

In Honour Bound

George Gissing

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At the top of a dim-windowed house near Gray's Inn Road, in two rooms of his own furnishing, lived a silent, solitary man. He was not old (six-and-thirty at most), and the gentle melancholy of his countenance suggested no quarrel with the world, but rather a placid absorption in congenial studies. His name was Filmer; he had occupied this lodging for seven or eight years; only at long intervals did a letter reach him, and the sole person who visited his retreat was Mrs Mayhew, the charwoman. Mrs Mayhew came at ten o'clock in the morning, and busied herself about the rooms for an hour or so. Sometimes the lodger remained at home, sitting at his big table heaped with books, and exchanging a friendly word with his attendant; sometimes he had gone out before her arrival, and in that case he would have been found at the British Museum. Filmer abjured the society of men for that of words; he was a philological explorer, tracking slowly and patiently the capricious river of human speech. He published nothing, but saw the approaching possibility of a great work, which should do honour to his name.

Proud amid poverty, and shrinking with a nervous sensitiveness from the commerce of mankind, he often passed weeks at a time without addressing a familiar word to any mortal save Mrs Mayhew. He had made friends with his charwoman, though not till the experience of years taught him to regard her with entire confidence and no little respect. To her he even spoke of his studies, half soliloquising, indeed, but feeling it not impossible that she might gather some general conception of what he meant. In turn, Mrs Mayhew confided to him some details of her own history, which threw light upon the fact that she neither looked nor spoke like an ordinary charwoman. She was a meagre but trim-bodied little person of about the same age as her employer, clean, neat, and brisk, her face sharply outlined, with large good-humoured eyes, and a round mouth. A widow, she said, for ten years and more; childless; pretty much alone in the world, though she had relatives not badly off. Shamefaced hints made known to Filmer that she blamed only herself for her poor condition, and one day she confessed to him that her weakness had been drink. When first he engaged her services she was struggling painfully out of the mire, battling with old temptations, facing toil and hunger. 'And now, sir,' she said, with her modest, childish laugh, 'I feel almost a respectable woman; I do, indeed!' Whereat Filmer smiled pensively and nodded.

No life could be less eventful than his. He enjoyed an income of seventy pounds, and looked not for increase. Of his costume he took no thought, his diet was the simplest conceivable. He wanted no holidays. Leisure to work in his own way, blessed independence this sufficed him.

On a morning of December (the year was 1869) Mrs Mayhew came to the house as usual, went upstairs and tapped at Filmer's door. On entering she was surprised to see a fireless grate, and on the table no trace of breakfast. Filmer stood by the window; she bade him good-morning, and looked about the room in surprise.

'I'm going out,' said the student, in a voice unlike his own. 'I didn't trouble to light the fire.'

She observed his face.

'But won't you have breakfast, sir? I'll get some in a minute.'

'No, thank you. I shall get some somewhere '

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He went into the bedroom, was absent a few minutes, and returned with his overcoat.

'I wanted to speak to you, sir,' said Mrs Mayhew, diffidently. 'But if you are in a hurry '

'No, no. Certainly not. I have plenty of time.'

'I am very sorry to tell you, sir, that, after next week, I sha'n't be able to come. But,' she hastened to add, 'I can recommend some one who'll do the work just as well.'

Filmer listened without appearance of concern; he seemed to have a difficulty in fixing his thoughts on the matter.

