

Christopherson

George Gissing

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It was twenty years ago, and on an evening in May. All day long there had been sunshine. Owing, doubtless, to the incident I am about to relate, the light and warmth of that long-vanished day live with me still; I can see the great white clouds that moved across the strip of sky before my window, and feel again the spring languor which troubled my solitary work in the heart of London.

Only at sunset did I leave the house. There was an unwonted sweetness in the air; the long vistas of newly lit lamps made a golden glow under the dusking flush of the sky. With no purpose but to rest and breathe, I wandered for half an hour, and found myself at length where Great Portland Street opens into Marylebone Road. Over the way, in the shadow of Trinity Church, was an old bookshop, well known to me: the gas-jet shining upon the stall with its rows of volumes drew me across. I began turning over pages, and — invariable consequence — fingering what money I had in my pocket. A certain book overcame me; I stepped into the little shop to pay for it.

While standing at the stall, I had been vaguely aware of some one beside me, a man who also was looking over the books; as I came out again with my purchase, this stranger gazed at me intently, with a half-smile of peculiar interest. He seemed about to say something. I walked slowly away; the man moved in the same direction. Just in front of the church he made a quick movement to my side, and spoke.

'Pray excuse me, sir — don't misunderstand me — I only wished to ask whether you have noticed the name written on the flyleaf of the book you have just bought?'

The respectful nervousness of his voice naturally made me suppose at first that the man was going to beg; but he seemed no ordinary mendicant. I judged him to be about sixty years of age; his long, thin hair and straggling beard were grizzled, and a somewhat rheumy eye looked out from his bloodless, hollowed countenance; he was very shabbily clad, yet as a fallen gentleman, and indeed his accent made it clear to what class he originally belonged. The expression with which he regarded me had so much intelligence, so much good-nature, and at the same time such a pathetic diffidence, that I could not but answer him in the friendliest way. I had not seen the name on the flyleaf, but at once I opened the book, and by the light of a gas-lamp read, inscribed in a very fine hand, 'W. R. Christopherson, 1849.'

'It is my name,' said the stranger, in a subdued and uncertain voice.

'Indeed? The book used to belong to you?'

'It belonged to me.' He laughed oddly, a tremulous little crow of a laugh, at the same time stroking his head, as if to deprecate disbelief. 'You never heard of the sale of the Christopherson library? To be sure, you were too young; it was in 1860. I have often come across books with my name in them on the stalls — often. I had happened to notice this just before you came up, and when I saw you look at it, I was curious to see whether you would buy it. Pray excuse the freedom I am taking. Lovers of books — don't you think — ?'

The broken question was completed by his look, and when I said that I quite understood and agreed with him he crowed his little laugh.

'Have you a large library?' he inquired, eyeing me wistfully.

'Oh dear, no. Only a few hundred volumes. Too many for one who has no house of his own.'

He smiled good-naturedly, bent his head, and murmured just audibly:

'My catalogue numbered 24,718.'

I was growing curious and interested. Venturing no more direct questions, I asked whether, at the time he spoke of, he lived in London.

'If you have five minutes to spare,' was the timid reply, 'I will show you my house. I mean' — again the little crowing laugh — the house which was mine.

Willingly I walked on with him. He led me a short distance up the road skirting Regent's Park, and paused at length before a house in an imposing terrace.

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'There,' he whispered, 'I used to live. The window to the right of the door — that was my library. Ah!'
And he heaved a deep sigh.

'A misfortune befell you,' I said, also in subdued voice.

'The result of my own folly. I had enough for my needs, but thought I needed more. I let myself be drawn into business — I, who knew nothing of such things — and there came the black day — the black day.'

We turned to retrace our steps, and walking slowly, with heads bent, came in silence again to the church.

'I wonder whether you have bought any other of my books?' asked Christopherson, with his gentle smile, when he had paused as if for leave-taking.

I replied that I did not remember to have come across his name before; then, on an impulse, asked whether he would care to have the book I carried in my hand; if so, with pleasure I would give it him. No sooner were the words spoken than I saw the delight they caused the hearer. He hesitated, murmured reluctance, but soon gratefully accepted my offer, and flushed with joy as he took the volume.

'I still have a few books,' he said, under his breath, as if he spoke of something he was ashamed to make known. 'But it is very rarely indeed that I can add to them. I feel I have not thanked you half enough.'

We shook hands and parted.

