

George Gissing, "My Clerical Rival" (1880)

In the year 186--, when I was yet in the happy days of undergraduate-hood, I had to choose between two widely different modes of spending the long vacation; on the one hand I was strongly tempted to join what is facetiously known as a "reading party", got up by certain of my friends, who had hit upon a most delightful nook in Normandy for the scene of their ascetic exercises; on the other there was a long-standing invitation from a good old uncle, rector of an out-of-the-way village somewhere in Hampshire, a classical scholar of the old school, who was especially desirous that I should read with him for a month or so preparatory to going in for Honours. The former was a sore temptation, let no one doubt it; but to my eternal credit be it related, I cast aside the Circe cup, deliberately chose to "scorn delights and live laborious days" and, fearful of my resolution, hurried off at once to Podsby Rectory. My worthy uncle received me with the utmost warmth, proceeded before we had reached the house to examine me in minute points of classical erudition, and insisted upon going through a chorus of the Agamemnon before he would allow me to eat a mouthful. I looked forward to the month which was to ensue with something more than apprehension. We shall see whether I had reason.

In those days I was an early riser, and it was scarcely seven o'clock next morning when I threw open my bedroom lattice and leaned out to breathe the fresh air. Already the sun was powerful, but, as my window faced the west, I could survey the landscape as it gleamed and sparkled in the heaven-born light, and at the same time enjoy the delicious, scented breeze which rustled among the ivy leaves on the shady side of the old house. On my right hand, past the front of the rectory, ran a pleasant lane, skirted for some distance by a row of fine poplars, between which I had glimpses of a wide prospect of meadow-land. The lane itself ran on, till, just within my sight, it began to form the main street of the village of Podsby. On the left my view was interrupted by a group of thick, dark yew-trees, which indicated the edge of the churchyard; and immediately in front of me was a delightful cottage, old and picturesque, but evidently the abode of well-to-do people. It stood in the centre of a large and handsomely-appointed garden, which was parted from the grounds of the rectory by a thick, towering hedge of holly. From my elevated position, I of course had a fine view of the garden, and, as I marvelled at the rich beds so charmingly laid out, my thoughts turned upon the dwellers in the cottage, and I concluded that they must certainly be interesting people. I would ask my uncle about them the very first thing.

When I had begun to inspect the cottage, all the blinds were down, but, even as I looked and mused, the white covering of a window in front was suddenly raised, and the sash thrown up. Then scarcely a minute passed before I distinctly heard the noise of locks and bolts being undone at the front door, and immediately there issued from the cottage a vision which I can compare to nothing save Aurora when first she steps out from the portals of the dawn and smiles upon the awakening earth. It was a young girl, I judged her to be between eighteen and nineteen, rather tall, her exquisite shape clad in white and circled at the waist with a pink band. She held in her hand a large garden-hat, leaving her face and long tresses of rich chestnut fully exposed to the slanting sunrays, which seemed to play about her in a halo. Her countenance I shall not attempt to describe, my poor words would but do it scandalous injustice; enough that I found in her look a never-imagined purity and sweetness. She passed down onto the gravel walk and began to pace among the beds. Heavens! how my heart leaped at every step she took; how my eyes followed her as she now bent to upraise a drooping flower, now raised her hand to draw down a rose growing against the house-wall and inhale its fragrance. I felt as if, at the mere sight of her, all the dusty academic lore had vanished from my mind, to be replaced by all the half-forgotten poetry and romance I had ever dreamed over. She was the fair Emelye, who appeared on that May morning to the sorrowful prisoner Palamon; she was the Lady Jane whom James of Scotland saw walking in the gardens at Windsor, and who inspired him with the "King's Quhair"; she was the heavenly vision of the "Sensitive Plant"; she was the "Gardener's Daughter"; -- she was all these, yet more than any of them, so deliciously real and present before my senses. I durst not move an inch, lest I should make a noise and

frighten her away -- I felt sure the least thing would cause her to vanish. Goodness knows how long I watched her; I only know that when she at length re-entered the house, and I moved from my fixed position, my arms were so completely numbed that they hung powerless beside me. She had disappeared, and with her the beauty of the morning. Though no doubt the sun still shone gloriously, for me the sky was overcast. At this moment the breakfast bell clanged out, and I slowly descended the stairs.

