

Christmas on the near horizon, to remember the new house springing from the ashes.

There are many qualities that I like about my neighbors. For example, on the day, now nineteen years ago, when there was something difficult to tell and so we wanted to tell it ourselves. What would our quiet farm community and the little village a mile away over the bridge think of us when they knew that our house was not to be only my house but was to be a family home for a new family, after two divorces were made?

I shrank from the telling and so the man took on the task. He said to our kindly neighbor, who was also the perfect plumber and so continued until his death last year:

"We want you to know, and perhaps you will tell the others, that we have a very difficult experience ahead of us, and we undertake it only out of the deepest conviction that it is right for us. We are getting divorces and plan to be married and live here. We hope you will understand."

The plumber was peering into some recess in the cellar and he came out, dusted his hands together and then held out his right one. "Don't you worry," he said. "It's none of our business. What you are is all we'll care about."

He said this exactly as though he were talking plumbing, with the same slow friendliness and detachment, and when I heard it my roots took a deep plunge down into the earth beneath my feet. This was where I could live.

I packed my bags soon after that and took the long journey westward to a small city named Reno in the beautiful Western state of Nevada, and there settled myself to the strangest six weeks of my existence. I had plenty of time, for I discovered the first day that I could not work at my writing. Everything was too strange, place and situation and people, but mainly the situation, and I had only my decision to stand upon. That was sure and long considered and unchangeable. Yet how persuade the hours to pass, especially as I had by now observed the insatiable need for news in the reporters whose ears were already stretched to windward? I did not blame them, for I had already learned that newspaper reporters are the most tolerant of persons and have less personal curiosity than any other human group. If they are relentless it is because they have their bread to earn, and twenty years ago a divorce was still news. See how we have grown since then! Last week I read in the back pages of a great New York daily a small paragraph stating in dignified terms that a certain well-known man, a high official in the government, had been granted a divorce from his wife. What progress!

We have caught up with the Chinese gentleman who, when Chiang Kai-shek divorced three wives at the moment when he was rising to his first height, still said that it was only "private business."

Twenty years ago we Americans were not so advanced and my dread was not of the six weeks of isolation, for I can always find diversion and I had the companionship of my future mother-in-law, with whom I was entirely congenial and in whose approval I basked. No, larger almost than happiness was the day of abhorrent publicity which I knew that I could not avoid. Reflecting, however, that since I could not escape it, and that there was no need of living it every day before it arrived, I determined to enjoy my enforced stay and learn as much as I could about the Western corner of my country.

After consultation with a lawyer, who made a specialty of such business and performed it with astonishing suavity and ease, I took his advice and settled myself comfortably in the biggest hotel in town, where nobody would expect me to be, and then cast about to find out how I could learn about Nevada. My eyes at that moment fell upon a card under the glass top of the bureau in my bedroom. It announced Madame Kolak, who was prepared to take pounds from any human frame by the most modern methods. Ah, I thought, and why not from my frame? Here was something to show results, even if I could not work at my novel then in progress. I was sixteen pounds above my college weight, and I would take all those pounds from my bones. I called upon the telephone for Madame Kolak and heard a large husky voice reply. Yes, she would come, that day at twelve. Sixteen pounds in six weeks? Yes, if I would help with diet and exercise. I would, and so the bargain was made.

At twelve o'clock I heard a heavy knock upon the door. I opened it and fell back, stupefied. The largest woman I had ever seen stood there in the doorway, not only tall but broad. That is, she was fat, very fat. Her big square face wore no make-up, her hair was drawn straight back and she loomed like a snow-covered mountain in her white uniform.

"Come in," I said faintly.

She came in, very businesslike, and snatched off an untrimmed battered straw hat. "Lay down," she said in the husky telephone voice. "If it hurts, tell me."

I lay down on the bed, and pulling up her sleeves she proceeded to batter the flesh from my resisting skeleton. The method is familiar and doubtless has improved in the years since, for I see many women far slimmer than I was able to stay. What I remember is not the process nor even the hateful dieting, for Madame Kolak put me at once upon

a vegetable soup of her own recipe, making me promise to eat nothing whatever except five large cups a day of the watery stew. She told me afterwards that she would not have been so severe except that she supposed of course I would cheat as her ladies "most always did." I never thought of cheating, having been reared to severe honesty when my word was given, and so I starved myself heroically—too thoroughly, alas, as I was afterwards to discover, for during the next year I had to combat a protein deficiency which all but wrecked me for a while, and undid most of our combined efforts, she coming twice a day to pound, and I exercising rigorously between her hours and swallowing the abominable soup.

What I remember clearly now is the incomparable character, Madame Kolak. She was the very embodiment of the American West. She had always lived there, she dabbled in gold mines, she had ridden—in the days when she could still hoist herself on a horse—all through the desert, and she loved it. Sometimes when she was pounding away and both of us were dripping with sweat, she of effort and I of endurance, she would close her eyes and say something like this—

"You know what I saw once? I was ridin' home from a gold mine. It was night but there was a moon, shinin' soft-like. And ahead of me was a little lake, maybe not more than a big pool. An' you know what I see? Nine white horses, drinkin' at the pool, and with 'em a coal-black stallion. Wild horses—"

She smiled, her eyes closed, and we both gazed at those horses drinking from a pool in the moonlight, nine white horses and a coal-black stallion.

