

A Freak of Nature

George Gissing

Table of Contents

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| <u>A Freak of Nature</u> | 1 |
| <u>George Gissing</u> | 1 |

A Freak of Nature

George Gissing

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

No more respectable man paid rates in Holloway. His house stood in a street unbroken by shop or licensed victualler's; a street with railings and areas, and only one genteel notice of Apartments to let; where tradesmen called for orders, and the itinerant vendor of coals or vegetables had no chance of a customer.

Mr Brogden looked back upon sixteen years of married life; his age was now forty, and he had eight children. It was one of the sights of the street, when, on a Sunday morning, Mr and Mrs Brogden set forth for church, drawing after them their retinue of five youngsters, the three of tenderest years being left at home for the maid-of-all-work to look after whilst she cooked the dinner. All were so nicely dressed, a pattern to Holloway households: from the father's silk hat (antiquated in form, but well preserved) to the pretty shoes of the youngest girl. Mrs Brogden's attire could not be called fashionable, but it was faultlessly neat, and such as became a self-respecting matron who has her regular seat half way down the nave. Such families, linked together, make the back-bone of English civilisation.

On Monday morning, be the weather what it might, Mr Brogden issued from his front door at an unvarying moment, cast a glance at the front of the house to see that windows were clean and curtains orderly, and walked to Holloway station, whence he had a season ticket to the City. From half-past nine to half-past five he sat in the offices of a well-known firm; and on his return by a specified train tea-dinner awaited him. At ten o'clock he went to bed.

When the sun chanced to shine, he would often have preferred to travel Citywards on the top of a Nag's Head omnibus; but this might not be. And for the simple reason that Mr Brogden could not afford the fare. His expenses were calculated, year in year out, down to the uttermost farthing; an uncovenanted tuppence would have thrown the budget into disorder. Literally, Mr Brogden durst not spend one halfpenny in gratification of a mere whim. Only by the exercise of severest economy, by the pursual of inflexible routine, could he hope to find himself solvent at the year's end. As it was, he owed nothing; and the possibility of an increase of salary helped him to face the probability of more children, and the growing demands of those already born.

Mrs Brogden was a thin, anaemic, yet wiry woman, somewhat younger than her husband. Her rigid sense of duty forbade moping and checked outbursts of temper, but was not inconsistent with ceaseless chatter in a high, querulous tone. She had altogether lost the habit of fondling her children, and for many years had uttered no word of affection to their father. This did not signify a dislike either of him or them; life had brought about such [a] state of affairs, that was all. To bear and nurse a new baby was a matter of the strictest business, to be dutifully discharged, with occasional reference to the will of God, and much more than occasional fault-finding with things domestic. Neither did Mr Brogden pretend to conjugal or paternal fervour. The phrase 'my dear' fell from his lips as a matter of course; he never addressed his wife unfeelingly, and gave her all the help that his other engagements allowed; but it was long, long, since her proximity had caused him a soft emotion, and very often indeed her voice, her countenance, told severely upon his nerves. The first child, and the second, had touched his heart; but now he regarded all with a weary kindness, or a harassing sense of responsibility.

Physically he was not a strong man, and for the last year or two he had been conscious of internal troubles which seemed to menace his mechanic health. A nervous disorder, perhaps; possibly something connected with the

A Freak of Nature

stomach. He dieted himself, but without appreciable result. Nowadays, when he rose of a morning, he generally had a slight headache, and sometimes his hand shook in an unpleasant way. Fits of mental abstraction began to worry him; he would unaccountably lose hold of a train of thought, or be unaware of remarks addressed to him. Undoubtedly, too, his wife and the children were more trying to his patience; he found himself, now and then, on the point of exclaiming angrily. The weekly revision of household accounts gave him special annoyance, accompanied as it was by Mrs Brogden's remarks on the behaviour of tradespeople and the quality of their wares.

One Saturday evening, when Mrs Brogden was discussing a grocer's bill, he suddenly experienced the strangest sensation. His brain seemed to rotate, and he clutched the table to prevent his body from likewise going round. Then a quivering fell upon his limbs, and his teeth chattered.

