

## Boys, Keep Away from Muslin

One may be surprised at the almost universal practice of newspapers in alerting young ladies against the scheming males who lay in wait ready to entrap them. Editors, it should be pointed out, were almost equally concerned about innocent young men who might fall a victim of the scheming wiles of the female of the species. Care in the choice of a mate, the need for constancy and high ideals, the importance of true love, these were important qualities to be considered in selecting a companion for life.

The *Boone County News* of August 17, 1859, was particularly apprehensive in its editorial which it captioned "Boys, Keep Away from Muslin."

### *Boys, Keep Away from Muslin*

If you don't want to fall in love, keep away from muslin. You can no more play with those girls without losing your hearts, than you can play with gamblers without losing your money.—The heart-strings of a woman, like the tendrils of a vine, are always reaching out for something to cling to. The consequence is, that before you are going you are—"gone," like a lot at auction. A woman will cling to the chosen of her heart like a fly to a "catch-'em-alive," and you can't separate her without snapping strings

no art can mend, and leaving a portion of her soul on the upper leather of your affections. She will sometimes see something to love where others see nothing to admire; and when fondness is once fastened on a fellow, it sticks like a penny-stamp to an envelope, or a tax-gatherer to your hosedoor. Beware, then, of muslin.

There were those, of course, who took an opposite view in urging young men to marry. One widely quoted Divine was Reverend Lorenzo[?] Dow, who ended a sermon by urging young men to marry. The *Fort Dodge Sentinel* of July 28, 1860, felt Dr. Dow's Discourse was "as singular for its quaintness as practical in its advice."

#### *Young Men Should Marry*

I want you my young sinners to kiss and get married, and devote your time to morality and money making. Then let your homes be provided with such comforts and necessaries as piety, pickles, pots and kettles; brushes, brooms, benevolence, bread, virtues, wine and wisdom. Have these always on hand and happiness will be with you. Do not drink anything intoxicating, eat moderately, go about business after breakfast, lounge a little after dinner, chat after tea, and kiss after quarreling. Then all the joy, the peace, and bliss the earth can afford shall be yours until the grave closes over you, and your spirits are borne to a brighter and happier world.

The *Northern* (Estherville) *Vindicator* of August 24, 1872, spoke with approbation of the following advice to young men which the editor had reason to feel might be helpful in expanding the population of northwestern Iowa.

*Advice to Young Men*

We find the following advice to young men in the *Altoona Tribune*: Young men, get married; you will never be worth a last year's robin's nest unless you do. The fruits of disobedience are misery and misfortune, and you will never be truly happy while in disobedience to God's commandment to our first parents in the Garden. Remember that there are seventy-five thousand more marriageable ladies in the United States than gentlemen, and three hundred thousand more females than males. Imagine yourself at the bar of judgment, with seventy-five thousand spinsters with tooth-less jaws, and tongues sharpened on the grindstones of temper, and honed on the strap of unrequited affection of your accusers; surely your chances for eternal bliss would not be very flattering. And furthermore, remember that unperformed duties always come home to roost, so you will be likely to go through the world with holes in the heels of your stockings, and your elbows out, and finally die unregretted and be forgotten like any other brute.

On December 19, 1866, in the *Dubuque Weekly Herald*, the editor emphasized the need for young men to "dress well" if they expected to gain a position of respect in their local community.

*Dress Well*

It is the duty of all men, young and old, to make their persons, so far as practicable, agreeable to those with whom they are thrown in contact. By this, we mean that they should not offend by singularity or slovenliness. Let no man know by your appearance what trade you follow. You dress your person, not your business. Be careful to mold the fashion of the times to your own personal peculiarities. Fashion is to be your servant, not your master.

Therefore never dress in the extreme of fashion. Only adopt it as far as it is consistent with your face and figure. That which will become one man ill becomes another; and for all to follow the same model is obviously absurd. The exercise of a little judgment on your part will enable you to adopt so much of the prevailing style in your dress as to show that you are acquainted with the fashion, without sacrificing your personal appearance for a scrupulous conformity to its laws. The best possible impression you can make by your dress, is to make no separate impression at all, but so to harmonize its material and shape with your own figure, that it becomes part of you; and people, without recollecting how you were clothed, remember that you look well and dress becomingly.

An objection may be urged here that attention to dress is dangerous. We think not. Extravagance is dangerous, but extravagantly dressed people are seldom dressed well. We constantly meet multitudes of people dressed in every imaginable style. Here is one in the best of broad cloth and the costliest jewelry, but who looks exceedingly vulgar; here another, habited plainly, in good taste, is gentlemanly in his appearance at half the cost. Showy and flaring clothes argue menial poverty of the wearer. The secret of being well-dressed is but the exercise of judgment and good sense—it invariably requires more care than cash; and instead of making a young man extravagant it is a saving of half the money it would cost to clothe him in the vulgar and pretending style which so many, now-a-days, unfortunately adopt.

