

## *Unhappy Endings*

# GEORGE GISSING

(1857—1903)

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Miss Clara Collet, Senior Investigator  
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2 December 1903

My dear Clara,

You need suffer no concern at my abandoning our usual formal address and reverting to that brief time when we were as close as man and woman can be. There is no danger of my offending Gabrielle in this final message to you. In fact, there is no danger of her ever reading this and withdrawing from the friendship you have so generously and wisely constructed with her. Wells remains at my bedside. When Gabrielle comes into the room with medicines and broths, H. G. conceals these pages on his person until she is out of the room again. He assures me that when he leaves me for the last time, he will effect delivery of this letter directly into your hands.

After you have read it, you may burn it, if you like, as you insisted on destroying all letters we exchanged before I met Gabrielle. You quite rightly assumed she is not so large-minded as you are about previous relationships (indeed what woman or man is?) I still remember your firm statement, so typical of you. "I have been your friend ever since I first read your books. I remained your friend during the weeks when we were more than friends, and, now that you have cast your lot with Gabrielle, I intend to remain your friend and hers, for life. That is why we must destroy our letters from the period before you met her."

You became, in a sense, my first friend (aside from my only friend from schoolboy days, Morley Roberts). First you were the friend of my work, lecturing at the Ethical Society on my first five—ignored—novels. When I was told about your lecture, then saw it printed in the Ethical Society's Newsletter, I wanted to call on you. But I held back, fearful, as always, that if you learned too much about me, you would be repelled. I underestimated you, and, by the time you had sought me out and insisted that we meet, I

had already made my second disastrous marriage—to Edith. If only I had acted on my initial desire to—no, no time for wallowing in regret—

Even now, with our daily lives separated by the channel, your friendship is the rock I cling to. That is why I accepted your offer to watch over my two boys after my death, naming you as legal co-guardian with my brother. That is why my last words—my confession, my apology, my prayer of gratitude—belong to you. I trust your judgment regarding which of these last words to pass on to my sons, when they are old enough to understand.

What Morley and H. G. warned me about has come to pass. I have finally driven myself beyond endurance. Why? Anxious overwork is the disease of my class, which clings to the edges of the upper-middle-class gentry, forever in terror of falling into penury. And yet, the poor house (which I could see from my garret window when I lived in London) was never really a threat after my fifth novel, and surely not after my twenty-fifth—not to mention my hundreds of essays and stories. Why did I continue to drive myself so hard that my efforts even affected my style? Long before Wells and I met, he wrote in a review that “the genre of Gissing’s books is one of nervous exhaustion.” Morley says I work like a ship at full sail, heading straight into a storm, buffeted by gale-force winds, always in danger of being swamped and sunk.

Surely I embodied that image by heading off on a hike in the Pyrennees in chilling wind, precipitating this pneumonia. Gabrielle had pleaded with me not to go, had wept, calling the trek suicide for a man with lung disease. She was right, yet mistaken in one detail: I committed suicide long ago, when I was hardly more than a boy.

The local priest calls several times a day, hoping, no doubt, for a deathbed conversion. I will cheat him of his aim, but I will not cheat death this time. I will not finish my new historical novel—my twenty-seventh book, if memory serves. I will die at the age of forty-seven, not in the work-house as I feared, but coughing up blood in this sweaty bed. And my way of meeting this final verdict is totally in character—I force myself to write to you for as long as I can hold my pen.

The priest says that dying men have an irresistible urge toward truth telling. I thought that I had already told the truth in my novels, more truth than most readers care to have forced upon them. I failed even in that aim. To believe that I knew the deepest truths constituted both the height of arrogance and the depths of lying in its worst form—self-delusion. You, my dear Clara, always recognized and respected the actual truths I had reached, while pointing out the lies I told myself. So you must be my confessor, my priest, my perfect mate, the New Woman I never quite created, even in the best of my books—the free, educated, rational, sexual being of which you stand as perfect model.

I remember your once saying—in the only moment of depression you ever revealed to me—that you wished people could like you better. With all good will, you were honest and truthful with them. You gave advice to people who admitted your advice was good. Yet their reaction was impatience. Why? The answer is simple, my dear Clara. You are nearly always right, unbearably right.

With one exception. You no doubt remember the last time we met in London, how I shouted that you were wrong, wrong, wrong! to praise our “patriotic English army fighting in the Boer War.” I issued my (usual, says Wells) diatribe against militarism and imperialism in all its forms. You (and Wells) are wrong to continue to hope that the fruits

of industrial invention will gradually benefit the common people. No. The fruits of mechanized industry will be mechanized weapons, bringing factory-efficient mass destruction. You smiled at my dream of sending my little Walter to an obscure corner of the world where there are no governments, no armies, only unspoiled land on which he might grow enough to eat. But I stand by my conviction, despite all this talk of “progress.” Disavow our military. Dissolve our empire. Save my boys from cutting someone’s throat or having theirs cut!

But my feverish mind wanders in circles.

Yours does not. You are consistent. You follow a straight path from knowing what is right to doing—what is possible. Others, like myself, glimpse the truth but, shocked and stunned by it, veer off the straight, if long, path to it, careening from one conflicted zone to another, lost. We create obstructions to defeat our own best interests, while you remain kind and patient, still offering advice, still trying to help us to straighten our crooked wanderings and detours.

