

UNHAPPY MARRIAGES IN FICTION.

BY ANDREW LANG.

Poscimur. The Editor of THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW asks for a study of married misery in fiction. Whence are we to begin? *A Jove principium*, we might say, for the poets fable that the King of Gods and Men was most unluckily married. This, no doubt, is a mystery, and implies a prehistoric belief that not even a god can secure a happy wedlock. But more modern students may start from a letter of Mr. Thackeray's to Alexandre Dumas. "Why don't you take possession of other people's heroes," asks the Englishman (I translate his French), and "show us the secret of their wedded lives?" The Master of Ravenswood, Thackeray thinks, did not really perish in the Kelpie's Flow. He was picked up by a passing smuggler (perhaps the skipper was Dirck Hatteraick the elder), and it was the Master's bonnet and plume, floating on the tide, that caused the myth of his decease. Why not continue his annals? Quentin Durward, too, had adventures manifold after he married the heiress of a castle in most debatable land. Let us pursue the fortunes of our favorites beyond the altar. So Thackeray said, and himself shows us how. Wilfred of Ivanhoe bore the yoke. But marriage is the trite finish of romance. Neither in poetry nor novels has married life been duly studied. Authors "avert their ken from half of human fate," like Wordsworth in Mr. Arnold's poem.

"They lived happy ever after." We all adopt that formula of the fairy tale. There are, to be sure, fairy tales more daring than most, which prolong the narrative beyond the nuptial hour, behind the nuptial veil; show us what a wicked mother-in-law can inflict and a pretty princess may endure. But human nature is impatient of such researches. If you will consult "*La Belle*

au Bois Dormant," of M. Charles Perrault, you shall find that the Sleeping Beauty's troubles only begin after she has been married and made a mother. But our English nursery versions, except in the old original rendering of Mr. Pote (1729), leave all that out. Is this not a clear proof, in its way, that novel-readers and story-hearers do not want to know the truth about marriage? Poets and romancers say they are "critics of life." But there is a part of it which very few of them criticise. It has been asked whether any poet has ever yet sung the sorrows of being "hen-pecked"? Not one, unless we count a dramatic rendering in Mr. Browning's "Andrea del Sarto." Yet many poets, and novelists too, must have been in Socrates's case. The wisest of men found the bay mare (Xanthippe) the better horse. But Socrates wrote little verse, still less fiction, and the world waits for the daring lyrist who is to touch this saddest and sweetest of minor chords.

Marriage, on the whole, is avoided as a topic, except where the "love interest," as they call it, is to begin *after* marriage. In an English or American story, the union of hearts occasionally follows tardily after the union of hands and fortunes. The girl is made to fall in love with her husband, or he with her, when both have passed through a period of slight aversion. This is not a very agreeable topic, and one may doubt whether any of the great novelists have handled a situation that tempts lady authors. Out of England and America the opposite rule prevails: love comes after marriage punctually enough, but it is love for Another. At the risk of seeming flippant, one is obliged to say a word on this view of marriage—of marriage when it is needlessly and improperly complicated; a situation with which the English mind has little sympathy. Marriage of this kind is criticised from a dozen points of view by the romancers of France, of Russia, of Finland, I dare say. Is this or that marriage of alien fiction happy? we are asked, but then the difficulties begin to arise. Happy for *whom*? Say there are only three persons interested,—the usual three,—and, thinking of M. Paul Bourget, I wonder at the moderation of the allowance. Is it a happy marriage? What does the heroine think, who likes her husband very well, and finds him unsuspecting and affectionate? That depends on the heroine's character and sense of honor. Sometimes she is perfectly happy; so is her lord, and so is the Third Person. Sometimes she is

unhappy,—a little grain of conscience makes her sour,—and then it is unnecessary to assure the experienced reader that neither of the others is allowed to be jolly. The lady takes care of *that*, and a duel, or suicides, one, two, or even three, may illustrate her lack of felicity.

Then we have the marriage (I am still speaking of Continental romance) where the Third Person learns to prefer the husband, to think him a good fellow, while, as to the lady, "he is passing weary of her love." I do not think we can call *that* a happy marriage; nor is it happy when the lady begins to prefer her lord, in the long run. Take, again, the case of the husband. He may believe in his wife and his friend, and then he is "happy as mortals count happiness," to render Aristotle's expression, and, as far as *he* goes, there is no reason why the marriage should not be happy also. Now and then the sympathetic man commits suicide to oblige the others, as in George Sand's "Jacques." But with so many possible situations, it is clear that wedded happiness is not easy to win in foreign fiction. French novels of married life are usually either humorous—when the whole sacred institution is made a joke of; or they are serious—and pessimistic. Indiana, that daring creation of George Sand, was not happy, nor was the wife in "Le Recherche de l'Absolu," nor that much-tried spouse of the Baron in "La Cousine Bette." On the other hand, the married lady in "Mensonges" was almost ideally happy, for she liked *all* of them, in their way, till things went wrong, and several of them found her out. But even then she displayed a stoicism and a power of making the best of things, which are very unlike the conduct of Brynhild in the "Völsunga Saga," that old and heroic novel of thwarted love.

