

How Gabriel Became Thompson

by H.G. Wells

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After the pact matrimonial there are nine possible events. All post-matrimonial stories belong to one or other of these nine classes indicated by these possibilities; the characters, the accessories, may vary indefinitely, but the tale is always to be classified under one of these heads. For each party to the marriage says one of these three things. First: "It is not as I expected, but it will do very well" (contentment). Secondly: "It is not as I expected, but we must manage" (compromise). Or, lastly: "It is not as I expected, and I will not endure it" (catastrophe). The permutations of these three formulæ taken two at a time are nine, forming the diapason of marriage.

Now the best stories, as stories, are to be made by taking number three in its five possible combinations, and solving your situation by the method of murder or elopement. Number one with itself gives only a nauseating spectacle of married people kissing in company; number two, alone or with one, affords no vivid sensations. Stories on these lines are but sunset pieces at the best. The young people go hither and thither buying furniture, receiving and returning cards, and the like, while the clouds of glory they trailed after them from the romantic time fade by imperceptible degrees. At last they look

round and remark, or do not remark, that the light is out of the sky, and the world blue and cold. The change, indeed, is sometimes so steady and so gradual that I doubt if some of them ever know the extent of their loss.

But what a splendid time is that of the pre-matrimonial flights, before the ephemeris of the human imagination accomplishes its destiny! How the world glows! Only the untried know the infinite strength of the untried. There are innumerable things to be, and no one has done them; the tale of those who have failed and died has no meaning in our ears. What ambitious student has not sat and talked with his sympathetic friend, lending and borrowing ears in a fair commerce of boasting of the great deeds germinating? This boasting of the future is the cement of all youthful friendships, as boasting of the past is of those of age. But the former have a divine warmth of nature which the latter lack.

Gabriel, my own friend, was a splendid exemplification of this romance period of life. Gabriel Thompson was his name, but at first it was juster to call him Gabriel. For he had golden hair that flowed over his collar, and a beardless angelic face, his soul was full of the love of great deeds and justice, and our common conversation was the entire reform, by a few simple expedients, of human society. Later, however, it became necessary to call him Thompson. That will explain the title: it is a story of compromise, of the clipping or shedding of the archangelic pinions by which he soared.

I remember the evening when Gabriel told me he was in love. We had discoursed of the mystical woman soul that sways men—Gabriel with divine warmth, and I in colder strain. Indeed, as regards that particular fire, I have always been a bit of salamander. Presently, however, Gabriel swooped down to the concrete. I felt more than one twinge of jealousy as he rushed into details with a transient nervousness of manner unusual to him. He gave no names or dates.

“Is she beautiful?” I said, perceiving he raved little in that direction.

“Her features are not regularly beautiful—”

“Plain?”

“Oh dear no! Indeed, she has the greatest of all beauty, the beauty of expression. You need to talk to her.”

A kind of upward adoring look, I thought. “Is she cultured?”

“She had read very few books, and yet she had a most wonderful insight into things. Several times as I have been timidly feeling my way to this or that advanced view of ours she has come out to meet me, as it were, and I found that in the seclusion of her quiet country town she had thought out things and arrived at the very same ends as we, with all our advantages, have done.”

“She must be quick-witted?”

“She is indeed; a more subtle and yet purer mind I never met. I am giving her some of Ruskin’s books now. He is a revelation to her, she says. She finds so much in him that has been in her own mind dimly perfectly expressed. Carlyle she must read; after that Wordsworth, Browning—”

And so he went on. She was quite “womanly.” Gabriel was very insistent upon that. She entirely agreed with him that a woman’s sphere was her home. She did not want votes. At that time he was smarting a little from a controversy with Miss Gowland (M B.), who did. This wonderful girl was quite content to accompany his song, so he was assured, to be the “complement of his existence,” his “good angel,” and his “armour bearer” in that fight for the righting of the world which his soul craved after. He was to be her teacher, servant—as a king is the servant of his people—and true knight. .

I felt more and more jealous. Scarcely two months before we had agreed that a new Reformation was needed, and I was cast in the role of Erasmus, and Gabriel as Luther. This arrangement, arrived at over our youthful pipes

solemnly enough, was all forgotten now. My share was to hear of this absolutely new manifestation of the feminine. I was interested only in her imperfections, as they showed dimly through Gabriel's panegyric. For once, Gabriel, with his bright face, his shining eyes, his rhetorical gestures, and his buoyant flow of words, absolutely bored and pained me. I cared for him a lot at that time, and had promised myself a creditable career by his side. I had, indeed, forgotten the feminine until Gabriel remembered it.

