

# **A Poor Gentleman**

George Gissing



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# A Poor Gentleman

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It was in the drawing-room, after dinner. Mrs Charman, the large and kindly hostess, sank into a chair beside her little friend Mrs Loring, and sighed a question.

'How do you like Mr Tymperley?'

'Very nice. Just a little peculiar.'

'Oh, he is peculiar! Quite original. I wanted to tell you about him before we went down, but there wasn't time. Such a very old friend of ours. My dear husband and he were at school together — Harrovians. The sweetest, the most affectionate character! Too good for this world, I'm afraid; he takes everything so seriously. I shall never forget his grief at my poor husband's death — I'm telling Mrs Loring about Mr Tymperley, Ada.'

She addressed her married daughter, a quiet young woman who reproduced Mrs Charman's good-natured countenance, with something more of intelligence, the reflective serenity of a higher type.

'I'm sorry to see him looking so far from well,' remarked Mrs Weare, in reply.

'He never had any colour, you know, and his life. . . . But I must tell you,' she resumed to Mrs Loring. 'He's a bachelor, in comfortable circumstances, and — would you believe it? — he lives quite alone in one of the distressing parts of London. Where is it, Ada?'

'A poor street in Islington.'

'Yes. There he lives, I'm afraid in shocking lodgings — it must be so unhealthy — just to become acquainted with the life of poor people, and be helpful to them. Isn't it heroic? He seems to have given up his whole life to it. One never meets him anywhere; I think ours is the only house where he's seen. A noble life! He never talks about it. I'm sure you would never have suspected such a thing from his conversation at dinner?'

'Not for a moment,' answered Mrs Loring, astonished. 'He wasn't very gossipy — I gathered that his chief interests were fretwork and foreign politics.'

Mrs Weare laughed. 'The very man! When I was a little girl he used to make all sorts of pretty things for me with his fret-saw; and when I grew old enough, he instructed me in the balance of Power. It's possible, mamma, that he writes leading articles. We should never hear of it.'

'My dear, anything is possible with Mr Tymperley. And such a change, this, after his country life. He had a beautiful little house near ours, in Berkshire. I really can't help thinking that my husband's death caused him to leave it. He was so attached to Mr Charman! When my husband died, and we left Berkshire, we altogether lost sight of him — oh, for a couple of years. Then I met him by chance in London. Ada thinks there must have been some sentimental trouble.'

'Dear mamma,' interposed the daughter, 'it was you, not I, who suggested that.'

'Was it? Well, perhaps it was. One can't help seeing that he has gone through something. Of course it may be only pity for the poor souls he gives his life to. A wonderful man!'

When masculine voices sounded at the drawing-room door, Mrs Loring looked curiously for the eccentric gentleman. He entered last of all. A man of more than middle height, but much bowed in the shoulders; thin, ungraceful, with an irresolute step and a shy demeanour; his pale-grey eyes, very soft in expression, looked timidly this way and that from beneath brows nervously bent, and a self-obliterating smile wavered upon his lips. His hair had begun to thin and to turn grey, but he had a heavy moustache, which would better have sorted with sterner lineaments. As he walked — or sidled — into the room, his hands kept shutting and opening, with rather ludicrous effect. Something which was not exactly shabbiness, but a lack of lustre, of finish, singled him among the group of men; looking closer, one saw that his black suit belonged to a fashion some years old. His linen was irreproachable, but he wore no sort of jewellery, one little black stud showing on his front, and at the cuffs, solitaires of the same simple description.

He drifted into a corner, and there would have sat alone, seemingly at peace, had not Mrs Weare presently

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moved to a seat beside him.

'I hope you won't be staying in town through August, Mr Tymperley?'

'No! — Oh no! — Oh no, I think not!'

'But you seem uncertain. Do forgive me if I say that I'm sure you need a change. Really, you know, you are not looking quite the thing. Now, can't I persuade you to join us at Lucerne? My husband would be so pleased — delighted to talk with you about the state of Europe. Give us a fortnight — do!'

'My dear Mrs Weare, you are kindness itself! I am deeply grateful. I can't easily express my sense of your most friendly thoughtfulness. But, the truth is, I am half engaged to other friends. Indeed, I think I may almost say that I have practically . . . yes, indeed, it amounts to that.'