I had thought it would be the simplest of matters to ask my uncle who lived in the neighbouring cottage, but when I found myself sitting face to face with him at the breakfast table, I felt an unaccountable reluctance to open my mouth on the subject. The rector, as soon as we sat down, had begun to discuss the work we had proposed to ourselves, and the necessity of answering his repeated remarks on those confounded heathens, when my mind was as far removed from them as Olympus from Tartarus, caused me the acutest annoyance. Frequently he was surprised at what he must have deemed my ignorance, and screwed up his eyes at me across the table in an exasperating manner. Throughout the meal I was perfectly wretched; my uncle, his hobby at a merciless jog-trot, would give me no opportunity of turning the conversation in the desired direction. Just as we had finished, a servant entered the room, and said --

“If you please, sir, Miss Wheatcroft would like to speak to you.”

“Ha!” exclaimed my uncle, half rising. “Request Miss Wheatcroft to walk in. Yes, yes, Richard; I was saying that I had several faults to find with Porson’s rendering of” --

Before he could complete his sentence the door again opened, and there entered -- no less a person than the goddess who was busying my whole heart and mind, the divinity of the garden.

I staggered to my feet, and was faintly conscious of being introduced, but only the sound of *her* voice recalled me to my senses.

“I would on no account have disturbed you, Dr Merton,” she said, “if I had known you had company. I only came to beg an excuse from my lesson this afternoon. Mamma has just received a note from Mrs. Tofter, asking us to go and spend the day at the Hall; and really it is such delightful weather that” --

“Yes, yes; quite right,” interrupted, my uncle, good-humouredly. “Let the Latin stand over till to-morrow. I think I had forgotten to tell you, Amy, that my nephew was coming to stay with me for a week or so? You are engaged to-day, but to-morrow we shall call and see your mamma. She is quite well?”

When I heard my uncle speak of a Latin lesson I was for a moment a trifle shocked, for in those days I was somewhat prejudiced against the “higher education”. But I quickly reassured myself that Amy Wheatcroft could be no ordinary blue-stocking; whatever learning she possessed was, I felt sure, but an added grace tending to make up the sum of female perfection. She left the room with a pleasant smile in my direction; I wonder whether she had any idea of the effect of her smiles.

“Miss Wheatcroft is our neighbour”, said my uncle, when she was gone. “She and her mother live in the little house over there. I have for some time been reading Virgil with her three afternoons a week, and to-day we should have had a lesson. Amy manifests considerable aptitude for classical study.”

“Mrs. Wheatcroft is a widow?” I asked.

“She has been so for about four years. Her husband was a corn-factor, and, I believe, well-to-do. But as they have only resided here since his death, I don’t know much about their affairs. But -- yes -- we were speaking of palimpsests.”

The same evening, at supper, we were honoured with the company of my uncle's curate, Mr. Cheeseman. It was the first time I had seen this gentleman, and the impression he made upon me was by no means favourable. In person he was tall and rather elegant, nor did his countenance lack a certain regularity which would have induced most ladies to pronounce him a handsome man. But his manner was a blending of extreme foppishness with an unpleasant suspicion of insincerity. I observed him carefully whenever he spoke; and felt sure that I could trace in his utterance a spirit of hypocrisy employed in the concealment of a cold and calculating nature. Evidently the good rector had none of my prejudice, and certainly he must have had good means of learning the man's character. Yet the antipathy was there; I thoroughly disliked Mr. Cheeseman.

Such being the case, I was hardly pleased when, entering Mrs. Wheatcroft's parlour on the following afternoon, the first person my eyes encountered was the curate himself. He was sitting in an easy chair, one leg thrown lazily over the other, and his head lolling back in a rather dandyfied manner. With him were sitting Mrs. Wheatcroft and her daughter, the former a lively, affected lady, who chattered at an unconscionable rate, and was palpably set on playing the part of a fascinating young widow, though she must have been much on the wrong side of forty. As we entered the curate made as though he would take his leave, but this Mrs. Wheatcroft would not permit. Five o'clock tea was on the point of being brought in, and we must all partake.

