

George Gissing, "Joseph".

Mrs. Waterbury's cup overflowed with bitterness. She had come down to a miserable eight-roomed house in a dreary suburb; and who could guarantee her that the next change would not be to yet more miserable lodgings? Her husband was just the man to end in downright pauperism -- a sanguine simpleton, whose money slipped through his fingers while he chased absurd schemes. She detested his ever-smiling face, his inexhaustible patience, his kindness to all the world. Her sole consolation (now that she had resolutely withdrawn from intercourse with friends and relatives) was in railing all day long, and day after day, at her maid-of-all-work, who presently, unable to stand the life any longer, forsook the house without notice. Coming home at his usual hour Waterbury found his wife in something more than her usual temper

"I give it up!" she exclaimed. "You may keep house for yourself. I shall go into lodgings. I'll never engage another servant as long as I live".

Waterbury had heard this declaration too often to be much impressed by it. Their six years of married life had been a ceaseless conflict with maid servants; some scores had come and gone, from the three prancing damsels with whom Mrs. Waterbury began housekeeping at Highgate to this latest deserter of the little house at Kilburn.

"The fact is, Mabel," he said, cheerfully, "you get them too young. Try an oldish woman".

"I hate women! I hate the sight of them!"

There was a good deal of truth in this. Mrs. Waterbury had never got on very well with her own sex. Of all women she had the meanest opinion, and delighted in attributing all feminine actions to base motives. She herself, presumably, was a shining exception, for she had never been known to confess herself other than a perfect being.

"I have an idea", cried her husband, with his usual hopefulness. "Why not get a man -- a lad -- to do the housework? I believe it would be an end of all your troubles. Why not? Splendid idea, eh?"

After the natural sneer at a suggestion from that quarter Mabel seemed to reflect.

“Now do give it a try”, he urged again. “Let me find a young man----”

“Don’t talk stuff! It wouldn’t be proper”.

“Nonsense! A lad of eighteen or so. Of course, there are certain things -- well, just for the sake of peace and quietness, you would not mind doing certain things for yourself”.

“Oh, of course!” broke out his wife, fiercely.

“That’s what it’ll come to. You’d like to see me blacking your boots -- oh, yes. I *know* you would”.

She railed for a quarter of an hour, yet all the time was thinking favourably of what had been proposed. After an evening as uncomfortable as she could make it Mabel agreed to let her husband try this experiment. She, of course, would accept no responsibility in the matter: if *he* liked to bring a man into the house, well and good; he must undertake all trouble connected with the charge, and bear the blame of disaster if it turned out badly -- as, of course, it would. Mabel went to bed, slept soundly, and in the morning allowed her husband to do all the servant’s work before he went off to business.

Waterbury bestirred himself with no little energy, and in a week’s time had discovered two young men, either of whom, he thought, would answer their purpose. Mabel desired to see both, and to make her choice.

“I’m sure *you* are not to be trusted”, she remarked. “As likely as not, you’d bring a burglar into the house”.

The youths called upon her, He who came first was immediately rejected, for a multiplicity of reasons not to be grasped by the masculine mind. The second -- his name was Joseph -- found favour with Mrs. Waterbury; she engaged him forthwith.

Joseph declared that his age was twenty but he had the look of seventeen; a form of elegant slimness, an upright carriage, a soft, discreet step, a fair complexion, and a most ingenuous smile. His upper lip shone with a pale growth, which might perchance develop into a moustache of golden hue; his chin he seemed to shave. Speaking with exemplary modesty, in a low voice, and with cockney accent, Joseph told a plain

unvarnished tale. He had been an errand boy, a page, a pastry-cook's apprentice, and one or two other things; his decided preference was for domestic service, and *not* in a large house. The place offered him by Mrs. Waterbury was exactly what he desired, it would be a "tranquil" life -- yes, Joseph said "tranquil". His tastes were all for quietness and domestic peace. He flattered himself that he was no bad hand at cooking -- it had been one of his special studies, he approached it in a "scientific spirit".