'Stop! Please stop!' he exclaimed, staring half wrathfully, half fearfully, at his wife.

'What's the matter?'

'I don't feel well. I can't bear this. Those bills will drive me mad.'

Mrs Brogden was rather indignant than alarmed.

'Oh, if you choose to let the grocer charge threepence for loaf-sugar '

He sprang up, and walked about the room.

'I must go out for a little turn. It's a rush of blood to the head, I think. Please don't talk to me don't!'

He hurried into the passage, seized his hat, and went forth. After a walk along Seven Sisters' Road, his strange seizure passed away. When he came home again, Mrs Brogden had gone to bed. As usual, he lay down beside her in silence.

But not to sleep. His mind was possessed with unwonted reminiscences; boyhood and bachelor days came vividly back to him. He saw himself a young fellow of somewhat warm temperament, and ambitious of success in life. He remembered peccadilloes, utterly forgotten in the routine of respectable existence. A certain Lizzie fie! And the night when he and a sportive friend tied a cord at hat-height across a gloomy suburban street. Then his resolves to become rich; the certainty that he would some day ride in his carriage; the municipal dignities he might attain.

Mrs Brogden breathed heavily. The baby cried for a minute, but went to sleep again.

In the morning he felt too unwell for church-going. All day long he struggled with a distressing inability to command his thoughts, which ran in the most singular directions for the thoughts of a respectable man on Sunday, too. In the afternoon he took a long walk, all down Caledonian Road; but his spirits were none the better for it, and perhaps were not likely to be. At nightfall, when Mrs Brogden was putting children to bed, he again rose at a sudden impulse, and stole from, rather than left, the house. To go out on Sunday without explanation to his wife was an unheard-of proceeding; he felt inspirited, oddly enough, by the sense of audacity.

This time he took the Camden Road direction, and after walking for half an hour he turned into a decent by-street, short and ill-lighted. Here the gleam of a polished door-bell caught his eye, and forthwith an extraordinary temptation awoke in him. He looked up and down the street, and saw no figure. In an instant, as though constrained by [an] irresistible motive, he gave a strong pull at the bell-handle; then rapidly strode away and vanished round the near corner.

A Freak of Nature

He was in a glow. That astounding prank had somehow done him good; it seemed to clear an obstruction from his brain. He laughed quietly and naturally, and felt disposed to skip.

In another deserted street, the spirit of mischief again demanded indulgence. This time it was a doctor's bell that he rang; and knowing that the door would be quickly opened, he sped off in delicious alarm. He ran almost into the arms of a policeman, just round the corner, and instantly, without a thought, exclaimed to him: 'Do you know there's a dreadful fire in Tottenham Court Road?'

'No, sir. Whose place?'

'Don't know. I only saw it from a distance. I'm in a hurry.'

Now his craving for sensation was appeased. At a brisk pace he returned to Holloway. On admitting himself with his latchkey, he found Mrs Brogden standing before him in the passage, her countenance indignant and wondering.

'I've had a walk, and feel better for it.'

His peremptory utterance had the natural effect. Mrs Brogden remonstrated with him for a full hour; to her the unusual was presumably the improper, and she told her husband in three score different ways that she could not understand him. Brogden did not give ear; his thoughts caused him so much amusement that with difficulty he refrained from chuckling.

But next day the headache and unsteadiness of hand were worse than ever. On his return from business, he felt most seriously out of sorts, and his wife at length perceived that he was unwell.

'I think a day or two of rest would put me up. Rest and change. In fact, I can't rest without change. I've a good mind to ask leave, and go down to my brother's.'

Mr Brogden's brother lived at a little town in Wiltshire, and thrived in a drapery business; it was some years since the two had met. After long discussions spread over a couple of days, with the result that Brogden felt himself, in all seriousness, on the verge of lunacy, he was permitted by his wife to take this step, if he could be spared from the office. Never before had he sought an undue holiday; his employers freely granted him a week. And by an early train he travelled from Paddington.

