The Light on the Tower

George Gissing

Table of Contents

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Mrs. Fleetwood had sat for an hour or two brooding darkly. Feeling at length the chill of the January evening, she rose to stir the fire; a flame presently made fitful illumination of the objects about her, hitherto obscured in the deepening of dusk. The room was her husband's study; portraits of statesmen and politicians hung about the walls, and on the writing table lay blue−books, reviews, piles of newspapers.

After a few more minutes of silence, she again raised herself, as if with reluctant effort, from the fireside chair, and lit a lamp. Then she went to the window. Whilst lowering the blind, she gazed over the house−tops at the northern sky, still broken and mottled with pale aftergleams of daylight. In the direct line of her view, far away, and set on an expanse of gloom above the city's horizon, shone steadily a clear, star−like beacon. It was the light upon the clock tower at Westminster.

With look and movements of weary distaste, Mrs. Fleetwood began to turn over some of the periodicals on the table; a knock at the door interrupted her, and a female servant looked in.

"Mr. Budge has called, 'm. He wants to know when master is likely to be at home."

"Say not until late this evening," answered the lady, with a decision which evidently came of annoyance. But the voice was as far as possible from suggesting ill−nature. Her face, though excessively worried, had the lines of long−enduring gentleness, and pleased a fastidious eye. She was dressed becomingly and as a woman of simple tastes.

In less than a quarter of an hour the servant again showed herself.

"Mr. Willis, 'm. As master isn't in, he would like to see you."

Mrs. Fleetwood, plainly on the point of refusing, is seemed to hold a brief debate with herself. It ended in the admission of the caller, whose step was heard briskly ascending. There entered a man of less than thirty, rather shabbily dressed, but with gloves and a silk hat; he stepped forward in a very animated way, and spoke at once, almost breathlessly:

"Have you heard the news, Mrs. Fleetwood? Merriman is dead accident in the hunting−field. The evening papers have it. Your husband must stand! Of course he will stand?"

"I really can't say." She spoke with difficulty, a prey to sudden nervousness. "I I don't think he is prepared "

"Oh, that would be such an awful disappointment to all his friends! I am sure you will persuade him, Mrs. Fleetwood. Merriman had made himself awfully unpopular. It's a splendid chance for a Radical candidate. I'm convinced your husband has nothing to do but to show himself. When will he be home? Where could I find him? If he likes, I'll run down to Waterbury at once."

The lady sat with her cheek propped upon her hand; she had slightly coloured and was thinking intently. Before she could speak a voice sounded from within the house, and at once she stood up.

"Here is my husband."

There was loud talk and laughter on the stairs. The study door flew open, and Fleetwood, followed by a friend, made abrupt appearance. He looked nearly forty, a good many years older than his wife, and on his countenance, as on hers, turbid life had made an impression; his eyes gleamed with inordinate hilarity; his cheeks were on fire. It was not the face of a man endowed with high gifts; one could not credit him with the power of ruling; but a contagious faculty of enthusiasm he undoubtedly possessed, and it appeared at its full in this moment.

"Ha, Willis! Then you're before us with the news. I see Mary has heard it. Gimble, let me introduce you to my wife. You know Mrs. Gimble very well by name, Mary. Willis, you'll stay and dine with us. We have to talk this business over. There'll be some other men dropping in later."

Mr. Gimble had not a prepossessing exterior; he was grizzled, snub−nosed, thick−necked, and baggy at the knees. Mrs. Fleetwood shrank from the pressure of his fat hand. The necessity of having to provide for unexpected guests excused her speedy withdrawal from the room, and, as soon as she was gone, the three men began to talk noisily, uproariously. Peculiarities of speech seemed to prove that Fleetwood's excitement had been aided by strong liquor; the others were sober enough, but evidently did their best to maintain their host's mood of exhilaration. Willis, an irregularly employed journalist, came from the town of Waterbury, and spoke as though his services would be invaluable there during an election. The man Gimble, of obscure calling, seemed well acquainted with arts of political agitation, and professed a special knowledge of the borough just made memberless by Mr. Merriman's death.

"I can't promise, mind you!" Fleetwood kept shouting. "There are several things to be decided. I must have a distinct and respectable invitation in any case. I promise nothing!"

He had sat in Parliament, but only for half a year the brief Parliament of 1886. On his presenting himself again to the electors of Waterbury, flood−tide Conservatism swept him out of sight. He stood again at the General Election of '92, and again was signally defeated. Now, only a year later, he had a reason for delaying his decision, which might, indeed, be suspected by his two friends, though they hoped the suspicion was unfounded. Fleetwood was practically at the end of his means; he knew not how to meet the expenses of a contest, still less how to subsist when it was over.

