

The Mental Hazard

—By Clarence Budington Kelland
One of the Series of Evening Public Ledger Original Short Stories on Married Life by the Best American Fiction Writers

"I'M BEGINNING to think," said MacDonald Kent to his wife, "that marriage is like golf—full of mental hazards."

"I presume," said Jane icily, "that you're trying to say something disagreeable."

"I'm trying to be pleasant. I'm trying to get dressed and out of this room without a row." His voice gradually lifted with his irritation. "Thus," he finished, "setting a world's record."

Jane turned to look out of the window, and then she began to hum. The sound of her humming bored into her husband's ears maddeningly. He was a reasonable man being; he knew nothing had been done or said which warranted either of them in giving way to anger and the usual morning quarrel, but he could feel it coming on. There was an inevitability about these morning rows, a silly inevitability. Morning after morning he had arisen with good resolutions, and so, he knew, had his wife—but the result was always the same.

"Mental hazard," he told himself. "Like driving a golf ball over the pond on the sixth hole. You know you're going to smash it into the water, and you do." He turned to Jane with elaborate self-expression and painstaking patience.

"I don't want to be disagreeable, God knows," he said. "I don't want to start the day with a rumpus, but—"

"But you always do," she said provocatively.

He compressed his lips and stared at her, determined to control his tongue. "Honestly, Jane," he said, "I wasn't trying to say anything disagreeable—that about mental hazards. What I meant was that you can't play golf without believing you can make your shots—and that's just like marriage. We're off our game. We're always topping our irons or hitting out of bounds. Purely mental. We could play the game as well as we did six or seven years ago if we just thought so."

"I hadn't lived with you ten years seven years ago," Jane said with finality.

"God send you're not living with me ten years hence," he said, his anger suddenly ablaze.

"I wouldn't be living with you tomorrow," she answered, "if there was any way out. Oh, why haven't I money of my own? Why can't I be independent of you?"

"Well," he said shortly, "you haven't and you can't—and there are the kids, so all we can do is make the best of it."

and, consequently, after all these years, Jane and MacDonald had time to think about themselves.

Jane was not the sort of person to think and analyze, but she felt. Her emotions were headstrong and she was undiplomatically frank in describing them. She knew that some essential elements had gone out of their marriage some element she craved. With something of fear she realized that she did not love MacDonald. The urge which had swept her into marriage with him, and made their first years together very sweet and wonderful, had vanished. This discovery was followed by a period of active revolt. She worked herself into a state of mind in which she believed her husband had become actually repulsive to her, and in her headstrong way, she told him in a storm of tears.

MacDonald stood aghast. That such a thing could have happened to him was unbelievable. It was incredible until he sorted over his own feelings toward his wife and found that he had reached a state of indifference toward her. The glow was gone forever.

They had reached a point which every married couple must reach—the moment of readjustment when they must rebuild upon a new foundation or see their structure swept away by the rising storm. They seemed unable to locate a stable foundation upon which to lay a new cornerstone.

MacDonald considered the practical side of the question. The thing, he told himself, was a fact. Apparently it could not be mended, so there was nothing to do but try to make the best of it. The children made any other course impossible, and finances made this course necessary. It was all he could do to support one establishment in comfort; therefore, even had he been willing to do so, he could not have allowed Jane to leave him as she seemed to wish to do. He had not the money to allow her to live separately in independent dependence.

Jane's reactions, however, were purely emotional. She no longer loved MacDonald and to love seemed to her the one essential to life—to love and to be loved. She awoke bitterly to the realization that the love which she loved had not been present in their marriage for years. She craved the warmth of love, remembering how she had borne along blindly upon a warm rushing wave of love during the first years of her married life. She wanted that again, wanted it to continue. The idea of the commonplace was abhorrent to her; the thought of continuing to live with MacDonald as his wife was repulsive. She was young, vivid, lovelier even than she had been ten years ago—and she felt somehow that her loveliness and her life were going to waste; that she was being cruelly, bitterly cheated.

Which, if you stop to think of it, is a dangerously fertile state of mind.



The husband paused, not intending to spy, and the man's voice came to his ears—John Firth was making love to his wife

"she'll stick. If not, she'll go." And there he rested, hoping for the best.

These things happened in those unpleasant days of nineteen hundred and twenty, when business was ill with that epidemic which decimated the financial population, as the flu had decimated the human population of the country, and now, when MacDonald's mind and heart were full of the danger which threatened his home, his business took sick of it, and lay at the point of death. He dealt it silks, and everybody knows what happened to silk in that unhappy year.

