The Poet's Portmanteau

George Gissing

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I

The poet had been nourishing his soul down in Devon. A petty windfall, a minim legacy, which plucked him from scholastic bondage in a London suburb, was now all but consumed. He turned his face once more to the mart of men, strong in the sanguine courage of two−and−twenty. His luggage (the sum total of his personal property, except twenty pounds sterling) consisted of a trunk and a portmanteau. The latter he kept beside him in the railway carriage — a small and very shabby portmanteau, but it guarded the result of ten months' work, the manuscript volume (entitled The Hermit of the Tor; and Other Poems) whereon rested all his hopes. A few articles of clothing and of daily necessity were packed in the same receptacle. On reaching London he would deposit his trunk at the station, and carry the small portmanteau whilst he searched for a temporary lodging.

Green vales and bosky slopes of Devon; the rolling uplands of Wiltshire, the streams and heaths and wooded hills of Surrey. It was late autumn, and the day drew to its close. Through mists of evening a red orb hung huge above the horizon; it crimsoned and grew lurid, athwart the first driftings of London smoke; it disappeared amid towers and chimneys and squalor multiform. The poet grasped his portmanteau, and leapt out on to the platform of Waterloo Station.

One cheap room was all he wanted, and as he could not carry his burden very far he turned southward, guided by memory of the gray, small streets off Kennington Road. Twenty minutes' walk brought him into a by−way where every other window offered its card of invitation to wanderers such as he. At this hour of gloom there was little to choose between one house and another. A few paces ahead of him sounded the knock of a telegraph messenger. Where telegrams were delivered there must be, he thought, some measure of civilisation; so he lingered till the boy had gone away, then directed his steps to that door.

His rat−tat was answered by a young woman, whose personal appearance surprised him. Her features were handsome and intelligent, though scarcely amiable; her clothing indicated poverty, but was not such as would be worn by a girl of the working class; her language and manner completed the proof that she was no native of this region. "Yes," she said, speaking distantly and nervously, "a single room was to let, a room up at the top." The poet, as became a poet, observed with emotional interest this unexpected figure. Only a wretched little oil−lamp hung in the passage, and he could not see the girl's face very distinctly; perhaps the first impression of sullenness was a mistake; it might be only the shrinking self−respect of one whom circumstances had forced into a false position. He noticed that in her hand she held a telegram.

"Would you let me see the room?"

"Please wait a moment."

She went upstairs, and soon reappeared with a lighted candle. Leaving his portmanteau, he followed her through the usual stuffy atmosphere to a chamber of the usual dreariness. His attendant placed her candle within the room, then drew back and waited outside on the landing.

"I think this would do. What is the rent?"

There was hesitation. The poet stepped forward, and endeavoured to discern a face amid the shadows.

"Eight shillings — I think," he was at length answered.

Ah, then she was not the landlady. Perhaps the daughter of people who had come to grief. He began to speak of details; she answered shortly, but to his satisfaction.

"I shall be glad to take the room for a week or two. I'll go and bring up my portmanteau."

"It is usual" — he still could not see the speaker — "to pay a week's rent in advance."

"Oh, to be sure."

Determined to see her face in full light he took up the candle, and stepped with it on to the landing. As if aware of his motive, the girl stood in a retiring attitude; but she met his gaze, and they looked, for an instant, steadily at each other. She was handsome, but her lips had a hard, defiant expression, and in her eyes he read either the suffering of a womanly nature or the recklessness of one indifferent to all good. Her speech favoured the pleasanter interpretation; yet, after all, the countenance disturbed rather than attracted him.

An old box stood by the head of the stairs; on this he placed the candle, and then drew from his pocket the sum he had to pay. The girl thanked him coldly. He ran downstairs, fetched his portmanteau, and put it in a corner

of the dark room. Then they again faced each other.

"By−the−bye," he said, wishing he could draw her into conversation, "what's the address? I have come here by mere chance."

