The Foolish Virgin

George Gissing

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Coming down to breakfast, as usual rather late, Miss Jewell was surprised to find several persons still at table. Their conversation ceased as she entered, and all eyes were directed to her with a : look in which she discerned some special meaning. For several reasons she was in an irritable humour; the significant smiles, the subdued 'Good mornings,' and the silence that followed, so jarred upon her nerves that, save for curiosity, she would have turned and left the room.

Mrs Banting (generally at this hour busy in other parts of the house) inquired with a sympathetic air whether she would take porridge; the others awaited her reply as if it were a matter of general interest. Miss Jewell abruptly demanded an egg. The awkward pause was broken by a high falsetto.

'I believe you know who it is all the time, Mr Drake,' said Miss Ayres, addressing the one man present.

'I assure you I don't. Upon my word, I don't. The whole thing astonishes me.'

Resolutely silent, Miss Jewell listened to a conversation the drift of which remained dark to her, until some one spoke the name 'Mr Cheeseman'; then it was with difficulty that she controlled her face and her tongue. The servant brought her an egg. She struck it clumsily with the edge of her spoon and asked in an affected drawl: 'What are you people talking about?'

Mrs Sleath, smiling maliciously, took it upon herself to reply.

'Mr Drake has had a letter from Mr Cheeseman. He writes that he's engaged, but doesn't say who to. Delicious mystery, isn't it ?'

The listener tried to swallow a piece of bread and butter, and seemed to struggle with a constriction of the throat. Then, looking round the table, she said with contemptuous pleasantry:

'Some lodging−house servant, I shouldn't wonder.'

Everyone laughed. Then Mr Drake declared he must be off, and rose from the table. The ladies also moved, and in a minute or two Miss Jewell sat at her breakfast alone.

She was a tall, slim person, with unremarkable, not ill−moulded features. Nature meant her to be graceful in form and pleasantly feminine of countenance; unwholesome habit of mind and body was responsible for the defects that now appeared in her. She had no colour, no flesh; but an agreeable smile would well have become her lips, and her eyes needed only the illumination of healthy thought to be more than commonly attractive. A few months would see the close of her twenty−ninth year; but Mrs Banting's boarders, with some excuse, judged her on the wrong side of thirty.

Her meal, a sad pretence, was soon finished. She went to the window and stood there for five minutes looking at the cabs and pedestrians in the sunny street. Then, with the languid step which had become natural to her, she

ascended the stairs and turned into the drawing−room. Here, as she had expected, two ladies sat in close conversation. Without heeding them, she walked to the piano, selected a sheet of music, and sat down to play.

Presently, whilst she drummed with vigour on the keys, some one approached; she looked up and saw Mrs Banting; the other persons had left the room.

'If it's true,' murmured Mrs Banting with genuine kindliness on her flabby lips, 'all I can say is that it's shameful shameful!'

Miss Jewell stared at her.

'What do you mean?'

'Mr Cheeseman to go and '

'I don't understand you. What is it to me?'

The words were thrown out almost fiercely, and a crash on the piano drowned whatever Mrs Banting meant to utter in reply. Miss Jewell now had the drawing−room to herself.

She 'practised' for half an hour, careering through many familiar pieces with frequent mechanical correction of time−honoured blunders. When at length she was going up to her room, a grinning servant handed her a letter which had just arrived. A glance at the envelope told her from whom it came, and in privacy she at once opened it. The writer's address was Glasgow.

My Dear Rosamund

[began the letter], I can't understand why you write in such a nasty way. For some time now your letters have been horrid. I don't show them to William because if I did he would get into a tantrum. What I have to say to you now is this, that we simply can't go on sending you the money. We haven't it to spare, and that's the plain truth. You think we're rolling in money, and it's no use telling you we are not. William said last night that you must find some way of supporting yourself, and I can only say the same. You are a lady and had a thorough good education, and I am sure you have only to exert yourself. William says I may promise you a five pound note twice a year, but more than that you must not expect. Now do just think over your position

She threw the sheet of paper aside, and sat down to brood miserably. This little back bedroom, at no time conducive to good spirits, had seen Rosamund in many a dreary or exasperated mood; to−day it beheld her on the very verge of despair. Illuminated texts of Scripture spoke to her from the walls in vain; portraits of admired clergymen smiled vainly from the mantelpiece. She was conscious only of a dirty carpet, an ill−made bed, faded curtains, and a window that looked out on nothing. One cannot expect much for a guinea a week, when it includes board and lodging; the bedroom was at least a refuge, but even that, it seemed, would henceforth be denied her. Oh, the selfishness of people! And oh, the perfidy of man!

For eight years, since the breaking up of her home, Rosamund had lived in London boarding−houses. To begin with, she could count on a sufficient income, resulting from property in which she had a legitimate share. Owing to various causes, the value of this property had steadily diminished, until at length she became dependent upon the subsidies of kinsfolk; for more than a twelvemonth now, the only person able and willing to continue such remittances had been her married sister, and Rosamund had hardly known what it was to have a shilling of pocket−money. From time to time she thought feebly and confusedly of 'doing something,' but her aims were so vague, her capabilities so inadequate that she always threw aside the intention in sheer hopelessness. Whatever will she might once have possessed had evaporated in the boarding−house atmosphere. It was hard to believe that

her brother−in−law would ever withhold the poor five pounds a month. And what is the use of boarding−houses if not to renew indefinitely the hope of marriage?

