

Will Warburton

A Romance of Real Life

By GEO. GISSING, author of "Demos," "The Nether World," etc.

CHAPTER XXIV.

By way of Allechin, who knew all the gossip of the neighbourhood, Warburton learnt that his new competitor in trade was a man with five children and a wife given to drink; he had been in business in another part of London, and was suspected to have removed with the hope that new surroundings might help his wife to overcome her disastrous failing. A very respectable man, people said; kind husband, good father, honest dealer. But Allechin reported, with a twinkle of the eye, that all his capital had gone in the new start, and it was already clear that his business did not thrive.

"We shall starve him out!" cried the assistant, snapping his thumb and finger.

"And what'll become of him then?" asked Will.

"Oh, that's for him to think about," replied Allechin. "Wouldn't he starve us, if he could, sir?"

And Warburton, brooding on this matter, stood appalled at the ferocity of the struggle amid which he lived, in which he had his part. Gone was his old enjoyment of the streets of London. In looking back upon his mood of that earlier day, he saw himself as an incredibly ignorant and careless man; marvelled at the lightness of heart which had enabled him to find amusement in rambling over this vast slaughter-strewn field of battle. Picturesque, forsooth! Where was its picturesqueness for that struggling soon-to-be-defeated tradesman, with his tipsy wife, and band of children who looked to him for bread? "And I myself am crushing the man—as surely as if I had my hand on his gullet and my knee on his chest! Crush him I must; otherwise, what becomes of that little home down at St. Neots—dear to me as his children are to him. There's no room for both of us; he has come too near; he must pay the penalty of his miscalculation. Is there not the workhouse for such people?" And Will went repeating to himself, "There's the workhouse—don't I pay poor-rates?—the workhouse is an admirable institution."

He lay awake many an hour of these winter nights, seeing in vision his own life and the life of man. He remembered the office in Little Aisle-street, saw himself and Godfrey Sherwood sitting together, talking, laughing, making a jest of their effort to support a doomed house. Godfrey used to repeat legends, sagas, stories of travel, as though existence had not a care, or the possibility of one; and he, in turn, talked about some bit of London he had been exploring, showed an old map he had picked up, an old volume of London topography. The white, world-wide forces, the hunger-struggle of nations, were shaking the roof above their heads. Theoretically he knew it. But they could escape in time; they had a cosy little corner preserved for themselves, safe from these pestilent worries. Fate has a grudge against the foolishly secure. If he laughed now, it was in self-mockery.

The night of London, always rife with mysterious sounds, spoke dreadfully in his straining ear. He heard voices near and far, cries of pain or of misery, shouts savage or bestial; over and through all, that low, far-off rumble or roar, which never for a moment ceases, the groan, as it seemed, of suffering multitudes. There tripped before his dreaming eyes a procession from the world of wealth and pleasure, and the amazement with which he viewed it changed upon a sudden to fiery wrath; he tossed upon the bed, uttered his rage in a loud exclamation, felt his heart pierced with misery which brought him all but to tears. Close upon astonishment and indignation followed dread. Given health

and strength, he might perhaps continue to hold his own in this merciless conflict; perhaps only; but what if some accident, such as befalls this man or that in every moment of time, threw him among the weaklings? He saw his mother, in her age and ill-health, reduced to the pittance of the poorest; his sister going forth to earn her living; himself, a helpless burden upon them both.—Nay, was there not rat-poison to be purchased?

How—he cried within himself—how, in the name of sense and mercy, is mankind content to live on in such a world as this? By what devil are they hunted, that, not only do they neglect the means of solace suggested to every humane and rational mind, but, the vast majority of them, spend all their strength and ingenuity in embittering the common lot? Overwhelmed by the hateful unreason of it all, he felt as though his brain reeled on the verge of madness.