'I am going to take a little shop,' pursued the other, 'a little general shop. It's part of the house where I've been living. The woman that's had it hasn't done well: but it was her own fault; she didn't attend to business, and she but there's no need to trouble you with such things, sir. Some one advised me to see what I could do in that way, and I thought it over. The landlord will let me have the shop, and a room behind it, and another room upstairs, for twenty-eight pounds a year, if I pay a quarter in advance. That's seven pounds, you see, sir; and I ought to have about twenty pounds altogether to start with. I've got a little more than ten, and I know some one who'll lend me another ten, I think.' She spoke quickly, a glow of excitement in her cheeks. 'And I feel sure I can make the business pay. I've seen a good deal of it, from living in the house. There's lots of people round about who would deal with me, and of course I could begin with a small stock, and '

Her breath failed; she broke off with a pant and a laugh. Filmer, after standing for a moment as if in uncertainty, said that he was very glad to hear all this, and that he would talk with her about it on the morrow. At present he must go out on business special and disagreeable business. But he would talk to-morrow. And so, without further remark, he went his way.

The next morning Mrs Mayhew saw that her employer was still in a most unusual frame of mind. He had a fire, but was sitting by it in gloomy idleness. To her 'Good-morning' he merely nodded, and only when she had finished putting the bedroom to rights did he show a disposition to speak.

'Well, Mrs Mayhew,' he said at length, 'I also have news to tell. I have lost all my money, and have nothing to live upon.'

Her large eyes gazed at him with astonishment and compassion.

'Oh, Mr Filmer! What a dreadful thing!'

'Bad; there's no disguising it.' He struggled to speak without dolefulness; his limbs moved nervously, and he stared away from his companion. 'No hope, now, of writing my book. All over with me. I must earn my living I don't know how. It's twelve years since I ever thought of such a thing; I felt safe for my whole life. All gone at a blow; you can read about it in the newspaper.'

'But but you can't surely have lost everything, sir?'

'I have a few pounds. About thirty pounds, I think. What's the use of that? I don't want very much, but' he tried to jest 'I can't live on ten shillings a year.'

'But with all your learning, Mr Filmer '

'Yes, I must find something. Go and teach in a school, or something of the kind. But I'm afraid you can't understand what it means to me.'

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He became silent. Mrs Mayhew looked up and down, moved uneasily, played with the corners of her apron, and at last found resolution to speak.

'Mr Filmer' her eyes were very bright and eager 'you couldn't live in one room, I'm afraid, sir?'

'One room?' He glanced vacantly at her. 'Why not? Of course I could. I spend nearly all my time at the Museum. But '

'I hardly like to say it, sir, but there's something if you thought I told you I was going to have a room behind the shop, and one upstairs. I meant to let the one upstairs.'

He interrupted, rather coldly.

'Oh, I would take it at once if I had the least prospect of being able to live. But what is the use of settling down anywhere with thirty pounds? To write my book I need at least two years, and a quiet mind '

'But I was going to say something else, sir, if you'll excuse the liberty. I told you I shall have to borrow some money, and and I'm not quite sure after all that I can get it. Will you lend it me, sir?' This came out with a jerk, on an impulse of great daring. 'If you would lend me ten pounds, I could afford to let you have the room, and and to supply you with meals, and in that way pay it back. I'm quite sure I could.' She grew excited again. 'If I miss getting the shop, somebody else will step in, and make money out of it. I know I could very soon make two or three pounds a week out of that business!'

She stopped suddenly, awed by the listener's face. Filmer, for the first time since her knowledge of him, looked coldly distant, even offended.

'I beg your pardon, sir. I oughtn't to have said such a thing.'

He stood up.

'It was a kind thought, Mrs Mayhew; but I really don't know ' His face was changing. 'I should very much like to let you have the money. A few days ago I would gladly have done so. But '

His tongue faltered. He looked at the woman, and saw how her countenance had fallen.

'Ten pounds,' he said abruptly, 'couldn't last for my support more than a few weeks.'

'Not by itself, sir,' replied the other, eagerly; 'but money grows so when it's put into trade. I do believe it would bring in a pound a week. Or, at all events, I'm quite sure it would bring enough '

She glanced, involuntarily, at the breakfast table, which seldom showed anything but bread and butter.

'In that case,' said Filmer, laughing, 'I should be a partner in the business.'

Mrs Mayhew smiled, and made no answer.

