

The Firebrand

George Gissing

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At the age of eighteen Andrew Mowbray Catterick vanished from among his kith and kin. They soon learnt that he was gone to London, and as this movement had been foreseen for a long time, the North Country folk made no fuss about it; if London proved too much for him, he had only to come back. Mrs. Catterick enjoyed a comfortable four hundred per annum, which at her death would be divided between Andrew and his sister. That the lad took his resolve and acted quietly upon it, without taxing anyone or calling for applause, seemed a point in his favour. If hitherto he had earned no high esteem, he had done nothing to be ashamed of. Rather an idle dog said his impartial acquaintances and a trifle given to self-praise; but no one denied his cleverness. At Mapplebeck, a grey and sooty little town ringed about with collieries, he was not likely to do much good; and his 'gift of the gab,' as people called it, would sooner or later involve him in difficulties. A young fellow in a public office should not meddle with politics, and can gain nothing by displays of oratory at pot-houses frequented by pitmen. Let him shift for himself in a larger world. Five pounds or so was the fortune he carried with him; capable men have gone forth and conquered with much less.

From eighteen to three-and-twenty Andrew doubtless had a hard time of it. He wrote very seldom, and disregarded invitations to visit the old home. Such reports as he made were of dubious complexion; that he lived was clear, but no one at Mapplebeck knew exactly how. Writing, however, on his twenty-third birthday, the young man announced that he had secured regular employment as a journalist in connection with two London papers; and presently he began to send specimens of his work. Mrs. Catterick, the widow of a town-clerk and herself much respected in the Conservative society of Mapplebeck, thought it a sad pity that her son persevered in revolutionary opinion: she did not care to circulate the newspapers he posted to her. Miss Bertha, now engaged to a solicitor of a neighbouring town, felt proud that Andrew had made such progress, and declared her indifference to his views if only he achieved a good position. Before long the journalist sent down a series of articles which, he said, were attracting attention descriptions of obscure industries in London and elsewhere. He spoke, too, of allowing himself a holiday, and of coming home.

A couple of months elapsed without more news. Then, on an evening of September, Andrew presented himself at his mother's door.

It was difficult to recognise him. Not only had time converted the lanky stripling into a tall, wiry specimen of bearded manhood, but he looked so deplorably ill that Mrs. Catterick's first exclamation was one of alarm. As if the journey had overtaxed him, he dropped upon the nearest chair, and wiped moisture from his clay-coloured face. Yes, he was seedy. He had been overdoing it. He must have a good long rest. Mother and sister straightway devoted themselves to nursing him. The old doctor, friend of his childhood, was called into council. Andrew talked to him with a quiet air of condescension, yet as if grateful for the kindness with which he was surrounded.

'Sleep? Oh, my dear doctor! I haven't slept for a year or so. Sleep is such an expensive luxury; a journalist making his way has to do without it. Meals? Oh, I really forget. I eat now and then, I believe. Why, yes; not long ago I dined at the National Liberal Club with the editor of the Morning Star; so on that occasion, at all events, I ate. But, do you know, I find a bit of anchovy toast and a glass of cognac about the best thing, on most days. I

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suppose I ruined my stomach with vache enragée.'

'What in the world is that?' asked the good doctor.

'Merely a pedantry for starvation, my dear sir. For three or four years I had simply nothing to eat. We all go through it, you know. A friend of mine, a novelist, says he thinks nothing of the man who hasn't starved to begin with. At the same time I drank rather too much. What would you have? Nervous force must be kept up somehow.'

The doctor began to entertain a suspicion that this habit of drinking was not yet outgrown; he privately doubted whether Andrew's state of collapse had anything to do with excessive toil. In a day or two, however, he felt sure that his misgivings were unjustifiable. Catterick's case allowed of but one diagnosis: the young man had lived preposterously, but not as a debauchee. He had worked himself like a machine, disregarding every admonition of rebellious nature.