We do not reward your kindly honesty with the same. We even withhold frank exposure of what we know. Yes, even I have withheld some facts, some details from you, who, of all people, deserve to know the truth.

Time is short. Yet I waste words—as if I were still being paid by the word, by some greedy publisher. I delay telling the sordid details of the central, decisive incident of my life. I have referred to this incident obliquely, but have never openly revealed to you the secret disgrace that has defined my life. Morley Roberts knows the details because he was at school with me. He also knows better than to mention these details.

Like you, I was born to a lower middle-class family. My father, who had some education, became a chemist, one of the lower rungs of the rigid English ladder of class by which a few climb above the abyss of poverty. My parents, like yours, hoped their children might step up to the next rung by means of education. There were even a few books in our house. I kept one of them, a book of satirical prints by Hogarth that I pored over as a child. I was captured by the bitter humor of the precisely detailed scenes, especially of the pompous upper classes, though he spared no one at any level of society. Hogarth astonishes us because he invented or imagined nothing—he copied reality in all its absurd horror. Have I followed his example? I never dared go quite so far. People may find amusement in graphic, exaggerated images of their stupid cruelties, but they will not tolerate clear description of them in cold words. The artist is granted some leeway—the novelist, none.

Once, as a child, while poring over Hogarth, I mentioned another book that I had heard of at school. My father flushed, then grew pale. He knew this book. He murmured his apology that he could not afford to buy it for me. His shame was horrible. He had been forced to break the great taboo of homes like ours—never to mention money, never to acknowledge its power over our souls. If I believed in an afterlife, I would imagine my father’s horrified spirit weeping as I published novel after novel in which the god of money rules, abjectly worshipped by acolytes who deny its rule.

It was the great hope of my father’s life that I escape the shame of genteel poverty. He, my mother, my brother Algernon, and my two sisters made every sacrifice to further my education. They took pride in my being always at the head of my class, always winning the highest scores in London exams, even in countrywide exams. I took childish pride in fulfilling their dreams while wallowing in my beloved classical studies.

Suddenly my father died. I was thirteen, and instantly we were truly poor, my hopes crushed—but not quite. Some of my father’s Quaker friends on the Town Council collected money to pay my tuition at a nearby boarding school, where I topped all scores on the Junior Oxford exam; at fifteen, I won three years free tuition at Owens College, Manchester.

Unlike the other boys at Owens, I had no contacts arranged by their influential families, and almost no money. I was sent to live in a cheap boarding house in Manchester. I studied like a madman, taking prize after prize. Then, too agitated to sleep, desperately lonely, I wandered the poor, working class streets. I was outraged and terrified by what I saw. Thus I spent the three years of explosion into manhood—the age at which Thomas Hardy’s poor “Jude”—who yearned to go to school but could not—succumbed to the seductions of “Arabella.”

Hardy’s fictional “Arabella” was vital, coarse, overpowering; my Nell—no fictional creation, but living and breathing—was beautiful and soft and weak. We were the same age, eighteen. I was a poor schoolboy aspiring to London University. She was an illiterate orphan standing on a corner under the lamplight, taking her first, tentative step toward selling her body for bare sustenance. We two seemed to embody the results of all the injustice of England in a cruel and indifferent world.

I devised what seemed a brilliant plan to save her. With every bit of money I could scrape up, I bought Nell a sewing machine, with which, I had been told, a poor girl could earn a modest living. For a while, it stood in the corner of her tiny room, ignored. Then it disappeared, sold for cash. And Nell needed more money. And more. Desperate in my determination to rescue her, I began to take small sums from the pockets of students’ coats in the cloakroom. Sometimes I picked up someone’s pen or knife to sell for a shilling or two. I told myself I was merely fighting the injustice of the world. There was no question in my mind that I personally must undertake to redress that injustice. Perhaps I had what one of those new Viennese “mind doctors” will name a Hamlet Complex: “The time is out of joint/Oh cursed spite/that ever I was born to set it right!”

I? Set it right? Rather, I was like a boy who cannot swim jumping into the ocean after a drowning woman. I continued to steal bits of money from my fellow students, even when I came, finally, to understand that Nell’s brightness of eye, her flushed cheeks, the slurring of her low-class accent told me she spent the money on drink.

Suddenly, I was caught. A trap set by school authorities and the police had snared me. I was stripped of all my academic prizes, dismissed from Owens College, dragged into court, judged, and condemned to one month of hard labor.

There you have it, the stupid disgrace that cut me off from further education, from the students (except for good old Morley) and faculty who knew me, from all contacts for advancement, from the future of brilliant scholarship my family and my teachers had predicted for me. Indeed, it was a life sentence of exile for the theft of a few pounds.

Irony piles upon irony. Petty theft is rampant in both day schools and boarding schools. A boyish prank for which intelligent students are seldom, if ever, caught, a game which soon pales, and ends. I think my fellow students reported the thefts, and the police were called, only because everyone believed it was one of the servants who pilfered from their pockets. If they had realized it was a fellow student of their own class (supposedly—virtually—potentially), they might not have reported the thefts to the

authorities. At worst, they would have quietly set the trap for me themselves and punished me with a good beating and a period of silent disgrace.