The first sight of open country afforded him vast relief. To see the end of London was like shaking off a burden which had all but crushed him. Privately he had determined to see a medical man, down in Wiltshire. Of course it worried him to think of the money he was spending; somehow it must be made up by retrenchments. But better this than to break down altogether like certain men he had known. Some ailment of the nerves, beyond a doubt. And really, remembering last Sunday, had he not been dangerously near insanity? He could not confess those disgraceful proceedings to any doctor.

Now, the further he advanced upon his journey, the less inclined he felt to go straight to his destination. Air and movement inspired him with a longing for liberty, absolute independence, which he could not enjoy at his brother's house. How delightful to spend the night somewhere alone, say at a country inn! And why not? Just this one night; then to-morrow he would proceed as he had purposed, and send the promised note to his wife.

Almost without an effort, he alighted at an unknown place some twenty miles on the hither side of the town for which he was booked. He left his bag at the station, and walked off along a rustic road; enjoying himself, though with mingled tremors, as he had never done since the eclipse of his youth in marriage. For a couple of hours he rambled in utter carelessness of locality, scarcely observing the landscape, absorbed in his exultant freedom. 'Ah!

A Freak of Nature

this is doing me good. This is what I needed. No necessity for paying doctors, after all. Already I am a new man.'

Appetite directed him at length to a pleasant village inn. He entered a room where two guests were dining: a middle-aged clergyman, with ruddy cheek and benevolent smile, and a well-dressed lad of about sixteen. They glanced at him; Mr Brogden removed his hat and bowed. He was wearing the ordinary City garb, and looked what he had every claim to be considered, a most respectable man of business. No hint of poverty appeared in his clothing; he even exhibited a gold watch-guard. As for Mr Brogden's features, they were as good as a letter of commendation from the Lord Mayor: honest in every line, impressed with habitual gravity, and suggesting a certain reputable shrewdness.

Whilst enjoying the homely meal set before him, he necessarily overheard the conversation of his fellow guests. It appeared that they were uncle and nephew, and they seemed, like Brogden himself, to be merely having a long country walk. The cleric talked very agreeably, revealing a cheery, sanguine disposition, and a pleasant simplicity of mind; his jokes were frequent and estimable, but not brilliant.

Above the fireplace hung a coloured picture which served as advertisement of somebody's whisky; it represented one of the great Californian pines, with a coach-way cut through the living trunk. The boy began to question his uncle about this prodigy of nature. Now, as it happened, Mr Brogden knew a City clerk who had travelled in California, and from him he had gathered much more information than the good clergyman seemed able to supply. He longed to join in the talk. A pint of good ale had warmed his brain; he was in the mood for companionship, and, more than that, felt an eagerness to appear a person of some importance—the joy which life had so seldom granted him. As he gazed at the picture, smiling, the clergyman noticed him, and spoke courteously.

'Possibly you know more about those noble trees, sir, than I do?'

Brogden, delighted, poured forth all he could remember, and his companions gave friendly ear.

'Have you travelled in that part of the world, sir?'

'Yes, sir; some years ago.'

Was it he himself, Mr Brogden of Holloway, who had spoken? Or had a devil taken possession of his tongue? He dropped back in his chair, quaking, overwhelmed with shame.

'How very interesting!' said the country parson, with a glance at his nephew. 'I must say that I envy you.'

'I was there on business,' Brogden remarked, in a voice that still did not seem his own. And he added certain particulars, true of his acquaintance in the City.

The clergyman was talkative; in a quarter of an hour's time he, his nephew and Mr Brogden made a friendly trio. The conversation turned upon matters commercial, for Brogden had allowed it to be understood that he was a London man of business taking a holiday, and this obviously interested the genial cleric.

'Pray tell me now, sir,' said the latter, 'what are the chances of an intelligent youth in a merchant's office in London? The fact is, my nephew here has a wish to obtain such a position.'

