

George Gissing, "The Sins of the Fathers" (1877)

I.

A broad archway, the gloom of its chill, murky shadow only deepened by the flicker of the shattered gas-lamp that hangs from the centre, its silence only broken by the agonized weeping of a poor girl who strives to still the throbbing of her temples by pressing them against the clammy stones; whilst, little as one would imagine it, but a few paces separate her from the crowd and glare of the wide streets - such a scene is but too common after nightfall in the heart of a great English manufacturing town. As such it did not at first produce a very startling effect upon Leonard Vincent, who, as he was hurrying home by short cuts from a social gathering of fellow-students, was stopped at the mouth of the archway by the sounds of distress that fell upon his ear; but his interest was more vividly awakened as he caught a glimpse of the upturned face faintly illumined by the light which just then a gust of wind blew into a flame. The dark, flashing eyes, the long, black hair all unkempt and streaming over the girl's shoulders, the face, lovely in its outlines, now weird with its look of agony and ghastly pale, made a picture such as he had never looked on, and held him for a moment as immovable as

though he had been gazing upon the head of Medusa. It was but for a moment, however, that he remained irresolute. Stepping quietly up to the sobbing girl, who was too much absorbed in her own grief to notice his presence, Vincent touched her lightly on the shoulder. She instantly turned round to meet his gaze; suppressing with a sudden and violent effort any trace of her emotion save the great tears, which she could not at once check in their course down her cheeks, The cheeks Were pale and somewhat sunken, as if hunger as well as grief had begun to mar her beauty, and, as she looked at the young man's face with a proud, impatient gaze, her tightly-compressed lips trembling despite her efforts, she aroused in him a feeling of the profoundest compassion. For some minutes they stood regarding each other in silence; then, as he saw the girl determined not to speak, Vincent began to address her, though with diffidence.

"May I ask the cause of your grief? Do not think me rude. I ask because I might - it is my wish to help you."

The young man, usually somewhat brusque in his manner of addressing his inferiors in station, was somewhat surprised at the tone he was led to adopt. The position of the girl before him, and the plain, much-worn character of her dress, showed that she belonged to the lower class; yet he almost quailed before her look, and felt unconsciously that in nature she was not beneath him.

The object of his compassion stood for a moment as if undecided; then, the proud expression on her face still unaltered, replied briefly and in a low, quick voice:

"I wish to be alone. You are very kind. I do not need help."

Leonard Vincent smiled in spite of his pity.

"You must allow me to doubt that," he said. "Will you not trust me? It is not from mere curiosity that I ask your confidence. I feel sure I can help you, if you will let me."

Again she replied quickly, but the tone was not that of her former speech:

"You are very kind. It is long since I have been spoken to kindly. But I need no help, indeed I need none."

The young man again smiled as he looked in her still unmoved face.

"You are very proud," he said. "It is long since I met any one so proud. I am proud, too. Will you not confide in a kindred spirit?"

It was now her turn to smile, and for a moment her countenance brightened with a look that was like the faint memory of happiness long past. It was enough that there was a sign of relenting. Vincent continued to urge her, and, after a few moments of hesitation, she seemed about to comply with his request.

"Why should I trouble you with a miserable story? You know it all before I begin. And yet, perhaps, you seem as if you had a good home and good parents; I will tell you in

a few words. It will make me cry again; that is good for my pride."

Then she told, briefly and plainly, the story of her young days; of a happy childhood in a little market-town in the south of England, of schooldays, and the joys of loving companions. All was happy till her father, who had been a small farmer, died, and her mother, a beautiful woman, yielded to their rich landlord's entreaties, and married him. She had acted on an impulse of pride, and her punishment was severe. Laura Lindon, her only child, was hated by her step-father, chiefly because she would not give up her old rustic friends. The man, whose nature was coarse and vulgar, abused the poor girl dreadfully, till at length her life became intolerable to her.

"What could I do? I could not kill myself for my poor mother's sake; so I resolved to leave home. I came North, accompanied by a girl of my own age, who had always been my best friend. For a few weeks we just managed to live on what we got for sewing, and then poor Lizzie would not bear the hard life any longer, and - left me. Do not ask me what has become of her; I dare not think. I have seen her once since; God grant I may never see her again. And I myself? You see me; I am alive, and that is all. I can no longer earn enough to live on; I am getting weak, I am afraid. I grew desperate tonight and came out, why and where I did not know. There is my tale. You see you cannot help me. It was kind of you to think of helping me. It is getting late, I am afraid. Good night."

She turned quickly round, wishing to hide the tears that were again coming into her eyes, and in another moment would have been gone; but Vincent, hastening after her, again compelled her to stay.