Our Anglo-Saxon fiction is rather shy of these complications, or used to be rather shy. Among the gallant gentlemen and ladies who now throw off our old-fashioned scruples, one notices an air of "who's afraid?" Like a warrior mentioned by Thackeray, "they are not only brave, but they know it," and are in a kind of emancipated flutter at their own audacity.

When we think of unhappy marriages in fiction, then, we mean English and American fiction, and we mean marriages which are *not* complicated by the errant affections of either party or of both. Then what *is* a happy marriage?—for only by establishing

the type can one estimate divergencies from the type and analyze marriages which are unhappy. Now, the essence of a happy marriage is put into few words by the first and greatest writer of romance—by the author of the “*Odyssey*.” His hero, shipwrecked on the coast of Phæacia, is rescued by the Sea-King’s daughter, and he addresses her thus: “May the gods give thee all thy heart’s desire, a husband, and a home, and a mind at one with his may they give, for there is nothing nobler nor stronger than this, when a man and wife are of one heart and mind in a house, a grief to their foes and to their friends great joy, but their own hearts know it best.” This is the definition of wedded happiness, and there is an irony in the words, for Nausicaæ loved Odysseus, who went home to his own wife, and it may be that she never came to her heart’s desire.

However that fell out, there are moderns who will tell us that the marriage Homer had in his mind is impossible. In a recent dialogue, Mr. Henry James introduces a character who remarks that the great war of the world and of the future is the strife between the women and the men. And another modern novelist, at the opposite pole of fiction from Mr. James, chanced casually to say the same thing lately. Men and women, he said, are, indeed, more absolutely divided in their estimate of life, its value, its conduct, its pleasures, its duties, than Aryans from Australians, or Jews from Chinese. Our idea of honor is not their idea, nor our notions of justice or of humor, nor can we at all discover a common calculus of the relative importance of things. Matters that are trivial to us fill women’s thoughts in sleeping and waking; affairs that we consider momentous leave them quite indifferent, quite unmoved. There is only one thing in the world better than a good woman; namely, a good man, and his excellence lacks the charm of hers, and the bloom on it. But a very indifferent man will, in some matters, have a juster estimate of life than the best of women. Children of the same mothers, we are born more different than if we were of alien race, and color, and speech. Yet nature compels us to try to be one, and to be wretched when we fail.

I do not speak cynically or lightly: the wisest of the ancients were of this mind. Aristotle will not allow that “happiness” can be predicated of a woman, a child, or a slave. Marcus Aurelius learned from his mother “piety, and beneficence, and

abstinence not only from evil deeds, but even from evil thoughts, and simplicity in his way of living, far removed from the habits of the rich." And yet it is Marcus Aurelius who, when sketching the absolute evil, says "a black character, a womanish character, a stubborn character, bestial, childish, animal, stupid, counterfeit, scurrilous, fraudulent, tyrannical." We know what Montaigne said of women, and Montaigne has a renown for being wise. It is not meant, of course, that women deserve what Montaigne says, and what Aristotle and the great Emperor say, but their words, and the male tradition of the world, are proofs of the eternal conflict and strife between the sexes.

Look at mythology—that is, at man's earliest theories of the world. Man always comes first and alone into the world. Woman follows to bring a curse, in Greece, among the Hebrews, among the Minitarees. The very gods are unhappily married in the Aztec, as well as in the Greek, mythology. Men and women are made to thwart and to misunderstand each other, no less than each is made to be, and may be, the help-meet of the other. But the way of evil is easy, and the way of good is steep and hard to climb. And so it happens, in the words of Rochefoucauld, that "there are excellent marriages, but there is scarce such a thing as a delightful marriage." St. Paul is of the same mind as the wise Duke: they speak the voice of humanity and of experience, not of stupid scorn and silly pessimism. Life is hard, and marriage is harder; we cannot mend the matter by effusive twaddle.