Throughout tea my eye was fixed upon Mr. Cheeseman as though he had been a deadly enemy whom I suspected of a design to poison my bread and butter. He sat between Mrs. Wheatcroft and Amy, and it was impossible not to perceive the assiduity of his attention to both. As I watched his eye glow and his lips shape themselves into a fascinating smile whenever he addressed Amy, I could not but admit the fellow's good looks, and they tortured me. Amy's face, too, I scanned with the sharpest attention. Were her pleasant smiles mere friendliness and good-nature, or did they speak a deeper sentiment? At all events, it was impossible to mistake the extraordinary graciousness with which the mother received every word Mr. Cheeseman addressed to her; her laughter, whenever he made some feeble joke in his insincere voice, was shocking to the nerves.

After tea we walked in the garden, thence wandered into the poplar-skirted lane, which we crossed into the meadows before the rectory. Here my uncle, the curate and Amy passed in front, leaving Mrs. Wheatcroft and myself to the delights of a *tête-a-tête*.

"And what do you think of our curate?" was her first question, in an insinuating whisper, expressive of the utmost confidence. "Very charming, is he not?"

"Mr. Cheeseman appears very agreeable," I replied, with what warmth I could feign; "but I have scarcely had an opportunity of becoming well acquainted with him." -

"O, Mr. Cheeseman is one of those men whom one has only to see in order to know well. He is so perfectly unrestrained, so open, so frank. And I believe he is an admirable scholar. And his sermons! -- well, I often cry over them. It is not at all unlikely that he will be a bishop some day."

I had heard quite enough. Whether Amy herself looked upon the curate with perfect approbation, I could not as yet feel sure; but it was evident that Mrs. Wheatcroft desired nothing better than to call him her son-in-law as soon as he chose to apply for the title. When I was again alone with my uncle, I ventured to remark in an off-hand way that Mrs. Wheatcroft appeared to have much respect for the curate.

"Yes, yes," said my uncle, smiling. "I shouldn't wonder if Cheeseman were to ask for my assistance one of these days."

“Do you think then,” I asked, as calmly as possible, “that Miss Wheatcroft is engaged to him?”

“Perhaps not actually engaged; I think I should have been told. But I am prepared to hear it any day.”

That was a restless night for me, in spite of all my appeals to commonsense to restore my calmness. In vain I asked myself what on earth it mattered to me whether Amy Wheatcroft became Mrs. Cheeseman, or Mrs. Anybody-else; I worked myself into a positive fume as I thought of that smooth-faced rascal (I fear I was horribly uncharitable,) leading that lovely girl to the altar, and my worthy uncle pronouncing a blessing over them. Of course I was in reality desperately jealous, and surely on as slight a foundation as the passion can well build upon.

Next morning I succeeded so far in self-restraint as to resolutely forbid myself the pleasure of looking out of the window; lest the vision should be there again; and for- hours that day I worked hard in my uncle’s study. In the afternoon, I was aware, Amy would come to the rectory to take her lesson, so as soon as we had dined I put on my hat and set off to stroll about the fields. But country rambles in delicious summer weather are about the most ill-advised antidotes to love that a man could possibly prescribe himself, and those few hours of solitary meditation undid all the resolutions of the morning. Fool that I was, I even at length hurried back at my utmost speed in hopes of finding Amy still at the rectory; in which I was of course disappointed. Then as my uncle was also absent, and it was impossible to sit down and work, I again issued forth, and walked slowly along the lane, past the cottage. My heart throbbed as a side-glance told me that Mrs. Wheatcroft and her daughter were in the garden, and throbbed still more when the former walked quickly down to the gate, beckoning me in. I obeyed, and we had a long chat, in the course of which something called Mrs. Wheatcroft away, and I was left alone with Amy. Alas! Long since all my good resolves had flown to the winds, and I yielded unresistingly to the delights of the situation. In the middle of our talk -- and I found that Amy could talk on almost any subject very charmingly indeed -- I somehow lugged in a mention of Mr. Cheeseman, curiously watching its effect upon the girl. She reddened -- yes, it was impossible to mistake the heightened colour in her cheeks; and so exasperated was I at the sight that I had almost taken my leave on the spot. But just then Mrs. Wheatcroft came once more hurrying across the lawn, followed by a servant carrying a small table, on which were arranged delicious plates of strawberries. The strawberries alone would scarcely have mollified me, but then Amy was looking up into my face with such a ravishing smile, and inviting me to the feast with such a siren voice, that I was fooled into complacency again. Perhaps, after all, I had only imagined that she blushed.