But, of course, my stealing from them was not a prank. My motive was a lofty attempt to right ancient wrongs. It was both selfless and egotistical, self-sacrificial and pretentious, courageous and stupid.

I have thought a good deal about this act that changed the direction of my life. I now see it as a theme, a thread woven through my body and soul. It is a sick, perverted form of the fine thread woven into your character, Clara. You saw the injustice of the world as early as I did. You pursued formal education—more than most women are allowed—and you have dedicated yourself to improving the condition of the poor, the abused, the oppressed—especially women. You teach, you write, you tirelessly assemble facts with which to confront those in power—shaming them, by your quiet persistence, into appointing you to influential government commissions. You go on doing the possible, dedicated to taking the world another step forward, then another, and another.

I—on the contrary—so much that I have done—like that first stupid theft—has been ineffectual, self-destructive. I even took pride in my actions being dominated by my overwhelming passion, as if it were more noble to injure myself by attempting to rescue Nell, who was already beyond rescue at eighteen. What has my life been but a continuation of that early folly? I have driven myself to death by writing without rest, eight hours every day, by musing over antique worlds that no longer exist, if they ever did exist as I imagine them. Result? Upon this “poor player who struts and frets his hour upon the stage” of life, the curtain falls after only forty-seven years.

My kindly and decent fellow students at Owens College did not abandon me without compassion. Regretting the closing of all doors to me in England, they persuaded their fathers to pay my passage to America, the land of new beginnings.

There are only two ways for a twenty-year-old to make this new beginning: either stay in America, or return to England a rich man. I did neither. I found opportunities, and then, as usual, I flung them away. I fled promising possibilities. And there were many offered me, without questions about my background.

Americans were impressed by my English accent and education. I quickly found work as a high school teacher in Massachusetts. I discovered that I enjoyed teaching, and I was an excellent teacher. But after a few months at Waltham High School, I walked out of the classroom at the end of one day and never went back.

I fled to brutal, noisy Chicago, where western cattle drives end, a town surrounded by stockyards whose smell sometimes wafts over the whole city. America at its most ugly and most vital. It was in Chicago that I wrote and sold my first short story, almost without trying, to the editor of a paper where I worked at copying. In that wonderfully direct American way, he read the story in my presence, raised his eyebrows, shrugged, and said, “Why not?” He paid me for it instantly, and printed it, then two or three others, enough to make me believe I might earn a living by this second-rate career, writing stories.

Given hope, I followed the crooked illogic of my character—I fled yet again, this time to make a writing career in New York, where, of course, there was no market for my stories. Americans love the works of English writers like Dickens, Hardy, Brontë—writers whose reputation was first made in England. I had no reputation, only a few scraps of stories in a third-rate Chicago newspaper.

I soon ran out of money, nothing in my pockets but a few misspelled letters from Nell, begging me to come back to England, assuring me that she had taken a cure, that she was sober, that she loved me. I wrote to my brother and obtained money for my passage home. I did not dislike America, but, yes, I was homesick. (Gabrielle, impatient whenever I have gone to Naples or to London without her, complained, “You are always homesick for wherever you are not!”)

I wander. It is the fever.

My time in America was not wasted. It did set me on the path of writing—as a second choice, of course, inferior to the life of a scholar of antique culture and language. Dare I draw another comparison to Hogarth, who did not begin his brilliantly satirical engravings until he had failed to make a living as a portrait painter? I wonder if he came to respect his popular engravings, as I—today—now at the end of everything—finally see my work as a novelist as worth something. I have even absorbed my original false hopes into a novel, my latest—my last. My hero, Henry Ryecroft, transcends his (my own) early struggles to achieve his (my) dream of solitary classical studies among the hills and moors of rural England. Finishing the book, I realized that—except for some brief, agitated, confessional passages—it is a lie, based on a mirage, a dream. And the joke is that it has become my best-selling book. Its success only proves that my fondest dreams were no more than the most stupid self-delusions of my philistine countrymen!

Again I digress. I waste words and energy though I have none to spare.

So I left America, returned to England, the home country I hate, except when I am far from it. Ever true to my self-deluding martyrdom, I married Nell. Despite what she had written about her “cure,” she was drinking more heavily than ever, and had become quarrelsome to the point of delirium. I dared not make friends, never invited anyone to our apartment. If anyone casually stopped to call on me, I locked Nell in her room. I am glad I did not know you during that time, grateful that you never set eyes on poor Nell.

After two years, I fled again, sending Nell money every week. It took five years more, until 1888, for her to die—in a miserable hovel, half-starved, nearly all her clothes pawned, all of her allowance from me spent on drink.

Freed of my obligation to her, I could afford to make my first trip to Italy and Greece, the happiest few months I had ever known. I did not see the hoards of starving Greeks and Neapolitans swarming over the ruins of great civilizations. I did not hear the beggars moaning their dream of escape to America. I saw the Parthenon and the Roman forum in all their classical glory. I heard in my mind the words of Socrates and Marcus Aurelius under blue skies and glorious sunshine.

