

# American Husbands

BY ALEXANDER BLACK

THE sort of thing visitors to the United States say about us—to us—naturally falls into a formula. These visitors may come with a benevolent expectation or with a grouch; they may be going away happily reassured or in a state of bitter disenchantment; they may be hoping on in the face of the awful testimony or be nursing a verified exasperation. Such diversities do not greatly affect certain standardized comments. If the visitor is polite there is the impulse to say what is expected. Challenge works to the same end. Since what we expect also is standardized, we get what is coming to us.

Male visitors may vary prodigiously in endowment and in disposition, but they all say that American women are wonderful. Some of them say it shyly, and some slyly. Others speak with an emotional ardor that suggests an elated passion for discovery. As a device to please this is invariably successful. We know it has to happen. Yet we expect no real man to say less. Male visitors anywhere on the visitable earth have been saying something of the kind since times older than interviewing, in answer to instincts older than gallantry. The man who emerges from the jungles of Uganda will tell you about tribal belles whose beauty and charm are simply astounding. It is all part of a biological imperative. A man who did not think the women were a mitigation probably should not be trusted. Of course, if he goes too far, and peoples a South Sea island with dazzling and enterprising flappers, the misguided multitude of responsive men who scurry across the Pacific to find the paradise full of fat old women will have an opinion of their own.

The woman visitor to the United States, in this as in other particulars, is more complicated, not, perhaps, in her actual reactions, but in her expressions. Chiefly because women are less perfectly adjusted to formulæ, they often disappoint those who look for the established word. Plainly, they do not always feel that American women are wonderful, and they are hampered by a delicacy. A man-made tradition permits an exuberant "To the ladies!" But it is another matter to ask women to eulogize the men. This isn't done. Aside from the traditional awkwardness, is the question of discipline. In the crisis the woman visitor points impressively to the American husband. It is to be gathered that one may speak of husbands without seeming to expound men. There is, too, often an effect of implying that only the husbandly relation makes the traits of men of any importance.

It was a woman who first remarked that men differ but that husbands are all alike, and women from abroad who have studied us have doubtless made their analyses upon some such theory. Women who have been married several times admit sharpness of variation between one husband and another. Naturally, nearness emphasizes difference. The remote moves into a classification. Thus, the American husband has been noted by those to whom he is exotic as a specific appearance, as a kind of creature with special color and markings. Feminine commentators who began by speaking vaguely and appreciatively as guests, have frequently gone away to analyze and discriminate. From these cases we learn that the American husband can be not only bewildering but incredible. No European

training seems to help very much in any effort to understand him. He blends traits that do not belong together. He violates ethnological grammar. He is absurdly docile, yet fearfully self-centered. Professionally he has imagination. Domestically his mind is blankly plastic. Publicly he is a pusher. Privately he does what he is told to do. He is submissive without gallantry. He never really worships. He only offers sacrifice. Even his brutality, when it happens, lacks the grand style that belongs with a technic ripened under classical conditions. No woman with a cave-man complex can hope to do anything with him.

Such analyses have not prevented the foreign critic from saying that she does not blame the American woman. The assumption appears to have been that any sane woman who cared to marry at all would take advantage of such opportunities. Unless all signs were delusive, it was receiving odds in the wager to get an American husband if one could be had, and was known to be true to type. To be true to type he would, of course, have money. No man without money can prove that he is indulgent. Moreover, the foreign impression that the American husband talks about nothing but business implies that, in all fairness, a wife who has to hear inordinately about money-getting should profit proportionately. The listener is worthy of her hire.

Probably it is a waste of time to linger over foreign opinion, as much of a waste of time as eliciting it in the manner of so many of our interviewers. We cannot prevent foreigners from writing about us, and we cannot seem to prevent ourselves from reading the things they write. It may be true that social relationships ought to be measured from a distance. The notion would sound plausible. But where are the experts? Mr. Einstein's brief excursion into social relationships seemed to be no better than anyone else's. Quite like anyone else, Mr. Einstein extolled American women. The

movies have not needed to reduce this particular dictum to a diagram. He is credited, too, with declaring that American men are lapdogs of the women. This is doubtless full of meaning and suggests greater complexity of explanation. Assuming that it is meant to be a rebuke, or an admonition, it lacks something that we ought to look for from a scientist; or perhaps the thing it lacks is something that we ought *not* to look for from a scientist. I am not sure. Meanwhile I have the feeling that distance has not helped Mr. Einstein. In spiffing us he does not rise above the ordinary.

