

One Way of Happiness

George Gissing

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Here and there in the more populous London suburbs you Will find small houses built with a view to the accommodation of two families beneath the same roof. Considering the class of people for whom this advantage was contrived, the originator of the idea showed a singular faith in human nature. It does, however, occasionally happen that two distinct households prove themselves capable of living in such proximity for a certain time without overt breach of the peace — nay, with a measure of satisfaction on both sides. This was the case with the Rippingilles and the Budes. Rippingille, salesman at a large boot warehouse, and Budge, a coal-merchant's clerk, were young men of sober disposition, not incapable of modest mirth, content with their lot in life, and rarely looking more than a month or two ahead. Their wives did not lack corresponding virtues. Granted the female privilege of believing (and telling each other) that they might have married much more brilliantly if they had waited longer, and the necessary relaxation of abusing their husbands when a dinner was ill-cooked or babes gave trouble, Mrs Budge and Mrs Rippingille discharged their domestic duties as well as could be reasonably expected. They talked in a high key, laughed in a scream, and bade defiance to care with a very praiseworthy resolution. The Rippingilles had three young children, the Budes had two. It was not always possible for the two families to take their annual holiday at the same time; this year circumstances were favourable, and the parents planned a joint expedition to the seaside. Long and warmly did they discuss the attractions of half a dozen popular resorts; the final vote was for Brighton. They would leave home on Saturday afternoon; spend Sunday, Monday (the August Bank Holiday) and Tuesday by the seashore, and on Wednesday return. Thursday morning must see the bread-winners back at their respective places of business.

Mrs Budge and Mrs Rippingille had a clear fortnight in which to make their preparations and to talk inexhaustibly about the glories of Brighton. Both had been to Brighton before, but neither of late years. They lived in a crescendo of joyous excitement; from room to room they interchanged high-pitched remarks, jests, ejaculations.

'Louie! this time next week — eh!'

'Jist be at London Bridge, shan't we? Oh my! Say, Annie ——'

One was in a top bedroom, the other in the wash-house, and at this moment the shrieks of two infants made them inaudible to each other; but they continued to vociferate with shrill merriment.

'Now look 'ere,' observed Rippingille, gravely, one night when the children were all in bed, and the elders had assembled, as was their habit, for a common supper. 'About the apartments.' It would never have occurred to Rippingille to say 'rooms' or 'lodgings.' His stress on 'apartments' held the listeners silent whilst he reflected. 'We mean 'aving comfort, understand, and we've got to pay for it. But we're not going to be 'ad.'

No, no; certainly not. All were determined not to be imposed upon. The ladies vied in screeching their reasonable demands. Two double-bedded rooms and a comfortable parlour; the cost not to exceed thirty shillings.

'And mind you,' Budge succeeded at length in remarking, with impressive severity, 'no hextras. Not a single bloomin' hextra! I know what that means, if they begin the game. Why, Tom Leggatt and me, we was once together down at Ramsgate ——'

He was not allowed to finish the reminiscence; a chorus of awful experiences clamoured him down. In a quarter of an hour's time, when the others had paused breathless, Budge repeated, as though it were a novel remark:

'Mind you, not a single bloomin' hextra!'

Thereupon renewal of shrieks, and for another fifteen minutes all was vociferous confusion.

The purchase of a new jacket by Mrs Budge, whereas Mrs Rippingille could not afford that luxury, caused a slight heart-burning between the two; but they outlived it. All the children had some new garment, showy, inexpensive, purchased without any regard to durability or the wearer's comfort. Rippingille bought a straw hat, a

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yellow waistcoat, and a pair of sand shoes; his friend purchased a guinea suit of tweeds, and a blue necktie, relying upon an old cricket cap for the completion of his seaside costume. On the Friday night all, children included, donned their holiday attire, and ran about the house inviting each other's compliments.

