The Prize Lodger

George Gissing

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The ordinary West−End Londoner — who is a citizen of no city at all, but dwells amid a mere conglomerate of houses at a certain distance from Charing Cross — has known a fleeting surprise when, by rare chance, his eye fell upon the name of some such newspaper as the Battersea Times, the Camberwell Mercury, or the Islington Gazette. To him, these and the like districts are nothing more than compass points of the huge metropolis. He may be in practice acquainted with them; if historically inclined, he may think of them as old−time villages swallowed up by insatiable London; but he has never grasped the fact that in Battersea, Camberwell, Islington, there are people living who name these places as their home; who are born, subsist, and die there as though in a distinct town, and practically without consciousness of its obliteration in the map of a world capital.

The stable element of this population consists of more or less old−fashioned people. Round about them is the ceaseless coming and going of nomads who keep abreast with the time, who take their lodgings by the week, their houses by the month; who camp indifferently in regions old and new, learning their geography in train and tram−car. Abiding parishioners are wont to be either very poor or established in a moderate prosperity; they lack enterprise, either for good or ill: if comfortably off; they owe it, as a rule, to some predecessor's exertion. And for the most part, though little enough endowed with the civic spirit, they abundantly pride themselves on their local permanence.

Representative of this class was Mr. Archibald Jordan, a native of Islington, and, at the age of five−and−forty, still faithful to the streets which he had trodden as a child. His father started a small grocery business in Upper Street; Archibald succeeded to the shop, advanced soberly, and at length admitted a partner, by whose capital and energy the business was much increased. After his thirtieth year Mr. Jordan ceased to stand behind the counter. Of no very active disposition, and but moderately set on gain, he found it pleasant to spend a few hours daily over the books and the correspondence, and for the rest of his time to enjoy a gossipy leisure, straying among the acquaintances of a lifetime, or making new in the decorous bar−parlours, billiard−rooms, and other such retreats which allured his bachelor liberty. His dress and bearing were unpretentious, but impressively respectable he never allowed his garments (made by an Islington tailor, an old school fellow) to exhibit the least sign of wear, but fashion affected their style as little as possible. Of middle height, and tending to portliness, he walked at an unvarying pace, as a man who had never known undignified hurry; in his familiar thoroughfares he glanced about him with a good−humoured air of proprietorship, or with a look of thoughtful criticism for any changes that might be going forward. No one had ever spoken flatteringly of his visage; he knew himself a very homely−featured man, and accepted the fact, as something that had neither favoured nor hindered him in life. But it was his conviction that no man's eye had a greater power of solemn and overwhelming rebuke, and this gift he took a pleasure in exercising, however trivial the occasion.

For five−and−twenty years he had lived in lodgings; always within the narrow range of Islington respectability, yet never for more than a twelvemonth under the same roof. This peculiar feature of Mr. Jordan's life had made him a subject of continual interest to local landladies, among whom were several lifelong residents, on friendly terms of old time with the Jordan family. To them it seemed an astonishing thing that a man in such circumstances had not yet married; granting this eccentricity, they could not imagine what made him change his abode so often. Not a landlady in Islington but would welcome Mr. Jordan in her rooms, and, having got him, do her utmost to prolong the connection. He had been known to quit a house on the paltriest excuse, removing to another in which he could not expect equally good treatment. There was no accounting for it: it must be taken as an ultimate mystery of life, and made the most of as a perennial topic of neighbourly conversation.

