

The Invincible Curate

George Gissing

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That was the time of penny readings, and very soon after his arrival at Donniston the Rev. Mr. Benshaw appeared on the platform of the Mechanics' Institute. His figure alone would have commanded attention tall, muscular, thrilling with vigour; his voice, impressive to begin with, ended by startling his audience and moving the more frivolous to mirth. He recited 'Horatius,' and never had such a recitation been heard in Donniston. At passages of culminating ardour the windows rattled as though after a thunder-clap. When Mr. Benshaw ceased, the sudden silence seemed of religious intensity; the applause that followed, though sufficiently hearty, had a very feeble effect.

He was only the curate of a minor parish, but his energies soon overflowed the whole town. In a month he was acquainted with all Church people, and stood on friendly terms with many Dissenting families, a thing hitherto unheard of at Donniston. Ladies took a great interest in him, and marvelled that such a man could remain so long in a subordinate position how unaccountable that such an embodiment of clerical force had never yet been presented with a living! In comparison with Mr. Benshaw, the beneficed clergy of the town and district became insignificant figures. The injustice must be rectified; the Bishop must be appealed to; patrons of livings must be awakened. Never had a curate thrown himself into his duties with such burning enthusiasm, such exhaustless physical powers. His talk was never of 'High' or of 'Low,' but of the plain mission of Christianity to the world at large. In his sermons (the mild vicar of St. Peter's cared not how often his curate relieved him in the pulpit) Mr. Benshaw dealt with vast topics, glowing and roaring in prophetic vehemence; one seemed to hear the preacher of a new Crusade, a late-born Apostle.

Unfortunately, he was married. Donniston saw very little of Mrs. Benshaw, and after the first satisfaction of curiosity, scarcely spoke of her. Ladies recognised the trying position of the poor woman she lived in a tiny house, had three young children (soon to be four), and kept no servant; a cruel state of things. As far as one could judge, she was the very antithesis of her husband: limp, colourless, of poor health, but moderately intelligent. No one ever met her out of doors; perhaps she stole out after dark, to do her shopping in the poor district where she lived. Her house was said to be most scantily furnished, and by no means a model of cleanliness; the children (two went to a day-school) had a neglected air, pretty but half-starved faces, and their clothing was evidently home-made. One did not like to think on how small an income the family subsisted; it was a shame, a scandal.

Mr. Benshaw had previously lived in a remote part of England; no one at Donniston had any connection with that far-off town. But in half a year's time rumours were somewhat set afloat concerning the reverend gentleman's earlier history; it began to be whispered that Mr. Benshaw had come away heavily in debt to tradesfolk. Moreover, his eldest child, a girl of thirteen, whom the curate had casually spoken of as living with a relative, was said, on some vague authority, to be in the care of a charitable person who had taken compassion on the family when they left their former home. These, and other such stories, had an effect on public feeling, the more so when it became known that Donniston shopkeepers were already complaining that Mrs. Benshaw never paid any bills. But just at this time there chanced to break out an epidemic in the lower quarters of the town, and the gossip of censure speedily gave place to new admiration, inspired by Mr. Benshaw's heroic efforts. For several weeks the curate's muscular form was

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splendidly prominent. He defied contagion, he knew not weariness by sick-beds he gave proof of womanly tenderness, and his leonine voice subdued itself to softness, soothingest murmurs. Impossible not to forget, for the moment, at all events, those unpaid shopkeepers in the remote town, and kindred grumblers at Donniston.

When the sickness came to an end, certain ladies got up a little testimonial for the curate of St. Peter's. It took the form of a silver tea-service, and those who gave it did so in the hope that Mrs. Benshaw, having evidently no use for such a luxury, would speedily dispose of it for coin of the realm. Ere a month had elapsed this actually came to pass. The curate took a journey to a large town, and returned at night with a more considerable sum of money than he had for many years possessed. When he arrived he found his wife sitting in the miserable little parlour, by a stinted fire, sewing at a child's garment; he bent over her, kissed her forehead, and stroked her hair kindly with his great fingers. Then he laid out the money before her, and they rejoiced together.

'I have been thinking very gravely' — this in his deep voice — 'that some portion of this — some portion — should go towards a liquidation of the debts.'

'I'm afraid so,' replied Mrs. Benshaw, sighing.

'Nicholson's very insolent letter makes it impossible to pay him. He would suppose I did it out of fear, and I fear no man. It shall be Dawson. Dawson has behaved very properly. I always liked the man. He shall have twenty shillings on account. No, he shall have thirty. More we cannot possibly afford.'

Mrs. Benshaw began a doleful recounting of all their immediate necessities. Her husband listened gravely, but in the end, as always, gave a cheery turn to the talk.

'Let us remember, dear, how much reason we have for thankfulness. Who could have imagined that Mrs. Riley — excellent woman! — would take entire charge of Harriet? I assure you, I never dreamt of it; I thought it would be for a few months at most; of course, I never hinted in the most distant manner any other desire or expectation. And now the dear child is provided for! Pray do not forget to write to Mrs. Riley at least once a month.'

'Oh,' said Mrs. Benshaw presently, 'I almost forgot to tell you. Mrs. Batt called this afternoon, and was very kind; She recommends a nurse in West Street; you must make inquiries.'

'To be sure. Excellent woman! I have a high opinion of Mrs. Batt. Did she see the children?'

'Oh, yes. She says Amy is very like her own that died. The likeness grows upon her, she says. And she asked the date of her birthday.'

'Ah! — well now, I must go round and see poor old Simkin; he may go off any day. Cheer up, dear! There are better days to come.'

Not long after this the baby was born, and Mrs. Benshaw had a perilous time. Female sympathy was not wanting, nor yet substantial assistance. The good lady, Mrs. Batt, a comfortable widow, with a grown-up son, remained staunch in her admiration of the curate, and lavished kindness upon his wife. But in the background was that little group of Donniston tradesfolk, who continued to supply goods rarely paid for, and grumbled incessantly. In truth, the rent of his house, and sundry inevitable expenses, consumed all Mr. Benshaw's petty stipend. He owed so much in many parts of Great Britain that solvency had come to seem a hopeless ideal. Sufficient unto the day was the evil thereof. Mr. Benshaw discharged with unfailing energy what he regarded as his immediate duty, and committed the rest to Providence.

But the end was foreseen — at all events, by the vicar of St. Peter's. At the close of a twelvemonth this gentleman spoke to his curate with mild but firm remonstrance. A long conversation resulted in Mr. Benshaw's grave announcement — that it certainly would be better if he could obtain some rustic curacy where living was cheaper and tongues fewer. The incumbent promised his aid to this end. Oddly enough, nothing whatever had been done in Donniston towards providing Mr. Benshaw with a benefice. He was the same as ever, but his admirers had grown languid.

The new curacy was found; the Benshaws prepared for another migration. Then on a day Mrs. Batt came to Mrs. Benshaw with a singular proposal: would the parents allow little Amy to remain with Mrs. Batt, to be cared for with all motherly kindness? Of course, she might at any time return, but for the present — until things looked brighter?

'Excellent woman!' remarked the curate that evening. 'Who could have looked for such generous thoughtfulness? I am sure dear Amy will be quite as happy as dear Harriet.'

There was some little unpleasantness in Donniston before the Benshaws' departure: one or two ill-conditioned shopkeepers said and did nasty things. But Mr. Benshaw received another testimonial — this time a silver

coffee-pot. It helped to pay for the removal.