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Scenes from Married Life

William Cooper



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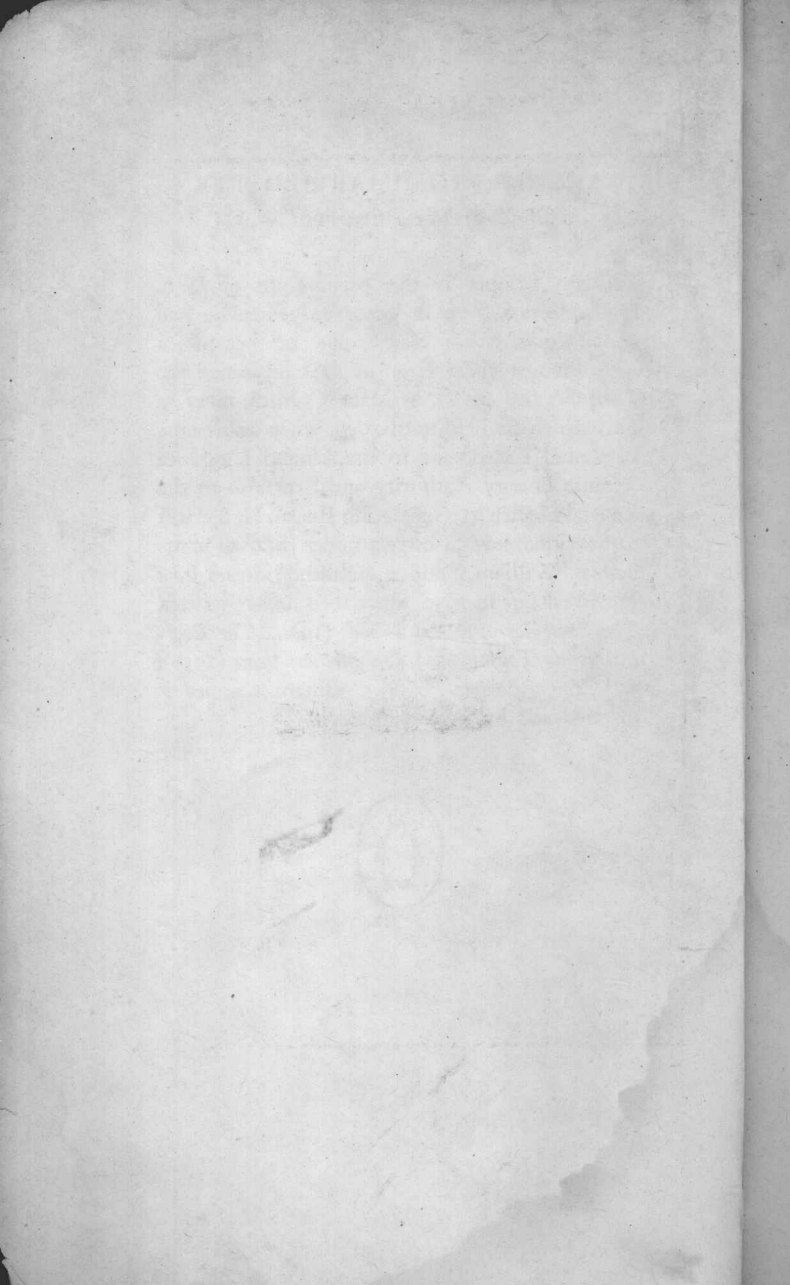
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SCENES FROM MARRIED LIFE

WILLIAM COOPER

William Cooper is the pseudonym of H. S. Hoff. He was born in 1910, and when he had come down from Cambridge he became a schoolmaster in Leicester. In 1945 he joined the Civil Service as an Assistant Commissioner, a post which he held until 1958, when he became Personnel Consultant to the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority and later also to the Central Electricity Generating Board. H. S. Hoff had written several novels under his own name before 'William Cooper' published *Scenes from Provincial Life* in 1950. Since then he has written *The Struggles of Albert Woods* (1952), *The Ever-Interesting Topic* (1953), *Disquiet and Peace* (1956), and *Young People* (1958). William Cooper is married and has two daughters.