"But I can help you; Miss Lindon, I must help you."

His first impulse had been to offer her money, but he at once saw how unwelcome such an offer would be, how impossible to make her accept of it. Instead of that he proposed to find her work, to provide her sewing enough to enable her to make a living. The offer was at once thankfully accepted.

"And," said Vincent, as they were parting, "I may see you again, I may come and see you?"

"Thank you," she replied, firmly but modestly, "I had rather you did not. I must work all my time. You are very kind to get me work."

And so they parted.

Leonard Vincent was as good as his promise with regard to finding Laura work, but, after a few weeks, he proved disobedient to her wish that he was not to visit her. In time she grew more cheerful, and more willing to talk freely, though it was long before she lost, when speaking to her friend, the air of reserve which was the result of her natural pride. At last Vincent, obedient to an impulse which had now become too

powerful for restraint, told Laura that he loved her, that he wished to make her his wife. He already knew that she was not indifferent to him, but he little knew of the consuming passion which, kindled at first by gratitude, now burnt fiercely in her heart; of the efforts it had long cost her to choke ardent affection 'neath the guise of cold respect. Laura's emotions were powerful, but her self-command still remained more powerful; and now, whilst she modestly confessed her love, she urgently besought her lover to reflect before he committed what might prove an irreparable error. But Leonard was heedless of consequences. In the warmth of the moment he sought an interview with his father, and desired him to sanction his marriage with Laura, at the same time giving a truthful account of her life and present condition.

Old Mr. Vincent was a retired cotton-spinner. His immense wealth had been accumulated by his life-long devotion to business; and his nature, of course material to begin with, was now rendered more selfish and intolerant by the addition of a vulgar pride. Furious at first when he heard his son's announcement; second thought induced him to rely upon low cunning as a better instrument against his son, who was himself proud, but not ignobly so. He pretended to consent to the match on one condition: that Leonard should first enable himself to support a wife by his own exertions, independent of any hopes he might entertain of settlement from his father.

Laura had awaited the issue of the conference with outward calmness, but, in reality, in suspense that amounted to agony.

"You have asked?" she exclaimed hastily, as her lover came to see her immediately after receiving his answer.

"All is well, dearest," he replied. "But we are both too young as yet. Let us be faithful to each other. Till our marriage you will live at my home and my parents will care for you. I am going to spend a year abroad."

Laura strove bravely with her emotions and tried to appear glad. In another week she was living under Mr. Vincent's roof, and Leonard had sailed for America.

II.

TWO YEARS have passed, and we meet with Leonard Vincent, this time not in the Old, but in New, England. The school-year is just at an end, the summer vacation is about to commence, and to-day all the scholars are assembled to show by an exhibition the results of their own work and that of their teachers, of whom our friend is one. The members of the graduating-class are here in all their glory; the boys, as is usual with boys on such occasions, well-dressed but awkward; the girls resplendent in the

combined charms of nature and of art - a perfect bouquet of rich buds just breaking into the full blow of womanhood. Let us notice Minnie Warren, the young lady whose place is at the head of this class. She is not tall, but her figure is perfect in symmetry; Minnie is grace itself, from the little slipper with the blue bow which now and then peeps from beneath the muslin, to the simple but jaunty coil of rich brown hair that sits on the back of her head. The face, usually wreathed in the most attractive smiles, but now demure-looking from a sense of being regarded by the whole assembly, is not handsome, but is incontestably pretty. Her cheeks, perhaps a trifle redder than on ordinary occasions, are soft and smooth as the petals of a flower, and her lips - description fails. On Minnie all eyes are fixed, and, among them, those of her teacher, Leonard Vincent; but does not the gleam of joy in the eyes of the latter indicate more than the justifiable pride of one who had helped to make Minnie's mind rich in learning and worthily corresponding to a face so rich in beauty? What has time brought about in the two years that have passed? Leonard Vincent never forgot his promise to Laura, but for many weeks wrote regular and loving letters, to which his betrothed replied in lines that showed the sincerity of her love and the nobility of her nature. Then all at once, she ceased to write, and the cause was explained by a letter which Leonard shortly after received from his father, wherein it was stated, with much attempt at sympathy and