If we had in America a sociological Einstein, one who could fix for the common mind the parallels, curves, tangents, and nuances of matrimony, who could show how and why so many of our social straight lines are not straight at all, the part temperamental refraction plays in the incidences of the social system, and so on, we should be able to turn more hopefully to the study of a fascinating and painful problem. Of course, there is no such person. He would be married or not married, and either situation must disqualify him. Evidently it is ordained that we should grope.

The sheer drama of groping after new grounds for complaint against marriage is one of the marked excitements of American life. Rebels are ever busy searching for a novel uncomfortableness. They are slow to see that all marriages are marriages of convenience, that marriage is, indeed, the Great Convenience and still awaits the invention of something just as good; that other conveniences must, of necessity, come into competition with it. For example, the husband who agrees cordially that his wife shall keep her maiden name, knows that in the conflict of the two conveniences the greater will conquer the lesser. Except in the case of professional expediency, wherein only the stupidest reactionary resents the keeping by the woman of the name that is her very own, the acceptance of the "Mr. and Mrs."

is quite likely to win use as the easiest way out of a basically awkward situation. To be simply "& Co." in the social firm is, in view of woman's actual equalities, a paradox. The point is, that it is a convenient paradox. As usual, that is determinative. The social-unit idea may label the man as nominally the head of the firm, but sentiment should be able to get some satisfaction from the fact that "Co." in business is often the real boss. Obliterating her name is but one of the things a woman chooses to do in the interest of coherence for the family; and the name she obliterates is, after all, simply the name of another husband for whom her mother made the same sacrifice of identity.

It is as the titular head of the family that the American husband comes in for the sharpest criticism. Both foreign and domestic critics are, on occasion, glib in asserting that he does not properly act the part. We are told that the foreign husband, good or bad as an individual, holds his place; that foreign children may be brought up without fear of God but not without the fear of father; that foreign wives always know who goes first, whose tastes determine the dinner and the ventilation, who leads the conversation, whose slippers must be warmed, whose nap must not be disturbed.

Of course, these generalizations about the foreign husband would look funny enough in Europe, but they serve as a handle for the switch that is laid on the American husband. There is at times an effect of stirring the American husband to assert himself, not only in his own interest, but in furtherance of the unifying reactions, as if the happiest women and children would be those who wore wound stripes. The joke is, evidently, to pretend that the American husband is a sweet person, enamored of the cynical beatitude, Blessed are the meek for they shall be married. Yet the divorce-court records seem to show not only that he can be abstractly unsatisfactory, but that he can specifically fail in meekness. Evidently the lapdog no-

tion has something wrong with it. There may be something wrong with the whole theory of his self-effacing simplicity.

To be sure, we ought to remember, even in a parenthetical recognition of foreign comment, that foreign impressions of the American husband really began to happen in Europe and outlying parts. There is no probability that any visitor to these shores ever came without at least a slight prejudice germinated on the other side. The American husband has been too visible abroad to have escaped being seen. And if he has been seen he has suffered. Nothing could be less impressive than an American husband trailing after an American wife who is frantically occupied in checking up on all the things she will be asked about when she gets back. He would be brazen enough to admit that he hadn't seen the Sistine Madonna, or even the Venus of Melos. But she would know better. It will not do to say that she also may have excited prejudice in Europe, to cite the fact that, for instance, there have been a thousand allusions to her shrillness. Any resentment arising from her unabashed audibility would only serve to make his obscuration the more pitiful. In Europe as elsewhere a too patient boredom is often mistaken for meekness. When the American man is bored, as with teas, or study clubs, or picture galleries, and chooses not to make a row, the effect is stultifying and unseemly, though it may appear to him to be better than a row. He wants the price he pays for not doing or knowing the things he doesn't want to do or know to be a quiet price. He pays, and the picture of him paying is not imposing. I have witnessed his gentle bewilderment in the wake of a wife who was after Art, as patient with her culture as with her hat, perhaps knowing that both were quite new; and I could believe that no European was likely to guess him—not in the Uffizi. Perhaps Einstein had watched him, too.

