George Gissing, “Simple Simon” (1896)

At a vegetarian restaurant, in a room set apart for those who took the sixpenny dinner (two courses and dessert), a pair of friends sat shoulder to shoulder consuming lentil soup. With rare omissions they had sat thus every day for two years; a previous twelvemonth of *vis-à-vis* proximity having led them gently from the nod and the casual remark, by cautious grades of acquaintance, to cordial brotherhood. They were young men, and of means as slender as their persons; clerks by calling, not unimpeachable in the article of grammar, and alike in the fervour of their devotion to abstinent ideals. Each wore a blue ribbon in the button-hole; each had closely-cropped hair and a meagre moustache; on taking a seat, they invariably hitched up their trousers at the knee.

Their names were Simon Mooney and Samuel Figg. Rugged features, a severe eye, and a trenchant mode of speech proclaimed the character which gave Figg an ascendancy over his companion. He criticised the world with sarcasm, and even in friendship was prone to righteous admonition. Mooney had a mild and pleasing countenance, a frequent smile, a soft conciliatory voice; his good-nature and lack of readiness in retort made him something of a martyr among his fellow-clerks, who called him Simple Simon.

Like the majority of their table-associates, they were thin-faced and colourless; plainly suffering from poverty of diet. But Simon was the less unhealthy of the two. He ate with appetite, and talked cheerfully; whilst his friend, who for a long time had been losing flesh and accumulating bile, struggled with the unpalatable dish, and kept a morose silence.

“I feel bad,” whispered Samuel, presently; and thereupon left the room.

For some days he was unable to go to business. Simon called to see him each evening, rich in sympathy and eager to aid. Yet at this moment Simon had grave trouble of his own, and felt as sick in spirit as his friend in body. For a year the difficulty had been the subject of discussion between them. Simon was in love, and, alas, with the daughter of a licensed victualler -- an eater of flesh, a drinker of ale, a female Gallio in regard to her lover’s enthusiasms. Yet a good girl, for all that, and not indisposed to favour Simon’s suit would he but waive the conditions on which he had hitherto insisted. They had long known each other, and regularly every week Simon ran down to St. Albans, where Barbara, an only child, abode with her well-to-do parents and assisted in their nefarious traffic. The publican thought well of Mr. Mooney, and had no objection to teetotalism (in this instance), but held for roast-beef. Barbara would renounce neither beef nor ale. So matters stood, and, as the girl’s suitors were numerous, poor Simon lived in dread of learning some dark day that his hopes had

vanished.

Samuel Figg, even on his bed of sickness, held fiercely to the ideal.

“Now, mind what I tell you, Simon! You’re in danger -- I can see it. The devil’s tempting you to sell your soul. Break it off! Have done with her! If you fall, I’ll never speak to you again.”

Simon felt the menace keenly.

“I hope I shall never so disgrace myself,” he murmured, with downcast eyes and twitching lips. “I’ve been reading the Temperance Herald, and I find strength in it. But -- oh, Figg!”

And the poor fellow turned away to groan.

When Samuel Figg returned to business, he had an air of mystery. The friends met once more at the vegetarian table, but they no longer conversed as of old. Figg had become strangely reticent on the great matters of their common interest; he preferred to talk of things indifferent; chiefly of international politics. Of Barbara he made no mention; and Simon, his native spirits direfully overcast, found it difficult to speak of anything at all, for he interpreted his friend’s manner as a dignified rebuke.

“I’m holding firm,” he whispered one day, as they left the restaurant.

Figg rewarded him with a smile of unusual brightness.

“It’s your duty to mankind, Simon.”

Now as the despairing lover sank from depth to depth, his friend exhibited a wondrous improvement in state of body and mind. Samuel began to pick up flesh; his eye grew bright and clear; he walked with a lighter step; occasionally, he even laughed. Simon, absorbed in his miseries, hardly observed this change; but, one day, when Figg positively clapped him on the shoulder, and bade him “Cheer up, old boy!” he stared through his smile.

“Thank you, Figg. You’re doing your best to keep me up. I’m grateful to you, but -- oh, Figg!”

“If you only knew,” replied Samuel, “you’d be more encouraged.” He frowned and sighed. “What

you’re going through, Simon, is nothing to what *I* have to endure. But I bear up -- I bear up.” He ground his teeth. “Come to my lodgings to-night, and I’ll tell you something.” He laughed sardonically.

Oppressed by a new anxiety, Simon kept the appointment. He found his friend comfortably seated by the fireside, reading an anti-tobacco tractate. This supplied Figg with matter for half-an-hour’s discourse; he wrought himself to a pitch of ferocity in railing against smokers.

“No one has ever yet pretended that smoking is a necessity of health,” he said at length. “In fact, it differs from flesh-eating and the taking of stimulants. Now, there *are* cases” -- he glowered -- “where vegetarianism and total abstinence are practically impossible. Yes!” His voice rose as if in contention. “There *are* such cases, Simon!”

The listener was appalled.

“You really think so?” he stammered. “I thought -- you used to ----”

A roar interrupted him.

“There *are* such cases; and I -- I myself -- am one of them.”

There was a fearful silence. Thereupon Samuel Figg made known that his improvement in health came from his obeying the doctor who had recently attended him. “Eat and drink like other men, or die!” The painful secret could not be for ever kept. But what it cost him to purchase his life by such concession!

“I shall tell no one but you, Simon. I take meat and beer at a little place where no one knows me; and mind, I can still, with a good conscience, support the great principles. My case goes for nothing; it is exceptional; it doesn’t apply to one man in fifty thousand. When I am thoroughly established in health, I shall go back to the right way.”