Not without much discussion was it decided how they and their luggage should be transported to London Bridge station; time had to be considered, as well as money, and there seemed to be no avoiding the expense of a cab. Solemnly the precise fare was calculated. Convinced against their will that the outlay would be smaller by sixpence or so than if any other course were adopted, the ladies none the less resented this tax upon the holiday fund; notwithstanding high spirits, they looked sourly at the cabman. Rippingille, with the two eldest children — for the cab could not be made to hold all — went by omnibus.

Brighton was reached about five o'clock. Mrs Budge's baby, probably objecting to a bottle of half-churned milk, screamed vigorously most of the way, and by Mrs Rippingille was secretly voted a nuisance; but in all other respects the journey proved enjoyable. For the third-class carriage had its complement of passengers, all going to Brighton for a holiday, all noisily talkative and joyously perspiring. Much solid food and a liberal supply of liquid refreshment were consumed en route. Thus fortified, the happy band could postpone thoughts of a meal until they had discovered the suitable lodging, on which quest they set forth at once from the station. The sun shone gloriously; the street pavements were hot and dry; if necessary, two or three hours could be devoted to inspection of apartments.

At house after house they tried, not, of course, with a view of the sea or anywhere near it; the highways and byways along which they trudged might well have been part of some London suburb, save, perhaps, for an unusual freshness in the air. The wonted noises, the familiar accents, everywhere protected these Londoners against the unpleasant feeling of strangeness. Numbers of people strayed hither and thither on the same errand as themselves; every snatch of talk that fell upon their ears was concerned with rent of 'apartments.' And, indeed, their undertaking promised to be not a little wearisome; rents were mostly, from their point of view, exorbitant, or, if reasonable, covered but mean accommodation. At first, the whole party invaded each house. Presently, Mrs Budge, overtired with the burden of her infant, had to lag behind a little; and with her two little girls, who had begun to cry, Mrs Rippingille grew cross, but could still enjoy a scornful laugh in the face of extortionate landladies. The men supported each other in boisterous good humour.

'All right, Annie,' shouted Budge to his pallid wife. 'We've got the night before us, and miles of apartments to choose from.'

'Cheer up, old girl,' Rippingille called out to his own spouse. 'We won't be bested. Like a shrimp tea before we go on again?'

But the children (the eldest only six years old) could hardly drag their little limbs along; wails arose, and the mothers, nervously unstrung, had to threaten a slap, or even a 'hiding.'

'I say, Tom,' remarked Budge to his male companion quietly, we shall have to take the first where there's room enough. I'm about done up.'

Rippingille nodded, and with an air of cheery resolve they made for the next house which showed a card in the window.

Here, by good luck, three rooms were vacant, but one only was double-bedded. The landlady, however, professed her willingness to put in a sofa each night, and provide it with bedclothes.

'Well,' said Budge to his wife, 'I could sleep on the sofa and you and the children in the bed.'

'Of course you could,' exclaimed Mrs Rippingille, eager to get housed, and fairly content with the chamber which was designed for her and her family. 'I've often slept on a sofa myself, and slept sound too.'

At this there was a general roar of laughter, with no special meaning. The terms were now inquired, and on this point followed a vigorous contest. For the rooms, until evening on Wednesday, the landlady asked thirty shillings — and extras.

'Now see here, Mrs What's-ye-name,' cried Rippingille, in what he meant for a perfectly civil tone, 'we don't pay no hextras. It's got to be hincusive — understand? Kitchen fire, candles, boots, and every blessed thing. We'll pay you thirty bob and not grumble, if you give us no cause. But no extras — see?'

All talked, or rather shouted, at once; there was a deafening uproar. The wives, tired out as they were, thoroughly enjoyed this combat of tongues, and the landlady, after a brave struggle against overwhelming odds, yielded with a good grace. She had never taken so little before; but as she could see that the babies, bless 'em,

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were crying to go to bed — well, she wouldn't hold out. But half the sum must be paid in advance; that she made a rule.

