George Gissing, “My First Rehearsal” (1880)

Be it premised that, in the days I am about to speak of, I was very youthful, very romantic, and -- fitting climax -- very poor. My position was the (literally) elevated one of clerk in a solicitor’s office, somewhere in the midland counties, and there is no telling to what dignity I might not have attained in time had it not been for that romantic element in my disposition which I have already mentioned. Owing to this unfortunate characteristic, I had early discovered extraordinary sources of attraction in the moon, which luminary I honoured by a multitude of fervid effusions. I was impressed, too, with the fact that “Spring” naturally suggested a rhyme in the word “sing”; and if! was precluded by my situation from hanging “odes upon hawthorns, and elegies on brambles”, I at least began to scribble couplets on the back of clients’ letters, and ornament with poetical aphorisms the white spaces of my blotting-pad. But this was not the worst. Somewhat out of concert with my own imaginings, I soon fell to declaiming the productions of others, till at length the visit of a strolling company to our town gave an irresistible impulse to my wavering aspirations, and I resolved to go upon the stage. Reckoning up my savings, -- I was always a youth of modest requirements, -- I rejoiced to find that I had not less than twenty pounds, and on the strength of this I gave my employer notice. As soon as I was free, I packed my trunk, settled with my landlady, penned on the back of my washing-bill a half-tender, half-satirical “Farewell”, and, as the old story-books have it, “set forth on my travels.”

Of course I was bound for London, where I doubted not I should find a host of magnanimous managers who would listen attentively to a few recitations from my favourite plays and immediately conclude an engagement with me upon handsome terms. Had I chosen to take a ticket by the first train going southwards, I might have arrived in the metropolis in a very few hours; but even on the way to the station a thought occurred to me, which, if not very pleasant, was at least in accordance with my age and temperament. Why should I deprive my journey of every poetical feature by making it in a railway train? I had read with enthusiasm numberless stories of men who, drawn on by visions of future greatness, had set out in youth for the city which is paved with gold, yet, from the illustrious Whittington downwards, I could not call to mind one who had been dragged thither behind a steam-engine. A stage-coach would have been the thing; but, alas! where should I find one? Clearly the idea which suddenly flashed across my brain was the right one: I would *walk* to London! The distance was some eighty miles, which meant perhaps three days’ pleasant tramping; the travelling-expenses, considering that I had the magnificent sum of twenty pounds in my pocket, would be inappreciable.

Accordingly, I despatched my poor trunk by luggage-train, having first extracted a change of linen, which, with a light heart, I made up into the traditional bundle and slung on a stout walking-stick.

It was early in June, and the weather, though a trifle hot for pedestrian exertion, was so gloriously bright and sunny, the heavens were so cloudlessly blue, and the face of nature so gleamed and sparkled with a thousand delightful hues, that, throughout the whole of my first day, I walked as though on air. Fatigue came not near me; the occasional breeze, laden with innumerable odours of wood and meadow, fanned the perspiration from my bare forehead and filled my whole being with the very intoxication of joy. And when at length the day drew to its close, and the sun was sinking amid unutterable glories, I hastened to the summit of the nearest hill, and there declaimed, with more fervour than I believed myself capable of, Manfred's sublime apostrophe. Despite their inappropriateness to my own situation, I uttered even the last lines, and that in a voice half choked with feeling:

"Fare thee well!
I ne'er shall see thee more. As my first glance
Of love and wonder was for thee, then take
My latest look: thou wilt not beam on one
To whom the gifts of life and warmth have been
Of a more fatal nature."

Scarcely had the last echo of my voice died away in the evening stillness, when I was startled by a sudden clapping of hands, and repeated exclamations of "Hear, hear!" With a face redder than the western sky, I turned rapidly round to see who it was that had overheard my extravagance. Just behind me stood an oldish gentleman, clad in a sober suit of black. His hair was a trifle grey, and his face, which was clean shaven, much wrinkled; the expression of his eyes, as they gleamed through a pair of spectacles, was decidedly benevolent, though I could not mistake a trace of good-humoured banter in the smile which played about his lips. His appearance, in short, was eminently reassuring, and I internally thanked goodness that I had been spared from making an exhibition of myself before anyone nearer my own age, or -- for I was horribly bashful -- before one of the gentler sex. As soon as I could recover any particle of equanimity, I made a tolerable bow, and was on the point of walking sharply away, when the old gentleman cried "Stay, sir!" and advanced towards me with extended hand.

