

Topham's Chance

George Gissing

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Chapter I

On a slimmer afternoon two surly men sat together in a London lodging. One of them occupied an easy-chair, smoked a cigarette, and read the newspaper; the other was seated at the table, with a mass of papers before him, on which he laboured as though correcting exercises. They were much of an age, and that about thirty, but whereas the idler was well dressed, his companion had a seedy appearance and looked altogether like a man who neglected himself. For half an hour they had not spoken.

Of a sudden the man in the chair jumped up.

'Well, I have to go into town,' he said gruffly, 'and it's uncertain when I shall be back. Get that stuff cleared off, and reply to the urgent letters — mind you write in the proper tone to Dixon — as soapy as you can make it. Tell Miss Brewer we can't reduce the fees, but that we'll give her credit for a month. Guarantee the Leicestershire fellow a pass if he begins at once.'

The other, who listened, bit the end of his wooden penholder to splinters.

'All right,' he replied. 'But, look here, I want a little money.'

'So do I'

'Yes, but you're not like me, without a coin in your pocket. Look here, give me half-a-crown. I have absolute need of it. Why, I can't even get my hair cut. I'm sick of this slavery.'

'Then go and do better,' cried the well-dressed man insolently. 'You were glad enough of the job when I offered it to you. It's no good your looking to me for money. I can do no more myself than just live; and as soon as I see a chance, you may be sure I shall clear out of this rotten business.'

He moved towards the door, but before opening it stood hesitating.

'Want to get your hair cut, do you? Well, there's sixpence, and it's all I can spare.'

The door closed. And the man at the table, leaning back, stared gloomily at the sixpenny piece on the table before him.

His name was Topham; he had a university degree and a damaged reputation. Six months ago, when his choice seemed to be between staying in the streets and turning sandwich-man, luck had made him acquainted with Mr. Rudolph Starkey, who wrote himself M.A. of Dublin University and advertised a system of tuition by correspondence. In return for mere board and lodging Topham became Mr. Starkey's assistant; that is to say, he did by far the greater part of Mr. Starkey's work. The tutorial business was but moderately successful; still, it kept its proprietor in cigarettes, and enabled him to pass some hours a day at a club, where he was convinced that before long some better chance in life would offer itself to him. Having always been a lazy dog, Starkey regarded himself as an example of industry unrewarded; being as selfish a fellow as one could meet, he reproached himself with the unworldliness of his nature, which had so hindered him in a basely material age. One of his ventures was a half-moral, half-practical little volume entitled *Success in Life*. Had it been either more moral or more practical, this book would probably have yielded him a modest income, for such works are dear to the British public; but Rudolph Starkey, M.A., was one of those men who do everything by halves and snarl over the ineffectual results.

Topham's fault was that of a man who had followed his instincts but too thoroughly. They brought him to an end of everything, and, as Starkey said, he had been glad enough to take the employment which was offered without any inconvenient inquiries. The work which he undertook he did competently and honestly for some time without a grumble. Beginning with a certain gratitude to his employer, though without any liking, he soon grew to detest the man, and had much ado to keep up a show of decent civility in their intercourse. Of better birth and breeding than Starkey, he burned with resentment at the scant ceremony with which he was treated, and loathed the meanness which could exact so much toil for such poor remuneration. When offering his terms Starkey had talked in that bland way characteristic of him with strangers.

'I'm really ashamed to propose nothing better to a man of your standing. But — well, I'm making a start, you see, and the fact of the matter is that, just at present, I could very well manage to do all the work myself. Still, if you think it worth your while, there's no doubt we shall get on capitally together, and, of course, I need not say, as soon as our progress justifies it, we must come to new arrangements. A matter of six or seven hours a day will be all I shall ask of you at present For my own part, I work chiefly at night.'

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Chapter II

By the end of the first month Topham was working, not six or seven, but ten or twelve hours a day, and his spells of labour only lengthened as time went on. Seeing himself victimised, he one day alluded to the promise of better terms, but Starkey turned sour.

'You surprise me, Topham. Here are we, practically partners, doing our best to make this thing a success, and all at once you spring upon me an unreasonable demand. You know how expensive these rooms are — for we must have a decent address. If you are dissatisfied, say so, and give me time to look out for some one else.'