Budge went back to the railway station to fetch a tin box, in which both families had packed their indispensable belongings. Rippingille set forth to purchase the groceries and other articles of food. The ladies, until their luggage arrived, closely examined each of the rooms, and tried to keep the children quiet. Relieved from weary prolongation of their walk, and gratified by a conquest of the landlady, they were in the mood for finding everything admirable. Impossible, they agreed, to have done better. The place was clean; the beds looked comfortable; they were not more than twenty minutes' walk from the beach.

'I don't know what you think, Annie, but I call this first-rate. Did you see the picture of the Queen and all her family in my bedroom?'

'And look at those lovely hartificial flowers! Why, you feel you want to be smelling at 'em. I don't know what you think, but I'm a-goin' to enjoy myself!'

The first disappointment was the unpunctuality of supper, which, ordered for nine o'clock, was served at a quarter to ten. The children being in bed, their parents at length sat down to the meal with keen appetite, and soon recovered good humour. Budge had brought in with him a bottle of Irish whisky, Rippingille a bottle of rum; these stood unopened upon the sideboard, an exhilarating promise for half an hour before bedtime. It gave the ladies some concern to discover that the cupboard in which they would keep their grocery had no lock; at table they discussed this matter from every point of view, and came to the decision that a very careful watch must be kept upon the various parcels. Mrs Budge hit upon an ingenious device; when sugar, coffee, tea, and the rest had been opened, she should mark, with a pencil, the exact position of each packet upon the shelf, so as to ensure immediate detection of any tampering with the goods. Mrs Rippingille suggested that all edibles should be kept under lock and key in the bedroom; but, besides the inconvenience of this method, there was a certain delight attaching to the anticipation of sternly convicting their landlady, in case of fraud.

At half-past ten they sallied forth to taste the sea air. In a street hard by, in front of a busy public-house, they were arrested by a crowd gathered around negro melodists, and here they feasted their souls with music until the hat began to circulate, which sped them onwards. Arrived at the sea front, they found abundant life of the kind most pleasing to them: a thronged highway, resounding with virile shout and feminine squeal, with refrains of the music-hall, and every such noise as inspirits the children of a great capital. In spite of the fatigue which made their limbs ache, the happy wives and mothers leapt about like girls, screamed mirthfully at each other, thumped their husbands' backs, and declared a thousand times that this was the height of human bliss. On their return the spirit bottles were exultantly opened, and each one drank a stiff, sweet, steaming tumbler. Ordinarily very temperate people in the matter of strong beverage, they felt it incumbent upon them to indulge a little at the seaside. Rippingille pretended to be overcome and staggered about the floor with low comedy monologue. This brought the evening to a splendidly hilarious close, and they paired off for rest with laughter which made the house ring.

They awoke to Sunday. Not only this, but the weather had suffered an unfortunate change; the sky was gloomy and threatened rain. Breakfast, ordered for nine, could not be obtained until nearly an hour later. The children were troublesome and very noisy; the ladies had a bad headache, and began to complain loudly of various discomforts. To complete the cheerlessness of the morning, rain actually began to fall just as breakfast was finished.

'I tell you what it is,' exclaimed Rippingille, voicing the general sentiment, 'we're going to be better waited on than this, and the landlady's got to understand that.' He spoke while the servant was in the room. 'I don't call that fish properly fried — what do you say?'

Budge was the person appealed to, and he assented vigorously, adding that, if dinner wasn't brought up at the right time, he would know the reason why.

'We've got eighteen people in the 'ouse to cook for,' remarked the servant impartially and casually.

All answered together that this had nothing to do with them, that they hadn't come here to waste time, and that they weren't the sort to pay money for what they didn't get. It was added that the bedrooms swarmed with fleas, and that the bedclothes were insufficient, with many another pointed complaint. But the servant merely smiled, and went her way.

