Conditioned

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Abstract

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Once there lived in a little town in a little college, a tiny little man who solved many of the eternal problems by ignoring them. He studied week days and looked for fun on the week-ends. The little man was fond of little women—and popcorn, and his ideal of fun was to go to the theater on Saturday evening leading a little woman with one hand and carrying a sack of popcorn—for two—in the other hand.

The little man was a deep thinker and a philosopher in his own way. He solved the problems of Time by thinking only of his present and his immediate future. He solved the problems of Space by ignoring the outside world and thinking only of his little environment and of the people with whom he was directly related. He solved his social problems by following public opinion and the current fashions—in dressing, in behavior, in thinking. His college studies kept him busy day and night, and his highest ambition was to keep his little woman and to be sure of a supply of popcorn for the week-end. He considered the popcorn as the food of his body, and the sensation he got from being with the little woman as the food of his soul.

But, unfortunately, the poor little man often lost the food of his soul. His little women usually left him at the end of a few weeks of this ideal friendship, for others who had more to offer or more to take.

At such times the little man felt lonely and miserable. He wished the weeks would never come to an end. But Saturday evenings came as usual, date or no date. And, having no other place to go, in that little town, the little man mechanically entered the theater with a sack of popcorn—for one. But the theater had lost its cozy romantic atmosphere, and the popcorn had lost its flavor. He went back home at the end of these evenings with a fatigued body and a sick starving soul.

Then the hunt would begin—a long patient hunt—in the classrooms, at parties, in the cafeteria, in the street, during the day, during the night, consciously and unconsciously, with no truce and no rest until a new little woman had been located and trapped. And once in possession of the food of his soul, the little man felt happy and satisfied again. The theater regained
its romantic atmosphere, the popcorn regained its flavor, and sleep came easily to his tired brain at the end of the evening.

Finally, the little man decided to put an end to all this uncertainty, this insecurity, this changeableness of life — and, before his last little woman was tired of his company, he proposed to her. The little woman was also tired of speculation, of uncertainty, of insecurity — and she accepted. They were married.

The little man discovered that marriage was the most wonderful experience in the world and he wished he had been married from the time of childhood. What more could he desire than a little romantic home and a little woman ready to entertain him to his heart's desire? The little woman had a job, too, and put her money into the enterprise — more money than was needed for the keeping of a tiny apartment. So the little man worked less and gave more time to his college studies and to his fun. It was like getting something for nothing, and the little man felt like a king. He was a man without a past. The present was ideal. The future was smiling.

The little man completely forgot all the other little women who had passed through his life. They had left no trace on his heart or on his mind. They were like the many sacks of popcorn that he had emptied and forgotten — living sacks of popcorn. But his little woman was different. She was a pretty little woman — the best one he'd ever met. He was in love with her the way he had expected love would be, and he was sure he would continue to be in love all his life.

But, as the days went by, the little man began to feel bored and tired of his domestic life. The evenings became dull and monotonous. They had little to say and little to do. It was like eating too much popcorn at one time. So he began to stay away from the romantic little home on certain evenings of the week, spending his time with friends — or in the theater, eating popcorn — for one. When he told his worries to an experienced friend, the friend only smiled and assured him that it was a rule in successful marriages to get tired, at the beginning, and that, with a little patience, he would solve his problem and get accustomed to the new feeling. The ultimate goal of all sensible men and women with an instinct for happiness was to accustom themselves to strange feelings.

Forty years passed, after that conversation, and one evening the little man found himself away from home on business in
a little room of a third-clas hotel. Having nothing else to do before going to sleep, he began reviewing the pictures of his past in his little memory. Forty years before, he had met his experienced friend in this same hotel and they had had an historical discussion about marriage. That discussion had influenced the little man's life. He had gone back home, after the discussion, accepting his monotonous life as a logical law of nature. Then had come the first little baby. It had made his life more colorful for many years. Children, the little man thought, are blessings to people who are bored. But then the little baby went away to college, and got married, leaving a void, an emptiness in the little man's heart. But the old boredom, the feeling of depression — that, had vanished long ago. The little man had become so attached to his little wife and to the monotonous routines of his little life, that now he felt homesick and restless at these few necessary times when he had to be away on business.

As he lay on his hotel bed, alone and depressed, the little man wondered what had happened to cause the change. Had he fallen in love anew with his little wife? Was it that he'd discovered the real Love — the ideal of all the dreamers and the artists? Or had he become accustomed to that way of living, at first hated, — just as horses become accustomed to the saddle, and oxen to the plough?

The little man went to sleep with the question fresh in his mind. He dreamt that he was going back home in a boat. His house seemed to stand on an isolated island. The romantic little house — and the island looked familiar to him. It was one of his old dreams from adolescence. He had often dreamed, then, of being on an island with plenty of food and a pretty little girl to share all the food and all the fun with him.

The little man stepped out of the boat, with the boatman following carrying the luggage, and went toward the house. It was his old dream house, with the walls made out of candy and the roof made of popcorn. The little man could even see the face of his wife, smiling at him from one of the little windows. He looked at the boatman. "Surely I'm dreaming. This is only the house of my dreams. Let us go to my real home."

But the boatman didn't move. He looked at the little man with a tired smile and said, "But this is your real home. You have been building it for years. You have always lived here. The other house — that is the dream."
The little man felt uncertain. "But what will my wife say?"

The boatman answered, "Your wife helped you all these years. She got accustomed to it, too. She loves it, now. She is conditioned to it."

The little man felt lost and frightened. He exclaimed, "What will people say about me? I'll be the joke of the community!"

"Not at all," answered the boatman; "each one of your friends lives on an isolated island, too. All are busy building houses out of their desires — you should be happy your desires are so few — and so simple. This gives you a finished house. Others have contradicting desires — hence they live in houses that can never be finished, like yours."

The little man looked up into the face of the boatman and even the face seemed familiar. It was the face of his friend — the one with whom he had once discussed his dreams. This was that conversation, with only minor changes. Then another question came into the mind of the little man. "What will become of me in this isolated place? Surely I will die of the boredom and the littleness!"

The boatman seemed to read his thoughts. "Don't be afraid," he said softly, "you have been living here for years. You are accustomed to it now. You are conditioned."

The little man was bewildered. He looked around and felt "little" for the first time in his life. He said, "Is this all that the work of my whole life has amounted to — a doll house that wouldn't satisfy a child — and an isolated island, where I'm doomed to live alone? It is a dull and impossible life, and I hate it!"

"What can I do for you?" the boatman asked, smiling compassionately.

"Take me back to the other world . . . that world of dreams as you call it. Where my house would look like a real house — and my life wouldn't be a failure!"

"Don't be afraid," said the boatman, "You have the instinct of happiness, you can be conditioned to any climate, to anyplace . . . in time."

When the little man awoke in the morning, he laughed at his fears . . . It was only a dream caused by a set of ideas put in his mind by a passerby. At no time were happy little men like him concerned with fantastic dreams and ideas.