

The following paper on the benefit of female influence in public schools was given by Henry Robinson King at a meeting of the United Ushers (U.U.) at Tonbridge School on the 13 March 1909, and was reprinted in the May 1909 issue of *The Journal of Education* (pp.323-326).

INFLUENCE OF WOMEN IN PEDAGOGY. A "U.U." ESSAY.

I began my paper very appropriately on the afternoon of Ash Wednesday, feeling sure that the strictest disciplinarian would allow me to get what enjoyment I could out of my ordinary indulgences in consideration of this Lenten penance then begun. Not that it is really unpleasant to write a paper for so kindly an audience as the "U.U."; but the subject I have chosen by my own fault, and my most grievous fault, is rather a perilous one – "opus aggredior opimum casibus." Marriage, though often treated as a humorous question by married people as well as bachelors, is not really a humorous matter at all, whatever secret amusement the dirty-faced man in "Pickwick" may have extracted from it: it is, at best, a very tragical mirth, and I do not mean to make the mistake of discussing it with levity. Perhaps not enough schoolmasters are married, but when they do marry they generally marry soberly and discreetly; one does not, I think, see many grievous misfits. You don't come across men who have kicked against their destiny in the spirit of the learned and pious Scotch Professor of Divinity who exclaimed: "I don't like clever women: I like silly gurrles!"

Let me not, however, beat about the bush anymore, but boldly state what my contention is. I am going to argue that the schoolmaster, or at least the house master, ought to be the husband of one wife in the sense in which the people of Shepperton (was it? Or Milby?) read the apostolic injunction, when urging the bachelor rector of their parish to marry. I am going to argue that he will be better married and that even the competent and enthusiastic sister is but a second best, and the lady housekeeper only a make-believe, and that there may be a profit for him qua schoolmaster in that expensive luxury – a family. One had better, perhaps, at once admit that one is married oneself and not without this so-called encumbrance, and the unkind critic, if there be any here, may see in my arguments merely

*The barren optimistic sophistries
Of comfortable moles, whom what they do
Teaches the limits of the just and true;
[‘To a Republican Friend’ by Matthew Arnold]*

But – I must hope for the best. I am aware that Mr Benson [A.C. Benson (1862-1925), author of *The Schoolmaster* (1902)], in one of his thoughtful books, has declared against me; but at least I can plead that I took this important step before I had the advantage of learning Mr Benson's opinion. He tells us that the married man has eyes for the things of his wife and not of the boys under his care; but of that anon. I have also against me the penetrating judgement of the Beetle [in Rudyard Kipling's *Stalky & Co.*]. The young gentleman delivers himself thus to the Padre who is engaged in his favourite amusement of smoking in the boys' studies:

"No Padre; I've met chaps in the holidays who've got married house masters. It's perfectly awful! They have babies and teething and measles and all that sort of thing right bung *in* the school; and the masters' wives give tea parties – tea parties, Padre! – and ask the chaps to breakfast!"

"That don't matter," said Stalky. "But the house masters let their house alone and leave everything to the prefects," and so on.

Later, on the third member of the triumvirate, McTurk thus interrupts: "It looks awfully pretty for one's people to see – a nice separate house with a nice lady in charge, an' all that. But it isn't. It takes the house masters off their work, and it gives the prefects a heap too much power, an' – an' – it rots up everything." So I begin badly with Stalky, the Beetle, McTurk, and Mr Benson against me; and I haven't done yet; for, if not a generous man, yet I am fairly just, and mean to put all the disadvantages down before I proceed to bowl them over with my heavy batteries.

I do not think that my own experience as a public-school boy some thirty-five years ago bears out my contention; it makes against it. I hate the sin of unfaithfulness, but I am bound to admit that, at school, we were ill-fed and suffered from the incompetence of the wife, perhaps from a worse defect in her. I dare say

it was good for our discipline, but it was bad for the bodily health, and on almost the only occasion when I saw this lady (after a football accident) I still remember her extended visit and lack of conversational power as one of the worst features of the case. When at length she took her leave of me I told her (in spirit) that she could not take from me anything that I would more willingly part withal. Yet she was a devoted wife and most deeply lamented by her husband when she died.

