Husbands and Bachelors

H. L. Mencken

THE ACTUAL HUSBAND views it as a great testimony to his prowess at amour to yield up his liberty, his property and his soul to the first woman who, in despair of finding better game, turns her appraising eye upon him. But if you want to hear a mirthless laugh, just present this masculine theory to a bridesmaid at a wedding, particularly after alcohol and crocodile tears have done their disarming work upon her. That is to say, just hint to her that the bride harboured no notion of marriage until stormed into acquiescence by the moonstruck and impetuous bridegroom.

I have used the phrase, “in despair of finding better game.” What I mean is this: that not one woman in a hundred ever marries her first choice among marriageable men. That first choice is almost invariably one who is beyond her talents, for reasons either fortuitous or intrinsic. Let us take, for example, a woman whose relative naiveté makes the process clearly apparent, to wit, a simple shop-girl. Her absolute first choice, perhaps, is not a living man at all, but a supernatural abstraction in a book, say, one of the heroes of Hall Caine, Ethel M. Dell, or Marie Corelli. After him comes a moving-picture actor. Then another moving-picture actor. Then, perhaps, many more – ten or fifteen head. Then a sebaceous young clergyman. Then the junior partner in the firm she works for. Then a couple of department managers. Then a clerk. Then a young man with no definite profession or permanent job – one of the innumerable host which flits from post to post, always restive, always trying something new – perhaps a neighbourhood garage-keeper in the end. Well, the girl begins with the Caine colossus: he vanishes into thin air. She proceeds to the moving picture actors: they are almost as far beyond her. And then to the man of God, the junior partner, the department manager, the clerk: one and all they are carried off by girls of greater attractions and greater skill – girls who can cast gaudier flies. In the end, suddenly terrorized by the first faint shadows of spinsterhood, she turns to the ultimate num-skull – and marries him out of hand.

This, allowing for class modifications, is almost the normal history of a marriage, or, more accurately, of the genesis of a marriage, under Protestant Christianity. Under other rites the business is taken out of the woman’s hands, at least partly, and so she is less enterprising in her assembling of candidates and possibilities. But when the whole thing is left to her own heart – i.e., to her head – it is but natural that she should seek as wide a range of choice as the conditions of her life allow, and in a democratic society those conditions put few if any fetters upon her fancy. The servant girl, or factory operative, or even prostitute of today may be the chorus girl or moving picture vampire of tomorrow and the millionaire’s wife of next year. In America, especially, men have no settled antipathy to such stooping alliances; in fact, it rather flatters their vanity to play Prince Charming to Cinderella. The result is that every normal American young woman, with the practicality of her sex and the inner confidence that goes therewith, raises her amorous eye as high as it will roll. And the second result is that every American man of presentable exterior and easy means is surrounded by an aura of discreet provocation: he cannot even dictate a letter, or ask for a telephone number without being measured for his wedding coat. On the Continent of Europe, and especially in the Latin countries, where class barriers are more formidable, the situation differs materially, and to the disadvantage of the girl. If she makes an overture, it is an invitation to disaster; her hope of lawful marriage by such means is almost nil. In consequence, the prudent and decent girl avoids such overtures, and they must be made by third parties or by the man himself. This is the explanation of the fact that a Frenchman, say, is habitually enterprising in amour, and hence bold and often offensive, whereas an American is what is called chivalrous. The American is chivalrous for the simple reason that the initiative is not in his hands. His chivalry is really a sort of coquetry.

The Unattainable Ideal

THE AVERAGE WOMAN is not strategically capable of bringing down the most tempting game within her purview, and must thus content herself with a second, third, or nth choice. The only women who get their first choices are those who run in almost miraculous luck and those too stupid to formulate an ideal – two very small classes, it must be obvious. A few women, true enough, are so pertinacious that they prefer defeat to compromise. That is to say, they prefer to put off marriage indefinitely rather than to marry beneath the highest leap of their fancy. But such women may be quickly dismissed as abnormal, and perhaps as downright diseased in mind; the average woman is well aware that marriage is far better for her than celibacy, even when it falls a good deal short of her primary hopes... Thus the average woman is under none of the common masculine illusions about elective affinities, soul mates, love at first sight, and such phantasms. She is quite ready to fall in love, as the phrase is, with any man who is plainly eligible, and she usually knows a good many more such men than one. Her primary demand in marriage is not for the agonies of romance, but for comfort and security... One frequently hears of remarried widowers who continue to moon about their dead first wives, but for a remarried widow to show any such sentimentality would be a nine days’ wonder. Once replaced, a dead husband is expunged from the minutes. And so is a dead love.

