

CLARA'S HUSBANDS

Laura M. Williams

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CHARACTERS

CLARA: a woman

CLAUDE: young, handsome

DICK: young and well dressed

BERTIE: long-haired, artistic

SAM: older than the others, bearded

PLACE

A living room.

NOTE: The four husbands may appear one by one by putting their heads through frames on the background. The first may appear, afterwards disappearing and taking the parts of other husbands by changing make-up. Or four different men may appear. A black curtain may be used, if desired, and each husband step out as CLARA speaks. Light should then be thrown upon him, giving him the appearance of a vision.

CLARA: It's come! I'm divorced again. I am the most unfortunate of women. So many live happily, or at least contentedly, with one, and he was my fourth! [Sniffles; reads paper.] One hundred a month—hum—he might have done better. Men are always so selfish.

My fourth. It doesn't seem possible. [Sighs.] We fascinating women suffer so. [Face of CLAUDE appears in first frame; CLARA starts, rises and goes toward picture.] Claude! I haven't forgotten you. You really were the best looking one and so romantic. I called you Lovey [sighs], but I was only sixteen and you were twenty-four. You should have considered my youth and silliness then. But men consider only themselves. You urged me to elope and you had no money. [Hastily.] You misunderstood me.

Good Lord, must a young girl spend her life scraping vegetables and mixing puddings? [Shudders. CLAUDE smiles sadly.] But you were so wrong to bring Dicky home with you. I couldn't help being attractive. Did you want me to shave off my hair or blacken out my teeth? [Laughs.] I believe you did. How jealous you were. [Seriously.] It really was your fault. You shouldn't have brought him home. When will men learn to leave their friends in town, when there are pretty wives about the house.

And then you became so unbearable, Claude, you know you did. Refusing to go out to dinner with us. Angry when Dicky, who had so much, gave me a few little things you couldn't buy. Should I go without because of your silly pride? That opera cloak I actually needed and the ear-rings meant nothing to Dicky and so much to me. But you couldn't see my point of view at all, so it had to be good-bye. Really, you made me suffer very much, your love was so selfish.

[DICK appears in the second frame.]

Don't look so reproachful, Dicky. It was all your fault. You should have kept away when you saw how pretty I was. I couldn't help letting you see how unhappy I was with Lovey. I was too pretty to be hidden in a flat, but you should not have listened to me. Men are so sentimental. I shall never forget you and Claude. It was so exciting.

Here stood Claude and there stood you. "Dick," says Claude, "my wife is unhappy because I cannot give her everything. You can!"

"Claude," says you, "she must have everything"; and then you shook hands. It was lovely. You arranged it between you. It wasn't my fault. I left Claude and married you.

You must admit I was a devoted wife. You had nothing to complain of, Dicky, nothing at all. You said I should have everything yourself. That white motor was beautiful. It was ridiculous of you to complain. I never knew such a downright crank as you were. Each time I bought a new gown you groaned. At every ring you sulked, and at the pendant you swore! You were unbearable.

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Naturally, my health broke down. No woman could live with such a fussy creature. I had to take that western trip to get away from you. [Sighs.] Selfish, cranky Dicky. I forgive you now. It's all over and your settlement was generous. But you didn't understand me. I cannot live without harmony. I liked showy, costly things—you did not, that's all. What is wealth for if not to impress others. I think, Dicky, in spite of your wealth and breeding you were a little common.

I couldn't help seeing the difference between you and Bertie. [BERTIE in third frame.] What wonderful weird things he wrote before I married him. He was so temperamental. His long hair and dreamy eyes deceived me. I thought he could understand me—but no.

Sometimes I think me don't understand us because they won't. They see but their own selves. I gave up a beautiful home to marry you, Bertie, but you never thought of that. Of course I had my jewels and Dick gave me such a nice sum, but I couldn't bear to have you touch a penny of it. That would have been too vulgar.

I thought you were going to be famous. Why couldn't you have done something while I was with you? But no—! Every time I went to your study you were writing or reading. If I wanted to go out I had to forcibly drag you with me. Your getting up at all hours of the night to scribble disturbed my rest. Why couldn't you have written when I didn't need you? You would write at the most inconvenient times. I was losing my looks with you, Bertie. You were so absorbed.

I expected you'd consider my personality a little. I had such a cute plot for a play. I remember it. A girl runs away from home and goes on the stage. Becomes famous in a night, she is so beautiful. Returns home just in time to save her poor old mother from being sent to the poor farm. You refused to help me write it.

All you thought of was your own work. I never could see any sense to a thing you wrote. Now you're rich and famous. [Sighs.] You earned little enough when I was with you. If it hadn't been for Dicky's alimony I could never have kept up any sort of appearance. That helped you a lot—my appearance, I mean. Every one thought you were prosperous—having such a well-dressed wife. Perhaps that accounts for your success now. No one but I know what you went through. I'm sure you can't blame me for leaving you. I was perfectly willing to help you with your work, but you refused to allow me. I'd been through high school and I had lots of cunning ideas. Well, I let you go it alone and you have surprised me.

I didn't see how you could have afforded such an alimony. But you were the last young man, Bertie. I made up my mind I'd never marry another. Young men are so ambitious and selfish.

[SAM in fourth frame.] When I met Sam I never was so deceived in a man. I thought he was gentle. Your children were darlings, but how a man could expect a stepmother to take care of another woman's children I never could make out. Of course, I used to tell them stories before I married you, but I couldn't keep it up afterward. I must have some chance to express my individuality. I wouldn't lost that for all the husbands in the world.

You were so selfish like all the rest. Not one of my husbands had such a temper. I must not allow men to dominate me any more. I have quite made up my mind. I have always lived for some one else. Poor old Sam, you didn't understand me. You might have been a bit more generous with the alimony. If it hadn't been for the children—perhaps—oh, I think you were positively silly over those children. You'll spoil them.

Well, there goes the last of them—that is, so far. I've been—a wronged, misunderstood woman. I think I'll turn to the stage. There may be somewhere in the world—a man who will push me forward in a career. Allow me to express my soul. [Sighs.] Oh, is there such a man? [To husbands.] Oh, my husbands? He shall replace you all. He shall be number five.

CURTAIN