Again, in one of the worst schisms that has ever distracted a school – I speak again of things “*quae ipse miserrima vidi, et quorum pars magna fui*” – though there were many unpleasant causes involved, according to some people all would have smoothed over without irreparable harm if it had not been for the ladies. “*Cherchez la femme*,” these people maintain, and you will account for two-thirds of the trouble. And I well remember a certain house master whose house was unsuccessful and moribund, but whose final discomfiture and retirement were brought about by the curious reason that a gentleman-butcher – a distant relation of the wife – set up business in the town, and the house master and his wife could not face the social disability which this terrible event would, it was supposed, bring about. So wide are the ramifications of this question of matrimony! I am not sure whether even Nicholas Nickleby would not have been against me. Squeers undoubtedly ought never to have married, if Dr Johnson’s dictum is true that no man ought to marry “who is not likely to propagate understanding” (Wackford Squeers had no understanding); but had it not been for this woman of whom her husband was proud as “always the same active, cheerful, bustling creature,” Nicholas might have thought he could gain Squeers over to the side of mercy and justice; with her to abet him, the thing was impossible.

Ideals are not often realised in any line of life, and house mistresses are no exception to this rule. I do not say that the lady ought to be acquainted with all that is awfully vast and elegantly little, but, if she is one who could not be exchanged, to the profit of the house, for the spinster of the honest, competent working matron, she must have, I think, certain qualities. She should not be decidedly uncomely; boys seem to me terribly hard critics of their house mistresses, and almost to forget the rules of chivalry in this matter. If she is, unfortunately, plain, let her direct operations from an unseen background. Yet one does not want in this sphere the lady of quality. There is a deep truth in Ruskin’s quaint remark that the peasant, producer of turnips, pays the courtly person in turnips for presenting a celestial appearance to him; but the courtly lady in a boarding house has drawbacks which more than counterbalance any inspiration she can breathe. It will not, in fact, really pay the Producers of Fees to give her anything for her manners and appearance. The superior social manner gives great offence in a country like ours, unless combined with rank and wealth. She must have tact to deal with servants, and, still more, to treat the boys properly, with their subtle gradations of rank – I mean rank in the school for the most part, but sometimes social rank. She must be well-bred, kindly, not stand-offish in the house, or with the neighbourhood, economical, sympathetic – and I know not what else, till you exclaim, like Rasselas, “Enough” you have convinced me that no woman can be a house master’s wife.”

The time has now come for me to use my heavy batteries in defence of my thesis; but, after all, the guns may turn out to be of very light calibre. We should none of us deny the force of influence, and yet it is a shadowy, impalpable thing to argue about. I should like to say, first of all, though it has nothing to do with my argument, what a pity it seems to me, from the point of view of public duty, that so many intellectually gifted men, and men of fine physique, in our profession, are unmarried. “I was ever of opinion that the honest man who married and brought up a large family did more service than he who continued single, and only talked of population,” says Dr Primrose; and I think that schoolmasters are well fitted to have children, and in spite of their inability, according to my own experience, to keep their young ones in order, to, on the whole, bring up their families with signal credit. But to leave this point. If it is agreed that every profession damages a man, in the sense that it stunts the perfection of his character, what is the damage which schoolmasters in particular suffer? It would be offensive in me to say what that is, and it is not in the least an obscure matter; there are plenty of people besides Mr H.G. Wells who have analysed our weaknesses as a class with no unsparing hand. I had to write a paper some months ago on “The Schoolmaster in Literature” for a boys’ literary society [The Duffers], and it was painful to me and astonishing to see how badly the profession fares at the hands of authors, from Horace to Wells. They seem to say: “They are all fair game for our wit; yes, everyone of them.” I don’t know what the cumulative effect of all this ridicule