That day they could not arrive at a decision; but after nightfall Filmer walked along the street in which he knew Mrs Mayhew lived, and looked for the shop. That which answered to her description was a miserable little hole, where seemingly business was still being carried on; the glimmer of one gas-jet rather suggested than revealed objects in the window a loaf, some candles, a bundle of firewood, and so on. He hurried past, and got into another street as quickly as possible.

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Later, he was prowling in the same locality, and again he went past the shop. This time he observed it more deliberately. After all, the place itself was not so squalid as it had seemed; by daylight it might look tolerable. And the street could not be called a slum. Other considerations apart he could contemplate having his abode here; for he knew nobody, and never had to fear a visit. Besides the little chandler's there were only two shops; no public-house, and hardly any traffic of a noisy kind.

In his great need, his horror of going forth among strangers (for of course his lodgings were now too expensive to be kept a day longer than he could help), Filmer compromised with himself. By lending Mrs Mayhew ten pounds he might justly accept from her a lodging and the plainest sustenance for, say, ten weeks, and in that time he would of necessity have taken some steps towards earning a livelihood. Some of his books and furniture he must sell, thus adding to the petty reserve which stood between him and starvation. If it would really be helping the good woman, as well as benefiting himself, common sense bade him disregard the fastidiousness which at first had been shocked by such a proposal. 'Beggars cannot be choosers,' said the old adage; he must swallow his pride.

Waking at the dead hour of night, and facing once more the whole terrible significance of what had befallen him, not easily grasped in daytime, he resolved to meet the charwoman next morning in a humble and grateful spirit. His immediate trouble thus overcome, he could again sleep.

And so it came about that, in some few days, Filmer found himself a tenant of the front room above the chandler's shop. As he still had the familiar furniture about him, he suffered less uneasiness his removal once over than might have been anticipated. True, he moaned the loss of beloved volumes; but, on the other hand, his purse had gained by it. As soon as possible he repaired to the Museum, and there, in the seat he had occupied for years, and with books open before him, he tried to think calmly.

Mrs Mayhew, meanwhile, had entered exultantly into possession of her business premises; the little shop was stocked much better than for a long time, and customers followed each other throughout the day. In his utter ignorance of such transactions, the philologist accepted what she had at first told him as a sufficient explanation of the worthy woman's establishment in shop-keeping. To a practical eye, it would have seemed not a little mysterious that some twenty pounds had sufficed for all the preparations; but Filmer merely glanced with satisfaction at the shop front as he came and went, and listened trustfully when Mrs Mayhew informed him that the first week's profits enabled her to purchase some new fittings, as well as provide for all current expenditure.

Under these circumstances, it was not wonderful that the student experienced a diminution of personal anxiety. Saying to himself every day that he must take some step, he yet took none save that literal step which brought him daily to the Museum. A fortnight, and he had actually resumed work; three weeks, and he was busy with the initial chapter of his great book; a month, and he scarcely troubled himself to remember that his income had vanished. For Mrs Mayhew did not let a day pass without assuring him that his ten pounds his share in the partnership produced more than enough to represent the cost of his board and lodging. He lived better than in the old days, had an excellent supper on coming home from the Museum, a warm breakfast before setting out. And these things caused him no astonishment. The literary recluse sees no limit to the potentialities of 'trade'.

At length he remembered that ten weeks had gone by, and on a Sunday morning he summoned his partner to a conference. The quondam charwoman looked a very presentable person as she entered in her Sunday gown. Though she still did a good deal of rough work, her hands were becoming softer and more shapely. In shop and house she had the assistance of a young girl, the daughter of the people who occupied the upper rooms, and it was this girl Amanda Wilkes by name, and known to her friends as 'Manda' who generally waited upon Filmer.

'Mrs Mayhew,' he began gravely, 'I begin to feel that I have no right to continue living in this way. You have long since paid me back the small sum I lent you'

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'Oh, but I have explained to you, sir,' broke in the other, who bated nothing of her accustomed respect, 'that money is always making more indeed it is. It makes enough for you to live upon, as long oh, as long as you like.'

