

Should Women Choose Their Mates?

By MAUDE RADFORD WARREN

HERE is an organization in London town called the Women's Freedom League and consisting of some of the most advanced feminine thinkers in the British Isles. Sometimes they discuss subjects that we in the United States dealt with years ago; sometimes they moot something we have not got to yet, and sometimes they discuss questions that are perennially interesting to men and women of any civilized country.

The other day Sir John Cockburn in lecturing before them remarked that among the various animals it was only in the case of man that the female did not have the choice. Women, he thought, should choose, and the reason why they did not was that in the human race man had almost the monopoly of breadwinning.

It seems to me that his word "almost" would have to be considerably emphasized. One has only to look at the Pueblo Indians, the French shopkeeping classes and the Polish lower class women, to take merely three instances, to see what women do in regard to breadwinning. But that isn't just the point. Should women choose their mates in these post-war days? And don't they? Or do they? I have my own views, but it seemed to me more fun to get the views of people of both sexes from the vintages, say, of 1912 to 1921, they being of the ages in which lovemaking and marrying are still active occupations. So at a tea I got the subject going, warning my friends, after they had spoken, that their views were going to be recorded in print.

I began by telling them of one of my friends, a happily married woman, who said to me this:

"I saw my husband in a class in the university one day. I decided then and there that I wanted him. I went after him and got him."

"Now," asked I, "did she do it? Or should she have done it? And if she did do it, ought she to confess it?"

Uprose a whirl of sound from which emerged the opinion of a young matron of the vintage of 1914.

"I don't know your friend, but I shouldn't be at all surprised to learn that she was one of these go-getters that don't leave a man much of the work to do in a friendship or a love affair. I shouldn't wonder if she had said that six times of six men and tried to get each of them, and succeeded in the case of number six. Then she either forgot all about the other five, the way a man would, or else she decided to ignore them, as men and women both ignore emotional failures, whenever it is possible."

"I don't know what her husband is like," said a wife of the vintage of 1912, "but I take it for granted he is a wishy-washy person, less forcible than herself. That is the only sort of man that lets a woman choose him. And if she did do it she should not have confessed it, even to herself."

"These be primitive views," said a dashing brunette of 20. "If she did do it, why should she not have confessed it?"

"Because," said her brother of 23, "no man with any manhood in him wants to be chosen. She should have kept that to herself to save the pride of her husband in the eyes of another woman."

"Then," said one of the Misses 1921, "do you men really wish to be fooled? I thought if there was anything that was different since the war it was that we could really be frank, we girls. Frank in showing you men whether we like you or not; frank in playing around with

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you as if you were our brothers. Frank even in making love to you and being made love to if we want to, without the bother of being engaged. But if we have to fool you, use the wiles the pre-war women used—"

Uprose then a wild babble that signified to me that my party was so far a success. Those who were obliged to consider themselves pre-war women said they did not use wiles, were as frank with men as human beings could be with one another, but that the differences of sex insisted on reticences and even indirections. They accused Miss 1921 of lack of sex loyalty in saying that pre-war women fooled men and used wiles. The 1921 girls combined in chorus to say that if telling the truth was to be construed as lack of sex loyalty how were women ever to get anywhere? But when a Mr. 1921 said women by nature used indirection and wiles and would fool men if the men allowed it, why then the women of all vintages turned and rent him and told him that if women did use wiles and indirection it was because men demanded it, and had for long ages trained them to meet this demand. But, concluded Miss 1921, of late years women had been passing out of this stage, preferring to be quite frank and comradely.

I saw in the storm quite a lot of sex loyalty—but also a digression from the subject in hand.

"Then," I prompted, "does Miss 1921 choose her own mate?"

"Certainly not," said a Mr. 1921.

"I don't care how emancipated girls get, we will not let them choose us."

"But what is choosing?" asked a shy little blond—that is, she seemed shy.

Ensued then a struggle over definition of terms.

"Choosing," said one of the men, "means that a girl meets a man, becomes friends with him, and then says, 'By George,' or words to that effect, 'I'm going to marry that fellow.' Then she goes after him. She invites him to call and to dine; provides him tickets to this and that entertainment, which she buys, but which she usually pretends were given her. When she sees him at other people's houses she manages to be in the group with him. She can't conceal that she's after him, and unless he is an awful ass she doesn't get him. If he is a vain fellow, being chased like that tickles his vanity, but mostly it makes him feel like a fool and ashamed of the girl."

I noticed in the brief silence that followed that various girls exchanged glances. They were deliberating as to whether or not they would say what they really thought.

"Let us say that the girl did choose you," said one of the Misses 1921 at last; "what was wrong with her was not deciding to choose you, but applying a mistaken method."



"In short," said an older woman, with a slight edge of bitterness in her voice, "the mistake such a girl makes is falling in love with a man before he falls in love with her and then trying to get him. What she should do, to succeed, is get him in a cold-blooded way, without caring, and then fall in love with him afterward."

"That, if you like," replied a girl. "Rather let her be halfway in love. That is, with her head cool enough to choose the right tactics, and her heart warm enough to respond once she gets him really going. If she doesn't get him going, her cool head can pull her out before she burns her fingers."

There wasn't a man present who would assent for a minute to this theory.

"I wouldn't mind," said one youth, "if a girl showed she wanted to be friends with me, and went fully half the way in that. I'd really rather take that as a compliment. But after that if she overstepped the limits of comradeship one inch, and got into sentiment—goodnight nurse! She'd never see me again."

