

THE HOUSEWIFE

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Josephine's Husband

L. M. Montgomery

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Zillah Gorham went swiftly up the narrow stairs and opened her bedroom door. The room was dark with the gloom of a November twilight. It was a long, cold, neat room, with four windows, three of which were shadowed by the cherry trees of the orchard and the firs behind the house. The fourth looked out westward over the pond, and through a break in the willows around it to the fields and homesteads of Lower Wentworth.

Josephine was sitting listlessly by it, one hand hanging at her side, the other propping her chin on the sill. Above her head was a narrow shelf across the window, supporting some potted house plants. The tendrils of a trailing fuchsia almost touched the smooth, glossy arch of her fawn-colored hair. Her faded wrapper was loose at the throat as if she had flung it open for air, and her black brows were knotted in a frown above the large, deep-tinted hazel eyes that were such a startling contrast to her colorless face.

Zillah came forward slowly and sat down on the low, chintz-covered seat before Josephine.

She was much older than her sister, and had the same sleek, thin hair and pale face, but her eyes were a faded blue and her expression was at once weaker and more malicious.

She had been talking to Amanda Reed over the line fence and had heard from her some news which she must tell Josephine. But she knew very well that it would never do to blurt it out too eagerly; Josephine looked dangerous.

“It looks like snow,” she began. Josephine made no answer, but Zillah had expected none.

“Who do you suppose was married last night?” she went on.

“I’ve no idea,” said Josephine indifferently.

“James Wright and Ada Allan. Folks are more than surprised. He courted her pretty sly. There’s another of your old beaux gone, Josephine. If you don’t look out there’ll soon be none of them left.”

“What’s that to me?” said Josephine scornfully, not glancing at the speaker.

“Oh, nothing much, I s’pose. Only this . . . you won’t get anybody to take you if you keep on acting this way much longer. If you’d got a divorce long ago, as you ought to have done, you might have your pick even yet. But you always were so set and stubborn.”

Doubtless Josephine was stubborn. Her mouth looked like it. It grew more set still as she responded drily,

“It’s a wonder you ain’t tired talking to me about it. I’ve told you often enough that I don’t mean to apply for any divorce. He can if he wants to.”

“Well, I guess he will before long,” said Zillah, seeing a chance to work in her news fittingly. “I’m going to tell you just what Mandy Reed told me out there to-night. Gilbert Flemming told Lonzo Farrer in the store at Upper Wentworth the other night, that he wished to mercy he was free of you once for all. There, Josephine Gorham! If a man said that about me I’d see that he had his wish soon enough!”

“I don’t believe it,” cried Josephine, moved for a moment out of her cold reserve. “Gilbert never said that.”

“He did. And I’ve heard other things he’s said. He’ll apply for a divorce if you won’t. And that’ll tell against you ten times worse than if ’twas you that applied.”

Josephine did not answer but Zillah was satisfied with the expression of her face. She hastened to strike while the iron was hot.

“Now, Josephine, listen to me. I’ve always had your best interests at heart and I’ve always stood by you. You’re miserable and I want to see you happy. Gilbert Flemming treated you scandalous and everybody says so. And now they say he has a notion of Caddy Evans.”

“Caddy Evans?” she repeated in a whisper.

“Yes. And he drove her home from prayer meeting last Wednesday evening. I saw that with my own eyes, but I didn’t dare to tell you before, for you always get in such a rage when I mention his name. But I think things have gone just far enough. With Gilbert courting another girl already and telling all over the country that he wishes he was rid of you, you’re a fool, Josephine Gorham, if you put up with it.”

Josephine sprang to her feet. Zillah had never seen her so moved. “I won’t put up with it,” she said passionately. “You’re right, Zillah. The court meets at Upper Wentworth next week and I’ll put in my application. He wishes he was free, does he? He shall be free! I hate him!”

She lifted her large hand and struck it violently against the window casing. Zillah felt frightened but triumphant.

“Don’t take on so, Josephine,” she said soothingly. “He ain’t worth getting worked up over. He never treated you right. You’re young and good-looking yet and there’s other men.”

“I don’t want any other man,” said Josephine sullenly, relapsing into her old reserve. “I’ve had enough of married life. I’ll get a divorce, but don’t you go prodding me about marrying again.”

“Well, well, not if you don’t want to,” said Zillah with another of her disagreeable laughs. “Perhaps you’ll change your mind. Of course, you’re always welcome to a home here as long as William and I have one to offer you. Anyhow, you’ll be free and feel happier. And Gil Flemming can marry his precious Caddy then. He had a

notion of her, folks say, before he ever took up with you.”

