

Chapter 10: Why Wives Leave Home

HELEN of TROY and Eve were sitting in the latter's garden waiting for the other members of the club to arrive. They had arranged to meet at Eve's house because Helen's classic bungalow was being done over for the winter season.

The two ladies sat on a broad terrace overlooking the Styx, its dark waters illuminated by the lights of many swiftly moving ferry steamers.

"What a change," Helen murmured, with a reminiscent smile, "from the days when Charon ferried us across, six or eight at a time, in his little boat."

"Rather." Eve lit a cigarette. "I was his very first passenger. My son Abel, who died before me as the result of a slight family disagreement, went to Heaven. It seemed ages,

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before anyone else arrived. Satan and I had the place all to ourselves.”

“Think of it! And now, I’m told, the lost souls are crowding in at the rate of a hundred thousand a day.”

“I know. People on Earth must be getting wickeder all the time, in spite of their many religions. Over two hundred different kinds in America alone, Satan tells me, each one offering to show you the only way to Heaven. But I notice they all agree on the way to Hell. Amazing, isn’t it? The sheep of one particular flock actually deny that the sheep of another will ever reach the Pearly Gates, but the goats are all consigned to the same Bottomless Pit. Well, at least it’s democratic.”

“I don’t believe it is because people are wickeder that our population is growing so rapidly,” Helen replied. “Don’t forget there are a great many more of them.”

“That may explain it, of course. But whatever the reason, poor Charon certainly has his hands full. There’s some talk, I hear, of building a bridge to take care of the traffic. Luckily it’s all one way. Nobody ever goes back.”

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“Yes. Hell is like any other trouble, in that respect. Easy to get into but mighty hard to get out of. Your little French maid has discovered that. What did she say when you told her Satan had disapproved our petition to the Throne?”

“She said there was no justice whatever in punishing a woman for giving herself to a man through love, and letting *him* off with a mere reprimand just because he had sacrificed his life for his country.”

“I quite agree with her,” Helen said. “But having been raised a pagan I have never been quite able to understand the doctrine of Original Sin. Who started the idea, anyway? Not Satan I’m sure. He’s far too broad-minded.”

“Oh, no. Satan didn’t originate it. He’s a perfect devil, at heart. But he’s obliged to carry it out, in order to hold his position. He told me once, in confidence, that a certain rather widely known Jewish friend of his, who claims to be in complete charge of the Universe, hit upon the scheme in order to make people get married and work. The common people, of course. It was never intended for the rich and powerful, as

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Solomon and David, to say nothing of millions of other important persons, both in and out of the church, have since proved. But the blame for starting that particular kind of sinning was placed on poor Adam, and while I'd never admit as much to him, he really hadn't a thing to do with it. The whole affair has always been something of a mystery to me. Adam and I were put in the Garden with certain very natural impulses. When we exercised them, we were punished. If we hadn't, I suppose we might have been there yet."

"In which case," Helen laughed, "there never would have been a little Cain nor Abel, nor anybody else in the world but just Adam and yourself. Think what a waste of good material *that* would have been! Remembering the many delightful hours I spent on Earth with my husband Menelaus, to say nothing of Paris and—er—others, I personally feel, my dear Eve, that you deserve some kind of a monument for your services."

"Let Hell be my monument," Eve smiled. "I'll take the blame for it. Here come the rest of the girls." She rose. "I see Delilah is wear-

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ing a new Paris gown. Don't you think she is extremely smart?"

"In a cheap, rather vulgar way," Helen sniffed. "I tolerate her, my dear, but naturally, as the daughter of one king and the wife of another I haven't much in common with a woman of her profession."

"Isn't that splitting hairs, my love? All women have one thing in common, at least. That's why most of us are here. And even though your father was a king and Delilah's only a camel driver you are both, like all the rest of your sex, just daughters of Eve." She turned to her other guests. "It's much too warm, my dears," she smiled, "to bother about minutes and things like that. Suppose we just omit formalities, and let Helen go ahead and tell us why wives leave home."

"Is there any particular reason?" asked Scheherazade quietly, "other than their husbands?"

"No husband could do anything," declared Mrs. Potiphar grimly, "to make me leave home, if I didn't want to."

"It isn't what they do, but what they don't

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do, in most cases," Helen said, "that makes all the trouble. Take the case of my husband Menelaus, for instance. Good-looking, kind-hearted, rich. I suppose I ought to have been very happy with him. But when the novelty of being married wore off, I found life dull and uninteresting."