When I returned to London, I finished *The Nether World*, my sixth and last novel about the oppressed working classes. Then I abruptly stopped attending socialist workingman’s meetings, which had become intolerable to me. After close, prolonged contact with the poor, I could no longer embrace a romantic, or even a very sympathetic, view of the lower classes. They are not Hardy’s gentle, oppressed “Jude,” longing for education, nor even his “Tess,” innocent victim of the aristocracy. Oppressed they are, indeed, but they are not noble. Poverty (as Milvain, one of my most cynical, calculating characters says) is not ennobling. With rare exceptions, the poor are generally crude,

coarse, and comfortable in their dirt and ignorance. Give them more money, and most will spend it on drink and gaming, not on soap and proper food for their children. Give them education, and you broaden their choice of comic newspapers and vulgar shows.

Even worse than their crude inertia is their fanatical animosity toward the exceptions, toward any man or woman of their class who desires the most simple of higher things: a Handel suite or a Shakespeare play enjoyed from standing room at the back of the hall; a clean collar despite London soot and fog; a blessed seat in the Valley of the Shadow of Books—the reading room at the British Museum. A boy in charity grammar school will most likely be regularly beaten by a mob of determinedly illiterate fellow students for committing only one of these sins against their invincible ignorance.

It is that boy, that individual trying to rise above the mob, whom I care for. It is that individual who may take grotesquely wrong turnings, commit stupid cruelties, in his yearning for something better than the brute comfort of the herd. That boy's greatest enemy may be his own kin and class. His longings, his strivings, his inevitable defeat in this world—these engage my sympathy. (Yes, you will say, all the more reason to change this world. Again we differ. You can believe such change is possible. I cannot.)

A far better and more successful writer than I shares my point of view. Thomas Hardy made a great success as a novelist, and his most recent, *Jude the Obscure* details the total destruction of the poor young man of talent. Hardy is a great writer, but that is not the secret of his success, which he freely confessed to me when I was a guest at his house in Dorchester.

He started writing novels as I did—as a second choice. His first love, poetry, paid nothing, so he wrote a novel about a poor but superior man rejected and humiliated by the family of the rich girl he loved. No publisher would buy it. An editor, George Meredith (by coincidence also my editor) gave him the same advice he gave me twenty years later. To sum up: “You are writing for people with some literacy and some leisure. They do not want to read about victims of the industrial Hades that England has become. They want to be entertained with love stories, adventures, mysteries, pretty scenery, gentle humor, mistaken identity, and, always, a happy ending for a pair of virtuous lovers.”

In his next novel, Hardy piled up generous amounts of all the above. He had to pay to have the book printed, but it was reviewed—ridiculed, that is—except for its “vivid” rural setting, made up from his grandparents' stories of Dorset County.

So he wrote another, full of rural harvests and sheep sheering and bright sunsets and clean air. Then another with the same setting, a sweeter love story, and an even happier ending. He received an offer to have his novels serialized in a monthly magazine, an extra income that tends to make the writer string the story out longer and longer. Of course, the magazine censored everything down to what was “suitable for a sixteen-year-old virgin,” but the indecent—that is, true—parts could be restored when the story was printed as a book.

Now having mastered the technique of giving of giving readers what they wanted, he poured it all into his fifth novel, *Far From the Madding Crowd*. As you know, the book sold many thousands here, then captured the American market. Hardy became famous, saleable, rich—and free to write tragedies like “Tess” and “Jude.” He also became very bitter about accusations of obscenity and some actual public burnings of these later, his best, books. He has vowed never to write another novel. He can keep that vow. He can afford to go back to his true love, poetry.

I tried to follow George Meredith's advice, but failed. My characters stubbornly grew in their own way, always toward disaster, betrayal, disillusionment—as most of us do in life. I had to grind them out just as they were, or they simply died on the page. One magazine was willing to pay me, badly, for a heavily censored version of the least grim of my novels, but I could not agree to this death by a thousand cuts. (Morley and H. G. scoff at what they call my “squeamish pride.” Perhaps they are right.)

It was a miracle that a publisher did take the first six novels, the ones that came to your attention, and that he continues to sell in barely sufficient numbers to go on publishing them. But he buys them outright for such a paltry price that I must go on producing and producing. (Hardy, I believe, is now paid by the new royalties system—but that would be an even greater disaster for me, dependent as it is on large sales.)

I had aspired—like Dickens—to write half a dozen novels showing the conditions that created women like Nell. But the realities I experienced sank the fairy-tale ending demanded by the reading classes. (My attempts to imitate Dickens's sweet, redeemable poor heroines resulted in characters like Thyrza. I had to kill her rather than supply a Prince Charming for her; I was so thoroughly sick of the insipid girl I had created.) Finally, in 1890 I turned away from the masses toward my true subject: the lonely thinker who finds a place neither within society nor among rebels against society.

Why do I go on writing all this? I say I have little energy. Perhaps the opposite is true, and the writing gives me the “nervous” energy to go on, to prolong the few days or the few hours of life I have left.

When I returned from Rome, did I seek out the woman who had lectured so knowingly on my books—you? No. Continuing on my disastrous path, I found Edith. Like Nell, Edith was an uneducated, working class girl. But she was not a prostitute, not a dipsomaniac. She was a respectable girl who insisted on marriage before moving in with me. I plunged into this marriage before I realized her weakness, how her weak and deteriorating brain chronically exploded in mad rages poured over everyone: myself, the two sons she bore me, the servant we could barely afford, who usually left within a week.

