The Justice and the Vagabond

George Gissing

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Mr. Rutland did not feel well this morning. As he dressed, a sense of faintness troubled him, the result, perhaps, of very hot weather in these days of spring. After breakfast he reclined languidly in the study, trying to read. There was no absolute necessity for his going forth; but at eleven he drove into the town to sit with his brother magistrates, preferring the tedium of the court to lonely idleness at home.

His age was about five−and−forty, and to a casual eye he seemed in good health; but certain lines upon his countenance denoted a habit of melancholy musing, and his voice suggested the same. The townspeople, regarding his wealth and social influence, his apparent domestic peace and life of leisure, judged him an enviable man. Mr. Rutland saw himself in a very different light, and to−day he suffered especially from the despondence which had weighed upon him for many years.

Born to easy circumstances, he had married at three−and−twenty; six children had been born to him, all daughters, but only three of them survived, the youngest a girl of fifteen. His wife was a woman of narrow mind and strong will; she ruled him in every detail of his life unobtrusively, suavely, without suspecting for a moment that the yoke galled him, or anticipating the possibility of conflict between his purpose and hers. Mrs. Rutland belonged to a county family, and valued above all things her local prestige: when she went to London it was only to associate with those of her country friends whom fashion had directed townwards; if she took a holiday abroad it was merely for the sake of its retrospective advantages on her return home. She regarded everything from a rigidly provincial point of view. Her daughters were admirably brought up that is to say, with a conscientiousness which never lost sight of their destiny as county ladies. The father had as little voice in their education as in the daily management of his household. Of him Mrs. Rutland expected only that he should exert himself to support the dignity of his name in county circles. To please her, he had twice contested a Parliamentary election, but on both occasions was defeated. Twice he had been mayor of the town in which he owned much property, and near to which he lived. Mrs. Rutland viewed this as rather a condescension, but it kept the good man occupied. For the same reason she liked him to discharge his functions as justice of the peace. At her bidding he took part in various local activities: opened flower−shows, presided at important lectures, encouraged movements for the (moderate) benefit of working folk, and so on all which duties Mr. Rutland thoroughly disliked. But still more did he dislike the shadow of domestic discord, and he knew very well that his independence could only be asserted at the cost of his tranquillity.

All his acquaintances spoke well of him. One or two old friends regretted the lack of energy which frustrated his natural abilities, and wondered that a man so well read, so interesting in private talk, should be content to lead such a humdrum existence. But as to the amiability and generosity of his character opinions never differed. As a magistrate, he enjoyed a reputation for leniency, and the town scamps whom he could not but commit to jail counted on Mr. Rutland's compassion when they came out again.

This morning, when he entered the court, a case of assault was being heard. Evidently a paltry matter. The prisoner, a stranger in the town, had obtained work at house−painting, and while thus occupied, an hour or two ago, had got into a quarrel with a loafing fellow, who accused him of some trade irregularity. Losing patience under insult, he knocked the man down, and was forthwith given into the charge of a constable who stood by. Mr. Rutland observed the prisoner, and at once felt a peculiar interest in him face and bearing spoke strongly on the

man's behalf; he looked superior to his position, and, though uncomfortable in the present circumstances, was neither shamefaced nor impudent. Aged forty or more, he had a clear brown skin, a bright intelligent eye, and a strong upright figure.

'What's his name?' inquired Mr. Rutland, in an undertone, of his neighbour on the bench.

'Henry Goodeve.'

'Goodeve Goodeve '

Mr. Rutland reflected with a puzzled countenance, and again scrutinised the prisoner. At that moment Goodeve's voice was heard in answer to a question. Mr. Rutland listened intently, and his features betrayed some strange thought.

A trivial fine was imposed, whereupon the prisoner declared that he had neither money nor money's worth unless it were the clothing he stood in. He had arrived in the town only yesterday, all but penniless, and this morning had found work. The statement was made with a half−amused air. Moreover, the man's speech made proof that he was no ordinary artisan; his tongue, though not particularly refined, smacked of gentle breeding.