She was not of the base order of women. Conscience yet lived in her, and drew support from religion; something of modesty, of self respect, still clad her starving soul. Ignorance and ill−luck had once or twice thrown her into such society as may be found in establishments outwardly respectable; she trembled and fled. Even in such a house as this of Mrs Banting's, she had known sickness of disgust. Herself included, four single women abode here at the present time; and the scarcely disguised purpose of every one of them was to entrap a marriageable man. In the others, it seemed to her detestable, and she hated all three, even as they in their turn detested her. Rosamund flattered herself with the persuasion that she did not aim merely at marriage and a subsistence; she would not marry any one; her desire was for sympathy, true companionship. In years gone by she had used to herself a more sacred word; nowadays the homely solace seemed enough. And of late a ray of hope had glimmered upon her dusty path. Mr Cheeseman, with his plausible airs, his engaging smile, had won something more than her confidence; an acquaintance of six months, ripening at length to intimacy, justified her in regarding him with sanguine emotion. They had walked together in Kensington Gardens; they had exchanged furtive and significant glances at table and elsewhere; everyone grew aware of the mutual preference. It shook her with a painful misgiving when Mr Cheeseman went away for his holiday and spoke no word; but probably he would write. He had written to his friend Drake; and all was over.

Her affections suffered, but that was not the worst. Her pride had never received so cruel a blow.

After a life of degradation which might well have unsexed her, Rosamund remained a woman. The practice of affectations numberless had taught her one truth, that she could never hope to charm save by reliance upon her feminine qualities. Boardinghouse girls, such numbers of whom she had observed, seemed all intent upon disowning their womanhood; they cultivated masculine habits, wore as far as possible male attire, talked loud slang, threw scorn (among themselves at all events) upon domestic virtues; and not a few of them seemed to profit by the prevailing fashion. Rosamund had tried these tactics, always with conscious failure. At other times, and vastly to her relief, she aimed in precisely the opposite direction, encouraging herself in feminine extremes. She would talk with babbling naïveté, exaggerate the languor induced by idleness, lack of exercise, and consequent ill−health; betray timidities and pruderies, let fall a pious phrase, rise of a morning for 'early celebration' and let the fact be known. These and the like extravagances had appeared to fascinate Mr Cheeseman, who openly professed his dislike for androgynous persons. And Rosamund enjoyed the satisfaction of moderate sincerity. Thus, or very much in this way, would she be content to live. Romantic passion she felt to be beyond her scope. Long ago ah! perhaps long ago, when she first knew Geoffrey Hunt

The name as it crossed her mind, suggested an escape from the insufferable ennui and humiliation of the hours till evening. It must be half a year since she called upon the Hunts, her only estimable acquaintances in or near London. They lived at Teddington, and the railway fare was always a deterrent; nor did she care much for Mrs Hunt and her daughters, who of late years had grown reserved with her, as if uneasy about her mode of life. True, they were not at all snobbish; homely, though well−to−do people; but they had such strict views, and could not understand the existence of a woman less energetic than themselves. In her present straits, which could hardly be worse, their ;;j counsel might prove of value; though she doubted her courage when it came to making confessions.

She would do without luncheon (impossible to sit at table with those 'creatures') and hope to make up for it at tea; in truth, appetite was not likely to trouble her. Then for dress. Wearily she compared this garment with that, knowing beforehand that all were out of fashion and more or less shabby. Oh, what did it matter! She had come to beggary, the result that might have been foreseen long ago. Her faded costume suited fitly enough with her fortunes nay, with her face. For just then she caught a sight of herself in the glass, and shrank. A lump choked her: looking desperately as if for help, for pity, through gathering tears, she saw the Bible verse on the nearest wall: 'Come unto me ' Her heart became that of a woeful child: she put her hands before her face, and prayed in

the old, simple words of childhood.

As her call must not be made before half−past three, she could not set out upon the journey forthwith; but it was a relief to get away from the house. In this bright weather, Kensington Gardens, not far away, seemed a natural place for loitering, but the alleys would remind her too vividly of late companionship; she walked in another direction, sauntered for an hour by the shop windows of Westbourne Grove, and, when she felt tired, sat at the railway station until it was time to start. At Teddington, half−a−mile's walk lay before her; though she felt no hunger, long abstinence and the sun's heat taxed her strength to the point of exhaustion; on reaching her friends' door, she stood trembling with nervousness and fatigue. The door opened, and to her dismay she learnt that Mrs Hunt was away from home. Happily, the servant added that Miss Caroline was in the garden.