The days passed on, and I had been a month at the rectory. If the first sight of Amy Wheatcroft had inspired me with love, what were my feelings now that I had seen her more or less constantly for four whole weeks, was received by her mother with the appearance of absolute affection, and had received from Amy herself not a few tokens of sincere friendship? Yet I was less at ease than ever. Frequently as I visited the cottage, I noticed that the curate went there still more persistently, I observed that his assiduities to both mother and daughter increased daily, that the former seemed never able to show him sufficient kindness, the latter grew more and more uneasy when, in the curate’s presence, she caught my eye rather too closely observant. My endeavours to find an explanation of Amy’s curious behaviour made my days and nights restless. My uncle even noticed this, and suggested that I sat up too late in my bedroom. The good man fully believed that disputed readings kept me from my couch.

Nearly six weeks had passed in this way when my doubts were all at once solved in a terribly decisive manner. One evening after supper I had strolled out to a seat in the garden where I could obtain a view of the full moon as it hung in a wonderful sky, just over the rectory. The seat was beneath that hedge of thick and high holly-bushes which, as the reader may remember, separated our garden from that of our neighbours. I had sunk into a deep reverie, when the sound of footsteps on the other side of the hedge suddenly struck my ear. It was very late for either Amy or her mother to be walking in the garden, but

the low voices which became gradually audible convinced me at first that it must be they. Yet no; the voices came nearer, and *one* at least I had certainly recognized, it was that of Mr. Cheeseman. At once I pricked up my ears with all the sharpness of jealousy; it was not in human nature to move away or make a noise that my presence might be known.

“Do not be cruel!” the curate was murmuring. “In three weeks -- no longer.”

There was an unintelligible whisper in reply.

“You consent,” he exclaimed, in suppressed rapture. “In three weeks will you be mine? -- I am the happiest of men.”

The silence that ensued was broken by a little sound which set my blood on fire. Careless whether or not I attracted attention, I at once sprang from my seat and hurried away. I shall not speak of the despair which kept open my eyelids throughout that horrible night; suffice it that I came down to breakfast resolved to leave the rectory forthwith. A letter from home had arrived opportunely; I made it the explanation of my immediate departure. Of course my uncle was amazed, almost indignant, and, to make it worse, I was in no mood for delicate regard of others' feelings. Should I flatly decline to take leave of our neighbours? It was hardly possible, so I faced the ceremony in a bitter and sarcastic mood, which must certainly have been obvious to all. Amy blushed painfully when I said good-bye -- well she might; her mother, on the other hand, I had never seen in such high spirits, and the wreathed smiles about her rejuvenescent countenance goaded me past expression. I hurried away with the feeling that I had been bitterly wronged -- though by whom, I fancy it would have been rather difficult for me to say.

More than half a year passed, and I was spending my Easter at St Leonard's. I was alone, for ever since my hasty departure from Hampshire a melancholy had ceaselessly weighed upon my mind, rendering society disgusting to me. In hopes of gaining peace of mind, I had worked so hard that I had overdone the thing;-- rest and change of air were imperatively prescribed.

