The Pretty Ways

George Gissing

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As they were to be married about the same time, Henry Wager and Joseph Rush, friends from boyhood, agreed to take a house and share it together. After much consultation with their future wives, young ladies keenly sensible of social distinctions, they chose a house in Brixton — imposing, spacious, and convenient for double occupancy. It was perhaps unfortunate, to begin with, that Wager's resources — he had just begun business as a hop−merchant in the Borough — enabled him to spend more on furniture and decoration than his friend could reasonably afford, Rush being only cashier to a firm of wholesale cheesemongers in Tooley−street; but the buoyancy of prenuptial days permitted this detail to pass without remark. On their return from the honeymoon, the ladies embraced with effusion, and spent their first day at home in exclaiming delightedly at each other's domestic appointments, in admiring each other's wardrobe, and in forecasting a long lifetime of rapturous intimacy.

Mrs Wager had dark tresses, a tall, slender form, and somewhat acute features. She was nine−and−twenty. Mrs Rush, younger by five years, exhibited a fluffy growth of pale−brown hair, had a face of rather infantile prettiness, and frisked about with the grace of a plump lamb. Their names being Elizabeth and Theresa, they decided to call each other 'Muriel' and 'May'.

'They seem to hit it off very well,' remarked Wager to his friend, when, for a day or two, they had been witness of affectionate demonstrations. And Rush, whose temper was less sanguine, answered fervently, 'First−rate!'

As might have been anticipated, the earliest note of dissonance that sounded amid these ideal harmonies came from below−stairs. The ladies had engaged two servants, who were expected to devote themselves impartially to both their mistresses. Given a quartette of females, each of whom was but a little lower than the angels, this arrangement might have worked fairly well; in a Brixton household it naturally led to trouble in the first week. Coming home one evening in expectation of a quiet dinner, the husbands found a scene of disorder; each was taken apart by his tender spouse, and, spite of hunger, compelled to hear a catalogue of complaints against cook and housemaid. Practical men, they pooh−poohed the difficulty, talked about system and firmness and the like, and turned towards the dining−room with resolute joviality.

'Things'll work themselves right,' said Wager, carelessly, as he smoked with his friend afterwards. 'The girls have to get used to housekeeping. Take my advice, Joe, and don't pay much attention to this kind of thing. It isn't our department.'

Rush acquiesced, subduing his nervousness. He had begun to understand, for his own part, that housekeeping on the present scale was decidedly more expensive than his calculations supposed. That night, he and his Theresa put aside their lovers' babblement for dialogue of a less agreeable nature. Mrs Rush had but the vaguest idea of domestic economy. When her husband insisted upon speaking gravely of sordid matters, she pouted, rambled into all manner of irrelevant subjects, and at length, accusing him of never having loved her, burst into tears. Joseph, whose soft heart and irresolute will put him at a great disadvantage in junctures such as this, passed a restless night, and came down next morning with no appetite for breakfast.

The servant difficulty, more serious as days went on, was soon complicated with heart−burnings between the newly−married women, of which their husbands for awhile heard and suspected nothing. Friends and relatives called, and had their calls returned; a river of gossip was set flowing, and ere long showed a decidedly turbid course. To Mrs Rush's ears came remarks on the inferiority of her furniture and her dress, when compared with her darling Muriel's possessions. Mrs Wager heard it whispered that her sweet May was complaining of slights and injustices experienced in the common home. One evening, Joseph found his wife in her bedroom, with red eyes and flabby cheeks. She would not dine; she was not well; she — in short, she wished she might soon breathe her last.

'Come, come. What's all this about?' exclaimed Joseph, good−naturedly. And he referred to the state of her health. Already there was question of the state of both ladies' health — a fact which their husbands would not henceforth have much chance of forgetting.

'That woman has been horrid to me!' sobbed Theresa, after five minutes' entreaty that she would explain herself.

'That woman! Who?'

Joseph was astounded to learn that Mrs Wager had been thus designated. Half an hour's talk resulted in other disclosures which no less perturbed him. Impossible, his wife declared, to go on living thus. She was despised and insulted — openly, flagrantly! The servants (a new pair) regarded her even less than those who had been dismissed. And, with autumn advancing, she had not yet purchased a single article of new attire, whereas Mrs Wager had spent the last three days in shopping, and at least half−a−dozen parcels had been delivered for her. It was enough to make one think of suicide! Why had Joe married her, if he meant only to plunge her into degradation?

'Look at my dresses! Look at my old waterproof! And I feel ashamed to take my sister into the bedroom, with that mean carpet —'

Rush felt the perspiration rising to his forehead. This helpmate he had chosen promised to help him only too effectually in one particular — the spending of his income. But before the dialogue ended, he had promised that Theresa should have a ten−pound note to lay out in garments of the new fashion, that she might hold her own with Mrs Wager.