might be, but I take it that the public has never seen anything outrageous in the treatment, and we have to take it lying down. Perhaps it is some consolation that solicitors fare little better than schoolmasters. Anyhow, the weaknesses being taken for granted, I think that marriage tends to minimise them. There is a give-and-take in married life (unless the wife happens to be an extraordinarily meek member of her sex) which fights against stiffness and positiveness and singularity. No doubt, in a great school, the younger members of the common room can do this still better than a wife; but, later on, the senior man retires to his house – that house which, if he is a bachelor, is no real home to him – and he has too much time to brood alone over life and meditate with sympathy on his own grievances. It is better even that he should enjoy a little gossip and playful backbiting of his countryside than that he should be wholly immersed in routine work; and nearly all good women will see that their husbands do not spend their lives entirely free from gossip. If a man asserts that he can get from his male friends as much gossip as is good for him, I say that the true gossip is understood by ladies only.

I feel sure that schoolmasters would do better by going more than they do into general society, even if it is not very wise or very witty. The wife is usually the best motive power to force the unwilling man out of his chair and make him put on his evening dress and go out. It is a nuisance, but it should be oftener done. "Society," says the novelist, "has the good at least; that it lessens our conceit by teaching us our insignificance and making us acquainted with our betters." No doubt he is speaking of the society of the town, and perhaps his candid remark may seem to apply less to country society – the society of the Fogeys of Drummington, the Welbores of the Barrow, the Squares of Dozeley Park, all of them doubtless conversing on "those heavy and dreary themes upon which country gentlemen do converse," according to this authority. But there is now no well-defined line between country and town society; all are in their degree cosmopolitan, and there are few well bred people who cannot teach us something and from whom we cannot learn. I know that with some men work is so incessant that this relief seems impossible; such (as the Vice-Provost of Eton once recommended at a "U.U." meeting) should neglect their work, if necessary, in order to do their duty. Most men, I fancy, are only too glad to plead their arduous duties in excuse for unsociability, and one often hears complaints in the neighbourhood of a public school that the masters insist on being unsociable. Perhaps that "slight social disability" under which our profession labours, and on which Mr Benson genially insists, if there is any truth in it, may arise from the members of a staff keeping too much to themselves. I feel sure that intercourse with the world adds vivacity and point to teaching, imparts greater ease to manners, and thus adds to authority and increases influence and efficiency. I believe that the younger men, whether married or bachelors, should even frequent dances now and then and be ready to desire no sleep till morn, when youth and pleasure meet to chase the glowing hours. Let the wives bestir themselves, if all this is true, and set in motion the unwilling mass, for if they do not nobody else will. The maiden sister identifies herself too much with the masterly inaction of her brother; she does not, like the wife, care to take the initiative. The old maid lacks the stronger social instinct which the wife possesses, or, at any rate, the wife feels more strongly that she must justify her position, and she thinks that it must be justified in this way.

It seems really the vague but powerful force known as home influence that is to recommend the expensive encumbrance of the house mistress if she is to be successfully recommended. We know how brisk and powerful a movement now is that of mixed education; the two sexes are said, by being trained together, to promote the virtues which each sex mostly lacks when left to itself, or to check the vices under which it suffers. Personally, I have no great faith in this system, perhaps through prejudice. But I believe thoroughly in more female influence being brought to bear on our young barbarians than is usually brought now in schools. Not, of course, by active interference in the government of the boys, or by what is rather offensively called "pecking at the personality" of another. There is a rumour that this happened lately in one great school, with disastrous results. I do not even pretend that the wife is a better nurse than a competent matron or the devoted sister. Thackeray rather cynically says somewhere that the devotion of a wife in sickness is not equal to that of the paid sick nurse, although cash nexus may be the only bond which attaches her to her work. But the idea of a well-ordered home is, I think, bound up with that of marriage, and if there are young children then it may be seen in perfection. With this idea the boys should be brought into contact as much and as often as possible. It enables them – at least such is the ideal – to see what home is like even in term time, and this is all to the good, though many boys may not exactly pine for

she-society. I believe this plan was conscientiously followed out by one house master in a great school, but I could never hear whether the experiment was completely successful or not.