"Let me at least have the pleasure of thanking you for the treat you have unconsciously afforded me," he said, in a most gentlemanly and agreeable tone. "It was well delivered, sir; remarkably well delivered. I may claim to be something of a judge in these matters, and 1 may say with Polonius, Fore God, well spoken; with good accent, and good discretion."

Need I say how delighted I was with such praise, praise at once so evidently sincere and coming from one whose tone and phrase at once manifested his capacity to criticize? If possible, I became redder than before, and did my best to stammer out a few phrases of a deprecatory nature, which my friend immediately negatived.

“You appear to be on a walking-tour,” he resumed, glancing at my stick and bundle. I assented.

“Then, in all probability,” he went on, “you put up in H---- for the night?”

H---- was a little town about half a mile off, which, from our elevation, we were now looking down upon. To stay there had indeed been my intention, and I said so.

“Ah! Then I may perhaps have the pleasure of your company so far? I myself am residing for a brief period in H----. Charming vicinity, is it not? The beauty of the evening tempted me irresistibly to a short walk. Shall we be moving? ‘The west yet glimmers with some streaks of day’.”

It chanced that, on the high-road below us, a horseman was just then riding along towards the town. I eagerly seized the occasion to exhibit at once my reading and my *esprit*, and, pointing downwards, exclaimed with a smile --

“Now spurs the lated traveller apace
To gain the timely inn...”

“Very good, very good,” exclaimed my friend, with much delight. “Upon my word, sir, I am almost tempted to believe that you are not an absolute stranger to the boards?”

I blushed, and replied modestly that, though above all things desirous of trying my fortune on the stage, I had never yet actually trodden it. Then I caught my companion’s genial look, and added in a burst of confidence that I was even now on my way to London to seek an engagement.

“To London, my dear young friend!” exclaimed the old gentleman. “I fear you have a long way before you. And then, (I am sure you will pardon my frankness, it is purely that of a well-wither,) have you well considered that it may be some little time before you can secure an engagement, that, in short, you may have to depend for some weeks, say, upon your own resources!”

There was something so extremely genial, so very considerate in my new acquaintance's manner and speech that, in my youthful enthusiasm, it was impossible for me not to reciprocate his good-feeling. In short, after some little hesitation, due to delicacy, I informed him that I was not so absolutely poor as I seemed, that the fact of my journeying on foot was entirely due to caprice, not to necessity, seeing that I had with me some twenty pounds, the result of my economies. At these words the old gentleman seemed quite pleased; he marvelled at my prudence, so different from the ordinary character of youthful aspirants, and recommended me to be as frugal as possible on the road.

"I suppose," he continued, "you are bent on making your *debut* in town? You would hardly care for an engagement at a provincial theatre?"

Something in my companion's manner had already, I know not how, impressed me with the belief that he was himself in some way connected with the stage. His last sentence he pronounced with something of emphasis, which, together with a look he cast at me, awoke at once all manner of hopes. I replied that I had scarcely thought of the latter alternative, but that if such an engagement were to offer, I should certainly not be so foolish as to refuse it.

"You would not? An extremely sensible resolution on your part, my young friend. And suppose I were myself able to assist you to such an engagement?"

"I should be beyond measure grateful!" I exclaimed. "Dare I hope such a thing, sir?"

The old gentleman smiled benevolently upon me, then suddenly stopped short in the road and seized my hand.

"I both can and will!" he said, with fervour. "Nothing delights me more than to discover youthful genius, and to be the means of affording it scope for development. Hitherto I have been testing you, but, from the moment I heard you speak that fine apostrophe to the sun, I had resolved, if you had any thought of the stage as a profession, to give you my utmost assistance. My dear -- hem! May I ask your name?"

"Richard Morton," I replied.

"Morton! -- Good name, sounds well. My dear Mr. Richard Morton, I was going to say that I happen myself to be manager of a London theatre. At present I am travelling with a select company whilst my house in town is undergoing restoration and enlargement. Tomorrow evening we give the first of

a brief series of performances in H----; our theatre, for the nonce, being a small Mechanics' Institute. I should scarcely have delayed in H---- had it not been for the earnest solicitation of a number of influential country gentlemen hereabout, who are extremely desirous of seeing me in Hamlet."

