GEORGE MOORE

A MERE ACCIDENT

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CHAPTER I.

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Three hundred yards of smooth, broad, white road leading from Henfield, a small town in Sussex. The grasses are lush, and the hedges are tall and luxuriant. Restless boys scramble to and fro, quiet nursemaids loiter, and a vagrant has sat down to rest though the bank is dripping with autumn rain. How fair a prospect of southern England! Land of exquisite homeliness and order; land of town that is country, of country that is town; land of a hundred classes all deftly interwoven and all waxing to one class—England. Land encrowned with the gifts of peaceful days—days that live in thy face and the faces of thy children.

See it. The outlying villas with their porches and laurels, the red tiled farm houses, and the brown barns, clustering beneath the wings of beautiful trees—elm trees; see the flat plots of ground of the market gardens, with figures bending over baskets of roots; see the factory chimney; there are trees and gables everywhere; see the end of the terrace, the gleam of glass, the flower vase, the flitting white of the tennis players; see the long fields with the long team ploughing, see the parish church, see the embowering woods, see the squire's house, see everything and love it, for everything here is England.

Three hundred yards of smooth, broad, white road, leading from Henfield, a small town in Sussex. It disappears

in the woods which lean across the fields towards the downs. The great bluff heights can be seen, and at the point where the roads cross, where the tall trunks are listed with golden light, stands a large wooden gate and a small box-like lodge. A lonely place in a densely-populated county. The gatekeeper is blind, and his flute sounds doleful and strange, and the leaves are falling.

The private road is short and stony. Apparently space was found for it with difficulty, and it got wedged between an enormous holly hedge and a stiff wooden paling. But overhead the great branches fight upwards through a tortuous growth to the sky, and, as you advance, Thornby Place continues to puzzle you with its medley of curious and contradictory aspects. For as the second gate, which is in iron, is approached, your thoughts of rural things are rudely scattered by sight of what seems a London mews. Reason with yourself. This very urban feature is occasioned by the high brick wall which runs parallel with the stables, and this, as you pass round to the front of the house, is hidden in the clothing foliage of a line of evergreen oaks; continuing along the lawn, the trees bend about the house—a wash of Naples-yellow, a few sharp Italian lines and angles. To complete the sketch, indicate the wings of the blown rooks on the sullen sky.

But our purpose lies deeper than that which inspires a water-colour sketch. We must learn when and why that house was built; we must see how the facts reconcile its somewhat tawdry, its somewhat suburban aspect, with the richer and more romantic aspects of the park. The park is even now, though it be the middle of autumn, full of blowing

green, and the brown circling woods, full of England and English home life. That single tree in the foreground is a lime; what a splendour of leafage it will be in the summer! Those four on the right are chestnuts, and those far away, lying between us and the imperial downs, are elms; through that vista you can see the grand line, the abrupt hollows, and the bit of chalk road cut zig-zag out of the steep side. Then why the anomaly of Italian urns and pilasters; why not red Elizabethan gables and diamond casements?

Why not? Because at the beginning of the century, when Brighton was being built, fragments of architectural gossip were flying about Sussex, and one of these had found its way to, and had rested in, the heart of the grandfather of the present owner: in a simple and bucolic way he had been seized by a desire for taste and style, and the present building was the result. Therefore it will be well to examine in detail the house which young John Norton of '86 was so fond of declaring he could never see without becoming instantly conscious of a sense of dislike, a hatred that he was fond of describing as a sort of constitutional complaint which he was never quite free from, and which any view of the Rockery, or the pilasters of the French bow-window, or indeed of anything pertaining to Thornby Place, called at once into an active existence.

Thornby Place is but two stories high, and its spruce walls of Portland stone and ashlar work rise sheer out of the green sward; in front, Doric columns support a heavy entablature, and there are urns at the corners of the building. The six windows on the ground floor are topped with round arches, and coming up the drive the house seems a perfect square.

But this regularity of structure has on the east side been somewhat interfered with by a projection of some thirty or forty feet—a billiard room, in fine, which during John's minority Mrs Norton had thought proper to add. But she had lived to rue her experiment, for to this young man, with his fretful craving for beauty and exactness of proportion, it is an ever present source of complaint; and he had once in a half humorous, half serious way, gone so far as to avail himself of the "eyesore," as he called it, to excuse his constant absence from home, and as a pretence for shutting himself up in his dear college, with his cherished Latin authors. It was partly for the sake of avenging himself on his mother, whose decisive practicality jarred the delicate music of a nature extravagantly ideal, that he so severely criticised all that she held sacred; and his strictures fell heaviest on the bow window, looking somewhat like a temple with its small pilasters supporting the rich cornice from which the dwarf vaulting springs. The loggia, he admitted, although painfully out of keeping with the surrounding country, was not wholly wanting in design, and he admired its columns of a Doric order, and likewise the cornice that like a crown encompasses the house. The entrance is under the loggia; there are round arched windows on either side, a square window under the roof, and the hall door is in solid oak studded with ornamental nails.

