

Sacrificing Home to Business

(Charles Frederick Goss, in 'Husband, Wife, and Home.')

There is always danger of castigating an innocent party when one becomes a social critic. The pupils of one of the head masters of Eton have recorded of him that he found a row of boys standing in his study one morning, and without a moment's hesitation began to thrash them with his cane. They were too terrified to remonstrate until he had gone half-way down the line, when one of them plucked up courage enough to falter out: 'Please, sir, we're not up for punishment; we are the confirmation class.'

Most of the men upon whom the blows I am about to administer will fall may prove to be 'domestic models,' but I must strike out with the hope of hitting a guilty one among the innocent now and then.

There is a vicious circle in the reasoning of the modern business man. 'I want to make a happy home,' he says, 'and so must conduct a successful business; but to do this I must give myself to it body and soul.'

By sacrificing himself to his business he renders himself incapable of making a home. And he does it in this way: The best energies of his heart and mind are absorbed to such a degree in the conduct of some great commercial enterprise that he has nothing to contribute to domestic life when he comes home at night, like a squeezed orange.

The energies of a man are not like those of a river. The water that turns the wheel of a factory is exactly as able to turn that of a grist mill a quarter of a mile further down the stream. But the man who has poured out the last drop of his strength on the wheel of his business simply goes home empty to his family.

Among the most pitiful spectacles in this world I put that of the haggard, exhausted man of affairs sitting helpless and useless in the circle about the fireside. If he is not so nervous and fretful as to forbid all merriment, he is so used up that he cannot enjoy it. If he realizes his condition he decorates his face with a smile; but it is at best no better than a petrification. His mind is not on the scene or the subject. His thoughts are down at the shop or store. He scarcely hears the children when they speak.

Later in the evening his wife may try to engage his attention upon some problem of the domestic life. Billy has not been behaving well at school, or Mary is begging to take music lessons, or Bridget has 'given notice,' or most likely gone off without saying 'good-by.'

She does her best, poor woman, but even while she is talking she knows by the look of his eye that his mind is wandering.

'You aren't listening to a word I say. You don't care any more about your home than if it were a boarding-house,' she snaps.

'I guess if you had all my big burdens on your mind you'd find it as hard as I do to listen to tittle-tattle,' he replies.

'Who asks you to burden yourself in this way? I'm sure I don't.'

'Talk is cheap. You want an establishment, and it takes money to keep it up. You ought to know that a man can't earn money without the concentration of all his strength on business.'

For my part I would rather have less money and more husband.'

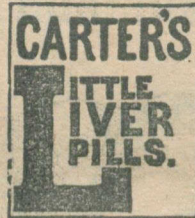
'Nonsense!'

'It's little enough you know about a woman's heart. What I long for beyond all earthly things is your love and sympathy. I need you to help me discipline the children. I want you to be interested in my household cares. I long to hear your old gay laugh. I hate that store. I hate business, I'm sick and tired of money and position. I want my lover back. I want to feel that he hears me when I speak. Can't you understand?'

'Eh? What? Excuse me, but I wasn't listening. I just happened to think of an order for one hundred dozen suits of underwear that I'll bet a twenty dollar bill that stupid shipping clerk has forgotten.'

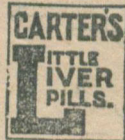
Pitiful, isn't it? What are we going to do about it? It's getting worse all the time. There is so much truth in what the man says about the exactions of business that we cannot help pitying him. To succeed (or even not to fail) a man must keep strained up like

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a fiddle string. His competitors are after him with a knife and tomahawk day and night. If they would only be reasonable—he could. But they won't. The whole pack are as mad as March hares. There seems to be no 'middle way' to-day. A man must either 'get rich' or 'go broke,' and that in a mighty hurry. He must either march at the head of the procession or get out of the ranks entirely.

Nevertheless, the dilemma remains. This man must give more time to his home or he won't have any. What he has now isn't a home. It's only a house. If he has to sacrifice one thing or the other he had better sacrifice the business to the home than the home to the business. And if he says, 'How can you have a home without a business?' the answer is, 'A simpler home with a less exacting business.'

More love, more peace, more of the bliss of the fireside is what this age needs—not more fine clothes, bobtailed horses and long-tailed gowns.

Doesn't it sometimes seem as if we had lost our minds? One time a kindly old clergyman stopped by the side of a laboring man who was turning at a windlass, bareheaded, beneath a blazing sun. 'Hey, man,' said he, 'working without your hat is bad for your brains.' 'Faith, your reverence,' he replied, 'if it's any brains I had I wouldn't be working at this windlass at all!'

Sometimes when I catch myself and other dunces like me tearing along at breakneck speed, eager, impetuous, absorbed, struggling for pleasure or prizes that turn to ashes in our grasp and sacrificing the joys of home to attain them, I think we have as few brains as the Irishman. For I know (as well as I know my A, B, C's) that undue absorption in business means the almost inevitable destruction of home.

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