

How to Stay Married

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Introduction to revised edition

More than forty years ago, I dined next to Godfrey Smith, the gloriously convivial editor of the *Sunday Times* Colour Magazine, and regaled him with tales about the screaming domestic chaos of my first months of marriage. I explained that because we made love all night and I spent all day, except for a scurrying shopping lunch, at the office, then rushed home to wash, iron, clean the flat, cook and eat supper, make love all night, go to the office – a pattern that was repeated until one died of exhaustion and our flat was so dirty I found a fungus growing under the sink.

On one occasion, I told Godfrey, my red silk scarf strayed into the washing machine at the launderette, so my husband Leo's shirts came out streaked like the dawn and he claimed he was the only member of the rugger fifteen with a rose-pink jockstrap. Our attempts at DIY were just as disastrous, as we stripped off the damp course in the drawing room, then found we'd papered our cat to the wall like the *Canterville Ghost*. Godfrey laughed a lot and commissioned a piece called 'A Young Wife's Tale', which appeared in the *Sunday Times* colour mag.

My poor mother was subsequently besieged by telephone calls from her friends: 'Darling, what's a jockstrap?'

Shortly after I had the miraculous break of a column in the *Sunday Times*, which lasted thirteen and a half years. At the same time a publishing friend asked me to write a little book called *How to Stay Married*.

I was so unbelievably flattered that even though I'd

only been married seven years, I said yes, and was soon merrily laying down the law on everything from sex on the honeymoon to setting up house, from in-laws to infidelity. With a deadline of three months, however, as well as my new weekly column to write, a six-month-old baby to look after and a newish house in Fulham to try to run, my poor neglected Leo got very short shrift and grumbled the book should be called *How to Get Divorced*.

He was, in fact, a huge help with the writing and, as can be seen by his photograph on the jacket, was the handsome hero of the book, which amazingly was published on time in October 1969 and even received some kind reviews.

Forty-two years later, when I blithely suggested reprinting *How to Stay Married* to coincide with our approaching golden wedding, my gallant publishers – to whom I have been happily hitched for almost as long – suggested I write a new foreword (or backward) from a fifty-year perspective. This entailed re-reading *How to Stay Married* for the first time since it was published, whereupon I nearly died of horror. What a smug, opinionated proselytising little know-all I was then. For a start, I announced sternly that men detested seeing women slaving in the house, so their wives must arrange to work from 8.30 a.m. to 4.30 p.m. so they could rush home and clean, iron and cook before their husband returned.

‘If you amuse a man in bed,’ I went on, ‘he’s not likely to bother about the mountain of dust underneath it,’ or even more hubristically, ‘be unlikely to stray.’

How could I have insisted that ‘a woman should be grateful her husband wants her,’ and suggested that if a wife refuses her husband sex then she has only herself to blame if he’s unfaithful. Ouch, ouch!

Amending this bit is one of the only changes I have made to the text.

More shamefully, I have never practised what I preached, advocating total honesty about money being essential in marriage, and that ‘couples should always know what the other is spending’. And that from a wife who regularly smuggled new clothes into her wardrobe, ripping off the price tag, lying: ‘This old thing.’

‘No wife has the right to go to seed,’ I thundered, when I myself become a positive hayfield when I’m trying to finish a book, not washing my hair for days, hairy ankles sprouting out from ragged tracksuit bottoms. Yet not a word did I add urging husbands to exert self-control to avoid a beer belly.

Back in 1969, of course, men were expected to be masterful: ‘If a man is married to a slut,’ I pronounced fiercely, he must remonstrate with her, adding that ‘women like a firm hand.’

‘They’d probably prefer a farm hand,’ observed Leo, when he read that bit.

My recommendations were all so dogmatic. One moment I was warning wives at the pain of divorce not to run out of toothpaste or loo paper, the next telling them how to detect if their husband was having an affair: ‘If you both come home from work and the cat isn’t hungry.’ There was hardly anything about wives pursuing a career. If she needed a little money, I suggested, why not make paper flowers, or frame pictures?

Oh dear, oh dear. In mitigation, I suppose I was writing in a different age, when women’s lib had hardly been heard of. No one had dreamed up New Men or paternity leave, and two-career marriages were a rarity, particularly if the couple had children. My own youthful ambition had been to marry a man

I'd fallen madly in love with, who'd whisk me away from the squalor of the typing pool. My role model was my beautiful mother, who looked after my father and us children so well because she never went out to work. My father, the breadwinner, because he called the shots, was surreptitiously nicknamed 'Monsieur Bossy' by my brother and me.

And yet despite the arrogance and the bossiness, I think there is good sense in much of *How to Stay Married*. What, I wonder, is the secret of a good marriage? Separate towns if you both snore, goes the old joke. Separate razors certainly. Today, probably separate remote controls.