'And do you imagine, Andrew, that this kind of thing will lead to anything except the grave?'

'I can't keep it up; that I have discovered. But so far it has paid. The editors know me. Nowadays, doctor, a man who aims at success in any profession must be content to take his chance between that and death. If I don't get out of the ruck, I may as well die.'

Talk in this vein amused the old practitioner, who regarded his patient as a boy, and studied in him the latest forms of puerile conceit. But not everyone could listen so urbanely. Robert Holdsworth, who came over to make the acquaintance of his future brother-in-law, had much ado to disguise contemptuous irritation; he resented the easy patronage of Andrew's behaviour, and half believed him a disreputable impostor. Talking privately with Bertha, he asked why her brother had allowed so many years to pass without visiting his relatives.

'Oh,' replied the girl, with a laugh, 'he made a confession about that only yesterday. His pride wouldn't let him come till he had done something that people could talk about.'

'Andrew's pride seems to be the great feature of his character,' Holdsworth remarked drily. 'And what has he done? A little anonymous journalism. I don't think that justifies his airs.'

'He does put it on rather. But, you know, he has worked frightfully!'

'So have a good many people.'

'Yes; but it's a great thing to write for London newspapers — don't you think? And he has made friends with such a lot of important men.'

Andrew took care that his arrival at Mapplebeck should be made known by the local paper. A short biography appeared in its columns, and the writer expressed his deep regret that Mr. Catterick had been ordered to abstain for the present from all literary work. He added

'This is the penalty paid by too many of our rising journalists. The conditions of modern journalism are terribly trying, and a young man of Mr. Catterick's distinguished ability is tempted to efforts beyond the endurance of human nature.'

With old acquaintances, most of whom were very sober and practical folk, Andrew made ostentatious display of his advanced opinions. He gave the good people to understand that Mapplebeck was a very sleepy little place, a century or so behind the civilisation which he himself represented. Occasionally he met with blunt answers, but they moved him only to a smile. People might say of him what they liked, if only they recognised his enormous advance in the interval since he disappeared from Mapplebeck. Superior to ordinary conversation, he discoursed in lively monologues, generally standing. His inquiries about local affairs were made in an indulgent tone. He deigned to show interest in the histories of young men, his contemporaries, who still remained in the town.

'Ah! poor old Robertson! I must have a talk with him. And Tom Gerard has three children? Amazing! It passes my comprehension how a fellow of any brains — and Tom had brains — can handicap himself in that way. Men don't marry nowadays — not till they have arrived.'

But about this time the local mind began to be occupied with a question which ultimately proved of national concern. Throughout the mining districts there was talk of an impending coal strike. Catterick, whose recuperative powers had soon overcome the grave symptoms of his disorder, amused himself with walking about the neighbourhood and holding converse with pitmen; whence it naturally came to pass that he one day found himself haranguing a coaly group, to whom he expounded the principles of modern industrial liberty. He came home in an excited state of mind, and from the hearthrug repeated to his mother and sister the oration he had publicly delivered.

'I think it very wrong to go talking in that way,' declared Mrs. Catterick. 'You may make a deal of trouble.'

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'Very likely,' Andrew replied, with modest allusion to his powers as an agitator.

'You have no business to encourage these men to strike,' exclaimed his sister. 'And what will our friends say if they hear of it?'

The suggestion confirmed Andrew in a resolve. A strike there undoubtedly would be, sooner or later, and how could he more profitably occupy his leisure than in helping to bring it about? The public eye would at once be fixed on him; with care and skill he might achieve more than local distinction, and the journalistic matter thus supplied to him would be all in the way of business.

