meant to speak jocosely 'that it would be only fair if you gave me a turn now and then. I get next to nothing out of this, you know. I should be much obliged if you '

The man of few words was looking at him, half in surprise, half in indignation, and when the chemist blundered into silence he spoke:

'I really have nothing to do with that. As a matter of fact, I was on the point of making a little purchase in your shop, but I decidedly object to this kind of behaviour, and shall make my purchase elsewhere.'

He strode solemnly into the street, and Mr. Farmiloe, unconscious of all about him, glared at vacancy.

Whether from the angry tradesman, or from some lady with whom Mr. Farmiloe had been abrupt, a complaint did presently reach the postal authorities, with the result that an official called at the chemist's shop. The interview was unpleasant. It happened that Mr. Farmiloe (not for the first time) had just then allowed himself to run out of certain things always in demand by the public halfpenny stamps, for instance. Moreover, his accounts were not in perfect order. This, he had to hear, was emphatically unbusinesslike, and, in brief, would not do.

'It shall not occur again, sir,' mumbled the unhappy man. 'But, if you consider my position '

'Mr. Farmiloe, allow me to tell you that this is a matter for your own consideration, and no one else's.'

'True, sir, quite true. Still, when you come to think of it I assure you '

'The only assurance I want is that the business of the post−office will be properly attended to, and that assurance I must have. I shall probably call again before long. Good morning.'

It was always with a savage satisfaction that Mr. Farmiloe heard the clock strike eight on Saturday evening. His shop remained open till ten, but at eight came the end of the post−office business. If, as happened, any one entered five minutes too late, it delighted him to refuse their request. These were the only moments in which he felt himself a free man. After eating his poor supper, he smoked a pipe or two of cheap tobacco, brooding; or he fingered the pages of his menacing account−books; or, very rarely, he walked about the dark country roads, asking himself, with many a tragi−comic gesture and ejaculation, why he could not get on like other men.

One afternoon it seemed that he, at length, had his chance. There entered a maidservant with a prescription to be made up and sent as soon as possible A glance at the name delighted Mr. Farmiloe; it was that of the richest family in the suburbs. The medicine, to be sure, was only for a governess, but his existence was recognised, and the patronage of such people would do him good. But for the never−sufficiently−to−be−condemned handwriting of Dr. Bunker, the prescription offered no difficulty. Rubbing his palms together, and smiling as he seldom smiled, he told the domestic that the medicine should be delivered in less than half an hour.

Scarcely had he begun upon it, when a lady came in, a lady whom he knew well. Her business was at the post−office side, and she looked a peremptory demand for his attention. Inwardly furious, he crossed the shop.

'Be so good as to tell me what this will cost by book−post.'

It seemed to be a pamphlet. Giving a glance at one of the open ends, Mr. Farmiloe saw handwriting within, and his hostility to the woman found vent in a sharp remark.

'There's a written communication in this. It will be letter rate.'

The 'lady eyed him with terrible scorn.

'You will oblige me by minding your own business. Your remark is the merest impertinence. That packet consists of MS., and will, therefore, go at book rate. Be so good as to weigh it at once.'

Mr. Farmiloe lost all control of himself, and well−nigh screamed.

'No, madam, I will not weigh it. And let me inform you, as you are so ignorant, that to weigh packets is not part of my duty. I do it merely to oblige civil persons, and you, madam, are not one of them.'

The lady instantly turned and withdrew.

'Damn the post−office!' yelled Mr. Farmiloe, alone with his errand−boy, and shaking his fist in the air. 'This very day I write to give it up. I say damn the post−office.'

He returned to his dispensing, completed it, wrapped up the bottle in the customary manner, and despatched the boy to the house.

Five minutes later a thought flashed through his mind which put him in a cold sweat. He happened to glance along the shelf from which he had taken the bottle containing the last ingredient of the mixture, and it struck him, with all the force of a horrible doubt, that he had made a mistake. In the irate confusion of his thoughts, he had done the dispensing almost mechanically. The bottle he ought to have taken down was that, but had he not actually poured from that other? Of poisoning there was no fear, but, if indeed he had made a slip, the result would be a very extraordinary mixture; so surprising, in fact, that the patient would be sure to speak to Dr. Bunker about it. Good heavens! He felt sure he had made the mistake.

Any other man would have taken down the two bottles in question, and have examined the mouths of them for traces of moisture. Mr. Farmiloe, a victim of destiny, could do nothing so reasonable. Heedless of the fact that his shop remained unguarded, he seized his hat and rushed after the errand−boy. If he could only have a sniff at the mixture it would either confirm his fear or set his mind at rest. He tore a long the road and was too late. The boy met him, having just completed his errand.

With a wild curse he sped to the house, he rushed to the tradesman's door. The medicine just delivered He must examine it he feared there was a mistake an extraordinary oversight.

The bottle had not yet been upstairs. Mr. Farmiloe tore off the wrapper, wrenched out the cork, sniffed and smiled feebly.

'Thank you. I'm glad to find there was no mistake. I'll take it back, and have it wrapped up again, and send it immediately immediately. And, by the bye' he fumbled in his pocket for half−a−crown, still smiling like a detected culprit 'I'm sure you won't mention this little affair. A new assistant of mine stupid fellow I am going to get rid of him at once. Thank you, thank you.'

Notwithstanding that half−crown the incident was, of course, talked of through the house before a quarter of an hour had elapsed. Next day it was the gossip of the suburbs; and the day after the city itself heard the story. People were alarmed and scandalised. Why, such a chemist was a public danger! One lady declared that he ought at once to be 'struck off the roll!'

And so in a sense he was. Another month and the flowery, bowery little suburb knew him no more. He hid himself in a great town, living on the wreck of his fortune whilst he sought a place as an assistant. A leaky pair of boots and a bad east wind found the vulnerable spot of his constitution. After all, there was just enough money left to bury him.