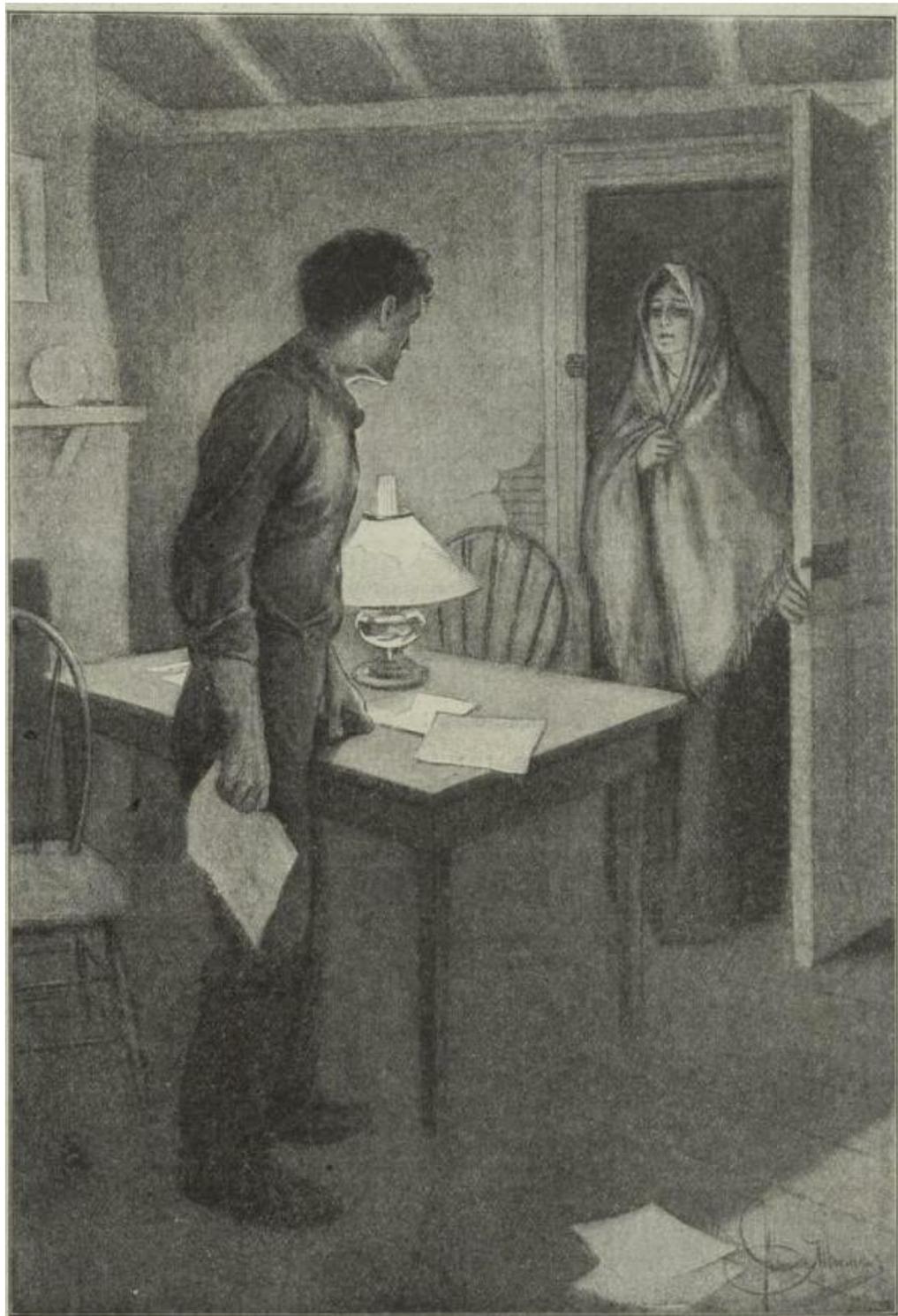
Zillah Gorham knew, no woman better, how to gall and exasperate. So well did she succeed in the present instance that she grew alarmed at Josephine’s face and hastened to change the subject. “Well, I must go down and get William’s supper. Don’t stay here in the dark and cold, Josephine. You’ll get melancholy. There ain’t any good in brooding. Goodness knows if there was you’ve done enough to make everything right.”