Perhaps that evening, or at any rate some evening about that time, two other friends discussed this same love affair of Gabriel's.

"I think Gabriel is a pretty name, dear," said one.

"Now, dearest," said the other, holding up one dainty finger with an air of great solemnity, "I want you to tell me just exactly what you think of him."

"He has a lovely profile. You must make him grow a moustache."

"And cut his hair, you want to say, and dare not. Minnie, you have no moral courage. Yes; he does look a little effeminate now, but he is awfully clever. He writes, you know, and he sends me such dreadfully difficult books to read. I am getting quite learned."

"It must be jolly to have a really clever husband, one that is well known, and has people running after his autograph, and all that. You will be cutting poor me—sunk to the besotted condition of a wine merchant's wife—dead."

"You shall always come to see me, dear-on my domestic days. But really, Minnie, I am going to be dreadfully happy. You know Gabriel is going to do all kinds of scientific researches, and I shall help him copy his things out, and put his experiments out for him, and all that. I shall make him be an F. R. S., and he will give performances at *soirées*, like that handsome man we saw who did something clever in a bottle. Gabriel's shadow would look splendid in profile on a white screen."

"Isn't he a Socialist or Anarchist or something?"

“All young men with anything in them are like that now. It is a kind of intellectual measles, dear. I don’t think any the worse of a young man for that. It is like his smoking pipes instead of cigars and cigarettes, and not wearing gloves. You must see Gabriel after I have polished him for a year.”

“Yes,” said Minnie, “that is a woman’s work. We cut and polish these rough diamonds, and they take all the credit for the flash and sparkle. But if it were not for us there would be no gentlemen in the world.”

“Oh! Gabriel, dear, is naturally a gentleman.”

“Unpolished, dear, as you admit.”

Well, so they talked, sitting cosily in dainty chairs. Long before the marriage this little Delilah of his cut his hair. He came to me less frequently, and one evening he explained that he thought he was clearer-headed when he smoked less. Besides which, the smell of tobacco hung about one so much.

Thereafter he ceased to be Gabriel to me, and became Gabriel Thompson. And one memorable day I had a kind of “Phantasm of the Living,” a vision of a fair-haired man with a beeswaxed moustache, dressed in an ample frock coat, and light gloves. It was my prophet—curled and scented. The vision fluttered between me and my bookshelves for a moment and vanished, and I knew at once that my Gabriel, the world-mender, was lost to me for ever. Soon after came the visiting cards of the happy pair.

I understand that the correct thing to do is to call upon your newly-married friends when they are settled, and see what kind of furniture they have. I did this. By way of quiet sarcasm I wore my old velveteen jacket. Mrs. Thompson said I looked “quite Bohemian,” and the only consolation I had was to think that Thompson had a conscience. I asked him point-blank about the new reformation, and she answered for him that he was dreadfully busy at research.

I saw Thompson look across at me with a dumb request not to press the matter. But I had no particular kindness for Thompson. Was he not the man who had murdered my Prophet Gabriel and buried him away in himself? I insisted upon social evils, the need of leaders for the people, and all our old themes. Presently my Gabriel awoke in Thompson again and began to talk.

“There is a passage,” he said presently, “in ‘Sesame and Lilies,’ the book you liked so much, dear. How does it go? I am sure you know it. Ah, here is the book.”

It lay on the table, one of the many volumes he had bought for her—one, I remembered, that had “come like a revelation” to her. He took it up and turned over the pages.

When I saw the pages were all uncut I felt sorry for the man. He stared at the book as though he hardly grasped the import of the thing. Then he put it down again with force and an expletive.

“Gabriel!” said the wife.

I rose to go. But Gabriel was white with anger. “You never opened the book,” he said to his wife, “and you told me you had read it.”

Mrs. Thompson turned to me. “Must you go?” she said.

So I left them face to face with each other.

It was what one might call their real introduction to one another. Each had played to the other of being what the other dreamt, and now that little comedy was over. Mrs. Thompson had repeated Gabriel’s conclusions after him to please him, and he had acted as a gentleman according her lights. But that unfortunate book had ended it.

As I went out I heard her begin: “To think, Gabriel, that in the second month of our marriage you should curse me.”

And he: “Why did you only pretend to read my book?”

I suppose she did it to please him, but I do not know if she made this excuse. It is for a womanly woman a perfectly adequate excuse for any little duplicity she commits.

