

An Inspiration

George Gissing

Table of Contents

<u>An Inspiration</u>	1
<u>George Gissing</u>	1

An Inspiration

George Gissing

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

About six o'clock, just as Harvey Munden came to the end of his day's work, and grew aware that he was hungry, some one knocked at the outer door—a timid knock, signalling a person of no importance. He went to open, and saw a man whose face he remembered.

'What is it this time?' he asked good-humouredly.

'Well, sir, I should like, if you will allow me, to draw your attention to an ingenious little contrivance—an absolute cure for smoky chimneys.'

The speaker seemed to be about forty; he was dressed with painful neatness, every article of his clothing, from hat to boots, exhibiting some trace of repair. He stood with his meagre form respectfully bent, on his drawn features a respectful smile, and prepared to open a small hand-bag—so strikingly new that it put its bearer to shame. Harvey Munden observed him, listened to his exposition, and said at length:

'When do you knock off work?'

'Well, sir, this is probably my last call to-day.'

'Come in for a minute, then. I should like to have a talk with you.'

Respectfully acquiescent, the man stepped forward into the comfortable sitting-room, which he surveyed with timid interest. His host gave him a chair by the fireside, and induced him to talk of his efforts to make a living. Brightened by the cheeriness of the surroundings, and solaced by an unwonted sympathy, the hapless struggler gave a very simple and very lamentable account of himself. For years he had lived on the petty commission of petty sales, sometimes earning two or three shillings a day, but more often reckoning the total in pence.

'I'm one of those men, sir, that weren't made to get on in the world. As a lad, I couldn't stick to anything—couldn't seem to put my heart into any sort of work, and that was the ruin of me—for I had chances to begin with. I've never done anything to be ashamed of—unless it's idleness.'

'You are not married?'

His eyes fell, and his smile faded; he shook his head. The other watched him for a moment.

'Will you tell me your name? Mine is Munden.'

'Nangle, sir—Laurence Nangle.'

'Well, Mr Nangle, will you come and dine with me?'

An Inspiration

Abashed and doubtful, the man drew his legs further beneath the chair and twisted his hat. There needed some pressure before he could bring himself to accept the invitation; improbable as it seemed, he was genuinely shy; his stammered phrases and a slight flush on his cheeks gave proof of it.

They descended together to the street, and Munden called a hansom; ten minutes drive brought them to the restaurant, where the host made choice of a retired corner, and quietly gave his directions. Nangle's embarrassment being still very observable, Munden tried to put him at ease by talking as to any ordinary acquaintance, of the day's news, of the commonest topics. It was not possible to explain himself to his guest, to avow the thought which had prompted this eccentric behaviour; Nangle could not but regard him with a certain uneasiness and suspicion; but by dint of persistence in cheerful gossip he gradually fixed the smile upon the face of his shabby companion, and prepared him to do justice to the repast.

Failure in that respect would not have been due to lack of appetite. When soup was set before him Nangle's lips betrayed their watery eagerness; his eyes rolled in the joy of anticipation. Obviously restraining himself, and anxious not to discredit his host by any show of ill-breeding, he ate with slow decorum though his handling of the spoon obeyed nature rather than the higher law. Having paused for a moment to answer some remark of Munden's, he was dismayed by the whisking away of his plate.

'But I I hadn't finished '

The waiter could not be called back, and Munden, by treating the incident jocosely, made it contribute to his guest's equanimity. When wine was poured out for him Nangle showed a joyous suffusion over all his changing countenance; he drew a deep breath, quivered at the lips, and straightened himself.

'Mr Munden' this when he had drunk a glass 'it is years since I tasted wine. And ah! how it does one good! What medicine is like it?'

'None that I know of,' jested Harvey, 'though I've had wine uncommonly like medicine.'

Nangle laughed for the first time a most strange laugh, suggesting that he had lost the habit, and could not hit a natural note. Feeling the first attempt to be a failure, he tried again, and his louder voice frightened him into silence.