She gave the information as briefly as possible.

"Thank you. Now I must go out and get something to eat."

The girl would not speak. There was nothing for it but to turn and descend the stairs. She followed, and half−way down her voice stopped him.

"When shall you be back to−night?"

"Not later than eleven, I think."

And so they parted, the poet taking a last look at her as he opened the front door.

She had strongly affected his imagination. As he walked towards Westminster, new rhymes and rhythms sang within him to the roaring music of the street. The Devon hermitage was a far, faint memory. London had welcomed him with so sudden a glimpse of her infinite romance that he half repented his long seclusion.

At about the hour he had mentioned he returned to seek a night's rest. Would the same face appear when the door opened? He waited anxiously, and suffered a sad disappointment, for his knock was answered by Just the kind of person that might have been expected — the typical landlady of cheap lodgings, a puffy, slatternly woman chewing a mouthful of the supper from which she had risen.

"Good evening," said the poet, as cheerfully as he could. "I am your new lodger."

The woman stared, as if failing to understand him.

"I took a room at the top, early this evening."

"You've made a mistake. It's the wrong 'ouse."

"But isn't this —?" he named the address which the girl had given him.

"Yes, that's 'ere."

"I thought so. I remember the house perfectly. You were out, I suppose. I saw a — a young woman. I paid a week's rent in advance."

This circumstantial story increased the listener's astonishment. She glared with protuberant eyes, breathed quickly, and gave a snort.

"Well, that's a queer thing. Wait a minute."

She went upstairs, and could be heard to tap at a door; but there followed no sound of voices. Then she came down again, and asked for a description of the young woman who had acted as her representative. The poet answered rather vaguely.

"We have somebody of that sort lodgin' 'ere, but she's out. You say you paid eight shillin's?"

"Yes. And left my portmanteau; you'll find it upstairs.

Again the landlady disappeared. When she returned her face exhibited a contemptuous satisfaction.

"There's no portmanty nowheres in this 'ouse. I told you you'd made a mistake. Try next door!"

The poet was staggered. Mistaken he could not be; the little oil−lamp, a dirty engraving on the wall of the passage, remained so clearly in his mind. A shapeless fear took hold upon him.

"Pray let me go up with you to the top room. I know this was the house. Let me see the room."

The woman was impatient and suspicious. At this moment there sounded from the back of the passage a male voice, asking, "What's up?" A man came forward; the difficulty was explained. For a second time the baffled poet essayed a description of the girl he remembered so well.

"He means Miss Rowe," said the husband. "She ain't in? Then you just take a light, and 'ave a good look in her room."

They went up together to the first floor, and the poet, unable to keep still, followed them at a distance. He was seriously alarmed. If his portmanteau were to be lost — heavens! His poems — his only copy! Some of the shorter ones he could rewrite from memory, but the backbone of his volume, The Hermit of the Tor, could not be reproduced. And how could the portmanteau have vanished? That girl — Surely, surely, impossible! Much rather suspect these vulgar people, or someone else of whom he knew nothing.

Man and wife were searching within the room. He heard feminine exclamations and a masculine oath. Unable to control himself he pushed open the door.

"She's took her 'ook," said the man, looking at him with a grin. "See — 'ere's her tin box — empty! nothing as

belongs to her in the room."

"And owin' a week's rent!" cried his wife. "I might 'a' known better than to trust her. There wasn't no good in her face. She's sloped with your eight bob and your portmanty, I'll take my hoath!"

The poet seized the candle, and strode up the higher flight of stairs. Yes, there was the old box on the landing; yes, this was the room he had paid for. Pheu! pheu!

"Sal!" roared the man's voice, "'ev a look and see if she's laid 'ands on anything of ours!"

The woman yelled at the suggestion, and began a fierce rummage, high and low.