The philologist drew a silent breath, and stared at the floor.

'Now don't trouble yourself, sir!' begged Mrs Mayhew, 'please don't! If you can be content to live here until '

'I am more than content so far as personal comfort goes. But well, let me explain to you. At last, I have really made a beginning with my book. If my misfortune hadn't happened I might have put it off for years; so, in one way, perhaps that loss was a good thing. I am working very hard '

'Oh, I know you are, Mr Filmer. I can't think how you do with so little sleep, sir. I'm sure I wonder your health doesn't break down.'

'No, no; I do well enough: I'm used to it. But the point is that I may be a year or two on this book a year or two, and how can I possibly go on presuming upon your great kindness to me '

Mrs Mayhew laughed, and for the hundredth time put before him the commercial view of the matter. Once again he suffered himself to be reassured, though with much nervous twitching of head and limbs; and after this he seldom recurred to his scruple.

Two years went by, and in the early months of the third Filmer's treatise lay finished. As he sat one evening by his fireside, smoking a delicious pipe, he flattered himself that he had made a solid contribution to the science of Comparative Philology. He was thirty-eight years old; young enough still to enjoy any honour or reward the learned world might choose to offer him. What he now had to do was to discover a publisher who would think this book worth the expense of printing. Long ago he had made up his mind that, if profit there were, Mrs Mayhew must share in it. Though his ten pounds had kept him alive all this time, yet clearly it would not have done so but for Mrs Mayhew's skill and labour; he felt himself vastly indebted to her, and earnestly hoped that he might be able to show his gratitude in some substantial form.

Fortune favoured him. His manuscript came into the hands of a generous scholar, a man after his own heart, who not only recommended it to the publisher in terms of enthusiasm, but expressed an earnest desire to make the acquaintance of the author. Filmer, no longer ashamed before his fellows, went forth from the hermitage above the chandler's shop, and was seen of men. He still had money enough to provide himself with decent clothing, and on a certain day his appearance so astonished Mrs Mayhew that she exclaimed tremulously:

'Are you going, Mr Filmer? Are you going to leave us?'

'I can't say,' was his nervous answer. 'I don't know yet whether I shall make any money by my book.'

He told her how things were tending.

'Oh,' she answered, 'then I'm sure you will soon get back to your proper position. After all, sir, you know, you oughtn't to be living in this poor way. You are a learned gentleman.'

Her voice was agitated, and her thoughts seemed to wander. The philologist examined her for a moment, but she turned away with a hurried excuse that she was wanted down stairs.

That day Filmer brooded.

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In another month it was known that his book would be published; whether he profited thereby must depend upon its success. In the meantime, one or two fragments of the work were to appear in the *Journal of Comparative Philology*; moreover, the author himself was to read a paper before an erudite society. Overcoming false delicacy, he had made known his position (without detail) to the philological friend who took so much interest in him, and before long a practical suggestion was made, which, if it could be carried out, would assure him at all events a modest livelihood.

Amid all this promise of prosperity, Filmer was beset by graver trouble than he had known since that disastrous day, now two years and a half ago. He could no longer doubt that the prospect of his departure affected Mrs Mayhew very painfully. She kept out of his way, and when meeting was inevitable spoke the fewest possible words. More, he had once, on entering his room unexpectedly, surprised her there in a tearful condition; yes, unmistakably weeping; and she hurried out of his sight.