WILLIAM COOPER

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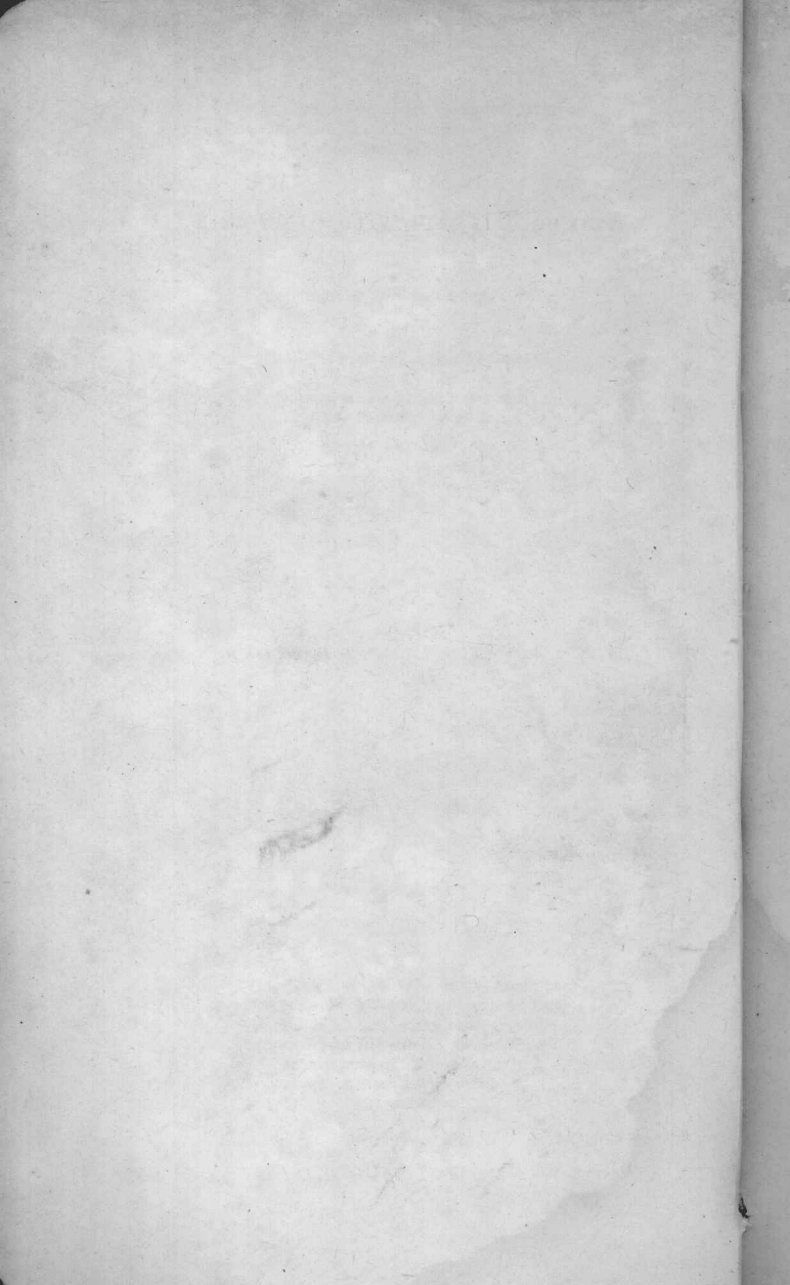
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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO MY WIFE



Contents

PART ONE

1. ON A NO. 14 BUS	11
2. TALKS WITH A FAT MAN	17
3. LUNCH IN A TEA-SHOP	23
4. DINNER WITH TWO DOCTORS	31
5. A COCKTAIL PARTY AT ANNETTE'S	37
6. THE RECURRING SITUATION	43