As to the desirability of having Mr. Jordan for a lodger there could be no difference of opinion among rational womankind. Mrs. Wiggins, indeed, had taken his sudden departure from her house so ill that she always spoke of

him abusively; but who heeded Mrs. Wiggins? Even in the sadness of hope deferred, those ladies who had entertained him once, and speculated on his possible return, declared Mr. Jordan a 'thorough gentleman.' Lodgers, as a class, do not recommend themselves in Islington; Mr. Jordan shone against the dusky background with almost dazzling splendour. To speak of lodgers as of cattle, he was a prize creature. A certain degree of comfort he firmly exacted; he might be a trifle fastidious about cooking; he stood upon his dignity; but no one could say that he grudged reward for service rendered. It was his practice to pay more than the landlady asked. 'Twenty−five shillings a week, you say? I shall give you twenty−eight. But ——' and with raised forefinger he went through the catalogue of his demands. Everything must be done precisely as he directed; even in the laying of his table he insisted upon certain minute peculiarities, and to forget one of them was to earn that gaze of awful reprimand which Mr. Jordan found (or thought) more efficacious than any spoken word. Against this precision might be set his strange indulgence in the matter of bills; he merely regarded the total, was never known to dispute an item. Only twice in his long experience had he quitted a lodging because of exorbitant charges, and on these occasions he sternly refused to discuss the matter. 'Mrs. Hawker, I am paying your account with the addition of one week's rent. Your rooms will be vacant at eleven o'clock to−morrow morning.' And until the hour of departure no entreaty, no prostration, could induce him to utter a syllable.

It was on the 1st of June, 1889, his forty−fifth birthday, that Mr. Jordan removed from quarters he had occupied for ten months, and became a lodger in the house of Mrs. Elderfield.

Mrs. Elderfield, a widow, aged three−and−thirty, with one little girl, was but a casual resident in Islington; she knew nothing of Mr. Jordan, and made no inquiries about him. Strongly impressed, as every woman must needs be, by his air and tone of mild authority, she congratulated herself on the arrival of such an inmate; but no subservience appeared in her demeanour; she behaved with studious civility, nothing more. Her words were few and well chosen. Always neatly dressed, yet always busy, she moved about the house with quick, silent step, and cleanliness marked her path. The meals were well cooked, well served. Mr. Jordan being her only lodger, she could devote to him an undivided attention. At the end of his first week the critical gentleman felt greater satisfaction than he had ever known.

The bill lay upon his table at breakfast−time. He perused the items, and, much against his habit, reflected upon them. Having breakfasted, he rang the bell.

'Mrs. Elderfield ——'

He paused, and looked gravely at the widow. She had a plain, honest, healthy face, with resolute lips, and an eye that brightened when she spoke; her well−knit figure, motionless in its respectful attitude, declared a thoroughly sound condition of the nerves.

'Mrs. Elderfield, your bill is so very moderate that I think you must have forgotten something.'

'Have you looked it over, sir?'

'I never trouble about the details. Please examine it.'

'There is no need, sir. I never make a mistake.'

'I said, Mrs. Elderfield, please examine it.'

She seemed to hesitate, but obeyed.

'The bill is quite correct, sir.'

'Thank you.'

He paid it at once and said no more.

The weeks went on. To Mr. Jordan's surprise, his landlady's zeal and efficiency showed no diminution, a thing unprecedented in his long and varied experience. After the first day or two he had found nothing to correct; every smallest instruction was faithfully carried out. Moreover, he knew for the first time in his life the comfort of absolutely clean rooms. The best of his landladies hitherto had not risen above that conception of cleanliness which is relative to London soot and fog. His palate, too, was receiving an education. Probably he had never eaten of a joint rightly cooked, or tasted a potato boiled as it should be; more often than not, the food set before him had undergone a process which left it masticable indeed, but void of savour and nourishment. Many little attentions of which he had never dreamed kept him in a wondering cheerfulness. And at length he said to himself: 'Here I shall stay.'