A sociological Einstein would clear the

ground by showing, as he might without effort, that, as most of the complaints registered against marriage should really be registered against life, so most of the complaints against the American husband do not properly lodge against his Americanness, or even against his husbandly relation. He may have helped to invent democracy, but he is not wholly to blame for its inevitable effects upon wives and children as well as upon husbands. The American habit of trying to keep a jump ahead of trouble may, in fact, often account for a way the American husband has of relinquishing, and relinquishing with an honest cordiality of assent, that which must surely be taken away from him. Now that even the Turk has seen a light, it would be grossly out of character for the married male in the United States to brace himself against the new spirit. He shows no disposition to do anything of the kind. To recognize both children and wives as persons can involve heroic renunciations. The degree of the heroism must depend upon the inherited luggage of the individual, and upon the nimbleness of his sense of humor. Yet children who regard the old man as a good sport are probably better fun than children who pretend to be obliterated when the ogre stalks in. The traditional master of the house was a stark figure. He may have been logical, but he was lonesome. He was indispensable to novels and plays. His way of cutting off the son, and of banging the door on the disobedient daughter, especially when it had begun to snow, facilitated plots enormously. He is still good for a sob if it can be arranged so that the mother will do no more than look heartbroken in the crisis. Somebody really should hit him with a chair. This would cure him, but it would spoil the story.

It cannot be denied that the American husband is a great spoiler of heavy plots. He is better in comedies of exasperation. Recognizing a wife as a person leads straight toward those little annoyances that loom large in the critical effort to

keep the old outlines. Take the matter of his babbling about business. Romance has always revolted against the idea, and it has been shown again and again that keeping romance is essential. Nobody pretends that as between telling the truth about business and telling lies about love there is any real choice. But there ought to be no such alternative. A husband should have a better instinct for the things a fully recognized person will find interesting. He should himself have more than one interest. Even golf sticks are not a wholly satisfying variation. A proper education would enlarge his chances of being a good dinner companion. Like many another, I am acutely sorry that the American husband does not read more, or read better. Leaving the book-reading to the wife and worrying along on a radio culture lead to his ruthless elimination as a person. He ends by becoming only "Him."

A husband aesthetically inferior must ever be, as George Eliot said about a difference of taste in jokes, a strain on the affections. The habit of not noticing a wife's clothes, even when the trait is in no way aggravated by a habit of noticing other women's clothes, has forced many a husband to give disproportionate and less appreciated praise to spiritual qualities of the wearer. Every man knows that homage to a gown, as a gown, gives a woman more satisfaction than a masterpiece of compliment which includes the woman herself. Few husbands show any aptitude for utilizing this knowledge. Few avoid the blunder of being flippant about clothes. It does not matter that a husband's vaudeville jest, "That's a pretty dress you nearly have on," is used to conceal a real chagrin over the physical display. Such sarcasms are a bad investment.

Married romance is, indeed, as fragile as ever. The essential subtleties cannot be made light of. Yet a study of the nice points is precisely the sort of thing for which the American husband has no flair. Naturally, he shows to the least advantage where chance has mated him

with a fearfully feminine woman, as, for instance, with one of those women who shed handkerchiefs, gloves, and other objects on all occasions. He may have become accustomed to her shedding responsibilities. It is the fragmentary thing, that jerks him into awkward action, toward which he feels most savage. There are women whose facility in dropping reaches the dimensions of a gift. Usually they are women who become greatly preoccupied with interior and theoretically invisible, but piercingly evident, garments that often need to be tucked down, but that more often need to be pulled up, especially at the shoulders, to which, by design or neglect, they are always imperfectly adjusted. Hands upon which are imposed so many obligations of search and seizure inevitably lose control of other things, and a man invested, permanently or by chance, with the responsibility of picking up has to have a good deal of jumping-jack agility. He may, while possessing other talents in plenty, be inferior in this one, and come to recognize the fact. Or he may be resentful from the start. A handkerchief or a fan retrieved for the fourth or fifth time in one evening may begin to look damnable, and the woman owner to look like a disturber of the peace; in which case the perfect poetry of relationship must suffer a bruise.

The European husband probably knows what to do with a wife who is a shedder. He knows the sign language of the dropped thing when the dropping is an art, but he knows, too, that this art has not a promising place between husband and wife. The European husband may be versed in the theory that sustained romance implies sustained coquetry, but all husbands will be found to agree that a woman must choose, if not the kind of coquetry a man understands, at least the kind he likes. Naturally, the same compulsion applies to a man's technic. A husband with the wrong gestures of gallantry can be a severer trial than one without any. Brute simplicity is seldom a mere bore.

Women have died of it, but never in hysterics.

Although husbands hate to be told that being married is an art, they are, on the other hand, almost as much irritated at being reminded by a practical wife that it is a business. A man who wants to loll amid domestic comforts can be unreasonably impatient over the details of the effort by which these comforts are produced. He is willing to know, domestically, what time it is, but he doesn't wish to see or hear the wheels go round. This is the hazard of married continuity—the behind-the-scenes contact, the sustained attritions of intimacy by which we are sometimes on the verge of verifying William James' discovery that you can't have anything without having too much of it.