My lodging at that time was in Camden Town. One afternoon, perhaps a fortnight later, I had walked for an hour or two, and on my way back I stopped at a bookstall in the High Street. Some one came up to my side; I looked, and recognised Christopherson. Our greeting was like that of old friends.

'I have seen you several times lately,' said the broken gentleman, who looked shabbier than before in the broad daylight, 'but I — I didn't like to speak. I live not far from here.'

'Why, so do I,' and I added, without much thinking what I said, 'do you live alone?'

'Alone? oh no. With my wife.'

There was a curious embarrassment in his tone. His eyes were cast down and his head moved uneasily.

We began to talk of the books on the stall, and turning away together continued our conversation. Christopherson was not only a well-bred but a very intelligent and even learned man. On his giving some proof of erudition (with the excessive modesty which characterised him), I asked whether he wrote. No, he had never written anything — never; he was only a bookworm, he said. Thereupon he crowed faintly and took his leave.

It was not long before we again met by chance. We came face to face at a street corner in my neighbourhood, and I was struck by a change in him. He looked older; a profound melancholy darkened his countenance; the hand he gave me was limp, and his pleasure at our meeting found only a faint expression.

'I am going away,' he said in reply to my inquiring look. 'I am leaving London.'

'For good?'

'I fear so, and yet' — he made an obvious effort — 'I am glad of it. My wife's health has not been very good lately. She has need of country air. Yes, I am glad we have decided to go away — very glad — very glad indeed!'

He spoke with an automatic sort of emphasis, his eyes wandering, and his hands twitching nervously. I was on the point of asking what part of the country he had chosen for his retreat, when he abruptly added:

'I live just over there. Will you let me show you my books?'

Of course I gladly accepted the invitation, and a couple of minutes' walk brought us to a house in a decent street where most of the ground-floor windows showed a card announcing lodgings. As we paused at the door, my companion seemed to hesitate, to regret having invited me.

'I'm really afraid it isn't worth your while,' he said timidly. 'The fact is, I haven't space to show my books properly.'

I put aside the objection, and we entered. With anxious courtesy Christopherson led me up the narrow staircase to the second-floor landing, and threw open a door. On the threshold I stood astonished. The room was a small one, and would in any case have only just sufficed for homely comfort, used as it evidently was for all daytime purposes; but certainly a third of the entire space was occupied by a solid mass of books, volumes stacked several rows deep against two of the walls and almost up to the ceiling. A round table and two or three chairs were the only furniture — there was no room, indeed, for more. The window being shut, and the sunshine glowing upon it, an intolerable stuffiness oppressed the air. Never had I been made so uncomfortable by the odour of printed paper and bindings.

'But,' I exclaimed, 'you said you had only a few books! There must be five times as many here as I have.'

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'I forget the exact number,' murmured Christopherson, in great agitation. 'You see, I can't arrange them properly. I have a few more in — in the other room.'

He led me across the landing, opened another door, and showed me a little bedroom. Here the encumberment was less remarkable, but one wall had completely disappeared behind volumes, and the bookishness of the air made it a disgusting thought that two persons occupied this chamber every night.

We returned to the sitting-room, Christopherson began picking out books from the solid mass to show me. Talking nervously, brokenly, with now and then a deep sigh or a crow of laughter, he gave me a little light on his history. I learnt that he had occupied these lodgings for the last eight years; that he had been twice married; that the only child he had had, a daughter by his first wife, had died long ago in childhood; and lastly — this came in a burst of confidence, with a very pleasant smile — that his second wife had been his daughter's governess. I listened with keen interest, and hoped to learn still more of the circumstances of this singular household.

'In the country,' I remarked, 'you will no doubt have shelf room?'

At once his countenance fell; he turned upon me a woebegone eye. Just as I was about to speak again sounds from within the house caught my attention; there was a heavy foot on the stairs, and a loud voice, which seemed familiar to me.

'Ah!' exclaimed Christopherson with a start, 'here comes some one who is going to help me in the removal of the books. Come in, Mr Pomfret, come in!'

The door opened, and there appeared a tall, wiry fellow, whose sandy hair, light blue eyes, jutting jawbones, and large mouth made a picture suggestive of small refinement but of vigorous and wholesome manhood. No wonder I had seemed to recognise his voice. Though we only saw each other by chance at long intervals, Pomfret and I were old acquaintances.

'Hallo!' he roared out, 'I didn't know you knew Mr Christopherson.'

'I'm just as much surprised to find that you know him!' was my reply.

