Lord Dunfield

George Gissing

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For the first time in his life Lord Dunfield was suffering a bitter disappointment. Things had always gone very smoothly with him. As a boy when his father was merely a wealthy commoner, absorbed in business and politics he had known very little restraint; at Oxford, well supplied with money, he lived pretty much as nature bade him; and in his four−and−twentieth year came the complete independence which he had desired, but hardly ventured to hope for. His father's death was in the order of things; that of his elder brother, following in less than a twelvemonth, seemed to declare him fortune's favourite. The title, the vast possessions, were his; and in the same moment his eye fell upon a woman who, above all women he had ever known, answered to his ideal of a wife. Miss Filkins belonged to the wealthy middle−class; she was not over−educated, liked horses and dogs, and had no nonsense about her; her beauty, which was of the barmaid or burlesque−actress type, laid a spell upon the young nobleman. For a month or two he imagined that he had only to ask and to receive. When he did ask, and the frank refusal made it clear that he had no hope, Lord Dunfield suddenly saw the world in a new light. His crude gaiety gave place to a bilious pessimism; his coarse good−nature corrupted into brutal harshness; the varnish of gentle breeding was rubbed away, and showed the cheap, rough fibre beneath. In a word, this young man became precisely what he would have been had he grown up in low station and amid unkindly circumstances.

It was most interesting to observe the revelation of natural blackguardism in one who had hitherto been raised above himself by the force of social example. That Lord Dunfield was born a blackguard no discerning person could doubt, yet there had seemed some likelihood of his making a decent show in the world's eye, especially if good luck attended him in the matter of marriage. It might well be that Miss Filkins was the woman marked for his suitable helpmate. Herself of all but the coarsest grain, she had thoroughly learnt the lesson of social prosperity, and could be trusted, while the sun still shone, never to deviate from the secure, the becoming path. But her inclination was to another man, whom, it was presently announced, she would marry at the end of the season. Lord Dunfield had but slight acquaintance with his rival, a middle−aged man of fashion, given indeed to gambling, but not otherwise worse than his neighbours. Cankered with jealous malignity, the noble youth cast about for some means, not of preventing the marriage, for that he could not hope to do, but of instilling mutual suspicion into the minds of bride and bridegroom, so that they might soon come to hate each other with something more than common intensity. This would supply him with a pleasant subject of contemplation, and mitigate his sufferings at the time when they would otherwise be most acute.

While pondering this project, he was little seen in the society he had always frequented. After a week or so of ferocious retirement during which he came near to killing a groom who displeased him, and only escaped legal penalties at a heavy cost Lord Dunfield sought companionship where he would naturally have found it but for the accidents of his name and wealth; in a world where he was quite unknown, among clerks and counter−jumpers, shop−girls and music−hall women, he awakened to a new sense of possible enjoyment. He had never been devoted to sport; the loss of a good deal of money had already disgusted him with betting circles; but here, in the thick of obscure London, a wonderfully congenial life offered him the resource he needed. He was himself surprised at the facility with which he made acquaintances, at the gusto with which he returned each evening to quarters of the town previously scarce known to him by name. Rowdyism in the purest form gave him keener pleasure than he had ever derived from its imitation at the West End. He liked the atmosphere of disorderly public−houses, it relieved him, as though from the burden of a lifetime, to yell and scuffle in back streets; with great success he threw off the phrases and accents demanded by civilisation, and used the language

of his associates like a native tongue. To fling coin about and excite envious admiration affected him with a more delightful sense of flattery than he had ever known. Lord Dunfield was in his element, and shone as never before.

Then came the day of Miss Filkins's marriage. Having been twitted on this subject by many of his old friends to whom he had spoken of the lady with premature confidence he resolved to be present at the ceremony. And not for this reason only. He wished to observe the countenance of the bridegroom if possible, of the bride. With feminine assistance, Lord Dunfield had concocted and manufactured two anonymous letters: one addressed to Miss Filkins, containing information with regard to her future husband; the other, for that gentleman's own perusal, professing to throw light on certain points of Miss Filkins's history and character. Each was a masterpiece of calumny, most ingeniously devised, and sure to cause temporary, if not permanent, trouble and discord. These letters were posted on the eve of the wedding−day, so as to exercise their effect in the morning hours preceding the ceremony.

The marriage was at a small but fashionable church in the Western district. Lord Dunfield, naturally not having received an invitation, sought one of his friends who had, and arranged to meet him at the door in time to get a good seat. People arrived in large numbers; those who held cards all but sufficed to fill the church. In an unsubdued voice of sprightliness, Lord Dunfield gossiped with his friend. Nor was he singular in this; a like animation, the same unrestrained freedom of talk, prevailed throughout the assembly. All who were present by invitation represented a certain order of plutocratic society. Their names were frequent in the lists of fashion; they set the tone in manners to a considerable section of the less privileged public. The majority being women, a high note of talk and laughter resounded through the building. As time went on, and when it seemed that the opening of the entertainment was somewhat strangely delayed, curiosity increased the polite uproar. People stood up and looked about; several men unfolded newspapers; Lord Dunfield caused great amusement by offering his cigarette−case to those near him. At length, nearly half an hour behind time, confused noises near the entrance told that the indispensable persons had arrived. Then occurred a singular incident. All were seated, and only an occasional laugh broke the silence, when a deep, clear voice sounded from the upper end of the church.

'I must remind the congregation that they are in a place of worship, not in a theatre.'

Some one giggled; two or three people coughed; then all were mute. Eyes exchanged glances of amazement. Had clergyman ever before dared to reprove the manners of such a congregation as this?

Lord Dunfield had much ado to contain his merriment. With every minute of the unexplained delay his spirits had risen; he was now jubilant, for the visage of the bridegroom convinced him that his plot had not failed; any one had but to look at the man to see that he was in no wedding−day mood. The bride's veil undoubtedly concealed a similar perturbation. Moreover, one or two of her relatives wore very dark looks. Lord Dunfield forgot his savage jealousy in delight at his success.

The clerical admonition secured a semblance of decent behaviour throughout the ceremony. When the organ struck up its notes of dismissal, there was a rush for the exit. Lord Dunfield, unfavourably placed for escape, after futile efforts to crush out into the gangway, cried to his companion, 'Come along, Bob, let's take the fences.'

And together they vaulted from seat to seat, an exhibition of activity which was facetiously noticed in the society journals next week.