'In a house, for instance, like Messrs Truscott & Windham's,' said Brogden, naming, with a smile, his own famous employers.

A Freak of Nature

'Ha!' The clergyman looked pleased. 'That would be the kind of thing. But in those great houses I fear it is not possible to place a lad without special influence.'

Brogden felt something perilous in his blood; the same impulse which wrought upon him when he rang the door-bells the other night; a sensation of reckless daring, exquisite to the nerves.

'I should like to hear,' he said, with something of solemnity, 'whether this young gentleman has undergone any preparation for commercial life.'

The boy good-humouredly submitted to examination. Mr Brogden's brain whirled. Turning at length to the clergyman, he remarked quietly:

'Perhaps I had better mention that I am Mr Truscott, the present senior partner in the firm we spoke of.'

A mist was before his eyes; the blood sang in his ears. From step to step of deception he had proceeded without power to check himself. An abnormal vanity hungered within him. He had set himself on all but the highest pinnacle in the world when, through life, he had played a humble part. So dazed was his imagination at the frantic feat, that he could not perceive its enormity.

'Mr Truscott,' the clergyman was saying, 'I have great pleasure in making your acquaintance. Permit me to introduce myself. I am Mr Lamb, vicar of Dippingham.'

If ever a man, not strictly insane, transferred himself into someone else's personality, it was Mr Brogden at this moment. For one thing, he had always admired and honoured Mr Truscott, and in the conduct of life had made him an exemplar. The great merchant was not only a power in the City; his private character commanded respect, and among his subordinates in business he had a reputation for singular generosity. Physically, it was true, Mr Brogden by no means resembled him; but the clerk gave not a thought to this detail; his fraud aimed only at impalpable profit. For the first time in his life he was the recipient of homage, and that from a clergyman of the Church of England. As a religious man, he doubtless ought to have felt that his crime of dishonesty was aggravated by that of sacrilege; but his state of mind permitted no such reflection. He walked on air; his head had become a sort of balloon.

'I find it absolutely necessary for my health,' thus was he speaking, 'to run down into the country every now and then and have a day's walking. It is the simplest and best remedy for little ailments which trouble me. I have walked over from' he named the station, 'and now I shall ramble back, and catch an evening train for London.'

Mr Lamb ventured a suggestion.

'I wish I could persuade you to take the other direction, and walk with us to Dippingham. The roads are delightful. There are local trains, by which you could reach Swindon'

'Oh, with the greatest pleasure!'

So the trio left their inn. To Dippingham was a walk of about seven miles; they made of it a leisurely ramble, which occupied the time from half-past two to half-past six on this bright summer afternoon. Out of delicacy, the clergyman had ceased to talk of his nephew's ambitions, but ever and anon Mr Brogden made a remark to the lad which indicated that he had not lost sight of this important matter. When they drew near to the little town, Mr Lamb begged that his friend would walk as far as the vicarage. There would be no difficulty in reaching Swindon in time for the last up train. Heedless of everything but his ecstatic illusion, Brogden cheerfully consented, and to the vicarage they bent their steps.

A Freak of Nature

They were received by Mrs Lamb, a homely gentlewoman, and her widowed sister, mother of the boy. As dinner was ready, Brogden sat down with the family. Nor did he incur the least danger of betraying habits inconsistent with his assumed station; flawless respectability appeared in his manners no less than in his speech. For the entertainment and instruction of the ladies he was induced to relate once more his experiences in California. He inquired benevolently concerning the poor of the parish, and then oddest of situations began to talk about the hardships patiently endured by a certain most meritorious class in London, to wit the body of respectable clerks, whose income, without being miserable, was yet barely sufficient for the needs of a decent family.

'Such cases, I fear, admit of no remedy. A strict economic law regulates the salaries paid by employers. But I have known of painful instances. Happily, they sometimes come under one's personal notice, and then, of course, something can be done.'

Mr Lamb was led into talk of curates; and so the conversation drew on, until a little clock on the dining-room mantelpiece struck eight. Mr Brogden looked round. Was he not forgetting, he said, that he had a train to catch? This moment had been awaited by the vicar.

