

MARRIAGE.*

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THE FACTS.

NOT without reason has the "Union of Free Thinkers and Free Believers for the purpose of Ethical Culture" put the crisis of the marriage problem at the head of its series of lectures on the "Crisis of Moral Ideas." Such a crisis now prevails among others over France and over the entire civilized world. In fact it is at the root of all the rest.

And why is this? Because since society is not the union of isolated individuals but of established families the fundamental crisis is that of the family, the social construction of which is represented by marriage. If that is disturbed the entire edifice of society totters.

It is not for me here to account for or to describe the marriage crisis. It is enough to observe the literature of to-day. What books are most read if not licentious novels or certain alleged philosophical lucubrations which are equally destructive to the principles of the family? With a few happy exceptions what dramas attract the largest numbers of spectators at the theatre? The answer is the same. If we study the customs of the people we see in the large cities many honest and courageous laborers mingled with the idle and the vicious contending against poverty and the evil conditions which render most difficult the formation of a family, and which furnish a sad excuse for failures. But if we raise our eyes to the highest rungs of the social ladder we find here more reason for indulgence for those resounding scandals which prove that the highest degree of culture is inadequate unless it is joined to the service of duty, and

* Translated by Lydia G. Robinson from the *Revue moderniste internationale*, Nov.-Dec., 1911. The *Revue* introduces it in a footnote as follows: "We are glad to be able to offer to our readers the stenographic report made for *Les droits de l'homme*, of the admirable extempore address of the grand old man who at the age of 85 spoke of the "great sacrament" with a power of thought, a nobility of style and an affecting emotion of which he alone possesses the secret."

that this duty itself is powerless if it is too abstract and has no yearning to love and to make itself beloved.

I shall content myself with inquiring into the remedies for this evil. In order to reform an institution, we must trace it to its origin, as Machiavelli once said. To be sure, the evolution of all things is a glorious and necessary law, but in our opinion progress consists in developing tradition by transforming it; that which gives value to the fruit is entirely contained within the root and sap of the tree.

THE ESSENCE OF MARRIAGE.

(The orator did not linger on the historical origin of the family which in its outlines existed before the state and before the churches. However tempted he might be to follow Fustel de Coulanges in showing the origin of our civilization in the Aryan family, he did not enlarge upon the admirable definition: "Marriage is the perfect communion of man and woman; it is the communication of all human and divine rights; *rerum divinarum humanarumque communicatio.*")

I wish to speak of psychological origins. I would dare pronounce a word which is no longer used in earnest discussions because it has been so degraded,—I mean the word love. For what is marriage if not the moral, social and religious organization of love, of that inevitable law of the sexes, which originates not in the body only but in the soul; of that terrible and prolific force which can destroy or uplift the whole individual and society.

Love! I need not say that I do not mean by the word a caprice of the imagination of greater or less duration, a more or less violent transport of the senses, but the consummate, complex choice which man and woman, the two halves of the human race, make with regard to each other. The tendency of nature is towards a single type—remember Plato's fine symbol of the androgyn—and it is incomplete in so far as it has not realized this type. Aside from legitimate and sometimes even glorious exceptions, a celibate is not a man but, as Jesus himself defined it, a eunuch. A man is not a man, a woman is not a woman, intellectually, emotionally, morally, except when they have become united in that simple and yet magnificent synthesis, the couple. Hence if one wishes to comprehend marriage, he must primarily analyze it in love. It is not a question of interests, however respectable; it is not a question of associating one name with another name, one fortune with another fortune; all these things may have their own importance, but it is not upon these elements that the union, the contract, the sacrament of marriage must be entered upon.

Sacrament? Oh, of course I do not think, as scholastic theol-

ogy teaches, that Jesus Christ consecrated it as a special rite. What is more, he did not institute any rite, any sacrament, any church. Born a Jew, he wished to live and die a Jew, and from the bloody swaddling bands of his circumcision to the embalmed winding-sheet of his burial, to perform the peculiar rites of his own nation. Certainly if Jesus Christ had been a founder he would have been inferior to Moses and to Mohammed. What he created is a new spirit, and it is in the light of this inspiration that I call marriage a sacrament. This pure and noble sacrament is the very sacrament of love in perfect union. When the young man makes his entry into life, at the hour of bygone emotions and positive reflections, he finds himself confronted by a sphinx with two faces, love and Love, female and woman. His life is at the mercy of the choice which he is about to make. The great problem of sex is presented to him. If he enters upon the royal path which woman opens to him his safety and the safety of society are assured. If he yields to the appeal of the voluptuous face which changes names from day to day, he is lost—at least for a long time—and with himself he has compromised society, for marriage must in nowise be a penance or a refuge. To marry too late when tired of the fruitless life one has led, to dismiss a mistress with whom one has profaned love, and to offer the remnants to a woman to whom one talks of an establishment (unless it be of reestablishment)—this is not marriage because indeed it is not love in the slightest degree.