With the aid of umbrellas, the whole party reached the parade, and found seats in a shelter. Budge and

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Rippingille, to ward off low spirits, engaged in horseplay, and were so far successful that at dinner-time all went back through the rain with resolute display of mirth. But the day was unpropitious. Mrs Budge, on scrutinizing the cupboard, protested that the bag of loaf sugar had been interfered with; there followed an unpleasant scene with the servant; the landlady herself could not be assailed, for she declined to come upstairs. Rain, squabbling, chastisement of children, and occasional words between the two ladies brought Sunday to its close. Happily, there remained the half-hour devoted to steaming tumblers, and this paid for all. Budge sang a song about waiting till the clouds roll by, and hearty voices joined him in the chorus. No one could honestly say that the day seemed lost.

On Monday morning the landlady began reprisals. Meeting Mrs Rippingille on the stairs, she complained of the noise that the five children made. A lady below (the word was meaningfully emphasized) had been unable to sleep since seven o'clock this morning, owing to the tumult. 'Tell the lydy,' answered Mrs Rippingille tartly, 'she'd better git up earlier; it's good for her 'ealth.' And this retort kept the holiday makers in exuberant spirits till dinner-time. For the first time they got down on to the beach; they rolled about, and pelted each other; spades and buckets were bought for the elder children. They talked about bathing, but, on the whole, it seemed better to save their money for more certain delights. 'Paddling' could be enjoyed free of expense; and remarkable figures did the two young women present as they ran hither and thither on the edge of the tide — their petticoats pinned up outside their dresses. Budge and Rippingille, reclining pipe in mouth, watched with a genial grin.

Dinner, obtained only after repeated and furious ringing at the bell, came up infamously cooked; the huge slab of steak was tough as leather, and swam in water of a yellowish hue. Mrs Rippingille, who had visited the butcher's this morning, declared that a good half-pound had been feloniously cut off below stairs. Messages of savage insult were sent to the landlady, but satisfaction ended here. It was some relief, however; and, after all, the cooking could not be very much worse than that to which our friends were accustomed at home.

In the afternoon, Mrs Budge, whose baby had an attack of some complaint incidental to its time of life, offered to take care of all the children, whilst the other three elders went in search of enjoyment. This took the form of a ten-mile drive in a public brake, where they sat squeezed and perspiring amid some thirty people. The sun blazed; chalky dust hung in a perpetual cloud about the vehicle; it was hardly possible to get a handkerchief out of one's pocket; but gaiety defied everything. On the way home, Mrs Rippingille, red as a peony with heat and laughter and many quenchings of thirst, consulted the comfort of her neighbours by sitting on Mr Budge's knee; ceaseless joking as to Mrs Budge's state of mind if she knew what was going on kept all three in a roar. The absent lady, meanwhile, having administered remedies to her infant, was walking about the main streets of Brighton, enjoying the sight of the Bank Holiday crowd; the baby she carried in her arms, and the other children followed her. They wanted to play on the beach, but Mrs Budge said it was too far, and for her own part she preferred the pavement.

Over the steaming tumblers that night a vow was registered that, on the morrow, they would have better attendance and better cookery, or know the reason why. As soon as the children awoke, they were encouraged to make the utmost possible noise; to stamp and jump and throw over the furniture, and yell at the top of their voices. This had the desired effect; it brought up the landlady at breakfast. Before she could speak, the angry woman was overwhelmed with vilification. Presently Rippingille voiced the general demand.

'We haven't come here to be bested, and just you bear that in mind! If this kind of thing goes on we won't pay — not a bloomin' penny — understand? You've got to cook our meals proper and to time — see? What do you tike us for? Why, the beds ain't even shook up. And do you call these boots cleaned? It's himposition, that's what it is.'

The combat was too unequal; in spite of her great command of 'language,' the landlady retreated. The lodgers, flushed with victory, sallied forth under a cloudy sky, and betook themselves to the pier, where they attended a popular concert. Dinner, for the first time, was ready almost at the appointed hour, and somewhat better prepared than hitherto; pæans rose round the table.