'What is your opinion?' asked Munden, smiling at this bit of character. 'Is it possible for a shy man to overcome the failing, with plenty of practice?'

'Do you ask that because of anything you have noticed in me?'

'Well, yes. It rather surprises me, after all your experience, that you are still unhardened. How do you manage to call at people's houses and face all sorts of '

'Ah! you may well ask! Mr Munden, it's a daily death to me; I assure you it is. I often stand at a door shaking and trembling, and can scarcely speak when it opens. I'm the last man to succeed in this kind of thing; I do it because I can't do anything else. But it's awful, Mr Munden, awful; and I get no better. I know men who never feel it; they'd laugh in my face if I spoke of such a thing. But all my life I've suffered from want of self-confidence. If it hadn't been for that '

He broke off to help himself from a dish offered at his shoulder. The waiter's proximity startled him, and for a few moments he ate in silence ate with manifest hunger, which he did not try to disguise; for the influences of the fortunate hour had warmed his heart and were giving him courage. Munden set a fair example, himself no despicable trencherman. After an entrée of peculiar savour, Nangle found it impossible to restrain his feelings.

An Inspiration

'I never in all my life ate anything so good,' he murmured across the table.

Munden observed the growth of a new man, born of succulent food and generous wine. The characteristics of the individual thus called into being promised amusement; it was clear that they would be amiable and not unrefined. Semi-starvation and a hated employment had not corrupted the original qualities of Laurence Nangle; rather, these qualities had been frozen over, and so preserved. They were now rapidly thawing, and the process, painful to him at first, grew so enjoyable that delight beamed from his eyes.

At dessert he talked without self-consciousness, and was led into reminiscence. Munden had chanced to mention that he was a Yorkshireman.

'And so am I!' exclaimed Nangle; 'so am I. But I came away when I was a little lad, and I've never been there since. Do you know Colchester? That's where I grew up and was educated. I hadn't a bad education; most men would have made more use of it. But something happened when I was a young man it seemed to floor me, and I've never quite got over it.,

'A love affair, I dare say?'

Nangle looked away and slowly nodded several times. Then he drank with deliberation, and smacked his lips. A glow was deepening on his hollow cheeks.

'Yes, you are right. I could tell you a strange thing that happened to me only a few days ago. But, first of all, I should like to know why did you ask me to dine with you?'

'Oh, an inspiration.'

'You thought I looked hungry. Yes, so I was; and the dinner has done me good. I feel better than I have done for years for years. I could tell you a strange thing '

He paused, a shade of troublous agitation passing over the gleam of his countenance. After waiting for a moment Munden asked whether he smoked.

'When I can afford it, which isn't very often.'

They rose and went to the smoking-room. Nangle's step had the lightness, the spring of recovered youth. He selected a cigar with fastidious appreciation; buoyantly he declared for cognac with the coffee. And presently the stream of his talk flowed on.

'Yes, I had a very good education at a private school a commercial school. You don't know Colchester? I went into the office of a woolstapler Cliffe was his name; our best friend, and always very kind to me. I didn't get on very well never was such a fellow for making mistakes and forgetting addresses, and so on. I was an idle young dog, but I meant well I assure you I meant well. And Mr Cliffe seemed to like me, and asked me to his house the same as before. I wish he hadn't; I should have done better if he'd been a little hard with me. He had a daughter Ah, well; you begin to see. When I was one-and-twenty, she was nineteen, and we fell in love with each other. We used to meet in a quiet place just outside the town you don't know Colchester, or I could tell you the spot. I happened to be down there a year or two ago, and I went and sat in the old place for a whole day. Ah, well! Lucy Cliffe; I've only to say the name, and I go back back It makes me young again.'

His eyes grew fixed; the hand in which he held his cigar fell. A deep sigh, and he continued:

An Inspiration

'I believe her father would have helped us, one way or another; but Mrs Cliffe spoilt all. When it came out, there was a fearful to-do. Lucy was what you may call rich; at all events, she'd be left comfortably off some day. As for me what prospects had I? Mr Cliffe talked kindly to me, but he had to send me away. He got me a place in London. Lucy wrote me a letter before I went, and said she must obey her parents. We were like each other in that: soft, both of us; hadn't much will of our own. And so we never saw each other again not till a few days ago.'