But how many other abuses there are which break up the institution, and first of all divorce! With Roosevelt I would say that the greatest misfortune of a nation is easy and frequent divorce. Only one calamity is comparable to it, namely voluntary sterility. Let us leave these scourges to fallen nations, and let us Frenchmen be men with but one wife so that we may be fathers of many and brave children. (Prolonged Applause.)

And yet to me fatherhood, motherhood, the extension of the life of two transitory creatures however glorious may be their functions, is not the essential end of marriage. A childless marriage may be a true marriage, but a marriage without love is not. The first result of marriage, procreation, is but a means, a very noble and sublime means, but morally of subordinate rank. Now it belongs to the dignity of the human personality not to be merely a subsidiary means but before all to be an end. If the man loves the woman and if the woman loves the man, it is because they discover in the qualities of mind, of soul, and even of the body of each other, the reason and incentive of their union. Each becomes to the other an

end, loved and desired for itself, the object of a mutual gift which comprises perfect happiness and perfect sacrifice.

Likewise we may say without paradox that divorce has never dissolved a marriage, for divorce applies solely to a marriage which is not one in fact, for it only interferes to confirm the absence of a true marriage. Those who have been divorced have never shared in the great mystery of marriage. They have only been shadows of husband and wife. What is to be deplored is not so much the dissolution of the union, as the pretended union itself which joined them together.

Moreover is not this exactly what the Bible teaches us? To accept that book as an exact history is in many cases to make it childish and ridiculous. Let us take it for what it really is, a miracle of ethical instruction, a sublime religious poem. Observe for instance the myth of the woman taken from Adam's side—a crude symbol but one which hides a precious truth. In the days of polytheism and polygamy there arises an unknown prophet who tells us that in order to be double and complete man must rise from a profound slumber. We are at liberty to understand thereby the animal sleep of numberless ages in which man knew not woman, for she was merely the female of the species. It is at this point that man, also resembling the brute creation, awoke and received the revelation of the human Eve who had been sleeping since the beginning at the bottom of his heart. Had he continued to lack this vision he would have remained a gorilla. He finally awakens out of his dense bestial sleep; he has the vision of new centuries and he cries out, "Ah, this is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called woman because she was taken out of man. They shall be joined together. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother and shall cleave unto his wife; and they twain shall be one flesh, one spirit, one personality, and from this time forth they shall bear but one name, that in which the eternal God created both of them, Adam, Man." (Applause.)

THE ATTRIBUTES OF MARRIAGE.

The principal qualities of marriage are liberty and indissolubility. Did I say liberty? Yes, for that is derived from the very character of love. If marriage is the consecration of love, it must be free like love. Hence there are no worldly prejudices, nor social conventionalities, nor considerations of fortune which can impose a law upon it. Of course it is the part of parents to give counsel, but they must not go beyond that nor from a selfish caprice keep apart

two hearts made for each other. For human authority cannot impose or forbid a love which no moral laws disapprove. Even the church which has invented so many invalidating prohibitions against marriage makes no pretense to dictate it. If it declared that a union contracted only before a civil magistrate is not marriage, at the same time by a happy contradiction and until the Council of Trent it recognized that two young people not belonging to the clergy who secretly took each other for husband and wife without the consent of their parents and without the presence of witnesses, even without the benediction of the priest, were actually married, not only as the beneficiaries of a contract but as participants of a sacrament which they administered to themselves!

Thus the marriage is consummated when two children give their hearts to each other. In the eyes of the theologians they are invested in a priestly majesty. The church gives them its benediction and submits; it recognizes that here there has been a priest prior to itself and which it is powerless to create.

Such is the essential quality of reinstated love which is the deliberate gift, the magnificent gift of one's self, a banquet prepared for the whole of life in which reason, conscience and heart play leading parts, and in which the senses have no place except as the guests of the soul!

