

# **A Well–Meaning Man**

George Gissing

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The advertisement evoked only three replies; perhaps it was less carefully worded than in former instances. However, one of the letters had a very encouraging sound. Youth of nineteen; till of late, clerk to his father; father just dead; small sum at disposal; willing to pay reasonable premium, but salary looked for. 'Yours obediently, Robert H. Winter.' The others read more doubtfully; it would be as well to see Robert Winter before replying to them.

Mr. Parrington (that was his name for the present) sat in the small office which he had taken, furnished, a month or two ago. Sales and purchases of every kind of property, valuation, surveying, recovery of debts all such undertakings fell within his scope; to him, nothing human was alien for which a commission could be charged. A thoroughly well-meaning man; no one more resolute to live honestly, if only the world would let him. But, for some ten years, the world had seemed intent on making him a rogue. Innumerable his fresh starts, his new leaves turned over with a virtuous thrill. He had been driven, by sheer force of circumstance, out of every large town in England; he had tried rural districts, with no better result, and the marvel was, that once only had the law laid a finger on him. A mere touch, as good as forgotten, yet it had helped to embitter Mr. Parrington. Why, think merely of his prodigious exertions in the borrowing of small sums! And now, at last, every effort of that kind had failed; what could he do but advertise again for such a young man as Robert Winter?

The young man came at the appointed time, with absolute punctuality. At the sight of the office he seemed a trifle disappointed, but Mr. Parrington was prepared for this, and combated the unfavourable impression with his blandest smile, his most cordial tone. He liked the look of young Winter; the pallid, amiable countenance, air of nervous conscientiousness; the mourning-band on his coat-sleeve and silk hat.

'Well, Mr. Winter, let us talk it over. This, by-the-bye, is a temporary office. Just now I do a good deal of my work at home. Well, and what exactly has your experience been? I see, I see. All very useful, but hardly never mind! Suppose I put a practical test. Here is a catalogue of the last sale at Brooks and Roper's, marked with prices obtained. Suppose you sit down and work out for me first, the average of items on the first page; then, a commission at 7 1/2 on the three highest figures.'

With a tremulousness he could not conceal, the young man applied himself to the task; Mr. Parrington, the while, turned to the writing of letters in which he had been interrupted.

'Done already? Very good time, indeed, Mr. Winter and perfectly correct. Come, I think we can make something of you.'

Mr. Winter flushed with satisfaction. Ten minutes more talk settled the whole affair. In consideration of a premium of five-and-twenty pounds Mr. Parrington would instruct his young friend in the art and mystery of commission-agency, and, moreover, would give him a salary of fifteen shillings a week, to be increased to twenty in six months' time. Payment of premium to-morrow morning, when duties would begin. And Mr. Winter took a friendly leave, without its ever having occurred to him to request any proof of Mr. Parrington's respectability. At half-past nine next morning the premium was paid. In exchange for it, Mr. Winter received a very solemnly worded and skilfully engrossed document, which he put into his pocket.

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'And now to business, Mr. Winter. Here is a catalogue of a sale at Snape's, Rose Alley, London Wall; you'll easily find it. You will attend the sale (10.30 for 11), and mark all the prices with great care. It'll probably be over by one o'clock. Then you will lunch—let me beg of you not to take alcoholic liquor—and be here at a quarter to two sharp. By—the—bye, as you pass Lukin Brothers'—ah! you must study the Directory in your spare time—just look in, with my compliments, and get their latest prices—current. You understand? Their latest.'

A week passed. Mr. Winter had been pretty fully occupied, almost always away from the office; it seemed to him that he was learning a good deal about public auctions, and his knowledge of the City of London had decidedly improved. On the morning of the day when his first week's salary fell due, he received at his lodgings a post-card from Mr. Parrington—'Meet me 10.15, booking-office King's Cross main station.' He kept the appointment, only to find Mr. Parrington in such a hurry that hardly a dozen words could be exchanged.

'Back to-morrow morning. Here's a list of matters you'll look after. Oh, by—the—bye, I'm in your debt. Hang it! No change. Settle to-morrow. Office, usual time.'

Robert Winter did not feel well this morning. Not long ago he had had an attack of influenza, and his present symptoms disagreeably suggested a return of the complaint. After struggling painfully through the work Mr. Parrington had set him (it was a cold, drizzly day), he went home, and to bed. Yes, the fever was upon him again. In his poor lodgings he passed a miserable night.

Till of late his home had been at Rochester. After his father's death, armed with a capital of thirty pounds, all he could hope for, he came up to London, and was lucky enough to see Mr. Parrington's advertisement. Of course, he must struggle against this slight illness. But in the morning he could not stand, much less prepare to go to the office. With difficulty he found a messenger to take a letter for him.

Now, as it happened, Mr. Parrington's sudden departure was on no make-believe business. When writing to his clerk he had purposed a mere trick to postpone payment of salary; as yet he was not quite ready to 'turn over a new leaf.' But that evening his eyes fell on a newspaper advertisement which startled him. It was headed with his name, his true name, and stated that, on applying to such and such persons in a Midland town he would 'hear of something to his advantage.' Of a possible something he had long been aware, and his heart leapt at the prospect of what he hardly durst hope. So it came to pass that, when his clerk met him at King's Cross, Mr. Parrington was actually speeding away on an affair of moment. It proved to be the event of his tremulous anticipation, and when, twenty-four hours later, he returned to London, it was as the jubilant possessor of a considerable sum of money; no fortune but quite enough either to support him for a few years in cosy idleness, or—as he fervently resolved to give him the genuine 'start in life' which he had so long sighed for.

In the letter-box at the office he found Robert Winter's excuse for absence: he read it thoughtfully.

'Poor devil! He looked run-down from the first. A good lad, too. I'll go and see him, and—yes, by God! he shall have his money back. He shall! I can afford the luxury of being honest, and I will.'

Mr. Parrington, to fortify himself for this great undertaking, repaired to a restaurant in Cheapside and lunched copiously. Over his subsequent cigar he mused:

'After all, why should I go and see the poor chap? Ten to one I should only make him ashamed: no doubt, he's lodging in some damned poor hole. I'll write and send him his week's salary, and tell him to meet me somewhere or other when he's on his legs again. Yes, that's better.'

In the glow of his bottle of wine, Mr. Parrington did write, and, what was more, enclosed a postal order for fifteen shillings. 'As soon as you are all right, send me a card to the General Post Office, and I'll tell you where to meet me. Certain circumstances have made it necessary for me to alter arrangements, but you will be treated

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honourably.'

Robert Winter's post-card lay at the General Post Office for a long time. Meanwhile Mr. Parrington no longer so named had quitted London. After all (such was the upshot of his musing), the foolish lad, if he got his twenty-five pounds back again would only lose it to some designing rascal; far better that he should exert himself and get a clerkship in the ordinary way, and earn honest wages far better. Mr. Parrington, as always, meant well, and, in days to come, he remembered with vast self-approval that he had sent the week's salary to the poor devil laid up with illness.