Fleetwood began life with plentiful provision, as the elder son of a man enriched by commerce. His convivial tastes, overflowing good nature, and conspicuous cleverness, surrounded him with innumerable friends, not a few of them more or less harmful parasites. Nominally he studied the law, but at thirty his profession still served merely as a disgraceful disguise of indolent and wasteful life. With his father, though often incurring severe rebuke, he remained on friendly terms until, in the year 1885, he began to take part in politics. Old Mr. Fleetwood would have nothing to do with a democrat. Against all his immediate interests, the young man took an extreme position on the popular side, and, in the year following, was elected member for Waterbury. One other thing he did which completed the alienation between himself and his father. To Mr. Fleetwood's satisfaction, Robert had shown himself impressed by the charms of a certain Miss Halley, an heiress and a brilliant person; there seemed every likelihood of marriage between them. But here again politics intervened. Robert not only turned his back upon Miss Halley; in the flush of his success at Waterbury he wooed and wedded a young lady of no social distinctions, and dowered not at all. After this his father gave him no more countenance. Dying a year later, Mr. Fleetwood left his eldest son a mere competence; the mass of his wealth fell to the younger brother, Thomas, a prudent and amiable gentleman. Scarcely was the time of mourning over, when Thomas Fleetwood married Miss Halley a consummation whereat Robert laughed with boisterous merriment.

By the wide circle of his friends, admirers, and hangers−on great things were expected of Fleetwood in Parliament. That he did nothing at all might be explained by the cruel fate which attached him to so short−lived an Administration. He had not even time to open his lips in the House. But this experience of public life was quite long enough to exert a disastrous effect upon Fleetwood's character and prospects. His excitable temper proved unequal to the strain of that half−year with its crowded emotions. When at the next election he had to go through a fierce struggle, ending in utter defeat, his health broke down, and so alarming were the symptoms that his young wife feared a mental derangement. They went abroad together, and Fleetwood seemed to become himself again; but the position in which he found himself after his father's death affected him more sensibly than he would confess. Hitherto intolerant of solitude, he now frequently spent a day in lonely brooding over his disasters. Thereupon came violent reaction: uproarious gatherings in his own house or elsewhere, when he played the part of a "man with a future intoxicated himself with flattery, genuine or interested; committed extravagances of every kind; and, as though intentionally, hurried on the day when he would be face to face with the bare problem of how to live.

Between him and his wife there existed a profound attachment proof, it seemed, against every trial. Mary Fleetwood not only loved her husband, but admired him as a man of extraordinary powers, and for a long time maintained unshaken her belief in his future greatness. It was only when a conviction of his defects had been forced upon her, that she would listen for a moment to the natural fears of a woman in her position. Accustomed to his moods of boundless exhilaration, she could not at first perceive that he was entering upon the vulgar path of the men who decline through drink. When the fact became indisputable, she exerted herself to the utmost for his salvation; and Fleetwood, often enough aware of the peril, wished nothing better than that his wife should save him. They tried lonely retreats, but the habits of a lifetime were too strong; the man rushed back into society, unable to exist without the sound of applauding voices. And each reaction of the kind brought him manifestly nearer to his doom.

Mary herself urged him to stand again for Waterbury at the election of 1892. She knew by this time how vain it was to hope that he would devote himself to any ordinary calling; but occupation he must have, or perish. She was still convinced, moreover, that Parliament offered him the career to which he was born; she still dreamed of sitting in the Ladies' Gallery and hearing her husband's voice ring forth in triumphant eloquence. Fleetwood threw himself eagerly into the fray. When defeat flung him into obscurity once more, he made a confession of dire things hitherto concealed from his wife. For some time they had been living upon their capital; a foolish speculation had ended calamitously; the only question now was where to turn for the necessities of life.

They gave up their comfortable house at Hampstead, and went into seaside lodgings to review the situation. Here, one morning, Fleetwood alarmed his wife by an outburst of extravagant rage such as she had never known in him. He brought her a letter.

"This is from Tom. I wrote to him, asking for help. Wasn't it the natural thing to do? Isn't he very rich, and to some extent at my expense? Look what he writes!"

