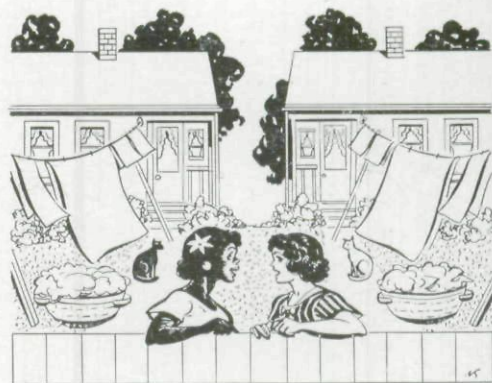


Katharine M. Byrne

Happy Little Wives and Mothers



THE HAPPY LITTLE WIFE AND MOTHER is really busy these days, and she is making my life no easier. You cannot turn many pages of a Catholic magazine without running into the brave and cheerful story of her life. Her days are filled with worthy projects at home and abroad, and the modest recital of her successes ("Of course, I can't do very much as I have eight children under six years of age") must have some good purpose in mind. Perhaps she rushes into print as an encouragement to the spiritually-lagging or hollering-at-the-kids type of female. That a quite opposite effect may follow is certainly no fault of hers.

THE LIFE BEAUTIFUL

Most of us females of a lower order have a hard enough time learning to live with the lady in the *House Gracious* ads. You know the one. She sits smiling on her sun-drenched patio reading *House Gracious*. In the out-of-doors recreation area, some distance removed, her two roguish children ("We will raise a family, a boy for you, a girl for me") are engaged in constructive and compatible play. Or she may be sitting at a desk in the meal-planning area of her kitchen, her gourmet cookbook at her fingertips, a pink telephone at her elbow. No child has ever hurled a bowl of Pablum at these walls, nor is this gleaming floor ever awash with spilled Wheaties.

Poor banished children of Eve, we look with longing at all the Things which seem to fill her life so nicely. Only after a spiritual struggle which may last for years do we learn to rise above this girl, and to reject her way of life as false, materialistic and secular. Besides, we tell ourselves, she couldn't be that happy. Maybe she has a mean mother-in-law.

But we are faced at times with a different and more difficult problem. There is another Happy Little Wife and Mother who sits on no sun-drenched patio. She lives, usually, in a huge lovable wreck of a house, distracted by few modern conveniences. In some cases her

numerous brood may be tucked into a three-room apartment. No matter. Cheerful as a well-worn cliché, she makes out nobly. While you pale at the thought of 48 hours with a non-operating Bendix, she wouldn't mind beating the bluejeans on rocks.

Her children are good. Her curly-headed two-year-old folds dimpled hands in prayer. Yours has just sunk savage teeth into the arm of her little brother, and followed up his screams with a soothing kiss. No such ambivalent behavior ruffles the spiritual calm of her household.

You may think you are doing a fair job in human relations, but your efforts never work out quite as beautifully as hers. If she is good to the little boy nobody in the neighborhood likes, he blossoms under her kindly ministrations, is diverted from his objectionable hobby (stealing small articles from the local dime store), and now writes her grateful letters from a monastery.

There was a little boy who hung around your swings and sandbox one summer. Nobody knew where he lived, and the other children weren't very kind to him. When you brought out the milk and sandwiches for yard picnics, you used to bring some for him, too. You urged the children to share toys and popsicles with this outlander. One day when it was time to put the rolling-stock away, you noticed that one fairly new 24-inch bike was missing. You never saw the little boy again either.

Nothing like this ever happens to the Happy Little Wife and Mother. Hers is a simplicit's world of easy and invariable answers to life's questions, a kind of you-too-can-learn-to-play-the-Hawaiian-guitar or *Readers' Digest* World in which formulas are neat and all the experiments behave as they should.

And yet, you know that life cannot be so simple, even for her. She probably leads the same soul-buffed life that we do. She may be better at it, but she's human, and I wish she'd break down and admit it. It would be a real comfort to me to hear the H. L. W. and M. admit that once, after three bleak winter weeks of unalleviated pressures, she walked out on her whole family and took a bus ride to the end of the line, alone.

Mrs. Byrne was formerly associated with the Bureau of Child Study of the City of Chicago.

