

Raw Material

George Gissing

Table of Contents

<u>Raw Material</u>	1
<u>George Gissing</u>	2

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'From the registry, mum! They informed me that you was in want of a domestic 'elp.'

And she stood with head aside, amiably ogling from beneath drooped eyelids. A perfume hung about her; she was dressed with cheap elaboration and spoke as one conscious of refinement.

Mrs. Pool since her marriage a few months ago had suffered from two general servants. The state of her health made it absolutely necessary that she should find a trustworthy person to help in the little house, but she was nervous, diffident, and without the practical instinct. This young woman from the registry-office rather overawed her, but, after the late experiences, she was tempted by a show of personal cleanliness — a suggestion of sympathetic good-nature. There ensued a conversation in the eight-foot square drawing-room. The applicant talked freely of herself, with a gentle, languid air of long endurance. She had been a lady's maid; she had received very high wages; but, oh! the unkindness, the humiliations she had had to put up with; What she wanted was a 'ome. She would work her fingers to the bone for a kind, considerate mistress — such a one as Mrs. Pool seemed to be. Her health? She had never had a day's illness. She might not look it, but she was very strong; and, as for early rising, she couldn't understand how any one lay in bed after six o'clock. Wages were a matter of total indifference to her, if only she could find a real 'ome; and in the matter of evenings out, she respected herself far too much to run about the streets of London after dark. She had the highest references, but nothing would persuade her to appeal for a character to her last mistress. After the heartless treatment she had received ——! But if the clergyman of St. Peter's hadn't unfortunately died two months ago ——

With a sigh of timid hopefulness, the young wife engaged her, and at nine o'clock in the evening (having promised to come at six) Minnie arrived. She was so sorry to be late; it was all the fault of the greengrocer's boy, who had promised to come punctually for her box, and kept her waiting. Oh, what a nice little bedroom! Here she could be 'appy for the rest of her life! And she must begin work this very night; indeed, she could not sleep until she had done something, if it were only cleaning knives or boots.

Her box was a very small one, and on the next day she pathetically made known to Mrs. Pool that all but the last of her garments had gone to pay the expenses of an illness brought on by overwork and harsh treatment at her last place. Delicacy prevented the mistress from showing surprise, and, on her promising an advance of wages, Minnie was touched almost to tears. All day long Minnie moved about the house with a duster in her hand, save when she was encouraging Mrs. Pool's efforts to show her how to prepare food and to lay the fable; her eyes beamed with mild contentment; she hummed to herself the latest melody of the streets. Incessant was her flow of gently patronising talk. 'And to think you should have had such dirty creatures! What a shime! I'm sure I don't know what servants is coming to. Why, if you ask me, I should think a girl ought to think herself lucky when she gets such a place as this! And you'd like me to buy caps, wouldn't you, mum? I had such nice ones at my last place, but they worn out in the washing. Perhaps it would be convenient to let me run round to a shop this evening? I shouldn't be more than a quarter of an hour, or twenty minutes at the outside.'

Mrs. Pool's husband was a junior clerk in a Government office, a young man whose energies had been somewhat over-tried by a series of competitive examinations. The new servant did not impress him altogether favourably, but he kept back his misgivings, and lent willing ear to a hopeful story of Minnie's commencement. When the girl chanced to approach him, she let her eyes slide across his countenance, then dropped them, with a half-smile of excessive modesty. He observed uneasily the perfume she carried about with her, and at length remarked on this matter to his wife. It was on the third day, and already a look of worry had begun to reappear on Mrs. Pool's countenance.

'I'm afraid there are several little things I shall have to speak about,' said the young wife; 'she doesn't seem

Raw Material

quite to understand cooking, and — and she hasn't touched the scrubbing-brush yet. But we must give her time.'

'Of course — of course,' rejoined Pool cheerily. 'Just look upon her as raw material, and exert yourself to make a good servant out of her. No doubt you can — no doubt whatever.'