PART TWO

1. CHRISTMAS EVE IN THE CIVIL SERVICE	51
2. FALLING IN LOVE	59
3. A TABLE AT THE CARLOS	71
4. MISCELLANEOUS CONVERSATIONS	82
5. APPROACH TO MARRIAGE	87
6. APPROACH TO BED	92
7. A DECISION AND A CELEBRATION	99
8. A SILVER RUPEE	106

PART THREE

1. NEWLY-WED	117
2. OIL-CLOTH ON THE TABLES	128
3. AN OFFICIAL VISITOR FROM AMERICA	137

Contents

4. ROBERT'S TROUBLES	145
5. SEVERAL POINTS ILLUMINATED	151
6. A SURPRISE AND A SHOCK	159

PART FOUR

1. LEARNING THE LAW	165
2. WAS IT A HELP?	175
3. DARK DAYS	183
4. THE TURNING-POINT?	193
5. THE STREAM OF LIFE	197
6. STILL DARKER DAYS	202
7. HELP	209
8. SCENE FROM MARRIED LIFE	213

Part One

CHAPTER I

On a No. 14 Bus

'P.S.A.,' said Sybil, in a tone of amiable comment. She was looking through the window of the bus and I had my arm round her.

Startled, I followed her glance. The bus was going along Piccadilly – I was on my way to seeing her off at Euston – and I judged that her glance was directed towards one of those huge-windowed shops which in London appear to be indispensable for selling motor-cars, though there is no evidence that fewer motor-cars are sold per financially eligible head of population in say Aberdeen without them. P.S.A.? Or was it B.S.A.? That rang a bell – it was the make of bicycle I had ridden when I was a schoolmaster before the war. A ridiculous idea. There could be no B.S.A.s among Hillmans and Austins and Bentleys, in fact there was no connexion between them other than in my imagination, where, when a provincial schoolmaster astride a B.S.A., I had imagined myself writing a novel which could sell enough copies to buy me a Bentley, or for that matter an Austin, even just a small Austin.

I could see no letters P.S.A., nor B.S.A. In fact I could see no three-letter group anywhere on anything.

'What on earth does P.S.A. stand for?' I asked.

Sybil half-turned to me and said: 'Pleasant Sunday Afternoon, of course.'

I burst into laughter. It was appreciative laughter. Just before getting on to this bus, Sybil and I had been in bed together. My appreciation was enormous.

Sybil was an unusually pretty girl. She looked remarkably like Marlene Dietrich – Marlene Dietrich when young, though Sybil was now about thirty-two. Sybil was aware of the resemblance and plucked her eyebrows accordingly. Above her wide-open blue eyes, they rose in two hyperfine arches, which, when she was talking to you, wiggled in a remarkable manner. I was fascinated by them: I could never understand why they did it.

'I thought you must have seen the letters on a shop-front,' I said. 'I was looking for them everywhere.'

At this Sybil turned away thoughtfully. The fact which I might have remembered, thereby saving myself some trouble, was that Sybil was so short-sighted she could scarcely see the shops. There was a pause while we went round Piccadilly Circus, and then she turned back on me and, with her eyebrows wiggling, said:

'Joe, do you think I ought to wear contact lenses?'

Like a fool, I replied: 'I should have thought a pair of specs would have done just as well.' Having bits of glass against one's eyeballs seemed to me creepy.

Sybil's expression was not a hurt one: it was an uncomprehending one. Contact lenses were something she could envisage: spectacles were not. I realized why not, by reference to a concept which originated from a friend of mine named Robert, who knew Sybil well. Robert was convinced that in her inveterate perusal of women's magazines Sybil had succumbed to the propaganda that any woman can be beautiful by following certain rules of make-up - 'Glamour Tips' was what Robert was convinced they were called, and he believed that there was a fixed apocalyptic number, actually forty-four, of them. Robert, I realized, would have understood at once why Sybil looked uncomprehending - not that he did not understand everything at once, being that sort of man: I revered him for it. Robert would have understood that contact lenses were numbered among Sybil's Forty-four Glamour Tips, whereas spectacles were not.