A mile or so beyond Mapplebeck was a colliers' hamlet known as Pit Row; it consisted literally of a row of cottages set on the black soil hard by a coal-pit — grimy little boxes, all built precisely alike, with a plot of sorry garden in front of each, and behind them the walled back-yards, where shirts and petticoats flapped in sooty air. Andrew decided to open his campaign at Pit Row. Thither he went on a Sunday morning, and inquired for Sam Dollop, a collier whose acquaintance he had made in casual talk on the road. Sam was a local firebrand, and it flattered him to be associated with a gentleman from London who had exactly his views as to the rights of the miner. Easily enough they collected the inhabitants of Pit Row; speeches were made, and Andrew scored an important point when he uttered a sentence or two in the dialect of his hearers. Mapplebeck, he went on to assure them, was his native place. He stood here as no interloper. From childhood's days he had regarded with compassion the hard lot of men who toiled underground; and now that fortune had favoured him, now that he had won by sheer hard work a somewhat prominent place in Metropolitan journalism, he felt it to be only his duty to come down and take part with his old friends in their struggle against the avarice of capitalists.

He had not long to wait for the public effect of these proceedings. Respectable Mapplebeck talked indignantly of his reckless and wicked meddling with troubles in which he had no concern. Mrs. Catterick's friends came to condole with her, knowing how strongly she disapproved of her son's politics. Andrew himself was stopped in the street by an old gentleman, who asked him severely what his good father would have thought of such doings, and advised him, if he must needs be working mischief, to go and speechify elsewhere. The town's one newspaper, which called itself 'independent,' and tried to please everyone, came out with an article vaguely deprecating the interference of outsiders in industrial disputes. Andrew replied in a long letter, printed the following week, wherein he justified himself on high grounds, economical and moral: it was the duty, he maintained, of all enlightened men to use these opportunities for a protest against the grinding tyranny of the present social system. He had deliberately taken off his coat, and was going to work with a full sense of the responsibilities he incurred. He might mention that he had carefully inquired into the state of the mining population in this district, and the results of his inquiries would shortly be made public in one of the leading organs of advanced opinion.

His 'facile pen,' as the local paper would have called it, knocked off a couple of sensational reports, which presently appeared in a London evening journal. Copies were in demand at Mapplebeck, and the county press made its comments, sympathetic or denunciatory. Andrew congratulated himself on the circumstances which had brought him hither just at this time. Mapplebeck would come to regard him as a terrible fellow. He looked impatiently for the actual outbreak of the strike, when, with a little effort, he might play a part of more than local distinction.

Meanwhile Mr. Robert Holdsworth viewed with keen annoyance the pranks of his future relative. This prudent young man by no means relished the thought of celebrating his marriage with Miss Catterick at a moment when Andrew was incurring the odium of all well-to-do people in the district. He came over to talk plainly of the matter; and Bertha, distressed by his grave representations, was driven to propose that their wedding should be put off till the next year.

'It's no use saying anything to Andrew; he is really very selfish. I think mother ought to tell him that we can't have him here any longer.'

'So do I,' replied Holdsworth emphatically. 'His behaviour is simply monstrous. Your mother will feel the effects of it for long enough.'

Andrew was away, carrying the fiery cross. When he returned, late at night, mother and sister united in a very strong appeal to him. Couldn't he see the inconvenience, to say the least, that he was causing them? If he was well enough to go about making speeches, had he not better return to London?

'I am obliged to stay here,' answered the journalist, with forbearance. 'Not only my interest, but my duty, forbids me to turn back from the work I have undertaken. But, of course, I need not remain in this house. I admit

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all you urge, and tomorrow I will look about for a lodging.'

To this Mrs. Catterick could not assent, and the discussion was prolonged to an unheard-of hour. Andrew, when he understood the difficult position in which his sister was placed, held firm to his self-denying ordinance; he would forego the comforts of home, and lodge somewhere in the neighbourhood. This step would declare to all and sundry that the ladies dissociated themselves from his obnoxious principles.

And on the morrow the change was made. Andrew felt a glow of conscious virtue; no one could say that he had not behaved with scrupulous honour. He wrote a touching letter to Holdsworth, explaining his sacrifice, and enlarging upon its meritorious features. The solicitor replied in a line or two of formal civility.