For me, so ignorant, yet so enthusiastic in everything connected with the stage, this was a veritable initiation into sacred mysteries. Here was I actually in intimate converse with a London Manager, an actor, moreover, famous in Hamlet! How my heart throbbed with delight!

"To-morrow evening," he pursued, "we open with Hamlet, and I have written for the occasion a brief prologue which I had some thought of delivering myself. But I now resign my intention, and, my dear Mr. Morton, in *your* favour. *You* shall speak the prologue, sir, -- if, I should say, you do not deem it, --"

"My dear Sir!" I broke in fervently. "How-ever *[sic]* can I thank you sufficiently! I shall esteem it the greatest of honours to speak the prologue. I will learn it this very night!"

"I was about to suggest that," put in the manager. "A beginner cannot have his part too thoroughly. And -- I presume you do not know H---- at all? You have not decided on your hotel?"

I replied in the negative.

"Then you shall go with me to my own quarters," said the manager. "There you shall at once study your prologue, and we will rehearse it before retiring. Do you approve?"

Of course I approved, and should have done so had it been the whole part of Hamlet which I had to learn before going to bed, instead of a mere prologue. We were now, entering the town, and, as we passed along the streets in the fading twilight, one of the first objects that caught my eye was a large yellow placard pasted on a wall, which informed the public that, on the following evening at 7.30 precisely, Shakespere's play of Hamlet would be performed at the Mechanics' Institute, the title role by Mr. Julian Bradford. My companion, seeing me strain my eyes at the bill, paused before it.

"You, -- you are. Mr. Julian Bradford?" I asked, with bated breath.

My companion bowed, and smiled good-humouredly. We went on a little further, then suddenly stopped before a small building, over the front of which I read the words "Mechanics' Institute".

“This is our theatre,” said the manager. “I must beg you to wait for a moment, Mr. Morton. Only a moment, -- something of importance has suddenly occurred to me, which I must see to at once.”

He ran off into the building, and was absent a few minutes. Then we resumed our walk, arriving at length at a somewhat shabby hotel, where we entered. I sought and obtained a bedroom, where I deposited my bundle, and then descended to the coffee-room to join Mr. Bradford at a light supper. Throughout the meal we were alone in the room, and my companion’s geniality, indeed I may say joviality, raised my spirits to the highest pitch. I could scarcely satisfy my hunger, so eager was I to set to work at the prologue, which I already held in my hands. There were some thirty lines, fairly copied out on half a sheet of foolscap.

“Now, Mr. Morton,” said the manager, when we rose from the table, and he was proceeding to light a cigar, “if you take my advice, you would at once repair to your bedroom. Strangers may come here at any moment, and you would be disturbed. And -- let me see, it is half past nine. At half past ten precisely, I shall take the liberty of knocking at your door, and then perhaps you will be in a position to rehearse before me. Am I too exacting?”

“By no means!” I cried, and at once sped off to my room. Before the end of the hour I was perfect in the prologue. When at length the eagerly expected knock came, I flew to the door. Manager Bradford entered, smiling in the old benevolent way. He carried in his arms a bundle, which looked like a suit of very old clothes.

“Ready, Mr. Morton?” he asked. “Ah! Your study is quick, I am delighted. Now, if you have no objection, I will ask you to slip off your own clothes and don those I have brought. They are not, of course, what you will appear in, but it is my constant rule that rehearsals shall take place in some kind of stage attire. It is particularly desirable for novices, as it accustoms them to the feel of the stage dress, which I have often known to be very distracting at first. You have no objection?”

“Of course not. I can well understand the advantage of the plan. There, they fit pretty well, I think.”

I looked at myself in the glass, and, it is true, found that I cut a somewhat grotesque figure. 1 had oil a long coat of eighteenth-century pattern, terribly shabby and covered with remnants of sham gold-lace; also a pair of very wide white trousers, much torn, which had probably been used in sailors’ parts. But what did my appearance matter? It was the feel of the thing, that was all.

“And now, if you please,” pursued Mr. Bradford, “we will just step to my own room. It is larger than

this, and there is a good looking-glass, which will be useful to you."

I followed at once to the floor below where we entered a bedroom much superior to mine. Mr. Bradford took a seat in an armchair, and prepared to listen with flattering attention. With heart throbbing painfully, and uncertain at first whether I could utter a sound, I elevated my right arm and commenced:

"When ancient Thespis on the primal stage
First showed the art to mimic love or rage,
How glowed the heart of each beholder then,
Taught by his voice the brotherhood of men!"