"I don't care for company, mem. All my leisure time is spent in study. I have collected a little library, and I try to improve my mind. You wouldn't object, mem?"

"Oh dear, no". Mrs. Waterbury regarded it as a most laudable ambition.

"I think you will suit me, Joseph".

"I really think I should, mem", he answered, with a smile of delightful simplicity.

And the experiment was a great success. After the first feeling of awkwardness had passed Mabel found it the most natural thing in the world to be waited upon by a youth-of-all-work; in practice, everything arranged itself quite simply and with the utmost propriety. The absence of children (whom Mrs. Waterbury hated) made it possible for Joseph to discharge all but every duty of a maid-servant, and he did his work remarkably well. The select library to which he had referred consisted of some two hundred volumes -- cheap, but of a high literary standard. In the kitchen of an evening Joseph might be seen delighting his soul with the poets, the essayists, the superior novelists. He kept a commonplace-book, and copied long passages, slowly, conscientiously. Waterbury thought the fellow excellent fun, and sometimes induced him to recite from Shakspeare while he was waiting at table: Joseph, who did nothing without zeal, suited the action to the word, and struck amazing attitudes, He was certainly very conceited, but in such an amiable way that one liked him the better for it. Then his cooking altogether surpassed that of the average servant; he scorned common dishes, and prepared little menu-cards for the dinner table, with French names accurately written. The house was kept in admirable order: cleanliness ruled throughout; everything was done at the proper time, and Joseph seemed to be shod with the shoes of swiftness and of silence.

"This is too good to last", said Mrs. Waterbury, when she had paid the first month's

wages.

But Joseph seemed to delight in the praise bestowed upon him. He redoubled his exertions, and the comforts which surrounded her occasionally made Mabel forget that she was a wronged and embittered woman. She began to regard Joseph with maternal affection: she was flattered by his unfailing deference, his air of respectful homage. Secretly she told herself that the poor young man was overcome by her gracious sweetness. She began to suspect that he wrote verses in her honour.

At the same time Waterbury's circumstances began to improve. Mabel, able to array herself becomingly, took a little share once more in social life, and aired her grievances to people who could listen. "No; I *can't* ask you to come and see me. Our home is too disgraceful. One servant, and a boy -- just fancy! after what I have been accustomed to!" It was not in her nature to tell the truth or she might have boasted of the singular arrangement which put her so much more at ease than people with a larger income.

One person there was, however, whose visits Mabel encouraged, and whose goodwill she tried hard to gain. Waterbury had an orphan niece, a ward in Chancery, resident with a well-to-do family at Hornsey, and on the principle that a moneyed relative should always be kept in sight Mabel desired to see as much as possible of this girl. Caroline Waterbury would soon pass out of tutelage, and her fortune, though it was not great, might in some way be made to benefit the Kilburn family. Not at all handsome, and soft-hearted to excess, Caroline would probably fall a prey to some shrewd young man of the City species, many of whom she knew. Mrs. Waterbury, assuming a tone of impartial affection, did her best to avert this danger.

"Ah, my dear! what stories I could tell you! Don't be misled by appearances. They are the ruin of most women".

"But, Aunt Mabel", replied the girl, on one such occasion, "I am the last to be deceived by appearances. All I care for is a simple and quiet life. I like quiet people. I should wish to have just such a little house as this of yours. I'm far happier here than where it's all noise and glitter".

As she ceased speaking the door opened, and Joseph entered with the tea-tray. Caroline, glancing at him for a moment, smiled good-naturedly. When he was gone she talked

about him with Mrs. Waterbury, who had always some new instance of Joseph's excellent behaviour to report and dwell upon.

"I feel half sorry for him", said Caroline, in her impulsive way. "He seems too good for such work -- don't you think?"

"Oh, I hope he'll stay for ever! I should be in despair if he left. You must remember, dear, he's of common birth after all; I don't see why he shouldn't be *quite* content in service. And I am sure I treat him very well".