Catterick had aptitude for the work of an agitator. His harangues were not merely fluent and spirited, they testified to a sincerity of feeling with which the casual observer would not have credited Andrew. Himself acquainted with hardships, he did, in fact, sympathise with the employed as against the capitalist. His whole bent of mind engaged him to the democratic standpoint; his interests were all in combative modernism. Robert Holdsworth, deeming him a noisy charlatan, did justice neither to his abilities nor to the motives of his conduct; yet there was a weak point in Andrew which the lawyer accidentally discovered, and which he resolved to attack by an ingenious stratagem. Talking confidentially of her brother, Bertha had mentioned that in boyhood he was anything but remarkable for courage.

'If there's any rioting,' she said, 'I'm quite sure he'll get out of the way. It's a pity he can't have a good fright. He would soon find that business called him to London.'

Holdsworth said little, but he reflected and schemed.

A few days after this Andrew received a letter addressed in a rude, sprawling hand, the writing of someone who barely knew how to hold a pen. The contents were with difficulty decipherable, but seemed to run thus:

'Mr. Caterikk, us three chaps as made up our moind to-night to wright to yo we work at a pit and weeve gotten wives and childer and we downt want to see them go hungry weer badly of as it is and we dont bileve a strike will mak it better so us chaps as mad up oor mind to give yo fare worning if the lads about here cum out on strike yol hear from us were not thretning yor life but well give yo the best threshin yo iver had sens yo was born thers three sticks redy and ef we go to jale for it thell be more bread fort wives and childer so look out.'

This same morning Andrew learnt that in a neighbouring county the strike had already begun. In a day or two great numbers of colliers would have left their work, and all but certainly those round about Mapplebeck would join in the movement. They were a particularly rough lot of men, and, as he well knew, eager to try their strength with the masters. He knew equally well that individuals among them, looking forward to short commons and fireless hearths, secretly cursed the agencies which threw them out of employment; and this letter from the nameless trio seemed to him an undoubtedly genuine threat. Its very moderation (he had only to fear bruises and indignity) was an alarming feature of the menace. For a long time he sat with the letter in his hand thinking anxiously.

The post-mark was Mapplebeck. Impossible to determine to what pit these three men belonged. His mind's eye surveyed whole crowds of grimy faces, and everywhere saw hostility in the white upturned orbs.

First came the natural impulse to make public his danger. It would be a proud moment. 'Behold this infamous production! Do you imagine that a base threat such as this can for a moment shake my purpose? See, I tear it into fragments, and scatter it to the winds!' Acquaintances in Mapplebeck would admire his scornful indifference, or, at all events, talk the more about him. 'He receives threatening letters. Hired ruffians have vowed to beat him within an inch of his life.' But was he actually indifferent? When all the pitmen of the locality were idle, would he care to walk about by-ways, or go home to his lodgings on a dark night? He hoped to make a figure during the strike, and to send journalistic correspondence to London; he must move freely hither and thither at all hours, affording his enemies abundant opportunity to waylay him. Well, was it not what a public man had to expect? Who that takes part in industrial warfare can feel secure from outrage? If the fellows thrashed him, they were not likely to escape, and here again would be a splendid advertisement.

Yes; but the thrashing itself Three sturdy colliers, armed with three big sticks, and only inclined to stop short of murder. His bones would ache for some time, be sure of it. He had never undergone a thrashing, not even as a boy. He had never fought; for, as his sister truly affirmed, physical courage was not his strong point. As he thought and thought, the drops came out upon his forehead.

For the present he would keep this letter in his pocket, and speak of it to no one.

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He went into the town, and kept an appointment with a fellow-worker in the bar-room of the principal hotel. 'Grand news!' exclaimed his friend, a provincial journalist without employment. At Baker's Pits that morning a notice was posted which would be sure to bring matters to a head: before evening the men would all be out. They must go at once ——

Andrew felt a chill run down his back.