'I shall pay for him,' said Mr. Rutland privately. 'And I must have a word with him out of court.'

The prisoner's case was allowed to stand over for half an hour. Led, at Mr. Rutland's direction, into a private room, Goodeve saw, to his surprise, that one of the magistrates wished to speak with him.

'May I ask,' began the kindly looking gentleman, 'whether you were at school at Brockhurst?'

'I was,' answered Goodeve with a smile, gazing steadily into the questioner's face. 'I left in '62.'

'The year before I did. Have you no recollection of me?'

'I'm afraid I haven't. And yet '

'My name is Rutland− Dick Rutland.'

The other slapped his thigh, and broke into words of delighted recognition. Thirty years ago these men were chums inseparable at a boarding−school of good repute. They came from different counties, and did not know each other's kinsfolk; Harry Goodeve was the son of a struggling shopkeeper, and had little to hope for save from his own efforts; while Dick Rutland saw the path of life smooth and pleasant before him. At fifteen Goodeve was put into an office, where he idled and played pranks; at sixteen he went to sea, and from that day to this he had been a cheery vagabond on the face of the earth.

'You must come to my house,' said Mr. Rutland after a few minutes' talk. 'It happens that I am quite alone for a few days; my wife and daughters are in London. Half−an−hour's walk from here; anyone will show you the way I shall be home at half−past one.'

'What about my fine?'

'Pooh! We'll soon settle that.'

When his Worship reached home he found the vagabond stretched at full length on a shady part of the lawn; a gardener, in doubt as to his assertions, had kept an eye upon the man.

'Is there a pond or stream anywhere about here,' Goodeve asked, 'where a fellow could have a plunge?'

'Well, no. But if you don't despise an ordinary bath '

'Not at all, when I can do no better.'

They sat down together to luncheon; a strange contrast as to their clothing, but in other respects no unsuitable companions. Goodeve betrayed not the least embarrassment amid these luxurious surroundings: he ate and drank with hearty appetite, and talked merrily of old days. His host, seeming to throw off a burden of care, astonished the domestic in attendance no less by his boyish gaiety than by his intimacy with so strange a guest. As yet, nothing was said of intervening years: they lived again in their schooltime, discussed the masters, roared over ancient jokes, revived the great days of cricket and football. Goodeve began to ask what had become of this, that, and the other fellow they were now alone, and could speak more freely.

'Gubbins disappeared,' said Mr. Rutland. 'His father was mixed up in a disagreeable affair, and I'm afraid the poor chap '

'Ah!' cried the other, 'I met him in New Zealand ten or twelve years ago. He was at the bar serving liquor.'

'Heavens!'

'And Potts Toady Potts, not Sammy. I came across him in Sumatra. He was clerking for a Dutch pepper−grower; had intermittent fever, and must be dead long ago.'

'How have you travelled so much?' asked Mr. Rutland. 'As a sailor?'

'Generally working my passage, but not always. On land I've been a bit of everything. I'm a good carpenter you remember, I had the knack at school and I reckon myself no bad hand at plumbing. I've done a little tailoring now and then. I've gained glory as a scene−painter, and made shift to live by taking photographs. It's only in England that I've sometimes found it hard to get a meal. Oh, yes! I often come back to the Old Country, though I have no relatives left. I get home−sick, and make plans for settling down, but I suppose I never shall. I landed at Southampton five weeks ago from Bahia an old friend of mine is in the tobacco business there, and I went just to see him, from Jamaica. Well, I landed with a dollar or two, found the weather pleasant, and just tramped, with nothing particular in prospect. At home here I generally fall back on house−painting, though it isn't always easy to get work. I don't take kindly to the rougher sorts of work. Last time, five years ago, I had to do a bit of navvying, down in Kent. It didn't suit me, and I soon shipped again.'

'What a life!' murmured the listener, staring before him.