But you know this dismal history. You saw it all shortly after we finally met. You accepted my life as it was and offered a few sensible suggestions to make it less unsatisfactory. You tried to see Edith with more sympathy, gently suggesting (with a slight smile, yes, I noticed) that reading Shakespeare to Edith every night, trying to teach her Greek, might only irritate her fragile nerves, especially since she had no interest even in learning to read and write her own native English. You made other good suggestions for my domestic harmony. Nothing you suggested could have solved the problem—that I had made another disastrous marriage, because I could not believe that any woman like you would marry a penniless writer with a criminal record.

Wells and Roberts, of course, both had already advised me that my physical needs, common to most men, are more sensibly satisfied by regular visits to a clean, well-chosen, well-paid professional rather than in marriage to an unsuitable woman. Other men have said and written the same. In my case, they are mistaken. As I once told you, my need is more complicated, a need for a female presence in my home, at my side, not only in my bed for an hour. The delicate line of a female face or hand, the pitch of voice, the movement across a room. It seems I am not altogether manly. I have the urgent sexual



needs of a man, but the yearnings of a woman for constancy, companionship, faithfulness.

You were the only woman with whom I could discuss such delicate questions, and you alone told me that my complex needs did not make me less of a man, but perhaps more of a man, the new man striving to be born in my novels. (Later, of course, you also told me, frankly, how far short I fell of acting the role of the new man. No, no, you were not cruel. You were always kind, always determined that we remain friends.) You embraced my children, even won over Edith. You persisted in supporting all that I was, while remaining my opposite—sane and sensible—helping to save me from utter despair.

I tried to lose myself in my work. I remember trying to describe the death of Reardon in *New Grub Street*, while Edith threw pots at our maid-servant, trying to finish *The Odd Women* as Edith stood over the sobbing infant Walter, screaming that she hated him. I would stop work, feed and change him, hold him, until Edith's fury was spent. Godwin Peak's final scene with Sidwell—his highest (or lowest) moment of truth in *Born in Exile*—came to me when Edith was screaming accusations of my infidelity with a woman conjured up by her disordered mind.

It is absurd! I have spent my life fleeing from one place to another for the sake of my health and my writing—only now to conclude that my best work, these three books out of a total of nearly thirty, were completed during three years of entrapment in that small flat ringing with the cries of a neglected baby and the enraged shrieks of Edith.

All three books, of course, like all my books, are about money, class, and women, blended into a disaster in which the women are not the least of the victims.

*The Odd Women* was completed before you and I met. Yet Wells (who grudgingly finds you admirable, if formidable) has said there is a bit of you in the best parts of Mary Barfoot and Rhoda Nunn. These two dedicate themselves to educating single, literate women for independent middle-class careers, lest they settle into the lower circle of hell preordained for them—spinster governesses. Like you, they offer practical means to liberate women. I believe it was the unfortunate Oscar Wilde who expressed, in one of his witty paradoxes, the mysterious prevalence of fictional prophecy as “life imitating art.”

*Born in Exile* is my favorite, my most passionate exposure of England's rigidity and hypocrisy, its false piety, its obsession with status and money, its abject scheming and crawling. I was pleased that you perceived the irony that the one redeeming trait in Godwin Peak—the self-loathing he suffers as he pursues success—is what destroys him.

Yet, if only one book of the dozen I have written is to last beyond my life, it will surely be *New Grub Street*. That would be the ultimate joke—that I should be remembered for writing a novel about hapless writers of novels.

At least I can say that *New Grub Street* is unique—the only true description of the life of a working writer, not the mythic fantasy of early artistic struggles crowned with fame and fortune, not the lives of Tolstoy or Dickens or Hardy, but the lives of the other ninety-nine percent of us writers, for whom “success” (having one or twenty books published) consists only of prolonging a life spent scribbling on the edge of poverty, enjoying the attention of a few readers, and then dying, to be soon totally forgotten, if not already forgotten, long before they die.

If my old friend Morley reaches my deathbed in time, perhaps he will forgive me for the portrait of himself as Whelpdale, the failed writer who makes a good living

advising and representing aspiring writers. More painful, Morley has said, was recognizing himself as the model for Jasper Milvain, who marries the beautiful widow of the talented Reardon, driven to death by his own high standards. I admit there is some resemblance to Morley in Milvain's cheery avowal that success, fame, and money are not the rewards of talent and work like Reardon's, but of cultivating powerful people, marrying into a rich family, favoring the rising writers in reviews, and so on. Jasper unashamedly admits to following these rules because, as he puts it, to be so nice a fellow as he is—requires money.

But Morley Roberts has little cause to complain. The use I made of his manner and his advice is nothing compared to the way I used myself, slicing and shredding my own character into one hack writer and another. Reardon works with my own nervous, self-centered hysteria. His beautiful, educated, disillusioned, exasperated wife is what I probably would have made of the kind of woman I wanted to marry instead of Nell or Edith. And, of course, I could have become Biffen, the realist, whose unsalable writing keeps him living in the lonely but honorable celibacy I found intolerable, until he quietly swallows poison, as I so often longed to do. Who is Yule but myself?—abusing his low born wife, the patient, kindly soul Edith might have become if my silent contempt for her had not daily abraded her weak nerves. I confess that the temper tantrums of Yule, on my pages, never surpass my own actual furies on some exhausted, shameful days.