He spoke in a thin fluting voice, with a preciseness of enunciation akin to the more feebly clerical, and with smiles which became almost lachrymose in their expressiveness as he dropped from phrase to phrase of embarrassed circumlocution. And his long bony hands writhed together till the knuckles were white.

'Well, so long as you are going away. I'm so afraid lest your conscientiousness should go too far. You won't benefit anybody, you know, by making yourself ill.'

'Obviously not! — Ha, ha! — I assure you that fact is patent to me. Health is a primary consideration. Nothing more detrimental to one's usefulness than an impaired. . . . Oh, to be sure, to be sure!'

'There's the strain upon your sympathies. That must affect one's health, quite apart from an unhealthy atmosphere.'

'But Islington is not unhealthy, my dear Mrs Weare! Believe me, the air has often quite a tonic quality. We are so high, you must remember. If only we could subdue in some degree the noxious exhalations of domestic and industrial chimneys! — Oh, I assure you, Islington has every natural feature of salubrity.'

Before the close of the evening there was a little music, which Mr Tymperley seemed much to enjoy. He let his head fall back, and stared upwards; remaining rapt in that posture for some moments after the music ceased, and at length recovering himself with a sigh.

When he left the house, he donned an overcoat considerably too thick for the season, and bestowed in the pockets his patent-leather shoes. His hat was a hard felt, high in the crown. He grasped an ill-folded umbrella, and set forth at a brisk walk, as if for the neighbouring station. But the railway was not his goal, nor yet the omnibus. Through the ambrosial night he walked and walked, at the steady pace of one accustomed to pedestrian exercise: from Notting Hill Gate to the Marble Arch; from the Marble Arch to New Oxford Street; thence by Theobald's Road to Pentonville, and up, and up, until he attained the heights of his own salubrious quarter. Long after midnight he entered a narrow byway, which the pale moon showed to be decent, though not inviting. He admitted himself with a latchkey to a little house which smelt of glue, lit a candle—end which he found in his pocket, and ascended two flights of stairs to a back bedroom, its size eight feet by seven and a half. A few minutes more, and he lay sound asleep.

Waking at eight o'clock — he knew the time by a bell that clanged in the neighbourhood — Mr Tymperley clad himself with nervous haste. On opening his door, he found lying outside a tray, with the materials of a breakfast reduced to its lowest terms: half a pint of milk, bread, butter. At nine o'clock he went downstairs, tapped civilly at the door of the front parlour, and by an untuned voice was bidden enter. The room was occupied by an oldish man and a girl, addressing themselves to the day's work of plain bookbinding.

'Good morning to you, sir,' said Mr Tymperley, bending his head. 'Good morning, Miss Suggs. Bright! Sunny! How it cheers one!'

He stood rubbing his hands, as one might on a morning of sharp frost. The bookbinder, with a dry nod for greeting, forthwith set Mr Tymperley a task, to which that gentleman zealously applied himself. He was learning the elementary processes of the art. He worked with patience, and some show of natural aptitude, all through the working hours of the day.

To this pass had things come with Mr Tymperley, a gentleman of Berkshire, once living in comfort and modest dignity on the fruit of sound investments. Schooled at Harrow, a graduate of Cambridge, he had meditated the choice of a profession until it seemed, on the whole, too late to profess anything at all; and, as there was no need of such exertion, he settled himself to a life of innocent idleness, hard by the country-house of his wealthy and influential friend, Mr Charman. Softly the years flowed by. His thoughts turned once or twice to marriage, but a profound diffidence withheld him from the initial step; in the end, he knew himself born for bachelorhood, and

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with that estate was content. Well for him had he seen as clearly the delusiveness of other temptations! In an evil moment he listened to Mr Charman, whose familiar talk was of speculation, of companies, of shining percentages. Not on his own account was Mr Tymperley lured: he had enough and to spare; but he thought of his sister, married to an unsuccessful provincial barrister, and of her six children, whom it would be pleasant to help, like the opulent uncle of fiction, at their entering upon the world. In Mr Charman he put blind faith, with the result that one morning he found himself shivering on the edge of ruin; the touch of confirmatory news, and over he went.