'Is it really imperative, Mr Truscott, that you should return to-night? It would give us such pleasure if you could stay if we might offer you a room '

Brogden began to suffer unpleasant symptoms. A half-painful languor was creeping over him. He felt unable to come to a decision. The morrow glimpsed upon his mind in awful shape. But while he stood thus vacillating, the vicar began to take it for granted that he would stay. As a matter of fact, it was no longer possible to return to London, and this Mr Lamb well knew. With pardonable zeal for his nephew's prospects, he was doing his utmost to cement the friendship with Mr Truscott, pathetic illustration of unwonted guile in a most simple and worthy man.

They sat together in the study, and smoked. Brogden had sunk into taciturnity; by ten o'clock he found it difficult to utter even a monosyllable. He was thinking of his wife and children; his actual surroundings seemed visionary; he had an aching in his muscles, a dizziness of brain, a terrible and increasing weight at his heart. Of a sudden, he staggered, rather than rose, from the chair.

'Mr Lamb, I am afraid I have walked rather too far to-day. I feel exceedingly tired '

The vicar was all sympathetic attention. In a few minutes he conducted the great man to his chamber, where all possible arrangements had been made for a guest's comfort.

'In the morning,' said Brogden, absently, as they shook hands, 'I should like to speak again of our young friend.'

'Oh, thank you, thank you,' replied the vicar, genially. 'A refreshing sleep to you, my dear sir!'

The door closed. Brogden stood in the middle of the room, and stared about him. He had the appearance of a man who has drunk too much, and who is passing from exhilaration to despondency.

He glanced at pictures; turned to the bed and regarded it with gloomy eye; began to pace slowly, with cautious step, between the window and the door. Presently his legs shook and failed him. He dropped upon a chair, let his hands fall upon his knees, and sat like one overcome by misery.

Time passed. He heard the church clock, hard by, from quarter to quarter. All sounds in the house had ceased. It was a perfectly still night; not a rustle in the trees.

A Freak of Nature

Midnight tolled. Then did Mr Brogden stand up, listen for a moment, step with lightest foot towards the window, most carefully draw up the blind. All dark without; no gleam visible above or below. He unhasped the window; he tried, with trembling hand, whether it was possible to raise the lower sash soundlessly. Yes, it might be done. This was an old and well-built house, without any of the makeshift appliances to which he was accustomed in his London home.

The window was half open, when a thought of terror stayed him. Did Mr Lamb keep a dog? He knew not whether this room looked from the front of the house or the back; but he discerned a garden, and some loud-voiced animal might be holding watch over the vicarage.

That must be risked. But stop; what was he doing? He had not extinguished the light. Someone might. all the time be observing him.

With sweat running from his forehead, he raised the window sufficiently to allow of his getting through. The drop would be a trifle in such a moment; twelve feet at most, and onto garden ground. He fixed the respectable silk hat very firmly on his head, braced his nerves, struggled somehow onto the outer sill; then grasped the lower woodwork of the window desperately, and allowed his legs to sink.

So hung he for half a minute, then fell. A heavy fall; but, as he had anticipated, broken by the mould of a flower-bed. It seemed to him that he had made an alarming noise. His hat had been jerked off, and, when the shock allowed him to stand, he looked vainly about him for this indispensable head-gear. Ah, he had stepped upon it; he turned and felt it crunch.

Squeezing the now dishonoured cylinder upon his head, he made off like a burglar surprised. Impossible to seek for paths and gateways. Before him was a low wall, and he surmounted it. Only to find himself deep in the mud of a ditch; but a moment released him, and he sped over a broad field. It must have been half an hour before he could find an issue; everywhere seemed to be impermeable hedges. Moreover, it began to rain; though his sweat-bath concealed this fact from him till the shower had become heavy. At length the gate was discovered, and he came out into a highway.