'I'll go round,' said Rosamund at once. 'Don't trouble '

The pathway round the pleasant little house soon brought her within view of a young lady who sat in a garden chair, sewing. But Miss Caroline was not alone; near to her stood a man in shirt sleeves and bare−headed, vigorously sawing a plank; he seemed to be engaged in the construction of a summer−house, and Rosamund took him at first sight for a mechanic, but when he turned round, exhibiting a ruddy face all agleam with health and good humour, she recognised the young lady's brother, Geoffrey Hunt. He, as though for the moment puzzled, looked fixedly at her.

'Oh, Miss Jewell, how glad I am to see you!'

Enlightened by his sister's words, Geoffrey dropped the saw, and stepped forward with still heartier greeting. Had civility permitted, he might easily have explained his doubts. It was some six years since his last meeting with Rosamund, and she had changed not a little; he remembered her as a graceful and rather pretty girl, with life in her, even if it ran for the most part to silliness, gaily dressed, sprightly of manner; notwithstanding the account he had received of her from his relatives, it astonished him to look upon this limp, faded woman. In Rosamund's eyes, Geoffrey was his old self, perhaps a trifle more stalwart, and if anything handsomer, but with just the same light in his eyes, the same smile on his bearded face, the same cordiality of utterance. For an instant, she compared him with Mr Cheeseman, and flushed for very shame. Unable to command her voice, she stammered incoherent nothings; only when a seat supported her weary body did she lose the dizziness which had threatened downright collapse; then she closed her eyes, and forgot everything but the sense of rest.

Geoffrey drew on his coat, and spoke jestingly of his amateur workmanship. Such employment, however, seemed not inappropriate to him, for his business was that of a timber merchant. Of late years he had lived abroad, for the most part in Canada. Rosamund learnt that at present he was having a longish holiday.

'And you go back to Canada?'

This she asked when Miss Hunt had stepped into the house to call for tea. Geoffrey answered that it was doubtful; for various reasons he rather hoped to remain in England, but the choice did not altogether rest with him.

'At all events' she gave a poor little laugh 'you haven't pined in exile.'

'Not a bit of it. I have always had plenty of hard work the one thing needful.'

'Yes I remember you always used to say that. And I used to protest. You granted, I think, that it might be different with women.'

'Did I?'

He wished to add something to the point, but refrained out of compassion. It was clear to him that Miss Jewell, at all events, would have been none the worse for exacting employment. Mrs Hunt had spoken of her with the disapprobation natural in a healthy, active woman of the old school, and Geoffrey himself could not avoid a contemptuous judgment.

'You have lived in London all this time?' he asked, before she could speak.

'Yes. Where else should I live? My sister at Glasgow doesn't want me there, and and there's nobody else, you know.' She tried to laugh. 'I have friends in London well, that is to say at all events I'm not quite solitary.'

The man smiled, and could not allow her to suspect how profoundly he pitied such a condition. Caroline Hunt had reappeared; she began to talk of her mother and sister, who were enjoying themselves in Wales. Her own holiday would come upon their return; Geoffrey was going to take her to Switzerland.

Tea arrived just as Rosamund was again sinking into bodily faintness and desolation of spirit. It presently restored her, but she could hardly converse. She kept hoping that Caroline would offer her some invitation to lunch, to dine, anything; but as yet no such thought seemed to occur to the young hostess. Suddenly the aspect of things was altered by the arrival of new callers, a whole family, man, wife and three children, strangers to Rosamund. For a time it seemed as if she must go away without any kind of solace; for Geoffrey had quitted her, and she sat alone. On the spur of irrational resentment, she rose and advanced to Miss Hunt.

'Oh, but you are not going! I want you to stay and have dinner with us, if you can. Would it make you too late?'

Rosamund flushed and could scarce contain her delight. In a moment she was playing with the youngest of the children, and even laughing aloud, so that Geoffrey glanced curiously towards her. Even the opportunity of private conversation which she had not dared to count upon was granted before long; when the callers had departed Caroline excused herself, and left her brother alone with the guest for half an hour. There was no time to be lost; Rosamund broached almost immediately the subject uppermost in her mind.

'Mr Hunt, I know how dreadful it is to have people asking for advice, but if I might if you could have patience with me '

'I haven't much wisdom to spare,' he answered, with easy good nature.

'Oh, you are very rich in it, compared with poor me. And my position is so difficult. I want I am trying to find some way of being useful in the world. I am tired of living for myself. I seem to be such a useless creature. Surely even I must have some talent, which it's my duty to put to use! Where should I turn? Could you help me with a suggestion?'

Her words, now that she had overcome the difficulty of beginning, chased each other with breathless speed, and Geoffrey was all but constrained to seriousness; he took it for granted, however, that Miss Jewell frequently used this language; doubtless it was part of her foolish, futile existence to talk of her soul's welfare, especially in tête−à−tête with unmarried men. The truth he did not suspect, and Rosamund could not bring herself to convey it in plain words.

'I do so envy the people who have something to live for!' Thus she panted. 'I fear I have never had a purpose in life I'm sure I don't know why. Of course I'm only a woman, but even women nowadays are doing so much. You don't despise their efforts, do you?'

'Not indiscriminately.'

'If I could feel myself a profitable member of society! I want to be lifted above my wretched self. Is there no great end to which I could devote myself?'