My secret was to marry a really sweet man, who as I said back in 1969, had been married before. Thus after a cataclysmic row when I was tearfully packing my bags, he would reassure me that such tempests were normal in marriage and would blow over. Then he would make me laugh by saying we mustn't let Michael, our black cat, be the victim of a broken home.

Throughout our marriage he's constantly been funny.

'What does Jilly wear in bed?' asked one journalist, to which Leo replied, 'Dogs mostly,' and that when he reached over in the night for something furry, he would often get bitten.

Marriage, I've always believed, is kept alive by bed-springs creaking as much from helpless laughter as from sex. On our honeymoon we passed a large sign saying: 'Bear left for Norwich', and had this vision of some purposeful grizzly setting out on his travels. Soon the bear had spawned a whole family of other imaginary bears, about whom we made up silly private jokes and talked through them, as we always talk through our animals:

‘You love that dog more than me,’ Leo will say.

‘I don’t, I don’t, he’s just nicer to me sometimes.’

When we had been married forty years, in 2001, although reeling from the hammer blow of Leo being diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease, we celebrated our ruby wedding with a very jolly party. In a speech, displaying far more humility than I ever did in *How to Stay Married*, I compared marriage to two people rowing across a vast ocean in a tiny boat, sometimes revelling in blue skies and lovely sunsets, sometimes rocked by storms so violent we’d nearly capsized, but somehow we’d battled on.

So many people gave us red or crimson roses, that we made a special ruby wedding flower bed in our garden. Ten years later as our golden wedding draws near, the roses are blooming, if a little battered, and the bed is invaded by wild flowers, happily including speedwell.

We have now reached a stage in our marriage when we worry much less about screwing than unscrewing the top on the Sancerre bottle or the glucosamine pills. We are utterly defeated by technology, but one of the plusses of six gorgeous grandchildren is they can turn on the DVD, use Google, send emails, change channels on wireless and television and record programmes for us.

Several hours a day are spent searching for credit cards, paper knives and spectacles, or a glass of wine left in an alcove in another room. The other day, we spent an acrimonious half-hour missing *Downton Abbey* as we searched frantically for the remote control, only to find Leo was sitting on it.

Having never mastered the metric system, I am utterly defeated by grams in cookery. Last week, as his red pair of cords plummeted to the floor, Leo announced he’d lost ten kilometres in weight.

Invitations and letters disappear in chucked-away newspapers, so people roll up unexpectedly for drinks or even dinner.

‘You never told me they were coming.’

‘I did, I did, but you never listen.’

But though domestic chaos is come again, I still believe that a happy marriage is the best thing life has to offer, cemented as much by the moments of irritation as of tenderness.

‘For everyone, particularly children,’ claimed Cecil King in 1969, ‘the essential basis for security and happiness is a loving home.’

To counteract this, hideous recently released statistics reveal that 50 per cent of children today can expect their parents to split up by the time they are sixteen. More tellingly, a vast 80 per cent of these splits happen to unmarried couples. Marriage, for all its limitations, makes people try harder.

Children above all long for their parents to stay together. When a teacher asked one little girl to define love, she wistfully replied: ‘Daddy and Mummy getting married.’

So I hope, despite some arrogance and smugness, that by charting the very real joys as well as the pitfalls – and panic stations – of our early years together, I may reassure and encourage more couples: married, unmarried, gay and straight, to stay together more happily.

God speed and good luck.

Jilly Cooper 2011

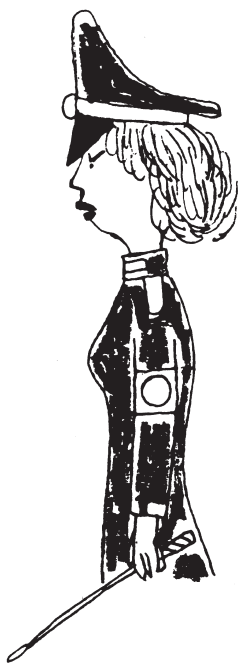
How to Stay Married

jilly cooper



drawings by Timothy Jaques

how to stay married



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to Leo

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Introduction

It is extremely easy to get married – it costs £4.5s. and takes two days to get a licence. It is much harder to stay married.

My only qualifications for writing a book on the subject are that I have had the example of parents who have lived in harmony for nearly forty years, and I myself am still married extremely happily after eight years. In eight years, of course, we've had marvellous patches and patches so bad that they rocked our marriage to its foundations, but I've come to realise that if you can cling on like a barnacle during the bad patches, your marriage will survive and in all probability be strengthened.

Anyone else's marriage is a dark unexplored continent, and although I have observed far too many of my friends going swiftly in and out of wedlock, I can only guess at what it was that broke the marriage up. Since the word got around that I was writing this book, my task has been made doubly difficult by the fact that married couples either sidled away or started behaving ostentatiously well, whenever I came into the room.

