

English Lesson

Hector Hugh Munro



Norman Gortsby sat on a bench in the almost deserted park. It was some thirty minutes past six on an early March evening, and dusk had fallen heavily over the scene, mitigated by faint moonlight and many street lamps. The scene harmonised with Gortsby's present mood. Dusk, to his mind, was the hour of the defeated.



Men and women, who had fought and lost, came forth in this hour so that their shabby clothes and bowed shoulders and unhappy eyes might pass unnoticed and unrecognized. Gortsby was in the mood to count himself among the defeated although money troubles did not press on him.



On the bench by his side sat an elderly gentleman, who looked as if the fight had gone out of him. His clothes could scarcely be called shabby. He rose to go, his retreating figure vanishing slowly into the shadows, and his place on the bench was taken almost immediately by a young man, fairly well dressed but scarcely more cheerful of mien than his predecessor.



He was angry, and flung himself into the seat with an offensive word

"You don't seem in a very good temper," said Gortsby,

"You wouldn't be in a good temper if you were in the fix, I'm in," he said, "I've done the silliest thing I've ever done in my life."

• "Yes?" said Gortsby dispassionately.

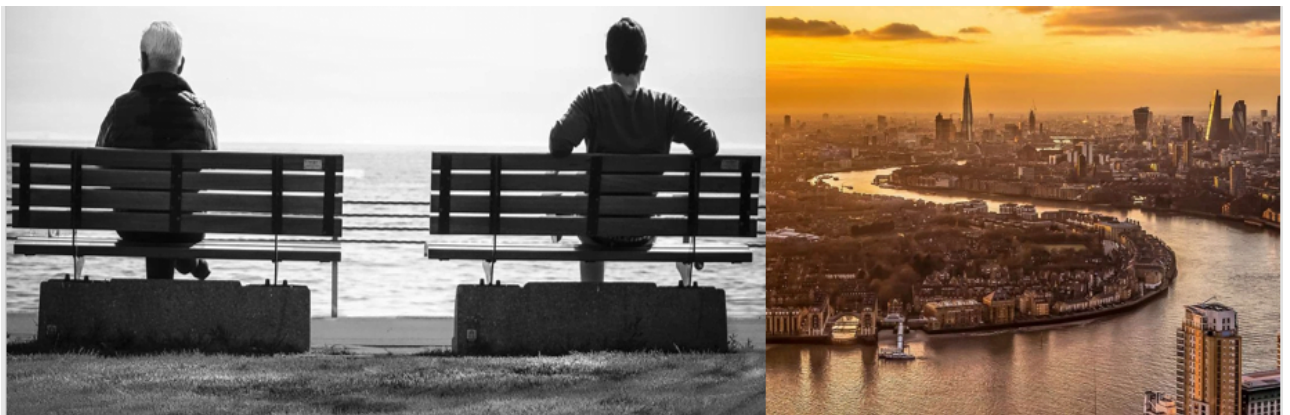


"Came up this afternoon, meaning to stay at the Patagonian Hotel in Berkshire Square, continued the young man; "when I got there, I found it had been pulled down some weeks ago and a cinema theatre run up on the site. The taxi driver recommended another hotel some way off. I just sent a letter to my people, giving them the address, and then I went out to buy some soap - I'd forgotten to pack any and I hate using hotel soap."

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Then I strolled about a bit, had a drink and when I turned my steps back to the hotel, I suddenly realized that I remembered neither its name nor even the street it was in. There's a nice predicament for a fellow who hasn't any friends or connections in London! Of course, I can wire to my people for the address, but they will not get my letter till tomorrow. I came out with about a shilling on me, which went in buying the soap and the drink, and here I am, wandering about with two pence in my pocket and nowhere to go for the night."



There was an eloquent pause after the story had been told. "I suppose you think I've spun you rather an impossible yarn," said the young man.

"Not at all impossible," said Gortsby judicially, "I remember doing exactly the same thing once in a foreign capital, and on that occasion, there were two of us, which made it more remarkable. Luckily, we remembered that the hotel was on a sort of canal, and we were able to find our way back to the hotel."



The youth brightened at the reminiscence. "Unless I can find some decent chap to swallow my story and lend me some money, I seem likely to spend the night on the street. I'm glad, anyhow, that you don't think the story outrageously improbable. He threw a good deal of warmth into the last remark. "Of course," said Gortsby slowly, "the weak point of your story is that you can't produce the soap." The young man sat forward hurriedly, felt rapidly in the pockets of his overcoat, and then jumped to his feet.



"I must have lost it," he muttered angrily. Then, he flitted away down the path, his head held high.

"It was a pity," mused Gortsby, "the soap was the one convincing touch in the whole story, and yet it was just that little detail that brought him to grief." With that reflection Gortsby rose to go and saw lying on the ground by the side of the bench, a small oval packet, wrapped and sealed by a chemist.



It could be nothing else but a cake of soap, and it had evidently fallen out of the youth's overcoat pocket when he flung himself down on the seat. Gortsby ran along the dusk-shrouded path in anxious quest for a youthful figure in a light overcoat. The young man turned round sharply with an air of hostility when he found Gortsby hailing him.



**"The important witness to the genuineness of your story has turned up," said Gortsby, holding out the cake of soap; "it must have slid out of your overcoat pocket when you sat down on the seat. I saw it on the ground after you left. You must excuse my disbelief. If the loan of a sovereign is any good to you
The young man hastily pocketed the coin.**



"Here is my card with my address," continued Gortsby, "any day this week will do for returning the money, and here is the soap - don't lose it again; it's been a good friend to you."

"Lucky thing your finding it," said the youth, he blurted out a word or two of thanks and fled. "It's a lesson to me not to be too clever in judging by circumstances." said Gortsby to himself.



As Gortsby retraced his steps past the bench, he saw his earlier fellow occupant, poking and peering beneath and on all sides of the bench, "Have you lost anything, sir?" he asked. "Yes, sir, a cake of soap."

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