

# **The Salt of the Earth**

George Gissing



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# The Salt of the Earth

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Strong and silent the tide of Thames flowed upward, and over it swept the morning tide of humanity. Through white autumnal mist yellow sunbeams flitted from shore to shore. The dome, the spires, the river frontages slowly unveiled and brightened: there was hope of a fair day.

Not that it much concerned this throng of men and women hastening to their labour. From near and far, by the league-long highways of South London, hither they converged each morning, and joined the procession across the bridge; their task was the same to-day as yesterday, regardless of gleam or gloom. Many had walked such a distance that they plodded wearily, looking neither to right nor left. The more vigorous strode briskly on, elbowing their way, or nimbly skipping into the road to gain advance; yet these also had a fixed gaze, preoccupied or vacant, seldom cheerful. Here and there a couple of friends conversed; girls, with bag or parcel and a book for the dinner hour, chattered and laughed; but for the most part lips were mute amid the clang and roar of heavy-laden wheels.

It was the march of those who combat hunger with delicate hands: at the pen's point, or from behind the breastwork of a counter, or trusting to bare wits pressed daily on the grindstone. Their chief advantage over the sinewy class beneath them lay in the privilege of spending more than they could afford on house and clothing; with rare exceptions they had no hope, no chance, of reaching independence; enough if they upheld the threadbare standard of respectability, and bequeathed it to their children as a solitary heirloom. The oldest looked the poorest, and naturally so; amid the tramp of multiplying feet, their steps had begun to lag when speed was more than ever necessary; they saw newcomers outstrip them, and trudged under an increasing load.

No eye surveying this procession would have paused for a moment on Thomas Bird. In costume there was nothing to distinguish him from hundreds of rather shabby clerks who passed along with their out-of-fashion chimney-pot and badly rolled umbrella; his gait was that of a man who takes no exercise beyond the daily walk to and from his desk; the casual glance could see nothing in his features but patient dullness tending to good humour. He might be thirty, he might be forty – impossible to decide. Yet when a ray of sunshine fell upon him, and he lifted his eyes to the eastward promise, there shone in his countenance something one might vainly have sought through the streaming concourse of which Thomas Bird was an unregarded atom. For him, it appeared, the struggling sunlight had a message of hope. Trouble cleared from his face; he smiled unconsciously and quickened his steps.

For fifteen years he had walked to and fro over Blackfriars Bridge, leaving his home in Camberwell at eight o'clock and reaching it again at seven. Fate made him a commercial clerk as his father before him; he earned more than enough for his necessities, but seemed to have reached the limit of promotion, for he had no influential friends, and he lacked the capacity to rise by his own efforts. There may have been some calling for which Thomas was exactly suited, but he did not know of it; in the office he proved himself a trustworthy machine, with no opportunity of becoming anything else. His parents were dead, his kindred scattered, he lived, as for several years past, in lodgings. But it never occurred to him to think of his lot as mournful. A man of sociable instincts, he had many acquaintances, some of whom he cherished. An extreme simplicity marked his tastes, and the same characteristic appeared in his conversation; an easy man to deceive, easy to make fun of, yet impossible to dislike, or despise – unless by the despicable. He delighted in stories of adventure, of bravery by flood or field, and might have posed – had he ever posed at all – as something of an authority on North Pole expeditions and the geography of Polynesia.

He received his salary once a month, and to-day was pay-day: the consciousness of having earned a certain number of sovereigns always set his thoughts on possible purchases, and at present he was revolving the subject of his wardrobe. Certainly it needed renewal, but Thomas could not decide at which end to begin, head or feet. His position in a leading house demanded a good hat, the bad weather called for new boots. Living economically

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as he did, it should have been a simple matter to resolve the doubt by purchasing both articles, but, for one reason and another, Thomas seldom had a surplus over the expenses of his lodgings; in practice he found it very difficult to save a sovereign for other needs.

When evening released him he walked away in a cheerful frame of mind, grasping the money in his trousers' pocket, and all but decided to make some acquisition on the way home. Near Ludgate Circus some one addressed him over his shoulder.

'Good evening, Tom; pleasant for the time of year.'

The speaker was a man of fifty, stout and florid – the latter peculiarity especially marked in his nose; he looked like a substantial merchant, and spoke with rather pompous geniality. Thrusting his arm through the clerk's, he walked with him over Blackfriars Bridge, talking in the friendliest strain of things impersonal. Beyond the bridge ——

'Do you tram it?' he asked, glancing upwards.

'I think so, Mr. Warbeck,' answered the other, whose tone to his acquaintance was very respectful.