'Oh, not so bad '

'You misunderstand me. I mean, what a glorious life! I envy you, Goodeve; with heart and soul I envy you!'

'You do? Well, I can't quite understand that either. A man who has a house like this; free to come and go as the humour takes him '

'Free!' cried the host. 'Don't judge by appearances. You ought to know the world better. There's no man living who is more a slave than I am.'

His voice quivered into silence, and he seemed to reprove himself for indiscretion.

'Come out into the garden, old fellow. Light another cigar, and put some in your pocket.'

This afternoon there was a garden−party at a house in the neighbourhood, and Mr. Rutland had promised to attend it. By failing to do so he would excite surprise, and cause no little disappointment to the people who counted his presence an honour. But time stole on; he felt ever more reluctant to leave his entertaining companion for the wearisome society of his neighbours; at length he said to himself deliberately that go he would not. Let Mrs. Rutland express her astonishment when she heard of the neglect. 'But, my dear Richard, surely it was rather ' He shut his ears against the voice, and listened only to Good eve.

' The next day we sighted the Horn. I forgot all my hardships. Do you remember how we used to talk of it at school−going round the Horn? I thought of you then; I did indeed.'

At seven o'clock, when the sun was setting and the air had grown cool, Mr. Rutland rose and stretched himself.

'There's the first dinner−bell. Hours have gone like minutes.'

'All the same, I'm pretty hungry,' laughed Goodeve.

'Why, so am I; the first time I've had an appetite for years. It's the sea air. What a life! What a life! Of course, you'll stay here over−night. Your coming was a godsend. I feel young again. I begin to see things '

He broke off and walked with his head down, musing.

After dinner a meal of scandalous informality they went into the library, and Goodeve began to run his eye along the shelves.

'Why, you seem to have nothing here but books of travel. I can't make you out, Rutland. If you've always thought as much of travelling as you did at school, why the deuce have you led such a stay−at−home life? wife and family! But you've always been a rich man. What was to prevent you going trips about the world as other men do?'

What, indeed? In the days of love−making Rutland delighted himself with the thought that he and his beloved would journey far and wide, beholding all the glories and the wonders of earth. Their honeymoon was to include a visit to Egypt; but Mrs. Rutland soon discovered that she had little taste for foreign countries, and on the hither side of the Alps they turned homeward. The births of his children, which came in rapid succession, loaded year by year the fetters of domestic bondage; until the poor rich man stifled in silence his last hope. At the suggestion of distant travel Mrs. Rutland would have smiled indulgently that terrible smile which her husband knew so well, a smile as of implacable fate. 'Richard is so fanciful,' he once overheard her say to a lady, and the word had a dread weight of meaning.

They opened a great atlas, and Mr. Rutland followed his friend's voyaging from land to land. Their heads together, and talking with the completest familiarity, they were as boys again. Thus had they sat many a time on the school benches, the map before them, and schemed expeditions of discovery. In those days Dick Rutland was the more sanguine, the more energetic, conscious of possessing wherewithal to travel: Harry Goodeve merely dreamed and desired. Now, with thirty years of subsequent life behind them, Mr. Rutland, the prosperous man, the local magnate, felt his heart burn within him as he heard Goodeve tell of joys and perils which put a circle round the globe.

'Ah, you have lived!' he exclaimed at length, starting up and moving excitedly about the room. 'It is you who have been the rich man; I, a miserable pauper! The Arabs have a proverb, "Travel is conquest." You have conquered the world, whilst I have been crouched in my petty corner, playing at life. I go down yonder, and sit in a big chair,

and look as wise as an owl, and send poor devils to prison: this is the utmost I have attained to. You have been living among men, working, suffering, enjoying like a man, and every day learning something new. Good God! it maddens me to look back on these thirty years, and contrast my vegetable existence with such a life as yours. Can you imagine the sort of people I have to do with? Men and women who wear a certain kind of costume in the morning, and a different kind at night, and who know nothing more important than the change from one to the other. We attend meetings about local option, and you you are fighting a hurricane in mid ocean, or landing in some new port, with a new world before you.'