Simon went home and lay awake all night, oppressed with strange, new thoughts. If his friend Figg had been plucked from fatal illness by a change of diet, why, were not Barbara and her father and all the rest of the world plainly right in their refusal of asceticism? Barbara, now so rosy of cheek, so round and supple of form, oh! oh! might not the dear girl’s health be dependent upon the sustenance he had insisted she should renounce? And he himself? Might he not be twice the man he was if he

followed Figg's unwilling example? He knew himself a poor, bloodless creature. He had not the pluck to punch a fellow's head when the nickname "Simple Simon" was thrown at him. Oh! for the blood, and muscle, and courage! Oh, for love and Barbara!

For a week he wrestled with worse temptation than he had ever yet known. Then, in the middle of a sleepless night, he got up and indited a long letter to Samuel. Timorously, circuitously, he approached the awful admission that it seemed doubtful to him whether he ought to make Barbara's conversion a *sine qua non* of their marriage. Personally, he would remain staunch, but why should he seek to imperil Barbara's health? He implored his friend to bear with him, to abstain from wrath.

This letter was posted, and the next day Simon did not go to business. He feared Samuel Figg, and, indeed, felt very unwell. In the evening he had a letter from Samuel, a forcible composition which at first shook him with shame, but, in the end, fired self-respect, and made him think of the writer as he never had before. No; if it came to calling names, he wouldn't submit; what right had Samuel Figg to use this imperative tone with him? Driven to bay by persecuting circumstance, Simon took a reckless resolve. To-morrow, Sunday, he would go down to St. Albans, and tell Barbara that he resigned all pretension of dictating to her in matters of food and drink; he would offer himself humbly, as a lover should, seeking only for the same liberty of conscience that he allowed her.

He did so, and Barbara smiled upon him -- but "without prejudice"; she feared they could not live together harmoniously. She must have much more time to think about it. In brief, the damsel made it clear that she would savour her triumph whilst holding herself quite free from tender obligations. And Simon Mooney returned to town full of the darkest imaginings.

He forsook the familiar restaurant, and kept out of the way of Samuel Figg. The two saw nothing of each other for a fortnight. Then came a letter from Samuel, a brief request that his old friend would call upon him that evening, as he had a grave matter for talk. Simon hesitated, took counsel of dignity, but none the less answered the summons.

On entering Figg's room he was aware of a strange odour, nay, of blended odours, such as made him doubt the evidence of his nostrils. His eyes completed the shock, and he stood aghast. On the horsehair sofa reclined Samuel Figg, puffing at a cigar; on the table stood a whiskey bottle, and a glass of steaming grog. With obvious effort, Samuel rose to his feet, grinning fatuously, and speaking in a thick voice.

"How do, Shimon? -- S'prised, eh? -- Doctor's orders, can't help it -- no harm in it. -- One case in

fifty -- thousand ----”

“But, Figg, you’re -- you’re ----”

Simon could not utter the terrible word. Rocking to and fro, Figg glared at him.

“I’m *what*? -- No, no; d -- don’t say it, Simon! All a m’shake. What the devil d’you mean? I’m sober’s you are, and a good deal more.”

With involuntary steadiness, Simon kept his eye upon the fallen man, and the result of his reproachful look was unexpected. Suddenly Figg dropped from a tone of bluster to one of abject self-rebuke. Yes, he was intoxicated; he was vilely, vulgarly drunk; he was fit only to be trodden upon and cast among swine. How had it come about? As such things always did -- by the damnable way of so-called moderate indulgence.

And Samuel tumbled together on the sofa.

For a minute there was silence. Then Simon lifted up his voice, and spoke, for once, like a man.

“Figg, I’m utterly ashamed of you. I’m to take warning by *you*, am I? Not I, indeed! Because *you* can’t help making a beast of yourself, you think I’m likely to do the same. Very well; we’ll see. So far from taking your advice -- *your* advice, indeed -- I shall just do the opposite. Here” he flung up his arm -- “here goes vegetarianism! Here” -- he repeated the gesture -- “here goes total abstinence! I’ll give in to Barbara in every single thing, and we’ll see who knows best, her or you. I’ll do it just to shame you, that I will, after all the names you’ve called me. It’s *you* that ought to take warning, Figg, and I warn you solemnly. Mind what you are about, and when you’re sober think of what I’ve said.”

“Simon! Simon!” shouted the other man; but it was too late. Winged with an indignant purpose, Simon Mooney had sped from the house.

It was yet early in the evening. He made straight for the railway-station, and by nine o’clock was at St. Albans. There, with an energy which transfigured him[,] he told the whole story to Barbara, and proclaimed himself a liberated man. In proof of it, he supped with the family, ate largely of cold pork, and drank a bottle of Bass, then passed the night under the same hospitable roof.

Reaching town in time for business, he was surprised to encounter Figg, who stood waiting for him at the office door.

“Why didn’t you stop, last night?” said Figg, in his ordinary voice. “I stood at the door of your lodgings till one o’clock. Simon, *do you really think I was drunk?*”

“Of course you were,” replied the other, with newly-acquired decision and severity.

“Then I tell you I was not. The cigar and the whiskey were just a get-up. I acted a part, Simon. I pretended to have fallen so low just to terrify you by my example. I knew that *you* couldn’t do with safety what *I* could. But you took it in a way I never expected.”

Incredulous for some minutes, Simon understood at length the veracity and the gigantic conceit of his quondam brother in Pythagoras.

“It’s all right,” he said, quietly. “You did me a greater kindness than you thought. And -- be careful, Figg.”

Samuel turned on his heels, and fronted the day’s clerkdom with a brow of night.

THE END.

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