"I can't miss nothin'," she kept shouting. And at length, "Go and fetch a p'liceman. D' y'ear, Matt? Go and fetch a p'liceman. This 'ere young gent 'll be chargin' us with robbin' him."

"Where's your receipt for the eight bob?" asked her husband, turning angrily upon the poet.

"I took no receipt."

"That doesn't sound very likely."

"Likely or not, it's true," cried the other, exasperated by this insult added to his misfortune. "Fetch a policeman, or else I shall. We'll have this investigated."

"I'll jolly soon do that," was the man's retort. "Think you're dealin' with thieves, do you? Begin that kind o' talk, and I'll — 'Ere, Sal, keep a heye on him whilst I go for the copper."

What ensued calls for no detailed narrative. Suffice it that by midnight all had been done that could be done in the way of charges, defences, and official interrogation. Later, the poet sat talking with his rough acquaintances in their own parlour. After all, the people had lost nothing but a week's rent, and they were at length brought to some show of sympathy with the stranger so shamefully treated under their roof. He, for his part, decided still to occupy the bedroom, which would be let to him, magnanimously, for seven−and−sixpence: whilst the police were trying to track his plunderer he might as well remain on the spot. At one o'clock he went gloomily to bed, and in his troubled sleep dreamt that he was chasing that mysterious girl up hill and down dale amid the Devon moorland; she, always far in advance, held his fated manuscript above her head, and laughed maliciously.

II

On the eighth anniversary of that memorable day the poet could look back upon his loss with an amused indifference. He was a poet still, but no longer uttered himself in verse. The success of an essay in romantic fiction had shown him how to live by his pen, and a second book made his name familiar "at all the libraries." For a man of simple tastes he was in clover. He dwelt among the Surrey hills, and on his occasional visits to London did not seek a lodging in the neighbourhood of Kennington Road.

As for The Hermit of the Tor, though often enough he wondered as to its fate, on the whole he was glad it had never been published. To be sure, no publisher would have risked money on it. In his vague recollection, the thing seemed horribly crude; he remembered a line or two that made him shut his eyes and mutter inarticulately. The lyrics might be passable; a couple of them, preserved in his mind, had got printed in a magazine some five years ago. One of his ambitions at present was to write a poetical drama, but he merely mused over the selected theme.

He was thus occupied one winter afternoon as he strolled from the outlying cottage, which he had made his home, to the nearest village. A footstep on the hard road caused him to look up, and he saw the postman drawing near. This encounter saved the humble official a half−mile walk; he delivered a letter into the poet's hands.

A letter redirected by his publishers; probably the tribute of an admiring reader, such as he had not seldom received of late. With a smile he opened it, and the contents proved to be of more interest than he had anticipated.

'SIR, — I have in my possession a manuscript which bears your name, as that of its author, and dates from some years back. It consists of poetical compositions, the longest of them entitled The Hermit of the Tor. I cannot at present explain to you how these papers came into my hands, but I should like to return them to their true owner, and for this purpose I should be glad if you would allow me to meet you, at your own place and time. But for a residence abroad, I should probably have addressed you on the subject long before this, as I find that your name is well known to English readers. Please direct your reply to Penwell's Library, Westbourne Grove, W., and believe me,

'Faithfully yours,

EUSTACE GREY.' At the head of the letter there was no address. 'Eustace Grey' sounded uncommonly like a pseudonym. Altogether a very surprising sequel to the adventure of eight years ago. Was the writer man or woman? Impossible to decide from the penmanship, which was bold, careless, indicative of character and of education. As a man, at all events, the mysterious person must be answered, and curiosity permitted no delay. Where should the meeting take place? He had no inclination to breathe the air of London just now, and a journey of twenty miles might fairly be exacted from a correspondent who chose to write in the strain of melodrama. Let 'Eustace Grey' come hither.

With all brevity the poet invited him to take a certain train from Waterloo, which would enable him to reach the cottage at about four in the afternoon, on a specified day.

