

Smith V. C.
By
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Characters

JESS: A Country Girl, tall and fair.
MILLIE: A Cockney, short and dark.
NANCY:
PAPER BOY:

SCENE: A street just outside a factory of Munitions. Door
centre from yard of factory, leading to street 3
stone steps. High brick wall chimneys in the
distance.

TIME: Noon.

A hooter is heard, then laughter, the clatter of
shoes and confusion chatter dying away.

Enter JESS through the factory yard door to street.

JESS: Phew!

She wipes her face with her apron, and sits down on
the stone steps, fanning herself with her apron. Then
lays her head back against the door, thinking, she
smiles dreamily, and then sits up and puts her hand
into the bosom of her dress and takes out a letter
which she reads, passionately kisses, and replaces
hastily on hearing footsteps.

Enter MILLIE from the street. She too wipes her face
and arms on her apron as she comes forward.

MILLIE: Hullo! Off your feet too! I can't eat to-day - too hot in
the shop. I saw myself going through the door feet first
this morning - but it went over (Sits down besides JESS on
step) But isn't good to get a breath of air.

JESS: Yes It was as much as I could do to stick it this morning - too slicky - Shells - my word, just lop off the S's and that's more the idea of what it's like in there! (Nods towards factory). Still grouching is no good. One thing I'm glad about that is that I'm in "finishing" I wouldn't be a "canary" for something. Picric's no picric - yellow as jealousy you get - and the Gov'ment don't provide funds for a course of beauty treatment.

MILLIE: Mm, I funk'd the explosives. Had enough blowin' up when I was a kid!

JESS: You're new up here, aren't you? I don't remember seeing you about the town?

MILLIE: Well - I'm not new. I've been here three months, but I lodge out north - (consciously) except for the last month I've been occupied most evenings!

JESS: (laconically) Boy?

(MILLIE nods and simpers)

JESS: What's he in? When did he go?

MILLIE: Oh Tom - he's in the 34th Staffords, and he went a month (sighs) and a day ago.

JESS: Funny so's my Tom, what's his name?

MILLIE: I dare say you've heard it before - Smith!

JESS: Well now _ that is queer. My boy's name is Tom Smith. I'll write an ask him if he knows yours.

MILLIE: (suspiciously) I don't see anything queer about it. There are a few thousand Tom Smiths knocking about the world anyway. And his name may be common but he isn't - (her face lights up with love as she speaks.) He's tall and he's straight, and there's a kink in his hair, and he's got eyes that smile and conquer - blue - so blue they are - and his lip lifts a bit on one side and shows his teeth - white and strong they are - and his laugh just makes you feel that the world is all sunshine - and - (softly) when he catches you up in his arms you feel all queer and funny - like, and he puts you down again - well- you wish he hadn't.

(JESS has been listening at first stonily, then with growing anxiety. She puts her hand out as if to ward off a blow. Then speaks roughly)

JESS: I reckon that most of our lads have a way with them - but don't they have their fancies! My Tom just hates short dark girls and many a time he's told me that his wife must be tall and fair - as for Londoners he's got no use for them at all. You're from London, aren't you?

MILLIE: (sulkily) Yes I am and its no concern of yours. It's a good job all our boys don't think alike. Now mine can't stange country girls - he says they are a sloppy lot - haven't the nouse of us cockneys. Oh Lord! I wish it was all over.

JESS: Well. Your bleatin' won't help matters. Everyone wishes it was over. Still I look on the side, and it does give you time to get a few things ready for the bottom drawer. Wages are good but its hard to save. Yet I'm scraping every penny together - every ha' penny - every farthing. Suppose (she shudders) he should come home without a leg or an arm or an eye - who'd there be to work for him n' capt me - his mother and father Mundie (MINNIE starts) wouldn't be no good. But I'd slave for him It'd be my joy to get up at 5 and go to bed at 12 if I was working for him all them hours and I wouldn't look for any thanks, if he's just pass his hand over my hair and say "My girl" as he used to - I'd have all the thanks I wanted. He don't write to often. I've heard nothin for weeks and he don't say much (Extracts her letter) but I suppose they mustn't.

MILLIE: Well - I shouldn't worry. I've not heard for fifteen days. The posts aren't always reg'lar from the front. This is the last - (takes a letter from her shoe)

JESS) (together) I'll read it to you.
MILLIE)

JESS) Dear Jess.
MILLIE) Dear Minnie.

JESS) I takes my pen in my hand hoping it finds you well as it
(MILLIE) leaves me at present. I had a few days with

JESS) Mother and father before I fell.
MILLIE) Father and Mother before I left.

(They pause)

JESS) Maudie grows very tall.
MILLIE) Maudie is getting a big girl.

(They pause)

JESS) Bless your pretty face.
MILLIE)

(They glare at each other)

JESS) I do miss you.
MILLIE)

(Each girl slowly puts her
letter in its place)

JESS) (uncomfortably) All the boys seem to write alike don't
they?
MILLIE)

(A Pause)

JESS: (nonchalantly) Don't you think it is warm for the time of
year?

MILLIE: (tartly) D'you expect an iceberg filled with snow on the 3rd
of July.

JESS: Oh all right - all right. Keep your feathers down.

MILLIE: Feathers! Feathers! Wheres the feathers you put on to make
you into a fine bird? (Bitterly) I shouldn't be surprised
if yer best Sunday frock was in pawn. After you'd taken the
buttons off -

JESS: What d' mean? Are you trying to have a row with me? You're
meanly jealous you are - because I happen to have a Tom
Smith that I love and who loves me, and it wouldn't matter
to me - no it wouldn't - if he had pretended to care for
any other girls for I know he belongs to me and if you
keeps 'em on a loose rein they clings to you tighter. I'd
(she gulps) like him to go out with another girl now and
again - if there was a thunderstorm or a black fog - one of
my choosing.

