

# **At High Pressure**

George Gissing



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'Really, Linda, I do think you might find time to take your meals properly The idea of writing letters while you're eating!'

'I must catch the very first post. There! that comes of fidgeting me.'

Linda had let a great ink-drop fall upon the tablecloth. Mrs. Vassie cried remonstrance in a louder key; the two younger girls were indignant; and their father, scampering over the columns of his newspaper in the few minutes left before he must rush for the train, growled at the noise and confusion. As in the great majority of families raised by paternal effort and the education of children above the lower middle-class degree in which they began, mild domestic discord was natural to the Vassies, especially at breakfast-time. Mr. Vassie declared that it was the cause of his dyspepsia. They did not quarrel with vulgar violence; mother and girls alike had learned to pick their phrases, and to abstain from excessive forms of irritation; but polite wrangling when the family were alone, seldom ceased, and, as often as not, Linda gave occasion for it.

This young woman led a surprising life. Without the least pretence of preparing herself for any recognised calling — there was no need for her to do so — she exhibited an activity which would have taxed the constitution even of a strong man. From morning to night — often, indeed, till past midnight — Linda was engaged, at high pressure, in a great variety of pursuits. Her correspondence alone represented a day's work for an ordinary person. She wrote to numberless people, public and private, on all manner of subjects. Scarcely a book, magazine, or newspaper came into her hands which did not suggest a letter of inquiry, criticism, or sympathy; her collection of autographs was very large, and she rejoiced loudly over every important addition to it. She attended all sorts of meetings, in town and country, at an expense in railway fares which often excited her father's protest. Her purely social engagements were numerous, and she threw herself into all the common forms of recreation with no less energy than into what she called her 'work.' Full of intellectual and moral self-esteem, she lacked the common form of personal vanity; dress concerned her little, and, since a very early age, she had never been known to betray sensibility to sexual impressions:

Not that Miss Vassie belonged to the advanced guard of emancipated women: in weighty matters of opinion she was orthodox; her views of life savoured of provincialism. But for this, it would have been impossible for her to remain a member of the household at Westbourne Park. The forms of religion (ritualistic) she discharged as punctually and conscientiously as any other of her innumerable undertakings; they had their hours in the methodical scheme which she drew up every Saturday for the ensuing week; prayers night and morning were 'fitted in' — to use her own constant phrase — with admirable precision; and a drawing-room meeting on some matter which concerned the spiritual life often appeared in her time-table, exactly wedged between mundane appointments. The cause of 'womanhood' greatly concerned her, but in no revolutionary sense. Herself the least domestic of persons, she maintained the time-honoured theory of female duties. Personally, she seemed to demand nothing but liberty to keep up a state of nervous tension, to speed about in cabs and trains, to read all the periodicals of the day, to make endless new acquaintances, and to receive a score of letters by every post.

Her age was seven-and-twenty; if anything, she looked younger. After a rather sickly childhood, she had grown into a thoroughly sound state of health, which seemed to demand, and to profit by, astonishing physical activity. Whether she exerted her mind in a corresponding degree, or at all in proportion to the show she made of mental alertness and application, might reasonably be doubted. The members of her family, though frank in condemnation of her self-will, restlessness, and disputatious temper, never presumed to question Linda's authority on all high matters; they marvelled at her learning, her mental powers. She talked with fluency on most subjects current in the journalism of the day. She professed, and believed, herself a sound critic of every art, with something of special attainment in the sphere of music. She managed to 'fit in' a good many half-hours of solitary

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study, the subjects varying at very short intervals; one week her zeal would be for the historical aspect of the Eastern Question; the next, she had resolved to learn 'everything' about Egyptology. As she never accused herself of desultoriness, it was to be presumed that she felt satisfied with the brief but vigorous efforts of her acute intelligence. At all times, in whatever company, she spoke at a speed which would have baffled any stenographer, and, when affecting to listen, she was evidently thinking of what she would say next.

Miss Vassie's delight was to make herself the instructress, the spiritual guide, of young girls. Whenever she could gather two or three ingenuous, docile maidens, and speed about London with them on a perspiring intellectual pilgrimage, her satisfaction knew no bounds. It once happened that two country cousins, good-humoured girls, eager to learn and to enjoy, came to stay with the family at Westbourne Park. From the first day Linda took possession of them, and did not flag in her zeal for their enlightenment until both were so seriously affected in health by the life she led them that Mrs. Vassie had to interfere. At the British Museum, at the National Gallery, she poured forth an inexhaustible stream of commonplaces and inaccuracies; when her hapless companions were all but fainting, the terrible cicerone pushed on from room to room. Linda always lost her disciples by mere excess of energy. Girls grew afraid of her, and at length fled before the sound of her voice.

She belonged to a great many societies, received dozens of reports, proceedings, prospectuses, and the like. Her talk at home was often unintelligible to her hearers owing to her habit of mentioning societies by initials instead of the full name. 'My dear girls, how can I go with you when I have a meeting at the S.R.T.M.?' 'Next week I shall be fearfully busy. There's the A.L.P.Q., and the S.R.D.B., and — Oh! do let me make a note of a letter I have to write to the secretary of the L.Q.C.E.W.!' These alphabetical designations rolled off her tongue with astounding volubility.

Her desire to form intimacies with people of name sometimes led her into an unpleasant situation. Civil coldness did not discourage her, and to the hints which would have rebuffed a sensitive woman she was, happily, obtuse. But on one occasion accident gave her something more than a hint to abstain from assiduities in a certain quarter. A lady with a mission, an advocate of 'womanhood,' after Linda's own heart, had allowed herself to be drawn into correspondence, and at length invited Miss Vassie to call upon her. For some weeks Linda boasted of the acquaintance. Then came a letter addressed in the well-known hand, and Linda opened it with eagerness. To her surprise it began, 'My dear Miss Jones.' Here was a mistake. The lady with a mission, no less busy than Linda herself, had in her haste misdirected the envelope. But it did not occur to Linda to fold the sheet without reading its contents, and her curiosity had its reward.

'MY DEAR MISS JONES, — I should have written to you yesterday, but just as I sat down I was worried by a call from I most trying and wearisome person, who talked and talked for more than an hour about her own silly, half-educated ideas. Do beware of her if she writes to you; it is a Miss Vassie of Westbourne Park — oh, a dreadful person! She seems to write to everybody. I think it a duty to warn my friends, and somehow I shall have to get rid of her.'

Then followed matter of no particular interest. Linda, hot and trembling, presently asked herself whether this was a mistake. She sent back the letter without a word, and never again heard from that distinguished lady — of whom, when she spoke at all, she spoke with an exceeding bitterness which no one could understand.