The old book-lover gazed at us in nervous astonishment, then shook hands with the newcomer, who greeted him bluffly, yet respectfully. Pomfret spoke with a strong Yorkshire accent, and had all the angularity of demeanour which marks the typical Yorkshireman. He came to announce that everything had been settled for the packing and transporting of Mr Christopherson's library; it remained only to decide the day.

'There's no hurry,' exclaimed Christopherson. 'There's really no hurry. I'm greatly obliged to you, Mr Pomfret, for all the trouble you are taking. We'll settle the date in a day or two — a day or two.'

With a good-humoured nod Pomfret moved to take his leave. Our eyes met; we left the house together. Out in the street again I took a deep breath of the summer air, which seemed sweet as in a meadow after that stifling room. My companion evidently had a like sensation, for he looked up to the sky and broadened out his shoulders.

'Eh, but it's a grand, day! I'd give something for a walk on Ilkley Moors.'

As the best substitute within our reach we agreed to walk across Regent's Park together. Pomfret's business took him in that direction, and I was glad of a talk about Christopherson. I learnt that the old booklover's landlady was Pomfret's aunt. Christopherson's story of affluence and ruin was quite true. Ruin complete, for at the age of forty he had been obliged to earn his living as a clerk or something of the kind. About five years later came his second marriage.

'You know Mrs Christopherson?' asked Pomfret.

'No! I wish I did. Why?'

'Because she's the Sort of woman it does you good to know, that's all. She's a lady — my idea of a lady. Christopherson's a gentleman too, there's no denying it; if he wasn't, I think I should have punched his head before now. Oh, I know 'em well! why, I lived in the house there with 'em for several years. She's a lady to the end of her little finger, and how her husband can 'a borne to see her living the life she has, it's more than I can understand. By—! I'd have turned burglar, if I could 'a found no other way of keeping her in comfort.'

'She works for her living, then?'

'Ay, and for his too. No, not teaching; she's in a shop in Tottenham Court Road; has what they call a good place, and earns thirty shillings a week. It's all they have, but Christopherson buys books out of it.'

'But has he never done anything since their marriage?'

'He did for the first few years, I believe, but he had an illness, and that was the end of it. Since then he's only loafed. He goes to all the book-sales, and spends the rest of his time sniffing about the second-hand shops. She?'

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Oh, she'd never say a word! Wait till you've seen her.'

'Well, but,' I asked, 'what has happened? How is it they're leaving London?'

'Ay, I'll tell you; I was coming to that. Mrs Christopherson has relatives well off — a fat and selfish lot, as far as I can make out — never lifted a finger to help her until now. One of them's a Mrs Keeting, the widow of some City porpoise, I'm told. Well, this woman has a home down in Norfolk. She never lives there, but a son of hers goes there to fish and shoot now and then. Well, this is what Mrs Christopherson tells my aunt, Mrs Keeting has offered to let her and her husband live down yonder, rent free, and their food provided. She's to be housekeeper, in fact, and keep the place ready for any one who goes down.'

'Christopherson, I can see, would rather stay where he is.'

'Why, of course, he doesn't know how he'll live without the bookshops. But he's glad for all that, on his wife's account. And it's none too soon, I can tell you. The poor woman couldn't go on much longer; my aunt says she's just about ready to drop, and sometimes, I know, she looks terribly bad. Of course, she won't own it, not she; she isn't one of the complaining sort. But she talks now and then about the country — the places where she used to live. I've heard her, and it gives me a notion of what she's gone through all these years. I saw her a week ago, just when she had Mrs Keeting's offer, and I tell you I scarcely knew who it was! You never saw such a change in any one in your life! Her face was like that of a girl of seventeen. And her laugh — you should have heard her laugh!'

'Is she much younger than her husband?' I asked.

'Twenty years at least. She's about forty, I think.'

I mused for a few moments.

'After all, it isn't an unhappy marriage?'

'Unhappy?' cried Pomfret. 'Why, there's never been a disagreeable word between them, that I'll warrant. Once Christopherson gets over the change, they'll have nothing more in the world to ask for. He'll potter over his books —'

'You mean to tell me,' I interrupted, 'that those books have all been bought out of his wife's thirty shillings a week?'

'No, no. To begin with, he kept a few out of his old library. Then, when he was earning his own living, he bought a great many. He told me once that he's often lived on sixpence a day to have money for books. A rum old owl; but for all that he's a gentleman, and you can't help liking him. I shall be sorry when he's out of reach.'