For weeks at a time his presence was required in the city day and night. For weeks at a stretch he carried his load of worry into his home after midnight, there to lay tossing, brain veiled almost to madness, unable to sleep. It was during these weeks of what Jane was pleased to call neglect that her inchoate affair with John Firth began to assume clear outlines. He was bringing into her life again that thing she craved—romance, the eagerness of those first days of her marriage. He loved her. Vehemently he told her of his love, and she delighted in the stirring of it—and then as must happen, being in love with love, she imagined herself in love with Firth. Which is exactly as bad as the real thing. Or perhaps it is the same thing. And, too, there was the element of adventure, secrecy, apprehension.

Love flowers best in such conditions. Here lies the chief defect of marriage—ease of access to the loved one. There are no difficulties, no obstacles. If some method could be invented whereby a husband would incur risk in seeing his wife, or the wife have to plan and evade and dare in order to see her husband, divorce would disappear from the earth.

For weeks now Jane had been holding Firth at arms' length, reluctantly and more reluctantly, with difficulty and with greater difficulty. She was happy, secretly, clandestinely happy, thrilled, poised on the brink of the precipice.

Of a Friday night MacDonald took an earlier train than usual, arriving at his home shortly after 10 o'clock. He was at the end of his rope. The worst had happened. He was smashed, bent down, obliterated. As he alighted from the train he was just where he had started fifteen years ago—no, he was in worse case than he had been then. Fifteen years ago he had dared to embark in business for himself. He had possessed youth and hope, and about his neck was no millstone of responsibility. He could make or break and no damage done to any but himself. But it was a different matter tonight. When his creditors finished with him he would not have two nickels to jingle together. On the house toward which he walked so slowly and heavily that the world was being ground. He dreaded the ordeal of breaking the news to Jane.

Usually he rode home in a jitney—but that he walked to save the chauffeur. He took the short cut through a vacant lot to his back door. The soft lawn deadened his footsteps as he rounded the house to the low porch, and he arrived unheard. So lost was he in his apprehension of the coming interview with his wife that he was unconscious of his surroundings until he stood at the corner of the porch. Then the sound of a man's voice arrested him. He paused, not intending to spy, and the man's words came to his ears, veiled as they were by the night.

"John Firth was making love to his wife," he heard.

MacDonald hesitated. He did not think clearly; he was incapable of sharp decision.

"You must love me," he heard Firth say. "You must. You must. I can't get along without you, Jane. Jane—"

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she had her friends, both men and women, but John saw with alarm her men friends were narrowing down to one. She goit with John Firth. John Firth took tea with her frequently.

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was in Jane a headstrong, rebellious authority sought to restrain her. MacDonald knew his interference would only make a bad matter worse.

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keep us apart if we love. It's a sin to keep up apart."

"—Oh, let me think, let me think," said Jane.

"Think! You've had time for thinking. Weeks and months of it. You must know. You do know. Oh, Jane, nobody ever loved you as I do."

"It's sweet to be loved," said Jane. But—Oh, a woman has so much to think of."

"Just think of you and me—of the happiness we have a right to have. Tell me, Jane, tell me you love me."

"Not now, John," MacDonald heard his wife say, "not tonight. Let me have just this night to think. Tomorrow I'll tell you—how it is to be."

"You'll tell me you love me? You'll tell me you will go away with me?"

Jane paused, while MacDonald waited dumbly, unable to speak, unable to move. "I—I hope so," she said softly.

MacDONALD turned slowly. Stealthily he walked away. He did not want to be seen or heard. He wanted to get away and to face this new disaster, to stare into its eyes and to demand its meaning. He tramped. Hour after hour he tramped, his head seething with incoherent thoughts. . . . So he had had lost everything, business, wife, home—all in one debacle! He tried to realize it, to peer ahead and to picture his future. He could not. . . . He groped for some plan to follow, for some action to take—but there was no light to follow, only the murky of bewilderment. . . . One thing he knew, one fact stood out. He did not want to lose his wife and his home. Perhaps his wife might be a better wife and his home a happier home—but they were his and he wanted them. The thought of losing what lay yonder was intolerable to him.

