

THE SKETCH BOOK

ON TAKING YOUR HUSBAND'S NAME IN VAIN

By St. John Ervine

I HEARD lately of a lady who vigorously exemplified "the triumph of hope over experience", as Dr. Johnson defined re-marriage, for she has had three husbands, two of whom are alive and reputed to be flourishing. The singular thing about this lady is not that she has been married three times, for many persons have voluntarily suffered such a fate, but that although her third husband and she are living in what Boswell called "conubial felicity", she insists on being called by the name of her first and only deceased husband. This insistence would appear to be a touching avowal of devotion to the memory of number one, unlikely, I imagine, to stir any responsive emotion in the breasts of the second and third husbands, were it not for the fact that the first husband had a title and the other two are commoners. He was a lord! I thought to myself, "This lady is a sort of Vicar of Bray. Husbands may come and husbands may go, but she will still be Lady Annabel Dismay!" And thinking of her, I thought also of some clever women whom I met in America a year or so ago, whose feminist faith is so pronounced and hearty that they refuse altogether to share their husbands' names. My lady of title only refuses to share the names of any husbands she may contract or has contracted since the decease of the first one, but my American friends decline to share

the name of any husband, dead or alive, first or last. Each of them is willing to be endowed with a man's worldly goods, but not with his surname. She will live with him, but will not be labeled by him. She will bear his children, but will not bear his name. She will suffer all of the inconveniences of marriage—and there are many of them—but she will not enjoy one of the conveniences.

The excuse made for this refusal is more honorable to the American ladies than the excuse made for the lady of title who insists on keeping the name of her first husband while she is living with her third; but it does not appear to me to be so practical. After all, there are some social advantages readily yielded to Lady Annabel Dismay which would not be yielded, readily or otherwise, to plain Mrs. Dismay. It is hardly flattering to the lady that she should use a title to obtain prestige which she seems incapable of winning on her personal merits, but since that prestige appears to be worth possessing, she may be said to have a common-sensible sort of mind, though not, perhaps, a highly idealistic one. At the sacrifice of a little pride, she obtains a considerable amount of attention and deference from subordinate persons which is no doubt very gratifying, besides being exceedingly useful. It is otherwise with my American friends. They do not secure any social advantages or amenities through their behavior. On the contrary, they must occasionally lose some. She gives up some of her pride, but they insist on the possession of

more than is reasonable, and as always happens to people who do that, they must now and then have to endure contemptuous treatment.

They say that a woman who abandons her maiden name on marriage commits a spiritual outrage on herself and is a traitor to her sex by acknowledging socially a superiority in the male which she denies politically. By giving up her own name and accepting his in exchange for it, she acknowledges that he has the right to impose his name upon her and that she is his inferior. That point of view is hardly so sensible, when deeply considered, as it seems when superficially considered. A woman who has established a reputation as a novelist under her maiden name is obviously at a disadvantage if, after marriage, she publishes subsequent books under her new name. The public which knows and likes the stories of Miss Susan Smith-Smythe will not easily recognize the same author in Mrs. Richard Robins-Robinson, and unless she continues to use her maiden name for publishing purposes, she will not only have to begin a new career with her husband, but also one with her public. That, however, is a matter easily arranged without indignity to anyone. It may be said that there is trouble and inconvenience in having to explain that Mrs. Richard Robins-Robinson is Miss Susan Smith-Smythe, "the writer, you know!" but they cannot be any greater than were the trouble and inconvenience of explaining that Miss Mary Ann Evans was "George Eliot, the writer you know!" or the still greater trouble of explaining that Miss Mary Ann Evans really remained Miss Mary Ann Evans when she appeared to be Mrs. George Henry Lewes. It certainly is not so difficult to explain that Mrs. Robins-

Robinson is Miss Susan Smith-Smythe as it would be, in certain circumstances, to explain that Miss Smith-Smythe is really Mrs. Robins-Robinson! There must be a considerable amount of embarrassing and even incomprehensible explanation made before a registration clerk can be persuaded to think otherwise than cynically when Miss Susan Smith-Smythe and Mr. Richard Robins-Robinson ask for a bedroom at his hotel; and chambermaids, notoriously austere persons, must surely be confirmed in their worst suspicions about the "goings on" in high society when they find Lady Annabel Dismay openly sharing apartments with Mr. Small Beer whom she somewhat brazenly describes as her husband. There may be hypocrisy in persons pretending to be married when they are living in what is technically known as sin—though hypocrisy is sometimes the tribute which vice pays to virtue—but there is more than hypocrisy, there is sheer silliness, in people who insist on behaving as if they were not married when in fact they are.