Her phrases grew only more magniloquent, and all the time she was longing for courage to say: 'How can I earn money?' Geoffrey, confirmed in the suspicion that she talked only for effect, indulged his natural humour.

'I'm such a groveller, Miss Jewell. I never knew these aspirations. I see the world mainly as cubic feet of timber.'

'No, no, you won't make me believe that. I know you have ideals!'

'That word reminds me of poor old Halliday. You remember Halliday, don't you?'

In vexed silence, Rosamund shook her head.

'But I think you must have met him, in the old days. A tall, fair man no? He talked a great deal about ideals, and meant to move the world. We lost sight of each other when I first left England, and only met again a day or two ago. He is married, and has three children, and looks fifty years old, though he can't be much more than thirty. He took me to see his wife they live at Forest Hill.'

Rosamund was not listening, and the speaker became aware of it. Having a purpose in what he was about to say, he gently claimed her attention.

'I think Mrs Halliday is the kind of woman who would interest you. If ever any one had a purpose in life she has.'

'Indeed? And what?' j

'To keep house admirably, and bring up her children as well as possible, on an income which would hardly supply some women with shoe−leather.'

'Oh, that's very dreadful!'

'Very fine, it seems to me. I never saw a woman for whom I could feel more respect. Halliday and she suit each other perfectly; they would be the happiest people in England if they had any money. As he walked back with me to the station he talked about their difficulties. They can't afford to engage a good servant (if one exists nowadays), and cheap sluts have driven them frantic, so that Mrs Halliday does everything with her own hands.'

'It must be awful.'

'Pretty hard, no doubt. She is an educated woman otherwise, of course, she couldn't, and wouldn't manage it. And, by the by'

he paused for quiet emphasis 'she has a sister, unmarried, who lives in the country and does nothing at all. It occurs to one doesn't it? that the idle sister might pretty easily find scope for her energies.'

Rosamund stared at the ground. She was not so dull as to lose the significance of this story, and she imagined that Geoffrey reflected upon herself in relation to her own sister. She broke the long silence by saying awkwardly:

'I'm sure I would never allow a sister of mine to lead such a life.'

'I don't think you would,' replied the other. And, though he spoke genially, Rosamund felt it a very moderate declaration of his belief in her. Overcome by strong feeling, she exclaimed:

'I would do anything to be of use in the world. You don't think I mean it, but I do, Mr Hunt. I '

Her voice faltered; the all important word stuck in her throat. And at that moment Geoffrey rose.

'Shall we walk about? Let me show you my mother's fernery; she is very proud of it.'

That was the end of intimate dialogue. Rosamund felt aggrieved, and tried to shape sarcasms, but the man's imperturbable good humour soon made her forget everything save the pleasure of being in his company. It was a bitter−sweet evening, yet perhaps enjoyment predominated. Of course, Geoffrey would conduct her to the station; she never lost sight of this hope. There would be another opportunity for plain speech. But her desire was frustrated; at the time of departure, Caroline said that they might as well all go together. Rosamund could have wept for chagrin.

She returned to the detested house, the hateful little bedroom, and there let her tears have way. In dread lest the hysterical sobs should be overheard, she all but stifled herself.

Then, as if by blessed inspiration, a great thought took shape in her despairing mind. At the still hour of night she suddenly sat up in the darkness, which seemed illumined by a wondrous hope. A few minutes motionless; the mental light grew dazzling; she sprang out of bed, partly dressed herself, and by the rays of a candle sat down to write a letter:

Dear Mr Hunt,

Yesterday I did not tell you the whole truth. I have nothing to live upon, and I must find employment or starve. My brother−in−law has been supporting me for a long time I am ashamed to tell you, but I will and he can do so no longer. I wanted to ask you for practical advice, but I did not make my meaning clear. For all that, you did advise me, and very well indeed. I wish to offer myself as domestic help to poor Mrs Halliday. Do you think she would have me? I ask no wages only food and lodging. I will work harder and better than any general servant I will indeed. My health is not bad, and I am fairly strong. Don't don't throw scorn on this! Will you recommend me to Mrs Halliday or ask Mrs Hunt to do so? I beg that you will. Please write to me at once, and say yes. I shall be ever grateful to you.

Very sincerely yours, ROSAMUND JEWELL

This she posted as early as possible. The agonies she endured in waiting for a reply served to make her heedless of boardinghouse spite, and by the last post that same evening came Geoffrey's letter. He wrote that her suggestion was startling. 'Your motive seems to me very praiseworthy, but whether the thing would be possible is another question. I dare not take upon myself the responsibility of counselling you to such a step. Pray, take time, and think. I am most grieved to hear of your difficulties, but is there not some better way out of them?'

Yes, there it was! Geoffrey Hunt could not believe in her power to do anything praiseworthy. So had it been six years ago, when she would have gone through flood and flame to win his admiration. But in those days she was a girlish simpleton; she had behaved idiotically. It should be different now; were it at the end of her life, she would prove to him that he had slighted her unjustly.