'Perhaps you ought to have contact lenses,' I said, to get on the rails again.

'Yes,' said Sybil. 'I can't see very much when I'm out.'

'How much can you see?' I said, thinking of her when she was in.

Sybil looked through the window again. She read out the name of the play that was then on at the Globe Theatre, *The Lady Is Not For Burning* - the year was 1949. As the letters were a foot high and only a pavement's width away, I said:

'If you look at the people on the other side of the road, can you tell which sex they are?'

Without hesitation, and with what seemed to me a touch of characteristic complacency, Sybil said:

'If it's fairly clearly marked.'

I laughed, and then something, perhaps actually looking at the people on the other side of the road, made me speculate on how the world looked to Sybil. Very, very different from how it looked to me. The difference visually was obvious – whatever my moral defects were, I had pretty good eyesight – but that was only the beginning. Not only did Sybil see the world differently from me with the outer eye: the truth was that after knowing her for years I had no idea *what* she saw with the inner one.

I had known Sybil off and on for fifteen years. She worked as a librarian in the provincial town that I came from. I repeat, as a librarian. Sybil looked so like Marlene Dietrich that you might have thought she would never have had a book in her hand, that nobody would ever even have shown her one. Not a bit of it. Once during a lull when we were in bed she recited the whole of one of Hamlet's soliloquies – and not the '*To be or not to be*' one either. I was amazed.

Sybil was a mystery to me. After knowing her for fifteen years I had to confess that I had not the faintest idea what moved her immortal soul, what made her tick. Nor had Robert. We used to discuss it with persistence and chagrin. You may think I was in a better position to solve the mystery because she had slept with me and not with Robert. Well, no, you are wrong there, I think.

Anyway, the generalization that you will penetrate the mysteries of somebody's nature if she sleeps with you is a shaky one at the best of times, and in the case of Sybil it was simply non-operative. There she lay, for example, happily reciting one of Hamlet's soliloquies. Amazing, but not exegetical.

'What does Sybil want out of life?' Robert would ask me. When propounding a question to which neither he nor I knew the answer, Robert always safeguarded his own self-esteem by aiming the question at me.

I told him I had heard her say she would like to be a film star.

Because it was out of the question for her to become a film star, Robert looked at me as if he thought I were reporting her untruthfully. It was not possible for Robert to believe that aspiration could exist so independently of action: in Sybil they existed together without the slightest mutual influence – they appeared not to cause each other a scrap of bother. Sybil went on her way imperturbably. Sometimes I thought conceitedness might have been the

source of her imperturbability, but she never seemed particularly conceited.

Then Robert and I argued about whether Sybil wanted to be married again. Robert wanted to know if she wanted to marry me, and when I said I saw no signs of it, that between Sybil and me marriage somehow did not come into it, he looked neither satisfied with my reply nor dissatisfied. He said: 'H'm.'

Sybil and I were friends who had slept together off and on for years, the off spells corresponding on my side to the times when I was in love with someone, and on her side to the spell when she was married. The latter, alas, was short. In 1943 she married a willowy, dashing young man in the Parachute Regiment, and he was killed at Arnhem. After that she went on working in her library, helping to support her mother. There were always men about the place who wanted to marry her, and no one was more in need of a guiding hand, literally, than Sybil. Sybil standing on the pavement looking for a bus stop was a sight so heart-rending that any man who saw her longed to drive up in an expensive car and carry her away. Yet she did not marry.

Marriage and widowhood had made no difference in Sybil's attitude to me: failure to marry and confirmation in bachelordom had obviously made no difference in my attitude to her. Sitting in the No. 14 bus that November Sunday evening, we might just as well have been sitting in a provincial tram soon after we first met. Oddly self-possessed yet diffident, in some ways ineffably remote – not to mention others in which she was deliciously contiguous – with beautiful eyes picking up next to nothing and eyebrows wiggling like antennae, she gave me no clue whatsoever to what made her tick. She never had. She never would.