No one was aware of it but Mr Charman himself, and he, a few days later, lay sick unto death. Mr Charman's own estate suffered inappreciably from what to his friend meant sheer disaster. And Mr Tymperley breathed not a word to the widow; spoke not a word to any one at all, except the lawyer, who quietly wound up his affairs, and the sister whose children must needs go without avuncular aid. During the absence of his friendly neighbours after Mr Charman's death, he quietly disappeared.

The poor gentleman was then close upon forty years old. There remained to him a capital which he durst not expend; invested, it bore him an income upon which a labourer could scarce have subsisted. The only possible place of residence — because the only sure place of hiding — was London, and to London Mr Tymperley betook himself. Not at once did he learn the art of combating starvation with minimum resources. During his initiatory trials he was once brought so low, by hunger and humiliation, that he swallowed something of his pride, and wrote to a certain acquaintance, asking counsel and indirect help. But only a man in Mr Tymperley's position learns how vain is well-meaning advice, and how impotent is social influence. Had he begged for money, he would have received, no doubt, a cheque, with words of compassion; but Mr Tymperley could never bring himself to that.

He tried to make profit of his former amusement, fretwork, and to a certain extent succeeded, earning in six months half a sovereign. But the prospect of adding one pound a year to his starveling dividends did not greatly exhilarate him.

All this time he was of course living in absolute solitude. Poverty is the great secluder — unless one belongs to the rank which is born to it a sensitive man who no longer finds himself on equal terms with his natural associates, shrinks into loneliness, and learns with some surprise how very willing people are to forget his existence. London is a wilderness abounding in anchorites — voluntary or constrained. As he wandered about the streets and parks, or killed time in museums and galleries (where nothing had to be paid), Mr Tymperley often recognised brethren in seclusion; he understood the furtive glance which met his own, he read the peaked visage, marked with understanding sympathy the shabby-genteel apparel. No interchange of confidences between these lurking mortals; they would like to speak, but pride holds them aloof; each goes on his silent and unfriended way, until, by good luck, he finds himself in hospital or workhouse, when at length the tongue is loosed, and the sore heart pours forth its reproach of the world.

Strange knowledge comes to a man in this position. He learns wondrous economies, and will feel a sort of pride in his ultimate discovery of how little money is needed to support life. In his old days Mr Tymperley would have laid it down as an axiom that 'one' cannot live on less than such-and-such an income; he found that 'a man' can live on a few coppers a day. He became aware of the prices of things to eat, and was taught the relative virtues of nutriment. Perforce a vegetarian, he found that a vegetable diet was good for his health, and delivered to himself many a scornful speech on the habits of the carnivorous multitude. He of necessity abjured alcohols, and straightway longed to utter his testimony on a teetotal platform. These were his satisfactions. They compensate astonishingly for the loss of many kinds of self-esteem.

But it happened one day that, as he was in the act of drawing his poor little quarterly salvage at the Bank of England, a lady saw him and knew him. It was Mr Charman's widow.

'Why, Mr Tymperley, what has become of you all this time? Why have I never heard from you? Is it true, as some one told me, that you have been living abroad?'

So utterly was he disconcerted, that in a mechanical way he echoed the lady's last word: 'Abroad.'

'But why didn't you write to us?' pursued Mrs Charman, leaving him no time to say more. 'How very unkind! Why did you go away without a word? My daughter says that we must have unconsciously offended you in some way. Do explain! Surely there can't have been anything ——'

'My dear Mrs Charman, it is I alone who am to blame. I . . . the explanation is difficult; it involves a multiplicity of detail. I beg you to interpret my unjustifiable behaviour as — as pure idiosyncrasy.'

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'Oh, you must come and see me. You know that Ada's married? Yes, nearly a year ago. How glad she will be to see you again. So often she has spoken of you. When can you dine? To-morrow?'

'With pleasure — with great pleasure.'

'Delightful!'

She gave her address, and they parted.