"Do you mind," she said one day, while she screwed a pound from my right hip, "if I call my new mine *The Good Earth*? It might bring me luck."

She had not, I surmised, much luck with her mines except for endless excitement and outdoor pleasure. And in those exacerbating days she shared with me, she explained the countryside and the city as well, she described the nature of rattlesnakes, she named the wild flowers, and she told me, bit by bit, the history of the region through the drama of her own life. It was she who whetted me to the point of wandering about the streets of the fabulous derelict, Virginia City, so that, undernourished though I was, I became familiar not only with its present, but with its incredible past.

Twice a day she weighed me, I would not have dared to show less than the prescribed loss. She granted me a reward about halfway through, when I dreaded going on and yet could not bear to give up.

"When you get down to the bottom," she said, "I'm goin' to take you

around to the fancy gamblin' places. We'll dress up and I'll bring my husband dressed up and we'll go to all the swell joints."

And so we did on the last memorable night, when, my evening gown hanging on my emaciated frame, I waited for Madame and her husband. They telephoned from the lobby and I went down and there she stood, immense and handsome as the Rock of Gibraltar in a long black satin gown of indeterminate style but massively décolleté and with plenty of shining stones. With her was a trim neat man, rather small, whom I recognized from her descriptions. He was Mr. Kolak. We had a wonderful evening. She urged me to eat all I wanted and was pleased when I wanted very little, my stomach having been properly shrunk. We went to half a dozen places and she, not at all shrunken, ate everywhere and very generously and recommended the wines, and the waiters all knew her and called her "the Duchess." She did, as a matter of fact, look like the Duchess in *Alice in Wonderland*, only a good-natured one and much broader. I went to bed exhausted, although she was fresh as ever, and prepared for the next day, which was the dreadful one when the news would break, and the man would arrive.

And then how maddening it was when he did arrive to have him stare at me with unappreciative eyes, although a very pretty white silk suit had been fitted to my thin figure only the week before, taken in, as Madame said proudly, "inches," and how many I have mercifully forgotten! I had kept the whole process from him to be a delightful surprise, and now he looked peevish. "This is not what I bargained for," he said or something like that, and then stubbornly, "I liked you the way you were."

"I'll be that way again, doubtless," I said gloomily.

Then we laughed. It was a glorious day, the greatest day of our lives, a day, to be sure, which we had both tried to prevent for several years, under the conviction that divorce was horrible, which it had been, and that furthermore nothing was more unfortunate for a publisher than marrying an author and vice versa, thus mixing business with everyday life—and this, thanks be, has been proved not true.

I have heard marriage argued from two contrary points of view, the one that it is wiser for opposites to marry, the other that there should be common interests, hobbies and vacations. My life has proved, for me, at least, the latter point of view. Observing the similar marriages of others, I add this caution—that cooperation and not competition must be the watchword.

Madame Kolak of course had her share in the day, after the court process was over. She and I had escaped reporters through a back exit while they waited on the front steps with poised cameras. We went

straight to the back garden of a parsonage where my mother-in-law was waiting for us, and there Madame Kolak and her husband were witnesses to a small quiet wedding. After it was over she handed to the bridegroom a basket which she said was our picnic supper and which later proved delectable in every detail that evening beside Lake Tahoe. But, best of all, when we were in the car and trying to drive away from the parsonage Madame Kolak stood in the middle of the road like a wall and prevented an avalanche of reporters in cars, cameras still poised, from running us down. While she stood placidly outspread, we escaped.

For years after that day Madame Kolak sent to me at Christmastime two large fruitcakes of her own making, one dark, one light, showing her tolerance in the matter of weight and certainly helping to undo all our joint labors. During the war such cakes became impossible and communication ceased between us, for Madame Kolak found letters difficult. Alas, only the other day a woman who had also been to Reno, said, "Did you know Madame Kolak? Oh, my dear, she's dead!" And together we mourned our friend.

The attitude toward divorce has changed somewhat in the many years since I knew Madame Kolak, and slowly our laws and prejudices are coming nearer to the realities of life. This humanizing process would have been more rapid except for the violations of taste and principle on the part of the few who have made of monogamy a progressive polygamy, and, as elsewhere, the outrageous behavior of a few has compelled restrictions upon all. But modern psychology is moving toward the perception that it is impossible to insist that two people remain together physically when communication of mind and heart has proved impossible. Indeed, no law can compel the frantic creature to remain in this prison far more horrible than iron bars and a locked gate. I hope it is not selfish of me now to say, upon long reflection, that I believe one divorce should always be socially and morally accepted as the acknowledgment of a mistake, perhaps merely youthful, but that the second divorce should be made very difficult indeed and that a third should be taken as evidence of lack of seriousness or as proof that the individual should not marry at all, since it becomes obvious that he, or she, is unable to be happy in marriage. There are persons who cannot for temperamental reasons be close to another human being, and to such the marriage relationship is impossible for long.

The condition known generally as incompatibility, or "mental cruelty," has been delicately and devastatingly portrayed by John Galsworthy in *The Forsyte Saga*. There Soames Forsyte, the irreproachable, the successful businessman, whose character as it is revealed has its pro-