A week later Mrs Wager's state of health necessitated fresh visits to big shops across the water. Again parcels arrived, and again Joseph Rush found his wife possessed with thoughts of self−destruction. The two men had carefully avoided speaking to each other of the discords no longer disguised from them, and the result was that they talked much less frequently and less cordially than of old. Both had long since repented their domestic experiment, but they would not confess. Wager contrived to spend very little time at home. He had many friends, and was to a large extent resuming his bachelor life — of course, with the consequence that his wife grew bitter against him, and yet more against Mrs Rush. Joseph, less courageous, came home at regular hours, and bore the brunt of miseries. His wife ruled him through his fears. Mrs Wager, on the other hand, sought more subtly to manage her husband through his pride and his passions.

So it came to pass that, less than four months after marriage, Joseph Rush was driven to the inevitable step. Before speaking to his wife he made avowal to Wager that the expense of this mode of living was too high for him; he must find a separate abode.

'I shouldn't wonder if you're right, old fellow,' said his friend. Neither spoke of their wives' dissensions.

Had matters ended thus, it had been well. But on learning that she must go into a small house, whilst her rival would henceforth occupy the whole of this 'desirable residence,' Mrs Rush fell into a voiceless fury. She resolved not only to quarrel violently with her erewhile darling Muriel, but that her husband and his old friend should be set at variance — the fiercer the better. And this she brought about with little difficulty. When for two or three days the house had been thrown into furious disorder, Henry Wager and Joseph Rush sought a colloquy late at night. Hitherto, in talk with their wives, each had tried to make peace by defending the wife of the other against more or less virulent charges — a masculine method which, needless to say, made things worse by adding to the cauldron of strife the fresh ingredient of jealousy. But this time Wager began by saying abruptly —

'Look here, old chap, you must really put a stop to your wife's talk. She had been saying all sorts of ill−natured things about Lizzie. Of course, I know that it isn't easy —'

Rush, driven to desperation, broke in hotly —

'Why, confound it, Wager! I'm told that your wife has spoken abominably — to the servants, too — about Theresa. You certainly ought not to allow that. Your wife is very much older, and —'

Now it happened that Mrs Wager, having crept down from her bedroom to hear if possible what the men were talking about, heard this last remark through the keyhole. And it also happened that, as she stood listening and quivering with rage, Mrs Rush, who suspected that this was to be a night of crisis, also crept downstairs, and caught her enemy eavesdropping. In consequence the men presently became aware of angry voices in the hall. They moved to the door, and forthwith the two couples were involved in loud reproof and recrimination. Where both women had determined that their husbands should come into conflict, such issue was inevitable. The old

friends said harsh things to each other, made charges and comparisons not easily forgiven. Had their social standing been one grade lower, they would have come to blows. For this they had too much self−respect; but it was impossible that they should live together for another day under the same roof. Next morning Rush took his wife into temporary lodgings, and in a week or two their goods were removed to a modest house half a mile away. The men of necessity corresponded, but they would not meet (out of shame as much as anger), and did not see each other again for a long time.

Though removed from contact with her rival, Mrs Rush still endeavoured to vie with her at all events in pursuit of the fashions. The little house and the solitary servant ate into her soul; but her dress when she received visitors, and that in which she showed herself abroad, became little inferior to Mrs Wager's equipment. When Joseph declared that ruin stared him in the face, his wife fell into hysterics, and shrieked about the state of her health. In the fulness of time this plea became no longer valid, but with the birth of a child Joseph found the demands upon his purse still increasing. Mrs Wager also had a baby, and common friends reported the magnificence of its layette. Again and again Rush yielded, until, one morning of late summer, his old friend Wager unfolding the newspaper at breakfast, uttered a horrified exclamation.

'What is it?' asked his wife, who by this time had learnt the limits she might not pass in resistance to her husband's will, and, on the whole, was better for it.

'Why, good heavens! Joe Rush has been arrested for embezzlement!'

Had she dared, Mrs Wager would have screamed with delight. Ha! there was an end of that odious Theresa and her pretensions to cut a figure! But Wager's eyes counselled a decent dissimulation.

'Oh, never! I must go and see that poor, silly creature —'

'You must do nothing of the kind,' replied her husband, sternly.

Nor was this amiable suggestion ever put into practice.

* For many months Joseph Rush disappeared from among his friends. It was not known to Mrs Wager that, among the people who took care of Mrs Rush and her child, Henry was the main, though a secret, benefactor. Neither did she learn, long after, by what instrumentality Joseph received a new start in life. It had been her devout hope that no such chance would ever be granted him; that he would remain an outcast, and drag his wife down to the gutter. Darling 'Muriel' would have gloated over the certainty of such a prospect for her sweet 'May.' Yet the fact was, that on a certain day two men encountered by appointment in a retired place, and, as they beheld each other, one of these men could not restrain his tears, whilst the other grasped him strongly by the hand.

'It's all right, Joe. I was a cursed fool to behave to you as I did. Women! women!'

And the other, hearing himself addressed in honest words of friendly encouragement, looked up again, and once more hoped.