Thomas Fleetwood, with whom his brother had scarcely held any communication since the junior's marriage, wrote amiably enough, but declared himself quite unable to accede to Robert's request. Why had Robert done nothing all these years? Why had he lived such a very wild life, with profitless associates? No, no, he must play the man, and help himself out of his hobble.

"You know what this means?" cried Fleetwood. "It's his wife. She bears malice against me, and she hates you. That's her nature, as I told you. Thank Heaven, I stopped in time, when I felt inclined to make a fool of myself about that woman! She has Tom under her thumb: he daren't do anything without her consent. Simpleton! That woman wants to see you brought down the lower the better. Well this is just what I needed. Now to work! You shall have reason for your faith in me yet, Mary."

Mary glowed. Hope reawoke in her, and for some days she kept a timid stillness, awaiting some great step on her husband's part. The next thing she heard from him was that his brother had sent five hundred pounds.

"Has had to do it stealthily, you see. Of course his wife saw the other letter. In this he says that he will give not a penny more. Well, I shall take it; I don't know what to do without it. It supplies me with a foothold."

They now took this little house in South London, and Fleetwood seemed to work. Unhappily, comrades gathered about him. As was natural, his associates were no longer those of the day of prosperity; he made acquaintances in all sorts of ways and all sorts of places; men such as Willis and Gimble, far from satisfactory companions in Mary's view. Yet she knew that a circle was necessary to him; hopeless to think of his living without moderate conviviality, and the encouragement of admirers. He must feel himself a man of importance, a man with a future. And as the months went on he sank into the evil habit once more. His intoxication was nowadays more easy to distinguish from extravagant enthusiasm than in times of brighter hope. Mary saw him occasionally prostrate, and wept in shame.

After one of these bouts, Fleetwood fell a prey to voiceless dejection. At such times he would sit, in darkness, by his study window, and stare persistently towards the far−off light on the tower at Westminster. From something he once said, Mary learnt that in this way he strove to animate his ambition, to raise his soul from the slough of vicious indolence. So she let him brood alone. Her own influence, she sadly recognised, was not strong enough to rescue him, in spite of his unfailing love.

Instead of a wholesome stimulus to effort, the thought of Parliamentary honours grew in him to a fixed idea, a morbid possession; sometimes it appeared hardly distinguishable from the visions of an unsound mind. Undoubtedly his memory of the year 1886 had become self−deceptive; he spoke of things he had never done, of conversations with leading statesmen which he certainly had never held, as though they were the commonplaces of reminiscence. In other respects his intellect was sound enough, however shattered his will. As a matter of course, he lived with scant regard for economy. Mary suspected, and with justice, that his eulogistic friends were in one way or another paid for their devotion. Fleetwood never allowed it to be known how narrowly he was circumstanced, and the men now about him were such as would cling on for the sake of a dinner, a restaurant supper, or a casual sovereign at need. Probably no one believed in his chance of again sitting in Parliament for Waterbury or any other borough; but several of his parasites saw amusement and profit to be got out of the few week's electioneering.

This evening, after dinner, a company of half a dozen gathered in Fleetwood's study. Mary, shaken with alternations of hope and fear, heard the thunder of her husband's voice ever and anon is rising above less authoritative shouts. Of course, the party had been supplied with abundant drink. When at length they broke up, one of them had a nasty fall on the stairs. Mary, dreading lest it should be her husband, ran out, but at once reassured, retreated hurriedly from the scene of bacchanalian tumult.

When all was quiet, Fleetwood's voice called softly. His wife at once joined him in the study, but so intolerable was the atmosphere that the first thing she did was to open the window. Fleetwood stepped up behind her.

"Look!" he said, in a voice thick from overstraining. "There shines the light! They're at it they're at it."

In the same instant the gleam disappeared.

"Gone! Has it gone? Or are my eyes ?"

"It has gone," said Mary, shuddering as the cold night air struck upon her. "Stand out of the draught, Robert. The room will be better in a minute."

"Mary!" He took her by the shoulders, and gazed at her with peculiar steadfastness. "Mary, how am I to manage it?"

To her surprise she saw that he was not greatly overcome with the night's potations. Perhaps the momentousness of his position had helped him to refrain.

"You haven't enough even for the expenses?"

"I don't think so. No, I haven't. And afterwards?"

"But then how can we think of it at all, dear?" she asked grievously.

"How can we not think of it?" Fleetwood cried, like a desperate man. "It's my last, and only hope. Put me in Parliament, and I have a future. Deny me that chance, and I have no chance of any sort. No chance, by Heaven!"