"Do you mean to say," inquired one of the listeners, "that if a girl had gone half way to make a friend of you, that would quash any possibility of your being lovers?"

"Not at all. But I would be the one to make all the advance in sentiment; and something in me would instinctively revolt, too, if I saw that she responded too quickly to my overtures."

"You'd penalize her, eh! for trying to meet you on grounds of comradeship?" inquired the little blond, forgetting her shyness.

"I suppose I would. I mean this: It's in nature for a man to want to do all the choosing in sex matters, even in friendship. If a girl takes advantage of the new frank relationships between the sexes, she has got to walk warily to see that she doesn't offend a man in the matter of this selection of his mate, where he is going to play the game in the old way."

"Well, how do you choose?" asked a girl.

"Choose? Why," he hesitated; "why, a fellow is thrown with a girl, likes her and sometimes something shows him that he cares more for her than for any other girl. Of course that takes different fellows different ways. Some see in a sort of flash that they are in love with the girl. Others see themselves slipping and decide whether they want to go on over the precipice. If they don't, they avoid the girl as much as they can without being too conspicuous. If they decide that it is all right to slip over the edge, why, they do."

"Go on," prompted some one, "you can't choose a mate without letting her in on it."

"Well, of course, once he is sure,

he begins to show her significant attentions, and if he isn't a fool he goes slow enough so that if she has a sense of honor she can stop him in case she doesn't want him. No man cares to be turned down, and the right sort of girl will save him the humiliation in time."

"Um-huh," said the flashing brunette, "the girl mustn't fall in love with her mate till he chooses her. She stands up against a lovely passive sheltered background to let herself be chosen. But I'd just like to know the exact point at which it ceases to become unaidedly for her to make up her mind; the exact point where it is all right for her to take a hand in the matter without offending the tender sensibilities of man."

"Yes," came a full feminine chorus.

"You may think you have something on me, but you haven't," said 1921, Esquire, stanchly; "a whole lot of this mate choosing is instinctive, is unconscious. The girl sees that the man likes her, is disposed to be more and more friendly. She responds, without analyzing her feelings very much, without knowing exactly how she stands. She just goes on, you know, till her own delicate and feminine feelings show her that he is in love with her. If she doesn't care for him, she shunts him off. If she does, she encourages him, still without probing her own heart too much, because, you know, it isn't quite maidenly for her to keep wondering if he really does love her, and when will he speak and all that. She just holds herself suspended, if you know what I mean, as much as she can, for that makes the thing all the more precious when he finally asks her."

It had been a manifest effort for Mr. 1921 to say this, and his listeners appreciated his contribution so fully that the slight sounds they emitted seemed more like gentle sighs than the gentle groans they really were. For there wasn't a girl there but was thinking:

"The poor simpleton, does he really think it's like that?" or "I wonder who it is he is in love with?" or "I wonder if some girl he is engaged to told him all that stuff?"

But there was an unspoken conspiracy to leave him to his illusions, partly for his own sake, and partly because in that state he thought most highly of women, and feminine vanity demanded that we should have from him as high a tribute as possible.

"All right," said the brunette, "maybe that's the way it ought to be, but that isn't usually the way it is. What really happens to the girl is this: A man who is a friend begins paying her especial attention. If she is clear-headed she says to herself: 'Is this man beginning to fall in love with me? Or is it just the Springtime that ails him? Or is he

just carrying platonic friendship so far that if I don't look out my friends will begin to gossip? Or is he in love with some other girl whom he is trying to make jealous at my expense?' If she goes on keeping her head cool, she will eliminate these hypotheses one after another. You can see, Mr. 1921, that it would not do for him to be allowed to pay her attention that looks significant, but is not really so, for that would keep off men who might really have serious intentions.

"Very well, suppose that she is convinced that he is in love with her. If she cares, or thinks she may learn to care or doesn't care for some one else or doesn't think she is likely to be given a chance to care for some one else, or wants him to go on and see how she is going to feel—in short, if she has one or more of many reasons for letting him do it, she will show him that his attentions please her. After that it's on the knees of the gods. He proposes, she accepts and how deeply she is in love with him then, or how deeply she grows to be in love with him after they are engaged, is a matter of chance."

There was an uneasy stirring on the part of two or three of the masculine listeners.

"Perhaps I put it in a cold-blooded way," said the brunette. "Remember I talk as one on the outside; it may not look like this to the girl after she has let herself go. Old Lady Nature arranges for that. It is for the good of the race that these should fall in love deeply if possible. After they have fallen to a certain depth you could hardly get them to believe that the mutual love had in it anything of hedging, or pause, or was anything but the most heavenly sort of spontaneous combustion. I'm not in love myself at present, but if ever I were to fall deeply in love I'd probably deny the aforementioned analysis and also deny that I had ever been guilty of thinking it. You see people are mercifully crazy when they are in love."

Not wishing to let the conversation stray too far away from the point of the discussion, I said:

"Then I take it, you consider that both men and women choose their mates?"

"Ye-es," said the girls.

"No," said the men.

They were good enough to ask me what I thought. So I soothingly said that to an extent both chose, but that men had a far wider range of choice than women, and would continue to do so as long as the economics of modern life continued as they were at present.

But the nearer my listeners were to the vintage of 1921, the less they agreed with me; because the younger people are, the less they listen to any one else's generalizations about love.