Brave words, but Rosamund attached some meaning to them. The woman in her the ever−prevailing woman was wrought by fears and vanities, urgencies and desires, to a strange point of exaltation. Forthwith, she wrote again: 'Send me, I entreat you, Mrs Halliday's address. I will go and see her. No, I can't do anything but work with my hands. I am no good for anything else. If Mrs Halliday refuses me, I shall go as a servant into some other house. Don't mock at me; I don't deserve it. Write at once.'

Till midnight she wept and prayed.

Geoffrey sent her the address, adding a few dry words: 'If you are willing and able to carry out this project, your ambition ought to be satisfied. You will have done your part towards solving one of the gravest problems of the time.' Rosamund did not at once understand; when the writer's meaning grew clear, she kept repeating the words, as though they were a new gospel. Yes! she would be working nobly, helping to show a way out of the great servant difficulty. It would be an example to poor ladies, like herself, who were ashamed of honest work. And Geoffrey Hunt was looking on. He must needs marvel; perhaps he would admire greatly; perhaps oh, oh!

Of course, she found a difficulty in wording her letter to the lady who had never heard of her, and of whom she knew practically nothing. But zeal surmounted obstacles. She began by saying that she was in search of domestic employment, and that, through her friends at Teddington, she had heard of Mrs Halliday as a lady who might consider her application. Then followed an account of herself, tolerably ingenuous, and an amplification of the phrases she had addressed to Geoffrey Hunt. On an afterthought she enclosed a stamped envelope.

Whilst the outcome remained dubious, Rosamund's behaviour to her fellow−boarders was a pattern of offensiveness. She no longer shunned them seemed, indeed, to challenge their observation for the sake of meeting it with arrogant defiance. She rudely interrupted conversations, met sneers with virulent retorts, made herself the common enemy. Mrs Banting was appealed to; ladies declared that they could not live in a house where they were exposed to vulgar insult. When nearly a week had passed Mrs Banting found it necessary to speak in private with Miss Jewell, and to make a plaintive remonstrance. Rosamund's flashing eye and contemptuous smile foretold the upshot.

'Spare yourself the trouble, Mrs Banting. I leave the house tomorrow.'

'Oh, but '

'There is no need for another word. Of course, I shall pay the week in lieu of notice. I am busy, and have no time to waste.'

The day before, she had been to Forest Hill, had seen Mrs Halliday, and entered into an engagement. At midday on the morrow she arrived at the house which was henceforth to be her home, the scene of her labours.

Sheer stress of circumstance accounted for Mrs Halliday's decision. Geoffrey Hunt, a dispassionate observer, was not misled in forming so high an opinion of his friend's wife. Only a year or two older than Rosamund, Mrs Halliday had the mind and the temper which enable woman to front life as a rational combatant, instead of vegetating as a more or less destructive parasite. Her voice declared her; it fell easily upon a soft, clear note; the kind of voice that expresses good humour and reasonableness, and many other admirable qualities; womanly, but with no suggestion of the feminine gamut; a voice that was never likely to test its compass in extremes. She had enjoyed a country breeding; something of liberal education assisted her natural intelligence; thanks to a good mother, she discharged with ability and content the prime domestic duties. But physically she was not inexhaustible, and the laborious, anxious years had taxed her health. A woman of the ignorant class may keep house, and bring up a family, with her own hands; she has to deal only with the simplest demands of life; her home is a shelter, her food is primitive, her children live or die, according to the law of natural selection. Infinitely more complex, more trying, is the task of the educated wife and mother; if to conscientiousness be added enduring poverty, it means not seldom an early death. Fatigue and self−denial had set upon Mrs Halliday's features a stamp which could never be obliterated. Her husband, her children, suffered illnesses; she, the indispensable, durst not confess even to a headache. Such servants as from time to time she had engaged merely increased her toil and anxieties; she demanded, to be sure, the diligence and efficiency which in this new day can scarce be found among the menial ranks; what she obtained was sluttish stupidity, grotesque presumption, and every form of female viciousness. Rosamund Jewell, honest in her extravagant fervour, seemed at first a mocking

apparition; only after a long talk, when Rosamund's ingenuousness had forcibly impressed her, would Mrs Halliday agree to an experiment. Miss Jewell was to live as one of the family; she did not ask this, but consented to it. She was to receive ten pounds a year, for Mrs Halliday insisted that payment there must be.

'I can't cook,' Rosamund had avowed. 'I never boiled a potato in my life. If you teach me, I shall be grateful to you.'

'The cooking I can do myself, and you can learn if you like.'

'I should think I might wash and scrub by the light of nature?'

'Perhaps. Good−will and ordinary muscles will go a long way.'

'I can't sew, but I will learn.'

Mrs Halliday reflected.

'You know that you are exchanging freedom for a hard and a very dull life.'

'My life has been hard and dull enough, if you only knew. The work will seem hard at first, no doubt, but I don't think I shall be dull with you.'

Mrs Halliday held out her work−worn hand, and received a clasp of the fingers attenuated by idleness.

