

An Old Maid's Triumph

George Gissing

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To this day's event Miss Hurst had looked anxiously forward for no less than thirty years. It was just thirty years since time and fate had made her dependent for a living upon her own exertions, without the least hope of aid from love or duty. Till then — that is, up to her twenty-eighth year — she had supported herself, but with frequent hospitality of kinsfolk to make the efforts lighter. Now, at eight-and-fifty, she had received from her pupils' parents, with all possible kindness of wording, the anticipated notice that after next quarter her services would be no more in request. So it had come at last, and fervently she thanked Heaven for the courage which enabled her to face it with so much composure. That there was no possibility of another engagement she took for granted; perhaps it was only out of delicate consideration that these good friends had kept her so long. She did not feel very old; was not conscious of mental decay; but probably others had observed some sign of it. At such an age as this who could expect to be retained as governess to young people? Doubtless it would be an injustice to her pupils. Moreover, she was ready for the change; again, Heaven be thanked!

'What will the poor old thing do?' asked Mrs. Fletcher of her husband. 'Impossible, I fear, that she can have saved anything.'

'Don't see how the deuce she can have done,' Mr. Fletcher replied. 'There are — institutions, I believe. I wish we could do something; but you know the state of things. Of course, a rather larger cheque — say double the quarter's salary; but I'm afraid that's all I can pretend to do.'

However, Miss Hurst had found it possible to save, though what the fact signified was known only to herself. To-night she made up her account with life, and it stood thus. At eight-and-twenty she had owned a sum of nearly thirty pounds, which ever since had remained intact. For the thirty years that followed her average earnings had been twenty-nine pounds per annum, and out of this she had put aside what amounted to fifteen pounds a year — sometimes more, sometimes less. Very seldom, indeed, had she suffered from ill-health; only once had she spent six months unemployed. Accumulation of petty interest — the Bank and Government security were all she had ever dared to confide in by this time made a sensible increment. With tremulous calculation she grasped the joyous certainty that a life of independence was assured to her. It must be by purchase of an annuity. She had never consulted any one on her financial affairs: common sense, and a strictly reticent habit, had guided her safely thus far. For the last and all-important pecuniary transaction she felt thoroughly prepared, so long had she reflected upon it, and with such sedulous exactitude.

Beauty was never hers, nor much natural grace: nowadays she looked a very homely, but a very nice old lady, with something of austerity in her countenance which imposed respect. She spoke with a gentle firmness, smiling only when there was occasion for it. In education she knew herself much behind the teachers of to-day; her mental powers were not more than ordinary; but Nature had given her that spirit of refinement which is not otherwise to be acquired. Generally able to win the regard of well-conditioned children, she had always been looked upon as an excellent disciplinarian, which accounted in large measure for her professional success.

Her success Never had she received the wages of a middling cook; yet the importance of her trust through life was such as cannot be exaggerated, and the duties laid upon her had been discharged with a competence, a conscientiousness, which no money could repay. Her success! At the age of fifty-eight she tremblingly calculated her hope of being able to live out the rest of her life with not less than twenty shillings a week.

And the life history which explained this great achievement. Miss Hurst could not have written it; she possessed neither the faculty nor the self-esteem needful for such a work; but assuredly it deserved to be written. Reflect upon the simple assertion that, from her twenty-eighth to her fifty-eighth year this woman had never unavoidably spent one shilling-piece. She, with the instincts and desires of the educated class, had never allowed herself one single indulgence which cost more than a copper or so. Ah! the story of those holiday times which she was obliged to spend at her own cost, of the brief seasons when she was out of employment! Being a woman she,

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of course, found it easier to practise this excessive parsimony than any man would have done; yet she was not, like so many women, naturally penurious. She longed for the delight of travel, she often hungered for books which a very slight outlay would have procured her, she reproached herself for limiting her charity to a mite at church collections. Mean lodgings were horrible to her, yet again and again she had occupied all but the meanest. And all this out of sheer dread of some day finding herself destitute, helpless, at the mercy of a world which never spares its brutality to those who perforce require its compassion. What a life! Yet it had not embittered her; her gentle courage, sustained by old-fashioned piety, had never failed. And now she saw herself justified of her faith in Providence.

Having regard to her sound constitution, she might live another twenty years. Her capital, merely put out to interest, would not afford sustenance. But the purchase of an annuity might assure at once her bodily comfort and her self-respect. Carefully had she studied the tables, the comparative advantages offered by many companies. The fact that a hundred pounds will yield a woman less than a man had often troubled her; she understood the reason, but could not quite reconcile herself to the result. As a man, she would have saved vastly more; as a woman, the longer-lived, she must be content to receive less for her smaller opportunities.

Throughout this last quarter her behaviour differed in no outward respect from that of years past; she worked with the same admirable honesty of purpose, and kept the same countenance of sober cheerfulness. In her heart she was ever so little troubled. At the end of her engagement there would be due to her a payment of seven pounds ten, and the total of her possessions would then fall slightly short of a sum needed to purchase the annuity on which she had fixed her hopes. She desired a clear fifty-two pounds per annum, twenty shillings a week: surely no excessive demand. Yet it seemed as if she must content herself with a smaller income. It might, however, prove possible to earn the extra sum — a mere trifle. Yes, it might be possible; she would hope.

On the last day, when her pupils were preparing to leave home for the seaside, Mrs. Fletcher called her apart, and spoke with confidential sweetness.

'Miss Hurst, need I say how very sorry we all are to part with you? I do so wish that circumstances allowed of my asking you to come back again after the holidays. But — really there is no harm in my telling you that we are obliged to — to make certain changes in our establishment.'

The governess listened with grave sympathy.

'Have you heard of any other engagement?' pursued the lady, with doubtful voice and eyes drooping.

'Not yet, Mrs. Fletcher,' was the cheerful reply 'I should like to find one, if it were only for a short time.'

'I will do my utmost in the way of making inquiries. And — let me give you the cheque, Miss Hurst. My husband begs you will accept from us, as a mark of our great — our very great — esteem, something more than the sum strictly due. I am sure we shall never be out of our debt to you.'

In her own room Miss Hurst eagerly inspected the little slip of paper — it was a cheque for twice her quarter's salary. There was a great leap of her heart, a rush of tears to her eyes. She held the security of independent life. The long fight was over, and she had triumphed.