

Travelling Companions by Ann Slade

HAS it ever struck you how easy it is to talk to an odd unknown travelling companion? You climb on to a train or boat for a long journey alone, and before an hour is up you find yourself yarning away to the nice creature beside you—saying things that had hitherto been vague, even in your thought, things that surprise even yourself. Have you ever wondered why?

"... and she told me the story of her life." "The Story of Her Life"—it's a phrase we hurl about in derision, perhaps, these days. It's supposed to lack humour—and it usually does. But—it matters. However melodramatic, stupid or dull it may seem to us, it is mattering horribly to the person who's doing the telling. And there's this—she needs to tell it, or she wouldn't be bothering. She—or he, for that matter—needs, badly, to talk to another human being about the things that touch deeply. You realise that most of us—however popular—are fiercely, in some remote inner way, lonely.

I've often wondered, actually, what contacts we do make in this scurried life. We love—and we think we are no more alone. We marry, we have children—and we think we have found the end of our quest—a being, and other beings, in whom we can merge our own. But, have we? Do we? With many of us, thank goodness, the answer appears to be Yes. With others, a definite No. And for all, perhaps, comes the odd moment when a word, a gesture, can destroy for us all that the years have built up. We are—after all—alone.

And in all sorts of matters—large and small—we are disconcerted, puzzled. And there seems no one who can help us to our decisions. Letters come drifting in to me—a stranger to a stranger—from all sorts of odd places. I answer them. They are the kind of letters that a woman journalist, who doesn't altogether count reward in space rates and who values human contacts, is more than glad to receive. But I have decided to answer them in these pages. After all, no problem in the world belongs solely to you or me. I am one of a thousand with an almost identical worry.

And have you thought why we choose the unknown travelling companion in preference to our friends? Isn't it a little more than a matter of ready sympathy? Isn't it because we have never met before and shall, probably, never meet again?

Here, then, in these pages, we are safe as anywhere. I shall use initials only, and never reveal place names. You can hand me your difficulties. I can hand you my candid opinions.

And here—my unknown travelling companions—are some:

Taken for Granted

"My husband and children all take me for granted. And yet I used to be thought interesting. I often regret in a half-hearted way the career I never followed. I used to write a bit. I love my family but I am not always happy.—L.S."

(Of course you're not. You love them to the exclusion of yourself—so you can't really blame them for not noticing you, can you? Surprise them by insisting on some part of the day to yourself—and write again. They will realise you afresh and form many new points of view. It should work wonders.)

City or Country?

"I have a good job in the city, but my boy is in the country in the little town I come from. Last holidays I went home and although we went about together we seemed to be strangers. I have thought about giving up my job and going back for good but there is no job for me there and he's no good in cities. Of course he writes.—W.T."

(Writing doesn't help really. He's probably got the idea that he can't compete with your city interests. If you truly care, as I think you do, give up your job and go back. Has it never occurred to you that he might wish to be the one with the job?)

Books for a Boy

"I am in the country and have a boy of six. I want him to have good books instead of just 'Annuals' that are usually full of rubbish. Can you suggest any?—A.T.L."

(Yes, indeed I can. But so could a really intelligent bookseller, I expect. Anyway, here are a few to go on with. "Ferdinand the Bull"—the original, not the Walt Disney version; and "Wee Gillies" by the same writer. All the "Dr. Dolittle" series—if he's a boy who likes imaginative nonsense—is valuable. If he is a practical sort of small person he could commence the series (I think there are nine) of books by Arthur Ransome. The first, I think, is "Swallows and Amazons.")

Wants to Move

"I hate the suburb we live in and want to move. My husband, of course, makes expense a reason for refusing. I, on the other hand, think we owe it to our three children.—(Mrs.) C."

(I do see your point. You want a better environment for your children—and for yourself. But there's this: can you afford it? It might prove a financial strain that would break down your husband's health and ruin the peace of your home. Secondly, are you

sure you are not merely competitive? There are few persons more wretched—or more despised—than the social climber, are there? And last, will your children really benefit—or will they lose their individuality and become empty-witted little snobs? Do you see my points? Write to me again.)

"Stage-Struck" Daughter

"What do you do with a girl who is 'stage-struck.' My daughter is sixteen and hates station life. I think she has real talent and her father and I had decided to struggle to help her achieve her ambition. We had meant to send her away to study acting. But the war has altered all that, I'm afraid. She is bitterly disappointed and miserable.—R.D."