It was a poor little house; built of course with sham display of spaciousness in front, and huddling discomfort at the rear. Mrs Halliday's servants never failed to urge the smallness of the rooms as an excuse for leaving them dirty; they had invariably been accustomed to lordly abodes, where their virtues could expand. The furniture was homely and no more than sufficient, but here and there on the walls shone a glimpse of summer landscape, done in better days by the master of the house, who knew something of various arts, but could not succeed in that of money−making. Rosamund bestowed her worldly goods in a tiny chamber which Mrs Halliday did her best to make inviting and comfortable; she had less room here than at Mrs Banting's, but the cleanliness of surroundings would depend upon herself, and she was not likely to spend much time by the bedside in weary discontent. Halliday, who came home each evening at half−past six, behaved to her on their first meeting with grave, even respectful, courtesy, his tone flattered Rosamund's ear; and nothing could have been more seemly than the modest gentleness of her replies.

At the close of the first day, she wrote to Geoffrey Hunt: 'I do believe I have made a good beginning. Mrs Halliday is perfect and I quite love her. Please do not answer this; I only write because I feel that I owe it to your kindness. I shall never be able to thank you enough.'

When Geoffrey obeyed her and kept silence, she felt that he acted prudently; perhaps Mrs Halliday might see the letter, and know his hand. But none the less she was disappointed.

Rosamund soon learnt the measure of her ignorance in domestic affairs. Thoroughly practical and systematic, her friend Rosamund soon learnt the measure of her ignorance in (this was to be their relation) set down a scheme of the day's and the week's work; it made a clear apportionment between them, with no preponderance of unpleasant drudgery for the new−comer's share. With astonishment, which she did not try to conceal, Rosamund awoke to the complexity and endlessness of home duties even in so small a house as this.

'Then you have no leisure?' she exclaimed, in sympathy, not remonstrance.

'I feel at leisure when I'm sewing and when I take the children out. And there's Sunday.'

The eldest child was about five years old, the others three and a twelvemonth, respectively. Their ailments gave a good deal of trouble, and it often happened that Mrs Halliday was awake with one of them the greater part of the night. For children Rosamund had no natural tenderness; to endure the constant sound of their voices proved, in the beginning, her hardest trial, but the resolve to school herself in every particular soon enabled her to tend the little ones with much patience, and insensibly she grew fond of them. Until she had overcome her awkwardness in every task, it cost her no little effort to get through the day; at bedtime she ached in every joint, and morning oppressed her with a sick lassitude. Conscious, however, of Mrs Halliday's forbearance, she would not spare herself, and it soon surprised her to discover that the rigid performance of what seemed an ignoble task brought its reward. Her first success in polishing a grate gave her more delight than she had known since childhood. She summoned her friend to look, to admire, to praise.

'Haven't I done it well? Could you do it better yourself?'

'Admirable!'

Rosamund waved her blacklead brush and tasted victory.

The process of acclimatisation naturally affected her health. In a month's time she began to fear that she must break down; she suffered painful disorders, crept out of sight to moan and shed a tear. Always faint, she had no appetite for wholesome food. Tossing on her bed at night, she said to herself a thousand times, 'I must go on, even if I die!' Her religion took the form of asceticism, and bade her rejoice in her miseries; she prayed constantly, and at times knew the solace of an infinite self−glorification. In such a mood she once said to Mrs Halliday:

'Don't you think I deserve some praise for the step I took?'

'You certainly deserve both praise and thanks from me.'

'But I mean it isn't everyone who could have done it? I've a right to feel myself superior to the ordinary run of girls?'

The other gave her an embarrassed look, and murmured a few satisfying words. Later in the same day she talked to Rosamund about her health, and insisted on making certain changes which allowed her to take more open−air exercise. The result of this was a marked improvement; at the end of the second month Rosamund began to feel and look better than she had done for several years. Work no longer exhausted her. And the labour in itself seemed to diminish a natural consequence of perfect co−operation between the two women. Mrs Halliday declared that life had never been so easy for her as now; she knew the delight of rest in which there was no self−reproach. But, for sufficient reasons, she did not venture to express to Rosamund all the gratitude that was due.

About Christmas, a letter from Forest Hill arrived at Teddington; this time it did not forbid a reply. It spoke of struggles, sufferings, achievements. 'Do I not deserve a word of praise? Have I not done something, as you said, towards solving the great question? Don't you believe in me a little?' Four more weeks went by, and brought no answer. Then one evening, in a mood of bitterness, Rosamund took a singular step; she wrote to Mr Cheeseman. She had heard nothing of him, had utterly lost sight of the world in which they met; but his place of business was known to her, and thither she addressed the note. A few lines only: 'You are a very strange person, and I really take no interest whatever in you. But I have sometimes thought you would like to ask my forgiveness. If so, write to the above address, my sister's. I am living in London, and enjoying myself, but I don't choose to let you know where.' Having an opportunity on the morrow, Sunday, she posted this in a remote district.

The next day, a letter arrived for her from Canada. Here was the explanation of Geoffrey's silence. His words could hardly have been more cordial, but there were so few of them. On nourishment such as this no illusion could support itself; for the moment Rosamund renounced every hope. Well, she was no worse off than before the renewal of their friendship. But could it be called friendship? Geoffrey's mother and sisters paid no heed to her; they doubtless considered that she had finally sunk below their horizon; and Geoffrey himself, for all his fine words, most likely thought the same at heart. Of course they would never meet again. And for the rest of her life she would be nothing more than a domestic servant in genteel disguise happy were the disguise preserved.