'Ah! I'm afraid it would make me late. – Oh, by the bye, Tom, I'm really ashamed – most awkward that this kind of thing happens so often, but – could you, do you think? – No, no; one sovereign only. Let me make a note of it by the light of this shop–window. Really, the total is getting quite considerable. Tut, tut! You shall have a cheque in a day or two. Oh, it can't run on any longer; I'm completely ashamed of myself. Entirely temporary – as I explained. A cheque on Wednesday at latest. Good–bye, Tom.'

They shook hands cordially, and Mr. Warbeck went off in a hansom. Thomas Bird, changing his mind about the tram, walked all the way home, and with bent head. One would have thought that he had just done something discreditable.

He was wondering, not for the first time, whether Mrs. Warbeck knew or suspected that her husband was in debt to him. Miss Warbeck – Alma Warbeck – assuredly had never dreamed of such a thing. The system of casual loans dated from nearly twelve months ago, and the total was now not much less than thirty pounds. Mr. Warbeck never failed to declare that he was ashamed of himself, but probably the creditor experienced more discomfort of that kind. At the first playful demand Thomas felt a shock. He had known the Warbecks since he was a lad, had always respected them as somewhat his social superiors, and, as time went on, had recognised that the difference of position grew wider: he remaining stationary, while his friends progressed to a larger way of living. But they were, he thought, no less kind to him; Mrs. Warbeck invited him to the house about once a month, and Alma – Alma talked with him in such a pleasant, homely way. Did their expenditure outrun their means? He would never have supposed it, but for the City man's singular behaviour. About the cheque so often promised he cared little, but with all his heart he hoped Mrs. Warbeck did not know.

Somewhere near Camberwell Green, just as he had resumed the debate about his purchases, a middle–aged woman met him with friendly greeting. Her appearance was that of a decent shopkeeper's wife.

'I'm so glad I've met you, Mr. Bird. I know you'll be anxious to hear how our poor friend is getting on.'

She spoke of the daughter of a decayed tradesman, a weak and overworked girl, who had lain for some weeks in St. Thomas's Hospital. Mrs. Pritchard, a gadabout infected with philanthropy, was fond of discovering such cases, and in everyday conversation made the most of her charitable efforts.

'They'll allow her out in another week,' she pursued. 'But, of course, she can't expect to be fit for anything for a time. And I very much doubt whether she'll ever get the right use of her limbs again. But what we have to think of now is to get her some decent clothing. The poor thing has positively nothing. I'm going to speak to Mrs. Doubleday, and a few other people. Really, Mr. Bird, if it weren't that I've presumed on your good nature so often lately ——'

She paused and smiled unctuously at him.

'I'm afraid I can't do much,' faltered Thomas, reddening at the vision of a new 'chimney–pot.'

'No, no; of course not. I'm sure I should never expect – it's only that every little – however little – does help, you know.'

Thomas thrust a hand into his pocket and brought out a florin, which Mrs. Pritchard pursed with effusive thanks.

Certain of this good woman's critics doubted her competence as a trustee, but Thomas Bird had no such misgiving. He talked with kindly interest of the unfortunate girl, and wished her well in a voice that carried

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conviction.

His lodgings were a pair of very small, mouldy, and ill-furnished rooms; he took them unwillingly, overcome by the landlady's doleful story of their long lodgerless condition, and, in the exercise of a heavenly forbearance, remained year after year. The woman did not cheat him, and Thomas knew enough of life to respect her for this remarkable honesty; she was simply an ailing, lachrymose slut, incapable of effort. Her son, a lad who had failed in several employments from sheer feebleness of mind and body, practically owed his subsistence to Thomas Bird, whose good offices had at length established the poor fellow at a hairdresser's. To sit frequently for an hour at a time, as Thomas did, listening with attention to Mrs. Batty's talk of her own and her son's ailments, was in itself a marvel of charity. This evening she met him as he entered, and lighted him into his room.

'There's a letter come for you, Mr. Bird. I put it down somewheres – why, now, where did I ——? Oh, 'ere it is. You'll be glad to 'ear as Sam did his first shave to-day, an' his 'and didn't tremble much neither.'

Burning with desire to open the letter, which he saw was from Mrs. Warbeck, Thomas stood patiently until the flow of words began to gurgle away amid groans and pantings.

'Well,' he cried gaily, 'didn't I promise Sam a shilling when he'd done his first shave? If I didn't I ought to have done, and here it is for him.'