On entering you find yourself in a common white-painted passage, and on either side of the drawing-room and dining-room are four allegorical female heads: Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter. Further on is the hall, with its short

polished oak stairway sloping gently to a balcony; and there are white painted pillars that support the low roof, and these pillars make a kind of entrance to the passage which traverses the house from end to end. England—England clear and spotless! Nowhere do you find a trace of dust or disorder. The arrangement of things is somewhat mechanical. The curtains and wall-paper in the bedrooms are suggestive of trades people and housemaids; no hastily laid aside book or shawl breaks the excessive orderliness. Every piece of furniture is in its appointed place, and nothing testifies to the voluntariness of the occupant, or the impulse prompted by the need of the moment. On the presses at the ends of the passages, where is stored the house linen, cards are hung bearing this inscription: "When washing the woodwork the servants are requested to use no soda without first obtaining permission from Mrs Norton." This detail was especially distasteful to John; he often thought of it when away, and it was one of the many irritating impressions which went to make up the sum of his dislike of Thornby Place.

Mrs Norton is now crying her last orders to the servants; and although dressed elaborately as if to receive visitors, she has not yet laid aside her basket of keys. She is in her forty-fifth year. Her figure is square and strong, and not devoid of matronly charm. It approves a healthy mode of life, and her quick movements are indicative of her sharp determined mind. Her face is somewhat small for her shoulders, the temples are narrow and high, the nose is long and thin, the cheek bones are prominent, the chin is small, but unsuggestive of weakness, the lips are pinched, the

complexion is flushed, and the eyes set close above the long thin nose are an icy grey. Mrs Norton is a handsome woman. Her fashionably-cut silk fits her perfectly; the skirt is draped with grace and precision, and the glossy shawl with the long soft fringe is elegant and delightfully mundane. She raises her double gold eyeglasses, and, contracting her forehead, stares pryingly about her; and so fashionable is she, and her modernity is so picturesque, that for a moment you think of the entrance of a duchess in the first act of a piece by Augier played on the stage of the Français.

Still holding her gold-rimmed glasses to her eyes, she descended the broad stairs to the hall, and from thence she went into the library. There are two small bookcases filled with sombre volumes, and the busts of Molière and Shakespeare attempt to justify the appellation. But there is in the character, I was almost going to say in the atmosphere of the room, that same undefinable, easily recognizable something which proclaims the presence of non-readers. The traces of three or four days, at the most a week, which John occasionally spent at Thornby Place, were necessarily ephemeral, and the weakness of Mrs Norton's sight rendered continuous reading impossible. Sometimes Kitty Hare brought a novel from the circulating library to read aloud, and sometimes John forgot one of his books, and a volume of Browning still lay on the table. The room was filled with shadow and mournfulness, and in a dusty grate the fire smouldered.

Between this room and the drawing-room, in a recess formed by the bow window, Mrs Norton kept her birds, and

still peering through her gold-rimmed glasses, she examined their seed-troughs and water-glasses, and, having satisfied herself as to their state, she entered the drawing-room. There is little in this room; no pictures relieve the widths of grey colourless wall paper, and the sombre oak floor is spaced with a few pieces of furniture—heavy furniture enshrouded in grey linen cloths. Three French cabinets, gaudy with vile veneer and bright brass, are nailed against the walls, and the empty room is reflected dismally in the great gold mirror which faces the vivid green of the sward and the duller green of the encircling elms of the park.

Mrs Norton let her eyes wander, and sighing she went into the dining-room. The dining-room is always the most human of rooms, and the dining-room in Thornby Place, although allied to the other rooms in an absence of fancy in its arrangement, shows prettily in contrast to them with its white cloth cheerful with flowers and ferns. The floor is covered with a tightly stretched red cloth, the chairs are set in symmetrical rows; with the exception of a black clock there is no ornament on the chimney-piece, and a red cloth screen conceals the door used by the servants.