However, she had provided a distraction for her gloomy thoughts. With no more delay than was due to its transmission by way of Glasgow, there came a reply from Mr Cheeseman: two sheets of notepaper. The writer prostrated himself; he had been guilty of shameful behaviour; even Miss Jewel!, with all her sweet womanliness, must find it hard to think of him with charity. But let her remember what 'the poets' had written about Remorse, and apply to him the most harrowing of their descriptions. He would be frank with her; he would 'a plain unvarnished tale unfold.' Whilst away for his holiday he by chance encountered one with whom, in days gone by, he had held tender relations. She was a young widow; his foolish heart was touched; he sacrificed honour to the passing emotion. Their marriage would be delayed, for his affairs were just now anything but flourishing. 'Dear Miss Jewell, will you not be my friend, my sister? Alas, I am not a happy man; but it is too late to lament.' And so on to the squeezed signature at the bottom of the last page.

Rosamund allowed a fortnight to pass not before writing, but before her letter was posted. She used a tone of condescension, mingled with airy banter. 'From my heart I feel for you, but, as you say, there is no help. I am afraid you are very impulsive yet I thought that was a fault of youth. Do not give way to despair. I really don't know whether I shall feel it right to let you hear again, but, if it soothes you, I don't think there would be any harm in your letting me know the cause of your troubles.'

This odd correspondence, sometimes with intervals of three weeks, went on until late summer. Rosamund would soon have been a year with Mrs Halliday. Her enthusiasm had long since burnt itself out; she was often a prey to vapours, to cheerless lassitude, even to the spirit of revolt against things in general, but on the whole she remained a thoroughly useful member of the household; the great experiment might fairly be called successful. At the end of August it was decided that the children must have sea air; their parents would take them away for a fortnight. When the project began to be talked of, Rosamund, perceiving a domestic difficulty, removed it by asking whether she would be at liberty to visit her sister in Scotland. Thus were things arranged.

Some days before that appointed for the general departure, Halliday received a letter which supplied him with a subject of conversation at breakfast.

'Hunt is going to be married,' he remarked to his wife just as Rosamund was bringing in the children's porridge.

Mrs Halliday looked at her helper for no more special reason than the fact of Rosamund's acquaintance with the Hunt family; she perceived a change of expression, an emotional play of feature, and at once averted her eyes.

'Where? In Canada?' she asked, off−hand.

'No, he's in England. But the lady is a Canadian. I wonder he troubles to tell me. Hunt's a queer fellow. When we meet, once in two years, he treats me like a long lost brother; but I don't think he'd care a bit if he never saw me or heard of me again.'

'It's a family characteristic,' interposed Rosamund with a dry laugh.

That day she moved about with the gait and the eyes of a somnambulist. She broke a piece of crockery, and became hysterical over it. Her afternoon leisure she spent in the bedroom, and at night she professed a headache

which obliged her to retire early.

A passion of wrath inflamed her; as vehement though so utterly unreasonable as in the moment when she learnt the perfidy of Mr Cheeseman. She raged at her folly in having submitted to social degradation on the mere hint of a man who uttered it in a spirit purely contemptuous. The whole hateful world had conspired against her. She banned her kinsfolk and all her acquaintances, especially the Hunts; she felt bitter even against the Hallidays unsympathetic, selfish people, utterly indifferent to her private griefs, regarding her as a mere domestic machine. She would write to Geoffrey Hunt, and let him know very plainly what she thought of his behaviour in urging her to become a servant. Would such a thought have ever occurred to a gentleman! And her poor life was wasted, oh! oh! She would soon be thirty thirty! The glass mocked her with savage truth. And she had not even a decent dress to put on Self−neglect had made her appearance vulgar; her manners, her speech, doubtless, had lost their note of social superiority. Oh, it was hard! She wished for death, cried for divine justice in a better world.

On the morning of release, she travelled to London Bridge, ostensibly en route for the north. But, on alighting, she had her luggage taken to the cloak room, and herself went by omnibus to the West End. By noon she had engaged a lodging, one room in a street where she had never yet lived. And hither before night was transferred her property.

The next day she spent about half of her ready money in the purchase of clothing cheap, but such as the self−respect of a 'lady' imperatively demands. She bought cosmetics; she set to work at removing from her hands the traces of ignoble occupation. On the day that followed Sunday early in the afternoon, she repaired to a certain corner of Kensington Gardens, where she came face to face with Mr Cheeseman.

'I have come,' said Rosamund, in a voice of nervous exhilaration which tried to subdue itself. 'Please to consider that it is more than you could expect.'

'It is! A thousand times more! You are goodness itself.'

