



THAT HAPPY ENDING

SHOULD NOVELS END: "—AND THEY WERE MARRIED
AND LIVED HAPPY EVER AFTER?"

By a Woman Novelist.

A "FIRST novel" that ends upon a grey note is handicapped at the outset. "In these sad days the public must have a Happy Ending," say the publishers. "We all need something to give us hope and cheer us up." And back goes the MS.

But to give a happy ending to the modern novel is not an easy task. To begin with, the end of the successful novel must be dramatic. We no longer permit our authors to finish tamely with a catalogue of the activities of the characters from the time the story ends until their death, such as many of our Victorian favourites used. To-day our novelists must end with a crisis that somehow conveys an impression of lasting effect.

Here lies the difficulty, since for most people happiness is built from months and years of small delights—friendship, congenial work, freedom from anxiety—while only sorrow sweeps upon them with a sudden blow. The happiness that comes with a startling crisis may fly away as quickly as it came.

Faced by this problem, the story-teller long ago had a brilliant inspiration, when first, to end his tale, he substituted matrimony for happiness. Instead of saying of his characters, "They lived happily ever after," he said, "And so they were married, and lived happily ever after."

Later on it became enough to say, "And so they were married," and leave the readers to fill in the "happily ever after."

ARE we beginning to see through the convention and be dissatisfied?

The publishers think "No," the authors "Yes."

After all, the conventional ending offers little in the way of consolation except the suggestion that if you marry the man or woman of your choice you will be happy.

But suppose that the reader does not want to marry? Or suppose that he has wanted to marry somebody and can't? Or suppose he even happens to be married already?

Then the consolation fails, as all attempts to console must fail when they rest upon a promise of changed circumstances. Circumstances may change for the better in this world. On the other hand, they just as easily may not. And if the only comfort that our novelists can offer is the promise of a hypothetical marriage, the happiness of which we can only judge from the evidence of our own and our neighbours' experience, is there much left for us to hope for?

Surely a wiser consolation would be the story of man triumphing over circumstances by his courage, rather than by the prospect of his forthcoming marriage?

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