

MARRIED LIFE :

COMFORT OR MISERY ?

Dramatis Personæ.

KATE	}	<i>married ladies.</i>
MARY		
ETHEL		<i>an unmarried lady.</i>

ETHEL (*entering to KATE*). How are you, Kate? What an age it seems since I saw you, and how well you look! Not a day older, I declare, than on your wedding day—how long ago is that now?

KATE. Almost six years. I *am* so glad to see you, dear; but I can't return your compliments: you seem to be thinner, and what is the meaning of those dark rings under your eyes?

ETHEL. Oh! that's nothing; I am quite well; I used to be too fat.

KATE. What rubbish! you were just right, and you look depressed, too.

ETHEL. That's all your fancy, Kate! I'm all right, but tell me about yourself: how have you been all this time? What a lovely little room you have got! Where did you get that beautiful dado? It's hand-painted, I do believe. Oh! you extravagant woman, is it for this your poor husband toils in the city?

KATE. Spare my blushes, and don't be so severe. That's "a little thing of my own", and cost me about ten shillings for colors.

ETHEL. You don't say so! What made you so awfully clever? I don't seem to remember anything of the kind at school.

KATE. Well! I did take the second prize for drawing in our last term, *though* you don't seem to remember it; but that was eight years ago, and I have been taking lessons ever since.

ETHEL. Curiouser and curiouser! It is borne in upon me that you used to hate every kind of lessons.

KATE. Your memory is painfully accurate this time, but I had a reason. But talking of school, do you remember Mary Burns?

ETHEL. Oh! quite well—a pretty, fair girl, with a lovely complexion; she was extraordinarily High Church, wasn't she? and used to fast, and appear unexpectedly in black, and sit up at night keeping vigils, or some queer thing of that sort. What about her?

KATE. She lives here, and I expect her every minute. When I got your note I asked her to come too, poor thing! I thought she would enjoy a chat over old times.

ETHEL. Why, what's the matter with her?

KATE. Wait till you see her: you will soon find out. You know she is married; her husband is Mr. Crossley, a curate here.

ETHEL. A curate, is he? I suppose they are not just rolling in wealth?

KATE. They are *not*. Here she is, I think; don't remark on her looks. (*A servant shows in Mrs. Crossley.*) Well, Mary dear, here you are; I was afraid you could not come after all, and I would not pour out the tea, because I wanted you to have the best cup. Try this chair, we have just got it, and it's *delightful*.

MARY. You are always so kind, Kate. I thought I should never get away. Just as I was ready, the baby woke and screamed, and Bessy was washing up, and I had to take him; and then Emmie fell down stairs, and hurt her head rather badly, so that stopped me again; and then, just at the door, the baker met me with his bill, and I had to persuade him — Why, Ethel, is that you? What a start you gave me, I was afraid it was a stranger.

ETHEL. It's the first time I have been considered a terrifying object, and I am rather flattered. I am very glad to see you, Mary. What changes there have been since we last met in that dingy old school-room! Do you remember how glad

we all were to get away from it? And all the ridiculous plans we used to make about our future lives. You were to be a nun, Kate was to go about lecturing on woman's rights, and I was always carnally-minded, and intended to marry the first man I met, provided he was young, had a Greek profile, Spanish eyes and the curliest black hair (I think we called it hyacinthine locks *then*), and was six foot four, and possessed six thousand a year, and came of a noble family. You will be surprised to hear that I have not met him yet, and I begin to doubt if that sort are quite as common as they were when I was seventeen.

MARY. How you do rattle on! *You* have not lost your good spirits, evidently. As for your hero, if you can find a man with six thousand a year, take him; if he were as ugly as sin and as old as Methusaleh, never mind; *nothing* is so dreadful as poverty.

ETHEL. Oh! Mary: you don't mean that seriously, surely; and, besides, I *am* engaged, only mother says we are too poor to marry.

MARY. Ethel, take my advice, *don't* marry a poor man. Take warning by me: I married a poor man for love, and have repented it ever since. I thought if we gave up luxuries and lived very quietly, we could manage: but I did not reckon on having five children in six years.

KATE. Mary, you know you need not have had them.