And the women! The educated daughters and sisters, obliged to be researchers, editors, copiers, and, yes, often uncredited writers—exploited and used, their unacknowledged labor demanded by fathers and brothers, in the name of familial duty. Women who age relentlessly, day by day, praying in vain for rescue into marriage, since the dowry they earn by their labor is stolen by their own fathers. And if they could marry a literary man like their father or brother? One look at the misery of their mothers might make them prefer death.

*New Grub Street* closes with my only happy ending—happy for only one couple—for Milvain, who knows the manipulative secrets of success, and for Reardon's widow, who has learned to choose the man who has mastered these secrets.

You, my dear Clara, offered me my one chance for a true happy ending. If only I could have perceived its reality and been able to live up to its requirements. I could not. I destroyed the happiness we could have shared. Then you demanded that I destroy the evidence of its existence, its promise, in our letters. So the letters died by immolation. Memory lives a bit longer before it dies with me.

During those brief weeks in 1898—is it only five years ago?—our relations were, on the surface, no different to those of the previous five years, when we often met to discuss my books as we walked along the Thames—the only way a man and woman could meet simply as friends without scandal, especially a man already trapped in a second, disastrous marriage, as I was with Edith.

How could I have missed the earlier signs of your love? Was I indifferent? Are your feelings and opinions so easily overlooked? Hardly. No woman is more straightforward and clear. I think it must be your frank—dare I say, manly—manner. You, Clara, have always disdained the artificial signals other women use to invite advances from a man—like the flutter of eyelids feigning subservience. Your direct, honest ways are disconcerting to most men, as is your blunt, intelligent speech. And so I

missed the depth of feeling behind your words. As you later pointed out, I am not so different from conventional Englishmen as I would like to believe.

Not until you became completely convinced that my third break with Edith was irrevocable did your manner change, completely. Not a “female” change, not a delicate, eye-fluttering invitation. No, a frank taking of my hand in the dark on a deserted bridge as we looked down at the water, a quick squeeze, a chin lifted to plant a kiss on my cheek, so quickly that if anyone had seen it, he could not have been sure it happened.

You murmured directions to your house, instructions to use a side door concealed by a hedge. “If you choose,” you said. “Otherwise, we go on as we are.” Then you left me, walking briskly away.

That invitation was the first surprise in a night of surprises, overturning assumptions I hardly knew I held. I was not surprised at the beauty of your body, hidden under all those hideous, stiff layers respectable women wear. I had suspected that, unlike Nell or Edith, you were sturdy and full-bodied like the only goddesses I worship—those of ancient Greek statuary. Yet, I hardly knew that such thoughts about you had even entered my mind.

What surprised me was learning that your formidable, frank intellect was matched by your formidable, frank passion. Yes, I am ashamed to admit that I held the common prejudice of English males—that intellectual, educated, liberated women are even colder than stupid, conventional, “decent” women are required to be. On the contrary, it never seemed to occur to your sane, healthy mind that physical sex should not be pleasurable, nor that it would not involve awkwardness for both of us. You laughed at our fumbling, as Nell did only now and then, and Edith, never. I was convinced that you must be far more experienced than I or even than Nell was, until the next surprise—evidence that I was the first man with whom you had had physical relations. You even laughed at my surprise, then reminded me, “A credible advocate of free love, divorce, and women’s independence—especially a woman—is well advised to live an irreproachably respectable life.” You sent me away before dawn, promising to write to me.

In that letter and later ones, you proposed other walks by the Thames, dinner meetings with two or three of your women friends, the weekly *At Home* of a woman suffrage leader, where we could talk in a quiet corner, virtually alone. These safe, public meetings were frequent but brief, partly so as not to arouse gossip, partly because we both worked long hours. More often we wrote letters, almost every day, telling each other what we were doing and thinking. Our private hours of love-making were stolen at odd times, arranged at short notice, when one or the other of us saw a safe opening.

Only during our one meeting in the country, a whole blessed week in that deserted herdsman’s cottage (whose ownership you were sworn not to divulge, even to me) did we actually taste living together. Both of us, typically, brought work to do between our walks and meals, our sleeping and waking together. It was a perfect dream of harmony in passion—but it was only a dream.

We discussed our reality endlessly, as if we could talk it away. But we could not. Unless Edith divorced me for desertion (which she would never do, especially if she suspected I had found happiness with someone else) we must wait for her death before we could marry. In the meantime, this was the best we could do, the price we must pay. You said you were willing to pay it rather than making a legal, respectable marriage with a man you cared little for. As for children, you said you already had two boys, my sons.

I said I was willing. I thought I was willing. But a few months after we came together, I was no longer willing to wait in hopes of outliving Edith—an unlikely prospect even then. A part of me found the arrangement intolerable, the part of me that longs for the constant presence of a woman, of that female part of me, the part that makes me whole. The stolen moments we had alone, the social hours “chaperoned” by groups of your sympathetic and trusted friends, our walks on carefully varied routes, only left me more intolerably lonely as soon as they ended. And perhaps—how I hate to admit this—our arrangement was intolerable to the perverse part of me that has always fled from making peace with life, accepting the possible, making the best of what is.