"I don't see how you could have been much better situated," said Thais. "The wife of a celebrated king——"

"Greek kingdoms in those days, my dear, weren't much to boast about," Helen replied. "Every village chief called himself a king. The woods were, literally speaking, full of them. Menelaus was rather better off than most, but even so our royal palace was just a nice big farmhouse, with a stone wall around it to keep out cattle and other thieves.

"Menelaus made the usual mistake of husbands. He thought that while he was having an amusing time gadding about the country, paying visits to the neighboring kings, I should be content to stay quietly at home and look after the farm. I did my best, but somehow I failed to make a success of it. As soon as I took

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charge, the goats and sheep all began to develop the most amazingly romantic dispositions, the bullocks refused to work, and even the hens, from the way they stopped laying eggs, had apparently taken up birth control. My mere presence seemed to disorganize the whole place.

“Being of a romantic nature myself, by the third summer I was bored. So I asked Menelaus to take me to the seashore. Our home, you know, was up in the Spartan hills.

“My husband, however, did not think much of the idea. He had a lot of wild boar hunting to do that season, he said, and was thinking of going on a journey to Crete.

“‘I have made myself the loveliest bathing suit,’ I told him, ‘from a pattern a friend in Athens has just sent me. I’ll put it on and show it to you, if you like.’ So I did. Menelaus gave me a gloomy look.

“‘Bathing is dangerous business,’ he grumbled. ‘You might be drowned.’

“‘But, darling,’ I told him, ‘I have no idea of going into the water.’

“‘Then why the suit?’

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“ ‘I thought I ought to wear something. Of course, if you object——’

“ ‘He became even more gloomy, when I began to take it off, but he didn’t say anything.

“ ‘Don’t you like my costume?’ I asked. It was a tremendously smart little thing, very low, above, and very high, below.

“ ‘It has its good points,’ he replied, ‘but so has a tabloid. And while it may insure you a great deal of attention, I prefer a policy which will keep you more fully covered.’

“ ‘It is very nice, darling,’ I said, ‘that you have such a keen sense of humor, but just the same this is the kind of suit everybody is wearing, and has the merit of being at the same time very economical, since I made it myself out of an old lace bureau scarf. That should appeal to you, for you are always complaining about the way I spend money. Although Aphrodite knows I try the very best I can to make both ends meet.’

“ ‘You have certainly succeeded this time,’ Menelaus remarked, ‘and they meet in a most charming vicinity. Thank the gods there is no public bathing beach within forty miles of the

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palace, or you would be arrested for obstructing traffic.'

" 'That is just like a man,' I told him. 'I had hoped that in a suit like this you would be proud of me.'

" 'I am, my dear—in private,' he said, kicking the door shut as he heard one of the servants in the hall. 'I should be proud of you in even less. But that is no reason why I should share my feelings with the public. And the truth is that you are not half so much concerned with my pride in you as you are with your pride in yourself. Every woman with a good figure—and I admit, my dear, that yours is the best in Greece—likes to show it off.'

" 'Well,' I remarked, 'beauty was never born to blush unseen.'

" 'That is true,' he said, 'although I know perfectly well that I am the only one who will do any blushing. But after all, I *am* your husband, and one of the chief, I may say the few, privileges a husband enjoys is that which gives him the right to be the sole admirer of his wife's more intimate charms.'

"I considered that a very selfish view-

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point, and said so, but Menelaus did not agree.

“‘Values in life, my dear,’ he remarked solemnly, ‘are based almost entirely on possession of something the other fellow hasn’t got. Take that emerald cup, for instance, which my brother Agamemnon brought me back from Egypt last year. It is a possession worthy of a king. Yet if every slave in Sparta had one like it, I should throw the thing in the dust heap. It is much the same with women, my dear. They decrease in value, the more common they become. I trust you see the point.’

“When Menelaus began to talk that way I found myself disliking him.

“‘So you refuse to take me to the seashore,’ I said.

“‘Impossible, darling,’ he told me. ‘This season. I really have important business in Crete.’

“‘Then I will go alone,’ I told him. I was very angry, but Menelaus only laughed.

“‘Whatever you do, my dear,’ he said unpleasantly, ‘I feel sure you will not do it alone. Such a performance would fail to interest you. In any case, I am expecting the son of King



*"Don't forget," remarked Menelaus, "that Paris has a charming wife in Troy."
"I shall do my best," said Helen, "to make him feel at home."*

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Priam of Troy, who is a close personal enemy of mine, to make us a visit some time this month, and if I should happen to be away, it will be your duty, as my wife, to dispense the customary hospitality.'