He had never spoken in this clear−sighted way, with this peculiar accent of fatality. Mary had a stern conviction that he spoke the truth at all events in his dread alternative. She could, moreover, still force herself to hope that Parliament might be his redemption.

"What plan have you?" she asked.

The man stood with eyes downcast, his attitude suggesting that he had conceived a project, which, for some reason, he could not readily explain.

"So it is hopeless to look to your brother?" Mary added.

"I don't know. That's the question. Let us have the window shut; it's all right here now. I'll tell you something that I kept to myself when it happened. A few months ago, knowing a general election wasn't far off, I wrote to Tom and asked him whether he would help me to get into Parliament again. I told him the plain truth that Parliament was my one aim and hope in life. He answered that I mustn't expect anything more from him, and he tried to make out that the whole thing was a crazy idea. Why? Do you think so? Just tell me what you really think."

He fixed his reddened eyes upon her, and with so much pathos in his earnestness, that Mary could not have had the heart to discourage him, think what she might. But there was no need of putting constraint upon herself; her belief in him grew with the demand for it. She remembered his public speeches of the great year when Waterbury (though by so small a majority) elected him. Oh, the happiness of that time! How he shone against the vulgar background of party squabbles! His eloquence had the note of true enthusiasm of a noble generosity. For all that had passed since then she still knew him pure at heart, utterly free from the petty forms of self−seeking; inspired, at all his best moments, by a proud ambition.

"He ought to help you," she exclaimed. "It is his plain duty."

"And he would, Mary but for his wife."

In speaking, Fleetwood tried to gaze at her steadily and with meaning, but his eyes fell before hers.

"I know that woman," he pursued. "I know what she wants. She hopes I shall come some day, and beg beg of her. That would gratify her malice."

"Impossible."

"Impossible, you mean, for me to do such a thing? I all but feel capable of it. I half believe I ought to do it. And not for my own sake alone. I have to think of you, Mary, as much as of myself."

The thought revolted her, and she exclaimed passionately against it. Such conduct would be unworthy of manhood; nay, the circumstances of the case made it absolutely unthinkable.

"You may be altogether wrong in your opinion of her," she urged. "What grounds have you?"

He persisted with obstinate vehemence. His brother would not deny help; Tom was a good, generous fellow, but deplorably weak. He had heard things about him, all proving his subjection to the imperious woman. By suing to her

"I won't hear of it," Mary interposed, with flushed face and eyes indignant. "We won't talk about it any more. It degrades you, Robert."

He turned from her, his head drooping, his countenance sunk in a profound despondency. Not another word was said of the matter in debate. In a few minutes Fleetwood went to the bedroom. Mary sat for half an hour by the dying fire.

After a short and troubled night she awoke at eight o'clock. Her husband was sleeping heavily; he might not stir for another hour or two. Mary rose and dressed with all possible quietness; she dressed, not in the ordinary way, but for going out. Downstairs, after drinking a cup of coffee, she hurriedly wrote a few lines, and put them into an envelope directed to Robert; the servant would give him this letter as soon as he came down. Then she left the house.

Between nine and ten Fleetwood received his wife's message, which ran thus:

"I think I shall be back to−night; but it is not quite certain. Don't be uneasy. I have thought of something which may help us. I shall certainly see you again to−morrow, if not to−night."

Fleetwood was astonished and troubled. The only conjecture he could make as to Mary's purpose seemed very improbable, and was so repugnant to his feelings that he tried not to entertain it. Through the morning, however, it kept recurring to his mind. Naturally feeling unwell after last night's excesses, he sat or reclined in the study until it was time to think of an appointment he had with Willis at a newspaper office. With the advancing day his spirits recovered something of their spring. Mary would not have gone off thus suddenly save on an errand which had rational hope in it. Most likely she had contrived something far more practical than his own wild ideas she was one of the quiet women who upon occasion can show themselves full of resource. Already he glowed with gratitude to her. In one way, at all events, he could repay her effort on his behalf: to−day he would drink nothing. When Mary came back she should find him calm, sober, a husband worthy of her. Mary was very patient with him, perhaps too patient, too tolerant. He never lost sight of her loyalty, never ceased to remind himself that, for her sake, if on no other account, he must redeem the promises of early life. And if, indeed, she helped him to use this present occasion

But there was no time to waste. Perhaps this very day he ought to go down to Waterbury. Willis, however, had promised to communicate by telegraph with certain people in the borough, and this afternoon there would doubtless be news.