We usually assume with our boys that their particular home influence is of a formative character, but I think it a large assumption. It is then a great advantage for some boys to be brought into contact with an orderly and fairly simple home life at school without paralysing luxury and not devoid of culture and family kindness. It is a moving thing to see big fellows – huge sons of football – forgetting their eternal games and eternal work to romp with little children and learn lessons of simplicity and childish gaiety. Well, we cannot always, like the wicked, have children at our desire; and, if we have, they will not always remain young, alas! or fond of romping. But the wise lady will generally be able to have young girl visitors who will do almost equally well. Let the boys see as much of them as possible, play at games with them, and converse with them, and converse with them. Nothing but good can come of this, and it will be found that at these gatherings all will go merry as a marriage bell. If it does not, then, with one slight change, the proper atmosphere will be produced. Let the house master, with his awful didactic countenance, go away and leave the young people to themselves and to his wife. An amazing amount of pleasure can be given by these simple parties; it is, perhaps, mostly owing to the charm of change, coming as it does in term time, when boys are not blasé with the incessant parties of the Christmas holidays. Near my own school is a ladies' college [Sherborne Girls' School] full of happy-faced girls trained in sensible modern methods of work and hockey playing, and I often wish they could forgather oftener with our boys in playing games at evening parties or dancing together, but it seems impossible. The gardens of the Hesperides are carefully guarded by a dragon [Miss Beatrice Mulliner (1844-1940), Headmistress of Sherborne Girls' School], and I have no doubt the dragon has plenty of wisdom to defend her action. Still, I wish the thing could be done. The only objection I have heard where something of this sort was tried came from my own famous, but sarcastic, house master [T.E. Brown (Thomas Edward Brown) (1830-1897) was H.R. King's housemaster at Clifton College]. He once told me that the result of an experiment of this kind was that the Close on a match day was given over to sentimentality, "full of languishers." But, if so, this only proves that you may have too much of a good thing.

My paper was to be really on the wider subject of female influence in public schools, not on the narrower issue of married v. single house masters. Therefore, I should like to say a word on the subject of matrons. Everyone knows how socially important in a boarding house is the matron. The great majority of these women are simply honest, capable women of no particular refinement, nor indeed of any particular vulgarity. The boys will always assemble by troops in the matron's room for conversation, unless the occupant is hopelessly unconvivial; and I think it would be well if, granting that the working efficiency is beyond dispute, the matron should be a woman of some culture and refinement. It is not that the manners of the boys need correction, but I think the matron would have greatly increase influence if they could see in her one, more or less, of their own class and possessing the innumerable graces in speech and manners of a well-bred woman, so that "what she wills to do or say seems wisest, virtuous, discreet, best." Unless she is of this type I think she ought not to come into hall, while the wife should certainly take her place there, at any rate, for one meal a day, in spite of the really formidable difficulties of sustaining conversation. It would be better for her to go in for a few minutes and, toying with a piece of bread or toast, deliver herself of a few painful conversations, than to stay like Penelope in the upper room with her work and her handmaidens, and never to visit the shadowy halls below and the vulgar din of the Wooers.

I must now bring to a close my long and inconsequent series of arguments, and can only hope that they do not appear to my audience as empty as, though much more lengthy than, the arguments in favour of women uttered by the enthusiastic Snodgrass. Our boarding houses are now much civilized than they were fifty years ago, and I wish them to become humanized as well as civilized by the influence of well-bred Englishwomen and girls – still among the best produces of the age. Even the lust-hardened Byron could say, half-tenderly and half-contemptuously:

*A matron and her daughters or her nieces
Shine like a guinea and seven-shilling pieces.
[‘Don Juan’ by Lord Byron]*

I don't think Mr Benson is right in saying that the possession of these shining treasures will take a house master's thoughts away from the boys confided to his care. The mothers of England don't think so either. Rather they will make him more efficient, better able to train his boys for Confirmation, more able to teach his boys with interest; they will keep his sympathies warm and foster his love of the wise poets; they will prevent him from becoming absorbed in golf or football, in cards or tobacco, or brooding over his fireside in a pair of bath slippers, and, perhaps, as the years go on, even troubled with thick-coming fancies.