The appointed hour was just upon nightfall. With blind drawn, lamp lit, and a log blazing in the old fireplace, the poet awaited his visitor, who might or might not come, for no second communication had been received from him. If he came, he would doubtless take a conveyance from the railway station, a mile and a half away; a rumble of wheels would announce him. At a quarter past four no such signal was yet audible, but five minutes later it struck upon the listener's ear. He stood up, and waited in nervous expectancy.

The vehicle stopped by the door; a knock sounded. A tap at the door of the sitting−room, and there appeared, led by the servant, a tall lady. She was warmly and expensively clad; wraps and furs disguised the outline of her figure, and allowed but an imperfect view of her features. In a moment, however, she threw some of the superfluities aside, and stood gazing at the poet, who saw now that she was a woman of not more than thirty, with a strong, handsome face, and a form that pleased his eye. She offered a hand.

"If I had known —" he began, breaking the silence with voice apologetic. But she interrupted him.

"You wouldn't have brought me all this way. Never mind. It's better. I shall be glad to have made a pilgrimage to the home of the celebrated author."

Her language and utterance certainly did not lack refinement, but she spoke with more familiarity than the poet was prepared for. He judged her a type of the woman that lives in so−called smart society. His pulses had a slight flutter; in observing and admiring her he all but forgot the strange history in which she was concerned.

"The cab will wait for me," she continued, "so I mustn't be long."

"I'm sorry for that," replied the poet, so far imitating her as to talk like an old acquaintance. "You shall have a cup of tea at once." He rang a hand−bell. "You've had a cold journey."

Whilst he spoke he saw her lay upon the table a rolled packet, which was doubtless his manuscript. Then she seated herself in an easy chair by the fireside, glanced round the room, smiled at her own thoughts, and met his look with a steady gaze.

"Are you Eustace Grey?" he inquired, taking a seat over against her.

"I chose the name at random. My own doesn't matter. I am only an — an intermediary, as you would say in a book."

He searched her countenance closely, persistently, without regard to good manners. It was no common face. Had he ever seen it before? It did not charm him, but decidedly it affected his imagination. This could not be an ordinary woman of fashion. He knew little of the wealthy world, but his experience of life assured him that 'Eustace Grey' was not now for the first time engaged in transactions which had a savour of romance.

"Those are my verses?" He pointed towards the table.

"Exactly as they left your hands," she answered calmly.

"Or my portmanteau, rather."

"Yes, your portmanteau." She accepted the correction with a smile.

Surely he had not seen her face before? Surely he had never heard her voice? At this moment the servant entered with a tea−tray. The poet stood up and waited upon his visitor, As soon as the door had closed she said:

"You are not married?"

"No — unhappily."

"Please don't add the word in compliment to me. I'm delighted to know that you keep your independence. Don't marry for a long time. And you live here always?"

"Most of the year."

"Ah, you are not like ordinary men.

"Nor you — I was thinking — like ordinary women."

"Well, no; I suppose not. She looked at him with a peculiar frankness, with a softer expression than her face had yet shown, and, whilst speaking, she drew off her left−hand glove. A peculiarity in the movement excited her companion's attention; he saw that she wore two rings, one of them of plain gold.

"I like your books," was her next remark.

"I'm glad of it."

"Have you good health? You look rather pale — for one who lives in the country."

"Oh, I am very well."

"To be sure you have brains, and use them. It's pleasant to know that there are such men." She sipped her tea. "But time is going, and the driver and horse will freeze."

"I have no stable," said the poet, "but the man can sit by the kitchen fire and have some ale. Anything to make your visit longer."

"Complimentary; but I am here on business." She had grown more distant. "Of course, you want to know how those papers came into my hands. I'll tell you, and make a short story of it. I had them a year or two ago from a friend of mine — a girl, who died. She had stolen them." The listener gave a start, and looked at the face before him more intently than ever. He detected no shrinking, but a certain suggestion of defiance.