JESS: (savagely) What's that to do with you - was yours?

MILLIE: I arst you first.

JESS: Well, you wait a bit, and p'raps you'll get an answer
(sarcastically).

MILLIE: There ain't no answer.

JESS: Oh! I don't want no truck with the likes o' you. What's my Tom Smith to do with yours? I'll stop you trying to be my first cousin I will. I don't want no cockney relatives. I going to have the bean and bells too, so don't you make not mistake. You take up with a water cart driver. That's what you want and plenty of disinfectant to wash your streets down with. We like things fresh - and clean down here we do. Your muds apt to show in your faces.

MILLIE: Well the green in yer woods matches yer nature - and yer turnin' nose goes with yer fields - and yer goose berries ain't in it with yer eyes, and no wonder that hedges all the time - all thorns you are - on yes: but I'd rather 'ave me tame Oats than your wild ones. One thing I'm sure of you'll go 'oppin'.

JESS: Getting clever? Take a book and learn to spell, Spoutin's easy enough.

MILLIE: (with deep scorn) To some.

JESS) (together) Hark!

MILLIE)

(The paper boy is heard in the distance,
and he is gradually drawing nearer)

PAPER BOY: Payper! - Payper! Local man gets V.C. Payper! Speshal! Payper!

(He comes quickly across the stage with
papers under his arm. Both girls spring
at his.)

PAPER BOY: Easy! Easy now!

(JESS flings a halfpenny at him and tears
the paper out of his hand. He picks up
the halfpenny with an injured air and moves
off)

(JESS and MILLIE open the paper together so
hurriedly that they can not manipulate it
- glaring at each other all the while. At
last they get the pages steady they shout
together.)

JESS) Oh my Tom! There's his picture! And it's him got the V.C.!

MILLIE)

(Then they face each other and slowly
drop the paper.)

JESS: (fiercely) What do you mean - you - you - slut! He's mine, mine d'ye hear? You dare look at him - you dare write to him - you dare speak to him and it's a wig you'll be buying. Care for him - you - you yellow - faced Cockney! He's mine I tell you - (she snatches up the paper and kisses his portrait passionately).

(At this MILLIE, who has seemed stunned,
dashes forward and tears the newspaper
from JESS'S hand)

MILLIE: Drop that! If you put yer mouth on 'im you'll poison 'im.

(She then breaks down and throwing her
apron over her head, rocks to and fro
sobbing)

MILLIE: (sobbing) Oh my Tom, my dear brave Tom, if you only knew what she's saying. It's not true. I trust you I do. A wicked lying false tongue she's got. (Then turning to JESS and speaking with cold hatred) And you think that a man like Tom Smith would look at the likes of you - A - tow - headed country calf - you'd work for him, slave for him, would you? Yes, I dessay you would if you 'ad 'arf a chance. Go on - pile up yer clothes - you'll never wear 'em - not as 'is wife you won't. (She breaks down again) And Oh ! I've got me kitchen fender and me parlour vase - and me cat's promise me.

JESS: (savagely) Oh yes - cry - cry - you white faced down at - heal, out - o' - date man - stealer. Look at the hole in your stockin'! Nice sort o' wife you'd make for a man like my Tom! Can you cook? Can you clean? Can you bake a loaf or milk a cow? Mewinitions! That's why you got a cat I s'pose, well, fur 'll fly if you don't go back to your dirty London streets. Rob a girl of her man - would you? Did he ever talk of banns to you? (Shakes MILLIE) did he -speak - can't you?

MILLIE: (still crying but speaking with spirit) Oh, I'll speak fast enough - you'll be sorry you 'arst me when I done speakin! Banns - marriage - why you don't know the meanin' of the words - you never 'eard 'em. The church where your name 'll be carried ain't built yet. And you leave my stockin' alone. Keep a civil tongue in yer 'ead or you'll feel the

feet inside 'em with the shoes outside. The only reason you got no 'oles in yours is that you're wearin 'em for the first time in your life. (She picks up the paper. JESS seizes it from her)

JESS: Drop it! I bought it with my 'ap'ny. Lay your hands on everything that belongs to me, would you ? Well - I'll show you (she rolls up her sleeves) come on -.

MILLIE: (fiercely) No, I'm too much the lady to lay my 'ands in the likes of you. Show me a female and I'll knock 'er 'ead off. Get married, go on. Theres an internment camp a mile away - you might find an' Un who'd fancy you. Layin' claim to my Tom - you.

(JESS springs at her and MILLIE recoils - her arm up to ward off the blow. At this moment NANCY rushes in, breathless, excited, gloriously happy, holding a paper in her hand - too absorbed in her own affairs to notice the other two.)

(Shouts and cheering "Hurrah for Tom - good old Tom" etc are heard off)

COMING CLOSER AND WHISPERING - I want to marry ye - there!

NANCY: Girls! Millie! Jess! Listen. Oh I promised him to keep it quiet, but I can't - I can't - not now. He's got it - he's got the V.C. and he's mine - he's mine - I must tell the whole world. We were married the day before he left. I'm his wife!

(NANCY rushes off and the cheers and shouts continue, gradually dying away.)

(JESS and MILLIE look at each other without a word. MILLIE holds on to the wall and drops as though fainting, but JESS breaks into a shout of laughter. She takes MILLIES hand and puts her arm about her to support her)

JESS: Cheer up Millie - he's got Nancy, and that's all the reward he'd want. The lowest spitfire in the town with a tough like a knife and a hole in her pocket, He'll needs to be brave, will Mr Thomas Smith V.C.!

CURTAIN