Then he hurried into the bedroom, and read his letter by candle-light. It was a short scrawl on thin, scented, pink-hued notepaper. Would he do Mrs. Warbeck the 'favour' of looking in before ten to-night? No explanation of this unusually worded request; and Thomas fell at once into a tremor of anxiety. With a hurried glance at his watch, he began to make ready for the visit, struggling with drawers which would neither open nor shut, and driven to despair by the damp condition of his clean linen.

In this room, locked away from all eyes but his own, lay certain relics which Thomas worshipped. One was a photograph of a girl of fifteen. At that age Alma Warbeck promised little charm, and the photograph allowed her less; but it was then that Thomas Bird became her bondman, as he had ever since remained. There was also a letter, the only one that he had ever received from her – 'Dear Mr. Bird, – Mamma says will you buy her some more of those jewjewbs at the shop in the city, and bring them on Sunday. – Yours sincerely, Alma Warbeck' – written when she was sixteen, seven years ago. Moreover, there was a playbill, used by Alma on the single occasion when he accompanied the family to a theatre.

Never had he dared to breathe a syllable of what he thought – 'hoped' would misrepresent him, for Thomas in this matter had always stifled hope. Indeed, hope would have been irrational. In the course of her teens Alma grew tall and well proportioned; not beautiful of feature, but pleasing; not brilliant in personality, but good-natured; fairly intelligent and moderately ambitious. She was the only daughter of a dubiously active commission-agent, and must deem it good fortune if she married a man with three or four hundred a year; but Thomas Bird had no more than his twelve pounds a month, and did not venture to call himself a gentleman. In Alma he found the essentials of true ladyhood – perhaps with reason; he had never heard her say an ill-natured thing, nor seen upon her face a look which pained his acute sensibilities; she was unpretentious, of equal temper, nothing of a gossip, kindly disposed. Never for a moment had he flattered himself that Alma perceived his devotion or cared for him otherwise than as for an old friend. But thought is free, and so is love. The modest clerk had made this girl the light of his life, and whether far or near the rays of that ideal would guide him on his unworldly path.

New shaven and freshly clad, he set out for the Warbecks' house, which was in a near part of Brixton. Not an imposing house by any means, but an object of reverence to Thomas Bird. A servant whom he did not recognise – servants came and went at the Warbecks' – admitted him to the drawing-room, which was vacant; there, his eyes wandering about the gimcrack furniture, which he never found in the same arrangement at two successive visits, he waited till his hostess came in.

Mrs. Warbeck was very stout, very plain, and rather untidy, yet her countenance made an impression not on the whole disagreeable; with her wide eyes, slightly parted lips, her homely smile, and unadorned speech, she counteracted in some measure the effect, upon a critical observer, of the pretentious ugliness with which she was surrounded. Thomas thought her a straightforward woman, and perhaps was not misled by his partiality. Certainly the tone in which she now began, and the tenor of her remarks, repelled suspicion of duplicity.

'Well, now, Mr. Thomas, I wish to have a talk.' She had thus styled him since he grew too old to be called Tom; that is to say, since he was seventeen. He was now thirty-one. 'And I'm going to talk to you just like the old

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friends we are. You see? No nonsense; no beating about the bush. You'd rather have it so, wouldn't you?' Scarce able to articulate, the visitor showed a cheery assent. 'Yes, I was sure of that. Now – better come to the point at once – my daughter is – well, no, she isn't yet, but the fact is I feel sure she'll very soon be engaged.'

The blow was softened by Thomas's relief at discovering that money would not be the subject of their talk, yet it fell upon him, and he winced.

'You've expected it,' pursued the lady, with bluff good-humour. 'Yes, of course you have.' She said 'ave,' a weakness happily unshared by her daughter. 'We don't want it talked about, but I know you can hold your tongue. Well, it's young Mr. Fisher, of Nokes, Fisher and Co. We haven't known him long, but he took from the first to Alma, and I have my reasons for believing that the feeling is mutual, though I wouldn't for the world let Alma hear me say so.'

Young Mr. Fisher. Thomas knew of him; a capable business man, and son of a worthy father. He kept his teeth close, his eyes down.

'And now,' pursued Mrs. Warbeck, becoming still more genial, 'I'm getting round to the unpleasant side of the talk, though I don't see that it need be unpleasant. We're old friends, and where's the use of being friendly if you can't speak your mind, when speak you must? It comes to this: I just want to ask you quite straightforward, not to be offended or take it ill if we don't ask you to come here till this business is over and settled. You see? The fact is, we've told Mr. Fisher he can look in whenever he likes, and it might happen, you know, that he'd meet you here, and, speaking like old friends – I think it better not.'