Not that his constant removals had been solely due to discomfort and a hope of better things. The secret — perhaps not entirely revealed even to himself — lay in Mr. Jordan's sense of his own importance, and his

uneasiness whenever he felt that, in the eyes of a landlady, he was becoming a mere everyday person — an ordinary lodger. No sooner did he detect a sign of this than he made up his mind to move. It gave him the keenest pleasure of which he was capable when, on abruptly announcing his immediate departure, he perceived the landlady's profound mortification. To make the blow heavier he had even resorted to artifice, seeming to express a most lively contentment during the very days when he had decided to leave and was asking himself where he should next abide. One of his delights was to return to a house which he had quitted years ago, to behold the excitement and bustle occasioned by his appearance, and play the good−natured autocrat over grovelling dependents. In every case, save the two already mentioned, he had parted with his landlady on terms of friendliness, never vouchsafing a reason for his going away, genially eluding every attempt to obtain an explanation, and at the last abounding in graceful recognition of all that had been done for him. Mr. Jordan shrank from dispute, hated every sort of contention; this characteristic gave a certain refinement to his otherwise commonplace existence. Vulgar vanity would have displayed itself in precisely the acts and words from which his self−esteem nervously shrank. And of late he had been thinking over the list of his landladies, with a half−formed desire to settle down, to make himself a permanent home. Doubtless as a result of this state of mind, he betook himself to a strange house, where, as from neutral ground, he might reflect upon the lodgings he knew, and judge between their merits. He could not foresee what awaited him under Mrs. Elderfield's roof; the event impressed him as providential; he felt, with singular emotion, that choice was taken out of his hands. Lodgings could not be more than perfect, and such he had found.

It was not his habit to chat with landladies. At times he held forth to them on some topic of interest, suavely, instructively; if he gave in to their ordinary talk, it was with a half−absent smile of condescension. Mrs. Elderfield seeming as little disposed to gossip as himself, a month elapsed before he knew anything of her history; but one evening the reserve on both sides was broken. His landlady modestly inquired whether she was giving satisfaction, and Mr. Jordan replied with altogether unwonted fervour. In the dialogue that ensued, they exchanged personal confidences. The widow had lost her husband four years ago; she came from the Midlands, but had long dwelt in London. Then fell from her lips a casual remark which made the hearer uneasy.

'I don't think I shall always stay here. The neighbourhood is too crowded. I should like to have a house somewhere further out.'

Mr. Jordan did not comment on this, hut it kept a place in his daily thoughts, and became at length so much of an anxiety that he invited a renewal of the subject.

'You have no intention of moving just yet, Mrs. Elderfield?'

'I was going to tell you, sir,' replied the landlady, with her respectful calm, 'that I have decided to make a change next spring. Some friends of mine have gone to live at Wood Green, and I shall look for a house in the same neighbourhood.'

Mr. Jordan was, in private, gravely disturbed. He who had flitted from house to house for many years, distressing the souls of landladies, now lamented the prospect of a forced removal. It was open to him to accompany Mrs. Elderfield, but he shrank from the thought of living in so remote a district. Wood Green! The very name appalled him, for he had never been able to endure the country. He betook himself one dreary autumn afternoon to that northern suburb, and what he saw did not at all reassure him. On his way back he began once more to review the list of old lodgings.

But from that day his conversations with Mrs. Elderfield grew more frequent, more intimate. In the evening he occasionally made an excuse for knocking at her parlour door, and lingered for a talk which ended only at supper time. He spoke of his own affairs, and grew more ready to do so as his hearer manifested a genuine interest, without impertinent curiosity. Little by little he imparted to Mrs. Elderfield a complete knowledge of his commercial history, of his pecuniary standing — matters of which he had never before spoken to a mere acquaintance. A change was coming over him; the foundations of habit crumbled beneath his feet; he lost his look of complacence, his self−confident and superior tone. Bar−parlours and billiard−rooms saw him but rarely and flittingly. He seemed to have lost his pleasure in the streets of Islington, and spent all his spare time by the fireside, perpetually musing.

