

***GEORGE
GISSING***



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George Gissing

The Paying Guest

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CHAPTER I

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It was Mumford who saw the advertisement and made the suggestion. His wife gave him a startled look.

'But—you don't mean that it's necessary? Have we been extrav—'

'No, no! Nothing of the kind. It just occurred to me that some such arrangement might be pleasant for you. You must feel lonely, now and then, during the day, and as we have plenty of room—'

Emmeline took the matter seriously, but, being a young woman of some discretion, did not voice all her thoughts. The rent was heavy: so was the cost of Clarence's season-ticket. Against this they had set the advantage of the fine air of Sutton, so good for the child and for the mother, both vastly better in health since they quitted London. Moreover, the remoteness of their friends favoured economy; they could easily decline invitations, and need not often issue them. They had a valid excuse for avoiding public entertainments—an expense so often imposed by mere fashion. The house was roomy, the garden delightful. Clarence, good fellow, might be sincere in his wish for her to have companionship; at the same time, this advertisement had probably appealed to him in another way.

'A YOUNG LADY desires to find a home with respectable, well-connected family, in a suburb of London, or not more than 15 miles from Charing Cross. Can give excellent references. Terms not so much a consideration as comfort

and pleasant society. No boarding-house.—Address: Louise, Messrs. Higgins & Co., Fenchurch St., E.C.'

She read it again and again.

'It wouldn't be nice if people said that we were taking lodgers.'

'No fear of that. This is evidently some well-to-do person. It's a very common arrangement nowadays, you know; they are called "paying guests." Of course I shouldn't dream of having anyone you didn't thoroughly like the look of.'

'Do you think,' asked Emmeline doubtfully, 'that we should quite *do*? "Well-connected family"—'

'My dear girl! Surely we have nothing to be ashamed of?'

'Of course not, Clarence. But—and "pleasant society." What about that?'

'Your society is pleasant enough, I hope,' answered Mumford, gracefully. 'And the Fentimans—'

This was the only family with whom they were intimate at Sutton. Nice people; a trifle sober, perhaps, and not in conspicuously flourishing circumstances; but perfectly presentable.

'I'm afraid—' murmured Emmeline, and stopped short. 'As you say,' she added presently, 'this is someone very well off. "Terms not so much a consideration"—'

'Well, I tell you what—there can be no harm in dropping a note. The kind of note that commits one to nothing, you know. Shall I write it, or will you?'

They concocted it together, and the rough draft was copied by Emmeline. She wrote a very pretty hand, and had no difficulty whatever about punctuation. A careful letter, calculated for the eye of refinement; it supplied only the

indispensable details of the writer's position, and left terms for future adjustment.

'It's so easy to explain to people,' said Mumford, with an air of satisfaction, when he came back from the post, 'that you wanted a companion. As I'm quite sure you do. A friend coming to stay with you for a time—that's how I should put it.'

A week passed, and there came no reply. Mumford pretended not to care much, but Emmeline imagined a new anxiety in his look.

'Do be frank with me, dear,' she urged one evening. 'Are we living too—'

He answered her with entire truthfulness. Ground for serious uneasiness there was none whatever; he could more than make ends meet, and had every reason to hope it would always be so; but it would relieve his mind if the end of the year saw a rather larger surplus. He was now five-and-thirty—getting on in life. A man ought to make provision beyond the mere life-assurance—and so on.

'Shall I look out for other advertisements?' asked Emmeline.

'Oh, dear, no! It was just that particular one that caught my eye.'

Next morning arrived a letter, signed 'Louise E. Derrick.' The writer said she had been waiting to compare and think over some two hundred answers to her advertisement. 'It's really too absurd. How can I remember them all? But I liked yours as soon as I read it, and I am writing to you first of all. Will you let me come and see you? I can tell you about myself much better than writing. Would tomorrow do, in the

afternoon? Please telegraph yes or no to Coburg Lodge, Emilia Road, Tulse Hill.'