Now, a proof that Mr Tymperley had never lost all hope of restitution to his native world lay in the fact of his having carefully preserved an evening-suit, with the appropriate patent-leather shoes. Many a time had he been sorely tempted to sell these seeming superfluities; more than once, towards the end of his pinched quarter, the suit had been pledged for a few shillings; but to part with the supreme symbol of respectability would have meant despair — a state of mind alien to Mr Tymperley's passive fortitude. His jewellery, even watch and chain, had long since gone: such gauds are not indispensable to a gentleman's outfit. He now congratulated himself on his prudence, for the meeting with Mrs Charman had delighted as much as it embarrassed him, and the prospect of an evening in society made his heart glow. He hastened home; he examined his garb of ceremony with anxious care, and found no glaring defect in it. A shirt, a collar, a necktie must needs be purchased; happily he had the means. But how explain himself? Could he confess his place of abode, his startling poverty? To do so would be to make an appeal to the compassion of his old friends, and from that he shrank in horror. A gentleman will not, if it can possibly be avoided, reveal circumstances likely to cause pain. Must he, then, tell or imply a falsehood? The whole truth involved a reproach of Mrs Charman's husband — a thought he could not bear.

The next evening found him still worrying over this dilemma. He reached Mrs Charman's house without having come to any decision. In the drawing-room three persons awaited him: the hostess, with her daughter and son-in-law, Mr and Mrs Weare. The cordiality of his reception moved him all but to tears; overcome by many emotions, he lost his head. He talked at random; and the result was so strange a piece of fiction, that no sooner had he evolved it than he stood aghast at himself.

It came in reply to the natural question where he was residing.

'At present' — he smiled fatuously — 'I inhabit a bed-sitting-room in a little street up at Islington.'

Dead silence followed. Eyes of wonder were fixed upon him. But for those eyes, who knows what confession Mr Tymperley might have made? As it was. . . .

'I said, Mrs Charman, that I had to confess to an eccentricity. I hope it won't shock you. To be brief, I have devoted my poor energies to social work. I live among the poor, and as one of them, to obtain knowledge that cannot be otherwise procured.'

'Oh, how noble!' exclaimed the hostess.

The poor gentleman's conscience smote him terribly. He could say no more. To spare his delicacy, his friends turned the conversation. Then or afterwards, it never occurred to them to doubt the truth of what he had said. Mrs Charman had seen him transacting business at the Bank of England, a place not suggestive of poverty; and he had always passed for a man somewhat original in his views and ways. Thus was Mr Tymperley committed to a singular piece of deception, a fraud which could not easily be discovered, and which injured only its perpetrator.

Since then about a year had elapsed. Mr Tymperley had seen his friends perhaps half a dozen times, his enjoyment of their society pathetically intense, but troubled by any slightest allusion to his mode of life. It had come to be understood that he made it a matter of principle to hide his light under a bushel, so he seldom had to take a new step in positive falsehood. Of course he regretted ceaselessly the original deceit, for Mrs Charman, a wealthy woman, might very well have assisted him to some not undignified mode of earning his living. As it was, he had hit upon the idea of making himself a bookbinder, a craft somewhat to his taste. For some months he had lodged in the bookbinder's house; one day courage came to him, and he entered into a compact with his landlord, whereby he was to pay for instruction by a certain period of unremunerated work after he became proficient. That stage was now approaching. On the whole, he felt much happier than in the time of brooding idleness. He looked forward to the day when he would have a little more money in his pocket, and no longer dread the last fortnight of each quarter, with its supperless nights.

Mrs Weare's invitation to Lucerne cost him pangs. Lucerne! Surely it was in some former state of existence that he had taken delightful holidays as a matter of course. He thought of the many lovely places he knew, and so many dream-landscapes; the London streets made them infinitely remote, utterly unreal. His three years of gloom and hardship were longer than all the life of placid contentment that came before. Lucerne! A man of more



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vigorous temper would have been maddened at the thought; but Mr Tymperley nursed it all day long, his emotions only expressing themselves in a little sigh or a sadly wistful smile.

Having dined so well yesterday, he felt it his duty to expend less than usual on to-day's meals. About eight o'clock in the evening, after a meditative stroll in the air which he had so praised, he entered the shop where he was wont to make his modest purchases. A fat woman behind the counter nodded familiarly to him, with a grin at another customer. Mr Tymperley bowed, as was his courteous habit.