I fancy there must have been a long discussion that afternoon. Practically it amounted to this, that each had married a stranger in mistake for an imaginary person. Such a complication, though common enough, requires very deliberate consideration and considerable mutual forbearance. On the contrary, their talk that afternoon was heated, and it ended with domestic thunder—which is the slamming of doors. Mrs. Thompson was calm and reasonable throughout, but Gabriel did a deal of walking to and fro, throwing books with violence on to the floor, and invective generally.

He had imagined that his marriage was to be an idyllic episode, from which he was to return presently to his dream of a new reformation—Gabriel well to the fore, wife inspiring, helpful and advisory. He felt himself cut off from all this at once, and first he tried to vent his dismay and displeasure on his wife, and being defeated by her polite coolness, he took it out on the books, the carpet, and the front door.

She was dreadfully pained at his temper and unreasonableness, and annoyed more particularly at his letting the servants hear the quarrel. She could not help asking herself what they would say. Moreover she was afraid he might do something rash or ridiculous. So that she decided to talk the matter over with Minnie, who was now a wine merchant's wife.

"I told him he could hardly expect me to read all the books he inundated the house with, especially when I had all my things to see to, and he simply raved; he went on dreadfully, dear—swore at me and insulted me, asked me if I thought was fair treatment towards a man with a mission in the world to marry him under false pretences. I said there were no false pretences, except that he had behaved like a gentleman and that when I trusted myself in his

hands I thought he would always do so. He almost cried when he said that he had looked to me to be his help and inspiration, just as if he had been going abroad as a missionary or something of that kind. I do think that kind of talk silly. If I had behaved really badly to him, Minnie, he could not have been worse. All this ranting and bother because I did not read his silly old books! Rather than have this scene, dear, I would have read every one from cover to cover. You can't think how I have reproached myself for not cutting those leaves."

So Mrs. Thompson.

Minnie judiciously heard her through two or three times before she attempted any consolation or advice.

"He is certainly going on badly, my dear, but we all have our troubles. It is quite enough to make you really ill."

"I should have been if I had not kept so cool."

"You bear up wonderfully. He does not deserve it. Of course, dear, if, you were ill—when he comes home again—really ill, I mean, not just a headache—so that all the house would be hushed—he might have the grace to feel ashamed of himself. You are too brave. It only makes a man rave worse than ever to stand up to him. They all hate to be told the truth about themselves, and they shout and bully you down. But your Gabriel—any real man—would not hit a really sick woman."

"It is almost a pity I am so well then," said Mrs. Thompson, scarcely grasping the new idea yet.

"It's the excitement, you poor dear," said Minnie. "That keeps you up now, but you will find the reaction presently, mark my words."

And sure enough, Mrs. Thompson had hardly reached home when this reaction came upon her, and she was helped upstairs by the sympathetic and

half-confidential parlor maid. And all the blinds were straightway drawn and the house hushed,

* * *

Meanwhile Gabriel had been with me.

“Don’t speak about it to me,” I said; “I will not be the man to come between husband and wife—especially when the wife is Mrs. Thompson.”

“For Heaven’s sake, don’t mock me,” said Gabriel; “I have been cruelly deceived. Here am I at five-and-twenty with all my card castles in a heap. It is not only that about ‘Sesame and Lilies,’ I have been finding her out since the marriage. That book—with you there—was the last straw. She is no helpmeet for me. Her ideas are shallow, and vain, her ways are always crooked; she is just a commonplace woman of the world. What can a man do for others, what can he do for himself, with a woman like that?”

So he raved. I did not join him, but I must own my silence was sympathetic. Presently, however, after a pause, he started to his feet, and flung his chair headlong.

“I will not endure it,” he shouted, repeating, as the attentive reader will notice, formula three. “Why should the error of three months dwarf and ruin a life? I will not live with her. I will go abroad. What are these customs and ceremonies, these flimsy ordinances, that they should chain me back from all my possibilities? I tell you I will part from her. I never married her. I married my ideal, and she is no ideal of mine.”

He caught up his hat in his hand. He stood splendid, almost heroic, holding his right hand for mine.

“Gabriel,” I said to him, calling him by that name for the last time, “you have had a bitter disappointment. I cannot advise you. The law of matrimony, like the law of gravitation, no respectable man disputes. Whatever you do, may you fare well.”

“No cat-and-dog compromise for me,” said Gabriel and so went out right valiantly, with my secret blessing.