overstrained expressions of regret, that Laura had been taken sick of fever suddenly, and very shortly after had died. Must it be confessed that Leonard experienced no keen sorrow at this sudden news? He was shocked; but he did not experience a lover's grief. His nature would never have allowed him to prove false to Laura as long as he knew her living in the constant hope of becoming his wife; but absence and reflection had so far altered his feelings as to enable him to bear her loss with equanimity. The truth was that from the first his love had contained far more of mere compassion and self-complacency than he could imagine or would have been willing to admit. Very soon after leaving England he had confessed to himself the wish that Laura had been intellectually more of a companion for him. His soul was not great enough to be contented with simple devotion in the woman who was to be his wife, and his imperfect sympathies required more points of contact. Thus it was that very soon after receiving the letter which told him of Laura's death he had consciously proceeded to foster a new attachment, the seeds of which had already been sown. Without being handsome, or in any sense a lady-killer, Vincent had yet, for those who knew him well, a decidedly pleasing appearance, which joined to a lively and agreeable manner, considerable powers, and the polish of culture, made him decidedly pleasing and attractive. His cheerful equability of temper had speedily resigned him to the lot his father imposed

upon him, and he had very soon become a decided favorite with the pupils, especially the young ladies.

The exhibition was considered a great success. The singing, the declamations, the recitations, were voted delightful by the assembly of parents and friends. At last all was over, the people were dispersing, and Vincent was engaged in making a few last arrangements in his own room, when there came a knock at his door, and, without waiting for an invitation, Miss Warren walked in.

"Well, Mr. Vincent are you satisfied now?"

"Decidedly, Miss Warren; and above all with you. You were charming."

Minnie appeared to take no notice of the compliment, but went on in her usual voluble manner.

"Oh, Mr. Vincent, did you notice Grace Wilson, how she spoke her piece? It was just elegant!"

"No doubt; but there was some one else who spoke a piece; and she was more than 'just elegant.'"

Minnie shook her head with a pretty air of mock impatience.

"How provoking you are! I really don't wish for any compliments, s- --; no; I was just going to call you 'sir,' but I'm not a schoolgirl now, and I shan't call you 'sir' any

longer."

"Very well, Miss Warren; then in revenge I shall deprive you of your title, and henceforth call you 'Minnie.'"

Minnie reddened slightly, and turned round to look out of the window. But directly afterwards she turned to face Vincent again.

"Shall you be here again next term, Mr. Vincent?"

"I am very uncertain. It depends greatly upon circumstances."

Minnie laughed merrily, and laid her hand upon the door as if about to leave the room.

"That is one of your provokingly indefinite philosophical phrases. I suppose time will show. But, really, all the people have left. I must be quick and get home. Good-by."

She opened the door and pretended that she was off in a great hurry. Leonard appeared for a moment undecided; then he took a step towards her.

"Minnie!"

She stopped, and, turning around with an assumed air of indifference, asked:

"Did you speak, sir?"

"So you are going off without wishing me a happy vacation? I am surprised at you, Miss Warren."

"I thought you were not going to call me 'Miss' any longer," she replied, with a merchant air.

"Oh, I forgot. Have you nothing to say but a cold 'good-by,' Minnie, now that we are seeing each other for the last time?"

Minnie exhibited a scarcely-perceptible start at this announcement.

"Oh, I am not going away," she replied, perhaps a trifle more earnestly than the occasion seemed to warrant. "I shall be at home when school begins again."

"But I think it very likely that I shall not. I think I shall go to England for good. I have been here long enough."

"So you are tired of us Americans already? Ah, well, we are stupid people, I suppose. Good-by, then."

She held out her delicate white hand, and it trembled just a little. Leonard took it, raised it to his lips, and then gently let it go. Minnie laughed her ordinary gay laugh.

"Is that how Englishmen say good-by? What a knightly lot of people you must be!"

"No," replied Leonard, earnestly, drawing nearer to Minnie, "that is not how we say good-by. We only do that when we mean that we are never going to say good-by."

"Oh, indeed! Then I must leave you, I suppose, without exchanging the usual civilities!"

She turned and moved very slowly towards the door. Vincent reached her side with a single step, and took her hand in his own. She turned around, and the blossoms in her cheeks deepened in color as she looked in his face, unable to say anything.

"Minnie," said Leonard, in a low, earnest tone, "you understand me, though you pretend not to. May I always keep this hand?"

She looked down at the ground, a most unusual thing with her, and replied somewhat indistinctly:

"Really, that would be asking me to stand here too long."

"It is a very pretty hand. May I kiss it again?"

Minnie gave no reply. He took the silence for consent.

"Those are very pretty lips, Minnie. May I kiss them?"

The question was asked in a tone little above a whisper. The reply was not in words, but the look that was in her hazel eyes as she raised her face to his told him that Minnie Warren, with all her beauty and roguishness, was his own.