Topham was afraid of the street, and that his employer well knew. The conversation ended in mutual sullenness, which thenceforward became the note of their colloquies. Starkey felt himself a victim of ingratitude, and consequently threw even more work upon his helpless assistant. That the work was so conscientiously done did not at all astonish him. Now and then he gave himself the satisfaction of finding fault: just to remind Topham that his bread depended on another's goodwill. Congenial indolence grew upon him, but he talked only the more of his ceaseless exertions. Sometimes in the evening he would throw up his arms, yawn wearily, and declare that so much toil with such paltry results was a heart-breaking thing.

Topham stared sullenly at the sixpence. This was but the latest of many insults, yet never before had he so tasted the shame of his subjection. Though he was earning a living, and a right to self-respect, more strenuously than Starkey ever had, this fellow made him feel like a mendicant. His nerves quivered, he struck the table fiercely, shouting within himself, 'Brute! Cad!' Then he pocketed the coin and got on with his duties.

It was toil of a peculiarly wearisome and enervating kind. Starkey's advertisements, which were chiefly in the country newspapers, put him in communication with persons of both sexes, and of any age from seventeen onwards, the characteristic common to them all being inexperience and intellectual helplessness. Most of these correspondents desired to pass some examination; a few aimed — or professed to aim — merely at self-improvement, or what they called 'culture.' Starkey, of course, undertook tuition in any subject, to any end, stipulating only that his fees should be paid in advance. Throughout the day his slave had been correcting Latin and Greek exercises, papers in mathematical or physical science, answers to historical questions: all elementary and many grotesquely bad. On completing each set he wrote the expected comment; sometimes briefly, sometimes at considerable length. He now turned to a bundle of so-called essays, and on opening the first could not repress a groan. No! This was beyond his strength. He would make up the parcels for post, write the half-dozen letters that must be sent to-day, and go out. Had he not sixpence in his pocket?

Just as he had taken this resolve some one knocked at the sitting-room door, and with the inattention of a man who expects nothing, Topham bade enter.

'A gen'man asking for Mr. Starkey, sir,' said the servant.

'All right. Send him in.'

And then entered a man whose years seemed to be something short of fifty, a hale, ruddy-cheeked, stoutish man, whose dress and bearing made it probable that he was no Londoner.

'Mr. Starkey, M. A.?' he inquired, rather nervously, though his smile and his upright posture did not lack a certain dignity.

'Quite right,' murmured Topham, who was authorised to represent his principal to any one coming on business. 'Will you take a seat?'

'You will know my name,' began the stranger. 'Wigmore — Abraham Wigmore.'

'Very glad to meet you, Mr. Wigmore. I was on the point of sending your last batch of papers to the post. You will find, this time, I have been able to praise them unreservedly.'

The listener fairly blushed with delight; then he grasped his short beard with his left hand and laughed silently, showing excellent teeth.

'Well, Mr. Starkey,' he replied at length in a moderately subdued voice, 'I did really think I'd managed better than usual. But there's much thanks due to you, sir. You've helped me, Mr. Starkey, you really have. And that's one reason why, happening to come up to London, I wished to have the pleasure of seeing you; I really did want to thank you, sir.'

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Chapter III

Topham was closely observing this singular visitor. He had always taken 'Abraham Wigmore' for a youth of nineteen or so, some not over-bright, but plodding and earnest clerk or counter-man in the little Gloucestershire town from which the correspondent wrote; it astonished him to see this mature and most respectable person. They talked on. Mr. Wigmore had a slight west-country accent, but otherwise his language differed little from that of the normally educated; in every word he revealed a good and kindly, if simple, nature. At length a slight embarrassment interfered with the flow of his talk, which, having been solely of tuitional matters, began to take a turn more personal. Was he taking too much of Mr. Starkey's time? Reassured on this point, he begged leave to give some account of himself.

'I dare say, Mr. Starkey, you're surprised to see how old I am. It seems strange to you, no doubt, that at my age I should be going to school.' He grasped his beard and laughed. 'Well, it is strange, and I'd like to explain it to you. To begin with, I'll tell you what my age is; I'm seven-and-forty. Only that. But I'm the father of two daughters — both married. Yes, I was married young myself, and my good wife died long ago, more's the pity.'

He paused, looked round the room, stroked his hard-felt hat, Topham murmuring a sympathetic sound.

