

Songs of Love on the Air

"Gilding wears out, with time and bad weather,
But leather remains, there's nothing like leather."
H. C. Anderson: "The Old House."

Written for "The Listener"
by B. HEYMANN



"... Love, as presented by these songs"

MY status of Unpaid Domestic allows me to listen to the radio during a great part of the day. I get my hour or two of classical music, I get my fill of the "Features," I get—prettily sprinkled over everything else—plenty of Ad-Vice from the announcers, advice which leaves me mixed rather than clarified in my views. I have yet to make up my mind whether I prefer the two-minute boil of one soap-powder, or the Extra-Active-Oxygen-Charged-Suds of another. Only the fact that I had no need for a Chesterfield Suite (or even an occasional table) have so far saved me from a conflict arising from the alluring offers of the various furniture manufacturers as regards their ware as well as the manner in which you may (or may not) pay for it.

And in between the serials and the sonatas, and underneath the sprinkling of the Ads., I get a great amount of that acoustical entertainment called Swing, called so with enthusiasm by some, disdainfully by others. I tried to follow the suggestion made for some time by the Commercial Broadcasting Stations and Dance while I Dust. But I had to give it up. It did neither the dancing nor the dusting any good. Nor was I able—I tried it as a substitute—to Waltz while I Washed. I could Sing

while I Sewed, if I could sing. But I can't. So I have resigned myself to just listen while I labour.

I HAVE thus acquired a rather thorough knowledge of the Modern Song, and while I am quite happy to leave the discussion of its musical values to the many who frequently and fervently discuss them, I should like to give some consideration to its poetical side or, more precisely, to that section which has LOVE for its subject.

I am beginning to get deeply worried about the conception of love as presented to the rising generation by these songs. They deal exclusively with the short period of human relationship commonly known as "Romance." According to them all that matters in a partner are Red Lips, Blue (brown or grey) Eyes, Fair, Dark or Red Hair, and Strong Arms. According to them the background of life is a Blue Lagoon (or a Sleepy one), Capistrone to which the swallows will have to come back at some time or other, and Berkeley Square with a nightingale. According to them the climax of achievements is "my arm around you" (or vice versa), the most desirable pastime continuous dreams, and the ideal state of affairs "if I were the only boy in the world and you were the only girl."

But it isn't. It would not be. It would be terrible after the first few weeks.

SOCIAL workers of all kinds express their alarm about the great number of marriages that "get on the rocks." It does not astonish me when I think of the wrong ideas which poetry puts into young people's heads. It is not that they cater only for short-lived emotions; they frequently speak of years to come and even "forever and a day." They do not exactly ignore marriage, but they seem to convey the idea that marriage is romance multiplied by forever and a day. If the poets had some social conscience they would warn the prospective partners that they will discover sooner or later that those red lips are largely due to cosmetics, that beautiful hair of any colour requires long and expensive sessions at beauty parlours, and

that the strong arms will often be too busy cleaning the car to hold anybody tight (even at the week-end). They would not persuade them that a tropical moon (or even a non-tropical one) or birds of any kind are essential for their happiness. They would prepare them for a time when we do not want to be together all the time, because we love one another, but can love one another in spite of being together all the time.

In short they would indicate that there is love in marriage, but it is a different kind of love from the one they favour. Not only the modern songs but literature as a whole has badly neglected married love. All I recall offhand are the story of Philemon and Baucis and the poem "John Anderson my Joe." But both Ovid and Robert Burns present their couples only when they have reached the "Darby and Joan" stage, tottering down the hill together, and they leave out the intermediate (and most essential) 40 or 50 years.

Apparently no poet has the courage to tackle this intricate problem. Even the fairy tales content themselves with telling us that "they lived happily ever after," how they do it is never revealed. When I was very young I considered it a most unfortunate coincidence that all the great lovers of literature had to die. Pyramus and Thisbe, Tristan and Isolde, Romeo and Juliet, none of them lived to show us love eternal, love in marriage. I have a strong suspicion, now, that their creators deliberately killed them off. Even Shakespeare did not seem able to face his creatures after the return from their honeymoon. Although one might reasonably expect the Montagues and Capulets to have been in a social and financial position which would have relieved Juliet from making beds and washing napkins, she surely could not always have walked about in silks and brocades, and her discussions with Romeo would have had other subjects than larks and nightingales in the course of the years.

But since most couples would, if I am not mistaken, prefer a lasting though more humble happiness to an ornamental tomb in Verona, it is up to the poets, the makers of modern songs, to prepare and educate them for it.

I HAVE been hoping and waiting for it for long; I should like to hear Vera Lynn sing something like this:

I look at you in silent admiration,
While you peruse the "Evening Post,"
Your smile, my darling, is an indication
You have forgotten that I burnt the toast.
Forgiven too, that button which was missing,
And that the porridge, yesterday, had lumps;
And—this is more than hugging, petting,
kissing—
That with three honour tricks I called No Trumps.

I should like to hear Nelson Eddy sing:

Your legs of mutton are so tender,
Your virgins, sweetheart, so divine;
Let other girls be young and slender;
You're getting stout, but you are mine.

Or Bing:

Never do I waste a thought on other
Women and on their expensive frocks,
My ideal is the "wife and mother"
In her faded overalls and smocks.
Though I no longer call you "Honey,"
It is only you whom I adore,
Even when you ask for household money,
And you get it, and you ask for more.

It can be done. Why, then is it not done?

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