What could it mean? Her business thrived; all appeared well with her. Could the mere thought of losing his companionship cause her such acute distress? If so

He took long walks, musing anxiously over the situation. At home he shrank into himself, moved without sound, tried, if such a thing were possible, to dwell in the house and yet not be there. He stayed out late at night, fearing to meet Mrs Mayhew as he entered. Ludicrous as it sounded to a man who had long since forgotten the softer dreams of youth, Mrs Mayhew might perchance have conceived an attachment for him. They had now known each other for many years, and long ago the simpleminded woman used to talk with him in a way that betrayed kindly feeling. She, it must be remembered, did not strictly belong to the class in which he found her; she was the daughter of a man of business, had gone to school, had been married to a solicitor's clerk. Probably her life contained a darker incident than anything she had disclosed; perhaps she had left her husband, or been repudiated by him. But a strong character ultimately saved her; she was now beyond reproach. And if he were about to inflict a great sorrow upon her, his own suffering would be scarcely less severe.

As he crept softly into the house one night, he came face to face with a tall man whom he remembered to have seen here on several former occasions; decently dressed, like a clerk or shopman, forty years old or so, and not ill-looking. Filmer, with a glance at him, gave good-evening, and, to his surprise, the stranger made no reply; nay, it seemed to him that he was regarded with a distinctly unamiable stare. This troubled him for the moment, sensitive as he was, but he concluded that the ill-conditioned fellow was a friend of the family upstairs, and soon forgot the occurrence.

A day or two later, as the girl 'Manda served his breakfast, she looked at him oddly, and seemed desirous of saying something. This young person was now about seventeen, and rather given to friskiness, though Mrs Mayhew called her an excellent girl, and treated her like a sister.

'If you please, Mr Filmer,' she began, in an unusually diffident tone.

'Yes?'

'Is it true that you're going to leave us, sir?'

She smirked a little, and altogether behaved strangely.

'Who told you I was going to?' asked Filmer.

'Oh! Mrs Mayhew said as it was likely, sir.'

Again she dropped her eyes, and fidgeted. The philologist, much disturbed, spoke on an impulse.

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'Yes,' he said, 'I am going very soon. I may have to leave any day.'

'Oh!' was the reply, and to his ears it sounded like an expression of relief. But why 'Manda should be glad of his departure he could not imagine.

However, his resolve was taken. He had no right to remain here. Prospects or no prospects, he would engage a room in quite a different part of the town, and make his few pounds last as long as possible.

And on this resolve he had the strength to act. Dreadful to him in anticipation, the parting with Mrs Mayhew came about in the simplest and easiest way. When he had made known his purpose with nervous solemnity which tried to mask as genial friendliness the listener kept a brief silence. Then she asked, in a low voice, whether he was quite sure that he had means enough to live upon. Oh yes; he felt no uneasiness, things were shaping themselves satisfactorily.

'Of course, Mrs Mayhew, we are not saying good-bye.' He laughed, as if in mockery of the idea. 'We shall see each other from time to time often! Such old friends'

Her dubious look and incomplete phrase of assent her eyes cast down troubled him profoundly. But the dreaded interview was over. In a few days he removed his furniture. Happily the leave-taking was not in private; 'Manda and her mother both shared in it; yet poor Mrs Mayhew's eyes had a sorrowful dimness, and her attempted gaiety weighed upon his spirits.

He lived now in the South-west of London, and refrained even from visits to the British Museum. The breaking-up of his life-long habits, the idleness into which he had fallen, encouraged a morbid activity of conscience; under gray autumnal skies he walked about the roads and the parks, by the riverside, and sometimes beyond the limits of town, but there was no escape from a remorseful memory. When two or three weeks had passed, his unrest began to be complicated with fears of destitution. But, of a sudden, the half promise that had been made to him was fulfilled: the erudite society offered him a post which, in his modest computation, represented all that a man could desire of worldly prosperity. He could now establish himself beneath some reputable roof, repurchase his books, look forward to a life of congenial duty and intellectual devotion. But

His wandering steps brought him to the Chelsea Embankment, where he leaned upon the parapet, and gazed at the sullen river.

