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The Bottom of the Barrel

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Would the "Other Woman" Want the Husband if She Knew Him as the Wife Does?

WHEN Mrs. Elbridge was not at work in the laboratory or with her children, in the course of her routine plan, she was a good deal of a girl. She neglected that fact. It served her well when she had to withstand the great shock of her life. She was slender, tall, without artificial aids to beauty, and she had that honest kind of loveliness which one believes is admired by dogs and children, birds and butterflies, as well as men. At 10 she bid fair to be always young.

Some one has said that Mary was a "strange bird." No doubt it is difficult for the person who said it to conceive a

Before he had found that his income permitted him to leave his father's old Nassau street law office with the reliable staff and devote his life to sharpening pencils and beginning various novels, he had not been an explorer of personalities. If Mary had regretted seeing Billy leave the law, she kept silent because she was willing to concede that a human being had a right to carve out his own destinies. Billy had acquired that magnificent height of belief to the extent that he considered that Mary's plea in behalf of the servants, the children, and herself that he should get up in the morning and be on time for meals constituted an evil, dominating influence, devastating to his right to grow and expand and to find the sunlight of self, as he called it.

He was not odious at all, according to Mary's notion. She loved him dearly. He was the center of her universe, not because if he had died she could not have gone on living and doing pretty well, but somehow her own ambition to do

canically. Her pillow was wet with tears and she turned it over in the morning so he would not know she had been awake. She closed her fists as she made pretense to play with the children. She thought wicked thoughts about revolvers. She felt as a tigress is supposed to feel. And she was ashamed because, perhaps, the tigress knows more about the truth of love and the family and the tiger than human beings know.

It was not the rock she had called "their island" which first attracted her conscious attention to the part that Edith Barston, with her tilted nose, her sad, meditative eyes, and her hair curled under so that it looked like bobbed hair, was going to play in Mary's life; it was a change in Billy.

One day came when, at Mary's suggestion, he went along the cliff walk, through the turnstile to invite Edith to come over to meet at dinner some people who were coming out for the night. Billy did not return soon. In fact, it was after luncheon when he came back.



"I'd like to pull your damned hair out by the roots."

young woman who could achieve, without beating the bass drum. In that respect, Mary failed to meet the supposed necessities of femininity because she failed to make a clamor. Her formula for living, as much as one could discern it from her management of life, was this:

"Create as much as possible, pay enough attention to the experience of ages after ages of mankind and not too much to doctrines which promise men progress and happiness in a hurry. Above all, mere discontent may be showy, but it's wasteful."

That was her notion of how a woman's life, or a man's, might be guided.

Her surprise was vast when she discovered that William Carr Elbridge was in love with another lady.

Busy with the children, and busy when she could find the time with a new lot of books reporting various post-war investigations of the ductless glands and the theory of immunity, just received from Germany, and finding her pleasures in the tints of sunsets behind the sea and the aromas of the pines, she was not alert. She absorbed the situation rather than received it in one piece; it came upon her somewhat like a slow dawn. She diagnosed it little by little as one diagnoses typhoid fever; it cannot be announced as identified merely because there is some slight disorder and some slight degree of temperature.

Edith Barston occupied the next shore estate, and Mary had to admit to herself that from the first of June, when Billy and the two children and she had come to their leased villa, the particular peculiarities and character of Miss Barston had not engaged as much of her attention as one human being may be thought to owe to another who hungers and subtly calls for attention.

Edith, who was 30, had inherited money and tuberculosis, had kept the first and after a time had suppressed the second. Good for her! The process had left her thin, wispy, meditative, slow in movement, with a kind or boneless grace observed in Burne-Jones figures.

She was a good swimmer. She used the same little beach in the same pretty little cove and though Mary was even a better swimmer, Mary stayed and paddled with the children. Edith used to invite Billy gently to swim out to the rock where the two often sat for a sun bath with their feet in the waving sea weed. There, apparently, they exchanged ideas about life, at first the impersonal ideas. The rock had never had significance for Mary and it was even a shock to herself one bright sunny day when she said to little Jane, "Daddy will be late for luncheon if he stays any longer on their island." It was absurd to voice objection to Billy's finding such treasure as he might in any mind or soul he wished to explore.

well and have the children do well was always associated with Billy. There was a certain fundamental animal instinct of love in it, and in addition there was a sense of adherence to a family unit, where after all the stupidities, the unreasoning slavery, the suppression of self, a willingness to play the game and a reprehensible loyalty to the others created the most useful, forward going, productive institution which men and women for ages past have been trying to smash, substitute for, or commiserate.