For practical purposes, we may assume that any custom which has survived for centuries has done so because the generality of mankind have found it to be a convenient custom. We do not call a married woman by the surname of her husband either to insult or to degrade her, but because it is socially convenient to do so. It is definitely useful in our intercourse with other people to know that this man and that woman are married to each other. We are saved, for example, from the unpleasantness and embarrassment of saying inappreciative things about a man to his wife by the fact that she has been introduced to us as Mrs. So-and-so. Heaven knows what social chaos would be caused if

married women were to insist on being introduced as Miss This-or-That! The inappreciative things we say about a man may be justly and sincerely said, but we cannot expect his wife to like them or to like us for saying them; and since social relationships are made possible as much by the things we do not say as by those we do, mankind has had to invent a number of signs by which we may readily recognize the people to whom we may safely say true or malicious things and the people to whom it is not safe to say them. Mrs. Robins-Robinson can see the fun of your calling Mr. Johns-Johnson a pernicious ruffian or an unprincipled scoundrel, but I doubt whether she will see much fun in such descriptions when applied to her husband. It may be good for her to know how the world regards him, but she will not thank you for enlightening her, assuming that she believes a word you say; and in any event it cannot be good for you to discover that you have been saying such things about him to his wife when you fondly imagined you were saying them to a single woman. You will certainly be a little more discreet or, as some would say, hypocritical when next you engage in conversation with an apparent spinster.

As a matter of social convenience, therefore, everything can be said for the custom of husband and wife sharing the same name—whether that name be the husband's or the wife's is immaterial—and there is nothing to be said for the proposal that each should retain the pre-marriage name. There might be something to be said for the suggestion that names, as well as persons, should be joined together in holy matrimony, so that Miss Smith and Mr. Robinson, on marrying, should become Mr. and Mrs. Smith-

Robinson, were it not for the fact that social convenience would be ill-served when the little Smith-Robinsons grew up and married the children of the Brown-Johnsons. Millicent Smith-Robinson and George Brown-Johnson, on marrying, would become Mr. and Mrs. Smith-Robinson-Brown-Johnson. The difficulty of announcing the names of the third and fourth generations of the Smith-Robinsons and the Brown-Johnsons would be more than any butler would relish!

But it is when we consider the use of the husband's name by the wife as an outrage on her individuality that we discover how thin is the argument for a woman keeping her maiden name after her marriage. Why should she refuse to be known by the name of her husband whom she has chosen for herself, and continue to be known by the name of her father whom she has not chosen? If it is an outrage on her spiritual nature to be called Mrs. Richard Robins-Robinson when she has freely consented to love, honor, and live with Richard—is, in fact, most eager to do so—how much more diabolical must be the outrage of having to endure the name given to her at her birth by one of her parents, and that one, in her judgment, the less important of the two, for whom she may or may not feel affection? We choose our friends and our lovers, but our relatives are imposed upon us. A woman can only escape from this indignity of answering to a name not of her choosing by marrying and adopting a name not of her husband's choosing. She, indeed, has more choice in that matter than he had. He has to be Richard Robins-Robinson, whether he likes it or not, but she need not be Mrs. Richard Robins-Robinson unless she chooses to be. I confess I see no way out of the difficulty other than

sensibly recognizing that it is not a difficulty at all. To take your husband's name in vain, that is to say, to take it and not use it, may comfort a woman's sense of her own value, but it is a very bothersome business and is hardly worth the trouble. And, after all, millions of women for centuries have endured the indignity without noticing that it is an indignity. An indignity which is not known to be one is not an indignity: it may actually be a delight.

CARL SANDBURG

By Sherwood Anderson

HE comes into a room where there is company heavily and slowly, staring about. His eyes are small and blue-faded. Everyone knows a personage has arrived but there is no swagger to him.

He is not a physically strong man although he looks like the stuff out of which champion middleweights are made—a fighter who has given up fighting, gone out upon another road, out of condition for fighting. His eyes are not strong and he reads little. He is an eternal sitter-up o' nights drinking quantities of black coffee.

In conversation concerning the two subjects that absorb him—labor and poetry—he is unsure of himself, makes startling statements hesitatingly and covers his uncertainty with a blustering manner. There is no intellectual smartness and oddly enough no intolerance.

A distinguished Frenchman came to my house and wanted much to meet Sandburg so I had him up for an evening. They sat and stared at each other—both helpless. Sandburg took

from his pocket a paper covered with figures and began to tell the Frenchman of the number of tons of coal mined in the state of Illinois each year, the number of miles from Chicago to Dallas, Texas, how many railroads come into Chicago, what Mr. Gary said at the time of the steel strike.

Silence settled down upon the two men. One might have cut the silence into little squares and rolled it into balls.

I led Sandburg to the piano and he began to sing, thumping steadily on two or three chords.

His voice is mellow and rich and he has the gift of song. He sang nigger songs, a song of the boll-weevil, one about Jesse James, another about a tough girl of the city streets whose lover had proved unfaithful.

Sandburg singing, naively, beautifully, was something the Frenchman understood and loved. Later he told me that the evening was one of his really fine experiences in America. On that evening we were all so absorbed that while Sandburg sang a robber crawled in at a window and going into his sleeping room robbed the Frenchman of his clothes, his money, and his luggage—thus giving him, in addition to his evening with Sandburg, a strikingly true picture of what life in Chicago is like. I've a notion that he went home to France inclined toward the suspicion that Sandburg and I were in league with the robber.

There is a growing tendency, as his fame goes up in the world, to speak of Carl Sandburg as a He man, an eater of raw meat, a hairy one. In Chicago newspaper local rooms he is spoken of as John Guts. I do not think of him so although I've a suspicion that he