To whom to whom did he owe all this? Who was it that had saved him at that black time when he thought of death as his only friend? Who had toiled for him, cared for him, whilst he wrote his book? Now at length he was able to evince gratitude otherwise than in mere words, and like a dastard he slunk away. He had deserted the woman who loved him.

And why? She was not his equal; yet certainly not so far his inferior that, even in the sight of the world, he need be ashamed of her. The merest cowardice, the plainest selfishness, withheld him from returning to Mrs Mayhew and making her that offer which he was in honour bound to make.

Yes, in honour bound. Thus far had his delicate sensibilities, his philosophical magnanimity, impelled the lonely scholar. Love of woman he knew not, but a generous warmth of heart enabled him to contemplate the wooing and wedding of his benefactress without repugnance. In a sense it would be loss of liberty; but might he not find compensation in domestic comfort, in the tender care that would be lavished upon him? But the higher view a duty discharged, a heart solaced

The next day was Sunday. In the morning there fell heavy rain: after noon the clouds swept eastward, and rays of sunlight glistened on the wet streets. Filmer had sat totally unoccupied. He made a pretence of eating the dinner

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that was brought to him, and then, having attired himself as though he had not a minute to lose, left home. Travelling by omnibus, he reached the neighbourhood hitherto so carefully shunned; he walked rapidly to the familiar street, and, with heart throbbing painfully, he stood before the little chandler's shop, which of course was closed.

A knock at the house-door. It was answered by 'Manda, who stared and smiled, and seemed neither glad nor sorry to see him, but somehow in perturbation.

'Is Mrs Mayhew in?' whispered, rather than spoke, the philologist.

'No, sir. She went out not long ago with Mr Marshall. And she won't be back just yet p'r'aps not till supper.'

'With with Mr Marshall?'

'Yes, sir,' Manda grinned. 'They're going to be married next Saturday, sir.'

Filmer straightened himself and stood like a soldier at attention.

'To be married? Mrs Mayhew?'

The girl laughed, nodded, seemed greatly amused.

'I should like to come in, and and speak to you for a moment.'

'Oh yes, sir,' she smirked. 'There's nobody in. Would you mind coming into the shop?'

He followed. The well-remembered odour of Mrs Mayhew's merchandise enveloped him about, and helped still further to confuse his thoughts in a medley of past and present. Over the shop window hung a dirty yellow blind, through which the sunshine struggled dimly. Filmer hesitated for a moment.

'Who is Mr Marshall, 'Manda?' he was able to ask at length.

'Don't you know, sir?' She stood before him in a perky attitude, her fingers interlaced. 'You've seen him. A tall man dark-looking '

'Ah! Yes, I remember. I have seen him. How long has Mrs Mayhew known him?'

'Oh, a long, long time. He lent her a lot of money when she started the shop. They'd have been married before, only Mr Marshall's wife was alive in a 'sylum.'

'In an asylum?'

'Brought on by drink, they say. There's all sorts of tales about her.'

The philologist eased himself by moving a few paces. He looked from the pile of firewood bundles before the counter to a row of canisters on the topmost shelf.

'I'm glad to hear this,' at length fell from his lips. 'Just say I called; and that I I'll call again some day.'

'Manda's odd expression arrested his eyes. He turned away, however, and stepped out into the passage, where little if any daylight penetrated. Behind him, 'Manda spoke.

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'I don't think I'd come again, sir.'

'Why not?'

He tried to see her face, but she kept in shadow.

'Mr Marshall mightn't like it, sir. Nor Mrs Mayhew Mrs Marshall as will be.'

'Not like it?'

'You won't say anything, if I tell you?' said the girl, in a low and hurried yet laughing tone. 'It made a little trouble because you was here. Mr Marshall thought ' a giggle filled the lacuna. 'And Mrs Mayhew didn't like to say anything to you. She's that kind to everybody '

Filmer stretched his hand to the door, fumbled at the latch, and at length got out. It took some hours before his shamefaced misery yielded to the blissful sense of relief and of freedom.