

The Tout of Yarmouth Bridge

George Gissing

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Technically speaking, Mrs. Bloggs was full; that is to say, she had packed her house with twice as many lodgers as a regard for health or comfort would have permitted her to receive. For a holiday refuge, it had no striking advantages; from the windows nothing was visible but a street precisely resembling those of poorer Kennington, and the beach was half a mile away. Mrs. Bloggs owed something of this prosperity to her niece, a girl only twelve years old, but rich in the peculiar gifts which go to make a perfect landlady. When a vacancy occurred, Serena — that was the girl's happy name — strolled down to Yarmouth Bridge, and met the swarm of people constantly pouring forth from the railway station. She had washed her face, and put on an attractive little pinafore, so that homely people in quest of lodgings readily gave ear to Serena's invitation. At other times Serena assisted her aunt in keeping the house dirty, in pilfering the lodgers groceries, and spoiling food given to be cooked. Her infancy had been passed in Camden Town, which was also Mrs. Bloggs's original abode. Achieving independence at the age of nine, she consulted health, pleasure, and profit by taking a London engagement (as 'general') for the gloomy months, and, in the season of light and joy, transferring herself to her relative's at Yarmouth. But Serena was not wholly satisfied with the terms granted her by Mrs. Bloggs; she desired a larger commission for her work as tout, and an increased stipend in her quality of domestic help. Overtures from a certain Mrs. Kipper, in the next street, had much unsettled her mind. This morning, while frying bacon in the pan which had just been used for bloaters, she mused wistfully. Of a sudden, Mrs. Bloggs rushed into the kitchen, and began to talk in a voice of suppressed excitement.

'There! That child's got scarlet fever! They wouldn't believe me at first, but I know it is. Take their breakfast up; they're going by the eleven o'clock. I've let them off with half the week if they'd go at once and not have no doctor here. I knew that child was going to have something soon as I set eyes on it. The idea of coming into people's 'ouses! They'd ought to be ashamed of themselves! You just hold your tongue, and take up their breakfast.'

The people in question, Londoners, with two babies, occupied a couple of rooms at the top of the house; it was only the third day since their arrival. The sick child had cried more or less all night. With the utmost despatch and secrecy, Mrs. Bloggs got rid of these dangerous inmates, who travelled back to London in a crowded third-class carriage. As soon as they were out of the house, Serena made ready to go down to the Bridge. It was high-season; rooms priced at twenty-five shillings a week must not stand vacant.

As usual, the girl had good luck. After only one or two futile attempts she accosted a decent-looking couple with a little boy, and found them willing to accompany her.

'You won't get better rooms in all Yarmouth, mum. Clean? The people as had them left early yesterday, and I've given them a thorough scrub out with my own hands. They was that sorry to leave us — and after three weeks, too! My aunt can't do too much to make her lodgers comfortable. From Colchester, mum? Why, I've got a sister there in service, and she says she don't think she'll ever leave — she likes the place so much!'

The man, who carried a small portmanteau, seemed to be some species of clerk; he had a bloodless face and a tired, anxious expression. His wife, laden with bags and parcels, talked incessantly, and with a half-hysterical laugh, as if the prospect of holiday were too much for her nerves. The little boy jumped about and shouted his joy at the novel scene. It took them some twenty minutes to reach Mrs. Bloggs's, and they were so tired after the walk that even a worse lodging would have been a welcome place of rest. Save the unavoidable change of water and linen, and a sprinkling under the beds of what she called 'disinfectin', Mrs. Bloggs had left the top rooms just as they were when the Londoners departed an hour or two ago. She received the newcomers with effusive welcome, delighted that they had not arrived ten minutes sooner, when she was concluding a violent dispute with her lodgers on the first floor. What did they think of these rooms? Didn't they smell sweet and fresh? The lady must excuse her if she asked where they came from; she did like to know something of people, as she tried to keep her

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house thoroughly respectable. And the very least she could take was twenty-seven shillings — which included first-rate cooking. Twenty-five? Oh, dear me! Did they think this was one of the ordinary lodging-houses? And so on for a long time, until the man wearily consented to pay twenty-six shillings — an extravagance of which his wife continued to talk petulantly until she closed her eyes at eleven o'clock that night.

