

## IN A LITERARY HOUSEHOLD

In the literary household of fiction and the drama, things are usually in a distressing enough condition. The husband, as you know, has a hacking cough, and the wife a dying baby, and they write in the intervals of these cares among the litter of the breakfast things. Occasionally a comic, but sympathetic, servant brings in an armful--"heaped up and brimming over"--of rejected MSS., for, in the dramatic life, it never rains but it pours. Instead of talking about editors in a bright and vigorous fashion, as the recipients of rejections are wont, the husband groans and covers his face with his hands, and the wife, leaving the touching little story she is writing--she posts this about 9 p.m., and it brings in a publisher and £100 or so before 10.30--comforts him by flopping suddenly over his shoulder. "Courage," she says, stroking his hyacinthine locks (whereas all real literary men are more or less grey or bald). Sometimes, as in *Our Flat*, comic tradesmen interrupt the course of true literature with their ignoble desire for cash payment, and sometimes, as in *Our Boys*, uncles come and weep at the infinite pathos of a bad breakfast egg. But it's always a very sordid, dusty, lump-in-your-throaty affair, and no doubt it conduces to mortality by deterring the young and impressionable from literary vices. As for its truth, that is another matter altogether.

Yet it must not be really imagined that a literary household is just

like any other. There is the brass paper-fastener, for instance. I have sometimes thought that Euphemia married me with an eye to these conveniences. She has two in her grey gloves, and one (with the head inked) in her boot in the place of a button. Others I suspect her of. Then she fastened the lamp shade together with them, and tried one day to introduce them instead of pearl buttons as efficient anchorage for cuffs and collars. And she made a new handle for the little drawer under the inkstand with one. Indeed, the literary household is held together, so to speak, by paper-fasteners, and how other people get along without them we are at a loss to imagine.

And another point, almost equally important, is that the husband is generally messing about at home. That is, indeed, to a superficial observer, one of the most remarkable characteristics of the literary household. Other husbands are cast out in the morning to raven for income and return to a home that is swept and garnished towards the end of the day; but the literary husband is ever in possession. His work must not be disturbed even when he is merely thinking. The study is consequently a kind of domestic cordite factory, and you are never certain when it may explode. The concussion of a dust-pan and brush may set it going, the sweeping of a carpet in the room upstairs. Then behold a haggard, brain-weary man, fierce and dishevelled, and full of shattered masterpiece--expostulating. Other houses have their day of cleaning out this room, and their day for cleaning out that; but in the literary household there is one uniform date for all such functions, and that is "to-morrow." So that Mrs. Mergles makes her purifying raids with

her heart in her mouth, and has acquired a way of leaving the pail and brush, or whatever artillery she has with her, in a manner that unavoidably engages the infuriated brute's attention and so covers her retreat.

It is a problem that has never been probably solved, this discord of order and orderly literary work. Possibly it might be done by making the literary person live elsewhere or preventing literary persons from having households. However it might be done, it is not done. This is a thing innocent girls exposed to the surreptitious proposals of literary men do not understand. They think it will be very fine to have photographs of themselves and their "cosy nooks" published in magazines, to illustrate the man's interviews, and the full horror of having this feral creature always about the house, and scarcely ever being able to do any little thing without his knowing it, is not brought properly home to them until escape is impossible.

And then there is the taint of "copy" everywhere. That is really the fundamental distinction. It is the misfortune of literary people, that they have to write about something. There is no reason, of course, why they should, but the thing is so. Consequently, they are always looking about them for something to write about. They cannot take a pure-minded interest in anything in earth or heaven. Their servant is no servant, but a character; their cat is a possible reservoir of humorous observation; they look out of window and see men as columns walking. Even the sanctity of their own hearts, their self-respect, their most

private emotions are disregarded. The wife is infected with the taint. Her private opinion of her husband she makes into a short story--forgets its origin and shows it him with pride--while the husband decants his heart-beats into occasional verse and minor poetry. It is amazing what a lot of latter-day literature consists of such breaches of confidence. And not simply latter-day literature.

The visitor is fortunate who leaves no marketable impression behind. The literary entertainers eye you over, as if they were dealers in a slave mart, and speculate on your uses. They try to think how you would do as a scoundrel, and mark your little turns of phrase and kinks of thought to that end. The innocent visitor bites his cake and talks about theatres, while the meditative person in the arm-chair may be in imagination stabbing him, or starving him on a desert island, or even--horrible to tell!--flinging him headlong into the arms of the young lady to the right and "covering her face with a thousand passionate kisses." A manuscript in the rough of Euphemia's, that I recently suppressed, was an absolutely scandalous example of this method of utilising one's acquaintances. Mrs. Harborough, who was indeed Euphemia's most confidential friend for six weeks and more, she had made to elope with Scrimgeour--as steady and honourable a man as we know, though unpleasant to Euphemia on account of his manner of holding his teacup. I believe there really was something--quite harmless, of course--between Mrs. Harborough and Scrimgeour, and that, imparted in confidence, had been touched up with vivid colour here and there and utilised freely. Scrimgeour is represented as always holding teacups in

his peculiar way, so that anyone would recognise him at once. Euphemia calls that character. Then Harborough, who is really on excellent terms with his wife, and, in spite of his quiet manner, a very generous and courageous fellow, is turned aside from his headlong pursuit of the fugitives across Wimbledon Common--they elope, by the bye, on Scrimgeour's tandem bicycle--by the fear of being hit by a golf ball. I pointed out to Euphemia that these things were calculated to lose us friends, and she promises to destroy the likeness; but I have no confidence in her promise. She will probably clap a violent auburn wig on Mrs. Harborough and make Scrimgeour squint and give Harborough a big beard. The point that she won't grasp is, that with that fatal facility for detail, which is one of the most indisputable proofs of woman's intellectual inferiority, she has reproduced endless remarks and mannerisms of these excellent people with more than photographic fidelity. But this is really a private trouble, though it illustrates very well the shameless way in which those who have the literary taint will bring to market their most intimate affairs.