

In No-Man's Land

George Gissing

Table of Contents

<u>In No-Man's Land</u>	1
<u>George Gissing</u>	1

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It was in the smoking-room of a second-rate commercial hotel. A rakish fellow, newly back from the Colonies, began to abuse England; he hated a country where there was no free space, where every inch of ground belonged to some landlord or other, where you couldn't live without paying rent

'Hold on!' cried Cogswell, who had done well at the races, and was in merry mood; 'there's people living in England who pay no rent. Yes, living in houses they don't own, and without any landlord houses as haven't belonged to anybody for no one knows how long.'

'Go along!'

'I tell you it's true. You'd like to know where, wouldn't you? Well, the place is in London. I'll tell you so much, and charge nothing for the information.'

There was a laugh, and Cogswell, who had to catch a train, went off; without saying any more. During the journey to London, he was unusually meditative. An odd thing, he said to himself, that for all these years he had never thought of Peter's Passage. The old state of things, perhaps, no longer existed; yet possibly it did, and, in that case, wasn't it worth thinking about? How long ago? Why, he left Peter's Passage, as a lad of ten or so, in '55, and it was now '75. Many changes happen in twenty years. All the same, he would go down East, and have a look.

Since boyhood, his rambling, haphazard life had never led him to that murky corner of East London. Peter's Passage lay in the mid-squalor of a region of small manufactories, and was unknown even to the rent-collector. Seven houses there were, wretched hovels, each containing four rooms. Cogswell remembered that his father, after occupying one of them for a long time, and wishing to remove, sold the key of the house for two pounds to another man. He well recollected his father's talk about the business: how, in Peter's Passage, all the occupiers lived rent-free, no one ever having heard of a landlord. Miserable enough, the life of these quasi-freeholders. Old Cogswell occasionally worked at some sort of factory; now and then he was a costermonger. His children, hungry and in rags, practically supported themselves from the time when they were able to talk; begging, stealing, doing jobs for neighbours, selling things in the streets. To-day, only one of the family survived, and he, not without reason, regarded himself as a very lucky man, for he had notably risen in the world, often had a pocketful of money, and not often felt shy of the police. For this Cogswell thanked his own wits, and, to a certain extent, his own honest effort. Had he not laboriously learnt to read and to write? Had he not, long before he was twenty, known a greater variety of occupations, some of them terribly hard, than most men know in a lifetime? Nowadays, he could dress well and eat well, and flattered himself that he looked a gentleman. At all events, he had dealings with many a so-called gentleman who would only be too glad to change places with him.

He sought out Peter's Passage, and saw at a glance that, externally, nothing had been altered. To his changed eyes, it seemed a hideous hole; though not given to sentiment, he stood for a moment pitying the days of his childhood. Assuming a grave important air, he walked the length of the passage there were houses only on one side, the blank wall of a timber yard—on the other—and viewed the buildings. Women in doorways regarded him curiously; he gave them a keen business-like glance. Then, taking out a note-book, he made certain jottings, while a group of children came together to observe him. Finally, he stepped up to the door of the first house; it

In No-Man's Land

was open, and a woman confronted him.

'Who is the occupier of this house?'

'What's that to you?'

Cogswell desired to make himself agreeable, and had no difficulty in doing so. Presently he was talking with a cluster of people, suavely, facetiously; and though no one would reply in plain terms to a plain question, he learnt that, beyond doubt, Peter's Passage was still occupied by mere squatters, some of whom, apparently, had held their houses for a good many years. All the time, he assiduously made notes in his pocket-book.

'How long' he looked round at the dirty, haggard faces 'how long is it since you had any repairs done?'

Repairs? The word seemed to be unknown. There was a laugh, and someone spat, as if in disgust, but no voice made answer.

'Can't you understand? When was the houses done up paint and plaster?'

A palsied old man uttered a squeaking laugh, which the children echoed mockingly. As Cogswell knew without asking, several voices informed him that new paint and plaster were unheard of in Peter's Passage.

'Very well. I shall send my workmen in on Monday morning, and you'll all be put straight. I am the landlord. I shall either come myself or send my agent one day next week, and the occupier of each house will be entered on my books.'

He had played his part very skilfully, and the matter-of-fact tone of these last remarks, authoritative, yet not such as to give offence, made an obvious impression. When he turned away, with a civil 'Good morning,' no insult was shouted. The group of tatterdemalions stared after him, silent, wonder-stricken. Just as he disappeared round the corner, a faint ray of the April sun gleamed on his silk hat, and this last glimpse of dignity helped to prolong the effect produced by his speech.

Chuckling over that happy idea of the repairs, and all but assured of success if he kept the game up with sufficient audacity, Cogswell lost no time in looking for a small builder who would serve his purpose. He discovered the suitable man in a district neither too near nor too remote and held a consultation with him, merely explaining that the property had just come into his hands. In due time he received an estimate of costs, which, when he had cut it down by half, he agreed to accept. And forthwith the job was undertaken. Peter's Passage underwent a tolerable cleaning and patching, of course without disturbance of the tenants, who simply held their tongues. When the work was nearly done, Cogswell came over to inspect, and, on the same occasion, he tried to obtain a list of the occupiers' names; but only in three out of the seven houses was he successful. Never mind, he said to himself, all in good time. It was plain that no one felt able to accuse him of imposture. The rents would soon recoup him for his small outlay; then, for the future, he could count upon a pleasant little sum as weekly addition to his income. It was a capital idea, and well worth the trouble.

To give the thing a more formal appearance, he arranged with the builder by name, Smethurst to act as his agent in collecting rents. Smethurst, as soon as the repairs were finished, delivered at each house a printed notice, making demand of a certain weekly rent, due immediately. As usual in this locality, rents would be collected on Monday, and on Monday afternoon Cogswell, full of hope, kept an appointment with his agent at the latter's place of business.

'Well, Smethurst? No trouble, had you?'

In No-Man's Land

'Trouble?' answered the other with a grin. 'No, not much trouble. But I got no money, either.'

'Eh? They won't pay their rents?'

'Not a blessed farden! They say they never have done, and they ain't a-goin' to begin.'

Cogswell, dark of countenance, made his way to the Passage. He had much ado to refrain from evil language: but, keeping up the show of matter-of-fact procedure, he proclaimed at each house that either rent must be paid or the premises vacated. All he got in return was mocking and defiance. The people did not contest his authority; they merely refused to pay, and bade him do what he would. One man declared that he had occupied the house and paid rates for fifteen years; another asserted the like status for very nearly as long. Let him try to turn them out; maybe he wouldn't find it so easy.

The struggle continued for some weeks if struggle it could be called, where the one side could only employ impotent threats, and the other remained contemptuously passive. Cogswell found he had overreached himself; there was Smethurst's bill to pay, and no prospect of a penny from the ungrateful tenants whose dwellings he had so generously restored. Had it been possible, he would, of course, have left the builder in the lurch; but, in his gay confidence, he had allowed Smethurst to get too sure a hold upon him; if the man sued for his money, the affair might have unpleasant consequences. Cogswell paid, and cursed the home of his childhood.