On a day in March one of his old landladies, Mrs. Higdon, sped to the house of another, Mrs. Evans, panting under a burden of strange news. Could it be believed! Mr. Jordan was going to marry — to marry that woman in whose house he was living! Mrs. Higdon had it on the very best authority — that of Mr. Jordan's partner, who

spoke of the affair without reserve. A new house had already been taken — at Wood Green. Well! After all these years, after so many excellent opportunities, to marry a mere stranger and forsake Islington! In a moment Mr. Jordan's character was gone; had he figured in the police−court under some disgraceful charge, these landladies could hardly have felt more shocked and professed themselves more disgusted. The intelligence spread. Women went out of their way to have a sight of Mrs. Elderfield's house; they hung about for a glimpse of that sinister person herself. She had robbed them, every one, of a possible share in Islington's prize lodger. Had it been one of themselves they could have borne the chagrin; but a woman whom not one of them knew, an alien! What base arts had she practised? Ah, it was better not to inquire too closely into the secrets of that lodging−house!

Though every effort was made to learn the time and place of the ceremony, Mr. Jordan's landladies had the mortification to hear of his wedding only when it was over. Of course, this showed that he felt the disgracefulness of his behaviour he was not utterly lost to shame. it could only be hoped that he would not know the bitterness of repentance.

Not till he found himself actually living in the house at Wood Green did Mr. Jordan realise how little his own will had had to do with the recent course of events. Certainly, he had made love to the widow, and had asked her to marry him; but from that point onward he seemed to have put himself entirely in Mrs. Elderfield's hands, granting every request, meeting half−way every suggestion she offered, becoming, in short, quite a different kind of man from his former self. He had not been sensible of a moment's reluctance; he enjoyed the novel sense of yielding himself to affectionate guidance. His wits had gone wool−gathering; they returned to him only after the short honeymoon at Brighton, when he stood upon his own hearth−rug, and looked round at the new furniture and ornaments which symbolised a new beginning of life.

The admirable landlady had shown herself energetic, clear−headed, and full of resource; it was she who chose the house, and transacted all the business in connection with it; Mr. Jordan had merely run about in her company from place to place, smiling approval and signing cheques. No one could have gone to work more prudently, or obtained what she wanted at smaller outlay; for all that, Mr. Jordan, having recovered something like his normal frame of mind, viewed the results with consternation. Left to himself, he would have taken a very small house, and furnished it much in the style of Islington lodgings; as it was, he occupied a ten−roomed 'villa,' with appointments which seemed to him luxurious, aristocratic. True, the expenditure was of no moment to a man in his position, and there was no fear that Mrs. Jordan would involve him in dangerous extravagance; but he had always lived with such excessive economy that the sudden change to a life correspondent with his income could not but make him uncomfortable.

Mrs. Jordan had, of course, seen to it that her personal appearance harmonised with the new surroundings. She dressed herself and her young daughter with careful appropriateness. There was no display, no purchase of gewgaws — merely garments of good quality, such as became people in easy circumstances. She impressed upon her husband that this was nothing more than a return to the habits of her earlier life. Her first marriage had been a sad mistake; it had brought her down in the world. Now she felt restored to her natural position.

After a week of restlessness, Mr. Jordan resumed his daily visits to the shop in Upper Street, where he sat as usual among the books and the correspondence, and tried to assure himself that all would henceforth be well with him. No more changing from house to house; a really comfortable home in which to spend the rest of his days; a kind and most capable wife to look after all his needs, to humour all his little habits. He could not have taken a wiser step.

For all that, he had lost something, though he did not yet understand what it was. The first perception of a change not for the better flashed upon him one evening in the second week, when he came home an hour later than his wont. Mrs. Jordan, who always stood waiting for him at the window, had no smile as he entered.

'Why are you late?' she asked, in her clear, restrained voice.

'Oh — something or other kept me.'

This would not do. Mrs. Jordan quietly insisted on a full explanation of the delay, and it seemed to her unsatisfactory.

'I hope you won't be irregular in your habits, Archibald,' said his wife, with gentle admonition. 'What I always liked in you was your methodical way of living. I shall be very uncomfortable if I never know when to expect you.'

'Yes, my dear, but — business, you see ——'

'But you have explained that you could have been back at the usual time.'