For my own part, I wished nothing better than to hear of Christopherson's departure. The story I had heard made me uncomfortable. It was good to think of that poor woman rescued at last from her life of toil, and in these days of midsummer free to enjoy the country she loved. A touch of envy mingled, I confess, with my thought of Christopherson, who henceforth had not a care in the world, and without reproach might delight in his hoarded volumes. One could not imagine that he would suffer seriously by the removal of his old haunts. I promised myself to call on him in a day or two. By choosing Sunday, I might perhaps be lucky enough to see his wife.

And on Sunday afternoon I was on the point of setting forth to pay this visit, when in came Pomfret. He wore a surly look) and kicked clumsily against the furniture as he crossed the room. His appearance was a surprise, for, though I had given him my address, I did not in the least expect that he would come to see me; a certain pride, I suppose, characteristic of his rugged strain, having always made him shy of such intimacy.

'Did you ever hear the like of that!' he shouted, half angrily. 'It's all over. They're not going! And all because of those blamed books!'

And spluttering and growling, he made known what he had just learnt at his aunt's home. On the previous afternoon the Christophersons had been surprised by a visit from their relative and would-be benefactress, Mrs Keeting. Never before had that lady called upon them; she came, no doubt (this could only be conjectured), to speak with them of their approaching removal. The close of the conversation (a very brief one) was overheard by the landlady, for Mrs Keeting spoke loudly as she descended the stairs. 'Impossible! Quite impossible! I couldn't think of it! How could you dream for a moment that I would let you fill my house with musty old books? Most unhealthy! I never knew anything so extraordinary in my life, never!' And so she went out to her carriage, and was driven away. And the landlady, presently having occasion to go upstairs, was aware of a dead silence in the room where the Christophersons were sitting. She knocked — prepared with some excuse — and found the couple side by side, smiling sadly. At once they told her the truth. Mrs Keeting had come because of a letter in which Mrs Christopherson had mentioned the fact that her husband had a good many books, and hoped he might

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be permitted to remove them to the house in Norfolk. She came to see the library — with the result already heard. They had the choice between sacrificing the books and losing what their relative offered.

'Christopherson refused?' I let fall.

'I suppose his wife saw that it was too much for him. At all events, they'd agreed to keep the books and lose the house. And there's an end of it. I haven't been so riled about anything for a long time!'

Meantime I had been reflecting. It was easy for me to understand Christopherson's state of mind, and without knowing Mrs Keeting, I saw that she must be a person whose benefactions would be a good deal of a burden. After all, was Mrs Christopherson so very unhappy? Was she not the kind of woman who lived by sacrifice — one who had far rather lead a life disagreeable to herself than change it at the cost of discomfort to her husband? This view of the matter irritated Pomfret, and he broke into objurgations, directed partly against Mrs Keeting, partly against Christopherson. It was an 'infernal shame,' that was all he could say. And after all, I rather inclined to his opinion.

When two or three days had passed, curiosity drew me towards the Christophersons' dwelling. Walking along the opposite side of the street, I looked up at their window, and there was the face of the old bibliophile. Evidently he was standing at the window in idleness, perhaps in trouble. At once he beckoned to me; but before I could knock at the house-door he had descended, and came out.

'May I walk a little way with you?' he asked.

There was worry on his features. For some moments we went on in silence.

'So you have changed your mind about leaving London?' I said, as if carelessly.

'You have heard from Mr Pomfret? Well — yes, yes — I think we shall stay where we are — for the present.

Never have I seen a man more painfully embarrassed. He walked with head bent, shoulders stooping; and shuffled, indeed, rather than walked. Even so might a man bear himself who felt guilty of some peculiar meanness.

Presently words broke from him.

'To tell you the truth, there's a difficulty about the books.' He glanced furtively at me, and I saw he was trembling in all his nerves. 'As you see, my circumstances are not brilliant.' He half-choked himself with a crow. 'The fact is we were offered a house in the country, on certain conditions, by a relative of Mrs Christopherson; and, unfortunately, it turned out that my library is regarded as an objection — a fatal objection. We have quite reconciled ourselves to staying where we are.'

I could not help asking, without emphasis, whether Mrs Christopherson would have cared for life in the country. But no sooner were the words out of my mouth than I regretted them, so evidently did they hit my companion in a tender place.

'I think she would have liked it,' he answered, with a strangely pathetic look at me, as if he entreated my forbearance.

'But,' I suggested, 'couldn't you make some arrangements about the books? Couldn't you take a room for them in another house, for instance?'

Christopherson's face was sufficient answer; it reminded me of his pennilessness. 'We think no more about it,' he said. 'The matter is settled — quite settled.'