One of the results of all this is a subtle reinforcement of the contempt with which women normally regard their husbands – a contempt grounded, as I have shown, upon a sense of intellectual superiority. To this primary sense of superiority is now added the disparagement of a concrete comparison, and over all is an ineradicable resentment of the fact that such a comparison has been necessary. In other words, the typical husband is a second-rater, and no one is better aware of it than his wife. He is, taking averages, one who has been loved, as the saying goes, by but one woman, and then only as a second, third or nth choice. If any other woman had ever loved him, as the idiom has it, she would have married him, and so made him ineligible for his present happiness. But the average bachelor is a man who has been loved, so to speak, by many women, and is the lost first choice of at least some of them. He represents the unattainable, and hence the admirable; the husband is the attained and disdained.

Here we have a sufficient explanation of the general superiority of bachelors, so often noted by students of mankind – a superiority so marked that it is difficult, in all history, to find six first-rate philosophers who were married men. The bachelor’s very capacity to avoid marriage is no more than a proof of his relative freedom from the ordinary sentimentalism of his sex – in other words, of his greater approximation to the clearheadedness of the enemy sex. He is able to defeat the enterprise of women because he brings to the business an equipment almost comparable to their own. Herbert Spencer, until he was fifty, was ferociously harassed by women of all sorts. Among others, George Eliot tried very desperately to marry him. But after he had made it plain, over a long series of years, that he was prepared to resist marriage to the full extent of his military and naval power, the girls dropped off one by one, and so his last decades were full of peace and he got a great deal of very important work done.

The Effect on the Race

IT IS, OF COURSE, not well for the world that the highest sort of men are thus selected out, as the biologists say, and that their superiority dies with them, whereas the ignoble tricks and sentimentalities of lesser men are infinitely propagated. Despite a popular delusion that the sons of great men are always dolts, the fact is that intellectual superiority is inheritable quite as easily as bodily strength; and that fact has been established beyond cavil by the laborious inquiries of Galton, Pearson and the other anthropometricians of the English school. If such men as Spinoza, Kant, Schopenhauer, Spencer, and Nietzsche had married and begotten sons, those sons, it is probable, would have contributed as much to philosophy as the sons and grandsons of Veit Bach contributed to music, or those of Erasmus Darwin to biology, or those of Henry Adams to politics, or those of Hamilcar Barca to the art of war. I have said that Herbert Spencer’s escape from marriage facilitated his life-work, and so served the immediate good of English philosophy, but in the long run it will work a detriment, for he left no sons to carry on his labours, and the remaining Englishmen of his time were unable to supply the lack. His celibacy, indeed, made English philosophy co-extensive with his life; since his death the whole body of metaphysical speculation produced in England has been of little more practical value to the world than a drove of hogs. In precisely the same way the celibacy of Schopenhauer, Kant and Nietzsche has reduced German philosophy to feebleness.

Even setting aside this direct influence of heredity, there is the equally potent influence of example and tuition. It is a gigantic advantage to live on intimate terms with a first-rate man, and have his care. Hamilcar not only gave the Carthagenians a great general in his actual son; he also gave them a great general in his son-in-law, trained in his camp. But the tendency of the first-rate man to remain a bachelor is very strong, and Sidney Lee once showed that, of all the great writers of England since the Renaissance, more than half were either celibates or lived apart from their wives. Even the married ones revealed the tendency plainly. For example, consider Shakespeare. He was forced into marriage while still a minor by the brothers of Ann Hathaway, who was several years his senior, and had debauched him and gave out that she was enceinte by him. He escaped from her abhorrent embraces as quickly as possible, and thereafter kept as far away from her as he could. His very distaste for marriage, indeed, was the cause of his residence in London, and hence, in all probability, of the labours which made him immortal.

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