Our final dark walk along the Thames is burned into my brain. I proposed to you that we defy the world, move into a house together, make our own “marriage” and be together forever. After long silence, you said one word—“impossible.” To my shame, I accused you of being a conventional woman after all, and, worst of all, of doubting my sincerity, my ability to keep a vow that is not bound with shackles of law. I cited the defiant “marriage” of a writer we both admired, George Eliot. You answered simply that the Board of Trade would discharge you; I countered that I was earning enough now to support us both. You gave an exasperated sigh that reminded me of my own reaction to Edith’s raving.

For the first time we quarreled, in low voices not to attract attention, but bitterly, passionately. I had never seen you lose your calm, sensible demeanor before. I sank to the depths of male stupidity and issued an ultimatum—my terms or none. You looked at me with impatient but sad contempt, turned, and left me.

I did not follow you as I could have, nor did I write to you the next day, as I should have. With the cowardice of injured pride, I fled to Naples, then to Rome, where I wandered among the grand relics of the ancient empire, but this time saw only the wine-sodden poor and their starving children huddled in the shadows of ruined towers. I fell desperately ill and was given the first official diagnosis of “grave weakness in one lung.” The prognosis given by two specialists in Turin and another in Paris, was that I might have a year to live—perhaps two, given care and rest.

I returned to London, where I found your letter, written and posted the day after our confrontation on the bridge.

I kept this letter when (as you later insisted) we destroyed all our others. Why keep one letter, just this one? Because it personified you, the New Woman, my goddess, and her devastating truth. I thought I had written that equality for women would change the world, but I had not calculated the extent of these changes, nor the price of them. You had measured my ability to pay that price and had found me wanting. As usual, you were infuriatingly right.

Now you shall have the letter back, to do with as you please. I have asked Wells to slip it into the envelope with this letter to you. It so clearly illustrates the difference between you and me. I have always bent all my efforts to escaping from suffering—only to throw myself into more suffering, while you—you regain your lost rationality, infusing your life with deeper, if sadder wisdom and sanity that I glimpse only fleetingly as it pours of its own volition from my pen.

My Dearest George,

For this last time I'll use your Christian name. From now on you are again Mr. Gissing. To you, I am again Miss Collet, your friend, a devoted admirer of your works, and, should it become necessary, guardian of your sons.

Let us forget the harsh words we hissed back and forth on that dark bridge. Silly words of grief and loss dropped into the Thames, drowned, extinct, forgotten.

Those weeks we had—our two lives in rare, equal balance of nurturing love—live on in memory, forbidden by law, convention, and custom of society. This oppression we must continue to work to correct by the only means available to us—your creative writing and my humble bureaucratic writing. The kind of rebellion you demanded cannot work, not for us.

You cited George Eliot as a rebel who continued to do her work in defiance of social isolation and disgrace. I answered that I would lose my position. You thought I meant losing only money—that I doubted that you could support me. I confess that your misunderstanding infuriated me as it might have done when I was sixteen—not thirty-four. Isolation and disgrace could not stop George Eliot from writing her novels. But my work—which also has value—is done within government offices and specialized libraries, researching labor documents; outside, in canvassing homes throughout London, interviewing women of all classes; in presenting my findings to commissions and councils, who then print them in official publications, in popular journals, in Parliamentary records. You know how rarely women are allowed to do this work.

If the slightest rumor of our true relation—let alone my living as your common-law wife—were suspected, I would lose my position, my work, my credibility, my usefulness to those whom my work has served. I would lose entry to any respectable house. Nor could I ever teach again. No publisher would accept my articles.

Imagine my proposing that you give up writing in order to live with me. Impossible—like giving up your very self. To meet clandestinely every week or two, to write letters every day, to hope for another week in an isolated cottage somewhere, to surround ourselves with other people when we meet publicly—and to wait patiently for your legal freedom from Edith—those are great sacrifices for people like you and me, who hate concealment and hypocrisy. More than that neither of us can sacrifice.

I confess that, for a moment during our quarrel, I felt that I lived inside Edith's skin. Quite simply, you were blind to her, this afflicted woman whose mind is a vacuum invaded by rage and delusion. Yet you expected from her what the most traditional husband blindly expects from a strong, healthy wife: that she devote herself to organizing your home around your needs, your eight or nine hours writing, your naps, your suppers out with friends like Mr. Wells. Edith was left to manage the one servant you could afford, a desperately poor, bitter woman forced to leave her own husband and children alone. (What of such women in a new world of women's equality with men?) Edith could not even manage her own child, but neither could you. Nor did you even consider that the unceasing, nerve-jangling, sleep-destroying howling of a new baby was in any way your affair, just as much as it was hers.

Like Edith I surely would have fallen—but at a different tilt—short of your unconscious expectations, the same as those typical of conventional men, especially of brilliant, pampered, first-born sons.

Even if, by some miracle, we had been able to marry, I would still have my work, my research and writing to do. Would we have descended from our separate intellectual

heights to debate whose turn it was to change Walter's nappies or to cook dinner? I cannot repeat too often that the equality of women we both strive for is a more earthshaking change than allowing women to operate typewriters in offices.

These facts need not cut you off from the educated, thinking woman you want. A literate, educated, attractive woman who loves you might rationally decide that the highest profession she could adopt would be as helpmeet to a great writer. Such a woman might be quite willing to brave the disapproval of the world and cultivate fewer but more broad-minded friends, like the talented Mr. Wells and Mr. Morley—and myself, for I can slough off any accusation of contact with an “immoral” woman, so long as my own reputation remains unquestioned. Such a woman would remain with you patiently until Edith dies, when you could marry her, legitimizing any more children you might have.

