

## HOW TO CHOOSE A CHRISTIAN NAME.



WHAT shall be the baby's name?" This important question is seldom decided without a great deal of family discussion, and much asking and receiving of advice from friends and kinsfolk. It often happens, however, that in spite of long consideration and abundance of counsel, the result arrived at is one which occasions to the recipient of the name no small amount of inconvenience and annoyance in after-life. It may therefore be of service to many persons to lay down a few general principles by which the selection of a name ought to be determined. The truth of these principles will be obvious enough when they are once stated, but they appear to be very commonly overlooked in practice.

In the first place, it ought to be borne in mind that the principal purpose for which a name is given, is to distinguish the person who bears it from other people. A name which does not effectually answer this purpose, whatever merits it may possess in other respects, is as bad as a timepiece which does not show the time, or a handwriting which cannot be read. Now it is precisely with regard to this all-important point that the advice of friends is most frequently misleading. There is nearly always some one ready to offer the counsel given to the parents of John the Baptist, to call the child "after" its father or mother, or some other relative, bearing, as often as not, the same surname.

There are many families in which the really absurd practice prevails of retaining the same set of Christian names from generation to generation, with the natural result that each member of one of these families is constantly subjected to the inconvenience of being mistaken for his father or his cousin. In the giving of names, considerations of sentiment ought always to give way to those of convenience. It is satisfactory to observe that the very commonest of our Christian names are fast losing their excessive popularity, and that the custom of giving double names, and that of using surnames as Christian names, are decidedly becoming more general. These useful innovations are especially to be recommended to the Smiths, the Browns, the Joneses, and all other possessors of excessively common surnames. We may reasonably hope that, in a generation or two, there may be no longer any plain John Smiths to lament the inconvenience of bearing a name which is practically "no name at all." Although as a rule it is well to avoid anything very eccentric or unusual in the choice of a Christian name, it may fairly be allowed that those families which have extremely common surnames are entitled to a dispensation from this general law.

However, it is quite possible that a name may abundantly fulfil its purpose of identifying the in-

dividual who owns it, and yet be in other respects exceedingly undesirable. It is bad enough to be called by a name which is "no name at all," but it is even worse to have a name which no stranger can hear pronounced without feeling either amusement or disgust. It may be hoped that there are not many parents who would wilfully inflict on their children the lifelong vexation which follows the possession of a ridiculous or disagreeable name. On the contrary, every right-feeling person, who has perceived how important this matter really is, would be anxious to select for his child a name which is likely to produce a distinctly favourable impression. Let us then consider what are the several grounds, apart from the utilitarian one of distinctiveness, on which one name may be preferable to another.

Amongst the most obvious of the points which determine the attractiveness of a name, is the pleasantness or unpleasantness of its sound. Of all the considerations affecting the choice of a name, this may be said to be the one which is least commonly overlooked. The first question to be discussed is usually whether the name be a "pretty" one; and if this be answered satisfactorily, the matter is considered as settled. It must, however, be confessed that euphony is very largely a matter of fancy. A name which to one person seems the very perfection of pleasantness of sound, will often strike another person as particularly disagreeable. The imagination, prompted by subtle and untraceable associations, has a great deal more to do with our judgments on this point than the organs of hearing. Nevertheless, there are some names which, from whatever reason, most educated people will be found to agree in regarding as comical or unpleasant in sound; and these it is obviously desirable to avoid. The names of the Old Testament, for instance, are, with a few exceptions, apt to sound extremely uncouth to English ears, or at least to English prejudices.

An odd effect is generally produced when the Christian and family names begin with the same letter, and still more when the alliteration extends to three names. Rhyming names, like John Conn, or Peter Streeter, are still more objectionable.

Under the head of euphony, we may include easiness of pronunciation. As a general rule, names of more than three syllables are awkwardly long. The giving of more than two Christian names is not to be commended. Two names, if well chosen, ought to be sufficiently distinctive, and a longer combination is needlessly troublesome, both to pronounce and to write. Instances are on record in which men have actually taken legal steps to dispossess themselves of one or two out of the long string of names which their parents had conferred upon them.