It was nearly two o'clock when he met the journalist.

"Look here!" cried Willis, fluttering a telegram. "Borwick, of Waterbury you know old John Borwick, of course wires that you ought to come at once. 'Capital opportunity. Committee forming.' Didn't I tell you? When can

you start?"

"Not till to−morrow. But we can get ready the address to the electors. You've had lunch, I suppose?"

Mr. Willis, having an appointment with Fleetwood at anything near luncheon time, would have deemed it foolish to go to the expense of a meal before they met. Together they repaired to a restaurant, and refreshed themselves heartily. Without forgetting his resolve, Fleetwood saw no harm in a bottle of Burgundy; the journalist drank most of it. Had conviviality ended here, all would have been well; but, as a matter of course, Willis led his friend to resorts of talkative gentlemen somewhat out at elbows, where liquor was the inevitable accompaniment of political conversation. In a measure overcome before he knew it, Fleetwood ignored the state of his affairs, and talked as though he would certainly contest the by−election at Waterbury. Impossible to resist the delight of being once more regarded and addressed as a "coming man." His eloquence made the wonted impression; strangers broke off their own dialogues, to give ear to him, and asked, "Who is it?" Himself unconscious that he was drinking even more persistently than usual, Fleetwood at length excited smiles, and at this point Willis carried him off.

"Can't dine in town," explained the great man. "Expecting important telegrams at home. Come with me; we shall find a bone to pick, I daresay."

They got into a cab and reached Fleetwood's house at about half−past seven. Mary had not returned, but there was a telegram, and from her.

"Go at once to Waterbury," it ran. "All arranged. Shall return early to−morrow."

Fleetwood, careless now of everything but his great end, gave a yell of joy. Willis took it up with a loud "Hurrah!"

"There!" exclaimed Fleetwood. "That's my wife's doing. There's a woman for you! Isn't her like in England. She isn't one of the talking women, Willis; but true blood trusty to the core such a wife as few men have."

Up in the study he again examined the telegram. It had been despatched from a place of which he barely knew the name, and this puzzled him. He talked to himself about it, regardless of the journalist's presence. "What is she doing there? It isn't what I supposed, after all, then. How the deuce has she managed it? Never mind, I shall know soon enough. Can't go to Waterbury till she gets back, Willis. Brave little woman! She shall go down with us, of course."

A meal was set before them; they ate and drank, then sallied forth again in search of an acquaintance who lived in the neighbourhood. At something after midnight Fleetwood regained his home; he was just able to climb the stairs, to distinguish his bedroom door, and to close it behind him.

He flung himself, as he was, on to the bed, but after rolling there for a minute or two, his drunken soul felt a desire to read once more that wondrous telegram which he had been carrying about with him. He groped and staggered to the gas, managed to turn it on, and only then remembered that he had not yet found a match. There was a box in his pocket, but empty. He groped for the dressing−table, knocked some things down, and abandoned the search as useless. Presently he was back upon the bed, supine and snoring.

The gas, fully turned on, poured forth into the pitch dark room, and continued to do hour after hour.

Mary Fleetwood was sleeping at an inn in the country town, whence she had sent her message to London. Resolved to undertake herself the humiliating endeavour suggested by her husband, she had taken train that morning for a place distant some fifty miles, where Thomas Fleetwood had his ordinary abode. She reached the house, is only to learn that Mr. and Mrs. Fleetwood were together on a visit to friends in the same county, an

hour's journey away. Feeling that her task must at any cost be carried through, she followed to the address given her, and here at length was admitted to the presence of Mrs. Thomas Fleetwood. It was the lady she had determined to see; not Thomas. The interview gave her every reason to believe that Robert was right in his interpretation of his brother's behaviour. Undisguisedly gratified by the abasement of her former rival, exacting to the uttermost all such pangs and long−drawn torments as refined feminine malice could invent, Mrs. Thomas Fleetwood was in the end graciously pleased to grant Mary's prayer; she would use her influence with her husband, and thought with such a smile that she could promise adequate assistance to the ambitious Robert. Thomas was then summoned to the room. Uneasy, obviously ashamed of himself, he watched the biddings of his wife's countenance, and confirmed the promise she had made.

To her grief Mary just missed the last train for London; but she had the satisfaction of telegraphing, and a great joy kept her awake through the lonely night.

After all, Robert Fleetwood was not seen again at Waterbury. His name, however, appeared in the local papers, followed by a brief narrative of his career. "He had all the makings of a great man" so said the Liberal organ.