To think over this letter Mumford missed his ordinary train. It was not exactly the kind of letter he had expected, and Emmeline shared his doubts. The handwriting seemed just passable; there was no orthographic error; but—refinement? This young person wrote, too, with such singular nonchalance. And she said absolutely nothing about her domestic circumstances. Coburg Lodge, Tulse Hill. A decent enough locality, doubtless; but—

'There's no harm in seeing her,' said Emmeline at length. 'Send a telegram, Clarence. Do you know, I think she *may* be the right kind of girl. I was thinking of someone awfully grand, and it's rather a relief. After all, you see, you—you are in business—'

'To be sure. And this girl seems to belong to a business family. I only wish she wrote in a more ladylike way.'

Emmeline set her house in order, filled the drawing-room with flowers, made the spare bedroom as inviting as possible, and, after luncheon, spent a good deal of time in adorning her person. She was a slight, pretty woman of something less than thirty; with a good, but pale, complexion, hair tending to auburn, sincere eyes. Her little vanities had no roots of ill-nature; she could admire without envy, and loved an orderly domestic life. Her husband's desire to increase his income had rather unsettled her; she exaggerated the importance of to-day's interview, and resolved with nervous energy to bring it to a successful issue, if Miss Derrick should prove a possible companion.

About four o'clock sounded the visitor's ring. From her bedroom window Emmeline had seen Miss Derrick's approach. As the distance from the station was only five minutes' walk, the stranger naturally came on foot. A dark girl, and of tolerably good features; rather dressy; with a carriage corresponding to the tone of her letter—an easy swing; head well up and shoulders squared. 'Oh, how I *hope* she isn't vulgar!' said Emmeline to herself. 'I don't like the hat—I don't. And that sunshade with the immense handle.' From the top of the stairs she heard a clear, unaffected voice: 'Mrs. Mumford at home?' Yes, the aspirate *was* sounded—thank goodness!

It surprised her, on entering the room, to find that Miss Derrick looked no less nervous than she was herself. The girl's cheeks were flushed, and she half choked over her 'How do you do?'

'I hope you had no difficulty in finding the house. I would have met you at the station if you had mentioned the train. Oh, but—how silly!—I shouldn't have known you.'

Miss Derrick laughed, and seemed of a sudden much more at ease.

'Oh, I like you for that!' she exclaimed mirthfully. 'It's just the kind of thing I say myself sometimes. And I'm so glad to see that you are—you mustn't be offended—I mean you're not the kind of person to be afraid of.'

They laughed together. Emmeline could not subdue her delight when she found that the girl really might be accepted as a lady. There were faults of costume undeniably; money had been misspent in several directions; but no glaring vulgarity hurt the eye. And her speech,

though not strictly speaking refined, was free from the faults that betray low origin. Then, she seemed good-natured though there was something about her mouth not altogether charming.

'Do you know Sutton at all?' Emmeline inquired.

'Never was here before. But I like the look of it. I like this house, too. I suppose you know a lot of people here, Mrs. Mumford?'

'Well—no. There's only one family we know at all well. Our friends live in London. Of course they often come out here. I don't know whether you are acquainted with any of them. The Kirby Simpsons, of West Kensington; and Mrs. Hollings, of Highgate—'

Miss Derrick cast down her eyes and seemed to reflect. Then she spoke abruptly.

'I don't know any people to speak of. I ought to tell you that my mother has come down with me. She's waiting at the station till I go back; then she'll come and see you. You're surprised? Well, I had better tell you that I'm leaving home because I can't get on with my people. Mother and I have always quarrelled, but it has been worse than ever lately. I must explain that she has married a second time, and Mr. Higgins—I'm glad to say that isn't *my* name—has a daughter of his own by a first marriage; and we can't bear each other—Miss Higgins, I mean. Some day, if I come to live here, I daresay I shall tell you more. Mr. Higgins is rich, and I can't say he's unkind to me; he'll give me as much as I want; but I'm sure he'll be very glad to get me out of the house. I have no money of my own—worse luck! Well, we thought it best for me to come alone, first, and see—just to