That Sunday evening was almost the last time I ever saw Sybil, so that I have had ten years to recollect her in tranquillity. Still no clue.

The bus fetched up at Euston and we went into the station. Euston is dark at the best of times and, on this particular evening, night had come early, coldly and wintrily, wafting into our nostrils fog flavoured with sulphur dioxide. We were in no hurry. We went through the classical entrance into the forecourt, where the lights were burning without seeming to make the slightest difference to the degree of illumination. A faint shadow had crossed both our minds, for a glance

at the clock had reminded us that although time was passing it was still too early to get a drink.

How often I had entered this station, just before seven o'clock of a Sunday evening! *Autres temps, autres femmes*, I reminded myself in a sprightly way – that suddenly fell flat . . . I was reminded of *autres temps*, some years back, when I had thought I was all set to get married.

'Damn this station!' I must have said it aloud, because Sybil said:

'Yes. It isn't as nice as Paddington.'

We went on to the platform and found that the train was in. It was always in. I put Sybil's case on a seat and then we strolled down the platform. The faint fishy, appley smell was too poignant to be borne, I thought. I really wished I might never be seeing anybody off from this station, from this particular platform, ever again. I said to Sybil all the same:

'How soon can you come and see me again?'

'Not till after Christmas, more's the pity!'

A porter beginning to slam the doors at the top end of the train took us by surprise. It was time for Sybil to get into the carriage.

When the train had gone out I made for the bar, which was now open, and ordered a large whisky. It may sound as if I had fallen into a bout of *tristezza* consequent on the pleasures of the afternoon, but to my mind it was consequent on something of much longer duration, and not pleasurable either. To ward it off I drank the whisky quickly and ordered another. I paused. And then inspiration suddenly hit me in the way a large whisky does.

There was something wrong with my life, and my predicament at this moment expressed it perfectly. Having just seen off Sybil, what had I got to go home to? An empty flat. At my age – I was thirty-nine – what had all other men got to go home to? A cosy house with a wife in it and some kiddies. What a corny dream-picture! I thought, and yet what an attractive one! (For the moment I disregarded the fact that if there had been a wife and some kiddies in my flat I should have been lucky to get out for a solitary whisky, let alone to see off at Euston, *con tristezza* or *con allegria*, some such girl as Sybil.)

A romantic bitterness about my fate temporarily overcame me, in the deserted bar. When I was young I had not wanted to get married.

And now! At that question my spirits slipped a notch lower. I began my second whisky.

As my colleagues in the Civil Service would have put it, I 'reviewed the situation'. What a situation! And what an awful review! For fifteen years I had slept with someone whom I comprehended so little that somehow marriage just never came into it. Like ships that pass in the night, Sybil and I, for all the passing and re-passing which practically amounted to a regular service, were still a couple of ships, lone in the night. I was still lone in the night. Was it, could it possibly be, that there was something wrong not with my life but with *me*? When I thought that, I felt something deep in my psyche like the fall of ice-cream on teeth that have just been scaled.

'Joe,' I said to myself as I drank some more of the whisky, 'it's bad, very bad.' I meant the prognosis was bad.

Mine was indeed a predicament – in Robert's idiom, a predicament and a half.

Remembering Robert made me decide to explain my latest view of my predicament to him. Of course he knew all about it, as he knew about everything else. The trouble with our predicaments, especially when they are painful, incapable of resolution, even tragic, is that we are just a bit proud of them, just a bit attached to them. Though Robert knew all about mine already, I had every intention of explaining my latest view of it even if I bored the hide off him.

I made my way out of the station and caught a No. 14 bus going in the opposite direction to the one I had come on.

'Terminus,' I said to the conductor heavily, but meaning it literally. I was living at Putney.