There was no pursuing the subject. At the next parting of the ways we took leave of each other.

I think it was not more than a week later when I received a postcard from Pomfret. He wrote: 'Just as I expected. Mrs C. seriously ill.' That was all.

Mrs C. could, of course, only mean Mrs Christopherson. I mused over the message — it took hold of my imagination, wrought upon my feelings; and that afternoon I again walked along the interesting street.

There was no face at the window. After a little hesitation I decided to call at the house and speak with Pomfret's aunt. It was she who opened the door to me.

We had never seen each other, but when I mentioned my name and said I was anxious to have news of Mrs Christopherson, she led me into a sitting-room, and began to talk confidentially.

She was a good-natured Yorkshirewoman, very unlike the common London landlady. 'Yes, Mrs Christopherson had been taken ill two days ago. It began with a long fainting fit. She had a feverish, sleepless night; the doctor was sent for; and he had her removed out of the stuffy, book-cumbered bedroom into another chamber, which luckily happened to be vacant. There she lay utterly weak and worn, all but voiceless, able only

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to smile at her husband, who never moved from the bedside day or night. He, too,' said the landlady, 'would soon break down: he looked like a ghost, and seemed "half-crazed."'

'What,' I asked, 'could be the cause of this illness?'

The good woman gave me an odd look, shook her head, and murmured that the reason was not far to seek.

'Did she think,' I asked, 'that disappointment might have something to do with it?'

Why, of course she did. For a long time the poor lady had been all but at the end of her strength, and this came as a blow beneath which she sank.

'Your nephew and I have talked about it,' I said. 'He thinks that Mr Christopherson didn't understand what a sacrifice he asked his wife to make.'

'I think so too,' was the reply. 'But he begins to see it now, I can tell you. He says nothing but —'

There was a tap at the door, and a hurried tremulous voice begged the landlady to go upstairs.

'What is it, sir?' she asked.

'I'm afraid she's worse,' said Christopherson, turning his haggard face to me with startled recognition. 'Do come up at once, please.'

Without a word to me he disappeared with the landlady. I could not go away; for some ten minutes I fidgeted about the little room, listening to every sound in the house. Then came a footfall on the stairs, and the landlady rejoined me.

'It's nothing,' she said. 'I almost think she might drop off to sleep, if she's left quiet. He worries her, poor man, sitting there and asking her every two minutes how she feels. I've persuaded him to go to his room, and I think it might do him good if you went and had a bit o' talk with him.'

I mounted at once to the second-floor sitting-room, and found Christopherson sunk upon a chair, his head falling forwards, the image of despairing misery. As I approached he staggered to his feet. He took my hand in a shrinking, shamefaced way, and could not raise his eyes. I uttered a few words of encouragement, but they had the opposite effect to that designed.

'Don't tell me that,' he moaned, half resentfully. 'She's dying — she's dying — say what they will, I know it.'

'Have you a good doctor?'

'I think so — but it's too late — it's too late.'

As he dropped to his chair again I sat down by him. The silence of a minute or two was broken by a thunderous rat-tat at the house-door. Christopherson leapt to his feet, rushed from the room; I, half fearing that he had gone mad, followed to the head of the stairs.

In a moment he came up again, limp and wretched as before.

'It was the postman,' he muttered. 'I am expecting a letter.'

Conversation seeming impossible, I shaped a phrase preliminary to withdrawal; but Christopherson would not let me go.

'I should like to tell you,' he began, looking at me like a dog under punishment, 'that I have done all I could. As soon as my wife fell ill, and when I saw — I had only begun to think of it in that way — how she felt the disappointment, I went at once to Mrs Keeting's house to tell her that I would sell the books. But she was out of town. I wrote to her — I said I regretted my folly — I entreated her to forgive me and to renew her kind offer. There has been plenty of time for a reply, but she doesn't answer.'

He had in his hand what I saw was a bookseller's catalogue, just delivered by the postman. Mechanically he tore off the wrapper and even glanced over the first page. Then, as if conscience stabbed him, he flung the thing violently away.

'The chance has gone!' he exclaimed, taking a hurried step or two along the little strip of floor left free by the mountain of books. 'Of course she said she would rather stay in London! Of course she said what she knew would please me! When — when did she ever say anything else! And I was cruel enough — base enough — to let her make the sacrifice!' He waved his arms frantically. 'Didn't I know what it cost her? Couldn't I see in her face how her heart leapt at the hope of going to live in the country! I knew what she was suffering; I knew it, I tell you! And, like a selfish coward, I let her suffer — I let her drop down and die — die!'