'Yes — that's true — but ——'

'Well, well, you won't let it happen again. Oh really, Archibald!' she suddenly exclaimed. 'The idea of you coming into the room with muddy boots! Why, look! There's a patch of mud on the carpet ——'

'It was my hurry to speak to you,' murmured Mr. Jordan, in confusion.

'Please go at once and take your boots off. And you left your slippers in the bedroom this morning. You must always bring them down, and put them in the dining−room cupboard; then they're ready for you when you come into the house.'

Mr. Jordan had but a moderate appetite for his dinner, and he did not talk so pleasantly as usual. This was but the beginning of troubles such as he had not for a moment foreseen. His wife, having since their engagement taken the upper hand, began to show her determination to keep it, and day by day her rule grew more galling to the ex−bachelor. He himself, in the old days, had plagued his landladies by insisting upon method and routine, by his faddish attention to domestic minutæ; he now learnt what it was to be subjected to the same kind of despotism, exercised with much more exasperating persistence. Whereas Mrs. Elderfield had scrupulously obeyed every direction given by her lodger, Mrs. Jordan was evidently resolved that her husband should live, move, and have his being in the strictest accordance with her own ideal. Not in any spirit of nagging, or ill−tempered unreasonableness; it was merely that she had her favourite way of doing every conceivable thing, and felt so sure it was the best of all possible ways that she could not endure any other. The first serious disagreement between them had reference to conduct at the breakfast−table. After a broken night, feeling headachy and worried, Mr. Jordan took up his newspaper, folded it conveniently, and set it against the bread so that he could read while eating. Without a word, his wife gently removed it, and laid it aside on a chair.

'What are you doing?' he asked gruffly.

'You mustn't read at meals, Archibald. It's bad manners, and bad for your digestion.'

I've read the news at breakfast all my life, and I shall do so still,' exclaimed the husband, starting up and recovering his paper.

'Then you will have breakfast by yourself. Nelly, we must go into the other room till papa has finished.'

Mr. Jordan ate mechanically, and stared at the newspaper with just as little consciousness. Prompted by the underlying weakness of his character to yield for the sake of peace, wrath made him dogged, and the more steadily he regarded his position, the more was he appalled by the outlook. Why, this meant downright slavery! He had married a woman so horribly like himself in several points that his only hope lay in overcoming her by sheer violence. A thoroughly good and well−meaning woman, an excellent housekeeper, the kind of wife to do him credit and improve his social position; but self−willed, pertinacious, and probably thinking herself his superior in every respect. He had nothing to fear but subjection — the one thing he had never anticipated, the one thing he could never endure.

He went off to business without seeing his wife again, and passed a lamentable day. At his ordinary hour of return, instead of setting off homeward he strayed about the by−streets of Islington and Pentonville. Not till this moment had he felt how dear they were to him, the familiar streets; their very odours fell sweet upon his nostrils. Never again could he go hither and thither, among the old friends, the old places, to his heart's content. What had possessed him to abandon this precious liberty! The thought of Wood Green revolted him; live there as long as he might, he would never be at home. He thought of his wife (now waiting for him) with fear, and then with a reaction of rage. Let her wait! He — Archibald Jordan — before whom women had bowed and trembled for five−and−twenty years — was he to come and go at a wife's bidding? And at length the thought seemed so utterly preposterous that he sped northward as fast as possible, determined to right himself this very evening.

Mrs. Jordan sat alone. He marched into the room with muddy boots, flung his hat and overcoat into a chair, and poked the fire violently. His wife's eye was fixed on him, and she first spoke — in the quiet voice that he dreaded.

'What do you mean by carrying on like this, Archibald?'

'I shall carry on as I like in my own house — hear that?'

'I do hear it, and I'm very sorry to. It gives me a very bad opinion of you. You will not do as you like in your own house. Rage as you please. You will not do as you like in your own house.'

