

THE SAME SPEECH FOR ALL

NO DIVERSITY NECESSARY IN THE MARRIAGE SERVICE.

A CLERGYMAN'S EXPERIENCE OF TWENTY-FIVE YEARS—THE MINISTER'S VENERABLE LITTLE JOKE.

"I have married so many girls that the ceremony no longer causes me the least emotion," said the gentleman suavely. But the confidential friend in the cozy little study knew that the speaker wore a white cravat and clerical black coat, so that there was nothing abnormal in his statement. He had merely married so many girls to an equal number of the other sex. In fact, he was a Reverend.

"For the last 25 years," continued the minister, looking into the anthracite of his fireplace dreamily, "I have been marrying couples in my drawing room up stairs, until the carpet has become threadbare under bridal feet, and the books have grown brown with age and the finger marks of couples eagerly awaiting my advent. Is there ever a week that passes without my uniting a couple? Never. I am eternally tying poor humanity into knots which can never be undone. Several times each week I am visited by those who, for reasons of their own, cannot marry at home, or decline to do so on the ground of objecting to commonplace, milk-and-water nuptial celebrations. I have married all classes of people, from the children of the wealthiest metropolitan parents to the offspring of the indigent. Well, my good Sir, after two years' practice—I will call it practice, as there is something legal about it—I decided that the Adams and Eves on their wedding day were all alike; that I could adopt one method of treatment for the rich and poor; that I need only stereotype one set of remarks for the occasion. I have saved myself a good deal of trouble. Ah, my dear good Sir, time is money. Save it when you can; hoard it up; don't let it slip away."

The reverend gentleman was losing the thread of his discourse in his endeavor to point a moral, but recalled himself, and once more settled his gaze into the lurid anthracite.

"Now," he continued, "I'll tell you my treatment, which, as nearly as possible, is always the same. Suppose I am sitting reading in my library after dinner, and that I have enjoyed my repast so much and it has soothed my nerves so utterly that I begin to doze. I don't say that is invariably the case. But suppose it for the moment. Then suppose that I awake with a start at the sound of voices beneath my window, and hear some such conversation as this:

"Ring the bell, dear"—from a man.

"Oh, John, I don't like to. He! he! You ring it, love, he! he! Oh! I'm getting so nervous. I feel as though I should drop"—needless to say from a woman.

"Well, don't let's stand out here all night, catching cold. I'll ring it"—from another man, very matter of fact.

"Now, he's rung it. We're in for it. He! he!"—from the first twain.

"Well, suppose this does not cause me the least merriment in the world. I am so completely accustomed to it that I cannot even remember the time when it was a novelty. I merely rub my eyes to wake myself up completely, and await developments. They come very rapidly. My housemaid Jemima enters with her best Sunday expression of countenance on, and says in a whisper: 'Please, Sir, a couple of folks is down stairs wanting to see you. They says if you will kindly come down as soon as you can, as they are in a hurry.'

"I sigh, not because I am annoyed, but because I am in the habit of sighing. I always wonder how it is that I can look so calmly on the performance of a ceremony which once used to cause me much emotion. Jemima, too, is perfectly unconcerned. You would expect that a domestic, who generally looks upon matrimony as the consummation of everything romantic and novel-like, would come in giggling and blushing. But Jemima has been with me 25 years and is wise in her generation. She has seen the comely brides who visited me at the beginning of that period develop into fat, middle-aged matrons, with no thoughts beyond boiled legs of mutton and how to live on nothing a year, and do it nicely, with appearances, and Jemima has remained single to open the door to matrimonial aspirants. Well, to resume: After the sigh I gird up my loins, tell Jemima to take the visitors to the drawing room, and to say that I shall be with them in a few moments. Then I go on with the book I had started to read when I began to doze. You see I like them to get a little impatient, for although I may be unconcerned myself, I think it extremely important that the young couple who are taking such a serious step should be as nervous and excited as possible. And they invariably are. At the end of the ten minutes I leave my study, descend the stairs with easy solemnity and a little creaking, open the dining room door, stand for one second on the threshold, and then enter with dignity. I nearly always see the bride in my armchair away from the rest, leaning her head on her hand and looking at my nearly threadbare carpet. The bridegroom is pretending that he is as unconcerned as though he had been married daily for the last twenty years, and is talking and laughing with the witnesses, who gape and look relieved when they see my figure in the doorway."

The reverend gentleman looked at himself in a mirror, invested himself with the correct matrimonial look, and then proceeded: "When I enter I say cheerfully, but by no means with jollity, 'Well, I think I can guess to what I am indebted for the honor of this visit.' The bride blushes and looks coy; the witnesses look at one another and titter, and the bridegroom rises and says nervously:

"W-well—er—er—the fact is, doctor—I—er—that is to say—er—this lady—how foolish I am—I mean both of us—together, of course—want—er—to—er—get married."

"I then glance at them both sternly, as though I would burn out any secrets with my eyes. Then, when I have made them both uncomfortable, I withdraw the screws and become willingly affable.

"Ah!" I say, pleasantly, 'so that's it, is it? You might do worse, young people. I believe in marriages, you know—that is to say, marriages properly undertaken. They are made in heaven, I think.' (I may here say that some people object to that sentiment, though I generally give it utterance.) 'Now, Sir,' I say, turning to the bridegroom, 'a word with you. Let us come into the next room.'

