

ON THE CHOICE OF A WIFE

Wife-choosing is an unending business. This sounds immoral, but what I mean will be clearer in the context. People have lived--innumerable people--exhausted experience, and yet other people keep on coming to hand, none the wiser, none the better. It is like a waterfall more than anything else in the world. Every year one has to turn to and warn another batch about these stale old things. Yet it is one's duty--the last thing that remains to a man. And as a piece of worldly wisdom, that has nothing to do with wives, always leave a few duties neglected for the comfort of your age. There are such a lot of other things one can do when one is young.

Now, the kind of wife a young fellow of eight- or nine-and-twenty insists on selecting is something of one-and-twenty or less, inexperienced, extremely pretty, graceful, and well dressed, not too clever, accomplished; but I need not go on, for the youthful reader can fill in the picture himself from his own ideal. Every young man has his own ideal, as a matter of course, and they are all exactly alike. Now, I do not intend to repeat all the stale old saws of out-of-date wiseacres. Most of them are even more foolish than the follies they reprove. Take, for instance, the statement that "beauty fades." Absurd; everyone knows perfectly well that, as the years creep on, beauty simply gets more highly coloured. And then, "beauty is only skin-deep." Fantastically wrong! Some of it is not that; and, for the rest, is a woman like a toy

balloon?--just a surface? To hear that proverb from a man is to know him at once for a phonographic kind of fool. The fundamental and enduring grace of womanhood goes down to the skeleton; you cannot have a pretty face without a pretty skull, just as you cannot have one without a good temper.

Yet all the same there is an excellent reason why one should shun beauty in a prospective wife, at anyrate obvious beauty--the kind of beauty people talk about, and which gets into the photographers' windows. The common beautiful woman has a style of her own, a favourite aspect. After all, she cannot be perfect. She comes upon you, dazzles you, marries you; there is a time of ecstasy. People envy you, continue to envy you. After a time you envy yourself--yourself of the day before yesterday. For the imperfection, the inevitable imperfection--in one case I remember it was a smile--becomes visible to you, becomes your especial privilege. That is the real reason. No beauty is a beauty to her husband. But with the plain woman--the thoroughly plain woman--it is different. At first--I will not mince matters--her ugliness is an impenetrable repulse. Face it. After a time little things begin to appear through the violent discords: little scraps of melody--a shy tenderness in her smile that peeps out at you and vanishes, a something that is winning, looking out of her eyes. You find a waviness of her hair that you never saw at the beginning, a certain surprising, pleasing, enduring want of clumsiness in part of her ear. And it is yours. You can see she strikes the beholder with something of a shock; and while the beauty of the beauty is common for all the world to

rejoice in, you will find in your dear, plain wife beauty enough and to spare; exquisite--for it is all your own, your treasure-trove, your safely-hidden treasure....

Then, in the matter of age; though young fellows do not imagine it, it is very easy to marry a wife too young. Marriage has been defined as a foolish bargain in which one man provides for another man's daughter, but there is no reason why this should go so far as completing her education. If your conception of happiness is having something pretty and innocent and troublesome about you, something that you can cherish and make happy, a pet rabbit is in every way preferable. At the worst that will nibble your boots. I have known several cases of the girl-wife, and it always began like an idyll, charmingly; the tenderest care on one hand, winsome worship on the other--until some little thing, a cut chin or a missing paper, startled the pure and natural man out of his veneer, dancing and blaspheming, with the most amazing consequences. Only a proven saint should marry a girl-wife, and his motives might be misunderstood. The idyllic wife is a beautiful thing to read about, but in practice idylls should be kept episodes; in practice the idyllic life is a little too like a dinner that is all dessert. A common man, after a time, tires of winsome worship; he craves after companionship, and a sympathy based on experience. The ordinary young man, with the still younger wife, I have noticed, continues to love her with all his heart--and spends his leisure telling somebody else's wife all about it. If in these days of blatant youth an experienced man's counsel is worth anything, it would be to marry a woman considerably older than oneself,

if one must marry at all. And while upon this topic--and I have lived long--the ideal wife, I am persuaded, from the close observation of many years, is invariably, by some mishap, a widow....

Avoid social charm. It was the capacity for entertaining visitors that ruined Paradise. It grows upon a woman. An indiscriminating personal magnetism is perhaps the most dreadful vice a wife can have. You think you have married the one woman in the world, and you find you have married a host--that is to say, a hostess. Instead of making a home for you she makes you something between an ethnographical museum and a casual ward. You find your rooms littered with people and teacups and things, strange creatures that no one could possibly care for, that seem scarcely to care for themselves. You go about the house treading upon chance geniuses, and get tipped by inexperienced guests. And even when she does not entertain, she is continually going out. I do not deny that charming people are charming, that their company should be sought, but seeking it in marriage is an altogether different matter.

Then, I really must insist that young men do not understand the real truth about accomplishments. There comes a day when the most variegated wife comes to the end of her tunes, and another when she ends them for the second time; *Vita longa, ars brevis*--at least, as regards the art of the schoolgirl. It is only like marrying a slightly more complicated barrel-organ. And, for another point, watch the young person you would honour with your hand for the slightest inkling of economy or tidiness. Young men are so full of poetry and emotion that it does not occur to

them how widely the sordid vices are distributed in the other sex. If you are a hotel proprietor, or a school proprietor, or a day labourer, such weaknesses become a strength, of course, but not otherwise. For a literary person--if perchance you are a literary person--it is altogether too dreadful. You are always getting swept and garnished, straightened up and sent out to be shaved. And home--even your study--becomes a glittering, spick-and-span mechanism. But you know the parable of the seven devils?

To conclude, a summary. The woman you choose should be plain, as plain as you can find, as old or older than yourself, devoid of social gifts or accomplishments, poor--for your self-respect--and with a certain amiable untidiness. Of course no young man will heed this, but at least I have given my counsel, and very excellent reasons for that counsel. And possibly I shall be able to remind him that I told him as much, in the course of a few years' time. And, by the bye, I had almost forgotten! Never by any chance marry a girl whose dresses do up at the back, unless you can afford her a maid or so of her own.

THE HOUSE OF DI SORNO

A MANUSCRIPT FOUND IN A BOX