Josephine made no reply and Zillah, well satisfied with the result of the interview, went downstairs with her cat-like step. She knew Josephine would keep her word. And Jabez Reed next door was a well-to-do bachelor who always wanted her.

“She’ll get over her crank about marrying again,” she said to her brother at the supper table, “and she’ll get on with Jabez better than she did with Gilbert. She was a fool not to take him in the first place but she was crazy about Gil Flemming. She’s well cured of that now, I guess. Jabez is easy-going and Mandy is a good-natured old fool who won’t try to boss her as ’Lisbeth Fleming did. I was afraid she would never apply for a divorce, she’s so stubborn. She’ll get one easy enough.”

“If Gil don’t fight it I s’pose she will,” said William Gorham. “But she might give him another chance. I believe he wants her back yet if he could get her. Lisbeth’s dead now and maybe they’d get on better together if they made up.”

“Well, there’ll be no making up,” said Zillah. “Josephine hates him and she’d never go back to him if he went down on his bended knees to ask her. And that being the case the sooner she’s free the better.”



“No human decree is ever going to make you anything else but my wife, Josephine.
Do you think you’ve done right?”

William Gorham said nothing more. He seldom ventured to differ openly from Zillah. In his heart he believed that Josephine, under all her pride and stubbornness and seeming hatred, loved Gilbert Flemming still.

Josephine, meanwhile, was pacing up and down the long room like a caged creature. A weaker woman might have wept her passion out in tears but Josephine’s wide-open hazel eyes were bright and dry, although her whole heart was filled with a tumult of wounded pride and the bitter hatred born of strong love. She would sue for a divorce and he might have his freedom and make what use of it he would. He might even marry Caddy Evans—she did not care. Anything that he might do was nothing to her forever.

When the court met at Upper Wentworth Josephine applied for her divorce, and much gossip was occasioned thereby. Josephine herself never spoke of the matter and allowed no one to speak of it to her. Even Zillah for once was cowed into silence. But one afternoon, when the latter was away, William ventured to mention it to Josephine.

“I saw Gilbert down at the store today, Josephine. He looks terrible haggard and thin and hasn’t a word to throw to a dog. Don’t you think you were rather hasty, suing for a divorce? You shouldn’t have let Zillah argue you into it if you didn’t want it.”

“I did want it,” said Josephine. Her voice was sullen and proud, but the hands that held her sewing trembled. “I did it of my own free will. He’s after Caddy Evans and I don’t intend to stand in his way.”

William rolled his tobacco thoughtfully in his hands. Zillah had always told him he was stupid and sure to make a mess of any affair he meddled with. But he did not see how this matter could be any worse than it was, so after a pause he went on, “I don’t believe there’s any truth in that gossip about him and Caddy. He drove her home from prayer-meeting one night when it was pouring rain and she was walking alone—and another time he gave her a lift on the road—and it all started from that. I believe Gilbert loves you yet, Josephine.”

Josephine’s mouth grew harder.

“It looks as if he did when he’d go and tell Lonzo Farrer that he wished he was free of me.”

“Well, I never heard the rights of that story. Maybe he never said such words and if he did you don’t know how he might have been goaded. I daresay people

have told him things too.”

“I don’t care,” said Josephine dully. “I don’t want to change my mind and you’d best let matters be, William. You can’t help them any now.”

“Josephine,” said Zillah one evening, a few days later, “Lawyer Stirling took the papers up today to serve on Gilbert. He’s got them by this time. You’ll soon be a free woman.”

Josephine was washing the milking pails on the backdoor platform. The November evening was raw and chill and her hands and face were blue with cold, but at Zillah’s words a tide of color surged up in her cheeks. She made no response, however, and Zillah, after waiting a moment, went into the house, slamming the door in her petulant disappointment.

When Josephine had finished her work she went up to her room. At the western window she sat down on the chintz seat and pressed her burning face against the pane. So Gilbert had the papers! What would he think? Would he care? Would he be glad?

The proud, angry woman folded her hands over her breast and looked back over her past. She recalled the days when Gilbert Flemming had first come wooing her. How proud and happy she had been! How she had loved him! Yes, and how he had loved her! He had loved her then, whatever he did now.