One of the great comforts of my own marriage, however, has been that my husband was married before, knew the ropes, and during any really black period, when I was all for opting out and packing my bags, would reassure me that such black periods were to be expected in marriage, and it had been far worse for him the first time round.

Similarly I hope that by pointing out some of the disasters and problems that beset us and how we weathered them, it may reassure other people either married or contemplating marriage.

Here comes the bride

THE WEDDING

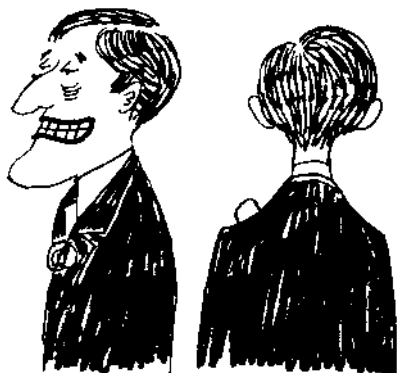
This is blast off – the day you (or rather your mother) have been waiting for all your life. It'll pass in a dream and afterwards you won't remember a thing about it. It helps, however, if you both turn up. Dope yourself with tranquillisers by all means, but watch the champagne later: drugs mixed with drink often put you out like a light. And don't forget to take the price tags off your new shoes, they'll show when you kneel down in church.

Brides: don't be disappointed if you don't look your best, far more likely you'll be scarlet in the face and piggy-eyed from lack of sleep.



Bride not looking her best

Bridegrooms: remember to look round and smile as your bride comes up the aisle. She'll be too busy coping with her bouquet and veil to notice, but it will impress those armies of guests lined up on either side of the church.



Groom smiling at bride

Coming down the aisle's more tricky – you never know where to look, that radiant smile can easily set into a rictus grin, and there's bound to be one guest you know too well, whose eye you want to avoid (like Tallulah Bankhead's remark about one couple coming down the aisle: 'I've had them both and they were lousy!').

If you look solemn, people will think you're having second thoughts. Best policy is to settle for a cool smirk with your eyes on the door of the church.

Be careful what hymns you choose. People like a good bellow at a wedding, so don't choose anything obscure. Equally, be careful of hymns with double meanings like 'Jesu – the very thought of thee', which will make everyone giggle and spoil the dignity and repose of the occasion.

THE RECEPTION

First there's the line-up, and you'll get so tired of shaking hands, trying to remember faces and gushing like an oil well, you'll begin to have a real sympathy with the Royal Family.

Don't worry when you circulate among the guests afterwards if none of them will speak to you. They'll all feel you're far too important to waste time talking to them, and you'll wander round like a couple of wraiths.

If you must make speeches, keep them short. Thank everyone in sight, and tell one stunning joke to convince your in-laws you do have a sense of humour after all. Never let the best man either speak or read the telegrams, unless he's very funny.

Don't flirt with exes. One girl I know, whose husband spent the reception playing 'do you remember' with an old girlfriend, refused to go on the honeymoon.

Try not to get drunk – you may feel like it – but it will cause recriminations later.

The honeymoon

Originally, the honeymoon was intended for husbands to initiate their innocent young brides into the delights and mysteries of sex. Today, when most couples have slept together anyway and are already bankrupted by the cost of setting up a house, the whole thing seems a bit of a farce and a needless expense. You probably both need a holiday, however.

When you arrive at your destination, you're likely to feel a sense of anti-climax. You're exhausted and suffering from post-champagne depression (a real killer). For months you've been coping with squabbles with the caterers, bridesmaids' tantrums over their head-dresses, parcels arriving every day, the hall

littered with packing straw, writer's cramp from answering letters, traumas with the dressmakers – every moment's been occupied, you're wound up like a clock, and suddenly it's all over and you've nothing to do for a fortnight except each other.

For the wife in particular, everything's suddenly new and unfamiliar, her spongebag and flannel, new pigskin luggage, a whole trousseau of new clothes, dazzling white underwear instead of the usual dirty grey – even her name is new.

The thing to remember is that your wife/husband is probably as nervous and in need of reassurance as you are, like the wild beast surprised in the jungle who's always supposed to be more frightened than oneself.

SABOTEURS

The first thing to do on arrival at your honeymoon hotel is to search the bedroom for signs of sabotage. Jokey wedding guests may well have instructed the hotel staff to make you an apple pie bed, or wire up the springs of the bed to the hotel fire alarm.

