The Superstition

of Divorce

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**Table of Contents**

Introductory Note

I The Superstition of Divorce (1)

II The Superstition of Divorce (2)

III The Superstition of Divorce (3)

IV The Superstition of Divorce (4)

**INTRODUCTORY NOTE**

The earlier part of this book appeared in the form of five articles

which came out in the "New Witness" at the crisis of the recent

controversy in the Press on the subject of divorce. Crude and sketchy

as they confessedly were, they had a certain rude plan of their own,

which I find it very difficult to recast even in order to expand.

I have therefore decided to reprint the original articles as they stood,

save for a few introductory words; and then, at the risk of repetition,

to add a few further chapters, explaining more fully any conceptions

that may seem to have been too crudely assumed or dismissed.

I have set forth the original matter as it appeared, under a

general heading, without dividing it into chapters.

G.K.C.

**I**

**THE SUPERSTITION OF DIVORCE (1)**

It is futile to talk of reform without reference to form.

To take a case from my own taste and fancy, there is nothing I feel

to be so beautiful and wonderful as a window. All casements are

magic casements, whether they open on the foam or the front-garden;

they lie close to the ultimate mystery and paradox of limitation

and liberty. But if I followed my instinct towards an infinite

number of windows, it would end in having no walls. It would also

(it may be added incidentally) end in having no windows either;

for a window makes a picture by making a picture-frame. But there

is a simpler way of stating my more simple and fatal error.

It is that I have wanted a window, without considering whether

I wanted a house. Now many appeals are being made to us to-day

on behalf of that light and liberty that might well be symbolised

by windows; especially as so many of them concern the enlightenment

and liberation of the house, in the sense of the home.

Many quite disinterested people urge many quite reasonable

considerations in the case of divorce, as a type of domestic liberation;

but in the journalistic and general discussion of the matter there

is far too much of the mind that works backwards and at random,

in the manner of all windows and no walls. Such people say they

want divorce, without asking themselves whether they want marriage.

Even in order to be divorced it has generally been found necessary

to go through the preliminary formality of being married; and unless

the nature of this initial act be considered, we might as well be

discussing haircutting for the bald or spectacles for the blind.

To be divorced is to be in the literal sense unmarried;

and there is no sense in a thing being undone when we do not know

if it is done.

There is perhaps no worse advice, nine times out of ten, than the advice

to do the work that's nearest. It is especially bad when it means,

as it generally does, removing the obstacle that's nearest.

It means that men are not to behave like men but like mice;

who nibble at the thing that's nearest. The man, like the mouse,

undermines what he cannot understand. Because he himself bumps

into a thing, he calls it the nearest obstacle; though the obstacle

may happen to be the pillar that holds up the whole roof over

his head. He industriously removes the obstacle; and in return,

the obstacle removes him, and much more valuable things than he.

This opportunism is perhaps the most unpractical thing in this highly

unpractical world. People talk vaguely against destructive criticism;

but what is the matter with this criticism is not that it destroys,

but that it does not criticise. It is destruction without design.

It is taking a complex machine to pieces bit by bit, in any order,

without even knowing what the machine is for. And if a man deals

with a deadly dynamic machine on the principle of touching the knob

that's nearest, he will find out the defects of that cheery philosophy.

Now leaving many sincere and serious critics of modern marriage

on one side for the moment, great masses of modern men and women,

who write and talk about marriage, are thus nibbling blindly at it

like an army of mice. When the reformers propose, for instance,

that divorce should be obtainable after an absence of three years

(the absence actually taken for granted in the first military

arrangements of the late European War) their readers and supporters

could seldom give any sort of logical reason for the period

being three years, and not three months or three minutes.

They are like people who should say "Give me three feet of dog";

and not care where the cut came. Such persons fail to see a dog as an

organic entity; in other words, they cannot make head or tail of it.

And the chief thing to say about such reformers of marriage is that

they cannot make head or tail of it. They do not know what it is,

or what it is meant to be, or what its supporters suppose it

to be; they never look at it, even when they are inside it.

