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EVERGREENS

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Evergreens

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Jerome K. Jerome

Evergreens

EVERGREENS

They look so dull and dowdy in the spring weather, when the snow drops and the crocuses are putting on their dainty frocks of white and mauve and yellow, and the baby-buds from every branch are peeping with bright eyes out on the world, and stretching forth soft little leaves toward the coming gladness of their lives. They stand apart, so cold and hard amid the stirring hope and joy that are throbbing all around them.

And in the deep full summer-time, when all the rest of nature dons its richest garb of green, and the roses clamber round the porch, and the grass waves waist-high in the meadow, and the fields are gay with flowers – they seem duller and dowdier than ever then, wearing their faded winter's dress, looking so dingy and old and worn.

In the mellow days of autumn, when the trees, like dames no longer young, seek to forget their aged looks under gorgeous bright-toned robes of gold and brown and purple, and the grain is yellow in the fields, and the ruddy fruit hangs clustering from the drooping boughs, and the wooded hills in their thousand hues stretched like leafy rainbows above the vale – ah! surely they look their dullest and dowdiest then. The gathered glory of the dying year is all around them. They seem so out of place among it, in their somber, everlasting green, like poor relations at a rich man's feast. It is such a weather-beaten old green dress. So many summers' suns have blistered it, so many winters' rains have beat upon it – such a shabby, mean, old dress; it is the only one they have!

They do not look quite so bad when the weary winter weather is come, when the flowers are dead, and the hedgerows are bare, and the trees stand out leafless against the gray sky, and the birds are all silent, and the fields are brown, and the vine clings round the cottages with skinny, fleshless arms, and they alone of all things are unchanged, they alone of all the forest are green, they alone of all the verdant host stand firm to front the cruel winter.

They are not very beautiful, only strong and stanch and steadfast – the same in all times, through all seasons – ever the same, ever green. The spring cannot brighten them, the summer cannot scorch them, the autumn cannot wither them, the winter cannot kill them.

There are evergreen men and women in the world, praise be to God! Not many of them, but a few. They are not the showy folk; they are not the clever, attractive folk. (Nature is an old-fashioned shopkeeper; she never puts her best goods in the window.) They are only the quiet, strong folk; they are stronger than the world, stronger than life or death, stronger than Fate. The storms of life sweep over them, and the rains beat down upon them, and the biting frosts creep round them; but the winds and the rains and the frosts pass away, and they are still standing, green and straight. They love the sunshine of life in their undemonstrative way – its pleasures, its joys. But calamity cannot bow them, sorrow and affliction bring not despair to their serene faces, only a little tightening of the lips; the sun of our prosperity makes the green of their friendship no brighter, the frost of our adversity kills not the leaves of their affection.

Let us lay hold of such men and women; let us grapple them to us with hooks of steel; let us cling to them as we would to rocks in a tossing sea. We do not think very much of them in the summertime of life. They do not flatter us or gush over us. They do not always agree with us. They are not always the most delightful society, by any means. They are not good talkers, nor – which would do just as well, perhaps better – do they make enraptured listeners. They have awkward manners, and very little tact. They do not shine to advantage beside our society friends. They do not dress well; they look altogether somewhat dowdy and commonplace. We almost hope they will not see us when

we meet them just outside the club. They are not the sort of people we want to ostentatiously greet in crowded places. It is not till the days of our need that we learn to love and know them. It is not till the winter that the birds see the wisdom of building their nests in the evergreen trees.

And we, in our spring-time folly of youth, pass them by with a sneer, the uninteresting, colorless evergreens, and, like silly children with nothing but eyes in their heads, stretch out our hands and cry for the pretty flowers. We will make our little garden of life such a charming, fairy-like spot, the envy of every passer-by! There shall nothing grow in it but lilies and roses, and the cottage we will cover all over with Virginia-creeper. And, oh, how sweet it will look, under the dancing summer sun-light, when the soft west breeze is blowing!

And, oh, how we shall stand and shiver there when the rain and the east wind come!

Oh, you foolish, foolish little maidens, with your dainty heads so full of unwisdom! how often – oh! how often, are you to be warned that it is not always the sweetest thing in lovers that is the best material to make a good-wearing husband out of? "The lover sighing like a furnace" will not go on sighing like a furnace forever. That furnace will go out. He will become the husband, "full of strange oaths – jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel," and grow "into the lean and slipper'd pantaloons." How will he wear? There will be no changing him if he does not suit, no sending him back to be altered, no having him let out a bit where he is too tight and hurts you, no having him taken in where he is too loose, no laying him by when the cold comes, to wrap yourself up in something warmer. As he is when you select him, so he will have to last you all your life – through all changes, through all seasons.

Yes, he looks very pretty now – handsome pattern, if the colors are fast and it does not fade – feels soft and warm to the touch. How will he stand the world's rough weather? How will he stand life's wear and tear?

He looks so manly and brave. His hair curls so divinely. He dresses so well (I wonder if the tailor's bill is paid?) He kisses your hand so gracefully. He calls you such pretty names. His arm feels so strong around you. His fine eyes are so full of tenderness as they gaze down into yours.

Will he kiss your hand when it is wrinkled and old? Will he call you pretty names when the baby is crying in the night, and you cannot keep it quiet – or, better still, will he sit up and take a turn with it? Will his arm be strong around you in the days of trouble? Will his eyes shine above you full of tenderness when yours are growing dim?

And you boys, you silly boys! what materials for a wife do you think you will get out of the empty-headed coquettes you are raving and tearing your hair about. Oh! yes, she is very handsome, and she dresses with exquisite taste (the result of devoting the whole of her heart, mind and soul to the subject, and never allowing her thoughts to be distracted from it by any other mundane or celestial object whatsoever); and she is very agreeable and entertaining and fascinating; and she will go on looking handsome, and dressing exquisitely, and being agreeable and entertaining and fascinating just as much after you have married her as before – more so, if anything.

But *you* will not get the benefit of it. Husbands will be charmed and fascinated by her in plenty, but *you* will not be among them. You will run the show, you will pay all the expenses, do all the work. Your performing lady will be most affable and enchanting to the crowd. They will stare at her, and admire her, and talk to her, and flirt with her. And you will be able to feel that you are quite a benefactor to your fellow-men and women – to your fellow-men especially – in providing such delightful amusement for them, free. But *you*

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