'They always try it on,' cried Budge. 'You've got to show 'em you won't stand it.' And he chanted a verse of the last song they had heard upon the pier.

Afterwards, all went for a sail in a yacht, and all were lamentably ill. Rain came on; it soaked the holiday garments, and led to all manner of unpleasantness among the three score people packed on board. After a low-spirited tea, the two men, foreseeing an evening of domestic discord, silently vanished, and did not reappear until eleven o'clock. They had been to the theatre. As it happened, their wives had found an excellent opportunity

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for assailing the landlady, and were again victorious; so things passed off better than might have been expected, and over the usual tumblers all unkindness was forgotten.

Wednesday dawned; the end of their holiday. Though breakfast was very late and very bad, no one seemed in the mood to make an uproar. Mrs Ripplingille busied herself with a scheme for packing and carrying away every smallest remnant of every purchased eatable; this must be done before she left the house for the morning's amusement, or servant and landlady would pillage without fear. Having swept the cupboard, she went briskly forth to purchase dinner. The meal was to consist of fried eggs and bacon, with a rice pudding to follow.

'And just you mind what I say' — thus she addressed the servant on her return with the provisions — 'if this dinner isn't properly cooked, you'll remember it. And tell your missis that.'

The menial grinned broadly, but made no answer.

Swift is the flight of happy hours and days. Everyone remarked, at intervals through the morning, that they seemed only just to have come to Brighton; yet to-night must see them home again. The children, whose enjoyment had been considerably less keen than that of their elders, wore gloomy faces at the thought of return; but the suggestion of donkey riding once more exhilarated the whole company. Great and small mounted for a gallop, and their yells rang along the beach. Other delights followed. As dinner-time approached their hunger grew fierce; the thought of delay was frenzy. A stampede upstairs announced their arrival, and rendered needless the loud ring of the sitting-room bell.

Nor had they to wait. The red-nosed servant appeared in a few minutes, panting with the heavy tray. Her lips rigidly set, she put down the dish of eggs and bacon. In the same moment Mrs Ripplingille, who had stepped forward to judge the cookery, uttered an indignant shriek. Her companions rushed to the table, and in union vociferated, not without cause, for the dish made a gruesome display; in place of succulent rashers lay blackened fragments scarce to be recognized as bacon, and the fried eggs were mere bits of greasy leather. Frightened at the results of her mischief, the servant fled; before she reached the kitchen the bell had begun to ring, and it rang incessantly, with ear-piercing clangour, until the landlady, who had just returned from a brief expedition on a matter of business, angrily confronted her lodgers.

'Look at that, woman!' they roared. 'What do you call that?'

The landlady could not pretend that complaint was unjustified. She happened to be particularly anxious to get rid of these people, as their rooms were already let to more desirable tenants, who desired to enter into possession as early as possible.

'I don't want to have no more words with you,' she began, as soon as she could make herself audible. 'There's been a accident, and I tell you what I'll do. If you'll leave after dinner, instead of after tea, I'll take the price of that dinner off what you owe me. How much did the stuff cost?'

The lodgers exchanged glances and reflected. It was possible to make a meal of a sort upon what lay before them, and the offered compensation would be clear gain. Not one had sufficient acuteness to see that, if they could claim damages at all, no condition need attach to the demand. After ten minutes' vehement debate they agreed upon terms, and promised to quit the house in an hour's time. Then, sharp set as wolves, they fell upon the base provender. Luckily, the rice pudding made a tolerable appearance; it vanished almost as soon as it reached the table.

They lingered about the shore and the streets till nearly sunset; the eating-house tea was universally declared the best meal they had had at Brighton. Every heart beat with a proud joy in the thought of two shillings deducted from their landlady's bill, compensation for a dinner, which, after all, they had thoroughly enjoyed. Nothing could have happened more luckily; the money saved, and the victory over a letter of lodgings, crowned their holiday. They talked of the affair at home and among their friends for many a month, and to the end of their lives it will be a sunny reminiscence.