I had corresponded occasionally with my uncle, who, however, *more suo*, spoke of little save his private reading, and the progress of a certain treatise upon which he had long been engaged; such a thing as *news* I never knew him pen. On my own part, I had not dared to ask whether Amy was actually married. Some wild sort of hope possessed me that the detestable union might have been prevented; it was so impossible to imagine Amy Wheatcroft transformed into a Mrs. Cheeseman, that -- I was sitting on the Parade, thinking thus for the millionth time, a newspaper lying unheeded on my knee, when all at once I happened to look up -- and continued looking. Walking directly before me were three persons, the farthest being without a doubt the Revd Mr. Cheeseman, next to him Mrs. Wheatcroft, and, by her side, Amy. O, how lovely she looked, attired in an elegant sea-side costume, shading the sun-rays from her pure complexion with the daintiest of parasols. And they did not even observe me, but passed along, conversing merrily.

Was I glad or sorry that they had not noticed me? Perhaps glad on the whole, for, in the moment when my last shred of self-deceiving hope was relentlessly torn away, how could I have behaved myself with any degree of composure? Perhaps I should have even had to endure a gleam of triumph from the eyes of that hateful curate, who, I often used to think, had more than suspected I was a secret rival. No, it was better they had not noticed me. Now it only remained for me to leave St Leonard's at once, lest a repetition of the incident should drive me altogether frantic.

I returned at once to my lodgings, gave notice of my departure pretended to eat a meal, then, before packing up, went out to purchase one or two little presents for home. I reached the shop, and, after examining the articles in the window for a moment, was on the point of entering, when who should

come out but -- Amy! She was by herself, carrying a little parcel, and, on finding herself face to face with me, she looked so startled that I thought she would faint. But immediately she recovered herself, blushed scarlet, and held out her hand, faltering, "Mr. Merton! You here?"

"How do you do, Mrs. Cheeseman?" I returned, with as much grave politeness as I could assume.

She gazed at me with a face in which surprise overcame every other expression; then stammered, painfully, "You -- you have made some strange mistake. Why do you call me Mrs. Cheeseman?"

It was my turn to look horribly discomposed, to stammer, to redden, to lose my senses well-nigh in the first rush of a startling conjecture.

"I beg a thousand pardons!" I exclaimed. "I -- I had been told that -- that since I last saw you, you had become Mrs. Cheeseman."

"Your information was curiously mistaken", returned Amy, her wonderful eyes brimming over with silent laughter. "My mother was married to Mr. Cheeseman last autumn, but I -- I am still the same as when you knew me."

If ever man's heart chanted a silent hymn of thanksgiving, it was mine, when I heard this explanation. So both my uncle and I had been deceived as to the curate's courtship. How readily could I explain a thousand things which had at times troubled me, especially the peculiarities of Amy's behaviour- when her mother and Mr. Cheeseman were both present; for doubtless the dear girl had some difficulty in reconciling herself to the match, and kept wondering what strangers must think of the matter. If I had only listened more closely to that second voice behind the holly-bushes!

"And you are not married at all!" I exclaimed, involuntarily; then broke into a laugh at my own absurdity. Amy laughed, too, as we walked away together; she seemed wonderfully light-hearted, and readily assented when I asked permission to visit her mother forthwith. I found Mr. Cheeseman and his blooming bride in elegant apartments; both appeared really glad to see me. It was clear my stay at St Leonard's must be prolonged.

Prolonged it was for a fortnight, during which occurred a little circumstance which had considerable interest for me. One day I found an opportunity of telling Amy the whole story of my mistake, and what is more, knitted on to it another very old, and less uncommon story, that which we all of us tell some time or another to a listener, who, in our eyes, constitutes the whole world. Sometimes the story is told in vain; mine -- rejoice with me -- was a happier fate.

After all, I had not been so far wrong in my estimate of Mr. Cheeseman's character. No long time passed before I had an opportunity of convincing myself how it was that he had chosen to marry a rather foolish woman, very much his senior, whom, there was no doubt of it, he had completely fascinated. The truth was, he had just then the chance of purchasing a very desirable living (such things are not unknown, good reader) whilst Mrs. Wheatcroft was delighted to put him in possession of the necessary sum -- on the little condition which we know.

THE END.

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