A difficulty had arisen with respect to diet. Minnie seemed to eat nothing whatever, and, when her mistress made timid inquiries, she confessed a chronic lack of appetite.

'I seem to have such a delicate stomach, mum. It isn't the food — oh dear, no! I'm sure the food couldn't be better. I'm afraid my stomach was spoilt at the last place, where she made me live on such food as you'd never believe. Perhaps, if I could have a little potted meat, it might tempt me at breakfast.'

'But don't you eat a great many sweets?' asked Mrs. Pool, who had noticed that the girl seemed to have something of the kind in her mouth perpetually.

'Sweets? Oh, no! I never touch such things, they're so bad for the teeth. Oh, I remember! I did suck a little bit of peppermint yesterday. I've been told it's good for a weakly stomach.'

It began to be borne in upon Mrs. Pool that Minnie sometimes varied from the truth. A few days more, and she seriously doubted whether the girl ever uttered a veracious word. In her ceaseless gossip Minnie had contradicted herself times innumerable. More than that, she seemed to be yielding to a physical languor which made her useless in the house; once, on returning from shopping, Mrs. Pool found her asleep, with her head on the kitchen table, and beside it a penny novelette. She rose late of a morning, and at night had a disinclination to go to bed. Such work as she pretended to do her mistress had to do over again. At the first grave remonstrance she raised her eyebrows in a look half distressful, half insolent, and declared an unbounded surprise that she was not 'giving satisfaction.'

However loth to trouble her husband, Mrs. Pool was at length obliged to seek his counsel.

'The truth is, dear, she has had no experience whatever in housework. Of course, it was very foolish not to insist on a character. I really can't imagine what she has been.'

'Well, well! I dare say she'll improve. We must regard her as raw material.'

Every other evening, Minnie, with profuse apologies, requested leave to go out for half an hour, and she never returned till after ten o'clock. Resolved upon firmness, Mrs. Pool at length refused permission; she herself wished to spend the evening at a friend's house. Pool remained at home, and sat reading. Not long after his wife's departure a timorous knock sounded at the sitting-room door, and Minnie entered, bringing with her a waft of perfume.

'I'm so sorry, sir, that I don't seem to be giving satisfaction ——'

A tear trembled on her eyelids, and she stood with bent head, hands clasped before her. The young man regarded her uneasily. She had decked herself more elaborately than usual, and looked rather pretty. Half closing the door, she came a step or two nearer.

'If you'd be so kind as to tell me, sir, how I can please mistress ——'

'Why, the fact is, Minnie, you seem to do nothing at all. And this perpetual going out at night, you know ——'

'If you only knew how hard I've tried, sir!' she sobbed. 'I've had no mother since I was eight years old, and brought up with strangers, and had to work for my own living these years and years ——'

'But, my good girl, you don't work.'

Minnie came still nearer, and fixed upon him a look of tearful languishment. Pool felt more uncomfortable.

'I suffer from such a lonely feeling like, sir. If I thought there was any one as cared for me — if you'd give me a kind word of encouragement, sir ——'

The man pulled himself together, and spoke energetically, though not harshly: thereupon bade her go back to the kitchen. Minnie moved away very slowly, and, from the doorway, cast one languishing look behind.

Another fortnight, and Mrs. Pool's patience was exhausted. When Minnie stayed out one night till twelve o'clock, and came back with flushed cheeks, incoherent talk, that was the end. The girl left next morning, shedding floods of tears; and all but prevailing with her soft-hearted mistress to be allowed a new trial. But Pool would suffer no such weakness. The girl must take her mendacious incompetence elsewhere; it was not incumbent upon them to save her from herself.

About half a year later, Pool was passing one night down Villiers Street to the Railway station. Near the music-hall a girl put herself in his way; looking into her face, he recognised Minnie. At once she turned from him, and he walked quickly on.

Raw Material

Minnie — no longer raw material, but a finished article of commerce.