Serena, meanwhile, had come to a momentous resolve. She was afraid of scarlet fever; this very day she would quit her aunt's house and go over to Mrs. Kipper's. But, first of all, she must secure the money due to her. When Mrs. Bloggs came down from settling her new lodgers, Serena, arms akimbo in the kitchen, put a plain question:

'And what are you going to give me for holding my tongue?'

Mrs. Bloggs was startled. Well, she would give eighteenpence instead of the usual shilling commission.

'Oh, you will! Then you may as well pay my wages at the same time, and make it a 'arf-a-sovereign. See!'

The girl grinned, and planted her foot firmly. The week's wages just due to her amounted to three-and-sixpence — monstrous for a child of twelve, her aunt was always saying; but Serena knew her own value, and the present opportunity was not to be neglected. She would have half-a-sovereign down, or tell the new lodgers what had happened this morning. Mrs. Bloggs cursed her niece, but durst not defy her. As soon as she had received the money, Serena, on pretence of putting it away, went into the wash-house (where she slept), made a bundle of her very few belongings, and straightway fled.

It was a disaster such as Mrs. Bloggs had not suffered for a long time. When she grasped the situation — in an hour or two she knew from a neighbour that Serena had gone to Mrs. Kipper's — her wrath overcame all prudence. Leaving house and lodgers to look after themselves, she rushed round into the next street, burst upon Mrs. Kipper's like a storm, and assailed that shrewd woman, as well as Serena, who stood by, with virulent abuse. Fury had made her forgetful of the weapon in her niece's hand, and Serena, amused at the conflict between the two women, took good care not to retaliate on Mrs. Bloggs by a disclosure of that morning's sinister event; for all she knew, Mrs. Kipper, at the very name of scarlet fever, might turn her out of doors. But when her aunt began to make charges of theft, to damage her character in her new mistress's eyes, the girl had much ado to restrain herself; secretly she resolved to be even with Mrs. Bloggs by a stratagem that would not imperil her own position.

The next day, after a morning on the dry sands (trampled and befouled for a month past by an innumerable multitude), amid the yells of ruffian peddlers, the roaring of blackguard vocalists, the boisterous mirth of an East-End mob transported to the sea-shore, Mrs. Bloggs's new lodgers were returning to dinner, when, in a bye-street, the wife and mother felt her arm touched; she looked round, and recognised Serena, who begged her to step aside for a moment's conversation.

'I think it only right to tell you, mum,' said the girl, 'that the lodgers as was before you in your rooms had the scarlet fever. I didn't know it till after, or I'd never have took you there. They was got away on the quiet. It was a child as had it, and if I was you ——'

The woman uttered a scream, which checked her husband, and in the confusion Serena ran away. There was a rapid, high-voiced colloquy, which ended in the man's hastening forward. Already he felt discontented with Mrs. Bloggs's lodgings, and fear for his child roused him to active indignation. The scene that followed Mrs. Bloggs would not soon forget. Met with a flat and furious denial of what he had heard, the man made such a disturbance that all the other lodgers, just home to dinner, came out of their rooms, and to them he addressed questions.

Yes — replied a voice — it was quite true that a family had left after staying only a day or two, and that they had a sickly, crying child. When did they leave? Why an hour or so before their successors arrival.

'Then there's a damned lie brought home to you at once!' shouted the man. 'Look here, all you people, there's been scarlet fever in the house. Take my advice, and do what we're going to do — clear out, and don't pay a farthing. If she tries to stop you, get a p'liceman!'

The shrill tones of his wife supplied detail to all who asked it; confusion grew worse confounded; though a burly woman (who, ere now, had retained lodgers by force), Mrs. Bloggs retreated downstairs into her kitchen, and there listened to the storm of vilification which laid bare all her misdoings and the discomforts of the house. Panic, aided by the spirit of dishonesty, emptied her lodgings in about half an hour. She did not dare to make her wrongs public, being already unfavourably known to the police, but against Serena she registered a deep and fearful vow.

That promising damsel, however, finding, on brief trial, that Mrs. Kipper exacted too much work, had already

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quitted Yarmouth for Lowestoft. Like all persons of genius, she abhorred monotony.