And so he did not leave America. He wrote to his father telling him that he had won a wife who belonged to a family that the old cotton-spinner had no reason to be ashamed of as his relations; in reply, his father opened, if not his heart, at all events his pocket-book, to his no longer wayward son. Mr. Vincent, for reasons of his own, had no

particular wish that Leonard should return to England, and experienced no great sorrow when he was told that his son desired, for some time at least, to continue to reside in America.

III.

And Laura Lindon? Was she really dead, as Leonard had heard from his father? No; it was but a cruel scheme invented by the purse-proud old man to frustrate a marriage in which he could see nothing but disgrace to himself and to his son. At the same time that he had written to Leonard to tell him that Laura was dead he had been to a man skilled in such matters and got him to forge a letter from Leonard, which said that he had for some time felt how unfitted he and Laura were for each other, owing to the latter's lack of education; that he had hitherto been silent on the matter, endeavoring to overcome his doubts; but that he at last felt it to be his duty to free Laura from her engagement, and hoped that she would ere long find a husband better suited to her. At the same time he stated that he had left his former residence, and thought it better that she should not know his present address. The forgery was so skillful, the awkward appearance of the letter so exactly like those she had hitherto

received, that the poor girl never for a moment suspected any deception, all the less because Mr. Vincent, with a cunning foresight, had always behaved to her with the utmost apparent kindness, and had openly professed himself anxious for the union of the two lovers as soon as Leonard should have attained his majority. The result was exactly what he had foreseen. Laura, after passing some days in an agony of grief, had suddenly asked Mr. Vincent if he would provide her with sufficient money to pay her passage to America, and, upon his refusal, had disappeared from the house during the night, and never been heard of since. The old man, confident of the perfect success of his stratagem, rubbed his hands in satisfaction, and turned his attention to other matters. Meanwhile all was peace and comfort in the little home in New England over which Minnie Warren, now Mrs. Vincent, presided with all her natty ways. Minnie, herself scrupulously neat and careful of her appearance, was resolved that everything and everybody about her should be no less irreproachable, and he would indeed have been a happy man whose wife was a better housekeeper. Leonard passed his days in elegant leisure, his easy nature flattered to the extreme by the affectionate attentions of his excellent little wife. It is true that he did occasionally revert in thought to his old home, and to the memory of her whom he had once fancied so dear to him; but his easy-going philosophy was at no loss to provide consolation for irremediable events; and it is

probable that, in such moments of reflection, his train of thought resulted in conclusions not so very far removed from those which his father had made use of to disappoint poor Laura's hopes.

It was an afternoon in January. New England weather had of late been doing its best to maintain its reputation for variability, and, whilst the streets were still wet with the recent rain, the still heavy sky, which was striving to stint the daylight of a few hours of existence, gave unmistakable warning of a coming snowstorm. Mrs. Vincent, who abhorred gloom of every kind, took the opportunity to pull down the blinds and light up the chandelier at an unusually early hour.

"Now, Leonard," said the charming little woman, as she sat down on a low stool at her husband's feet and crossed her hands over his knees, "do, pray, put aside that book and let me have a little of your society."

Leonard had been somewhat silent all day, an unusual thing for him, and had buried himself since morning in the depths of some metaphysical novel. Doubtless, as Mrs. Vincent had suggested, the weather had something to do with it. He now threw aside his book, stretched himself, and yawned somewhat drearily.

"Well, Mm," he replied, "to tell you the truth, I feel rather out of sorts."

Then, as if a sudden thought had struck him, he stood up and took up the

newspaper that lay on the floor beside him. Turning to the advertisements of amusements he read half aloud:

"Globe Theatre: Last night of 'The Wild Man of the Prairie,' - bosh! Variety Theatre: 'Jem Thompson's Marvelous Impersonations; Miss Williams with her favorite song - pshaw! Theatre Comique: Opera-Bouffe, - ah, that's better. 'La Fille de Madame Angot.' What do you say, Minnie! Let us have an evening at the theatre."

Minnie, who had a New England girl's delight in the theatre, put on a demure look, but didn't seem unfavorable.

"Well, Leonard, it certainly is some time since we have been, and---"

"Very well, then," broke in her husband. "Let's get supper over. I'll just go order a hack."

In due time arrangements were completed, the hack arrived, and before very long the pair were comfortably seated directly in front of the stage, wishing for the curtain to rise. In the meantime Minnie became the unconscious focus of many opera-glasses, as was usually the case when she appeared in public. Leonard had gradually been regaining his even flow of spirits, and by the time that the orchestra commenced with the well-known delightful airs he was quite ready to enjoy to its full the peculiar pleasure of the entertainment. All went splendidly. The prima donna was a noted "star,"

and entranced the house with her singing. Minnie was totally absorbed in the performance, when she suddenly felt her husband start. At the same time she noticed a disturbance on the stage. What was the matter? Oh, it was nothing, said the people next to her; only one of the chorus who had fainted. Look, they were carrying her off the stage. Minnie looked at Leonard and saw a pale, anxious look on his face that she had never before seen there. Thinking nothing of the slight confusion before her, she laid her hand on her husband's arm:

"What is the matter with you, Leonard?" she whispered. "Don't you feel well?"