Caroline mused a little, then laughed. Perhaps she remembered the humble origin of her own parents. The girl was very simple-minded, and, it was generally thought, not at all the kind of person an heiress should be. She often did very foolish things in the way of extravagant alms-giving and the like. One saw in her eyes that she had not much depth of character or intellect -- a weak and trivial, but sweet-natured girl.

Mrs. Waterbury was acquiring influence over her, and joyfully perceived the fact. Already Caroline had spoken of coming to live with her relatives at Kilburn when she was one and twenty.

She made a call one afternoon when Mabel was out. On her return, two hours later, Mrs. Waterbury found the young lady waiting for her. Caroline said merrily she had had quite a conversation with Joseph, who had brought her tea.

"He's really quite a gentleman. I know lots who haven't such good manners. It must be his reading, I suppose?"

"Oh, he improves", said Mrs. Waterbury. "He talks much better than when he came. Of course it's living with *us*".

Caroline was not seen again at Kilburn for more than a month. Then she came on a Sunday, spent the afternoon in her usual way, and could not be persuaded to stay for the evening. A day or two after she wrote briefly, saying that she was about to spend some few weeks in the North of England.

About this time Mabel suffered a shock. Joseph, on receiving his month's wages, began

to speak with timid gravity, saying how greatly he had enjoyed the honour of serving in this house, how attached he had become to his master and mistress, and how it pained him -- then words failed: he stammered, turned very red, averted his face. Mrs. Waterbury could not believe that she grasped his meaning.

“You are not going to *leave* us, Joseph!”

“I regret deeply, ma’am. I am under the necessity of giving a month’s notice”.

The mistress flew into boundless excitement; in the same breath she refused to accept his notice, and asked why he wished to leave. Joseph had but a vague explanation to offer; private circumstances, family duties, called him away -- he had no choice. Losing all control of herself, Mabel tempestuously forbade him to speak of such a thing: it was the basest ingratitude! Why, had she not educated him? Had she not rescued him, so to speak, from the gutter? Did he not owe her everything? She would not hear of it; she refused to let him go. And Joseph, horribly perturbed, trembled out of the room. But the same evening, questioned by Mr. Waterbury, he adhered to his resolution. Thereupon Mabel raged against him with astonishing vehemence. She would not have him in the house another day. From the first he had been a worthless impostor; he came with the sole purpose of causing trouble; instead of doing his duty he had sat reading by the hour -- a lazy, good-for-nothing, impertinent creature! Not another day should he remain. For all that, Joseph stayed to the end of his month, and suffered all the extremities of Mrs. Waterbury’s temper. He bore it with a meek air of martyrdom, answering insult with a sad smile, and seeming to the end an adorer of the lady’s natural graces.

Six months elapsed. Mabel had engaged successively three young men, and was beginning to quarrel with the fourth, when, one afternoon, Caroline Waterbury made an unexpected appearance. There was a strangeness in her manner, and Mabel had not long to wait for its explanation.

“Aunt!” began the young lady, after apologising rather awkwardly for her long silence, “Aunt -- you remember Joseph?”

“Joseph? Remember him? The worthless ----”

“Please don’t”, interposed the other, half laughing, half crying. “I have just been married

to him”.

Stricken silent, Mrs. Waterbury heard the extraordinary narrative. It began with the afternoon when Caroline and Joseph were alone in the house together. The day after, Miss Waterbury was surprised at receiving a letter from Joseph -- he wrote in the humblest manner -- begging to be allowed to thank her for the encouraging words she had spoken when he told her of his inclination for studious pursuits. To this letter Caroline replied, and behold Joseph presently wrote again, and again she answered him; and their correspondence led at length to a meeting that Sunday evening (Joseph's evening out), when she declined to stay at Kilburn. By this time she was in love with Joseph, and she all but confessed it. The actual avowal came in the course of subsequent correspondence, while Caroline was away from London. Joseph thereupon gave notice, feeling it unworthy of him henceforth to occupy a menial position. Until his marriage he had lived penuriously on meagre savings.

Telling all this, Caroline blushed and shed tears -- not of distress. Her relative, when at length able to utter speech, exclaimed with a gasp:

“Oh, you little idiot!”

THE END.

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