Countless poems appeared in the press in which young men expressed their feelings and ideals about what they expected in a wife. Some were in a serious vein, others were definitely humorous in character.

*On Choosing a Wife*

I ask not beauty—'Tis a gleam  
 That tints the morning sky;  
 I ask not learning—'tis a stream  
 That glides unheeded by.  
 I ask not wit—it is a flash  
 That oft blinds reason's eye;  
 I ask not gold—'tis glittering trash  
 That causes many a sigh  
 I ask good sense, a taste refined,  
 Candor with prudence blended,  
 A feeling heart, a virtuous mind  
 With charity attended.

On the humorous side it was not uncommon for young men to express their views as to the qualifications they felt most desirable if they were to become willing partners in matrimony. The *Sioux City Weekly Times* of July 13, 1872, contained an unusually long list of requirements that reflect in no small degree a number of female activities that doubtless caused some husbands to become irritable.

*Advertising for Sealed Proposals*

A chap issued a leap-year invitation, and sent the following notice to the papers for publication:

## TO CONTRACTORS

The undersigned, feeling the need of some one to find fault with and grumble at, when business matters go wrong, and being lonely with no one to hate him and whereas, having arrived at the proper age, he is therefore determined to "crawl out."

Sealed proposals will be received until two o'clock p.m. on the 31st of December, 1872.

Applicant must possess beauty, or its equivalent in currency.

She must possess a sweet and forgiving disposition, and when one cheek is kissed, turn the other—that is, if the right man is kissing.

She must not chew gum.

Nor wear long dresses in the street.

Nor frequent sewing circles.

Nor go around begging for charitable purposes.

Nor read the papers first in the morning.

Nor talk when I am sleepy.

Nor trade off my clothes to wandering Italians, for flower vases.

Nor borrow money from my vest pocket when I am asleep.

Nor hold a looking glass over my face at such times, to make me tell all I know.

She must believe in sudden attacks of chills, and make allowances for their effect on the nervous system.

When the "old bear" comes home from "a few friends" rather affectionate, she must not take advantage of his state and wheedle him into trips to watering places.

And above all, she must not, on such occasions put ipecac into the coffee she prepares for his "poor head."

She must sit up for him, when he happens to be detained to a late hour on his committee.

A lady possessing the foregoing qualifications, positive and negative, can hear of something to her advantage by addressing the undersigned, and inclosing a stamp.

All proposals must be accompanied with satisfactory evidence of the ability of the applicant to support a husband in the style to which he has been accustomed.

Young ladies were not so modest but that they

would refrain from inserting their own advertisements in Iowa newspapers to snare an eligible young man, particularly if it was Leap Year. The *Waterloo Courier* of April 3, 1860, carried the following plea:

### *Husband Wanted*

A young lady residing in one of the small towns in Central New York, is desirous of opening a correspondence with some young man in the West, with a view to a matrimonial engagement, should the preliminary correspondence be satisfactory to both. She is about 24 years of age, possesses a good moral character, is not what would be called handsome, has a good disposition, enjoys good health, is tolerably well-educated, and thoroughly versed in the mysteries of house-keeping. The real name and post office address can be ascertained, by those desirous of opening a correspondence, by addressing the *Courier* Office. None but young men of good moral character and strictly temperate habits need address.

The editor of the *Courier*, on another page, declared the above advertisement offered a "rare chance" for a young man "to obtain that useful and essential article of household furniture—a Wife." He declared with "all due respect to the fair damsels of our own town" that the young lady in quest of a husband was "good-looking . . . writes a very pretty letter and will doubtless make a devoted and loving companion." He was confident there would be a "marked increased" in the number of letters enclosed in "white envelopes" that would be deposited in the post office.

The need for sharing the news of the day with a wife was considered a sine qua non for a successful married life. The editor of the *Boone County News* of December 28, 1859, felt it particularly important for young men to keep their wives well-informed on the events of the day.

### *Post Up Your Wives*

Keep them posted duly, promptly, cheerfully. Impart to them all the light you can. Do you, husbands, post them up on subjects of importance; interest and reform; collect facts, passing events, things interesting, probably edifying; things moral, intellectual and political? Sensible, intelligent, virtuous, wives highly appreciate this, especially those pressed with domestic cares and duties, who have very little time for extended reading and investigation. Some husbands are remiss in this benevolence: others we are pleased to say, are happily communicative, take special pains and delight in posting their wives and children in imparting life and information. At table, during mealtimes and on every occasion, they open their minds freely, cheerfully, give a condensed, succinct, bird's eye view of their book and paper readings and all the interesting and important facts, gathered variously daily, weekly, monthly.

A century ago it was considered both unwise and reprehensible to spend beyond one's income; today business and industry, banks, savings and loans, and numerous other loan associations, encourage by every means and device, the assumption of an ever-increasing indebtedness. The editor of the *Northern Vindicator* of Estherville im-

parted the following sound words of advice to young men on October 19, 1870.

