A Song of Sixpence

George Gissing

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The window of a little stationer's shop, far away in North−East London, exhibited not long ago the following advertisement, written in an old−fashioned female hand, on half a sheet of note−paper:

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Lessons on the Pianoforte, also in Singing, given by a
Professional Lady. Sixpence an hour. Apply within.
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It befel, from time to time, that persons did make application, with the result that they were requested to walk into the parlour behind the shop, where the 'professional lady' gave them audience. Her name was Miss Withers, her age not more than forty, and she had lost one of her legs. Though in such very humble circumstances, and constrained by poverty to welcome every one who would engage and pay her to 'teach music,' Miss Withers had anything but a meek countenance or a naturally subservient manner. Twenty years ago she must have been rather a handsome young woman. Her profile was still good, but premature wrinkles and the wasting of flesh, together with a something which expressed itself in close−shut lips and brows bent over bright though myopic eyes, gave her an aspect not generally found attractive. In speech she was brief, not seldom curt; and her accent, if not that of an educated person, betrayed superiority to those among whom she lived. When the parent of a new pupil sought her out, she would eye him, or her, with keen inspection, and regulate her remarks accordingly. As may be presumed, it rarely happened that she had to deal with people of any intelligence, but stupidity and ignorance have their degrees. Occasionally Miss Withers made a mistake. Perchance, she had undertaken to teach a little girl whose parents seemed to her endowed with some measure of reason. She would begin with notes and scales, and so on. At the third lesson, the mother (who had been listening outside the door) would come in with dissatisfied look.

"Arriet don't seem to be gettin' on very much. When are you goin' to teach her a toon, Miss Withers? Her father says that kind o' plyin' mikes his 'ead ache.'

'She shall begin tunes at once,' was the teacher's short reply. And forthwith, dropping all methodic instruction, she trained the child (as though some docile animal) to hammer out a familiar melody. The parents applauded, and were willing to recommend Miss Withers to their friends.

Of course, it was not merely by stress of misfortune that Miss Withers had fallen so low. Character is fate, but of necessity we attribute to mortals a share in the shaping of their own ends. This woman had enjoyed some advantages in early life; her mother was a professional singer, her father the proprietor of a panorama; up to the age of ten, she had fairly good schooling and something more than ordinary instruction in music, this seeming to be her strong point. But at that time her mother died, and for the next ten years her father's history was a process of degradation, mainly due to drink. The only child, she did what in her lay to answer her father's hopes; no harshness embittered her young life, and only when she found herself alone in the world did she become entirely dependent on her own exertions.

It need not have been difficult for her to earn a living, whether as singer, instrumentalist, or teacher but Miss Withers suffered from an overweening sense of her powers and importance; she fretted in a state of subordination, and came to grief by taking what seemed a short cut to independence. Scorning the lower walks of the vocalist's profession, she had attached herself to a provincial concert company, and was living in moderate comfort, when the wealthy son of a wealthier father (commercial folk) made her acquaintance, and offered her marriage. The

splendid prospect proved too much for her, and certain indiscretions — nothing worse — led first to the postponement, then to the final defeat of her hopes Unhappily for the girl, her quondam lover offered pecuniary compensation, thus suggesting a step she would probably not have taken if left to her mere chagrin. She consulted a speculative solicitor, and brought an action for breach of promise, in which she was awarded five hundred pounds.

A fatal success. To begin with, the publicity of the case had nourished all the worst elements of her character: vulgar flattery debased her ambitions, and the week's notoriety ruined her self−respect. As often happens at such a juncture, she received offers of marriage by the score. Feeling that the future was in any case assured, she lived for some months in luxury and waste, and was surrounded by precisely the people it would have been well for her to avoid. When her means ran low, she surveyed the list of possible husbands — now diminished. The proprietor of a hotel ultimately won and wedded her. He, as it happened, was on the point of bankruptcy, and in a year's time the ambitious woman had no choice but to work as manageress in a much smaller establishment, to which with difficulty they had got appointed.

Followed gloom, decline, and squalor. Her husband drank; she did likewise. In a quarrel one night, she was thrown down the stairs, and so badly injured that one of her legs had to be amputated. The allowance she extorted from her husband was poor consolation, and in wretched solitude, unable to appear as a musician, knowing that her voice had failed, she naturally betook herself to the bottle. At nine−and−twenty, when widowhood brought a new event into the life of sordid monotony, she had neither health nor prospects. Her childless condition might, or might not, have aided the downfall which she herself was accustomed to contemplate with a bitter defiance.

Strange to say, the fear of destitution did her good. She was not so far degraded as to let herself sink into the slough of mendicancy, and she shrank in horror from the workhouse. Still possessed of some self−control, she changed her locality, changed her name, and began a struggle for existence as a music−teacher. Help from old acquaintances was out of the question; she must subsist, if at all, on the patronage of the lowest class that paid for music−lessons, people who made no inquiries, and were satisfied or not on their own judgment of results. Years had gone by, and Miss Withers — it was riot even her own maiden name — kept body and soul together. Of her petty earnings, she spent more in liquid than in solid sustenance, but, by whatever grace, could not be called a drunkard; most people with whom she came in contact suspected her of nothing worse than semi−starvation.

After many changes of abode, she was fortunately settled with a family in some slight degree civilised people who gave her a garret, the use of the parlour with its piano, and occasional food, in return for five shillings a week and music−lessons to three girls. These pupils were almost the only ones whom Miss Withers had permission to teach properly. Her sixpenny hours brought her in daily contact with strange forms of vanity and doltishness. Sometimes the pupil had no piano at home, and must be taught in the parlour behind the shop; but, as a rule, the desire for lessons came as the result of possessing an instrument, which had been procured merely for exhibition. The newly−wedded wife would dispense with anything rather than with a piano. Miss Withers gave her lessons in singular places: in garrets above, and cellars below; bed−sitting−rooms, kitchen−sitting−rooms, bed−kitchen−sitting−rooms, over stables, at the rear of rag−and−bottle shops, amid filth, stench, every shape of brutal uncleanliness. And, by very scorn of the people whose imbecility supported her, she was saved from some of her own vices.

'Oh, the fools! Oh, the mean, dirty fools!' Thus did she mutter to herself, day after day, in going from lesson to lesson.

'A tune?' she once exclaimed to a fat woman clad in silk, who grumbled that her all but idiot child could 'ply' nothing after the second hour; 'what tune shall I teach her? Will "Sing a Song of Sixpence" do?'

The fat woman had no sense of irony, and said that would be better than nothing.