'She married some one else, no doubt?'

'Yes, she did. And I knew all about it, worse luck; I'd rather have lost sight of her altogether. She married the brother of a friend of mine; well, not a friend, but an acquaintance, who was in London when I came, twenty years ago. She married three years after our parting, and I've heard of her from James Dunning (that's her brother-in-law's name) off and on ever since. I used to have a good opinion of Dunning, but I know better now. He's a rough, selfish brute!'

The last words were uttered with startling vehemence. Nangle clenched his fist, and sat stiffly, quivering with excitement. Munden subdued a smile.

'A long time back, nearly four years, this fellow Dunning told me that his brother had just died. Lucy was left with her daughter, the only child she'd had; and they lived at Ipswich. Since then, I've met Dunning only once or twice, and when I asked him about Lucy, he just said she was going on as usual, or supposed she was. He told a lie, and I half guess the reason of it. The other day do you know Prince of Wales Road, Kentish Town? You've heard of it. Well, I was going along Prince of Wales Road, in the usual business way, and I knocked at the door of a largish, respectable-looking house. The minute I'd knocked the door opened; it was a lady just coming out dressed in black. She looked at me, and I looked at her. I had a queer feeling, and there seemed to be something of the same on her side. I was just going to say something, when she asked me who it was I wished to see. I had only to hear her voice, and I knew I wasn't mistaken. But I didn't dare to speak; I stood staring at her, and she stood just as still. At last I somehow got out a word "I think you are Mrs Dunning?" "And you," she said all of a tremble, "you are Laurence Nangle." Then she turned round to the door and asked me to come in. And we sat down in a dining-room, and began to talk. You can't imagine how I felt. It was like talking in a dream; I didn't know what I said. Lucy hadn't altered very much nothing like as much as I should have expected in twenty years. She seemed so young I could hardly believe it. Of course she's only about thirty-eight, and has lived all her life in comfort. But it's wonderful she should have known me, after all I've gone through. I must seem more like sixty than forty.'

'Not at present,' remarked the listener. And truly, for the warm, animated face before him was that of a comparatively young man.

'Well, I felt bitterly ashamed of myself, dressed as I was, and peddling from house to house. She kept staring at me, as if she couldn't get over her astonishment. Had she never heard of me? I asked. Yes, she had, every now and then. James Dunning had told her I was a commercial traveller, or something of that kind. Then I asked if she was living here, in Kentish Town. Yes, she was; with James Dunning and his wife. "And your daughter as well?" I asked. Then she began to cry, and told me her daughter had been dead for nearly two years, and she was quite alone, but for the Dunnings, who were very kind to her. She had come to live with them after her daughter's death. And she told me her husband had left her very well off, but what was the use of it when all her family was gone?'

And just then we were disturbed by some one coming into the room; a flashy sort of young woman, I guessed her to be Dunning's wife, and I was right. Lucy I can't help calling her Lucy stood up, and looked nervous; and of course I stood up too. "I didn't know anyone was here," said her sister-in-law, looking very hard at me. "It's some one I used to know," said Lucy. "Oh, then I won't intrude." Lucy couldn't say any more. She was ashamed of me, after all. But I felt a good deal more ashamed of myself, and I choked something about being in a hurry, and got out of the room. Neither of them tried to stop me. When I'd let myself out at the front door, I

An Inspiration

walked off like a madman, running into people because I didn't see them, and talking to myself, and going on straight ahead, till I came to my senses somewhere out Hampstead way.'

'I hope that isn't the end of the story,' said Munden, as he cut the tip of a second cigar.

'I only wish it was,' returned his guest, frowning and straightening himself as before. 'Now, you know something about me, Mr Munden I mean, you can form some notion of the man I am from what I have told you. And do you think that I could do such a mean thing as go to that lady – her I call Lucy, for old-time sake – in the hope of getting money from her? Do you believe it of me?'

