

Transplanted

George Gissing

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The cab was piled with luggage, and within sat a young matron, her cheeks fresh as the meadows she had quitted but a few hours ago. Long Bill, lurking on the limits of the railway station, caught a significant nod from the cabdriver, and at once started in pursuit.

Long Bill was not very tall, but had limbs so excessively slender, and so meagre a trunk, that his acquaintances naturally thought of him in terms of length. When unoccupied, which was generally the case, he let his arms hang straight, and close to his sides, as though trying to occupy as little room in the world as possible. He walked on his toes, rather quickly, and almost without a bend of the knee; his back was straight, and the collar of his filthy coat always turned up, to shield the scraggy, collarless neck. Observe him in motion at a distance, and you were reminded of a red Indian on the trail. Catch sight of him suddenly close at hand, and his sliding, furtive carriage made you anxious about your pockets or watch-guard. By his own account, Bill was nineteen years old, but he had the wizened face of senility: his hairless cheeks hollow over tooth-gaps, his nose mere cartilage, his small eyes a-blink, yet eager as those of a hungry animal.

For more than a mile he ran along by the laden cab, and seemingly without much effort: when it drew up in front of a comfortable house, Bill sprang to the door of the vehicle.

'You'll let a pore young feller help with the luggage; lydy? I've ran all the w'y from Victoria.'

He panted his mendicant humility, and with a grimy paw shook drops from a scarce visible forehead. The fair young matron regarded him with pained, compassionate look.

'You have run all the way from Victoria? Certainly you may help; of course you may!'

She alighted, entered the house, and stood there in the hall watching Long Bill as, with feverish energy, he assisted a servant to transfer trunks and parcels. Relatives pressed about the lady, but she could not give them due attention.

'Look at that poor creature. He has followed my cab all the way from Victoria, just to earn a few pence! Oh, these things are too dreadful !'

The simple heart of this lady was a law unto itself. She had possessions, and spoke with authority. In happy moment, Long Bill had pursued the wheels of her cab. Holding money in readiness, she talked with him. Could he not get work? What was his story? Where did he live? To every question Bill made fluent reply, panting oft, and squeezing the rag which served him for headgear. Work! Only give him the chawnce! See what it was to be rigidly honest: not since yesterday at this time had a morsel of bread passed his lips. Work! He threw up his eyes in appeal to powers supernal.

'Come and see me to-morrow at twelve o'clock.'

His immediate wants provided for, Bill passed the evening in contemplation. He felt no prompting to impart to any one the wonder that had befallen. Very punctually next day did he present himself at the area-door of the comfortable house, and silently he was led to a room where the lady waited for him. To various searching questions he again answered with a tremulous candour which had its full effect. Then, bidding him listen and perpend, the lady offered her suggestion. Far away from London, in very beautiful country, she had a house, with gardens and fields, and there, if so it pleased him, William could support himself honourably by the labour of his hands — could learn the rural life, could gain health and strength, could forget the horrors of his early years. Was William disposed to consider this? The head-gardener, an estimable man, would direct and encourage him. He would receive wages, and eat the bread of independence. What said he?

William once more threw up his eyes, and, in very truth, knew not how to respond; but his face answered for him. Very well; he should have this chance of proving his sincerity. In a day or two the arrangements would be complete. Let him come again, at a time appointed, and be in readiness to quit London. Meanwhile, he must

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purchase the decent clothes of a labouring man; herewith, money for that purpose. Let him be faithful, and the sun of happiness would henceforth shine upon him.

In less than a week, behold Long Bill, answering now to the name of William Higgs, transplanted to quite a new sphere of existence. His lodging was in the cottage of a farm-labourer; his duties led him to the kitchen-gardens of the manor-house, where Mr. Brown, grave and suspicious, set him primitive tasks with the fewest possible words. William looked as though he had fallen from the moon. He was vastly uncomfortable in his clean, new clothing; he stared at everything and everybody; he stood on guard against possible attacks, and kept wondering whether, if he climbed to the top of a hill not far away, he would be able to see London. The fact that he had travelled for three hours by an express train did not affect this speculation. Never in his life had William felt so hopeless, so purposeless.

By the directions of his benefactress, he was abundantly fed, and such advantage did he take of this novel experience that, on the second day, he began to suffer from an alarming disorder. A severe pain oppressed his breathing, and his heart throbbed violently; at length, utterly overcome, he lay gasping as if for life. A doctor had to be summoned. Soon there followed a second and no less violent attack; William had secretly eaten two large cucumbers and a pound of cheese; he paid the penalty. Work, from the first not only distasteful, but difficult, was for some days impossible.

Presently it appeared that he had caught a very bad cold; he was threatened with congestion of the lungs. Writing to the lady of the manor, the doctor explained to her that William's constitution had suddenly broken down in consequence of the great and sudden change. There would have to be care; figuratively and literally, this poor fellow had as good as no legs to stand upon; he seemed ripe for all manner of diseases. If his diet and habits were not strictly regulated, the result might be lamentable.

A month went by. William had pretended to work, but always gave up on the plea of weakness he looked very miserable, and did not talk much; his cough was bad. One day, after spitting on the gravel walk, he showed the gardener a red stain. Mr. Brown, though he did not like William, looked troubled.

'Ever seen that afore now?'

Ruefully and resentfully, the other declared that he had never known what it was to have anything the matter with him. Then he went apart into a quiet spot, and lay on the grass, and was beset with terrors. Moreover, a great wrath awoke in him: he cursed the place and the people, and, above all, the well-meaning lady who had sent him into exile. Far-off London called to him with irresistible lure he longed for the streets, the noises, the smells, for his old companions, for the lurking-places of his homeless nights. Money he had none; as yet his weekly wages only paid for board and lodging. But, with or without money, he would get back to London. His purpose must be secret; if the enemy got wind of it, he would be forcibly detained.

That evening he contrived to make a stealthy entry into the grape-house, and to cut the roots of all the vines. Early the next morning he did the like damage to a number of rose-trees. A poor revenge, but it soothed him. Suspecting that his malfeasance among the vines must soon be discovered, he held himself in readiness for flight at any moment; and while listening eagerly for every word spoken by the people about him, he sought new forms of mischief. His troublesome cough kept him in mind of the wrong he had suffered; it urged him to malicious activity. But before he could do anything worse than pinch blossoms off certain valuable plants, the alarm struck upon his ear.

'Hoy! London Bill! Mr. Brown wants you, and look sharp!'

It was one of the under-gardeners shouting from a distance. In sudden terror, in a mad desire for liberty and home, he slunk rapidly out of sight, then took to his heels.

In the night, at a village some twenty miles away, the constable came upon a tramp who lay helpless by the roadside. 'Severe hæmorrhage from the lungs,' said a doctor. And, but a few days later, William Higgs was again transplanted — this time to a yet more quiet locality, where no work would ever be asked of him.