'Hang it, man!' shouted the other with a great laugh, 'it's not too late. You're no older than I am.

Mr. Rutland stared at him with fascinated eyes.

'Yes yes,' he said slowly and under his breath. 'I might see something of the world yet.'

He moved again to the atlas, and turned to the map of South America.

'That's one of the things I most wish to see the river Amazon.'

'Little more than a fortnight's voyage,' replied Goodeve mirthfully.

'A fortnight! Yes. A fortnight.'

Mr. Rutland spoke as one in a dream. His finger trembled as it marked the course of the great river.

'Go to Bahia,' said Goodeve, 'and see my friend the tobacco merchant. A fine fellow. He can tell you more in an hour than I could in a week. I wish I could go with you.'

Again Mr. Rutland stood and stared at his guest.

'Why not? You mean the expense of going as a passenger? What's that to me? Say you will go, and '

He paused, his hand in the air, and seemed to be fronting a vast enterprise. However ludicrous the obstacles in another's sight, to Mr. Rutland they meant nothing less than the crushing habits of a lifetime.

'I'll go fast enough,' said Goodeve, seeming to sniff the Atlantic.

'We might do more than just go to Brazil and back,' pursued his host, whose face had grown very red. 'If I once left England, I shouldn't be content to see only one country. I should like to travel for a year or more perhaps for two or three years.'

His voice quivered and his eyes flashed. Goodeve watched him with a smile of sympathy.

'Will you travel with me, Harry, as far and as long as I like?'

'Of course I will! When can you be ready to start?'

Mr. Rutland fell into a reverie. He was silent for more than five minutes, then drew a deep breath, and said gravely

'To−day is Wednesday. I will be ready to leave home on Saturday morning.'

'We must look up the steam−boats.'

'Yes; but whether there is a ship or not, I shall leave home on Saturday morning, and join you where you like. Stay with me one more day. I shall be busy, but I want to have you near. On Friday you shall go, and on Saturday we meet again at Liverpool, or Southampton, or wherever you appoint.'

They sat talking till late in the night, and, among other things, it was arranged that Goodeve should next day change his rude clothing for a garb more suitable to Mr. Rutland's guest. He was in no way troubled by a sense of obligation. Thirty years of adventurous life had taught him to regard things with simplicity and directness: if a wealthy man chose to relieve his friend of all worldly cares, why should the friend make any difficulty? Goodeve was a bluff, plain−spoken, honest fellow, quite incapable of scheming for his own advantage. The fine points of his character appealed to Mr. Rutland as strongly as in the days gone by. Rough living, labour, and the companionship of his inferiors had not debased him; what he lacked in refinement of manner was abundantly compensated by his sincerity, good−nature, and freshness of mind. Mr. Rutland's circumstances appeared to him in a humorous light; he suspected that the poor fellow lived under female tyranny, and to Goodeve such a state of things was inexplicable. He enjoyed the thought of releasing his old comrade from this sorry fix, and the joke was all the better if, as he suspected, Rutland meant to escape from bondage during his wife's absence.

That, indeed, was his Worship's project. Knowing the uselessness of an attempt to sleep, Mr. Rutland sat up all night, busy with multifarious concerns: arranging papers, writing letters, reviewing his personal, domestic, and public affairs. The suddenness with which he had taken his resolve, the firmness with which he held to it, seemed to him a manifestation of destiny; for, like all contemplative and irresolute men, he had a vein of philosophic superstition. He knew that his purpose must be put into effect at once; Goodeve's arrival in the absence of Mrs. Rutland was a coincidence which, the more he thought of it made him the more eager to depart. His wife and daughters were to return on Saturday evening. He would leave a mere note, saying that he had just left home with a friend, and might be away for a day or two. Later, but before she had had time to grow uneasy, Mrs. Rutland should receive the full explanation.