They do the work that's nearest; which is poking holes in the bottom

of a boat under the impression that they are digging in a garden.

This question of what a thing is, and whether it is a garden or a boat,

appears to them abstract and academic. They have no notion of

how large is the idea they attack; or how relatively small appear

the holes that they pick in it.

Thus, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, an intelligent man in other matters,

says that there is only a "theological" opposition to divorce,

and that it is entirely founded on "certain texts" in the Bible

about marriages. This is exactly as if he said that a belief

in the brotherhood of men was only founded on certain texts

in the Bible, about all men being the children of Adam and Eve.

Millions of peasants and plain people all over the world assume

marriage to be static, without having ever clapped eyes on any text.

Numbers of more modern people, especially after the recent experiments

in America, think divorce is a social disease, without having ever

bothered about any text. It may be maintained that even in these,

or in any one, the idea of marriage is ultimately mystical;

and the same may be maintained about the idea of brotherhood.

It is obvious that a husband and wife are not visibly one flesh,

in the sense of being one quadruped. It is equally obvious

that Paderewski and Jack Johnson are not twins, and probably

have not played together at their mother's knee. There is indeed

a very important admission, or addition, to be realised here.

What is true is this: that if the nonsense of Nietzsche or some

such sophist submerged current culture, so that it was the fashion

to deny the duties of fraternity; then indeed it might be found

that the group which still affirmed fraternity was the original

group in whose sacred books was the text about Adam and Eve.

Suppose some Prussian professor has opportunely discovered

that Germans and lesser men are respectively descended from two

such very different monkeys that they are in no sense brothers,

but barely cousins (German) any number of times removed.

And suppose he proceeds to remove them even further with a hatchet,

suppose he bases on this a repetition of the conduct of Cain,

saying not so much "Am I my brother's keeper?" as "Is he really

my brother?" And suppose this higher philosophy of the hatchet

becomes prevalent in colleges and cultivated circles, as even

more foolish philosophies have done. Then I agree it probably

will be the Christian, the man who preserves the text about Cain,

who will continue to assert that he is still the professor's brother;

that he is still the professor's keeper. He may possibly add that,

in his opinion, the professor seems to require a keeper.

And that is doubtless the situation in the controversies about divorce

and marriage to-day. It is the Christian church which continues

to hold strongly, when the world for some reason has weakened on it,

what many others hold at other times. But even then it is barely

picking up the shreds and scraps of the subject to talk about

a reliance on texts. The vital point in the comparison is this:

that human brotherhood means a whole view of life, held in the light

of life, and defended, rightly or wrongly, by constant appeals to every

aspect of life. The religion that holds it most strongly will hold

it when nobody else holds it; that is quite true, and that some of us

may be so perverse as to think a point in favour of the religion.

But anybody who holds it at all will hold it as a philosophy,

not hung on one text but on a hundred truths. Fraternity may

be a sentimental metaphor; I may be suffering a delusion when I

hail a Montenegrin peasant as my long lost brother. As a fact,

I have my own suspicions about which of us it is that has got lost.

But my delusion is not a deduction from one text, or from twenty;

it is the expression of a relation that to me at least seems a reality.

And what I should say about the idea of a brother, I should say

about the idea of a wife.

It is supposed to be very unbusinesslike to begin at the beginning.

It is called "abstract and academic principles with which we English,

etc., etc." It is still in some strange way considered unpractical

to open up inquiries about anything by asking what it is.

I happen to have, however, a fairly complete contempt for that sort

of practicality; for I know that it is not even practical.

My ideal business man would not be one who planked down

fifty pounds and said "Here is hard cash; I am a plain man;

it is quite indifferent to me whether I am paying a debt, or giving

alms to a beggar, or buying a wild bull or a bathing machine."

Despite the infectious heartiness of his tone, I should still,

in considering the hard cash, say (like a cabman) "What's this?"