'It's a confounded nuisance!' he began blusteringly. 'I have a letter from my editor. He wants me to go at once to the Clegg Valley district. I've half a mind to wire back that I must see it out here.'

But the friend thought this imprudent. His own ambitions clashed somewhat with Catterick's, and he would not be sorry to see the fiery orator depart for the Clegg Valley or elsewhere.

'It's a beastly nuisance!' repeated Andrew, wondering how soon after the declaration of a strike at Baker's Pits his bludgeon-armed foes would start on the war-path. Perhaps this very evening would see them lying in wait for him. 'I think I shall stay.'

He drank a glass of whisky, but it had no effect whatever upon his state of mind. Ah! — he said to himself — this was manifestly the result of nervous breakdown. He had not recovered from his illness; he had been over-exciting himself when what he needed was repose. Why, his limbs trembled under him! No, no; he was not such a poltroon as all that! In reasonable health he could have faced the peril, which, after all, might be imaginary. Those fellows would not dare to attack him — why, it would be as much as their lives were worth! But a dark night — the lonely road near his lodgings — faces masked — they might, perhaps, do it with impunity. Cold sweat again started on his forehead.

And all the time his friend was counselling him not to neglect the editor's instructions.

'My people at home yonder,' said Andrew with a smile, 'would be glad enough if I took myself off. Perhaps I owe it to them to make the sacrifice. I must think it over quietly for a few minutes. You go over to Pit Row. If I don't come presently you shall hear from me.'

He sat in the hotel for nearly an hour, and only strangers entered. At length appeared a shopkeeper with whom he was slightly acquainted.

'Well, Mr. Catterick, I suppose this is a great day for you? I hear that Baker's men have come out.'

Andrew smiled, but could not at once reply.

'Sure of it?' fell from his lips, when he had moistened them.

'It's the talk in the town, at all events And I dare say you know more about it than most people.'

Andrew rose, nodded, and left the hotel.

He walked quickly to his mother's house, and cast many glances about him in the quiet suburban road which led thither. It began to rain, but he did not put up his umbrella. Mrs. Catterick and Bertha were sitting by the fireside, talking about the price of coals; his abrupt entrance — for he walked in without ringing the bell — made them start up in apprehension.

'What has happened? Why do you look so?'

'Nothing. I've done my work, that's all, and I'm off.'

'Oh, thank goodness!' cried Bertha.

'You know that the colliers are on strike everywhere? Sorry for what it'll cost you in coals' — he laughed noisily — 'but you mustn't mind that. I have to rush off to the Clegg Valley — seat of war — telegram from London. Done all that I can here. Bertha, will you do me a kindness?'

'Certainly.'

'Take a cab to my lodgings, pack up all my things, leave them at the station cloak-room and keep the receipt till I send for it. It's all I shall do to catch my train. I thought of staying here to see the fun out, but I should rile an important man if I declined to go. And as you two rejoice, it's just as well. Explain to Holdsworth, will you? Sorry I couldn't say good-bye to him. But I hope to come down for your wedding, Bertha. Rather I didn't? Well, well, I quite understand; no harm done. You'll have broader views some day. Good-bye! Not one minute to lose.'

And away he sped.

In a few days Holdsworth was at Mapplebeck. He listened with a grave smile to the repetition of what Bertha had already told him in a letter. 'And he went off in a tremendous hurry?'

'Hardly time to say a dozen words. This morning he writes from London, and I have to send on his luggage.'

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'From London? I'm surprised he could do his work for the newspaper so soon!'

'He says it was too exciting for him — he was falling ill again.'

Holdsworth could not feel absolutely sure that his stratagem had got rid of the firebrand. Andrew's explanations might be all true; yet he disappeared on the very day when that threatening letter must have reached him; and, what was more, on the day when the strike began at Baker's Pits. In any case an odd and amusing coincidence.