*Advice to Young Men*

One of the most fatal mistakes—and a common one—leading to many beside itself, which I have often heard with amazement, is conveyed in the almost proverbial phrase: "The world owes me a living." The world does no such thing. It is not debtor to you, but you are debtor to it, and you cannot work too hard to discharge your obligation. It not only does not owe you anything, but it is not going to pay you anything except as you earn it. And just so fast as you do that, it will pay—not wealth necessarily, not what you may call success or repute, but the honest return of wage, while God stands by to throw in his benediction to make up any deficiency. We are none of us going to thrive except by work—not by waiting for this or that, not by looking to this and the other man, not by expecting to be lifted, boosted into success. There are Micawbers all the world over—men waiting for the world to get ready to pay the obligation they suppose it to be under, men as miserably useless as they are contemptible. The fact is, this is a very busy world—a bit selfish if you will—and too thoroughly absorbed in various and varying interests to think much about individual men, young or old. Any of us is of mighty little consequence, and if you would like a healthy snub to your estimate of yourself, shut yourself up for a week and see how superbly indifferent the world is as to your absence, and with what marvelous facility it accommodates itself to your loss. The fly upon the coach-wheel in the fable is not more insignificant. The only thing that gives significance to you is your work, your industry and fidelity.

After reading such sound advice, a young man might be excused if he gave serious thought to the

additional responsibilities a wife and family would bring him. But there were other valuable assets a young bachelor would have to forego once he entered the holy bonds of matrimony. On September 16, 1837, the *Iowa News* of Dubuque summed it up as follows:

*How a Man Feels When About to Get Married*

It is said to be a serious thing for a girl to leave her mamma and entrust herself to the keeping of the man of her heart. No doubt it is so, but we propose to show that even the sterner sex cannot surrender up their singleness without some misgivings and trepidations.

In the first place, then, the victim of matrimony feels that he must surrender up the companions with whom he has so long held close communion, his evenings, instead of being spent at the club or the engine house, must be devoted to the charming young creature, whose guileless heart must find him very different from that to which he has been accustomed. But this is not all; he knows that after he has become bound in the silken chain of marriage, he is no longer a welcome visitant in those circles where, while free, wreathing smiles and glaring eyes, strove to weave a knot for his feet. He knows that while a bachelor is welcome wherever he goes, a married man is regarded as one dead—crossed off the books—and no longer available to the fair. In addition to all these unhappy circumstances, he has become the head of a family. Then through the busy shapes into his mind, of silks and calicoes, [come] doctors bills and duns for debts that he has never reaped the benefit of. Like the horse in the mill, he has a task to perform for others. He is no longer free to embrace poverty or wealth. No wonder that with an angel at his side he looks gloomy.

The *Fayette County Pioneer* was in complete agreement with the Dubuque editor. Mindful of the frequent harping in the press against bachelors, the West Union editor penned the following powerful defense of bachelors on April 4, 1857.

### *A Bachelor's Defense*

Bachelors are styled by married men who have put their foot into it, as only half-perfected human beings, cheerless vagabonds, but half a pair of scissors, and many other titles are given them; while on the other hand they extol their state as one of such perfect bliss, that a change from earth to heaven would be somewhat of a doubtful good. If they are so happy, why don't they enjoy their happiness and hold their tongues about it. What do half the men get married for? Simply that they may have somebody, as a married man once said, to pull off their boots when they are a little balmy. These fellows are always talking of the loneliness of Bachelors. Loneliness, indeed! Who is petted to death with marriageable daughters?—invited to tea and to evening parties, and told to drop in just when it is convenient?—the bachelor. Who lives in clover all his days, and when he dies has flowers strewed on his grave by the girls who couldn't entrap him?—the bachelor. Who strews flowers on the married man's grave?—his widow? Not a bit of it; she pulls down the tombstone that a six week's grief has set up in her heart, and goes and gets married again, she does. Who goes to bed early because the time hangs heavy on his hands?—the married man! Who has wood to split, house hunting to do, the young ones to wash, and the lazy servants to look after?—the married man. Who is taken up for whipping his wife?—the married man.—Who gets divorced—the married man. Finally, who has got the Scripture on his side?—the bach-

elor! St. Paul knew what he was talking about—"He that marries does well; but he that marries not does better."

An Iowa bachelor must have gained genuine comfort from the words of St. Paul. And yet, staying away from "Muslin" was not an easy thing to do. Nevertheless, the bachelor probably reasoned, there were some definite advantages to it. For example, if it was important for him to dress well, he could do so much better as a bachelor, unhampered by a wife who squandered his hard-earned dollars on fetching Paris bonnets. Furthermore, some bachelors would not relish the "task" of "posting" their wives daily when a snooze after a hard day's work seemed more to his liking. Finally, what a boring life it would be without those delicious free meals prepared by designing mothers with eligible daughters. Despite the advantages held out for bachelorhood, most readers will probably agree it was fortunate for Iowa that only a small minority chose this status in life. And just about every reader will breathe a sigh of relief that there were no bachelors in his or her direct family lineage.