'Any hour,' I said, 'may bring you the reply from Mrs Keeting. Of course it will be favourable, and the good news —'

'Too late, I have killed her! That woman won't write. She's one of the vulgar rich, and we offended her pride;

and such as she never forgive.'

He sat down for a moment, but started up again in an agony of mental suffering.

'She is dying — and there, there, that's what has killed her!' He gesticulated wildly towards the books. 'I have sold her life for those. Oh! — oh!'

With this cry he seized half a dozen volumes, and, before I could understand what he was about, he had flung up the window-sash, and cast the books into the street. Another batch followed; I heard the thud upon the pavement. Then I caught him by the arm, held him fast, begged him to control himself.

'They shall all go!' he cried. 'I loathe the sight of them. They have killed my dear wife!'

He said it sobbing, and at the last words tears streamed from his eyes. I had no difficulty now in restraining him. He met my look with a gaze of infinite pathos, and talked on while he wept.

'If you knew what she has been to me! When she married me I was a ruined man twenty years older. I have given her nothing but toil and care. You shall know everything — for years and years I have lived on the earnings of her labour. Worse than that, I have starved and stinted her to buy books. Oh, the shame of it! The wickedness of it! It was my vice — the vice that enslaved me just as if it had been drinking or gambling. I couldn't resist the temptation — though every day I cried shame upon myself and swore to overcome it. She never blamed me; never a word — nay, not a look — of a reproach. I lived in idleness. I never tried to save her that daily toil at the shop. Do you know that she worked in a shop? — She, with her knowledge and her refinement leading such a life as that! Think that I have passed the shop a thousand times, coming home with a book in my hands! I had the heart to pass, and to think of her there! Oh! Oh!'

Some one was knocking at the door. I went to open, and saw the landlady, her face set in astonishment, and her arms full of books.

'It's all right,' I whispered. 'Put them down on the floor there; don't bring them in. An accident.'

Christopherson stood behind me; his look asked what he durst not speak. I said it was nothing, and by degrees brought him into a calmer state. Luckily, the doctor came before I went away, and he was able to report a slight improvement. The patient had slept a little and seemed likely to sleep again. Christopherson asked me to come again before long — there was no one else, he said, who cared anything about him — and I promised to call the next day.

I did so, early in the afternoon. Christopherson must have watched for my coming: before I could raise the knocker the door flew open, and his face gleamed such a greeting as astonished me. He grasped my hand in both his.

'The letter has come! We are to have the house.'

'And how is Mrs Christopherson?'

'Better, much better, Heaven be thanked! She slept almost from the time when you left yesterday afternoon till early this morning. The letter came by the first post, and I told her — not the whole truth,' he added, under his breath. 'She thinks I am to be allowed to take the books with me; and if you could have seen her smile of contentment. But they will all be sold and carried away before she knows about it; and when she sees that I don't care a snap of the fingers —!'

He had turned into the sitting-room on the ground floor. Walking about excitedly, Christopherson gloried in the sacrifice he had made. Already a letter was despatched to a bookseller, who would buy the whole library as it stood. But would he not keep a few volumes? I asked. Surely there could be no objection to a few shelves of books; and how would he live without them? At first he declared vehemently that not a volume should be kept — he never wished to see a book again as long as he lived. But Mrs Christopherson? I urged. Would she not be glad of something to read now and then? At this he grew pensive. We discussed the matter, and it was arranged that a box should be packed with select volumes and taken down into Norfolk together with the rest of their luggage. Not even Mrs Keeting could object to this, and I strongly advised him to take her permission for granted.

And so it was done. By discreet management the piled volumes were stowed in bags, carried downstairs, emptied into a cart, and conveyed away, so quietly that the sick woman was aware of nothing. In telling me about it, Christopherson crowed as I had never heard him; but methought his eye avoided that part of the floor which had formerly been hidden, and in the course of our conversation he now and then became absent, with head bowed. Of the joy he felt in his wife's recovery there could, however, be no doubt. The crisis through which he had passed had made him, in appearance, a yet older man; when he declared his happiness tears came into his

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eyes, and his head shook with a senile tremor.

Before they left London, I saw Mrs Christopherson — a pale, thin, slightly made woman, who had never been what is called good-looking, but her face, if ever face did so, declared a brave and loyal spirit. She was not joyous, she was not sad; but in her eyes, as I looked at them again and again, I read the profound thankfulness of one to whom fate has granted her soul's desire.