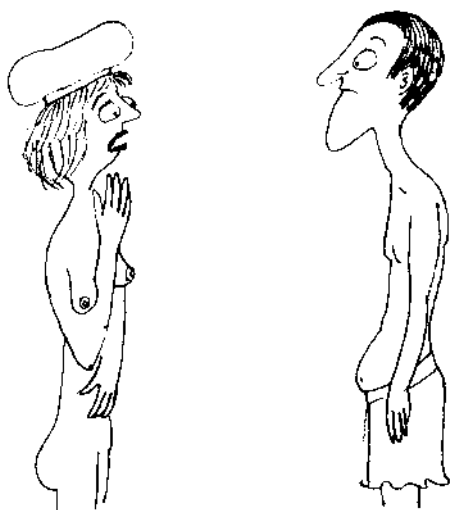
One couple I know reached their hotel to be confronted by the manager waving a telegram from one such joker, saying: 'My wife has just run off with my best friend, I believe they are booked into your hotel under the assumed name of Mr and Mrs So and So. Could you refuse to let them have the booked room until I arrive?' Whether you're heading for the Bahamas or Billericay, the best way to scotch honeymoon saboteurs is not to be coy about your destination. Simply tell everyone you're staying at the Grand and then book rooms at the Majestic.

Then there's the problem of getting used to living together. Here again the wife in particular will be worried about keeping up appearances. Before marriage she's relied on mud packs and rollers and skinfood at

night, but now her husband's going to be with her every moment of the day, and the mystery's going to be ruined. When's she going to find time to shave her legs? And she's always told her husband she's a natural blonde, and suddenly he's going to find the home-bleacher in her suitcase.

She'll soon get used to it all, just as she'll get used to sitting on the loo and gossiping to her husband while he's having a bath, or to wandering around with nothing on instead of discreetly changing in the bathroom.

If she's ashamed of her small breasts and mottled thighs, he's probably equally self-conscious about his narrow shoulders and hairless chest.



If she's ashamed . . .

FIRST THING IN THE MORNING

If you're worried you look like a road accident in the mornings, sleep with the curtains drawn, and if you're scared your mouth will taste like a parrot's cage when he bends over to kiss you, pretend you're going to the loo, and nip out and clean your teeth.

DON'T PANIC if you get bored, or have a row, or feel claustrophobic or homesick. These are all part of growing-together pains. They won't establish a behaviour pattern for the next fifty years.

A vital honeymoon ploy is to go somewhere where there is plenty to do. It's not sacrilege to go to the cinema or watch a soccer match or even look up friends in the district. Take lots of books and sleeping pills.

DON'T PANIC if you get on each other's nerves. My mother, who's been happily married to my father for over thirty years, nearly left him on honeymoon because he got a line of doggerel on his mind and repeated it over and over again as they motored through the cornfields of France.

We drove round Norfolk on our honeymoon and I nearly sent my husband insane by exclaiming: 'How lovely', every time we passed a village church.

SEX

I'm not going into the intricacies of sexual initiation – there are numerous books on the subject – I would just plead for both parties to be patient, tolerant, appreciative and understanding. Temporary frigidity and impotence are not infrequent occurrences on honeymoon, and not to be taken too seriously.

Take things slowly, you've probably got a lifetime in front of you – all that matters at this stage is to get across strongly that you love each other, and you're not sorry you are married.

DON'T WORRY if, unlike the girl in *The Carpetbaggers* who wanted to see nothing but ceilings on her honeymoon, you don't feel like leaping on each other all the time. As I've already pointed out, you're probably exhausted and in no condition for a sexual marathon.

Do take a red towel if you're a virgin, or likely to have the Curse. It saves embarrassment over the sheets.

Even if you've been sleeping together for ages beforehand, and sex was stunning, don't worry if it goes off for a bit, or feel convinced that it can only work in a clandestine setting. You haven't been married before, and may just be having initial panic because the stable door is well and truly bolted.

One friend told me he was woken up in the middle of most nights of his honeymoon by his wife staggering groggily out of bed, groping for her clothes and muttering she must get home before her parents woke up.



Eases tensions

It's a good idea to borrow someone's cottage in the country for a honeymoon. It's cheaper than a hotel, and you won't be worried by the imagined chortlings of chambermaids and hallporters, and you can cook if you get bored.

Don't worry if he/she doesn't gaze into your eyes all the time and quote poetry. Most people don't know enough poetry to last more than a quarter of an hour. A certain amount of alcohol is an excellent idea – it eases tension, breaks down inhibitions. Take the case of the girl in our office who on her arrival with her new husband at the hotel was presented with a bottle of champagne.

'It was wonderful,' she told us. 'We shared a glass each night and made the bottle last the whole fortnight.'

WEDDING PRESENTS

Get your thank-you letters written before the wedding. Once the pre-wedding momentum has been lost, you'll never get down to them.

Don't beef too much about the presents your partner's family or friends have given you, even if they are ghastly. No one likes to be reminded that they are related to, or acquainted with, people of execrable taste. Try and keep a list of who gave you what, so you can bring those cake forks out of hiding when Aunt Agatha comes to tea, and you won't, as we did, give a particularly hideous vase back to the woman who gave it to us, when later she got married.