The American husband and wife can make a good public impression. At their best they publish well. The husband, as a husband, is seldom a strutter. The wife may lead rather too obviously on occasion, but unless the husband follows sheepishly instead of with the tolerant pride that is more characteristic, her effect of being advance agent and spokesman for the firm is never likely to be resented. Yet no success in public can greatly lighten those natural difficulties of private adjustment which have no nationality. A husband is more than a spectacle. Unless he is mated to a fashionable wife who is always somewhere else, he must be lived with. Few meet the test. American theories of equality and frankness serve to make the test harder. It is committing a triteness to remark that large considerations, such as Mr. Howells was examining when he decided that after so many centuries of effort man is imperfectly monogamous, are less poignantly present with the average woman's nerves than those minor but vital phases of the human animal that build the sum of Him. When she hears him sleep or clear his throat, or winces at sight of the soup in his mustache; when she sees his lips distorted by a reeking black cigar, watches



the ashes drop into the rugs and steels herself to tolerate the stale odor of tobacco; when she counts the crises of collar buttons and shaving, the tensions incidental to the 8.15, the fumbblings and forgetfulness of the man who is (by his own account) a miracle of efficiency in his business; when she detects in his complaint against circumstances the effect of a complaint against her—as if *she* had neglected to wind his watch; when she realizes his readiness to promote her to the office of unsalaried valet and to accept all her talents as natural features of feminine endowment, she may excusably doubt whether she is as much “spoiled” as Europe thinks she is.

The accusation that he spoils his woman is quaintly congenial to the American man. To feel lavish is to feel a kind of sultanic superiority. A man may bask in such emotions. He may feel as flattered as a German who is accused of having an iron hand. Traditionalists have no trouble in showing, to their own satisfaction, that American women really are spoiled, as much spoiled as the children. The American husband and father rises to say, “I did it,” perhaps with a good deal of complacence. Whether he goes on to explain that it is simply tradition that has received the blight will depend largely upon his interest in the subject. In any event, he is likely to be unrepentant. Smashed traditions cannot be put together again, and if it is too late to reintroduce the ogre role, it is too late to argue about it. If it is necessary to assume responsibility to justify his abdications, it is comforting to pretend that he prefers the results. He listens to the catalogue of the American wife’s sins. He has his own special catalogue of her peculiarities. He is foolishly annoyed, it may be, by profoundly little things. He may notice that at six paces the design in her veil looks like a hideous birthmark. He may wish that she had the sense to wear glasses when she needs them, that she had at least one pocket for her train

ticket, or that she wouldn’t eye him while he goes through twenty-one pockets after his own. He may review her sins, like the shrill talking, and her follies, like the red clay on the lips, and decide to call it a day. Since it is all part of his very thorough job of spoiling her, who shall presume to complain? He doesn’t know anything about art, but he knows what he likes.

In his crude way the American husband is an idealist. It would deeply please him if he might be accused of filling the bill—if She happened to admit or contend that he measured up.

I can remember being shocked and charmed by an American wife’s analysis of the reasons why, to attain a perfected sublimation, she should have three husbands, three concurrent husbands. Under such an arrangement the Business Husband who went forth would have a splendid freedom of action. He could concentrate on office efficiency, production, distribution, road or mail-order sales, the entertainment of buyers, late-in-the-evening club conferences, out-of-town conventions, and the showy wives of purchasing agents. With his activities fully accounted for under an intensive specialization, there would be no need to decode his answers to any conubial questionnaire. Where he had been, what he had done or had neglected, would involve no questions, would be of no more than academic importance so long as the returns were satisfactory. Any incidental uproar would mean simply more money. With his mind free to forget the furnace, he could start off in the morning on high gear, radiant with productive expectations. That the house roof had begun to leak would be to him a triviality concerning only the Handy Husband. The Handy Husband would be selected solely with regard to his versatility in tinkering. He would know all about hollyhocks and manure, laundry traps, hot-water bags, can openers, garbage pails, screw drivers, picture-frame wire, camphor chests, and Yale locks. He would know how to stop win-

dows from rattling, subdue the obstinacy of doors, turn mattresses, wire a lamp, air a rug, mend a doll, or rationalize a vacuum cleaner. For him the 8.15 would not exist. He would always have time. He would not have to synchronize with commerce. Nothing that he forgot would have to be explained by the insistent whisperings of a business conscience. His handy mind could expand. His imagination, kindled by a joyous freedom to putter, could rove through the uttermost recesses of house and yard, find pure poetry in potato knives, and attain a kind of religious fervor in polishing the piano. He could reach that destination of every liberal soul, unhampered individual expression. It would be a happiness to a wife, when not otherwise occupied, to watch him, to see him, dressed in becoming overalls, ecstatically concentrated, like an artist, in training up the peas, and to know that for every triumph of his genius she was the inspiration.

