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<CHOOSING OR FINDING.>

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The controversy as to which is the better of the two methods of

marrying one's daughter, in use in France and England respectively,

has not yet been decided by any preponderating evidence. Whether the

parents ~~ especially the mother ~~ ought to find a husband for the

daughter, or whether the girl, young and inexperienced as she is,

should seek one for herself, with the chance of not knowing her own

mind in the first place, and of not understanding the real nature of

the man she chooses in the second ~~ these are the two principles

contended for by the rival methods; and the fight is still going on.

The truth is, the worst of either is so infinitely bad that there is

nothing to choose between them; and the same is true, inversely, of

the best. When things go well, the advocates of the particular system

involved sing their pæans, and show how wise they were; when they go

ill, the opponents howl their condemnation, and say: We told you so.

The French method is based on the theory that a woman's knowledge of

the world, and a mother's intimate acquaintance with her daughter's

special temper and requirements, are likely to be truer guides in the

choice of a husband than the callow fancy of a girl. It is assumed

that the former will be better able than the latter to separate the

reality from the appearance, to winnow the grain from the chaff. She

will appraise at its true value a fascinating manner with a shaky

moral character at its back; and a handsome face will go for little

when the family lawyer confesses the poverty of the family purse. To

the girl, a fluent tongue, flattering ways, a taking presence, would

have included everything in heaven and earth that a man should be; and

no dread of future poverty, no evidence of the bushels of wild oats

sown broadcast, would have convinced her that Don Juan was a <hi> mauvais

parti </hi> and a scamp into the bargain. Again, the mother usually knows

her daughters' dispositions better than the daughters themselves, and

can distinguish between idiosyncrasies and needs as no young people

are able to do. Laura is romantic, sentimental, imaginative; but Laura

cannot mend a stocking nor make a shirt, nor do any kind of work

requiring strength of grasp or deftness of touch. She has no power of

endurance, no persistency of will, no executive ability; but she falls

in love with a younger son just setting out to seek his fortunes in

Australia; and, if allowed, she marries him, full of enthusiasm and

delight, and goes out with him. In a year's time she is

dead ~~ literally killed by hardship; or, if she has vitality enough to

survive the hard experience of roughing it in the bush, she collapses

into a wretched, haggard, faded woman, prematurely old, hopeless and

dejected; the miserable victim of circumstances sinking under a burden

too heavy for her to bear.

Now a French mother would have foreseen all these dangers, and would

have provided against them. She would have known the unsubstantial

quality of Laura's romance, and the reality of her physical weakness

and incapacity. She would have kept her out of sight and hearing of

that fascinating younger son just off to Australia to dig out his

rough fortunes in the bush, and would have quietly assigned her to

some conventional well-endowed man of mature age ~~ who might not have

been a soul's ideal, and whose rheumatism would have made him chary of

the moonlight ~~ but who would have taken care of the poor little frail

body, dressed it in dainty gowns and luxurious furs, given it a soft

couch to lie on and a luxurious carriage to drive in, and provided it

with food convenient and ease unbroken. And in the end, Laura would

have found that mamma had known what was best for her; and that her

ordinary-looking, middle-aged caretaker was a better husband for her

than would have been that adventurous young Adonis, who could have

given her nothing better than a shakedown of dried leaves, a deal box

for an arm-chair, and a cup of brick tea for the sparkling wines of

her youth.

It may be a humiliating confession to make, but the old saying about

poverty coming in at the door and love flying out of the window holds

true in all cases where there is not strength enough to rough it; for

the body holds the spirit captive, and, however willing the one may

be, the weakness of the other conquers in the end.

On the other hand, Maria, square-set, defying, adventurous, brave, as

the wife of a rich man here in England, would be as one smothered in

rose leaves. The dull monotony of conventional life would half madden

her; and her uncompromising temper would break out in a thousand

eccentricities, and make her countless enemies. Let <hi> her </hi> go to the bush if you like. She is of the stamp which bears heroes; and her sons

will be a stalwart race fit for the work before them. The wise mother

who had it in hand to organize the future of her daughters would take

care to find her a man and a fortune that would utilize her energy and

courage; but Maria, if left to herself, might perhaps fall in love

with some cavalry officer of good family and expectations, whose

present dash would soon have to be exchanged for the stereotyped

conventionalities of the owner of a place, where, as his wife, her

utmost limit of physical action would be riding to hounds and taking

off the prize for archery.

