

The Last Half-Crown

George Gissing

Table of Contents

<u>The Last Half-Crown</u>	1
<u>George Gissing</u>	1

The Last Half-Crown

George Gissing

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

"There!" exclaimed the little girl, with a start, and stood looking up into the young man's face in such a queer, old-fashioned way that the latter could not help laughing.

Yet Harold was in no laughing mood; his pale, emaciated face bore witness at once to bodily privations and that sickness of the heart which comes from ever-deferred hope. A few moments before, he had stepped out of the house with his last half-crown in his hand, and, instead of walking away, had stood at the door in a wretched reverie, turning the coin over and over mechanically, and endeavouring to think what he should do with it. Suddenly it slipped from between his fingers, clinked on the pavement, rolled away, and disappeared through the grating, beneath which was the window of the miserable little cellar-kitchen. There it lay in the sunshine which streamed through the grate, only to be regained by making a descent into the kitchen and reaching out through the window. Harold repeated the little girl's exclamation of "There!" and laughed quietly.

"You'll have to wait till they come back," went on the little girl, whom Harold knew well by sight, for she lived next door, and in this bright summer weather sat all day long upon the pavement playing with her poor, make-believe doll. "Mrs. Wilson and Lizzie is both out, I see them go just now."

"Indeed? Then I must take a walk till they come back, I suppose. Good-bye!"

It was in Colville Place, a narrow out-of-the-way passage just behind Tottenham-Court-Road. No vehicles pass through Colville Place, for it is paved all across, and so makes a capital playground for the poor children who swarm in the neighbourhood. Harold Sansom would scarcely have chosen such modest lodgings of his own free will; once he had known the comforts of a very different home, but a miserable train of circumstances had changed all that, and for some months he had been glad to rent a little garret at half-a-crown a week, furnished with a bed, a broken-seated chair, and an apology for a table. The sloping roof scarcely permitted him to stand upright, but that mattered little, for, when not wandering about in hopeless search for employment, he either lay upon his bed, seeking forgetfulness in the pages of one or two dear old books which still remained to him, or else sat at the crazy table, making desperate efforts to write something which might bring him bread. He had always been unsuccessful, and for the last few weeks had written nothing; how could he scribble about fictitious joys and woes when his own heart was racked day and night with anguish and despair? He had no friend, and sadly little of that courageous energy which enables men to conquer single-handed in the battle of life. So his little capital had dwindled, dwindled. This morning he had two half-crowns; one of them had gone to pay the week's rent which the businesslike Mrs. Higgs always demanded in advance, whilst the other lay at this moment down beneath the grating, only to be got at through the cellar window.

In such quarters as Colville Place human beings are accustomed to pack themselves into the smallest practicable space, and this cellar-kitchen of which we speak was at once bed-room, sitting-room and work-room for a mother and daughter. By peering down through the grate on a bright day like this, one could see two little cards hanging in the window, one of which informed all whom it might concern that mangling was done below, the other that plain-sewing could be executed here well and cheaply. Mrs. Wilson and her daughter were, in a certain sense, friends of Harold's; since he had lodged here they had been his laundresses, and, finding they were painfully poor, the kind-hearted fellow had paid for the little jobs more, perhaps, than, considering his

The Last Half-Crown

circumstances, he was justified in doing. Mrs. Wilson was a poor-spirited, broken-down woman, who often had scarcely strength to turn her mangle, and Lizzie, her daughter, was a pale, consumptive girl of sixteen or seventeen, whose unceasing toil over the needle was killing her day by day. Poor child, if only her cheeks had been fuller and her eyes less haggard, she would have possessed no little beauty; as it was, her suffering face had from the first deeply touched Harold, and, as often as he had occasion to speak to her, he lingered as long as possible, using every excuse to listen longer to her voice, and then pondering miserably for hours over her sad fate. Possibly to Lizzie also there was something strangely sweet in these moments of talk but who shall say what are the sentiments of creatures whose home is a cellar-kitchen and who live on plain-sewing?

Harold paced the streets for more than an hour, in that dogged, aimless way which had become his habit of late. Walk about London, reader, any part of it, and at any time of the day, and you are sure to notice more than one such figure, the bent shoulders, the drooping head, the worn, careless attire, above all that fixed, hopeless look indicating too clearly a mind warped and spirit crushed in the brutalizing struggle with his fellow men, a struggle compared with which to have fought with beasts at Ephesus were nought. The coarser natures wear long, resist to the end; those of more delicate mould are soon driven to strange extremities, and become familiar with dread ideas from which a healthy mind shrinks in horror. For days past such ideas had haunted Harold. Why should he endure this unceasing torture when an end might so easily be put to it, at once and forever?

It was past noon, but to-day he had not broken his fast, and hunger was making him so faint that his weak frame staggered as he walked. The only means of satisfying it was to return home and ask Mrs. Wilson to reach the half-crown for him; if she had come back most likely the little girl had already told her the story. The coin was literally all he possessed, except the poor clothing which decency compelled him to retain; everything else had gone bit by bit to supply his wants. Indeed it would soon be impossible to leave the house till after nightfall; already one or two business-men to whom he had applied for a situation had openly sneered at his shabby appearance. A few months ago the sneer would have cut him like a knife; as it was, it seemed a mere matter of course. Society prescribes a brutal demeanour towards all who are so inconsiderate as to appear in rags.

On reaching the house, a glance told him that the half-crown had already been taken in. His little friend from next door was no longer playing about, but by dint of peering he could see someone moving in the kitchen. He entered with his latchkey, went down the dark stone steps, and knocked at the kitchen-door. It was opened at once by Mrs. Wilson, who, as well as Lizzie in the background, wore a look of joy which Harold could not but notice, so unwonted was it. He had not long to wait for an explanation, for the mother at once poured out a stream of talk.

