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<BORED HUSBANDS.>

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The curtain falls on joined hands when it does not descend on a

tragedy; and novels for the most part end with a wreath of

orange-blossoms and a pair of high-stepping greys, as the last act

that claims to be recorded. For both novelists and playwrights assume

that with marriage all the great events of life have ceased, and that,

once wedded to the beloved object, there is sure to be smooth sailing

and halcyon seas to the end of time. It sounds very cynical and

shocking to question this pretty belief; but unfortunately for us who

live in the world as it is and not as it is supposed to be, we find

that even a union with the beloved object does not always ensure

perfect contentment in the home, and that bored husbands are by no

means rare.

The ideal honeymoon is of course an Elysian time, during which nothing

works rusty nor gets out of joint; and the ideal marriage is only a

life-long honeymoon, where the happiness is more secure and the love

deeper, if more sober; but the prose reality of one and the other has

often a terrible dash of weariness in it, even under the most

favourable conditions. Boredom begins in the very honeymoon

itself. At first starting in married life there are many dangers to be

encountered, not a shadow of which was seen in the wooing. There are

odd freaks of temper turning up quite unexpectedly; there is the

sense, so painful to some men, of being tied for life, of never being

able to be alone again, never free and without responsibilities; there

are misunderstandings to-day and the struggle for mastery

to-morrow ~~ the cloud, no bigger than a man's hand, which may prove to

be the tempest that will destroy all; there is the unrest of

travelling, and the awkwardness of unusual association, to help in the

general discomfort; or, if the happy pair have settled down in a vale

and a cottage for their month, there is the 'sad satiety' which all

men feel after a time when they have had one companion only, with no

outside diversion to cause a break. But the honeymoon at last draws to

a close, and the relieved bridegroom gets back to his old haunts, to

his work, his friends, and his club; and though he takes to all these

things again with a difference, still they are helps and additions.

This is the time of trial to a woman. If she gets over this pinch, and

is sensible enough to understand that human nature cannot be kept up

at high pressure, even in love, and that a man must sooner or later

come down from romance to work-a-day prose, from the passionate lover

to the cool and sober husband ~~ if she can understand this, and settle

into his pace, without fretting on the one hand or casting about

for unhealthy distractions on the other ~~ she will do well, and will

probably make a pleasant home, and thereby diminish the boredom of

life. But unfortunately, not every woman can do this; and it is just

during this time of the man's transition from the lover to the friend

that so many women begin to make shipwreck of their own happiness and

his. They think to keep him a romantic wooer still, by their tears at

his prosaic indifference to the little sentimentalities once so

eagerly accepted and offered; they try to hold him close by their

flattering but somewhat tiresome exactions; their jealousies ~~ very

pretty perhaps, and quite as flattering ~~ are infinite, and as baseless

as they are infinite; all of which is very nice up to a certain point

and in the beginning of things, but all of which gets wearisome as

time goes on, and a man wants both a little change and a little rest.

But women do not see this; or seeing it, they cannot accept it as a

necessary condition of things; wherefore they go on in their fatal

way, and by the very unwisdom of their own love bore their husband out

of his. Or they grow substantially cold because he is superficially

cooler, and think themselves justified in ceasing to love him

altogether because he takes their love for granted, and so has ceased

to woo it.

If they are jealous, or shy, or unsocial, as so many women are, they

make life very heavy by their exclusiveness, and the monastic

character they give the home. A man married to a woman of this

kind is, in fact, a house prisoner, whose only free spaces lie beyond

the four walls of home. His bachelor friends are shut out. They smoke;

or entice him to drink more than his wife thinks is good for him; or

they induce him to bet on the Derby; or to play for half-crowns at

whist or billiards; or they lead him in some other way of offence

abhorrent to women. So the bachelor friends are shouldered out; and

when the husband wants to entertain them, he must invite them to his

club ~~ if he has one ~~ and pay the penalty when he gets home. In a few

years' time his wife will be glad to encourage her sons' young friends

to the house, for the sake of the daughters on hand; but husbands and

sons are in a different category, and there are few fathers who do not

learn, as time goes on, how much the mother will allow that the wife

refused.

If bachelor friends are shouldered out of the house, all female

friends are forbidden anything like an intimate footing, save those

few whom the wife thinks specially devoted to herself and of whom she

is not jealous. And these are very few. There are perhaps no women in

the world so exclusive in their dealings with their husbands as are

Englishwomen. A husband is bound to one woman only, no doubt; but the

average wife thinks him also bound to have no affection whatever

outside her and perhaps her family. If he meets an intelligent woman,

pleasant to talk to, of agreeable manners and ready wit, and if

he talks to her in consequence with anything like persistency or

interest, he offends against the unwritten law; and his wife, whose

utmost power of conversation consists in putting in a yes or no with

tolerable accuracy of aim, thinks herself slighted and ill-used. She

may be young and pretty, and dearly loved for her own special

qualities; and her husband may not have a thought towards his new

friend, or any other woman, in the remotest degree trenching on his

allegiance to her; but the fact that he finds pleasure, though only of

an intellectual and æsthetic kind, in the society of any other woman,

that he feels an interest in her life, chooses her for his friend, or

finds community of pursuits or sympathy in ideas, makes his wife by

just so much a victim and aggrieved.