'Now, as to my business, Mr. Starkey. I'm a fruiterer and greengrocer. I might have said fruiterer alone; it sounds more respectable, but the honest truth is, I do sell vegetables as well, and I want you to know that, Mr. Starkey. Does it make you feel ashamed of me?'

'My dear sir! What business could be more honourable? I heartily wish I had one as good and as lucrative.'

'Well, that's your kindness, sir,' said Wigmore, with a pleased smile. 'The fact is, I have done pretty well, though I'm not by any means a rich man: comfortable, that's all. I gave my girls a good schooling, and what with that and their good looks, they've both made what may be called better marriages than might have been expected. For down in our country, you know, sir, a shopkeeper is one thing, and a gentleman's another. Now my girls have married gentlemen.'

Again he paused, and with emphasis. Again Topham murmured, this time congratulation.

'One of them is wife to a young solicitor; the other to a young gentleman farmer. And they've both gone to live in another part of the country. I dare say you understand that, Mr. Starkey?'

The speaker's eyes had fallen; at the same time a twitching of the brows and hardening of the mouth changed the expression of his face, marking it with an unexpected sadness, all but pain.

'Do you mean, Mr. Wigmore,' asked Topham, 'that your daughters desire to live at a distance from you?'

'Well, I'm sorry to say that's what I do mean, Mr. Starkey. My son-in-law the solicitor had intended practising in the town where he was born; instead of that he went to another a long way off. My son-in-law the gentleman farmer was to have taken a farm close by us; he altered his mind, and went into another county. You see, sir it's quite natural: I find no fault. There's never been an unkind word between any of 'is. But——'

He was growing more and more embarrassed. Evidently the man had something he wished to say, something to which he had been leading up by this disclosure of his domestic affairs; but he could not utter his thoughts. Topham tried the commonplaces naturally suggested by the situation; they were received with gratitude, but still Mr. Wigmore hung his head and talked vaguely, with hesitations, pauses.

'I've always been what one may call serious-minded, Mr. Starkey. As a boy I liked reading, and I've always had a book at hand for my leisure time — the kind of book that does one good. Just now I'm reading *The Christian Year*. And since my daughters married — well, as I tell you, Mr. Starkey, I've done pretty well in business — there's really no reason why I should keep on in my shop, if I chose to — to do otherwise.'

'I quite understand,' interrupted Topham, in whom there began to stir a thought which made his brain warm. 'You would like to retire from business. And you would like to — well, to pursue your studies more seriously.'

Again Wigmore looked grateful, but even yet the burden was not off his mind.

'I know,' he resumed presently, turning his hat round and round, 'that it sounds a strange thing to say, but — well, sir, I've always done my best to live as a religious man.'

'Of that I have no doubt whatever, Mr. Wigmore.'

'Well, then, sir, what I should like to ask you is this. Do you think, if I gave up the shop and worked very hard at my studies — with help, of course, with help, — do you think, Mr. Starkey, that I could hope to get on?'

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He was red as a peony; his voice choked.

'You mean,' put in Topham, he, too, becoming excited, 'to become a really well-educated man?'

'Yes, sir, yes. But more than that. I want, Mr. Starkey, to make myself — something — so that my daughters and my sons-in-law would never feel ashamed of me — so that their children won't be afraid to talk of their grandfather. I know it's a very bold thought, sir, but if I could——'

'Speak, Mr. Wigmore,' cried Topham, quivering with curiosity, 'speak more plainly. What do you wish to become? With competent help — of course, with competent help — anything is possible.'

'Really?' exclaimed the other. 'You mean that, Mr. Starkey? Then, sir' — he leaned forward, blushing, trembling, gasping — 'could I get to be — a curate?'

Topham fell back into his chair. For two or three minutes he was mute with astonishment; then the very soul of him sang jubilee.

'My dear Mr. Wigmore,' he began, restraining himself to an impressive gravity. 'I should be the last man to speak lightly of the profession of a clergyman or to urge any one to enter the Church whom I thought unfitted for the sacred office. But in your case, my good sir, there can be no such misgiving. I entertain no doubt whatever of your fitness — your moral fitness, and I will go so far as to say that with competent aid you might, in no very long time, be prepared for the necessary examination.'

The listener laughed with delight. He began to talk rapidly, all diffidence subdued. He told how the idea had first come to him, how he had brooded upon it, how he had worked at elementary lesson-books, very secretly — then how the sight of Starkey's advertisement had inspired him with hope.