There was a contemptuous anger in her eye which the man could not face. He lost all control of himself,

uttered coarse oaths, and stood quivering. Then the woman began to lecture him; she talked steadily, acrimoniously, for more than an hour, regardless of his interruptions. Nervously exhausted, he fled at length from the room. A couple of hours later they met again in the nuptial chamber, and again Mrs. Jordan began to talk. Her point, as before, was that he had begun married life about as badly as possible. Why had he married her at all? What fault had she committed to incur such outrageous usage? But, thank goodness, she had a will of her own, and a proper self−respect; behave as he might, she would still persevere in the path of womanly duty. If he thought to make her life unbearable he would find his mistake; she simply should not heed him; perhaps he would return to his senses before long — and in this vein Mrs. Jordan continued until night was at odds with morning, only becoming silent when her partner had sunk into the oblivion of uttermost fatigue.

The next day Mr. Jordan's demeanour showed him, for the moment at all events, defeated. He made no attempt to read at breakfast; he moved about very quietly. And in the afternoon he came home at the regulation hour.

Mrs. Jordan had friends in the neighbourhood, but she saw little of them. She was not a woman of ordinary tastes. Everything proved that, to her mind, the possession of a nice house, with the prospects of a comfortable life, was an end in itself; she had no desire to exhibit her well−furnished rooms, or to gad about talking of her advantages. Every moment of her day was taken up in the superintendence of servants, the discharge of an infinitude of housewifely tasks. She had no assistance from her daughter; the girl went to school, and was encouraged to study with the utmost application. The husband's presence in the house seemed a mere accident — save in the still nocturnal season, when Mrs. Jordan bestowed upon him her counsel and her admonitions.

After the lapse of a few days Mr. Jordan again offered combat, and threw himself into it with a frenzy.

'Look here! '~e shouted at length, 'either you or I are going to leave this house. I can't live with you — understand? I hate the sight of you!'

'Go on!' retorted the other, with mild bitterness. 'Abuse me as much as you like, I can bear it. I shall continue to do my duty, and unless you have recourse to personal violence, here I remain. If you go too far, of course the law must defend me!'

This was precisely what Mr. Jordan knew and dreaded; the law was on his wife's side, and by applying at a police−court for protection she could overwhelm him with shame and ridicule, which would make life intolerable. Impossible to argue with this woman. Say what he might, the fault always seemed his. His wife was simply doing her duty — in a spirit of admirable thoroughness; he, in the eyes of a third person, would appear an unreasonable and violent curmudgeon. Had it not all sprung out of his obstinacy with regard to reading at breakfast? How explain to anyone what he suffered in his nerves, in his pride, in the outraged habitudes of a lifetime?

That evening he did not return to Wood Green. Afraid of questions if he showed himself in the old resorts, he spent some hours in a billiard−room near King's Cross, and towards midnight took a bedroom under the same roof. On going to business next day, he awaited with tremors either a telegram or a visit from his wife; but the whole day passed, and he heard nothing. After dark he walked once more about the beloved streets, pausing now and then to look up at the windows of this or that well−remembered house. Ah, if he durst but enter and engage a lodging! Impossible — for ever impossible!

He slept in the same place as on the night before. And again a day passed without any sort of inquiry from Wood Green. When evening came he went home.

Mrs. Jordan behaved as though he had returned from business in the usual way. 'Is it raining?' she asked, with a half−smile. And her husband replied, in as matter−of−fact a tone as he could command, 'No, it isn't.' There was no mention between them of his absence. That night Mrs. Jordan talked for an hour or two of his bad habit of stepping on the paint when he went up and down stairs, then fell calmly asleep.

But Mr. Jordan did not sleep for a long time. What! was he, after all, to be allowed his liberty out of doors, provided he relinquished it within? Was it really the case that his wife, satisfied with her house and furniture and income, did not care a jot whether he stayed away or came home? There, indeed, gleamed a hope. When Mr. Jordan slept, he dreamed that he was back again in lodgings at Islington, tasting an extraordinary bliss. Day dissipated the vision, but still Mrs. Jordan spoke not a word of his absence, and with trembling still he hoped.