"Nothing, nothing," he replied, hastily. "It was only for the moment. And yet, - would you mind if we left the theatre?"

"Let us go at once. Give me my shawl." They rose from their places and left the theatre, the performance going on as if nothing had happened to disturb it. When they were outside Vincent seemed to alter his mind. "Minnie," he said, his voice trembling slightly, "would you mind going home alone? It was foolish to disturb your enjoyment. I feel all right now; but it is hardly worth while going back, and I think I will take the opportunity of going to see a friend in town whom I have often promised to call on." At first she remonstrated, but at length, as Leonard began to show signs of irritation, she pressed him no further, and left him to return home. Hitherto the threatened

snow-storm had held back, but now white specks began to dot the air, falling steadily.

Leonard showed no intention of going to visit his friend, but paced hurriedly up and down in front of the theatre, repeatedly looking at his watch. Old memories were at work within his mind, and his knit brows and anxious look indicated the working of some strong emotion. At length 10 o'clock struck, and the people began to swarm out of the theatre. Hastily walking down a narrow, gloomy street that led alongside of the house, he stopped before the stage-door, as if awaiting some one. Shortly the door opened, and, one after another, muffled forms appeared. He peered into their faces as they passed, but seemed to recognize none, till at length a tall female figure came down the steps, and, after hesitating a moment, walked down the dark street. Leonard could not see the face, but the walk of the figure he could not mistake. With light, quick steps on the new-fallen snow he followed her, and, when they had come to a spot slightly illuminated by a street-lamp, he stepped up quite close to her and touched her. She turned round hurriedly, gazed eagerly in his face, and then threw her arms around his neck and sobbed convulsively.

"I saw you, - I knew you at once! It was wrong, - it was unkind of you! But now I have found you again, I can forgive everything."

Her incoherent sentences were spoken as quickly as her sobs would permit, and

till she had ceased Leonard could not speak a word. Then he gently removed her arms from his neck, and as she gazed eagerly at him she saw his face was ghastly pale. He spoke slowly and as if with difficulty.

"Laura, you must not think of me. We must not see each other again. She you saw with me was my wife."

He paused. The light of half reproach, half joy that had shone from her eyes was suddenly changed into a wild glare of madness. She strove to speak but could not. Leonard, terrified at her look, went on in humbling tones.

"Listen to me, Laura. It is not my fault. They told me you were - dead."

She caught both his hands lightly in her own, and whispered rather than spoke.

"It does not matter. It does not matter. They were right, - I was dead!"

Then with a powerful effort she seemed to gain command over herself and spoke calmly, but reproachfully, "And you would leave me at once, - without talking over old times With me? I have so much to tell you. Come; at least you will come to my house and sit one hour with me and talk."

He could not resist her voice, but he answered nothing. She turned quickly round and led the way, he following her with difficulty. The snow was now descending heavily and the storm-wind began to whistle through the narrow streets and heap up the white

drifts against the houses. Leonard knew not the direction in which they were going; the snow and sleet in his face scarcely allowed him to keep in sight of the tall, dark figure that seemed almost to fly before him. Now and then she turned round to see that he still followed her, and each time beckoned to him to go faster. They had been walking thus for some time when Leonard raised his eyes to see where they were going. They had got out of the regular streets and he could only see a few houses around him. The storm was raging fearfully and the snow was already so deep as to render walking difficult. He stopped and called to her.

"Laura I cannot go further; where do you live?"

She did not turn round to him, only beckoned with her hand, and cried, "Only a little further."

Leonard could not see at all where he was. In the utmost perplexity he still followed. Finally they came to the top of a short flight of steps, below which he could discern a long, level, white track. They both stopped at the same moment. Leonard strained his eyes through the storm and the dark, and then suddenly drew back.

"Laura! where are you going? Oh, God; it is the river!"

She answered with a wild shriek of laughter, clasped him fiercely round the neck, and dragged him down the steps. In vain he tried to struggle, for she was nerved with

the strength of frenzy. There was a plunge, a cracking as the thin layer of ice gave way, a splashing of the water on the lowest step, and then all was still. The thick snow soon made the river once more a smooth white surface, and the hidden depths bore witness to the edict that the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children.

THE END.