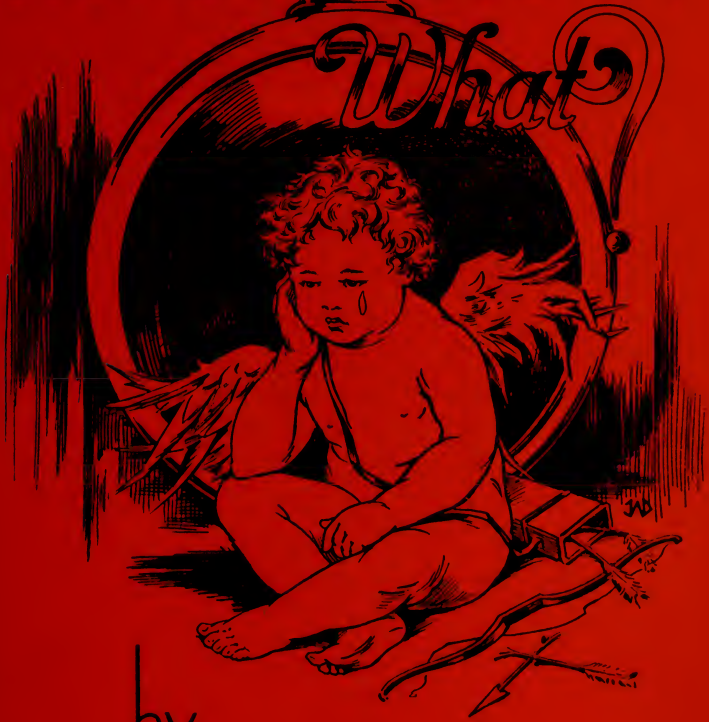
AFTER THE HONEYMOON



by

KATHLEEN NORRIS

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This pamphlet is a reprint of an article entitled "A Plea for Less 'Happy' Talk." The author is one of our foremost novelists. The fact that she is herself married ought to make its lesson all the more effective and convincing. Anyone who has read any of Kathleen Norris' fiction will want to read this. Pass it on to some one who is married. To some one who some day may be married. Nothing more appropriate can be found.

After the Honeymoon—What?

By Kathleen Norris.

HE darlings—I hope they're always going to be as happy as they are today!" whispers the bride's mother, watching her little girl come down the aisle on the arm of the young groom.

"I think they will be—Dick's such a dear, and they're madly in love with each other!" whispers back the bride's aunt, wiping her smiling eyes. "Don't they look happy!"

Happy. Happy. Happy. The foolish word rules the scenes that follow. May they always be happy. We hope you are going to be happy. Dick and Mary are ideally happy.

Everyone—even the most disillusioned and experienced of the relatives and friends—speaks of happiness exactly as if it were a complete, concrete thing, tied up in one more jeweler's box.

The novelty of it, the passion of young love, the excitement of gifts and flattery, last for a few months, and indeed they are happy. And then the glamour wears away, and the silver tarnishes, and the wedding checks are spent,

and they are not happy. Not knowing exactly how or why, the young husband and wife had a short time of radiant satisfaction in themselves and in life. Not for any particular reason it has all ended, it is over,—they are like bewildered children, not knowing what to do.

"We don't love each other any more," they say pathetically; "we are not happy!"

Mary's mother listens to her in consternation, when Mary begins to explain just why the whole thing has been a mistake. This sort of talk, from a young married daughter, strikes consternation to a mother's heart. What can she do? Mary is still mentally, spiritually, a child, with a woman's responsibility to meet. She won't—indeed, she cannot—meet it. She has always taken her troubles to her mother and father, wriggled out of them somehow, and she bursts into tears when her mother says feebly:

"But, darling, you're married now. You—you must try to make the best of it!"

"Make the best of it!" Mary echoes bitterly. "I tell you we are both wretched—we are unhappy!"

There has been some religion mixed into Mary's twenty-three years, and her mother, remembering how angelic the child looked in her

little First Communion frock, gropes for it vaguely:

"Perhaps it's partly so much dancing, dear, so many parties—running about in the car five nights a week. It doesn't seem like Dick to object to lip-red and cocktails now, when he never did before, but we—we must pray about it."

Pray! Mary jerks a rebellious shoulder. Dick's business unsuccessful, and the suit for the motor accident, and Dick's rudeness and inconsiderateness do not seem matters for prayer. The groove of Mary's life has been carrying her steadily away from prayer.

Anyway, why should she pray when Dick is entirely to blame for the situation? Perhaps she never has prayed, really, except vaguely and ecstatically on that same First Communion day, and once or twice since,—that it would not rain on the day of the garden party, and that poor Uncle Charley would get well.

As if happiness were an indispensable element in married life, Mary carries the discussion of it to the next stage, which is the ever popular argument about the effect of an unhappy marriage upon the children of the household.