And yet what a miserably monotonous home is that to which she would

confine him! He is at his office all day, badgered and worried with

various business complications, and he comes home tired, perhaps

cross ~~ even well-conducted husbands have that way sometimes. He finds

his wife tired and cross too; so that they begin the evening together

mutually at odds, she irritated by small cares and he disturbed by

large anxieties. Or he finds her preoccupied and absorbed in her own

pursuits, and quite disinclined to make any diversion for his sake. He

asks her for some music; she used to be ready enough to sing and play

to him in the old love-making days; but she refuses now. Either she

has some needlework to do, which might have been done during the

day when he was out, or baby is asleep in the nursery, and music in

the drawing-room would disturb him ~~ at all events she cannot sing or

play to-night; and even if she does ~~ he has heard all her pieces so

often! If he is not a reading-man, those long, dull, silent evenings

are very trying. She works, and drives him wild with the click of her

needle; or she reads the last new novel, and he hates novels, and gets

tired to death when she insists on telling him all about the story and

the characters; or she chooses the evening for letter-writing, and if

the noise of her pen scratching over the paper does not irritate him,

perhaps it sends him to sleep, when at least he is not bored. But

dull, objectless, and vacant as their evenings are, his wife would not

hear of any help from without to give just that little fillip which

would prevent boredom and not create ceremony. She would think her

life had gone to pieces, and that only desolation was before her, if

he hinted that his home was dull, and that though he loves her very

dearly and wants no other wife but her, yet that her society

only ~~ <hi> toujours perdrix </hi>, without change or addition ~~ is a little stupid, however nice the partridge may be, and that things would be

bettered if Mrs. or Miss So-and-So came in sometimes, just to brighten

up the hours. And if he were to make a practice of bringing home his

men friends, she would probably let all parties concerned feel pretty

distinctly that she considered the home her special sanctuary, and

that guests whom she did not invite were intruders. She would

perhaps go willingly enough to a ball or crowded <hi> soirée </hi>, or she

might like to give one; but that intimate form of society, which is a

mere enlargement of the home life, she dreads as the supplementing of

deficiencies, and thinks her married happiness safer in boredom than

in any diversion from herself as the sole centre of her husband's

pleasure.

Home life stagnates in England; and in very few families is there any

mean between dissipation and this stagnation. We can scarcely wonder

that so many husbands think matrimony a mistake as we have it in our

insular arrangements; that they look back regretfully to the time when

they were unfettered and not bored; or that their free friends, who

watch them as wild birds watch their caged companions, curiously and

reflectively, share their opinion. Wife and home, after all, make up

but part of a man's life; they are not his all, and do not satisfy the

whole of his social instinct; nor is any one woman the concentration

of all womanhood to a man, leaving nothing that is beautiful, nor in

its own unconjugal way desirable, on the outside. Besides, when with

his wife a man is often as much isolated as when alone, for any real

companionship there is between them. Few women take a living interest

in the lives of men, and fewer still understand them. They expect the

husband to sympathize with them in the kitchen gossip and the nursery

chatter, the neighbours' doings and all the small household politics;

but they are utterly unable to comprehend his pleasures, his

thoughts, his duties, the responsibilities of his profession, or the

bearings of any public question in which he takes a part.

Even if this were not so, and granting that they could enter fully

into his life and sympathize with him as intelligent equals, not only

as compassionate saints or loving children, there would still be the

need of novelty, and still the certainty of boredom without it. For

human life, like all other forms of life, must have a due proportion

of fresh elements continually added to keep it sweet and growing, else

it becomes stagnant and stunted. And daily intercourse undeniably

exhausts the moral ground. After the close companionship of years no

one can remain mentally fresh to the other, unless indeed one or both

be of the rarest order of mind and of a practically inexhaustible

power of acquiring knowledge. Save these exceptional instances, we

must all of necessity get worn out by constant intercourse. We know

every thought, every opinion, and almost every square inch of

information possessed; we have heard the old stories again and again,

and know exactly what will lead up to them, and at what point they

will begin; we have measured the whole sweep of mind, and have probed

its depths; and though we may love and value what we have learnt, yet

we want something new ~~ fresh food for interest, though not necessarily

a new love for the displacement of the old. But this is what very few

Englishwomen can understand or will allow. They hold so intensely

by the doctrine of unity that they are even jealous of a man's

pursuits, if they think these take up any place in his mind which

might also be theirs. They must be good for every part of his life;

and the poorest of them all must be his only source of interest,

suffering no other woman to share his admiration nor obtain his

friendship, though this would neither touch his love nor interfere

with their rights. Friendship is a hard saying to them, and one they

cannot receive. Wherefore they keep a tight grasp on the marital

collar, and suffer no relief of monotony by judicious loosening, nor

by generous faith in integral fidelity. The practical result of which

is that most men are horribly bored at home, and that the mass of them

really suffer from the domestic stagnation to which national customs

and the exclusiveness of women doom them so soon as they become family

men. It must however, in fairness be added, that in general they

obtain some kind of compensation; and that very few walk meekly in

their bonds without at times slipping them off, with or without the

concurrence of their wives.