'Just to get to be a curate — that's all. I should never be worthy of being a vicar or a rector. I don't look so high as that, Mr. Starkey. But a curate is a clergyman, and for my daughters to be able to say their father is in the Church — that would be a good thing, sir, a good thing!'

He slapped his knee, and again laughed with joy. Meanwhile Topham seemed to have become pensive, his head was on his hand.

'Oh,' he murmured at length, 'if I had time to work seriously with you, several hours a day.'

Wigmore looked at him, and let his eyes fall: 'You are, of course, very busy, Mr. Starkey!'

'Very busy.'

Topham waved his hand at the paper-covered table, and appeared to sink into despondency. Thereupon Wigmore cautiously and delicately approached the next thought he had in mind, Topham — cunning fellow — at one moment facilitating, at another retarding what he wished to say. It came out at last. Would it be quite impossible for Mr. Starkey to devote himself to one sole pupil.

Chapter IV

'Mr. Wigmore, I will be frank with you. If I asked an equivalent for the value of my business as a business, I could not expect you to agree to such a proposal. But, to speak honestly, my health has suffered a good deal from overwork, and I must take into consideration the great probability that in any case, before long, I shall be obliged to find some position where the duties were less exhausting.'

'Good gracious!' exclaimed the listener. 'Why, you'll kill yourself, sir. And I'm bound to say, you look far from well.'

Topham smiled pathetically, paused a moment as if to reflect, and continued in the same tone of genial confidence. 'Let us consider the matter in detail. Do you propose, Mr. Wigmore, to withdraw from business at once?'

The fruiterer replied that he could do so at very short notice. Questioned as to his wishes regarding a place of residence, he declared that he was ready to live in any place where, being unknown, he could make, as it were, a new beginning.

'You would not feel impatient,' said Topham, 'if, say, two or three years had to elapse before you could be ordained?'

'Impatient,' said the other cheerily. 'Why, if it took ten years I would go through with it. When I make up my mind about a thing, I'm not easily dismayed. If I could have your help, sir——'

The necessity of making a definite proposal turned Topham pale; he was so afraid of asking too much. Almost in spite of himself, he at length spoke. 'Suppose we say — if I reside with you — that you pay me a salary of, well, £200 a year?'

The next moment he inwardly raged. Wigmore's countenance expressed such contentment, that it was plain the good man would have paid twice that sum.

'Ass!' cried Topham, in his mind. 'I always under value myself.' . .

..... It was late that evening when Starkey came home; to his surprise he found that Topham was later still. In vain he sat writing until past one o'clock. Topham did not appear, and indeed never came back at all. The overworked corresponding tutor was taking his ease at the seaside on the strength of a quarter's salary in advance, which Mr. Wigmore, tremulously anxious to clinch their bargain, had insisted on paying him. Before leaving London he had written to Starkey, apologising for his abrupt departure, 'The result of unforeseen circumstances.' He enclosed six penny stamps in repayment of a sum lent, and added——

'When I think of my great debt to you I despair of expressing my gratitude. Be assured, however, that the name of Starkey will always be cherished in my remembrance.'

Under that name Topham dwelt with the retired shopkeeper, and assiduously discharged his tutorial duties. A day came when, relying upon the friendship between them, and his pupil's exultation in the progress achieved, the tutor unbosomed himself. Having heard the whole story, Wigmore laughed a great deal, and declared that such a fellow as Starkey was rightly served.

'But,' he inquired, after reflection, 'how was it the man never wrote to ask why I sent no more work?'

'That asks for further confession. While at the seaside I wrote, in a disguised hand, a letter supposed to come from a brother of yours in which I said you were very ill and must cease your correspondence. Starkey hadn't the decency to reply, but if he had done so I should have got his letter at the post-office.'

Mr. Wigmore looked troubled for a moment. However, this too was laughed away, and the pursuit of gentility went on as rigorously as ever.

But Topham, musing over his good luck, thought with a shiver on how small an accident it had depended. Had Starkey been at home when the fruiterer called, he, it was plain, would have had the offer of this engagement

'With the result that dear old Wigmore would have been bled for who knows how many years by a mere swindler. Whereas he is really being educated, and, for all I know, may some day adorn the Church of England.' Such thoughts are very consoling.