Mary, in behalf of this institution, went to the seashore in the summer, where her work and her energies suffered most. She herself preferred the mountains. There was Billy, however, and the children, and though they had never been to the mountains, once, when she mentioned it, Billy had a tantrum about her selfishness in wanting him to go where they would be no inspiration to start various successive beginnings of unfinished novels. Tantrums, however, Mary knew, usually took place when people love each other. And they loved each other—certainly, until Billy began to inquire why and pick life's fabric into its separate threads.

Then Mary had said: "Go to the devil, Billy. Don't choose the tallest trees when you bark under them. Take the saplings that are your own size. The reason why Jane sometimes had that look of God in her face that sometimes appears in yours is no greater mystery than why I love you. You've got a good mind and I am glad it explores, but you'd better start for the north or south pole of understanding rather than advertise that your next whirl will be around the rings of Saturn. All men and women, even Socrates, are more or less limited to being darn fools. And honestly, as much as I admire your mind, I'd never pick you to know it all."

Billy laughed—a handsome person. Mary would have liked to throw her arms around his bronzed young neck so those arms could tell him things that she couldn't. He said, "I never expect to know it all."

She grew serious for a moment. "Because your foundation isn't very good, Billy," she said. "A good foundation for exploring the mysteries of life better be built of Aristotle and Confucius, Huxley, Spencer and Saint Thomas Aquinas, and so on rather than—"

She stopped because he scowled and said, "I never asserted the modern writers of revolt, fiction or otherwise, were perfect. But they deal with a world which has changed."

Mary took one of the characteristic gazes into eternity of which her gray eyes appeared capable and said rather sadly, "I wonder how much the world does change."

Now events had come which made her world change vol-

"Eating out?" Mary asked. "Certainly not!" he replied. Then as he looked into the mirror in the hallway and saw the crumb on his cheek he added, "She offered me a cruller—a brown cruller—with sugar on it. I haven't had a cruller since I left boarding school." He laughed lightly.

Then the irritation swept over him. All mated beings who love each other recognize it. He said, "For heaven's sake, Mary, must we always be messing around discussing trivialities? I didn't start this discussion. What's the fuss about? Life is intolerable!"

He was not hungry; he said that he was very hungry. Naturally honest, he felt that his snoopy lie would not quickly stop sagging down like a gallstone in his self-respect until surgery took it out. Mary knew he felt it. He had had a little stolen luncheon with Edith. Perhaps he had not even sat down; perhaps he had just stood around her dainty table, playfully; perhaps Edith, who had an impishness, had romped with him about the table in that simulation of childish care-free spirit which restless husbands or wives think would go on forever, or at least for a year, if they could be with one of the cunning personalities day in and day out.

Billy told Mary that he did not consider Edith was anything but rather plain, and this, being inconsistent with all he had heretofore said, appeared to Mary to indicate that her husband, by his absurd strategy of saying things derogatory to Edith, was not only committing petty larceny in the cash drawer of their partnership confidence, but that he was, as an incidental, doing it at Miss Barston's expense. All that he said, indeed, about Edith he said with a skill in duplicity which shocked his wife. But above all, there was a lack of dignity in one who failed so miserably in an attempt to deceive, even though the attempt extended to deceit of himself. Billy was usually profuse in his reports of conversations held with others. He never reported what Edith had said to him and still less what he had said to Edith. Mary could see that whatever the June weeks had made of a relationship between them was their own private preserve and she was not invited even to peek through the knotholes in the fence.

Mary thought that evil consequences come from the discoveries of such subtleties. Big breaks in family life may be painful, but they are out in the open, at least. Everybody concerned can be told to either shoot or give up the gun. Taken early, the answer usually is that it is best not to shoot.

She knew there was one evil consequence. The accursed thing appeared at once and it would not down. It pulled all day at her skirts and plucked her fingers as she