MARY. Kate, don't talk so; I can't bear to hear you. I know what you mean, but these things are in God's hands, and we must submit to His will. If my husband knew you had mentioned such a thing to me, he would be very angry, and perhaps stop my coming here any more. But, Ethel, do listen to me; my life is nothing but a burden; *often* I wish I were in my grave; we can only afford one servant, and no *good* servant would work in such a household as ours. I never get half the sleep I want, and I'm sure no London maid-of-all-work does as much as I do. I often sit up half the night mending and making, and that's not all. Two years ago my little Eddie died; he was only ill two or three days, and we owed the doctor so much I did not like to send for him again; and when at last I did, it was too late. It was inflammation of the lungs, and he said Eddie's life might have been saved if he had seen him earlier. I shall never forgive myself. And when we buried him, we could not afford even the plainest tombstone. It is the same with everything; we can't pay our way. You

heard me speak of the baker just now; you would not believe the degrading things I have had to do, to coax tradesmen into waiting for their money. I never can overtake my work; it's useless to attempt it. As to books, I have not opened one for years.

ETHEL. And your singing—you had such a sweet voice.

MARY. Singing! *we* can't afford a piano; I have forgotten it all. That would be nothing, but I can't keep the place even clean, and the children never get all the milk they should, and this is my best dress—just look at it! And just look at me, did you ever see such a fright as I have grown? But I could bear it all if it were not for my husband, he looks so wretchedly ill, and he is not half warmly enough dressed. If he could but have a great-coat this winter, but I know it is impossible, and then he slaves day and night at any literary work he can get, even copying he does. But, oh! Kate, the worst is still to be told: another baby is coming, and the last two are so delicate, what will this one be? And how can I do more than I do now?

(MARY *breaks down and sobs*; ETHEL *tries to comfort her, and KATE leaves the room, and returns with a glass of port wine.*)

KATE. Now, Mary, drink this; there, you will feel better directly. Come and lie on the sofa a little.

MARY. Dear Kate, thank you; but I must go home—I don't know what the children may be doing. I ought not to have stayed so long. Good bye, dear; good bye, Ethel, and remember what I have said. (*Exit MARY.*)

ETHEL. Oh, Kate, what a shocking story! And how ill she looks, and how miserable! I don't think I should have known her. And I'm afraid she is right, and one ought not to marry a poor man. To live as Mary describes, I am sure would just kill *me*. I don't think I am very selfish, but I could not give up every comfort like that, and with it all to be so miserable. And I am sure it would drive Jack into a lunatic asylum! Kate: what ought we to do? We have been engaged five years, and I sometimes think Jack is getting tired of it—his letters are colder now. Oh! I wish he were as well off as your husband; if Jack and I could have a smart little house like this, we should want nothing better.

KATE. I thought something was wrong, and I am glad you told me. Who is "Jack"?

ETHEL. Jack Dawson: he is a doctor, but only beginning to practise, and——

KATE. Why, I know Mr. Dawson very well, and like him

so much. I knew he was engaged, but had no notion it was to you. I *do* congratulate you—he is one of the nicest men I know.

ETHEL. I thank you, dear, but I don't know that there is much to congratulate us on, for I don't see a chance of our getting married for years, and I'm not exactly growing younger.

KATE. You are twenty-five, I think, and Mr. Dawson, I know, is twenty-seven. He was here the other day, talking over his prospects with Fred; and now I have good news for you, Ethel—Mr. Dawson and my husband are making almost exactly the same income.

ETHEL. Kate! What! Oh! I *can't* believe it. Do you mean to say you are living on the sum Jack earns now?

KATE. Yes; and, what is more, Mr. Crossley, who is so steeped in poverty, has very nearly the same. Within three or four pounds, I believe, the three incomes are exactly similar.

ETHEL. I am more astonished than I can say. Then is it simply the children that make the enormous difference between you and Mary? Why, I thought you were quite rich.

KATE. It is as I say; but then our income is divided by two, while theirs is divided by seven already.

ETHEL. Ah! yes; but that simply means that you are lucky to have no family.

KATE. You *should* say, how *wise* I am.

ETHEL. Kate, what did you mean by telling Mary she need not have had them? Can one really prevent it? Do tell me truly, because, if one can, Jack and I might marry to-morrow.