There was no serious obstacle whatever in the way of his proposed flight. He could easily commit to his solicitors the care of all such matters as Mrs. Rutland would be unable to deal with. His departure need not make the smallest change in the life of his family. The mother and daughters would pursue their course as methodically, as respectably, as ever. In pecuniary affairs Mrs. Rutland had always held an independent position; she was better fitted to manage everything of the kind than her husband. It would cost him no severe pang to be long away from his children, for they belonged to their mother rather than to him; the one who had loved him best was dead. Yes; by Saturday morning he might so have ordered everything in his control as to feel entirely free. A boyish rapture in the thought of what was before him made him regardless of the wonder, the censure, the gossip he was leaving behind.

About the hour of sunrise he was overcome with exhaustion not a feeling of wholesome weariness, not a desire for sleep; but an oppressive faintness, like that which troubled him yesterday morning. He explained it, naturally enough, as the result of unwonted excitement. A drop of brandy seemed to do him good, and he lay down; but no sleep came to him.

Through the day he pursued his business, though languidly; the weather was again very warm, and it seemed to overpower him.

'I shall soon pick up on the sea,' he remarked to Goodeve at luncheon, after confessing that he hadn't been 'quite the thing' lately. 'It's just what I need. I have lived sluggishly foregone all custom of exercise, as Hamlet says. If I went on like this, I should smoulder out at fifty or so.'

'As likely as not,' assented the other genially.

Again they passed a long evening together, with the big atlas open; and again Mr. Rutland worked himself into a fever of anticipation. When he went to bed his eyes looked very large and prominent, and his cheeks were burning. For an hour or two he tossed in misery of sleeplessness, then fell into fearful dreams of storm and wreck, which harassed him until day.

On the Friday morning Goodeve departed. He had learnt that a steamer would leave Southampton on Monday for Rio de Janeiro, which place they agreed to make the starting−point of their travels. The new clothing irked him a little, but, on the whole, he was rather pleased with his appearance; he went off in high spirits, well provided with money to make necessary purchases at Southampton. He had already telegraphed for berths to the shipping agents, and had received a satisfactory reply.

It rained a little to−day, and Mr. Rutland enjoyed the coolness. He thought with some apprehension of the climate for which he was setting forth, but reassured himself with the certainty that a fortnight on shipboard would quite re−establish him in health and vigour. There was nothing really the matter with him; of course not. His mind had affected his body; that was all. Then, if Brazil proved uncomfortable, he and his friend would simply travel north or south. The world lay open before him, like the atlas over which he had so often pored. He set no limit to the extent of his wanderings, and had quite resolved that nothing save ill−news from home should bring him back before the end of a year or two.

When he did return he would no longer be the same man. His wife would know by then that her reign was over.

He had now transacted all his business, and the hours dragged. There was a letter from Mrs. Rutland speaking of her return to−morrow, and requiring his attention to a score of vexatious trivialities; he laughed, and threw it aside. In the afternoon, feeling incapable of the least exertion, he lay on the couch in his study; his heart was beating rapidly, and he tried to calm the mental agitation which disturbed it, but every hour seemed to intensify his excitement. He dreaded the long evening and night, and wished himself already at Southampton.

At dinner he ate only a little soup. There was no disguising from himself that he felt seriously unwell, and the dread of being unable to start in the morning kept him miserably agitated. From table he went again into the study, and sat down in an armchair with a newspaper. As his body lay back he drew a deep sigh.

Shortly after ten o'clock the butler wished to speak with Mr. Rutland; he knocked at the study door, and entered. But on drawing near he saw that his master had fallen asleep.

An hour later he again entered the room. Mr. Rutland had not moved, and the servant, regarding him more closely, became aware of something strange in his appearance. He bent to listen. Mr. Rutland was not breathing.

And next day, at Southampton, Henry Goodeve sought vainly among the passengers who arrived by a certain train. 'Hanged if I wasn't afraid of it! 'he muttered in vexation. 'His wife has come back and caught him.'