There were savage thoughts, too, violent thoughts, but he fought them down. Somehow he did not blame Firth, and he could not blame his wife. Circumstances, cursed circumstances, were at fault. It was just the ways things had happened. . . . And then, as dawn broke over the eastern treetops, fatalism came to his succor.

"I'm at my blackest hour," he said to himself. "I'm broke. . . . If she's any good she'll stick by me. . . . If she leaves me at a time like this she's better gone."

So once again he turned his footsteps toward his home. The house was still as he admitted himself and mounted the stairs to the room which was his wife's and his own. He opened the door. Jane heard the sound of it closing and sat up startled.

"Oh, MacDonald," she said, and then she sat more erect and stared at him, at his gloomy, despairing eyes, at his weary, haggard face. "What time is it?" she asked.

"Nearly five."

"What—what is the matter, MacDonald? Where have you been all night?"

"Walking," he said; "walking."

"Walking?" alarm was in her voice. "What has happened? What's the matter?"

He paused. Which calamity should he announce first? Something, not reason, told him there was but one calamity to announce. About his discomposure of the night he would say nothing. He could not bring himself to speak of it, and in that moment he knew that whatever came, whatever should be the outcome, he could never tell her what he had done. It must be buried, buried in his heart, never to be at hand.

"I'm broke," he said baldly. . . . "Broke? What do you mean?" "That the business has gone up the spout. I've lost everything. Even this house has gone. We'll have to get out of it. I haven't a cent in the world. It's—"

She stared at him wide-eyed, and strangely enough the thought that filled her mind was not of the money lost, of comforts departed, of possible poverty stricken here. . . . She drew him to her, and she kissed him. "What time is it?" she asked.

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They went up the stairs together and searched, first Pinto's flat, and then the floor, higher and higher, until they found the door and waited, in case she tries to get out," said the colonel.

He returned to the room with the two men, and they looked at one another in blank astonishment.

"Have you any idea what's happened, Crews?" asked the colonel suspiciously.

"No idea in the world," said Crews. "But she went downstairs," said the colonel; "I heard her alarm clock."

"The alarm?" questioned Crews.

"I've got a buzzer under one of the treads of the stairs," said the colonel; "it's full to know when people are coming up. It went off about twenty seconds after she left."

Ten minutes passed, and Selby returned to say that the policeman had been making inquiries as to whom the car belonged.

"You'd better get it away," said the colonel, "and send away your man."

"They've gone," said the other. "I wasn't taking any risks."

He disappeared to carry out the colonel's instructions, and they heard the whine of the moving car.

Boundary unlocked a cabinet and took out a full decanter of whisky. Without a word he poured three stiff doses into as many glasses and filled them with soda. Each man was thinking, and thinking after his own interests.

Boundary looked up and saw the danger which Pinto had thrown. It was still bedded in the wall.

"It isn't enough that I should have Jack O' Judgment messing my room about," he said, "but you must do something to the same wall! Pull it out and don't let me see it again, Pinto."

The Portuguese smiled sheepishly, walked to the wall and gripped the handle. Evidently the point had emboldened him. He pulled and the wall moved. He pulled again, exerting all his strength, and this time succeeded in extracting not only the knife but a large portion of the plaster and a strip of the wall paper.

"You fool!" said the colonel angrily. "See that you have done! Jumping Moses!"

He walked to the wall and stared, for some dislignment of plaster and paper had revealed three round, black discs, set flush with the plaster and only separated from the room by the wall-paper, which had been stripped.

THE first sharpness of realization became somewhat dulled. Life continued. The household remained intact, but always it perched upon the brink of disaster. Everything was commonplace, habit, humdrum. It was maddening, wearing, a constant source of irritation. Bickerings were inevitable.

MacDonald settled down grimly to the task of holding his family together, of holding his wife. He was essentially fair-minded. He perceived, regretted, and tried to make the best of it—but it was not easy. A certain restlessness of disposition added to the difficulties. As for Jane, she went along thinking of herself, holding herself more or less in suspense, craving herself more or less the return of that which had vanished forever.

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JACK O' JUDGMENT : By Edgar Wallace

WITH that he jerked on his coat and flung out of the room to eat a breakfast which had become flavorless for him as it had for his wife. Words, words, words. He knew, as she knew, that what had passed between them was really meaningless, was nothing but sound and irritation. Both knew that for the most part they lived amicably, comfortably—and sincerely wanted to live together in peace and enjoyment. . . . Then why? Why these quarrels so easily lighted? Why this exasperation with each other, this shortness of patience, this painstaking search for cause of affront? MacDonald could find no answer to his questions.