But if marriage is supremely free it is none the less indissoluble. This may seem contradictory, but as far as I am concerned I base the conviction not only on the Christian tradition which I endorse but on the very law of human nature. The nature of this mysterious gift exchanged between husband and wife is such that love can not be taken back because it has so deeply impressed in the soul and in the flesh a physical and moral seal which nothing can efface. When in the fulness of their consciousness and of their consent two beings have exchanged the free gift of perfect love, when each has penetrated to those depths within the other whence worlds gush forth, it is for all time and forever, as in the beautiful and simple formula of the Anglican liturgy: "I take thee to be my wedded wife for richer or for poorer, for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, until death do us part."

I appeal even to those who have never loved but who have at least studied love in books and in life, and even in the counterfeits to which it is subjected. These profane people know that always and everywhere the same language is used. Both the man who experiences love in the bottom of his heart and the hypocrite who skilfully imitates it cry with one voice, "You only do I love, and you

forever!" And what woman is there who in the face of an offer of unworthy love would not repulse her seducer with scorn if she herself were not in her turn a seducer? I appeal to all women who have loved, that this holds true at the very basis of human nature.

But, some one will say, the eternity of love is a dream, whereas its reality is but ephemeral; after a time the flower withers never to bloom again. And the wisest people give council that when you shall have paid your tribute to love this net which nature spreads for us, as Schopenhauer calls it, should be changed to friendship if you would have peace in your heart, and after all a relative happiness. I make answer that this is impossible. It is true that friendship is one of the most beautiful things in the world, but love by its very nature is superior even to friendship. Friendship may change into love but love never moves backward, it never returns to friendship. When it ceases to be itself it changes to indifference, to antagonism, to hate. Hence in order to strengthen marriage, seal up the cornerstone of the building and found the marriage upon love.

But love, some one again will say, passes through different ages and is clad in changing forms. What if it is? It always remains love even under the aspect of friendship, for under the crown of her snowy hair as formerly under the flowers of her spring time the grandmother is always loved with love and the wrinkles upon her brow are sacred lines formed by sweet memories unknown to youth itself. *Et meminisse juvabit!*

THE ENEMIES OF LOVE.

However, love has two enemies, divorce and death. I am not speaking here of legal divorce which I admit in exceptional cases. When it is brought to protect against the man's tyrannical repudiation of a woman, even Jesus did not absolutely reprove divorce, and the Greek and Russian churches which most closely preserve the primitive form of Christian dogma practically tolerate it in certain cases, at least in that of adultery. I am speaking of the divorce which escapes all civil laws and all religious stipulations, the internal divorce of those who, not being able to actualize love and not wishing to scandalize the moral sense of the world, become resigned to the outward appearance of a conjugal union and to perfectly creditable relations with each other, disarming and dispelling all suspicion. In this case especially the divorce is a complete one. The indissolubility of a marriage which is separated from the permanence of love is the worst of all masks assumed by the worst of divorces.

Now I would say of those hostile couples who face each other

at their hearth stones, consenting perhaps to the cheapest courtesies, exactly as of those which are more openly separated by law, that they have never been married, that they have never known love since they have permitted it to die. Love does not condemn its elect to galley chains.

But if true love can triumph over divorce, can it triumph over death? Sooner or later the time will come when time is not the only obstacle to the permanence and beauty of love; either the man or the woman passes away before the allotted time, and so far before in many cases as to render the separation the more bitter. Thus the dream of eternal union is broken by death, and according to the verse of the Count de Lisle translated from St. Augustine the whole world seems to be engulfed:

"Qu'est-ce que tout cela qui n'est pas éternel?"

Of course, for those who are convinced that everything ends with death there is nothing more sad or more horrible than to think that a being who was the noblest part of your self, who had labored by your side, who had been the confidante of all your secrets, of all your hopes, of all your infinite longings, that this being when departing had spoken of a future meeting, and that in spite of all this, you would not meet again and that the promise is but a lie. For my part I admit that if I had this desperate conviction, in spite of the obligation to remain until the end I would not feel that I had the strength to do so. On the contrary I have drawn from my Christian faith, from the meditations of the deepest philosophers, Leibnitz and Renouvier among others, from the study of the moral laws of human nature as irrefragable as those of physical nature, the certainty that death is not annihilation but transformation. What disappears is the phantom of man, the transitory being, the breath of a day. . . . Yes this physical, and even to a certain point intellectual, phantom has vanished into the black whirlwind, but the personality which thinks, which wills, which suffers, which is exalted and which loves—I swear it by human nature, at least such as I bear within myself—this essential being is called to a still higher training; this being is immortal.