

Out of the Fashion

George Gissing

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'How shall I tell her?' the man said to himself, on his way homeward. 'How the devil shall I tell her?'

He reached his home at Tufnell Park, entered as usual, and found the customary quietude, the familiar atmosphere of well-being, of security, of order. There would be guests at dinner this evening; he must keep up his countenance till he and Mary were alone and the house hushed.

Mary met him at the head of the stairs; her wonted smile, her silence that was all-sufficient, He asked after the baby, and received a word or two of satisfactory information. Then Mary smiled again, and passed on to dress for dinner.

It was a pleasant evening, and such as they often enjoyed. Only two friends, people of their own standing, well-to-do, but unpretentious. Mary's music, always a great resource; her husband's thoroughly good-natured, far from brilliant, talk. No niggardliness, no display. Mary knew how to manage these things. Then they were alone, and the night before them.

'Mary, there's bad news. I may as well out with it at once; but it's the hardest job I ever had in my life.'

No exclamation. She stood, with nerves strung, and looked steadily at him. Assuredly it was not a pleasant thing to make known. Appointed, a year and a half ago, manager of a department in a great house of business, Claxton had fallen short of the expectations of the firm. The appointment, to begin with, had surprised as much as it delighted him; he knew that he owed it to personal favour; the head of the firm, an amiable old gentleman, friendly to him since his childhood, had given him this great chance. And, for a time, not unnaturally, Claxton seemed to rise to the demands upon him. He was an exultant man; the advancement had enabled him to marry; great happiness lifted him above himself. But his old patron very soon died, and Claxton became aware that the new order of things was not quite favourable to him. Month after month he had struggled hard, allowing no one to suspect his mortifications and his fears. Now the blow had fallen. He was under notice to resign his position, and — what would become of him?

He told it in a few shamefaced words, the mere humiliating truth; to his wife he could not do otherwise. And Mary drew a sigh of relief.

'Oh, I thought, from your face, it was something dreadful!'

'And don't you think it so?'

'It's very hard for you, dear.'

There was silence. Then they talked things over as quietly as usual. And for many days the conversation was resumed, always cheerfully on Mary's part, until at length a resolve had been taken.

The Claxtons left London, and began a new life in a Northern town. Mary had now a much smaller house, and much more to do in it. Her second child was born Happily, she had not been brought up in the world of limitless leisure; she was not very highly educated, though native intelligence made her seem superior in that respect to her husband; when it became necessary to lay aside books and music, and to do much of the work which servants had hitherto done for her, the spirit was willing and the flesh did not fail. Her smile lost nothing of its sweet loyalty; her words — weighed as women's seldom are — had all the old, quiet cheerfulness.

Then Claxton received at the hands of destiny his second chance. He was enabled, and encouraged by Mary, to begin business on his own account. He looked up once more, recovered the note of hopefulness. When a third child was born to him, he felt justified in removing to a better house. And Mary's music presently sounded again.

But in secret he could not trust himself, and, as time went on, he had more and more reason for the heavy countenance, the long, dark broodings, which he carefully concealed from his wife. Upon fear followed rashness; then came the second, the more grievous, downfall.

Again in a strange place, and in poorer circumstances than she had ever known, Mary shed about her the light

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of home. She had now to battle for her children's future. The father might do his best to earn their livelihood; upon the mother lay a more difficult duty. Hers to guard them from the degrading effects of manifest poverty: to foster, by ceaseless thought and imaginative effort, the self-respect of the little ones: to hold their minds above the slough of base necessity: to supply from the riches of her own heart so much that the world denied. The help of one servant — often enough hindrance rather than help — was all she could now afford. Her strength failed not, but it was more severely tried than her husband ever imagined. No merry holidays; no social relaxation; once a year, at most, the brief change of air without which her children could hardly live. Work of the hardest, the most exhausting to mind and body, from early morning till the hour when her husband came home. But evening was sacred. Mary knew that man cannot live by bread alone; not hers to brutalise the bread-winner by denying him his hour of mental rest. She could not play to him — there was no piano; but sometimes she sang, keeping her voice very low and soft, that the sleeping children might not be disturbed.

She bore another child, but it only breathed and passed away. Then Mary lay in the valley of the deep shadow, and for many days her husband was chill with fear. Once, opening the Bible as he sat by her bedside — but only for his own comfort as Mary could not hear — he came by chance upon the last chapter of Proverbs and saw the words:

'She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life.'

Then the man's strength was broken, and his head fell, and he choked with sobs.

It passed. Mary again moved about the house, shedding the light of home. Again she taught her children and toiled for them, and did not lack her reward. Slowly Claxton's position was once more improving; he had no brilliant prospects, but, as the years went by, things needful came to him in larger measure. The children could attend a good school, and the eldest of them, a boy, could presently be put in the way of a not too humble life. The lad knew whom he should thank for advantages far greater than fall to the lot of many rich men's sons.

'Now, don't trouble about me any more, mother,' he said, not long after. 'If I ever give you a day's anxiety that I can help — well, just look straight at me, and I shall know what to think of myself.'

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She sits there, with thin face, with silent-smiling lips, type of a vanishing virtue. Wife, housewife, mother — shaken by the harsh years, but strong and peaceful in her perfect womanhood. An old-fashioned figure, out of harmony with the day that rules, and to our so modern eyes perhaps the oddest of the whole series of human odds and ends.