'Oblige me,' he said, 'with one new-laid egg, and a small, crisp lettuce.'

'Only one to-night, eh?' said the woman.

'Thank you, only one,' he replied, as if speaking in a drawing-room. 'Forgive me if I express a hope that it will be, in the strict sense of the word, new-laid. The last, I fancy, had got into that box by some oversight — pardonable in the press of business.'

'They're always the same,' said the fat shopkeeper. 'We don't make no mistakes of that kind.'

'Ah! Forgive me! Perhaps I imagined ——'

Egg and lettuce were carefully deposited in a little handbag he carried, and he returned home. An hour later, when his meal was finished, and he sat on a straight-backed chair meditating in the twilight, a rap sounded at his door, and a letter was handed to him. So rarely did a letter arrive for Mr Tymperley that his hand shook as he examined the envelope. On opening it, the first thing he saw was a cheque. This excited him still more; he unfolded the written sheet with agitation. It came from Mrs Weare, who wrote thus: —

My Dear Mr Tymperley,

After our talk last evening, I could not help thinking of you and your beautiful life of self-sacrifice. I contrasted the lot of these poor people with my own, which, one cannot but feel, is so undeservedly blest and so rich in enjoyments. As a result of these thoughts, I feel impelled to send you a little contribution to your good work — a sort of thank-offering at the moment of setting off for a happy holiday. Divide the money, please, among two or three of your most deserving pensioners; or, if you see fit, give it all to one. I cling to the hope that we may see you at Lucerne.

With very kind regards.

The cheque was for five pounds. Mr Tymperley held it up by the window, and gazed at it. By his present standards of value five pounds seemed a very large sum. Think of what one could do with it! His boots — which had been twice repaired — would not decently serve him much longer. His trousers were in the last stage of presentability. The hat he wore (how carefully tended!) was the same in which he had come to London three years ago. He stood in need, verily, of a new equipment from head to foot; and in Islington five pounds would more than cover the whole expense. When, pray, was he likely to have such a sum at his free disposal?

He sighed deeply, and stared about him in the dusk.

The cheque was crossed. For the first time in his life Mr Tymperley perceived that the crossing of a cheque may occasion its recipient a great deal of trouble. How was he to get it changed? He knew his landlord for a suspicious curmudgeon, and refusal of the favour, with such a look as Mr Suggs knew how to give, would be a sore humiliation; besides, it was very doubtful whether Mr Suggs could make any use of the cheque himself. To whom else could he apply? Literally, to no one in London.

Well, the first thing to do was to answer Mrs Weare's letter. He lit his lamp and sat down at the crazy little deal table; but his pen dipped several times into the ink before he found himself able to write.

'Dear Mrs Weare,' —

Then, so long a pause that he seemed to be falling asleep. With a jerk, he bent again to his task.

'With sincere gratitude I acknowledge the receipt of your most kind and generous donation. The money...

(Again his hand lay idle for several minutes.)

'shall be used as you wish, and I will render to you a detailed account of the benefits conferred by it.'

Never had he found composition so difficult. He felt that he was expressing himself wretchedly; a clog was on his brain. It cost him an exertion of physical strength to conclude the letter. When it was done, he went out, purchased a stamp at a tobacconist's shop, and dropped the envelope into the post.

Little slumber had Mr Tymperley that night. On lying down, he began to wonder where he should find the poor people worthy of sharing in this benefaction. Of course he had no acquaintance with the class of persons of whom Mrs Weare was thinking. In a sense, all the families round about were poor, but — he asked himself — had

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poverty the same meaning for them as for him? Was there a man or woman in this grimy street who, compared with himself, had any right to be called poor at all? An educated man forced to live among the lower classes arrives at many interesting conclusions with regard to them; one conclusion long since fixed in Mr Tymperley's mind was that the 'suffering' of those classes is very much exaggerated by outsiders using a criterion quite inapplicable. He saw around him a world of coarse jollity, of contented labour, and of brutal apathy. It seemed to him more than probable that the only person in this street conscious of poverty, and suffering under it, was himself.