Then there would be, of course, the Lover Husband, a glorified Nice Man, tall, but not too tall, romantic, pleasantly emotional and, at times, perhaps even tempestuous, but a non-smoker, meticulous in the matter of clothes, though capable of a certain spirited casualness in wearing them. He would swear just enough to give him a manly effect, but his profanity would be refined as became a man who looked well in church. He would be a good dancer, bright at bridge, with the correct voice for reading aloud, a cheerful taste in ties, and a discerning interest in dinners. He would be moderately witty and a noise-

less sleeper. Being freed of the sordid distractions of the Business Husband, and having no diversity of duties such as must fall to the Handy Husband, he would always be right there. He would not want to read the financial page. He would not be ruined as a listener by any habit of wondering whether that noise meant trouble with the kitchen boiler again. He would, in fact, be no more subject to bedeviling distractions than either of the other husbands. Each, like an endowed specialist, would be, and could afford to be, winged by high purpose. In ensemble they would assure the perfect home. Automatically, the wife also would become perfect.

To the theory which I have here translated rather freely, the American husband makes an obvious response. With characteristic confidence he asks why he shouldn't be a candidate for the position of composite, why he shouldn't aspire to be a beautiful blend, to win the honors of all. Optimism could go no farther. I can fancy the wistful compassion of the Average Wife; her disenchantment, skeptically tolerant, with something of the maternal, as of one who has suffered all and chooses to go on. It would strike her as so like his cheek, this aspiration to be all things to one woman. It would remind her that a male creature can be ridiculous yet be capable at times of a certain magnificence; that one may smile at the graveside of Respect.

Yes, it is utterly true that the American wife respects the husband less than husbands used to be respected. But she seems, for some reason, really to like him more.

# The Happy Isles

A NOVEL—PART VII

BY BASIL KING

Author of *The Inner Shrine*, *The Wild Olive*, etc.

## XXXIII

THE day after Honey was buried Tom went to Mrs. Danker's to pay what was owing on the room rent, and take away his effects. The effects went into one small trunk which Mrs. Danker packed while Tom sat on the edge of the bed and listened to her comments. A little wiry woman, prim in the old New England way, she was tireless in work and conversation.

"He was a fine man, Mr. Honeybun was, and my land! he was fond of you. He'd try to hide it; but half an eye could see that he was that proud of you! He'd be awful up-and-coming while you was here, and make out that it didn't matter to him whether you was here or not; but once you was away—my land!—he'd be that down you'd think he'd never come up again. And one thing I could see as plain as plain: he was real determined that when you'd got up in the world he wasn't going to be a drag on you. He'd keep saying that you wasn't beholdin' to him for anything; and that he'd be glad when you could do without him so that he could get back again to his friends; but my land! half an eye could see."

During these first days Tom found the memory of a love as big as Honey's too poignant to dwell upon. He would dwell upon it later, when the self-reproach which so largely composed his grief had softened down. All he could do as yet was to curse himself for the obtuseness which had taken Honey

at the bluff of his words, when the tenderness behind his deeds should have been evident to anyone not a fool.

He couldn't bear to think of it. Not to think of it, he asked Mrs. Danker for news of Maisie. He had often wondered whether Maisie might not have told her aunt in confidence of her engagement to himself; and now he learned that she had not.

"I hardly ever hear from her; but another aunt of Maisie's writes to me now and then. Says that that drummer fellow is back again. I hope he'll keep away from her. He don't mean no good by her, and she goes daft over him every time he turns up. My land! how do we know he hasn't a wife somewhere else, when he goes off a year and more at a time, on his long business trips? This time he's been to Australia. It was to get her away from him that I asked her to spend that winter in Boston; but now that he's back—well, I'm sure I don't know."

Tom had not supposed that at the suggestion of a rival he would have felt a pang; and yet he felt one.

"Of course, there's some one; we know that. It must be some one too who's got plenty of money, because he's given her a di'mond ring that must be worth five hundred dollars, her other aunt tells me, if it's worth a cent. We know he makes big money, because he's got a fine position, and his family is one of the most high thought of in Nashua. That's part of the trouble. They're very religious and toney, so they wouldn't think Maisie a good