A Profitable Weakness

George Gissing

Table of Contents

A Profitable Weakness

George Gissing

Only to the few and the very fortunate of men is it granted to earn a livelihood by the exertion of their best powers. Men in general owe sustenance to the meaner of their faculties, often enough to the basest possibility that is in them; and, even so, find the effort no light one. As a singular instance of something between the two, of a man who found his profit in the cultivation of a mere amiable weakness, without fatigue, and without sense of degradation, take Lambert Wellaway.

At the age of five−and−twenty he was a master in a boarding−school, and loathed his calling. Possibly, under very favourable circumstances, he might have made a good teacher; he had a vein of studious inclination, a faculty for the lucid exposition of his knowledge, a pleasant manner, an alluring sportiveness of intellect; but, in the school, these gifts were wasted. The large, noisy classes made his head ache; average brainless boyhood was a horror to him; he had not the least power of discipline, and was wont to declare in bitterness that his post demanded the qualities, not of a teacher, but of a drill−sergeant. Yet, how otherwise support himself? Of course, he had thought of literature — who has not? But Lambert Wellaway did not overrate his endowment; he was wise enough to judge of his chances as an author by the inertia that opposed him whenever he sat down to write. Indolence had a great part in his temperament; a book, a sunny corner, and entire tranquillity, formed his ideal of supportable existence. When the inevitable came to pass, and his headmaster suggested to him that their engagement was for the advantage of neither, Wellaway could feel nothing but relief. He went away to his people in the country, and mused on things in general as he idled about the fields.

His walk one day led him by a stream−side path, along a leafy little valley, and here he came upon a middle−aged man, who was painting a picture — a serious picture in oils, a large canvas, the artist very business−like in his costume and attitude. Much interested, but afraid to linger, Wellaway threw a glance at the work, and passed on. He noticed, however, that the artist gave him a very friendly look, and so, on his return in half−an−hour's time, he slackened pace as he drew near again, viewing the canvas more boldly than before. A civil greeting rose to the lips of both men: Wellaway halted.

'How very beautiful! Pray allow me to watch your work for a moment.'

He spoke with perfect sincerity, honestly admiring the picture, and delighted at the opportunity of conversing with a genuine painter. It surprised him when he saw the face of the middle−aged man flush with boyish gratification.

'You like it? Really? I'm very glad. I — I rather thought that I had — had got the effect. Very difficult, this plein air work. The water just there — yes, under the willow — doesn't quite satisfy me.'

The artist had a very deep yet soft voice, and spoke nervously. His utterance was not altogether that of an educated man, and his lack of self−possession, a certain uncouthness in his bearing, excited Wellaway's wonder. Young, inexperienced, fastidious, he had imagined that an artist must of necessity be distinguished by every kind of refinement The longer they talked, the more plainly it appeared that the painter had no very bright intelligence, and that he was very defective in grace of manner. But Wellaway's interest seemed to flatter him profoundly; be showed an eagerness to detain the young man, to strike up a friendship with him. He mentioned that he was staying, alone, at a little inn not far away, and:

'If you're living about here, you might look me up — if you have time in the evening. I should like to show you some little things I have with me — trifles — water−colours. My name is Paddy, but' — he laughed — 'I'm not an Irishman. Perhaps one of my ancestors was; I don't know.'

Wellaway gladly promised to call that very evening, and kept his word. He found Mr. Paddy sitting in the inn's best room, with cigars and strong waters on the table. The artist received him with almost excessive cordiality; they were soon talking like old acquaintances. When Mr. Paddy opened a portfolio, Wellaway tried to

examine the sketches and finished water−colours with a critical eye; for already he suspected that the painting he had liked so much at the first glance was not, in truth, of great artistic value. All unskilled in the matter, he now felt his doubts irresistibly confirmed; these small things seemed to him decidedly commonplace. Another might have suffered embarrassment; not so Wellaway. To speak smoothly, pleasingly, was in his very nature not only did he shrink from giving pain, in such a case as this, by silence or scanted applause, but it positively gratified him to be the cause of gratification.

'Delightful! A charming little thing that. How wonderfully you have got the sky! Yes, that's one of the best; a really exquisite thing!'

Mr. Paddy drank in the praise as though at every pore; his eyes danced with joy; an infantile slobbering appeared at the corners of his mouth; he fidgeted hither and thither, his hands tremulous in sheer delight. All the time, he kept swallowing great draughts of whisky−and−water, and a gentle rubescence tinged the end of his soft unshapely nose.

They exchanged confidences. Having spoken frankly of his own affairs, Wellaway learnt that his friend was no artist by profession, but a retired man of business, who from youth upwards had conceived himself born to be a painter. Mr. Paddy had a small estate in a delightful part of Gloucestershire; was married, but childless. In the summer−time he wandered extensively, with elaborate apparatus; his aim was to make a gallery of English landscape.

'I don't exhibit. To tell the truth, I don't think it quite fair to the men who have to sell pictures. I do sell, now and then, privately, but always for some charitable purpose — something of that kind, you know. I tell you what it is, you must come over to my place and spend a day or two — a week or two. Now, will you? I mean it — do, indeed!'

Why not? Wellaway accepted the invitation, and, in a week's time, he arrived as a guest at Mr. Paddy's house. Here another surprise awaited him. Mrs. Paddy was not at all the sort of person he had imagined. At least ten years younger than her husband, handsome, good−naturedly supercilious, this lady seemed to lead a perfectly independent life, and to take no interest whatever in the doings of her spouse. When Wellaway spoke to her of Mr. Paddy's paintings, she smiled, uttered an 'Ah — yes,' and changed the subject. Of actual disagreement between them there was no sign; they went their several ways with complete decorum, neither seeming to desire anything else.

Having come for a week, Lambert Wellaway remained Mr. Paddy's guest for nine years.

Both would have been astonished had any one hinted to them that the situation was other than honourable. Wellaway called himself a 'secretary,' and saw no reason to doubt that his services merited their reward; in truth, the one and only service he rendered to his patron was that of unwearying flattery. For this Mr. Paddy had languished: in Wellaway he found a priceless stimulant, which soon became a necessity of life. His artistic hobby had yielded him but a doubtful, troublous satisfaction, yet he could not abandon it. Though more than moderately obtuse, he had learnt that his acquaintances considered him a bore of the first magnitude: be was ever seeking for new friends who would admire his pictures, receive them as presents, and, chief point, hang them conspicuously in their houses. In the nature of things it grew more and more difficult to satisfy this craving for admiration, since, however vain, Mr. Paddy stood upon his social dignity, and the praise of boors had little savour for him. Such a man as Wellaway, educated, well−bred, who could practise adulation without a trace of vulgar obsequiousness, appealed to his very heart. And Wellaway himself never found the position burdensome. owing to those happy characteristics of his, the inability to tell a disagreeable truth, and the pleasure he took in pleasing. He deemed himself a favourite of fortune. At thought of the past, he shuddered; forward he never desired to look. He lived in a luxurious home associated with agreeable persons, travelled amid the pleasantest scenes. It had come about insensibly by repeated prolongation of his visit; perhaps he could hardly have said at what moment he changed his quality of guest for that of permanent inmate. Really, an ideal state of things.

Then Mr. Paddy died, and his testament bequeathed to Mr. Wellaway a very comfortable little income. Mrs. Paddy, having a separate estate, took the matter quite reasonably and with much good−nature.