Mrs Norton walked with her quiet decisive step to the window, and holding the gold-rimmed glasses to her eyes, she looked into the landscape as if she were expecting someone to appear. The day was grimy with clouds; mist had risen, and it hung out of the branches of the elms like a veil of white gauze. Withdrawing her eye from the vague prospect before her, Mrs Norton played listlessly with the tassel of one of the blinds. "Surely," she thought, "he cannot have been foolish enough to have walked over the downs

such a day as this;" then, raising her glasses again she looked out at the smallest angle with the wall of the house, so that she should get sight of a vista through which any one coming from Shoreham would have to pass. Presently a silhouette appeared on the sullen sky. Mrs Norton moved precipitately from the window, and she rang the bell sharply.

"John," she said, "Mr Hare has been going in for one of his long walks. I see him now coming across the park. I am sure he has walked over the downs; if so he must be wet through. Have a fire lighted in Mr Norton's room, put up a pair of slippers for him: here is the key of Mr Norton's wardrobe; let Mr Hare have what he wants."

And having detached one from the many bunches which filled her basket, she went herself to open the door to her visitor. He was however still some distance away, and standing in the shelter of the loggia she waited for him, watched the vague silhouette resolving itself into colour and line. But it was not until he climbed the iron fence which separated the park from the garden grounds that the figure grew into its individuality. Then you saw a man of about forty, about the medium height and inclined to stoutness. His face was round and florid, and it was set with sandy whiskers. His white necktie proclaimed him a parson, and the grey mud with which his boots were bespattered told of his long walk. As is generally the case with those of his profession, he spoke fluently, his voice was melodious, and his rapid answers and his bright eyes saved him from appearing commonplace. In addressing Mrs Norton he used her Christian name.

"You are quite right, Lizzie, you are quite right; I shouldn't have done it: had I known what a state the roads were in, I wouldn't have attempted it."

"What is the use of talking like that, as if you didn't know what these roads were like! For twenty years you have been making use of them, and if you don't know what they are like in winter by this time, all I can say is that you never will."

"I never saw them in the state they are now; such a slush of chalk and clay was never seen."

"What can you expect after a month of heavy rain? You are wringing wet."

"Yes, I was caught in a heavy shower as I was crossing over by Fresh-Combe-bottom. I am certainly not in a fit state to come into your dining-room."

"I should think not indeed! I really believe if I were to allow it, you would sit the whole afternoon in your wet clothes. You'll find everything ready for you in John's room. I'll give you ten minutes. I'll tell them to bring up lunch in ten minutes. Stay, will you have a glass of wine before going upstairs?"

"I am afraid of spoiling your carpet."

"Yes, indeed! not one step further! I'll fetch it for you."

When the parson had drunk the wine, and was following the butler upstairs, Mrs Norton returned to the dining-room with the empty glass in her hand. She placed it on the chimney piece; she stirred the fire, and her thoughts flowed pleasantly as she dwelt on the kindness of her old friend. "He only got my note this morning," she mused. "I wonder if he will be able to persuade John to return home." Mrs

Norton, in her own hard, cold way, loved her son, but in truth she thought more of the power of which he was the representative than of the man himself: the power to take to himself a wife—a wife who would give an heir to Thornby Place. This was to be the achievement of Mrs Norton's life, and the difficulties that intervened were too absorbing for her to think much whether her son would find happiness in marriage; nor was it natural to her to set much store on the refining charm and the uniting influences of mental sympathies. Had she not passed the age when the sentimental emotions are liveliest? And the fibre was wanting in her to take into much account the whispering or the silence of passion.

Mrs Norton saw in marriage nothing but the child, and in the child nothing but an heir—that is to say, a male who would continue the name and traditions of Thornby Place. This would seem to indicate a material nature, but such a misapprehension arises from the common habit of confusing pure thought—thought which proceeds direct from the brain and lives uncoloured by the material wants of life—with instincts whose complexity often causes them to appear as mental potentialities, whereas they are but instincts, inherited promptings, and aversions more or less modified by physical constitution and the material forces of the life in which the constitution has grown up; and yet, though pure thought, that is to say the power of detaching oneself from the webs of life and viewing men and things from a height, is the rarest of gifts, many are possessed of sufficient intellectuality to enjoy with the brain apart from the senses. Mrs Norton was such an one. After five o'clock tea she would

ask Kitty to read to her, and drawing her shawl about her shoulders, would readily abandon the intellectual side of her nature to the seductive charm of the romantic story of James of Scotland; and while to the girl the heroism and chivalry were a little clouded by the quaint turns of Rossetti's verse, to the woman these were added delights, which her quiet penetrating understanding followed and took instant note of.