A fire burned in the listener's cheeks, a noise buzzed in his ears. He understood the motive of this frank request; humble as ever – never humbler than when beneath this roof – he was ready to avow himself Mr. Fisher's inferior; but with all his heart he wished that Mrs. Warbeck had found some other way of holding him aloof from her prospective son-in-law.

'Of course,' continued the woman stolidly, 'Alma doesn't know I'm saying this. It's just between our two selves. I haven't even spoken of it to Mr. Warbeck. I'm quite sure that you'll understand that we're obliged to make a few changes in the way we've lived. It's all very well for you and me to be comfortable together, and laugh and talk about all sorts of things, but with one like Alma in the 'ouse, and the friends she's making and the company that's likely to come here – now you do see what I mean, don't you, now? And you won't take it the wrong way? No, I was sure you wouldn't. There, now, we'll shake 'ands over it, and be as good friends as ever.' The handshaking was metaphorical merely. Thomas smiled, and was endeavouring to shape a sentence, when he heard voices out in the hall.

'There's Alma and her father back,' said Mrs. Warbeck. 'I didn't think they'd come back so soon; they've been with some new friends of ours.' Thomas jumped up.

'I can't – I'd rather not see them, please, Mrs. Warbeck. Can you prevent it?' His voice startled her somewhat, and she hesitated. A gesture of entreaty sent her from the room. As the door opened Alma was heard laughing merrily; then came silence. In a minute or two the hostess returned and the visitor, faltering, 'Thank you. I quite understand,' quietly left the house.

For three weeks he crossed and recrossed Blackfriars Bridge without meeting Mr. Warbeck. His look was perhaps graver, his movements less alert, but he had not noticeably changed; his life kept its wonted tenor. The florid-nosed gentleman at length came face to face with him on Ludgate Hill in the dinner-hour – an embarrassment to both. Speedily recovering self-possession Mr. Warbeck pressed the clerk's hand with fervour and drew him aside.

'I've been wanting to see you, Tom. So you keep away from us, do you? I understand. The old lady has given me a quiet hint. Well, well, you're quite right, and I honour you for it, Tom. Nothing selfish about you; you keep it all to yourself; I honour you for it, my dear boy. And perhaps I had better tell you, Alma is to be married in January. After that, same as before, won't it be? – Have a glass of wine with me? No time? We must have a quiet dinner together some evening; one of the old chop houses. – There was something else I wanted to speak about, but I see you're in a hurry. All right, it'll do next time.'

He waved his hand and was gone. When next they encountered Mr. Warbeck made bold to borrow ten shillings, without the most distant allusion to his outstanding debt.

Thomas Bird found comfort in the assurance that Mrs. Warbeck had kept her secret as the borrower kept his.

Alma's father was not utterly dishonoured in his sight.



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One day in January, Thomas, pleading indisposition, left work at twelve. He had a cold and a headache, and felt more miserable than at any time since his school-days. As he rode home in an omnibus Mr. and Mrs. Warbeck were entertaining friends at the wedding-breakfast, and Thomas knew it. For an hour or two in the afternoon he sat patiently under his landlady's talk, but a fit of nervous exasperation at length drove him forth, and he did not return till supper-time. Just as he sat down to a basin of gruel, Mrs. Batty admitted a boy who brought him a message. 'Mother sent me round, Mr. Bird,' said the messenger, 'and she wants to know if you could just come and see her; it's something about father. He had some work to do, but he hasn't come home to do it.'

Without speaking Thomas equipped himself and walked a quarter of a mile to the lodgings of a married friend of his – a clerk chronically out of work, and too often in liquor. The wife received him with tears. After eight weeks without earning a penny, her husband had obtained the job of addressing five hundred envelopes, to be done at home and speedily. Tempted forth by an acquaintance 'for half a minute' as he sat down to the task, he had been absent for three hours, and would certainly return unfit for work.

'It isn't only the money,' sobbed his wife, 'but it might have got him more work, and now, of course, he's lost the chance, and we haven't nothing more than a crust of bread left. And ——'

Thomas slipped half-a-crown into her hand and whispered, 'Send Jack before the shops close.' Then, to escape thanks, he shouted out, 'Where's these blessed envelopes, and where's the addresses? All right, just leave me this corner of the table and don't speak to me as long as I sit here.'

Between half-past nine and half-past twelve, at the rate of eighty an hour, he addressed all but half the five hundred envelopes. Then his friend appeared, dolefully drunk. Thomas would not look at him.

'He'll finish the rest by dinner to-morrow,' said the miserable wife, 'and that's in time.'

So Thomas Bird went home. He felt better at heart, and blamed himself for his weakness during the day. He blamed himself often enough for this or that, knowing not that such as he are the salt of the earth.