From nightmarish dozing, he started with a vivid thought, a recollection which seemed to pierce his brain. To whom did he owe his fall from comfort and self-respect, and all his long miseries? To Mrs Weare's father. And, from this point of view, might the cheque for five pounds be considered as mere restitution? Might it not strictly be applicable to his own necessities?

Another little gap of semi-consciousness led to another strange reflection. What if Mrs Weare (a sensible woman) suspected, or even had discovered, the truth about him? What if she secretly meant the money for his own use?

Earliest daylight made this suggestion look very insubstantial; on the other hand, it strengthened his memory of Mr Charman's virtual indebtedness to him. He jumped out of bed to reach the cheque, and for an hour lay with it in his hand. Then he rose and dressed mechanically.

After the day's work he rambled in a street of large shops. A bootmaker's arrested him; he stood before the window for a long time, turning over and over in his pocket a sovereign — no small fraction of the ready coin which had to support him until dividend day. Then he crossed the threshold.

Never did man use less discretion in the purchase of a pair of boots. His business was transacted in a dream; he spoke without hearing what he said; he stared at objects without perceiving them. The result was that not till he had got home, with his easy old footgear under his arm, did he become aware that the new boots pinched him most horribly. They creaked too: heavens! how they creaked! But doubtless all new boots had these faults; he had forgotten; it was so long since he had bought a pair. The fact was, he felt dreadfully tired, utterly worn out. After munching a mouthful of supper he crept into bed.

All night long he warred with his new boots. Footsore, he limped about the streets of a spectral city, where at every corner some one seemed to lie in ambush for him, and each time the lurking enemy proved to be no other than Mrs Weare, who gazed at him with scornful eyes and let him totter by. The creaking of the boots was an articulate voice, which ever and anon screamed at him a terrible name. He shrank and shivered and groaned; but on he went, for in his hand he held a crossed cheque, which he was bidden to get changed, and no one would change it. What a night!

When he woke his brain was heavy as lead; but his meditations were very lucid. Pray, what did he mean by that insane outlay of money, which he could not possibly afford, on a new (and detestable) pair of boots? The old would have lasted, at all events, till winter began. What was in his mind when he entered the shop? Did he intend . . . ? Merciful powers!

Mr Tymperley was not much of a psychologist. But all at once he saw with awful perspicacity the moral crisis through which he had been living. And it taught him one more truth on the subject of poverty.

Immediately after his breakfast he went downstairs and tapped at the door of Mr Suggs' sitting-room.

'What is it?' asked the bookbinder, who was eating his fourth large rasher, and spoke with his mouth full.

'Sir, I beg leave of absence for an hour or two this morning. Business of some moment demands my attention.'

Mr Suggs answered, with the grace natural to his order, 'I s'pose you can do as you like. I don't pay you nothing.'

The other bowed and withdrew.

Two days later he again penned a letter to Mrs Weare. It ran thus:

The money which you so kindly sent, and which I have already acknowledged, has now been distributed. To ensure a proper use of it, I handed the cheque, with clear instructions, to a clergyman in this neighbourhood, who has been so good as to jot down, on the sheet enclosed, a memorandum of his beneficiaries, which I trust will be satisfactory and gratifying to you.

But why, you will ask, did I have recourse to a clergyman? why did I not use my own experience, and give myself the pleasure of helping poor souls in whom I have a personal interest — I who have devoted my life to this

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mission of mercy ?

The answer is brief and plain. I have lied to you.

I am not living in this place of my free will. I am not devoting myself to works of charity. I am — no, no, I was — merely a poor gentleman, who, on a certain day, found that he had wasted his substance in a foolish speculation, and who, ashamed to take his friends into his confidence, fled to a life of miserable obscurity. You see that I have added disgrace to misfortune. I will not tell you how very near I came to something still worse.

I have been serving an apprenticeship to a certain handicraft which will, I doubt not, enable me so to supplement my own scanty resources that I shall be in better circumstances than hitherto. I entreat you to forgive me, if you can, and henceforth to forget

Yours unworthily,

S. V. TYMPERLEY