Until the sky flushed with dawn, he walked forward at his utmost pace; for the most part through open country, but now and then passing a hamlet or village. His watch had stopped, but by daybreak he knew that he must have travelled at least ten miles. And what was the use of this, when assuredly, in a few hours, the police would everywhere be looking out for him? Mr Lamb must necessarily conceive the worst opinion of him. Communication would instantly be made with the real Mr Truscott. A full description of his appearance, together with the fact of his absence from town, could not but excite his City acquaintances to a surmise of the truth. He had ruined himself and his family. Better to end by suicide, and so get the benefit of the assumption that he was a victim of lunacy.

Yes. He would drown himself in a river or pond. And straightway he began to look out for a suitable spot.

It was not hard to find, but the effort to carry out his resolve proved hard indeed. For two or three hours he sat or walked near the muddy river which promised an end of his woes; with every minute the possibility of such an act grew more remote. He felt faint with hunger. There was money in his pocket, and inns were near. Midway in the morning he entered a wayside tavern, and ate as he had not eaten since boyhood.

By dint of much manipulation, he had restored his hat to a shameful sort of shapeliness. Brushes, water, and such aids now removed the other signs of vagrancy. Yet what was the use? he asked. To be sure, he had no actual reason to fear arrest; excitement had magnified the dangers of his flight from Dippingham. But of a certainty he was ruined. As he lacked the courage to die, he must face the consequences of living. Idle, now, to think of a visit to his brother. He desired to obliterate himself, to disappear; to earn laborious bread under a strange name, in a

A Freak of Nature

locality where he could never be recognized. Charity must provide for his wife and children.

Hitherto completely ignorant of his geographical position, he now learnt that aimless wandering had brought him within a few miles of Swindon. Projects he could not form, but he set off and walked to the railway station. His mind was still visionary; he had no grasp of the realities of life; and so it came to pass that, at Swindon, he took a ticket for Bristol, where, after nightfall, he hired an obscure lodging, saying to himself that he must begin life anew.

Three days after this, Mr Truscott, the busy merchant, received a letter which puzzled him. It was written by one of his numerous clerks, the Mr Brogden who was just now away on sick-leave, and dated from somewhere in the East End. 'Sir, I humbly entreat that you will grant me a private interview. I believe that I have been seriously ill, and that I was not responsible for the actions that have disgraced me. I earnestly beg that you will hear me in my own defence. I will come at any hour to any place you may appoint.' Now Mr Truscott had heard nothing whatever of disgraceful actions on his clerk's part. On inquiring in the office, however, he gathered that Mr Brogden had not been quite like himself of late. So he replied to the letter by telegram, simply requesting Mr Brogden to call at his residence that evening.

The interview which accordingly took place was remarkable. At the first sight of his clerk, and on hearing the first words which the poor man poured forth, Mr Truscott had no doubt that he was dealing with a lunatic. But a quarter of an hour's conversation put the matter in another light. A man of intelligence and of sympathy, he gave close attention to the whole surprising story, and then put a few important questions relative to Mr Brogden's private life.

'Tell me frankly,' he said at length. 'What is your own explanation of these strange proceedings?'

Brogden could think and speak lucidly enough. He looked very disreputable, very wretched, undoubtedly ill; but the man's honesty was obvious.

'I fear, sir,' he replied in humble tones, 'that I must have been rather overstrained, in some way.'

'I think so too. And how do you feel, in mind, at present?'

'Much better, sir,' Brogden answered with truth. 'Very much better.'

Mr Truscott surmised, what Brogden perhaps did not understand, that nature had revenged herself and was permitting the return of normality. He spoke kindly and judiciously. The clerk was to take a month's holiday at his employer's expense; when the result was seen, they would have another talk. And so it came about that, at the month's end, Mr Brogden resumed his position in the office, but with slightly increased salary. He was as trustworthy and respectable a man as ever.

Between Mr Truscott and the vicar of Dippingham there took place a friendly correspondence, satisfactory to both. It was not Mr Lamb who wrote first, and that singular story never became known outside the walls of the vicarage.