Their marriage had stretched over eleven years, and there were two children, nine and seven years old. Neither MacDonald nor his wife gave consideration to the fact that the ages of their children might have much to do with the steadily increasing inclemency of their life together. The fact of the matter was that the children had passed babyhood in safety. They were in school; no longer were they monopolizing the attention of their parents,

WHO'S WHO IN THE STORY

COLONEL DAN BOUNDARY, fat, distinguished but unbecomingly clever. He is a retired army officer and a member of the House of Commons. He is a member of the House of Commons.

PINTO, a thin, dark man about town, forces his attentions on an actress, who is a member of the House of Commons.

MAISIE WHITE, daughter of Selby White, one of the gang who wishes to retire. She is a member of the House of Commons.

LOLLIE MARRI, a daffodil but clever girl who sits as a "bump" of the black-magic.

"SWELL" CREWE, once a gentleman, now a crook.

"You'll pay for that," he said breathlessly, but Selby Crews had walked to the girl and laid his hand on her shoulder.

"Lollie," he said, "I'm believing you, and I think the colonel is, too. If you're going out of the country, why I'll say good luck to you. You've made a very wise decision, and one which we shall all make—some of us perhaps too late."

"Wait a moment," said the colonel. He exchanged a glance with Selby, and the man slipped quietly from the room. "Before we do any of that fare-thee-well stuff I've got a few words to say to you, Lollie. I'm with Crews. I think it is time you went out of the country, but you're going out my way."

"But do you mean?" she asked.

"Her hand clutched Selby Crews' sleeve.

"You're going out my way," said the colonel, "and I swear no harm will come to you. You're leaving tonight."

"But how?" she asked, "and where?"

"Selby will tell you. You'll meet him downstairs. Now be a sensible girl and do as I tell you. Selby will go with you and see you safe. We made all preparations for your departure tonight."

"What's this, colonel?" asked Crews.

"You're out of it," said the colonel savagely. "I'm running this show myself. If you want to join Lollie later, why you can. For the present she's going just where I want her to go and in the way I have planned."

"He held out his hand to the girl and she took it.

"Good-by and good luck, Lollie!" he said.

"But can't I go back to my rooms?" she asked.

"Do as I tell you," he said shortly. She stood at the door, and for a moment her eyes met Crews' and he moved toward her.

"Wait," the colonel gripped his arm. "Good-by, Lollie," and the door shut on the girl.

"Let me go," said Crews between his teeth. "If she trusts you, I don't. This is some trick of that dirty half-breed!"

With a snarl of rage Pinto whipped his ever-ready knife from his hip pocket and flung it. It was the colonel who drew Crews aside, or that moment would have been his last. The knife whizzed past and was buried almost to the hilt in the wall. The colonel broke the tense silence which followed.

"Pinto," he said in his silkiest voice, "if you ever want to know what it feels like to be a dead man just repeat that performance, will you? Then his rage burst forth. "I'll shoot either of

you if you play the fool in front of me again. You dirty little pickpockets that I've taken from the gutter! You miserable little sneak thieves!"

He let loose a flood of abuse that made even Crews wince.

"Now sit down, both of you," he finished up, out of breath.

He went to the window and looked out. The car which he had hired for the occasion was still standing at the door, and he distinguished Selby talking to the chauffeur.

"Listen, you," he said, "and especially you, Crews. You're too trusting with these females. Maybe Lollie's speaking the truth, but it is just as likely she's lying. I'm not going to take your corroboration, you know, Crews," he said. "We've got to depend on her word. There's nobody else can speak for her, is there?"

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Clarence Budington Kelland started writing by work on a newspaper because he "wanted to get three square meals a day." He had been on the staff of the Detroit News for several years. Then he edited the American Boy. He comes originally from Michigan, but he has lived in Vermont and Maine, and has owned lumber camps in both States. At one time he and his brother owned and ran a mill for the manufacture of clothes pins. He knows the Northwest and the Maine woods; the business of big industries, and he knows everyday people, too. His way they think and feel and love. His attitude is big and human and typically American.

His first story to bring him into prominence was "Sudden Jim." Since then he has been a name to conjure with. "The Mental Hazard," written purposely for this series of married life stories, shows the infinite fitness of his treatment of the marriage theme.

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