'Assuredly not.'

'I thank you for your saying so. It came about like this. I did a foolish thing. Two days after that meeting I had to be in Kentish Town again, and late in the evening I passed near Prince of Wales Road. Well, I was tempted. I couldn't resist the wish to go by that house where she lives. And when I got near it, in the dark, I stood still; some one was playing a piano inside, and I thought it might be Lucy. I stood for a minute or two and all at once a man came up from behind me and stared in my face. James Dunning it was. "Halloa!" he said. "Then it is you, Nangle. I just thought it might be. And what are you doing here?" I couldn't understand his way of speaking, and I hadn't any words ready. "Now, look here, Nangle," he went on, drawing me away by the arm; "you've found out that my sister-in-law is living with us. I didn't want you to know, because I couldn't trust you, and after what happened the day before yesterday I see I was right. Of course they told me. Now I want you to understand that my sister-in-law can't be troubled in this way. I suppose you're spying here on the chance that she may come out; I'm glad I happened to find you at it. If you're in low water I don't mind lending you half-a-crown, but you'll keep out of Prince of Wales Road, or I shall know how to deal with you.' There, that's what he said to me. I wasn't man enough to strike him as I ought to have done; I've always been poor-spirited. I just told him in a few hot words what I thought of his behaviour, and went off, feeling devilish miserable, I can assure you."

Munden reflected. There was silence for a little.

'Do you suppose,' asked the host at length, 'that Mrs Dunning the widowed lady regarded you with any such suspicion?'

'Not for one moment,' cried Nangle.

'No? and isn't it possible that you misunderstood her when you thought she was ashamed of you? From what you have told me of her character '

'Yes,' interrupted the other eagerly, 'no doubt I was wrong in that. She felt like I did – a sort of shame, a sort of awkwardness; but if I had stayed she'd have got over it. I'm sure she would. I was a fool to bolt like that. It gave James Dunning's wife a chance of thinking of me as her husband does. It's all my fault.'

'And another thing. You take it for granted that James Dunning accused you of wanting to beg or borrow from his sister-in-law. Doesn't it occur to you that he might be afraid of something else – something more serious from his point of view?'

'I don't quite understand.'

'Why, suppose that when the widowed lady talked to him about you she showed a good deal more interest in you than James Dunning approved? Suppose she even asked for your address, or something of that kind?'

Nangle fixed a gaze on the speaker. His eyes widened to express an agitating thought.

An Inspiration

'You think that is possible?'

'Well, not impossible.'

'And that fellow is afraid Lucy might '

'Precisely. In all likelihood that would be very disagreeable to Mr and Mrs James Dunning. She is a widow in easy circumstances, without children, without near relatives '

'You are right!' murmured Nangle slowly. 'I see it now. That's why he has been afraid of me. And he must have had some reason. Perhaps she has spoken of me. It seems impossible after all these years '

He sank back, and stared into vacancy with glowing eyes.

'In your position,' said Munden, 'I should take an early opportunity of revisiting Prince of Wales Road.'

'How can I? Think of my poverty! How can you advise such a thing?'

'It behoves you,' continued the other, with much gravity, 'to clear your character in the eyes of that lady. In justice to yourself '

'Again you are right! I will go to-morrow.'

'It seems to me that this is a case for striking while the iron is hot. It's now only eight o'clock, and give me leave to say that you will never be so able to justify yourself as this evening. A hansom will take you to Kentish Town in half an hour.'

Nangle started up the picture of radiant resolve.

'I have just half-a-crown in my pocket, and that's how I'll use it! Thank you! You have made me see things in a new light. I feel another man! And if I find that what you hinted at is really the case, shall I hesitate out of false shame? Which is better for Lucy: to live with those people, always feeling sad and lonesome, or to find a real home with the man she loved when she was a girl the man who has loved her all his life?'

'Bravo! This is the right the heroic vein.'