I should continue to insist, priggishly, that it was a highly practical

point what the money was; what it was supposed to stand for, to aim

at or to declare; what was the nature of the transaction; or, in short,

what the devil the man supposed he was doing. I shall therefore

begin by asking, in an equally mystical manner, what in the name

of God and the angels a man getting married supposes he is doing.

I shall begin by asking what marriage is; and the mere question will

probably reveal that the act itself, good or bad, wise or foolish,

is of a certain kind; that it is not an inquiry or an experiment

or an accident; it may probably dawn on us that it is a promise.

It can be more fully defined by saying it is a vow.

Many will immediately answer that it is a rash vow.

I am content for the moment to reply that all vows are rash vows.

I am not now defending but defining vows; I am pointing out that this

is a discussion about vows; first, of whether there ought to be vows;

and second, of what vows ought to be. Ought a man to break a promise?

Ought a man to make a promise? These are philosophic questions;

but the philosophic peculiarity of divorce and re-marriage, as compared

with free love and no marriage, is that a man breaks and makes

a promise at the same moment. It is a highly German philosophy;

and recalls the way in which the enemy wishes to celebrate his

successful destruction of all treaties by signing some more.

If I were breaking a promise, I would do it without promises.

But I am very far from minimising the momentous and disputable nature

of the vow itself. I shall try to show, in a further article,

that this rash and romantic operation is the only furnace from which

can come the plain hardware of humanity, the cast-iron resistance

of citizenship or the cold steel of common sense; but I am not denying

that the furnace is a fire. The vow is a violent and unique thing;

though there have been many besides the marriage vow; vows of chivalry,

vows of poverty, vows of celibacy, pagan as well as Christian.

But modern fashion has rather fallen out of the habit; and men

miss the type for the lack of the parallels. The shortest way

of putting the problem is to ask whether being free includes being

free to bind oneself. For the vow is a tryst with oneself.

I may be misunderstood if I say, for brevity, that marriage is an affair

of honour. The sceptic will be delighted to assent, by saying it

is a fight. And so it is, if only with oneself; but the point here

is that it necessarily has the touch of the heroic, in which virtue

can be translated by virtus. Now about fighting, in its nature,

there is an implied infinity or at least a potential infinity.

I mean that loyalty in war is loyalty in defeat or even disgrace;

it is due to the flag precisely at the moment when the flag nearly falls.

We do already apply this to the flag of the nation; and the question

is whether it is wise or unwise to apply it to the flag of the family.

Of course, it is tenable that we should apply it to neither;

that misgovernment in the nation or misery in the citizen would

make the desertion of the flag an act of reason and not treason.

I will only say here that, if this were really the limit of

national loyalty, some of us would have deserted our nation long ago.

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II

**THE SUPERSTITION OF DIVORCE (2)**

To the two or three articles appearing here on this subject

I have given the title of the Superstition of Divorce;

and the title is not taken at random. While free love seems

to me a heresy, divorce does really seem to me a superstition.

It is not only more of a superstition than free love, but much

more of a superstition than strict sacramental marriage; and this

point can hardly be made too plain. It is the partisans of divorce,

not the defenders of marriage, who attach a stiff and senseless

sanctity to a mere ceremony, apart from the meaning of the ceremony.

It is our opponents, and not we, who hope to be saved

by the letter of ritual, instead of the spirit of reality.

It is they who hold that vow or violation, loyalty or disloyalty,

can all be disposed of by a mysterious and magic rite, performed first

in a law-court and then in a church or a registry office.

There is little difference between the two parts of the ritual;

except that the law court is much more ritualistic.

But the plainest parallels will show anybody that all this is sheer

barbarous credulity. It may or may not be superstition for a man

to believe he must kiss the Bible to show he is telling the truth.

It is certainly the most grovelling superstition for him to believe that,

if he kisses the Bible, anything he says will come true. It would

surely be the blackest and most benighted Bible-worship to suggest

that the mere kiss on the mere book alters the moral quality of perjury.