Scarcely had I completed the fourth line when there came a loud rap at the door. The manager rose with a look of annoyance.

"Confound it!" he exclaimed. "I cannot have a moment's privacy! -- Pardon me, Mr. Morton."

He went to the door, spoke for a moment with someone outside, and then returned to me.

"It is extremely annoying," he said. "It seems some difficulty has arisen with regard to the properties, and one of our people is below, insisting upon seeing me. Might I crave your indulgence for five minutes? -- Pray be seated. -- Your commencement was simply admirable; I am all impatience to hear your climax. -- Here is today's paper. -- Five minutes at the most!"

I was left alone. Instead of taking up the paper, I began at once to recite to myself, using the glass to regulate my gestures. I had left my watch in the bedroom with the rest of my apparel, and had no means of telling how time went; but when I had gone through the prologue some half a dozen times I began to think the manager's five minutes a trifle long. Still he did not come, and I grew impatient. At length I quietly opened the door, and looked out into the passage. The house was dark and still, it appeared to me as if everyone had gone to bed. I moved to the top of the staircase. There was not a trace of light below. What could the time be? My only way of ascertaining was to take up the candle, ascend to my own room, and look at my watch. Treading very softly, lest anyone should surprise me in my strange garb, I mounted the next flight, entered my bedroom, and closed the door softly behind me.

But where was my watch? Certainly I remembered laying it on the dressing-table. And -- what the

dickens! -- where were my clothes? Everything had disappeared. My blood ran cold with apprehension. I suddenly remembered that all my money had been left in my trouser-pockets; it had never occurred to me to put it in a safer place. I searched the room like a madman; nothing was to be found. Heedless of my absurd appearance, I forthwith ran downstairs in the darkness, crying as loud as I could “Thieves! Thieves!” In a minute there was a bustle below, and the landlord issued from a little back parlour where he had been sitting late, candle and poker in hand.

“What’s the matter?” he cried. “Where are the thieves? What the devil’s the noise about?”

“Someone has ransacked my bed-room!” I shouted in return. “I have lost all my clothes, my money, and my watch.”

The landlord was amazed at my strange appearance, and asked me who I was. I replied that I was in the company of Mr. Bradford.

“Mr. Bradford? What Mr. Bradford?” he returned; and, as we talked, other people gathered round us in alarm, all asking questions.

“Why, Mr. Julian Bradford,” I urged, “the theatrical manager, -- the gentleman who has the room upstairs.”

“What, that actor fellow? Why, he gave his name as Smith when he came here this morning. I take him to be what they call walking-gentleman, or something of the kind. You didn’t take him for the manager, did you?”

A horrible suspicion seized upon me; I was struck dumb. At this point a waiter broke in, saying that the man we spoke of had asked him to knock at the bedroom door at precisely a quarter to eleven. The waiter had done so, and, very shortly after, had seen the actor leave the hotel with a bundle under his arm. He supposed that some professional business called him out so late, and had not remarked on the circumstance.

“Then,” said the landlord, “depend upon it, he’s bolted. And he hasn’t paid for one of his meals, for I knew he belonged to the company and didn’t trouble myself about him. No doubt he’s gone off with all your things.”

A storm of questions followed, suggested by my strange appearance and the circumstances of the

robbery. Not even shame could keep me from relating the whole story, and, despite genuine sympathy, and still more genuine anger at his own loss, the landlord could not help laughing heartily. Whatever could be done must clearly be done at once.

I borrowed a top-coat to hide my pitiful exterior, and, in company of the landlord, repaired at once to the police-station, where we gave all the information we could. Then we called upon the real manager, notwithstanding the unseasonable hour, and I had the gratification of hearing that my friend had only that morning been dismissed on account of drunkenness and dishonesty. The manager was indignant, and sympathizing, but, for all that, could not refrain from laughing at my adventure.

I grieve to say that my benevolent acquaintance succeeded in escaping, and I never saw him again. How I rescued myself from my miserable position it would take too long to tell; suffice it to say that the real Mr. Julian Bradford regretted he had no opening for my genius, and I never spoke the prologue which I had so enthusiastically rehearsed.

THE END.