If this be true, we might expect the majority of marriages in fiction to be, not unhappy, but far from "delicious." The novelists who end their story at the altar, of course leave the opposite impression, and with perfect fairness and honesty. The hero and heroine come, in Homer's words, "to their heart's desire," and the gods give no better gift. Why should we go further, and show how often the heart's desire is deceived, or fades, or is thwarted? But the novelists who deal with married life might be expected, on a reasonable calculation, to describe unhappy marriages. Happy are the couples, as well as the countries, whose history is uninteresting, and as the novelist is compelled to interest, he may seem almost compelled to make his married people more or less miserable.

On the whole, speaking only of "Anglo-Saxon" fiction, it is wonderful how often the novelist escapes what seems inevitable.

Let us think first of the dead masters; of Richardson, Fielding, Miss Austen, Sir Walter Scott, Thackeray, Dickens, George Eliot; of those who wrote for our great-grandfathers and our fathers. No doubt they all described marriage as they saw it, when they chanced to make married people prominent characters, which was not very often. Now, Sir Walter did not marry the woman of his heart; he never "came to his heart's desire"; his poems and his letters—at least, his unpublished letters—and his diary frankly confess it. One can hardly remember one example of married hero and heroine in his works. He writes of the love of young folk, and he once admitted that his lovers were "automata," mere uninteresting puppets. It is not, therefore, to Scott that we can look for studies of marriage. He takes it for granted that Rowena and Ivanhoe will "ca' through it," as the Scotch say, well enough, after the ceremony, and that the memory of Rebecca will not be too importunate. Perhaps their life will be as humdrum as that of the laird in "Guy Mannering," while his worthy wife endured—a more good-natured Mrs. Bennet. Lady Ashton and her subservient lord, in "The Bride of Lammermoor," may be pronounced moderately happy. The lady has her will and her way, and the husband has stoicism enough, and not too much heart, for the situation. He can see his daughter's heart broken, his honor stained, his house disgraced, by his wife's masterfulness, and he can bear it very tolerably. The study is true enough, but it was not Sir Walter's way to dwell on the dismal commonplace of miserable marriages.

Nor is Richardson fond of this topic. "Clarissa" scarcely gives him an opportunity, and to wed Sir Charles Grandison was, in itself, bliss beyond the dreams of maidenhood. Fielding is such a believer in marriage, and in good women, that he probably expects wedlock to convert Tom Jones, that volatile foundling, or Sophia to be happy with him even while he remains unconverted. Nor could any man fail to be happy with Sophia. Fielding's wife, whether she had "a broken nose" or not, must have been an angel. It is she who sat for Sophia Western, and for Amelia Booth, the kindest, the dearest, the most charming and lenient of women. The author does not linger over the sorrows of the men who led Lady Booby and Lady Bellarton to the altar. He furnishes a rugged tavern-keeper with a shrew for a wife, in "Joseph Andrews," and the

shrill shrew is drawn with masterly success—the Lady Ashton of lowly life. But, on the whole, looking at the three greatest of our elder novelists, we see them making matrimony a goal, and a fortunate goal; but the beginning of evils.

If any novelist might have been expected to sketch married miseries, it is Mr. Thackeray. In a recent criticism by a modern English writer of one or two obscure tales, Thackeray is spoken of as the artist of “the odd and the ugly.” This kind of estimate simply amazes, however narrow the education and the intellect of the person who ventures on it may be. Unhappy married life abounds in the odd and the ugly, but it is not these qualities—not these, but the mortal pain of the wretchedness—that meet us in Mr. Thackeray’s miserable marriages. We think of Clive and Rosey, of Clive with his heart elsewhere:

“There she sits; the same, but changed: as gone from him as if she were dead, departed indeed into another sphere, and entered into a kind of death. . . . Do you suppose you are the only man who has had to attend such a funeral? You will find some men smiling and at work the day after. Some come to the grave now and again out of the world, and say a brief prayer, and a ‘God bless her!’ . . . Shall we go visit the lodge gates of Newcome Park with the moon shining on their carving? Is there any pleasure in walking by miles of gray paling, and endless pail-sades of firs? O, you fool, what do you hope to see behind that curtain? Absurd fugitive, whither would you run? Can you burst the tether of fate: and is not poor dear little Rosey Mackenzie sitting yonder waiting for you by the stake?”

That is the man’s part in the entertainment—and the lady’s.

“Who is it, Pen?” says Clive. I said, in a low voice, ‘Ethel’; and starting up and crying ‘Ethel! Ethel!’ he ran from the room.