In five minutes they had quitted the restaurant. They found a hansom, and, as he leapt into it, Nangle shouted gallantly to the driver: 'Prince of Wales Road, Kentish Town!' Impossible to recognize the voice which but two hours since had murmured respectfully at Harvey Munden's door. 'Come and see me tomorrow,' Munden called to him, and a hand waved from the starting cab.

Munden was entertained, and something more. Partly out of kindness, in part from curiosity, he had given a good dinner to a poor devil oppressed with ills; he desired to warm the man's chilly blood and to improve its quality; he wished to study the effects of such stirring influence in this particular case. And it seemed probable that he had achieved a good deal more than the end in view. It might come to pass that a good-humoured jest would change incalculably the course of two lives.

It happened that on the morrow he was obliged to go out of town. On returning late at night he found in his letter-box a hand-delivered note, with the signature, 'Laurence Nangle.' Only a couple of lines to say that Nangle had called twice, and that he would come again in a day or two. 'Yours gratefully,' he wrote himself, which possibly signified the news Munden hoped for.

An Inspiration

Nearly a week went by, and again at six o'clock Munden was summoned to the door by a knock he recognized. There stood Mr Nangle quantum mutatus! In his hand no commercial bag, but a most respectable umbrella; on his head an irreproachable silk hat; the rest of his equipment in harmony therewith. The disappearance of an uncomely beard had struck a decade from his apparent age; he held himself with a certain modest dignity, and did not shrink from the scrutiny of astonished eyes.

'Come in! Delighted to see you.'

He entered, and for a moment seated himself, but his feelings would not allow him to keep a restful position. Starting up again, he exclaimed:

'Mr Munden, what can a man say when he's in debt for all that makes life worth living?'

'It depends whether the creditor is man or woman.'

'In my case, it's both. But if it hadn't been for you '

His voice failed him.

'I was right, was I?'

'Yes, you were right. I'll tell you about it. I got out of the cab at the end of Prince of Wales Road, and walked to the house. I knocked at the door. A servant came, and I told her I wished to see Mrs Dunning the widow lady. I'd hardly spoken when James Dunning came out of a room; he had heard my voice. "What's the meaning of this?" he said in his brutal way, pushing up against me. "Didn't you understand me?" "Yes, I did, and better than you think. I have come to see a lady who happens to live in your house " And just then I saw Lucy herself at the back of the hall. I brushed past Dunning, and went right up to her. "Mrs Dunning, I wish to speak to you. Will you let me? Or do you want me to be turned out of the house like a beggar?" "No, no!" She was white as a sheet, and held out her hand to me, as if she wanted protection. "It's all a mistake. You must stay I want you to stay!" James's wife had come forward, and she was staring at me savagely. "Where can we talk in private?" I asked; and I didn't let go Lucy's hand. Then, all of a sudden, Dunning turned about; you never saw such a change in a man. "Why, Lucy, what's the matter? I thought you didn't wish to see Mr Nangle. You've altogether misled us." I looked at Lucy, and she was going red and then I saw tears in her eyes. "Go into the drawing-room, Nangle," said Dunning. "It's all a misunderstanding. We must talk it over afterwards." So I went into the room, and Lucy came after me, and I shut the door '

He stopped with a choke of emotion.

'Excellent, i' faith,' said Munden beaming.

'Do you suppose,' continued the other, gravely, 'that I could ever have done that if it hadn't been for your dinner? Never! Never! I should have crept on through my miserable life, and died at last in the workhouse; when all the time there was a woman whose own happiness depended on a bit of courage in me. She'd never have dared to show a will of her own; James Dunning and his wife were too strong for her. Cowards, both of us but I was the worst. And you put a man's heart into me. Your dinner your wine your talk! If I hadn't gone that night, I should never have gone at all never!'

'I knew that.'

'But what I can't understand is why did you ask me to dine with you? Why? It's like what they call the finger of Providence.'

An Inspiration

'Yes. As I told you it was an inspiration.'