He noticed the blinds in the front of the house were all down, but, being a man, he did not grasp the full symbolism of this. He knocked for admission—a firm, clear knock. Mrs. Thompson, at that moment, was upstairs hurriedly putting away her bonnet, which she had thought of—happily—in time.

The parlormaid let him in noiselessly, with a funereal expression of face. This startled him, for she was a flourishing, noisy sort of girl.

“Please, sir,” she said in a whisper, holding out his bath slippers; “do you mind putting these on? Missus is very ill indeed.”

“Why! What is the matter?” asked Gabriel in his natural voice, trying to keep up his militant front.

“She regular broke down, sir, after you left her,” said the parlormaid reproachfully, in an almost noiseless whisper, and therewith handing him the slippers, she glided away, leaving him “to his conscience.” Needless to say, she did not mention Mrs. Thompson’s visit to Minnie. Gabriel stood in confused thought for a minute, and then sat down on one of the hall chairs and quietly changed his boots. He had not expected this.

He sat meditating vaguely over his discarded boots for some time. He would have to postpone his climax after all. Nuisance! Then his chivalry began to awake. Perhaps he had been hitting unnecessarily hard. She was only a weak woman, and he had come home to do battle and finish with her as if she were a dragon. Certainly his ways were violent. She had seemed cool enough during their quarrel; but then women, he had read, are clever at hiding their pain, though the dart, nevertheless, may have gone well home. What if she really cared for him? He remembered all the wrath, sorrow, and bitterness of his denunciation. Had he been heedlessly carried away?

Presently he rose and stole upstairs. He would look at her. It was a fatal resolution.

His wife was lying dressed upon the bed, in the darkened room. Her pale cheeks-were wet, and her eyes were closed so that the damp long lashes lay upon her cheek. Her hair, which was abundant and beautiful—indeed, her chief beauty—was down. In one hand she held her smelling salts and the other lay limp and extended. There was an expression of pain on her face; she seemed to have cried herself to sleep. Gabriel could hardly realise that this sorrowful little figure was the human being he had raged against ten minutes ago.

There came over my Gabriel, I suppose, a great wave of generous emotion. I admit—though it worked to my hurt—that there was some greatness in his forgetting his world mending at that moment. Had he not held her in his arms? Had not she trusted the happiness of her life to him? He was not one of those intellectual prigs who will pass their dearest through the fire for some Moloch of an idea. He had thought his career was to be stifled by his wife. He had not realised how his assertion of this would break her down. Poor little girl with the dishevelled hair! Poor little Sissie! The New Reformation receded through an illimitable perspective to the smallest speck.

She sighed in her sleep. “Oh, Gabriel!” she said, with a sob in her voice.

Gabriel could scarcely imagine why he had just been so angry. She was dreaming of him. The New Reformation vanished. He knelt by the bed, full of self reproach, and took her hand.

Her eyes slowly opened. She looked in his face and saw she had conquered.

“I have been a brute,” he said—this emancipator of his sex.

“Gabriel,” she whispered faintly, “Gabriel, dear,” and closed her eyes again.

“I have been a brute,” repeated Gabriel.

“Gabriel,” she said, “promise me something.”

“Anything, dear,” said Gabriel.

“Promise me you will never speak to that horrid man again.”

Now the horrid man referred to was myself. And—will you believe it, dear reader?—Gabriel, who had left my home scarcely 10 minutes, vowing he would do or die, *promised*.

This is the plain and simple story of how Gabriel became Thompson, so that there was no Gabriel anymore for me. I and the New Reformation were buried under the foundation stone of their compromise, and there was, in spite of Gabriel’s repetition of formula three, no catastrophe. From that day to this Thompson and I have met and crossed one another in highways and byways, but never a word has passed between us after my first rebuff. But I understand, through a friend—and it is a curious example of the metaboly of memory—that Thompson is under the impression that I incited him to desert his wife.

The health of Mrs. Thompson is, and has been, very uncertain since that day. It had been a tactical necessity. Thompson has to be gentle and careful in all his doings; he takes her to church regularly, they have a prominent pew, and he keeps all the observances. However, the scientific research languished somehow, and he is not a Fellow of the Royal Society yet, though it led to several profitable patents. He has one of the best houses on Putney Hill, and Mrs. Thompson bears up bravely against her uncertain health and gives really very brilliant garden parties. She has dropped Minnie, because she is deceitful, and lives in one of the smaller houses in the Upper Richmond road.

Thompson is said to be apathetic in society and irritable in business. His health has been poor lately, through an excessive consumption of cigars.—

Truth.