Yet this is precisely what is implied in saying that formal

re-marriage alters the moral quality of conjugal infidelity.

It may have been a mark of the Dark Ages that Harold should

swear on a relic, though he were afterwards forsworn.

But surely those ages would have been at their darkest, if he had

been content to be sworn on a relic and forsworn on another relic.

Yet this is the new altar these reformers would erect for us,

out of the mouldy and meaningless relics of their dead law and

their dying religion.

Now we, at any rate, are talking about an idea, a thing of the intellect

and the soul; which we feel to be unalterable by legal antics.

We are talking about the idea of loyalty; perhaps a fantastic,

perhaps only an unfashionable idea, but one we can explain and defend

as an idea. Now I have already pointed out that most sane men

do admit our ideal in such a case as patriotism or public spirit;

the necessity of saving the state to which we belong.

The patriot may revile but must not renounce his country;

he must curse it to cure it, but not to wither it up. The old

pagan citizens felt thus about the city; and modern nationalists

feel thus about the nation. But even mere modern internationalists

feel it about something; if it is only the nation of mankind.

Even the humanitarian does not become a misanthrope and live in a

monkey-house. Even a disappointed Collectivist or Communist does

not retire into the exclusive society of beavers, because beavers

are all communists of the most class-conscious solidarity.

He admits the necessity of clinging to his fellow creatures,

and begging them to abandon the use of the possessive pronoun;

heart-breaking as his efforts must seem to him after a time.

Even a Pacifist does not prefer rats to men, on the ground that

the rat community is so pure from the taint of Jingoism as always

to leave the sinking ship. In short, everybody recognises that

there is some ship, large and small, which he ought not to leave,

even when he thinks it is sinking.

We may take it then that there are institutions to which we

are attached finally; just as there are others to which we are

attached temporarily. We go from shop to shop trying to get what we want;

but we do not go from nation to nation doing this; unless we

belong to a certain group now heading very straight for Pogroms.

In the first case it is the threat that we shall withdraw our custom;

in the second it is the threat that we shall never withdraw ourselves;

that we shall be part of the institution to the last. The time when

the shop loses its customers is the time when the city needs its citizens;

but it needs them as critics who will always remain to criticise.

I need not now emphasise the deadly need of this double energy of internal

reform and external defence; the whole towering tragedy which has

eclipsed our earth in our time is but one terrific illustration of it.

The hammer-strokes are coming thick and fast now; and filling the world

with infernal thunders; and there is still the iron sound of something

unbreakable deeper and louder than all the things that break.

We may curse the kings, we may distrust the captains, we may murmur

at the very existence of the armies; but we know that in the darkest

days that may come to us, no man will desert the flag.

Now when we pass from loyalty to the nation to loyalty to the family,

there can be no doubt about the first and plainest difference.

The difference is that the family is a thing far more free.

The vow is a voluntary loyalty; and the marriage vow is marked

among ordinary oaths of allegiance by the fact that the allegiance

is also a choice. The man is not only a citizen of the city,

but also the founder and builder of the city. He is not only a

soldier serving the colours, but he has himself artistically selected

and combined the colours, like the colours of an individual dress.

If it be admissible to ask him to be true to the commonwealth that has

made him, it is at least not more illiberal to ask him to be true

to the commonwealth he has himself made. If civic fidelity be,

as it is, a necessity, it is also in a special sense a constraint.

The old joke against patriotism, the Gilbertian irony, congratulated the

Englishman on his fine and fastidious taste in being born in England.

It made a plausible point in saying "For he might have been a Russian";

though indeed we have liked to see some persons who seemed

to think they could be Russians when the fancy took them.

If commonsense considers even such involuntary loyalty natural,

we can hardly wonder if it thinks voluntary loyalty still more natural.

And the small state founded on the sexes is at once the most

voluntary and the most natural of all self-governing states.

It is not true of Mr. Brown that he might have been a Russian;

but it may be true of Mrs. Brown that she might have been a Robinson.