“Little Mrs. Rosey started up too on her sofa, clutching hold of the table-cover with her lean hand, and the two red spots on her cheeks burning more fiercely than ever. I could see what passion was beating in that poor little heart. Heaven help us! What a resting-place have friends and parents prepared for it!”

Even without the Campaigner (who is “ugly,” but not “odd,”) here is a memorable marriage, here are two excellent people in a very evil way. They have more desperate companions in Barnes Newcome and his wife, and there the Third Person, Mr. Jack Belsize, is very much more importunate and obtrusive than the prematurely-buried love of Ethel. Thence comes another hopeless wedding, that of Jack and Lady Clara; a mere example of what follows when the rules of the game are broken. For in England, at least, it can be said that, however unhappy a marriage may be, it is less unhappy than whatever may be won by breaking the rules.

In Thackeray’s opinion, as far as it can be gathered from his

novels, marriages are usually spoiled either by having been arranged in the beginning by relations, or by the intrusion of the mother-in-law. It is the mother-in-law who makes Olive's marriage an inferno,—it need have been no more than an endurable state of probation,—and the mother-in-law appears in such sketches as "A Little Dinner at Timmins's," and in "Love the Widower." This wicked cynic, by the way, this dabbler in the odd and the ugly, is almost as fond as Henry Fielding of happy marriages. Who were ever happier than General Lambert and Mrs. Lambert, in "The Virginians," and who ever deserved happiness better, for their tenderness and humor? Did Theo and George Warrington not reach the haven where they would be, even their heart's desire, after many a tempest? We are to understand that Pen's wedlock proved happier than was likely, and that Laura did not trouble him about Blanche. The new occupant did *not* say, "Are *these* the letters you thought so charming? Well, upon my word, I never read anything more commonplace in my life," and so forth.

But, somehow, we don't much envy the happiness of Mr. Pendennis, nor, indeed, are we allowed to envy Rawdon Crawley. He had, to be sure, the most delightful wife in the world. Becky would have made any man happy, till he found her out, and for my own part I believe that Mrs. Wenham *had* one of her headaches, that Becky was cruelly used, that she was not unkind to little Rawdon. The author does not agree with us; he seems to credit all that unkind tongues have said of Mrs. Rawdon Crawley, just as George Eliot invents dreadful, spiteful calumnies about fair Rosamond Vincy. Miss Rosamond made a mistake; she married Dr. Lydgate, who was what the young men call "an ideal bounder." He may not have made her happy, but her friends remain true to her, as they are true to Becky, through good report and evil report. Mr. Thackeray's genius was too strong for him; his own creation mastered him and masters us; and which would you rather have wedded, the bride of Rawdon or of his brother, Sir Pitt? Was Becky ever *jealous*? Her green eyes were not lit by that flame which shone behind poor Rosey's and Lade Jane's, and even Emmy's when George flirted with Becky on the balcony. Had we known Mrs. Rawdon Crawley, she would have made us all her slaves, and was it her fault that she had not £3,000 a year? It was all she asked

as a condition of goodness. Her fall, her failure, move one like Napoleon's at Moscow, like Charles Edward's when they made him ride northward from Derby. Why had Mrs. Wenham that unlucky headache?

Dickens was more or less bound to make his married people happy. There is no better-assorted union than that of Mr. and Mrs. Squeers. Sir Leicester Dedlock was a Baronet, and had to be punished somehow; so his nuptial fortunes were cloudy. The old schoolmaster's wife in "David Copperfield" comes to prefer her husband to her cousin. David himself had all the chances of unhappiness, but Dora conveniently died, and Agnes came to the front. Another woman might not have been wholly blessed in such a lord, but Mrs. Micawber would never desert Mr. Micawber. Mr. Weller the elder was rendered unhappy by the intrusion of the clergy, in the shape of Mr. Stiggins—a not infrequent cause of matrimonial wretchedness.

For it is to be observed that the saints are always, or almost always, unmarried. If either husband or wife is filled with the ambition to be a saint, misery is assured. Christian deserted Mrs. Christian and the children. It was a mean act, but what was he to do? What is any one to do, who feels a vocation for perfection, after marrying, in another mood, as one who plays tipcat, drinks beer, and dances with the girls. This is a fruitful source of unhappiness in married life; it matters not whether you take the case of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, or of the second wife of the elder Weller. Where one partner is a saint and the other a "wessel," happiness flies out of the door. We are usually invited to sympathize with the "wessel," but I am not certain that the saint does not as much deserve our compassion. In other cases, the saintliness is common to both partners, but the pattern of excellence differs. Then we have the woful predicament of Mrs. Elsmere, who was good, but on the old lines, while the Rev. Elsmere was good too, but "advanced"—a reader of Strauss and Renan and Baur.

