

THE JOYS OF BEING ENGAGED

As I was passing the London University the other day I saw my uncle emerge from the branch of the Bank of England opposite, and proceed in the direction of the Burlington Arcade. He was elaborately disguised as a young man, even to the youthful flower, and I was incontinently smitten with curiosity respecting the dark purpose he might veil in this way. There is, to me, a peculiar and possibly rather a childish fascination in watching my more intimate friends unobserved, and, curiously enough, I had never before studied the avuncular back view. I found something singularly entertaining in the study of the graceful contour of his new frock coat, and in the cheerful carriage of his cane. He paraded, a dignified procession of one, some way down the Arcade, hesitated for a moment outside a jeweller's shop, and then entered it. I strolled on as far as Piccadilly, returned to the shop, and so fell upon him suddenly in the midst of his buying.

"Hullo, George!" he said hastily, facing me so as to hide as much of the counter as possible. "How's Euphemia?"

I looked him fairly in the eye. "You are buying a ring," I said in a firm, decided voice.

He turned to the counter with an air of surprise. "By Jove, so I am!"

"A lady's ring," I said. He was, I could see, hastily collecting his sufficiently nimble powers of subterfuge. "One must buy something, you know, George, sometimes," he said feebly.

He had selected some dozen or so already, the most palpable engagement rings I think I ever saw. One of them had visible on its inner curvature the four letters MIZP--. He looked at them, saw the posy, and then, glancing at me, laughed affably. "I meant to tell you yesterday, George--I will take these," to the shopman. And we emerged with a superficial amiability; the case of rings in my uncle's pocket. The thing was rather a shock to me, coming so suddenly and unexpectedly. I had anticipated some innocent purchase of the jewellery he reviles so much, but certainly not significant rings, golden fetters for others to wear and enslave him; and we were past the flowershop towards Hyde Park before either of us spoke. It seemed so dreadful to me that the cheerful, talkative man beside me, my own father's little brother, a traveller in distant countries, and a most innocent man, and with all the inveterate habits of thirty years' honourable bachelorhood and all the mellowness of life upon him, should, without consulting me, have taken the first irrevocable step towards becoming a ratepayer, a pew tenant, paterfamilias, a fighter with schoolmasters, and the serf of a butler, that I scarcely knew what to say adequate to the occasion.

"Well," said I at last, with an involuntary sigh, "I suppose I must congratulate you."

"Don't look at it in that light, George," said my uncle; and he added in a more cheerful tone, "I am only going to get engaged, you know."

"You can scarcely imagine, George," he proceeded, "how I have longed to be engaged. All my life it has been my hope and goal. It is, I think, the ideal state of man. There was a chap with me when I was at Kimberley who first put the idea into my head. His ways were animated and cheerful even for a diamond field, where you know animation and cheerfulness are, so to speak, *de rigueur*. Whisky he affected, and jesting of the kind that paints cities scarlet. And he used every night, before festivities began, to write a long letter to some girl in England, and say, within limits, how bad he had been and how he longed to reform and be with her, and never, never do anything wrong any more. He poured all the higher and better parts of his nature into the letter, and folded it up and sealed it very carefully. And then he came to us in a singularly relieved frame of mind, and would be the life and soul of as merry a game of follow-your-leader as one can well imagine."

Pleasant reminiscences occupied him for a moment. "Every man should be engaged, I think, to at least one woman. It is the homage we owe to womankind, and a duty to our souls. His fiancée is indeed the Madonna of a true-hearted man; the thought of her is a shrine at the wayside of one's meditations, and her presence a temple wherein we cleanse our souls. She is mysterious, worshipful, and inaccessible,

something perhaps of the woman, possibly even propitious and helpful, and yet something of the Holy Grail as well. You have no rights with her, nor she with you; you owe her no definite duties, and yet she is singularly yours. A smile is a favour, a touch of her fingers, a faint pressure of your hand, is an infinite privilege. You cannot demand the slightest help or concern of her, so you ask it with diffident grace and there is an overflowing stream of gratitude from small occasions. Whatever you give her is a gift too, while a husband is just property, a mere draught-camel for her service. All your functions are decorative, you hang her shrine with flowers and precious stones. You treat her to art and literature, and as for vulgar necessities--some one else sees to that."

"Until you are married," began I.

"I am speaking of being engaged. Marriage is altogether a different thing. The essence of a proper engagement is reverence, distance, and mystery; the essence of marriage is familiarity. A fiancée is a living eidolon; a wife, from my point of view at least, should be a confidential companion, a fellow-conspirator, an accessory after the fact, at least, to one's little errors; should take some share of the burthen and heat of the day with one, and have the humour to bear with a mood of vexation or a fit of the blues. I doubt, do you know, if the same kind of girl is suitable for engagements as for marriage. For an engagement give me something very innocent, a little awe-inspiring on that account, absolutely and tenderly worshipful, yet given to moods of

caressing affection, and altogether graceful and beautiful. A man, I think, ought to be incapable of smoking or lounging in front of the girl he professes to love, so reverent ought his love to be. But for marriage let me have humour and some community of taste, a woman who can climb stiles and stand tobacco smoke, and who knows a good cook by her fruits.... It is a complicated business, this marrying.

"The familiarity of the marriage state, if it does not breed positive contempt on the part of the angel, engenders at times, I think, a considerable craving for change on the side of both parties. We men are poor creatures at the best--I always pity your Euphemia. Married people, for instance, always get too much of each other's conversation. They do not have sufficient opportunity to recuperate their topics from original sources. They get interested in outside people, merely from a perfectly legitimate desire to get some amusing novel ideas for each other, and then comes jealousy. I sometimes think that if Adam and Eve had been merely engaged, she would not have talked with the serpent; and the world had been saved an infinity of misery.

"No, George: engagements for me. It is the state we were made for. I have delayed this matter all too long. But, thank heaven, I am engaged at last--I hope for all the rest of my life. Now, will you not congratulate me?"

"It may be very nice as you put it, but engagements end as well as begin," I insisted. "You cannot be a law unto yourself in these

matters. When will you get married?"

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed my uncle. "Get married and end this delightful state! You don't think she will want me to marry her, do you? Besides, she told me some time ago that she did not intend to marry again. It was only that encouraged me to suggest an engagement to her. Though she is a wonderful woman, George--a wonderful woman. Still, I think she looks at things very much as I do."

He paused thoughtfully. Then added with fervour, "At least I hope so."

LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI

A RHAPSODY

I found him in his own apartments, and strangely disordered. He went to and fro, raving--beginning so soon as I entered the room. I noticed a book half out of its cover, flung carelessly into the corner of the room.

"I am enchanted of an impalpable woman, George," he said, "I am in bonds to a spirit of the air. I can neither think nor work nor eat nor sleep because of her. Sometimes I go out suddenly, tramping through