The meaning of a name is a matter not altogether without importance, although I would by no means recommend people to select names principally on account of their signification. To give such advice-

would be to confine the range of choice within undesirably narrow limits. Besides, it is not always easy to obtain trustworthy information respecting the meaning of a name, the statements on the subject that are contained in popular books being for the most part quite misleading. As a general rule, however, where the etymology of a name belongs to a language which few people understand, there is no reason for being solicitous about its meaning. It is only when the real or apparent signification of a name is so obvious as to be certain to excite remark, that it becomes worth while to consider whether this meaning is desirable or the reverse. For example, the name of Ursula, which is the plainest of subject Latin for "little she-bear," is not unlikely to subject the owner of it to a good deal of quizzing.

Before bestowing on a child an obviously significant Christian name, it is well to consider whether it may not afterwards turn out to be comically inappropriate. One is sometimes amused by the incongruity of a name like Lily or Violet, applied to a lady of stalwart frame and masculine demeanour, or of Blanche as the appellation of a very decided brunette. In the village where my childhood was spent, there lived a matron whose Christian name of Silence gave awkward point to the unfortunate reputation she had acquired as a "common scold."

I have previously commended, in the interest of distinctiveness, the practice of bestowing a surname as a subsidiary Christian name; but some caution is needed in following this advice, because family nomenclature abounds in oddities both of sense and of sound, which become all the more conspicuous when voluntarily adopted. Still greater care is advisable when it is proposed to employ a surname as a sole or principal Christian name. This is sometimes done with very happy effect; but there are only a few surnames which can be thus used without seeming either awkward or grotesque. It may be safely said that no surname which has any obvious meaning in English should ever be used as a Christian name.

Far more important than the signification of a name are its historical or proverbial associations. Instances have been known in which parents have given to their children such names as Iscariot, Pilate, and Nero. It is probable that these outrages proceeded from a worse cause than mere ignorance or thoughtlessness. Amongst the less-educated classes, however, it is very often found that names of very inauspicious associations are bestowed without any evil intention. In the North of England, for instance, the name of Absalom is by no means uncommon.

Of late years, it has become quite a fashion among certain people to give to their children as Christian names the titles or surnames of various aristocratic families. Such names as Percy, Digby, Vernon, and Howard are become too common to occasion much ridicule in individual cases; but the adoption of them, when there is no good reason for it,

must be stigmatised as a foolish piece of snobbishness. The use of the names of persons illustrious in literature or art is not greatly to be recommended. Such a name as Cicero (which has really been borne as a Christian name by at least one Englishman during this century) would be a decidedly awkward possession for a young man who aspired to distinguish himself as a speaker; nor would the case be much better if the owner of the name happened to be exceptionally deficient in oratorical talent.

Many persons delight in indicating their political or religious sympathies in the giving of names to their children. To do this is certainly not an evidence of good taste. A parent who would compel his child to wear a party badge in the form of a name, is not likely to be deterred from doing so by the consideration that a change of opinion on the part of the recipient of the name may render it absurdly inappropriate.

Another point which should be carefully taken into account is, that a name which is not in itself at all objectionable may become so when coupled with a particular surname. This is especially the case when any ludicrous proverbial association is suggested by the combination. The Fawkes family, for instance, should avoid the name of Guy, and the Piper family that of Peter. Those persons who are so unfortunate as to have surnames which are provocative of amusement, ought to take especial care to avoid calling attention to the oddity of the surname by prefixing to it anything eccentric in the way of Christian names.

As most people have sometimes occasion to write their initials instead of their full signature, it does not seem too trifling to refer to the droll effect which is produced when the initials of a name spell some ridiculous word. This matter seems to be one which is very seldom considered, as there are few families in which some absurdity of this kind has not been perpetrated. There is a distinguished living musical composer who, when he signs his initials, is obliged to write himself down an A. S. S. Other odd combinations which may be mentioned are F. O. P., R. A. T., and G. A. B. Y. This is no doubt only a small matter, but it is surely worth while to avoid needlessly inflicting on one's children even a trifling amount of annoyance. Perhaps we may go a little further and say that where a name has three initials, it is better that they should not admit of being pronounced as a syllable.

It would be possible to offer more detailed suggestions regarding the choice of a name, but to do this would be to enter on more or less debatable ground. The few rules which I have ventured to give are, I think, scarcely open to dispute, and any one who bears them in mind will be tolerably safe from falling into the gross absurdities so frequently committed. No general advice, however, can supersede the exercise of individual good taste, which, in this matter as in all others, is to be acquired by thoughtful observation.

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