I hope you find her. And when you do, I will remain her—and  
 Your friend for life,  
 Clara Collet

As if your letter were a magic charm, I found, just under it, in the dozen or so letters awaiting me, a letter from a Mademoiselle Gabrielle Fleurry, introducing herself and expressing interest in translating *New Grub Street* into French. It was like a summons to flee the filthy English winter and seek better weather on the Continent. I took the next boat to Paris, where Gabrielle lived with her mother and her dying father. Our meeting was a further fulfillment of your prophecy: her petite beauty, her simple elegance that seems to be a French birthright, her education, her literary interests.

After her father's death a few weeks later, she visited London, where you so graciously invited her to stay in your house. You were indeed determined to be her friend as well as mine. I followed your advice to lay before Gabrielle all the facts—my wretched marital state, my wretched health—all the facts but one, that you and I had ever been, ever so briefly, more than friends.

Gabrielle, as you had prophesied, agreed to spend her life with me. Her now widowed mother, knowing that we could not marry, set certain conditions: we must make our home with her in France; my legal marriage and the existence of my sons in England must be kept secret; Madame Fleury's friends and neighbors must be told that we had married in England.

I accepted these conditions gladly at the time. I was sick of England, its foul weather, its insular stuffiness. You and Wells and Roberts promised to visit us, and you were really my only friends. I had finally found the perfect mate. What other woman would devote herself to a man who visibly weakened, week by week? What other woman would give so much energy to translating and promoting my work? That I have had four years more of life before the end I now face is due entirely to the devotion of Gabrielle.

And yet, even during these four years, I left her so often that she came to fear I would violate my vow and desert her. The truth is, when I was in England, I hated everything about it, but in France I became more and more English, more and more homesick—for the accent of English newsboys, for the libraries so necessary to my work, even for the English food universally despised by people on the continent, especially Gabrielle's mother, who refused to “pollute the apartment every morning with the stench of frying bacon!” then stopped speaking to me entirely.

Most of all, my dear Clara, I was homesick for you, for the independent, forthright New Woman I admired and welcomed, the New Woman I aspired to create in my books. (I had failed to fully portray her in art, and, when I found her in real life, I wholly failed to live up to her.) Whenever I wandered back to England, I avoided seeing you alone, lest I be tempted to betray Gabrielle. And I knew, of course, that if I ever made such an attempt, I would lose your respect and your friendship forever.

If only I had any strength left, I would attempt my great novel, the novel of a soul split between the New Man and the old, loving the New Woman but

Coughing fit	blood	
Priest gone to get Gabrielle.		
Last words should be serene		serenity beyond me
forgive	be kind to Gabrielle	guard my boys

GG

*Clara Collet kept her promise to remain friends with Gabrielle and to watch over Gissing's sons. Gissing's fear of militarism proved prophetic; his son Walter was killed in World War I. Clara continued writing and serving on government commissions until her death in 1948.*

*George Gissing (1857-1903) wrote more than two dozen novels, many short stories, a travel book, a critical work on Dickens, and innumerable letters. Reading half a dozen of his best novels confirms the opinion of critics who say that he pitied and despised the lower classes, that he pitied and despised women, and that he never portrayed a pair of pure, idealized lovers destined for a happy, fairy tale ending.*

*The pre-movie, pre radio/TV world Gissing described offered more opportunities for writers to earn a bare living, writing books and magazine articles bought outright by publishers at so much per word. With the advent of the royalty system of payment, plus the invention of competing media, the chances for most writers to earn even a meager living declined.*

*Nevertheless, the myth of literary fame and fortune—fed by a precious few best-selling exceptions—persists today. Perhaps that fact explains why New Grub Street is still read, often called a “writer’s book,” ironically amusing to writers who have dropped these illusions, and who recognize all of Gissing’s characters in modern dress. (The “right people” to be cultivated by the cheerfully cynical Jasper Malvain might today be members of the academic/foundation establishment.)*

*George Gissing shows some affinity with a 20<sup>th</sup> century English writer, who also gained little attention or money—but who got lucky on his deathbed and won posthumous fame (another rarely fulfilled myth). Like Gissing, George Orwell, a brilliant scholarship boy in chronic poor health, seems to have driven himself to an early death. Also, like Gissing, Orwell held conflicted views of women, the Left, the poor. He too was deeply pessimistic—perhaps because he lived through the industrialized horrors of warfare that Gissing had prophesied, as well as through betrayals by the Left. An admirer of Gissing, Orwell insisted that “England has produced very few better novelists.” Among George*

*Gissing's virtues, Orwell writes, are that he "never writes for effect . . . it is always clear what he means," and "he is willing to face facts."*

*Gissing's life and career would seem to have been a masochistic disaster, lived at the "end of his tether," so to speak, starting with his first attempt at 18 to "save" Nell, in which he succeeded only in destroying his own prospects. Henry James famously remarked upon briefly meeting Gissing that he appeared "quite particularly marked out for what is called in his and my profession an unhappy ending." Again, Orwell takes a more positive view: "We must be thankful for the piece of youthful folly which turned him aside from a comfortable middle-class career and forced him to become the chronicler of vulgarity, squalor and failure."*

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