"'Is he young?' I asked.

"'He is. But do not let that upset you. He has a charming wife in Troy.'

"'I shall do my best,' I said, 'to make him feel at home.'

"Menelaus took his best broadsword out of the cupboard at that, and began to feel its edge.

"'I think I will have Orestes turn the grindstone for me for a while,' he remarked. 'This sword has been dull ever since I killed those two bandits last month.'

"The next night Paris arrived, just as we were sitting down to supper. My very first look finished him. Love at first sight, he told me later on."

Sappho glanced up from the pad on which she had been scribbling the opening lines of a new poem.

"That is one question which has always puzzled me," she said. "How can there be any

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such thing as love at first sight if love is blind?"

"I've never thought of it in just that way before," Helen laughed, "but perhaps it is that first look which does the damage. After that, love would have to be blind, in most cases, or it couldn't exist at all.

"With Paris and myself, however, it was different. He was the handsomest man I ever saw. Even Menelaus was quite taken with him, at first, and kept asking him questions about Troy.

"'It's a great little town,' Paris said, 'and our bathing beach is the finest on the Mediterranean. You ought to see the costumes! These one-piece suits the girls are wearing this season are a sight for the gods. My dear Menelaus, I do not wish to seem personal, but have you ever thought that your wife would look very well in a one-piece bathing suit?'

"'I've not only thought it,' Menelaus answered, choking a bit over his wine, 'but I have seen it.'

"'Then you have a beach hereabouts?' Paris went on hopefully.

"'No. The nearest one is forty miles away and the roads are terrible.'

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“‘We might try the river,’ Paris suggested.

“‘I shouldn’t advise it,’ Menelaus grumbled. ‘It’s full of snakes.’ Which settled the bathing question then and there.

“But Paris wasn’t a man to be easily discouraged. He spent most of the next day, while Menelaus was packing up for his trip to Crete, telling me what wonderful eyes I had, and how misunderstood he was, at home. It annoyed Menelaus frightfully, especially when I remarked that Paris was the most attractive man I had ever met and I hoped to persuade him to stay with us for a couple of months at least.

“‘I don’t care for his attentions to you,’ my husband said. ‘You had better do something to stop them.’

“‘I might marry him,’ I laughed. ‘That usually proves effective.’

“‘If you mean by that remark,’ Menelaus growled, giving me a nasty look, ‘that you think I should be more attentive, I will give up this trip to Crete.’

“‘Not for worlds,’ I told him. ‘You would spend all the rest of the summer reminding me of it.’

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"When he left, next day, he spoke rather pointedly to Paris.

"'As a guest in my house,' he said, 'your person is sacred, so long as you do not take advantage of my hospitality. See that when you go, you leave only pleasant memories behind you.'

"'I promise you,' Paris replied, giving me a wink, 'that I shall leave nothing else.' So as soon as we were alone he told me to pack up my clothes, and the family jewels and silver, and have the best pieces of furniture crated.

"'I am going to take you to Troy,' he said. 'You are wasted here on this farm.'

"'It has been the dream of my life, Paris darling,' I told him, 'to go to the seashore, but have you counted the cost?'

"'I am your lover, not a mathematician,' he laughed. 'And besides, I have my private yacht.'

"'Very well. I will go with you,' I said. 'But you seem to have forgotten your wife.'

"Paris did not appear at all disturbed.

"'I admit that she had escaped my mind for the moment,' he went on, 'but I have always

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considered it a man's duty to forget his past mistakes. I am sure my father and mother will adore you. As for my fifty brothers, they will welcome you with open arms.'

"'Enough,' I murmured. 'When do we start?'

"'As matters now stand,' Paris whispered, putting his arm around me, 'we should start at once. I am of a hasty disposition, and do not like to put things off. But I still remember that the rules of hospitality forbid me to give way to my feelings beneath your husband's roof.'

"'If you are as particular as all that, darling,' I told him, 'we might step out into the garden. I see there is a gorgeous moon.'"

"How romantic!" Lucrezia Borgia breathed softly. "There is something about the moonlight I never could resist. I nearly lost a perfectly good sweetheart one night in Florence on account of it. We had no idea the moon was shining so brightly, until my husband came into the garden. I was obliged to quiet his suspicions with a whiff of *eau de cologne*."