When I was a little girl we had a remarkable neighbor named Mrs. Mulholland. Because she was the oldest person in the community, her birthday was always the occasion for a newspaper interview. When she reached her 100th year the usual questions were asked. But Mrs. Mulholland, God love her, had none of the usual answers. Did she drink? Well, yes, a little. She had had her first cocktail at 95. Wasn't that a bit late in life to start drinking? "Well, no. Before that I just took a straight nip when I needed it." Wasn't it hard for her to raise all those children alone, since her husband had died when she was in her thirties? Well, no, not as hard as you might think. Her husband, though a good man, you understand, had never really been too much help to her. But she had had a bachelor brother, Joe, with a good civil service job with the city, and he had turned over his check for years. Dear Mrs. Mulholland, I salute your honest virtues.

THE HUMAN TOUCH

When a woman whose dieting efforts have largely failed reads a "You, too . . ." article by a lady who lost 50 pounds in 50 weeks, she is heartened by the author's rueful admission that once, in the midst of this rigorous regimen, she locked herself in the bathroom and devoured a pound of butter-creams.

In much the same way, perhaps, we would welcome

from the Happy Little Wife and Mother the admission that while the way of life which she chose, and the one which, with God's grace she is trying to live well, is the one she wants, it is nevertheless a somewhat monotonous life. And often very lonely.

And on occasion, as she kisses her immaculate, clean-shaven, white-collared husband goodbye, and turns to face the montage of congealed egg-yolks, unbraided braids, ankle-deep cereal and damp baby which constitute her first order of the day, might she not indulge, even briefly, her Cool Sewer Complex? (This complex was inspired by Ed Young's famous cartoon depicting the fat and harassed wife who greets her Art Carney-type husband with the classic plaint, "Here I am, standing all day over this hot stove, while you're down in that cool sewer.") Or think, even fleetingly, "Lord, life was good in the dime store." Or the Acme Tool and Die Works. Or the dust and dimness of the Modern Language Library stacks.

While I am often plunged into sadness by a comparison of my own inadequacies with the lives led, in print, by all Happy Little Wives and Mothers, I would feel a real spiritual affinity for the woman who will give us groundlings a work-in-progress report of her efforts toward the Good Life, an account written, not from the peak of Everest, but from halfway up, where the going is still rough and the backslides many.

Peace on West 108th Street

IN HIS interesting and inspiring book, *The Aaronsburg Story*, published this month by Vanguard Press, Arthur H. Lewis tells of his first visit to Campion House, AMERICA's editorial residence on West 108th Street, Manhattan. He had come for the purpose of obtaining the cooperation of Fr. John LaFarge, whom he had never met, in his Aaronsburg Project. Having lived in Campion House for over thirteen years, I was impressed by Mr. Lewis' approach to it:

. . . as the iron door swung open softly and I walked into the hushed reception room, I experienced the sensation of being transported back not a quarter of a century but ten centuries. . . . It is an emotion that stirs many people of other faiths every time they enter a Catholic institution—not so much envy for the unreal peace or seemingly undisturbed permanence found there, but amazement that this anachronism should still exist in a paranoiac 20th-century world.

This mystic state, however, was dispelled by the brisk presence and warm and hearty greetings of Father LaFarge's secretary, William H. Dodd.

My first reflection on Mr. Lewis' experience was that he must have visited our house at some halcyon hour when the men from the Department of Sanitation were not performing the usual obligato with garbage cans on the sidewalk, and no youth in a sports car was sounding his horn in a *Fugue for a Girl Friend on the Fifth Floor*. The 20th-century world is very much with

us on 108th St. Nor would the editors of AMERICA have it otherwise. This Review was founded precisely to raise a Catholic voice in law-court and capitol, in forum and marketplace.

We are pleased that Mr. Lewis got an impression of peace as he crossed our threshold. But the phrase he used, "unreal peace," seems to indicate that he sensed a fragile peace, a peace not far separated from war.

If this sounds like paradox, it should be remembered that we are the servants of Him who said, "My peace I leave you," and yet again, "I came not to send peace, but the sword." The peace that our Master has promised us is conditional upon our doing His will. But His will is that we promote a revolution.

The plans for that revolution are contained chiefly in the social encyclicals of the Popes from Leo XIII to Pius XII. AMERICA's role in that revolution is to promote the application of the principles of right reason and Christian morality to the problems of our times. And this not in an abstract, academic way, but in concrete, day-to-day circumstances.

We must talk, for instance, about Puerto Ricans in New York and Mexican migrants in the Southwest, about Unesco and Geneva, about public schools and private schools, about H-bombs and taxes. Anyone who has ever tried to discuss problems like these in terms of reason and morality will realize that the peace on 108th Street is a pretty precarious one.

CHARLES KEENAN