"She was a girl who did what is supposed to be the privilege of men — sowed wild oats. She came to an end of her money, and found herself in a poor lodging — somewhere in the south of London —"

"Off Kennington Road," murmured the poet.

"Very likely. I forget. She had got rid of all the clothing she could spare. She was a week behind with her rent. Another day or two, and she would starve. No way of earning money, it seemed. Poor thing, she thought herself something of an artist, and went about offering drawings to the papers and the publishers; but I'm afraid the work was poor to begin with, and got poorer as she did. The desperate state of things made her fierce and ready for anything."

"However, she had a girl friend who wrote to her now and then, addressing to the name she had assumed. This friend lived far away in the north, and earned her own living. One afternoon, just when things were at the

blackest, there arrived a telegram: 'If you come at once, I can promise you employment. Start immediately.' All very well, but how was she to raise fifteen shillings or so for her journey? Now it happened that at this moment she was the only person in the house. The landlady, she knew, would be away for two or three hours; the husband wouldn't be home till eight (it was now five), and another lodger had just gone out. I mention this — you know why. Whilst she was still standing with the telegram in her hand, some one knocked. She opened the door. A young man, carrying a portmanteau — a very nice−looking young man, who spoke softly and pleasantly — had come for a lodging; he wanted one room. She let him in, and took him upstairs.

"She did," murmured the poet, his eyes staying about the room.

"And you remembered what followed?"

"Remarkably well. I can see−well, I'm not quite sure; but I think I can see her face."

"Can you? Well, until you had left the house her intention was perfectly honest. She thought that, in return for her service in letting the room the landlady might perhaps lend her money for the journey north, and trust for repayment. But as soon as you had gone the devil began whispering. Your money lay in her hand. Your portmanteau contained things that would sell or pawn. The chance of a loan from the landlady was dreadfully slight. You see? A man of imagination ought to understand."

"I do — perfectly."

"She tried her keys on the portmanteau. No use. But it was old and shaky. She prised open the lock. What she found disappointed her; it wouldn't fetch many shillings. But she had taken the fatal step. No staying in the house now. She put on her hat and jacket, stuffed into her pockets the few things still left to her, caught up the portmanteau — and away!"

The poet could not help a laugh, and his companion joined in it. But she was agitated, and her mirth had not a genuine ring.

"And how much were my poor old rags worth?"

"Five shillings."

"By Jove! You don't say so!"

"She pawned them in a street somewhere north of the Strand. But this gave her only thirteen shillings. Then she sold the portmanteau; that brought eighteen−pence. Fourteen shillings and sixpence. Next she sold or pawned her jacket; it brought three shillings."

"Poor girl! With such a journey before her on a cold might! But the poems?"

"She looked at them, and was on the point of throwing them away, but she didn't. She read some of them in the train that night. And oh — oh — oh! how ashamed of herself she was then and for many a long day! So much ashamed that she couldn't even feel afraid."

"And she got the employment promised?"

"Yes. And sowed no more wild oats. It was a poor living, but she struggled on — until by chance she met a very rich man, who took a fancy to her. She didn't care for him. In her life she had only seen one man who really attracted her, but — well, she made up her mind to marry the rich man; and then — she died. I knew her story already, and at her death she left your poems in my care, to be restored if possible. There they are."

With a careless gesture she rose.

"You are not going yet," exclaimed the poet.

"I am; this moment. I have a train to catch."

"Hang the train! There's one at about nine o'clock. I shall send away your cab."

She looked at him very coldly.

"I am going at once, and you will be good enough to stay where you are."

"You won't even tell me your name?"

"Not even that. Good−bye, poet!"

She gave him her hand. Holding it, he gazed at her with bright eyes.

"I do remember your friend's face. And how I wish' she could have spoken to me that night!"

"The ideal is never met in life," she answered softly. "Put it into your books — which I shall always read."

The door closed, and he heard the cab rumble away.