"Were mother and son ever so different?" was the common remark. The artistic was the side of Mrs Norton's character that was unaffectedly kept out of sight, just as young John Norton was careful to hide from public knowledge his strict business habits, and to expose, perhaps a little ostentatiously, the spiritual impulses in which he was so deeply concerned: the subtle refinement of sacred places, from the mystery of the great window with its mitres and croziers to the sunlit path between the tombs where the children play, the curious and yet natural charm that attendance in the sacristy had for him, the arrangement of the large oak presses, wherein are stored the fine altar linen and the chalices, the distributing of the wine and water that were not for bodily need, and the wearing of the flowing surplices, the murmuring of the Latin responses that helped so wonderfully to enforce the impression of beautiful and refined life which was his, and which he lived beyond the gross influences of the wholly temporal life which he knew was raging almost but not quite out of hearing. But, however marked may be the accidental variations of character, hereditary instincts are irresistible, and in obedience to them John neglected nothing that concerned

his pecuniary instincts. He was in daily communication with his agent, and the financial position of every farmer, and the state of every farm on his property, were not only known to him but were constantly borne in mind, and influenced him in that progressive ordering of things which marked the administration of his property. He was furnished quarterly with an account of all monies paid, to which were joined descriptive notes of each farm, showing what alterations the past three months had brought, and setting forth the agricultural intentions and abilities of the occupier.

John Norton waited the arrival of these accounts with a keen interest: they were a relish to his life; and without experiencing any revulsion of feeling, he would lay down a portfolio filled with photographs of drawings by Leonardo da Vinci—studies of drapery, studies of hands and feet, realistic studies of thin-lipped women and ecstatic angels with the light upon their high foreheads—and cheerfully, and even with a sense of satisfaction, he would untie the bald, prosaic roll of paper, and seating himself at his window overlooking the long terrace, he would add up the figures submitted to him, detecting the smallest arithmetical error, making note of the least delay in payment of any money due, and questioning the slightest overpayment for work done. The morning hours fled as he pursued his congenial task; and from time to time he would let his thoughts wander from the teasing computation of the money that would be required to make the repairs that a certain farmer had demanded, to the unworldly quiet of the sacristy; he would think, and his thoughts contained an evanescent sense of the paradox, of the altar linen he would have to fold and put away, and of

the altar breads he would presently have to write to London for; and meanwhile his eyes would follow in delight the black figures of the Jesuits, who, with cassocks blowing and berrettas set firmly on their heads, walked up and down the long gravel walks reading their breviaries.

And living thus, half in the persuasive charm of ceremonial, half in the hard procession of account books, the last three years of John's life had passed. On coming of age he had spent a few weeks at Thornby Place, but the place, and especially the country, had appeared to him so grossly protestant—so entirely occupied with the material well-to-doness of life—that he declared he longed to breathe again the breath of his beloved sacristy, that he must away from that close and oppressive atmosphere of the flesh. Since then, with the exception of a few visits of a few days he had lived at Stanton College, writing to his mother not of the business which concerned his property, but of mental problems and artistic impulses. On business matters he never consulted her; but he thought it fortunate that she should choose to spend her jointure on Thornby Place, and so save him a great deal of expense in keeping up the house, which, although he disliked it with a dislike that had grown inveterate, he was still unwilling to allow to fall to ruins.

Mrs Norton, as has been said, was capable of understanding much in the abstract; so long as things, and ideas of things, did not come within the circle of her practical life, they were judged from a liberal standpoint, but so soon as they touched any personal consideration, they were judged by a moral code that in no way corresponded

to her intellectual comprehension of the matter she so unhesitatingly condemned. But by this it must by no means be understood that Mrs Norton wore her conscience easily—that it was a garment that could be shortened or lengthened to suit all weathers. Our diagnosis of Mrs Norton's character involves no accusation of laxity of principle. Mrs Norton was a woman with an intelligence, who had inherited in all its primary force a code of morals that had grown up in the narrower minds of less gifted generations. In talking to her you were conscious of two active and opposing principles: reason and hereditary morality. I use "opposing" as being descriptive of the state of soul that would generally follow from such mental contradiction, but in Mrs Norton no shocking conflict of thought was possible, her mind being always strictly subservient to her instinctive standard of right and wrong.

And John had inherited the moral temperament of his mother's family, and with it his mother's intelligence, nor had the equipoise been disturbed in the transmitting; his father's delicate constitution in inflicting germs of disease had merely determined the variation represented by the marked artistic impulses which John presented to the normal type of either his father's or his mother's family. It would therefore seem that any too sudden corrective of defect will result in anomaly, and, in the case under notice, direct mingling of perfect health with spinal weakness had germinated into a marked yearning for the heroic ages, for the supernatural as contrasted with the meanness of the routine of existence. And now before closing this psychical investigation, and picking up the thread of the story, which