Every day, and all the day long, the shop, the counter. Had he chosen, he might have taken a half-holiday, now and then; on certain days, Allechin was quite able, and abundantly willing, to manage alone; but what was the use? To go to a distance was merely to see with more distinctness the squalor of his position. Never for a moment was he tempted to abandon this work; he saw no hope whatever of earning money in any other way, and money he must needs earn, as long as he lived. But the life weighed upon him with a burden such as he had never imagined. Never had he understood before what was meant by the sickening weariness of routine; his fretfulness as a youth in the West Indies seemed to him now inconceivable. His own master? Why, he was the slave of every kitchen wench who came into the shop to spend a penny; he trembled at the thought of failing to please her, and so losing her custom. The grovery odours, once pleasant to him, had grown nauseating. And the ever repeated tasks, the weighing, parcel making, string cutting; the parrot phrases a thousand times repeated; the idiot bowing and smiling—how these things gnawed at his nerves, till he quivered like a broken horse. He tried to console himself by thinking that things were now at the worst; that he was subduing himself, and would soon reach a happy, dull indifference; but in truth it was with fear that he looked forward. Fear of unknown possibilities in himself; fear that he might sink yet more wretchedly in his own esteem.

For the worst part of his suffering was self-scorn. When he embarked upon this strange enterprise, he knew, or thought he knew, all the trials to which he would be exposed, and not slight would have been his indignation had anyone ventured to hint that his character might prove unequal to the test. Sherwood's letter had pleased him so much, precisely because it praised his resolve as courageous, manly. On manliness of spirit, Will had always piqued himself; it was his pride that he carried a heart equal to any lot imposed upon him by duty. Yet little more than a twelvemonth of shopkeeping had so undermined his pluck, enfeebled his temper, that he could not regard himself in the glass without shame. He tried to explain it by failure of health. Assuredly his physical state had for months been declining, and the bad cold from which he had recently suffered seemed to complete his moral downfall. In this piercing and gloom-wrapped month of February, coward thoughts continually beset him. In his cold lodgings, in the cold streets, in the draughts of the shop, he felt soul and body shrink together, till he became as the meekest of stammering bucksters.

Then something happened, which recurred him for a while from this haunting snail. One night, just at closing time—

a night of wild wind and driven rain—Mrs Hopper came rushing into the shop, her face a tale of woe. Warburton learnt that her sister Liza, the ailing girl whom he had befriended in his comfortable days, had been seized with lung hemorrhage, and lay in a lamentable state; the help of Mrs Allechin was called for, and any other that might be forthcoming. Two years ago, Will would have responded to such an appeal as this with lavish generosity; now, though the impulse of compassion blinded him for a moment to his changed circumstances, he soon remembered that his charity must be that of a poor man, of a debtor. He paid for a cab, that the two women might speed to their sister through the stormy night as quickly as possible, and he promised to think of what could be done for the invalid—with the result that he lost a night's sleep in calculating what sum he might spare. On the morrow came the news he had expected; the doctor suggested Brompton Hospital, if admission could be obtained; home treatment at this time of the year, and in the patient's circumstances, was not likely to be of any good. Warburton took the matter in hand, went about making inquiries, found that there must necessarily be delay. Right or wrong, he put his hand in his pocket, and Mrs Hopper was enabled to nurse her sister in a way otherwise impossible. He visited the sick-room, and in an hour managed to talk as of old, in the note of gallant sympathy and encouragement. Let there be no stint of fire, of food, of anything the doctor might advise. Meanwhile, he would ask about other hospitals—do everything in his power. As indeed he did, with the

result that in a fortnight's time, the sufferer was admitted to an institution to which, for the nonce, Warburton had become a subscriber.

He saw her doctor. "Not much chance, I'm afraid. Of course if she were able to change climate—that kind of thing, but, under the circumstances—"

And through a whole Sunday morning Will paced about his little sitting room, not caring to go forth, not caring to read, caring for nothing at all in a world so full of needless misery. "Of course, if she were able to change climate—" Yes, the accident of possessing money; a life to depend upon that! In another station—though, as likely as not, with no moral superiority to justify the privilege—the sick woman would be guarded, soothed, fortified by every expedient of science, every resource of humanity. Chances to be poor, and not only must you die when you need not, but must die with the minimum of comfort, the extreme of bodily and mental distress. This commonplace struck so forcibly upon Will's imagination that it was as a new discovery to him. He stood amazed, bewildered—as men of any thinking power are wont to do when experience makes real to them the truisms of life. A few coins, or pieces of printed paper, to signify all that! An explosion of angry laughter broke the mood.

Pacing, pacing, back and fro in the little room, for hour after hour, till his head whirled, and his legs ached. Out of doors there was fitfully glinting sunshine upon the wet roofs; a pale blue now and then revealed amid the grey rack. Two years ago he would have walked twenty miles on a day like this,

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