The Little Woman from Lancashire

George Gissing

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Every one laughed at Mrs. Jephson, but only the ill−conditioned laughed unkindly. For all her vanity, it was impossible to dislike her: for all her astonishing naïveté, one could not help thinking of her as a clever woman. She did a great many foolish things perhaps her life in London was one supreme folly yet who could deny her social gifts, or fail to understand the temptation which brought her into such strange prominence? She was no adventuress; any one who took the trouble could ascertain all about her large income, and how she had inherited it. Plainly, her one desire was to enjoy life, and to see other people sharing in her pleasures. Of scandal, not a word, not a breath. Her husband seldom showed himself, but his absences were most satisfactorily explained; and people who had seen the two together agreed that there could be no shadow of doubt as to the harmony of their life.

Of course, even Mrs. Jephson did not tell everything. Probably her husband had begun life at the very bottom of the ladder; in appearance and talk he still resembled the average Lancashire mill−hand. Of herself she gossiped freely; joked about her barefoot childhood in the little moorland town, and mimicked her early modes of speech. No one needed to ask whence she came; however skilfully she had picked up the language of education, her tongue at once bewrayed her. But she was never heard to make fun of Mr. Jephson. His name was often on her lips, and always with a phrase of affection, admiration, eulogy. 'My husband' as soon as the words were uttered, one knew what would come. For her, Mr. Jephson's opinion was the final authority; his wish was law. One could only suppose that the man himself conscious of deficiencies, chose to keep in the background, satisfied so long as his brilliant wife had all she wanted. It did not seem at all wonderful that he should look on at her social triumphs with the calmness of perfect trust. Mrs. Jephson was childless, by no means ill−favoured, and not yet thirty−five; but if ever a wife could take card of herself and if ever one was resolute to walk straight, it was she.

She did not flash of a sudden upon the world that amuses itself. In her first London season she knew very few people, and lived quietly at a first−rate boarding−house. At the close of that year, after foreign travel, she took a large house, and began to entertain. But only the third year of her prosperity established her as a recognised leader in certain circles of wealth and fashion; then it was that one began to read so much about her, and to hear her name both above and below the sphere in which she shone. Mrs. Jephson frankly declared that she had now attained the summit of her wishes. She could not aspire to a place among the aristocracy; enough to be received among 'nice and jolly people' that was her phrase and to feel that she was getting 'really good value for her money.' The hearty candour of her egoism forbade one to remember that she had no intellectual aim, and that she seemed not so much indifferent to as utterly oblivious of social problems and miseries. Intensely conservative in her instincts, she lived as though it were her duty to support and enjoy the existing order of things. Reminiscences of her own poverty appeared to inspire her with no sympathy for that of others. One gathered now and then that she felt gratitude to Providence for the care it had taken of her; but, at the same time, she evidently saw in her promotion a striking example of the fitness of things.

Early in August, Mrs. Jephson left town. It was understood that she had a great round of visits to make. For a month or two, the Society journals chronicled her movements; then she disappeared, and no one heard anything of her till after Christmas. One day, in a London drawing−room, a lady startled her friends by declaring that Mr. Jephson had filed a petition of divorce. She had it on the very best authority.

'Impossible!' exclaimed another lady present. 'I called yesterday. A lot of people were there. She was just the same as ever.'

Incredulity was general. No less than three of the company went straight to call upon Mrs. Jephson, whom they found in excellent health and spirits. About a dozen persons were in the drawing−room, and presently they began to form little groups, at a distance from the hostess, talking earnestly in a low voice. Mrs. Jephson, observant, but unconcerned, beckoned a certain young matron to her side.

'What is it? What were you talking about?'

'I? Oh trifles really I forget.'

'Oh, no, you don't. What made you turn red? Tell me at once.'

There was no resisting this Northern bluntness. The lady whispered, 'Some malicious person has been saying that you that Mr. Jephson '

Having heard the rumour, Mrs. Jephson reflected for a moment. Then, glancing round, she saw that many eyes were fixed upon her. Suddenly, she let a teacup fall; it shattered on the floor.

'A way of getting your attention,' she exclaimed with a laugh, as the guests turned to look. 'You're all talking about the same thing, but you're all wrong. I may as well let you know the truth. It's I who am the petitioner in a certain case, not my husband. There, now we won't talk any more about it; you'll all know whatever there is to be known before long.'

And not another word was said. Nor, until the public were invited to the feast of scandal, did any one of Mrs. Jephson's fashionable acquaintances learn a single detail of the affair. An acute observer, much interested in the little Lancashire woman, would have it that she had made up her mind not to spoil the effect of Divorce Court revelations; an artist in her way, she understood the advantage of stimulating curiosity by reticence. This, to be sure, was rather a new reading of Mrs. Jephson's character; but, judging by subsequent events, there seems to have been something in it. Most likely she enjoyed the universal astonishment. Seeing people as usual (except the few more scrupulous who preferred to hold aloof), she was unlike herself only in the one respect, that she never mentioned her husband.

The case came on; the story was told. In its main features, so simple a story, that ordinary people were disappointed. Last autumn, while staying at a country house, Mrs. Jephson learnt that her husband was unfaithful to her: he had a working−class mistress somewhere in the North. At once she went to see him; they quarrelled violently, and Jephson refused to make any change, save on the condition that his wife should relinquish her fashionable career, and live with him away from London. He brought no charge against her; merely said that her way of living was distasteful to him an oft−repeated protest on his part. In the end Mrs. Jephson yielded, and for two or three weeks they dwelt together in retirement. But it was not a success. Discord soon broke out again, and rose to such a point that one night Jephson beat his wife savagely. He then kept her a prisoner in the little country house for several days, until, alarmed by her condition, he was obliged to call in a doctor. This medical man now testified that Mrs. Jephson had suffered gravely; indeed, it was a wonder she had not been lamed for life. A reconciliation being impossible, the husband abruptly took himself off, and rejoined his mistress, with whom he was still living. He did not defend the case.

Well, that was all, and people felt disappointed. Not so the acute observer. 'Think what a wonderful little woman!' he remarked. 'For years she has evidently subdued to her will a man of violent passions, of tremendous character. Plainly she was fond of him: But there came the inevitable moment; she had to choose between him and social success. A year ago she would have yielded in the contest, had it become acute; in the end, ambition carried it.

Say, if you like, that the little woman has been spoilt; perhaps so. At all events, the thrashing was too much. She welcomed the opportunity of making a new start in life. Not an ungenerous little woman, you can't say that she took advantage of her position; all along, it was fair subjugation of will by will. She would never have spoken disloyally of the man, or have tried to get rid of him. But after the thrashing, she would naturally feel "Now we are quits." Probably, she won't be quite what she was; we shall see.'

Six months later, the Times contained this advertisement:

MRS. JEPHSON begs sincerely to thank her friends for sympathy, written and verbal, pending proceedings for dissolution of marriage, in which she, the petitioner, obtained the final decree on the 14th inst.

The acute observer laughed.