Then had followed their marriage and those first few happy months. Gilbert, like herself, was intense and deep-natured—“high spirited,” as the phrase went in Wentworth—and the strong wills sometimes clashed. But love had smoothed the way. How good and kind he had been to her, even in her tempers! Then his older brother at the homestead had died, and the sister who had kept his house came to live with Gilbert. After that there was nothing but trouble. Lisbeth Flemming was a domineering woman, accustomed to having her own way. She and Josephine quarrelled incessantly. Both took their complaints to Gilbert. At first he had taken his wife’s part. But Lisbeth had a craftiness that Josephine lacked. Instead of exasperating Gilbert with railing and reproach, as Josephine had done, she posed as a patient, ill-used martyr. Gradually Gilbert was led to blame his wife for their domestic dissensions.

Then Josephine made another mistake. She fled for sympathy to her own kin. Zillah Gorham was one of those women whose capacities for brewing trouble are limitless. She championed her sister’s cause less from affection for her, or even from family pride, than from pure love of mischief-making and interference. She soon made the already bad situation intolerable and it had ended in Josephine leaving Gilbert’s house and going home to William and Zillah.

That was two years ago. Since then Gilbert had lived his comfortless life alone, for Lisbeth had died soon after the separation.

Josephine thought it all over relentlessly. But somehow the memories of recriminations and quarrels seemed less vivid than those of kindness and gentleness, of tender words and kisses, of the long, sweet hours of early bridal days. Deep down in her heart she loved Gilbert still. And yet she meant to discard him forever!

“If I only thought he cared!” she muttered chokingly.

Far out over the dim, lifeless fields a light was gleaming from the kitchen window of Gilbert’s house. She pictured him sitting there, alone and uncared for. The thought was suddenly more than she could bear. She rose and went silently down stairs. She took a shawl from the nail behind the front door, wrapped it around her head, and slipped stealthily out.

The sun had long since set, but the western sky was still an arc of cold primrose softly threaded with crimson. The hills came out clearly against it, but the long valley was brimmed with twilight and the pond lay in it like a great semi-lustrous jewel. Josephine skirted it swiftly and made her way over the fields, passing through lanes where beeches, with their withered, sibilant leaves met overhead, and along dim woods, where frosted bracken clung to her dress and pungently sweet odors of dying fir floated out on the moist air. Sometimes a sudden gust of wind sent the dried leaves scurrying before her in weird dances as of wood elves; sometimes voices came from afar on the still air, or the hoof-beats of a horse mingled with young laughter rang down the shadowy country roads. But Josephine heard and heeded no sound save her own wildly beating heart and quick-drawn breath. Only when she reached the gate of her forsaken home did she pause and listen tremulously.

In the farmhouse kitchen Gilbert Flemming was sitting by the table with his arms outstretched upon it and his head bowed on them. Before him lay the papers that had been served that day. The fire was out and the untidy room was but dimly lighted by a smoky, ill-trimmed lamp. The man himself looked shabby and hopeless.

There was a light footstep outside. Somebody fumbled uncertainly with the kitchen latch; then as Gilbert rose slowly to his feet the door opened and Josephine came in. For a moment husband and wife looked at each other; then Josephine’s eyes fell to the scattered papers.

“You’ve got them,” she said dully.

“Yes.” Gilbert’s tone was bitter. “The lawyer brought them today. I’ve been expecting them. But no human decree is ever going to make you anything but my wife, Josephine. Do you think you’ve done right?”

She threw back the shawl from her pale face.

“I was driven to it,” she said defiantly. “There was nothing else left for me to do.”

Her voice broke like a child’s. Gilbert strode forward and caught her in his arms.

“Josephine, if you’re sorry you did it it ain’t too late yet,” he cried eagerly.

“Why did you say you wanted to be free of me?” she demanded passionately, straining back from his embrace.

“I never said it.”

“Lonzo Farrer said you did.”

“He lied then. I’ll tell you what I did say. He’d been telling me things he’d heard you had said, and one was that you wished you’d never set eyes on me. And I was so riled and badgered I said I wished it too. I was feeling bitter at you, Josephine, when you never gave me word or look, or answered my letter.”

“Your letter?”

“Yes, the one I wrote you the Spring after Lisbeth died. I never could get a chance to speak to you, so I wrote and asked you if you wouldn’t come back.”

“I never got any letter of yours, Gilbert.”

“You didn’t? I left it at the post-office for you. Oh,” he added fiercely, “I suppose Zillah took good care that you shouldn’t get it. From first to last that woman has made most of the trouble between us.”

“She’ll never make any more,” cried Josephine.

She snatched the papers from the table, tore them twice across, and flung the fragments into the ashes of the littered hearth. Then she turned to Gilbert and held out her arms.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *Josephine's Husband* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]