(She is still very young. I think it might be an excellent thing to arrange for her to visit a friend in the city for a longish time—say, six months or a year. If she were to join a really good repertory society she might find means of proving her ability and studying at the same time. She should join several play-reading groups, and read, herself, all the plays she can lay hands on, both drama and comedy, together with books of criticism and stagecraft. For the serious worker Shaw's Prefaces are even more brilliant than his plays. A course of Eurythmics and Voice Training would prove invaluable. The war, after all, will not last forever.)

A Widow's Dilemma

"I have been left a widow with a small annual income and three young children. I do not seem to get over my sorrow. A doctor friend has offered me a position as matron of a Rest Home he is going to run. On the other hand I am welcome to return to my own family. Which should I do?—W.E.V."

(Your first impulse was to return, wasn't it?—to the sympathy of your own people? That is natural. But ultimately I think you will be happier to choose the other course. Work, especially that is for others, effects a cure quicker than anything, and you have an excellent chance of building a new and independent life, of tending for your children and of earning their respect as well as their love.)

"SHOP PROWL"

Details of articles mentioned under this heading in previous issues of *The Listener* have been forwarded to the following enquirers: Mrs. F. A. Swarbrick, Box 10, Hamilton, Waikato; Mrs. John MacKenzie, Walter Peak, Lake Wakatipu; Mrs. F. J. Wilson, Beach Street, Port Chalmers, Otago; Miss Helen Graham, Tawa Street, Wellington; Mrs. T. A. Ogle, R.M.D. Okaihau, North Auckland.

"Decoration": H. Rudall, No. 1 Camp, Wairakei, Rotorua.

WHILE THE KETTLE BOILS

Dear Friends,

This is a funny old world, isn't it? Or, maybe, it is we poor mortals who are funny. Sometimes we have our values, like Alice in Wonderland, turned upside down — while most of us are dissatisfied with what we've got and insist on crying for the moon.

Take the matter of weight (*avoirduois*). The thin ones of the world usually pine to be round and chubby — while the fat ones yearn for a sylph-like slenderness.

In the old days weight was taken more or less for granted. If one got fat, well, one got fat, and that was the end of it. Anyway, the old-fashioned whalebone corset must have helped to subjugate any superfluous pounds. But with women's physical emancipation went those hideous armours, and no twist of fashion will ever impose them on us again.

Of course, we had to pay something for our new-found freedom. Women's briefer dressing, her wider, freer, sporting life — all made for physical development. Till one day someone whispered the word — Fat, and immediately women all over the world became weight conscious. Now when women become actively conscious about anything, they never deal in half-measures. Almost with the realisation of Fat came another word—Diet.

Oh, Diet! How much sacrifice, how much endurance and suffering has been perpetuated in your name. Long, breadless days — hours shorn of butter and pastries and cream. The sigh of the tortured passes round the world. From China to Alaska — from England to Ecuador. Everywhere women began to diet. It became the rage. Enterprising Dietitians flooded the market with new and hideous forms of self-abnegation. The Eighteen Day Diet, the Hay Diet — a hundred others, all with the common objective of keeping the unwanted pounds in check. Restaurants joined forces and advertised these special diets on their menus. In the seclusion of their homes, women slimmed and starved and endured — while their tempers and their husbands suffered. Diets flourished through the Press, all in bewildering contradiction. One would tell you to shun potatoes as you would the devil, while others quoted them as the mainstay of their dietetic sheet. Poor frail woman floundered among it all. It became the survival of the fittest. Only the strong-souled could endure. The weaker sisters fell by the roadside.

However, let it be said thankfully, the craze wore itself out. Women still diet to-day, but with an eye blessedly set to proportion. The Eighteen Day Diet and the Hay Diet with their multiple sisters have lost their former glamour. Women have learnt to eat sensibly, and to keep their unwanted pounds in check by a sane, balanced diet of fruit, meat, vegetables, and cereals.

A final word about potatoes. So many women deny themselves this wholesome vegetable for fear it will add to their weight. The old saying about a potato — "In your mouth a few minutes, in your stomach a few hours, on your hips for the rest of your life," no longer holds any terrors. Marcovici, a world-famous expert, has the most recent word. He declares definitely that potatoes are not fattening and can be taken on the most rigid diet — provided sweets, pastries, and the like are avoided.

Meanwhile, two lemons squeezed into a glass and drunk first thing in the morning, if they do not certainly reduce your weight, will make you feel lighter and fresher. A doctor once told me that if people realised the medicinal value of lemons they would pay guineas for them instead of pence!

Yours Cordially,

Cynthia