"Really," remarked Helen, with her golden

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laugh. "I never went in for murders myself. There were always so many people about ready to commit them for me. Take Paris and his family, for instance, to say nothing of the entire Trojan army. They worshiped me. When they heard that my husband and the rest of the kings of Greece were coming with a thousand ships to rescue me, they didn't suggest that Paris and I should move on to some less prominent location. Not at all. They said if the Greeks came they would give them a warm welcome, and that Troy was full of splendid opportunities in the restaurant business. The Trojans certainly treated me well, I'll say that for them."

"Why shouldn't they have been nice to you?" Queen Scheherazade remarked. "It was Paris's fault that you left your husband."

"Not at all, my dear. I made him do it."

"Do you mean to say that you actually forced him to run off with you?" asked Salome.

"It wasn't necessary. I merely said I was sick of my dull domestic grind. Paris insisted on curing me."

"I have always heard," Eve remarked slyly, "that an apple a day keeps the doctor away."

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“Exactly,” Helen laughed. “But I can’t say that Priam and the rest of the family looked on me in quite so romantic a way. They couldn’t, what with my bringing a ten years’ war on them and everything.

“It was a very nice war. I used to watch it every day from a reserved seat on the battlements. But when Paris and Hector and the rest of my friends got killed, I somehow lost interest in it.

“Almost every day my husband Menelaus would drive around the walls in his chariot, urging the Greeks to keep up the fight, but I could see they were bored. It was all very well to help another man collect his wife but they had begun to think it was about time they got back to their own. In ten years, almost anything might happen. As it was, a lot of them stayed away too long.

“So what with everybody being tired of the war, and wanting to get home, I decided it was my duty to go back to Menelaus at once. I could see that the poor fellow was unhappy. So I sent him word that if he would let bygones be bygones, and take me back to Sparta with him

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and no questions asked, I would slip quietly downstairs the first dark night and open the city gates. He agreed, and that put an end to the struggle."

"But," Mrs. Potiphar objected, "I have always understood the Greeks got in by building a wooden horse."

Helen glanced quickly about the room.

"Camouflage, my dear," she whispered. "One of the war's great mysteries. But now the truth can be told. There never was any wooden horse. When Menelaus delivered my message to the other Greek leaders, Ulysses, who married my cousin Penelope, and was the smartest of the lot, said it would never do to have people think that I, the incomparable Helen, wife of King Menelaus, had proved a traitor to my Trojan friends by opening the gates of the city, after the way they had fought for me for ten years. It wouldn't look well, in history, he said, and would reflect discredit on the family. So he invented the story about the wooden horse and got his friend Homer, who was the official observer for the Greeks, to put it in his account of the war.

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"It was a silly yarn, of course. The Trojans were much too clever to be taken in by any such device. But the public believed it, which saved my reputation at home, with no one any the worse off. Even the Trojans were glad the struggle was over."

As Thais glanced at Helen with a cynical smile, a gaunt individual, wearing the full dress uniform of an admiral in the Imperial Satanic Navy, stepped to the terrace, holding a frightened figure by the arm.

"Charon!" Eve exclaimed. "And Marie! What's wrong?"

The old sea-dog spat accurately in the direction of a cactus bush and hitched up his trousers.

"This young woman, who claims to be your maid, ma'am," he growled, "has just been caught trying to escape from Hell as a stowaway on one of my boats. When His Majesty hears of it he'll be boiling. Shouldn't be surprised if he'd send her to the Pit at once."

Eve went up to the old salt and threw her arms about his neck.

"Now, Admiral," she murmured, "you know how fond I've always been of you. There is

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something about a uniform I simply can't resist. Promise me you won't say anything to Satan about the matter and I'll——”

“My duty, ma'am,” Charon objected, struggling to avoid Eve's caresses. But he seemed to struggle more and more weakly.

“Run along into the house, girls,” Eve called sweetly over her shoulder. “And take Marie with you. There is something I wish to discuss with the Admiral in private.”

When she joined the others, half an hour later, there was a twinkle in her eyes.

“He isn't going to report it,” she said.

“How did you manage,” Delilah asked, “to get around him?”

“Did you ever know a sailor yet, from Noah down,” smiled Eve, “who could resist the ladies? I appealed to his manhood, of course, to save a lady in distress. Poor Marie. She would probably have been boiled alive.”