KATE. I am anxious to tell you the truth. It *can* be done: it only requires perseverance; and if you make up your mind to marry, I will tell you all about it.

ETHEL. Oh! Kate, how can I thank you—I was so unhappy! Mother had just shown me a letter from that horrid Mrs. Grundy, and she said: "You are never going to let Ethel marry that wild young Jack Dawson." And then—oh! I can't tell you what she said; and I don't believe it; but I know Jack is vexed with me for delaying our marriage so long.

KATE. Never mind Mrs. Grundy. Fred knows Mr. Dawson well, and I know there is nothing for you to be alarmed at. But, remember, he is not the stuff out of which ascetics or hermits are made—nor, for that matter, is Fred. I should not like it if he were. But we married very young, and I am certain Fred has never thought of another woman in that way, although he is good friends with several. Then I am always well and

able to go out with him; and, though I say it, I don't believe there is a prettier or more comfortable home in England than his; so what temptation has he to be wild or fast?

ETHEL. But, Kate, why did Mary say her husband thinks it so wrong? Ought one not to believe what a clergyman says?

KATE. I cannot see why Mr. Crossley's opinion should have more weight than yours or mine. This is not a question of religious dogma, but of morality and the welfare of the human race, in which questions we are all equally interested.

ETHEL. But suppose Jack agreed with him.

KATE. In that case you had better not marry; but it is very unlikely. Jack is a really well-educated and thoughtful man, and all advanced thought in the present day tends in this direction. But, if you like, Fred shall find out casually in conversation, what his views are, and I will tell you.

ETHEL. I wish he would; but, Kate, how did you find this out?

KATE. You know my old aunt Dorothy. In her youth she was engaged to a young man for ten years, and then he jilted her, and married a young girl. She was dreadfully heart-broken, and has spent her life almost in propagating these ideas. She wrote a book about it, and when I became engaged she gave Fred a copy to read, and when he told her he thought it very sensible, and that he agreed with every word, she urged us to marry. And we did. You see the result. But that is not all. I have plenty of leisure time, and I earn money too. Fred's earnings supply the necessities and a fair amount of comfort; mine supply my dress and all the little luxuries you see round us, and keep a cot in the children's hospital besides. If I had a family to attend to, I could not earn anything, for I should not have time.

ETHEL. How do you earn money, Kate; could I?

KATE. Very likely you could. I earn money by my drawings. You were admiring my dado: I have painted three others in different drawing rooms, and was well paid for it. I paint screens, too, and design Christmas cards by the score. I paint menus and programmes and all sorts of things. And I take a lesson every week; I work between three and four hours a day, and I like it.

ETHEL. Well, I can't draw, but I *can* make lace. I sold some the other day at fifteen shillings a yard at a fancy bazaar, and I overheard the purchaser saying that she thought it cheap at the price. I know I could help in that way; but, Kate,

would you not *like* to have children? I do love them so.

KATE. Yes, I should, but we can't afford it yet. I am only twenty-five, and there is plenty of time. When we *can* afford it I hope to indulge in one or two. I am sure it would be wrong to have a large family.

ETHEL. But why, if you could afford it?

KATE. Because the country is too full now, and we should do wrong to add to the pressure of competition, which is already too great.

ETHEL. Kate, how clever you are; I never heard anyone else talk like this.

KATE. I'm not a bit clever, and my ideas are all second-hand: but you see I have time to read and improve myself, and I *have* read a good deal since we married.

ETHEL. Well, you have taken a great weight off my mind; but what will mother say to all this?

KATE. You must, of course, use your own discretion about telling her; but you are old enough to please yourself, and remember you must choose between her and Jack. When she sees that you are happy and comfortable, she will surely be content.

ETHEL. Yes, I suppose so—at least that is all she can want for me. And now I must go. Good-bye, dear Kate; I *am* so much obliged to you, and I'll come and see you again very soon. (*Exit* ETHEL.)

KATE (*soliloquises*). I think I have smoothed her way a little. I wish everyone were as quick and sensible. Nothing can be done for those poor Crossleys: one can't get them to listen to reason; and what a dreadful example for a clergyman to set! Their case is hopeless; but Ethel is different, and for her I foresee both a useful and a happy life.

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