"O, Mr. Sansom, sir, and what do you think? The queerest thing I ever know'd, I do declare! Why, here was Lizzie an' me only a quarter of an hour ago cryin' our very heyes out wasn't we, Lizzie? 'cos we hadn't got nothink like enough to pay the rent, an' Mrs. Iggs is one as will have it, you know, come what may and we was a wonderin' whatever we should do, seein' as we've hard a thing left we can pledge, an' goodness only knows how we're to find ourselves food through the week, an' Mrs. Iggs wouldn't let the rent run on for a week, no, not if it was ever so! though I'm sure she's know'd us long enough; well, as I said, I was just a-goin' to hopen the winder, it was so very 'ot in the room, when what should I see lyin' just outside but a 'ole 'alf-crownd, upon my word! And I cries out with a little scream like to Lizzie to come an' look, for I really couldn't trust my own heyes, thinkin' it might only be a shinin' like, as I'd been cryin' so; 'Why, Lizzie,' I says, 'If 'ere isn't a 'alf crownd!' 'Why,' says Lizzie, 'someone must a' dropped it, mother!' 'Well,' says I, 'if they has, no doubt they've I knocked at the door for it; let's arst Mrs. Iggs.' But no, Mrs. Iggs know'd no more on it than me an' Lizzie, an' if that ain't a cur'ous thing, I don't know! An' to think it should come just when we wanted it so bad as never was! I've bit it, an' knocked it, an' it seems a good 'un; what do you say, Mr. Sansom, sir?"

Harold stood throughout this long speech, struggling with himself. So the little girl from next door had evidently not seen the two when they returned; they had no idea that the coin was his. He took it from the woman and made a pretence of examining it, then gave it back with a remark that it was doubtless good. He could not have held it for longer than a few seconds, yet so many thoughts battled through his mind the while that he seemed to have

The Last Half-Crown

been standing there for quite a long time. He had surveyed the wretched room, with its little bed stowed away in one dark corner, the table strewn with a few odds and ends of needle-work, the mangle for which there was to-day no employment, the shelves whereon were ranged a few of the humblest articles of household use, and half a loaf of bread, all the food that remained. He saw all this, and yet he never seemed to move his eyes from Lizzie's face. The draught caused by the open door had given her a fit of coughing; and the mixture of bodily suffering with mental relief which her countenance displayed affected him unspeakably. At his entrance she had drawn a little backwards, away from the light of the window, but for all that he had not missed the slight tinge which momentarily rose to her cheek; it was not the first time he had noticed it. Was it possible to claim the money and throw them once again into despair? This half-crown, good reader, which you throw away without a thought on the first whim that strikes you, represented an important sum to all the actors in this very vulgar scene. Harold Sansom knew that he could live on it for a whole week, and to Lizzie and her mother it made all the difference between solvency and the most hopeless distress.

"I am very pleased at your good fortune," Harold said, his mind already made up; then added, with the pleasant smile which looked so strange upon his haggard face, "I came to ask you if you would kindly tell the milkman not to leave my ha'p'orth when he comes this afternoon I see Mrs. Iggs isn't in, or I wouldn't have given you the trouble."

"O dear, no trouble at all, sir," exclaimed Mrs. Wilson. "You're goin' out this fine day, sir?"

"Yes, I'm going out," returned Harold; then nodded, smiled to Lizzie, and ran up the steps.

About half an hour after the little girl next door returned from a long errand upon which she had been sent by her mother, and the first thing she did was to peep down the grating to see if the half-crown was still there. No, it was gone.

"Has he fetched it?" she called out to Lizzie, who was standing near the window.

"Fetched what, Annie?"

"Has the gen'l'm fetched his 'alf-crownd as he dropped?"

"Half-crownd? Gentleman? What do you mean?"

"Why, the gen'l'm as lives upstairs, to be sure. As he come out, he dropped a 'alf-crownd through your grating, and said as h'd ask you for it when you come back. I see him drop it myself, so you mustn't go to say as 'ow he didn't, 'cos I know better."

Harold Sansom did not return that night. After much discussion between Lizzie and her mother, the half-crown was paid to Mrs. Iggs for rent, it being decided that this was a piece of intentional benevolence on Harold's part, who had adopted this method lest he should offend them. It was agreed, moreover, that the money should only be regarded as a loan; the washing and starching must of course be done for nothing till the amount was made up. Mrs. Wilson was loud in the praise of their benefactor; Lizzie said much less, but went about with a glad light in her eyes which was seldom seen there.

Strange to say, the next day passed, and the next, and still Harold had not returned, nor was anything to be heard of him. But when Sunday came, and just as Lizzie and her mother were sitting down to their dinner, bread and butter and a cup of tea, Mrs. Iggs suddenly startled them by running into the kitchen with the weekly newspaper in her hand, uttering all manner of exclamations.

The Last Half-Crown

"Well, an' who would a' thought it, now! Lord bless me! As sure as I'm a livin' woman, if that 'ere poor young feller ain't been an' gone an' drowneded hisself! An' there's been a inquest, see if there ain't, an' they couldn't find nothink to hidentify of him, only that he 'ad a old card in his pocket with Mr. H. Sansom a-printed on it. Think o' that, now! Eh, God 'elp us, an' he must a' been driven to it by want, they say, poor-young-feller! An' that's the reason as he never come back, for 'ow could he come, yer know, when he was all the while drowneded?"

Whilst the landlady chattered on in this fashion, Lizzie and her mother gazed at each other fixedly, the former pale as death. The poor girl had clasped her hands over her breast, and her eyes were full of tears.

"O mother," she cried, "how good he was! How kind he was!" and fell upon her mother's neck, sobbing bitterly.