In Rosamund's eyes the man had not improved since a year ago. The growth of a beard made him look older, and he seemed in indifferent health; but his tremulous delight, his excessive homage, atoned for the defect. She, on the other hand, was so greatly changed for the better, that Cheeseman beheld her with no less wonder than admiration. Her brisk step, her upright bearing, her clear eye, and pure−toned skin contrasted remarkably with the lassitude and sallowness he remembered; at this moment, too, she had a pleasant rosiness of cheek which made her girlish, virginal. All was set off by the new drapery and millinery, which threw a shade upon Cheeseman's very respectable, but somewhat time−honoured, Sunday costume.

They spent several hours together, Cheeseman talking of his faults, his virtues, his calamities, and his hopes, like the impulsive, well−meaning, but nerveless fellow that he was. Rosamund gathered from it all, as she had vaguely learnt from his recent correspondence, that the alluring widow no longer claimed him; but he did not enter into details on this delicate subject. They had tea at a restaurant by Notting Hill Gate; Miss Jewel! appearing indefatigable, they again strolled in unfrequented ways. At length was uttered the question for which Rosamund had long ago prepared her reply.

'You cannot expect me,' she said sweetly, 'to answer at once.'

'Of course not! I shouldn't have dared to hope '

He choked and swallowed; a few beads of perspiration shining on his troubled face.

'You have my address; most likely I shall spend a week or two there. Of course you may write. I shall probably go to my sister's in Scotland, for the autumn '

'Oh! don't say that don't! To lose you again so soon '

'I only said "probably" '

'Oh, thank you! To go so far away and the autumn; just when I have a little freedom; the very best time if I dared to hope such a thing '

Rosamund graciously allowed him to bear her company as far as to the street in which she lived.

A few days later she wrote to Mrs Halliday, heading her letter with the Glasgow address. She lamented the sudden impossibility of returning to her domestic duties. Something had happened. 'In short, dear Mrs Halliday, I am going to be married. I could not give you warning of this, it has come so unexpectedly. Do forgive me! I so earnestly hope you will find some one to take my place, some one better and more of a help to you. I know I haven't been much use. Do write to me at Glasgow and say I may still regard you as a dear friend.'

This having been dispatched, she sat musing over her prospects. Mr Cheeseman had honestly confessed the smallness of his income; he could barely count upon a hundred and fifty a year; but things might improve. She did not dislike him no, she did not dislike him. He would be a very tractable husband. Compared, of course, with

A letter was brought up to her room. She knew the flowing commercial hand, and broke the envelope without emotion. Two sheets three sheets and a half. But what was all this? 'Despair . . . thoughts of self−destruction . . . ignoble publicity . . . practical ruin . . . impossible . . . despise and forget . . . Dante's hell . . . deeper than ever plummet sounded . . . forever! . . .' So again he had deceived her! He must have known that the widow was dangerous; his reticence was mere shuffling. His behaviour to that other woman had perhaps exceeded in baseness his treatment of herself; else, how could he be so sure that a jury would give her 'ruinous damages'? Or was it all a mere illustration of a man's villainy? Why should not she also sue for damages? Why not ? Why not?

The three months that followed were a time of graver peril, of darker crises, than Rosamund, with all her slip−slop experiences, had ever known. An observer adequately supplied with facts, psychological and material, would more than once have felt that it depended on the mere toss of a coin whether she kept or lost her social respectability. She sounded all the depths possible to such a mind and heart save only that from which there could have been no redemption. A saving memory lived within her, and, at length, in the yellow gloom of a November morning her tarnished, draggle−tailed finery thrown aside for the garb she had worn in lowliness Rosamund betook herself to Forest Hill. The house of the Hallidays looked just as usual. She slunk up to the door, rang the bell, and waited in fear of a strange face. There appeared Mrs Halliday herself. The surprised but friendly smile at once proved her forgiveness of Rosamund's desertion. She had written, indeed, with calm good sense, hoping only that all would be well.

'Let me see you alone, Mrs Halliday. How glad I am to sit in this room again! Who is helping you now?'

'No one. Help such as I want is not easy to find.'

'Oh, let me come back! I am not married. No, no, there is nothing to be ashamed of. I am no worse than I ever was. I'll tell you everything, the whole silly, wretched story.'

She told it, blurring only her existence of the past three months.

'I would have come before, but I was so bitterly ashamed. I ran away so disgracefully. Now I'm penniless all but suffering hunger. Will you have me again, Mrs Halliday? I've been a horrid fool, but I do believe for the last time in my life. Try me again, dear Mrs Halliday!'

There was no need of the miserable tears, the impassioned pleading. Her home received her as though she had been absent but for an hour. That night she knelt again by her bedside in the little room, and at seven o'clock next morning she was lighting fires, sweeping floors, mute in thankfulness.

Halliday heard the story from his wife, and shook a dreamy, compassionate head.

'For goodness' sake,' urged the practical woman, 'don't let her think she's a martyr.'

'No, no; but the poor girl should have her taste of happiness.'

'Of course I'm sorry for her, but there are plenty of people more to be pitied. Work she must, and there's only one kind of work she's fit for. It's no small thing to find your vocation is it? Thousands of such women all meant by nature to scrub and cook live and die miserably because they think themselves too good for it.'

'The whole social structure is rotten!'

'It'll last our time,' rejoined Mrs Halliday, as she gave a little laugh and stretched her weary arms.