"Isn't it better," asks Mary, with the thousands of other glib young wives who have this bit of logic ready to hand, "Isn't it better to separate, with all dignity and consideration, than to have innocent children brought up in an atmosphere of constant dispute and nagging and bickering?"

The obvious answer, "Must there be disputes and bickerings between decently self-controlled persons?" is passed over with superior scorn. The voices of Mary's friends chorus eagerly, "Oh, anything is better than for children to grow up with a father and mother who have stopped loving each other!"

"I wish Dick no harm," says Mary. "But we are both unhappy. And rather than go on making each other more and more wretched, I shall consent to separate."

"She and Dick are still good friends!" says the loyal circle of intimates. But this is never true.

Mary's position now depends upon her ability to convince the world that Dick was wrong and she right, and as the pendulum of sympathy naturally swings a little away from her, she goes to any length to prove that no woman in the world could possibly have lived with Dick an instant longer than she did.

To save herself, she commits herself to hate her husband, and she naturally gives that viewpoint to his children. And this is the first fruit of the search for happiness.

But where did the deep-rooted superstition begin, that married persons are going to find happiness ready-made? Who, in this world, has a right to it, without the slow, painful struggle toward goodness, toward God, that results in a complete losing of all the values of this life, a complete abnegation of self, a crushing of the false life that the true life may be found?

When a scientist shuts himself up in a laboratory for years of research, when an explorer girds himself for a bitter trip into torrid or frozen zones, when a child is born crippled, and some mother's heart is chained to his suffering little couch for life, we do not press upon them with idiotic queries as to whether or not they are "happy." Such a question would be an insult.

Marriage, humanly speaking, is a job. Happiness or unhappiness has nothing to do with it. There never was a marriage yet that could not be made a success, nor a marriage yet that could not have ended in bitterness and failure.

So much good, so much bad, in the husband, the wife, the house, the children, the income, the town, the friends, the health and the assets generally of the new social unit. A little more hardship this year with which to contend, a little less next year.

And at the end of fifteen years, twenty years, success. A developed and ripened soul, taught where to find happiness, not expecting to gather it out of the air.

All marriages are alike—and for that matter all lives are alike—in that the wife and husband seem to experience disappointment in its hardest guise. The domestic, book-loving wife finds herself mated to a pleasure-loving man whose amusements are all away from home. The baby-loving woman finds to her enduring grief that there will never be a child. The youthful little enthusiast for jazz and dancing is burdened in her early twenties with a third, a fourth, baby. The proud woman blushes for an easy-going unsuccessful mate, and the mother-loving girl finds herself spending year after year without a glimpse of the old home.

And that is marriage. And life.

The girls whose vocation is religious rather than matrimonial are more fortunate. They are

put into a mill, and the Mistress of Novices has two or three years in which to fit them for living.

One day I asked an old religious, who had trained five hundred postulants, what element was most important in the process.

"Humility, humility, humility!" she said. "Nothing else matters. If a girl is shy, stupid, ignorant, headstrong, jealous—nothing else is important, except that she be humble! It is the beginning of wisdom. The only girls with whom we have any difficulty are the proud girls, the girls who are self-righteous, who want to explain, to defend themselves, to make excuses."

It would be a good word to substitute for the insipid "happy." Are the bride and groom humble? May they always be humble! Don't they look humble?

"Yes, I am to be humble," Mary says bitterly, "while Dick goes around playing poker and wasting money and having a good time!"

"Dick is to be faithful to that shallow little bobbed-headed wife of his," mourns his mother, "while she makes no concessions at all!"

But what has that to do with it? A husband may be a sinner, but that does not give his wife the right to sin. A wife may fail in all her wedded obligations, but one cannot imagine

her husband as pleading that fact, upon the terrible Day of Judgment, as an excuse for his own faults.

Each and everyone of us has one obligation, during the bewildered days of our pilgrimage here,—the saving of his own soul, and secondarily and incidentally thereby affecting for good such other souls as come under our influence.

Happiness has nothing to do with it. And in these days, when divorces and separations and unhappy marriages are almost universal, it behooves us as Catholic women to gird ourselves for a stronger position on the question, and to disunite the words "marriage" and "happiness" once and for all.

Marriage is a great means of grace, rather than of shallow human joy. It is a great road to heaven, rather than to the country club.

Speaking from a purely human standpoint, there is no modern institution so completely and dramatically a failure as the institution of divorce. It is working like a sort of hate factory in our midst, creating enmities and silences and coldnesses in a world that for two thousand years has been struggling to lessen the sickening total of them. Its cruelty to innocent

childhood is proverbial, its effect upon society is ruinous, and the thousands of embittered and useless women it sets adrift upon our communities every year are a real menace to sober, self-controlled Christian living.