Such well-fitting arrangements as these are the ideal of the French

system; just as the union of two hearts, the one soul finding its

companion soul and both living happily ever after, is the ideal of the

English system. Against the French lies the charge of the cruel sale,

for so much money, of a young creature who has not been allowed a

choice, scarcely even the right of rejection; against the English the

cruelty of suffering a girl's foolish fancy to destroy her whole life,

and the absurdity of treating such a fancy as a fact. For the French

there is the plea of the enormous power of instinct and habit, and

that really it signifies very little to a girl what man she marries;

provided only that he is kind to her and that she has not fallen in

love with <reg orig=”any one”> anyone </reg> else; seeing that she is sure to love the first

presented. For the English there is the counter plea of individual

needs and independent choice, and the theory that women do not love by

instinct but by sympathy. The French make great account of the

absolute virginity in heart of the young girl they marry; and few

Frenchmen would think they had got the kind of woman warranted if they

married one who had been engaged two or three times already ~~ to whose

affianced lovers had been accorded the familiarities which we in

England hold innocent and as matters of course. The English, in

return, demand a more absolute fidelity after marriage, and are

generous enough to a few false starts before. To them the contract is

more a matter of free choice than it is in France; consequently

failure in carrying out the stipulations carries with it more

dishonour. The French, taking into consideration that the wife had

nothing to say to the bargain which gave her away, are inclined

to be more lenient when the theory of instinctive love fails to

work, and the individuality of the woman expresses itself in an

after-preference; always provided, of course, that the <hi bienséances </hi> are respected, and that no scandal is created.

Among the conflicting rights and wrongs of the two systems it is very

difficult to say which is the better, which the wiser. If it seems a

horrible thing to marry a young girl without her consent, or without

any more knowledge of the man with whom she is to pass her life than

can be got by seeing him once or twice in formal family conclave, it

seems quite as bad to let our women roam about the world at the age

when their instincts are strongest and their reason weakest ~~ open to

the flatteries of fools and fops ~~ the prey of professed

lady-killers ~~ the objects of lover-like attentions by men who mean

absolutely nothing but the amusement of making love ~~ the subjects for

erotic anatomists to study at their pleasure. Who among our girls

after twenty carries an absolutely untouched heart to the man she

marries? Her former predilection may have been a dream, a fancy ~~ still

it was there; and there are few wives who, in their little tiffs and

moments of irritation, do not feel, <p> 'If I had married my first love,

<hi> he </hi> would not have treated me so.' </p> Perhaps a wise man does not care

for a mere baseless thought; but all men are not wise, and to some a

spiritual condition is as real as a physical fact. Others however, do

not trouble themselves for what has gone before if they can but secure

what follows after; but we imagine that most men would rather not

know their wives' dreams; and <hi> cet autre </hi>, however shadowy, is a rival not specially desired by the average husband.

If the independence of life and free intercourse between young men and

maidens is in its degree dangerous in England, what must it be in

America, where anything like chaperonage is unknown, and where girls

and boys flock together without a mamma or a guardian among them?

where engaged couples live under the same roof for months at a time,

also without a mamma or a guardian? and where the young men take the

young women about on night excursions alone, and no harm thought by

<reg orig=”any one”> anyone </reg>? Is human nature really different in America from what it is

in the Old World? Are Columbia's sons in truth like Erin's of old

time, so good or so cold? It is a saying hard of acceptance to us who

are accustomed to regard our daughters as precious things to be taken

care of ~~ if not quite so frail as the French regard theirs, yet not

too secure, and certainly not to be left too much to themselves with

only young men for their guardians. They are our lambs, and we look

out for wolves. To be sure the comparative paucity of women in the

United States, and the conviction which every girl has that she may

pretty well make her own choice, help to keep matters straight. That

is easy to be understood. There is no temptation to eat green berries

in an orchard full of ripe fruit. But if this be true of America, then

the converse must be true of England, where the redundancy of women

is one of the most patent facts of the time, and where consequently

they cannot so well afford to indulge that pride of person which

hesitates among many before selecting one. In America this pride of

person of itself erects a barrier between the wolves and the lambs;

but where the very groundwork of it is wanting, as in England, it

behoves the natural guardians to be on the watch, and to take care of

those who cannot take care of themselves. Whether or not that care

should be carried to the extent to which French parents carry

theirs ~~ and especially in the matter of making the marriage for the

daughter and not letting her make it for herself ~~ we leave an open

question. Perhaps a little modification in the practice of both

nations would be the best for all concerned. Without trusting quite so

much to instinct as the French, we might profitably curtail a little

more than we do the independent choice of those who are too young and

too ignorant to know what they want, or what they have got when they

have chosen; and without letting their young girls run all abroad

without direction, the French might, in turn, allow them some kind of

human preference, and not treat them as mere animals bound to be

grateful to the hand that feeds them, and docile to the master who

governs them.