"Better had he been plodding
Among his clods that day!"

George Eliot made but little use of speculative differences in her unhappy marriages. Romola's was unhappy, because, being a High Soul, she married for the delight of the eye; she married a handsome, agreeable person, with no more conscience than a

kitten. One is sorry for poor Tito when Romola sits up late for him. That marriage could not end well. As to Dorothea, she married also from some wrong, and, indeed, quite inscrutable motive; she married an elderly and deeply mistaken mythologist. As a rule, mythologists make the *best* husbands; their studies incline them to tolerance, and when out of temper they can wreak it on the other mythologists. Mr. Casaubon was a person who would never have married at all if Dorothea would only have let him alone. She, not he, is to blame for an unfortunate union. Mr. Grandcourt would have made Griselda Grantley happy enough; Gwendolen would have been happy with nobody. There are persons of both sexes who cannot be happy, whether wedded or single, and Gwendolen was one of them. We should not be too hard on Mr. Grandcourt, though he was not amiable. George Eliot's ideal of a happy marriage was that of Caleb Garth. He had humor, which is almost indispensable to a Benedick—witness the case of Mr. Bennet, in "Pride and Prejudice." Only a humorist could have extracted content and enjoyment out of Mrs. Bennet and the girls. A High Soul would not have been happy with Mrs. Bennet: suppose, for example, that Robert Elsmere had married Mrs. Bennet or Lydia! It would have been dreadful, and yet the mind lingers with fondness on this idea. Indeed, the possible combinations of Venus, when, glad in her cruel business, she delights to yoke unequal mates, are full of ideas for novelists. Let some one take such a lofty moralist, full of noble aspirations and soul-conflict, let him marry this hero to a lady like Becky, or one of Miss Broughton's girls,—say, Sara, in "Belinda,"—and what would happen? The experimental novelist may use the notion, and work it out. There will be laughter and tears on the way—tears and laughter which make up our lives—above all, wedded lives—and render us a spectacle for gods.

The unhappy marriages of later novelists are not easy to remember. Either the characters they draw are much less marked and memorable than those of Scott, Thackeray, Miss Austen, or we forget them more easily because we studied them in later life. Mr. Stevenson has two unhappy marriages—first, that of Prince Otto, which I confess I could never make head or tail of; and next, in his romance, unfinished as I write, "The Master of Ballantrae." That is a study of gloomy power. Mr. Henry James's

marriages one does not expect to be happy, because they are at the mercy of "international complications"; indeed, they are international complications themselves. They add a new element of misery, and an element quite superfluous. Mr. Howells has a most unhappy marriage in "A Modern Instance," but who can be sorry for such a pair—a jealous shrew, and a beery journalist? Elsewhere—I have hopelessly mislaid the reference—one of a jangling pair in a novel of Mr. Howells's says the best and most touching thing about such a union—about husband and wife being like two children together—that one remembers to have read. Can the story be "Dr. Breen's Practice"?

Mr. George Meredith has treated this matter fully in the singular poem, "Modern Love," but less in his prose. Mr. Besant's marriages are always what Rochefoucauld says *no* marriages can be. The ideas of Mr. Norris are not so radiant. There is a most complicated miserable marriage in Mrs. Burnett's "Through One Administration," but it is easy to see that the author has been in more than one mind about her sentimental heroine; nor can one believe that the poor married man was *repente turpissimus*. The man is usually treated but badly in this kind of romance, just as in real life the husbands of the prettiest ladies are commonly, but perhaps inaccurately, reported to be "brutes." Concerning an early marriage of She, (1340 B. C.) it may be enough to observe, on private information, that the union was far from happy. Perhaps the best advice on marriage is given by the miserably-mated Uncle John, in a story of Whyte Melville's. The counsel ends with the words: "And, whatever you do, never try to reason with her as if she were a man." By remembering this, much unhappiness will be avoided in the marriages of real life.

Nay, let us end with a wiser word and a kinder picture out of Thackeray,—the picture of George Warrington in his old age. "An old man, sitting in this room, with my wife's work-box opposite, and she but five minutes away, my eyes grow so dim and full that I can't see the book before me. 'But five minutes' away, and some time he or she will go away, and will not come back again, and the other will know that this trouble and that, all the little jars and sorrows of their lives, endured but for a moment, and are burned up in love, which is one and is immortal. For if we love so much those whom we have lost, can we quite lose those whom we have loved?"

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