These divorced women are of all types, but they have two points in common. Each one wants above all other things to tell you just how wronged and how angelic she was, as a wife, and each one wants immediately to remarry. If she does remarry, she adds, with simplicity, that the children adore their new father, and that she is going to be absolutely happy.

If love is an essential attribute of heaven, then surely hate is an attribute of hell, and I have never felt so close to the latter place as when in the company of the divorced woman who is obliged to hate violently and incessantly, or admit that she herself was at fault.

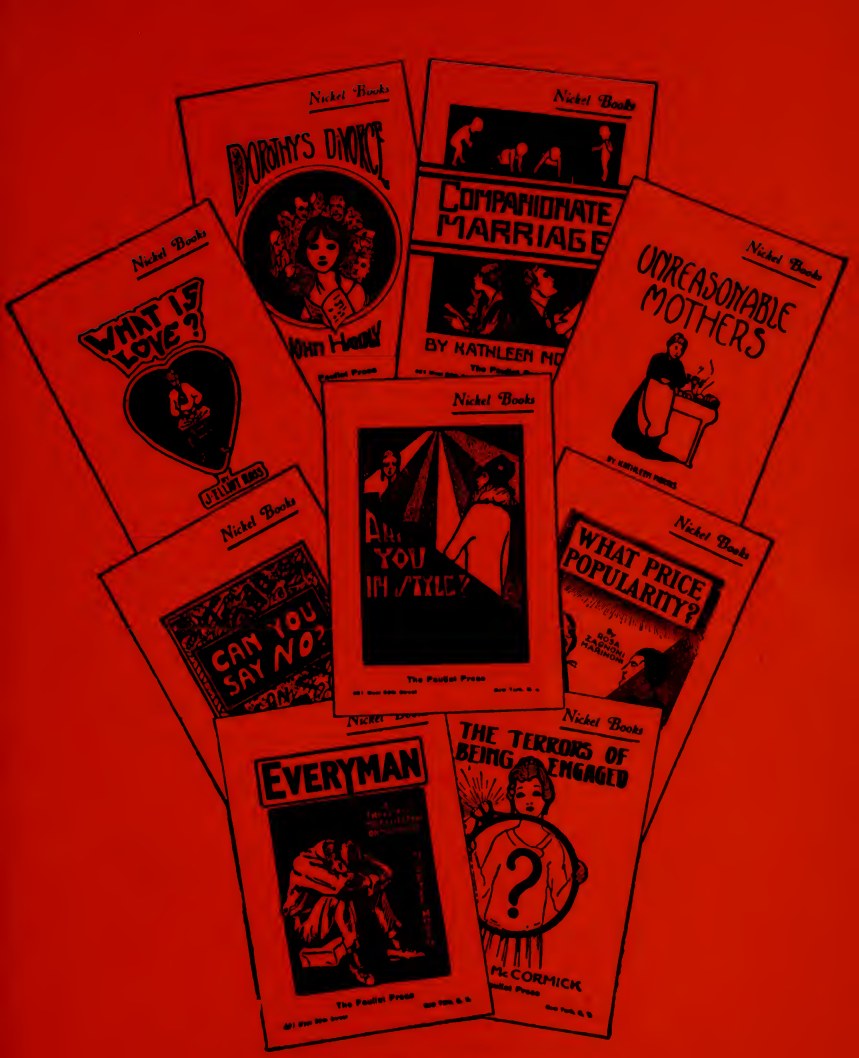
She is not entirely "happy" with the second husband, but she must continue to hate the first. The son of the first hates his stepfather, she hates what she finds in him of his own father. The daughter hates spending six months a year with each parent, during which time she hears the other parent bitterly scored; the old grandparents on both sides have hideous stories to tell; the whole atmosphere is stifling to the soul.

Committed to a marriage vow, bound by a sacrament, assisted mysteriously by grace, how peaceful it may be, on the other hand, to be obliged only to love and to endure! With that vow, that irrevocable promise, beneath one like a rock, there need be no faltering. In sickness rather than health, poverty rather than riches, for worse rather than better—until death; there it is, complete, there can be no mistaking it. The bitter was foreseen, as well as the sweet, and there is no weakling argument involved, as to whether one is happy or not.

We know, we older persons, that that hard road is the real road, after all; that the motor cars and wedding presents and frocks and trips and admiration and excitement are only will-o'-the-wisps that the children quite naturally chase for a few giddy years. Surely it would help them to find the true secret if we dropped the consideration of "happiness" from our own problems, and from theirs, where the big things of life are concerned, and gave them to consider instead the thought that real happiness must be made, not found, and that the materials right in their hands at this moment are its ingredients.

Which is perhaps only to glimpse for one second the truth of the stupendous words:

"The kingdom of heaven is within you."



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