"The bride pouts at this, and asks if she cannot come with us, and being told that it is not necessary, she goes on pouting. Then I obtain points and necessary details from the bridegroom, after which I return to the drawing room for the bride and the witnesses and prepare for the necessary signing and formality. The bride is invariably nervous at this stage. The most phlegmatic woman I have ever seen trembles when what I call 'making the declaration' is commenced. 'Now, Miss Smith,' I begin, 'what is your father's name?' She always says Mr. Smith. Nine women out of ten think initials unnecessary. When I ask her the mother's name she generally sheds a tear. I am at a loss to know why. The mere mention of a mother's name is not particularly pathetic, though perhaps it may be on the eve of marriage. I always crack a little joke when I ask the bride her age. 'How old are you, Miss Smith?' I say. 'I know you think it very rude of me to ask, but you needn't be afraid of your minister, your doctor, or your lawyer.'

"If I have made that joke once I have made it—let me see—twenty-five times fifty-two—zero and carry five, one hundred and twenty-five—thirteen hundred times, multiplied by four, the weekly average—five thousand two hundred times. Well, out of those five thousand two hundred brides represented I could almost swear that five thousand have laughed at that joke. I never change it. It is a hit. The bride never minds telling under those circumstances, but I have noticed that she invariably gives her age last birthday, and looks much annoyed when I inscribe that of next birthday. After that it is comparatively straight sailing. When the declaration is at an end I always say to the bride: 'Now, Miss Smith, sign your maiden name for the last time.' That makes her so extremely nervous that in very many cases she spills the ink. I have made it a rule to keep the table on which these important documents are signed covered with oilcloth. When I first entered upon my official duties I used dainty little table covers, which I imagined would appeal to the artistic sense of the brides. Perhaps the delicate work did so appeal, but it never prevented the deluge of ink, which brought tears of anguish to the eyes of my wife, who was equally foolish when she was married herself, but declines to own it. The witnesses usually enjoy signing their names. Men and women as a rule like to put themselves on record everywhere. They rejoice to be able to say, 'Well, you'll find my name there.' The witnesses are longer signing their names than are the bride and bridegroom. They add touches and put long flourishes in ecstasies of calligraphy. At last, when it is over, I say solemnly: 'Mr. Snooks, give your fiancée your arm and walk into the drawing room.' The bride giggles, the bridegroom ambles stupidly along, because he imagines every one is looking at him. I follow them into the drawing room.

"Before the ceremony begins the bride generally says: 'John, tell him to be as quick as he can. Can't he use a short service?' If she only knew that I was as desirous of returning to my library as she was to start on her bridal trip, that injunction would never be made. I thus arrange them in the prescribed manner, of which they are usually blissfully ignorant. The awkwardness of a bride and bridegroom is phenomenal. When I say, 'Let the lady stand to the gentleman's left' it usually takes them a couple of minutes to distinguish between the right and left, and I have to literally put them in place. Their movements seem to be impeded, and I don't believe that six couples out of ten can tell their right from their left hand five minutes before they are married. During the ceremony they have nothing to do, so there is no trouble. At the end, when I say to the man 'Take your bride,' he looks very frequently astonished and as though he did not understand me. Often he seizes her hand and remains holding it with most ridiculous energy, apparently waiting for developments. I have to break the spell by remarking mildly: 'That is all, my young friends. You are now man and wife.'

"After the ceremony I ask them to be seated, and endeavor to lead them into conversation.

At first this was most embarrassing for me, but I am quite used to it now. I generally begin;

"Now, I suppose, Mrs. Snooks—"

"Mrs. Snooks," she says, "how funny it sounds. Am I Mrs. Snooks, John, dear?"—coquettishly to her husband.

"Of course you are," he says, tenderly; "you must get accustomed to the name."

"Excuse me interrupting you, doctor," she resumes sweetly, "you see I didn't know my name. You were the first to call me Mrs. Snooks. You were about to say—"

"Now I had merely desired to use the married girl's new name, and had said all I was about to say, but I had some original remark ready, about the weather, and the probability that there would be more rain or sun next week. So I give utterance to this remark, and then we chat easily for five minutes or so. Soon they lapse into silence. I can see that they are anxious to depart, though neither likes to say so, while the witnesses rarely desire change of scene. Sometimes I let them wax uncomfortable. Then John says: 'Well, doctor, I suppose you've finished with us?'"

"Yes," I say shortly.

"John stammers a little something about being much obliged, and looks at his bride and the witnesses. The lady is twirling round her wedding gown and seems to enjoy that occupation immensely. The witnesses are looking at my pictures rather critically. I am convinced that a number of married couples would remain in my drawing room for two or three hours from sheer bashfulness if I did not come to the rescue. So I say delicately and with fine humor, as I rise, 'Well, Mr. Snooks, if I can ever do anything for you in a similar capacity again I shall be delighted.' At which Mrs. Snooks pouts and declares that she has not the least intention of leaving John a widower, and that sooner than that he should marry again she would haunt him, or words to that effect. They depart immediately after that, and I retire to my library and wonder why I don't feel either amused or distressed."

The reverend gentleman was startled by a knock at his door, to which he answered, "Come in, Jemima." A portly form presented itself and a solemn voice said: "Please, Sir, a couple of folks is down stairs wanting to see you. They says if you will kindly come down as soon as you can, as they are in a hurry." The doctor glanced in the mirror. There was no need to ask whether he was amused or distressed. He looked distressed.