Now it is not at all hard to see why this small community,

so specially free touching its cause, should yet be specially bound

touching its effects. It is not hard to see why the vow made

most freely is the vow kept most firmly. There are attached to it,

by the nature of things, consequences so tremendous that no contract

can offer any comparison. There is no contract, unless it be what said

to be signed in blood, that can call spirits from the vastly deep,

or bring cherubs (or goblins) to inhabit a small modern villa.

There is no stroke of the pen which creates real bodies

and souls, or makes the characters in a novel come to life.

The institution that puzzles intellectuals so much can be explained

by the mere material fact (perceptible even to intellectuals)

that children are, generally speaking, younger than their parents.

"Till death do us part" is not an irrational formula, for those will

almost certainly die before they see more than half of the amazing

(or alarming) thing they have done.

Such is, in a curt and crude outline, this obvious thing for those

to whom it is not obvious. Now I know there are thinking men among

those who would tamper with it; and I shall expect some of these to

reply to my questions. But for the moment I only ask this question:

whether the parliamentary and journalistic divorce movement shows

even a shadowy trace of these fundamental truths, regarded as tests.

Does it even discuss the nature of a vow, the limits and objects

of loyalty, the survival of the family as a small and free state?

The writers are content to say that Mr. Brown is uncomfortable

with Mrs. Brown, and the last emancipation, for separated couples,

seems only to mean that he is still uncomfortable without Mrs. Brown.

These are not days in which being uncomfortable is felt as the final

test of public action. For the rest, the reformers show statistically

that families are in fact so scattered in our industrial anarchy,

that they may as well abandon hope of finding their way home again.

I am acquainted with that argument for making bad worse and I

see it everywhere leading to slavery. Because London Bridge is

broken down, we must assume that bridges are not meant to bridge.

Because London commercialism and capitalism have copied hell,

we are to continue to copy them. Anyhow, some will retain

the conviction that the ancient bridge built between the two towers

of sex is the worthiest of the great works of the earth.

It is exceedingly characteristic of the dreary decades before the War

that the forms of freedom in which they seemed to specialise were suicide

and divorce. I am not at the moment pronouncing on the moral problem

of either; I am merely noting, as signs of those times, those two true

or false counsels of despair; the end of life and the end of love.

Other forms of freedom were being increasingly curtailed.

Freedom indeed was the one thing that progressives and conservatives

alike contemned. Socialists were largely concerned to prevent strikes,

by State arbitration; that is, by adding another rich man to give

the casting vote between rich and poor. Even in claiming what they

called the right to work they tacitly surrendered the right to leave

off working. Tories were preaching conscription, not so much

to defend the independence of England as to destroy the independence

of Englishmen. Liberals, of course, were chiefly interested

in eliminating liberty, especially touching beer and betting.

It was wicked to fight, and unsafe even to argue; for citing any

certain and contemporary fact might land one in a libel action.

As all these doors were successfully shut in our faces along the chilly

and cheerless corridor of progress (with its glazed tiles) the doors

of death and divorce alone stood open, or rather opened wider and wider.

I do not expect the exponents of divorce to admit any similarity

in the two things; yet the passing parallel is not irrelevant.

It may enable them to realise the limits within which our moral

instincts can, even for the sake of argument, treat this desperate remedy

as a normal object of desire. Divorce is for us at best a failure,

of which we are more concerned to find and cure the cause than to

complete the effects; and we regard a system that produces many divorces

as we do a system that drives men to drown and shoot themselves.

For instance, it is perhaps the commonest complaint against the existing

law that the poor cannot afford to avail themselves of it. It is

an argument to which normally I should listen with special sympathy.

But while I should condemn the law being a luxury, my first thought

will naturally be that divorce and death are only luxuries in a rather

rare sense. I should not primarily condole with the poor man on

the high price of prussic acid; or on the fact that all precipices

of suitable suicidal height were the private property of the landlords.

There are other high prices and high precipices I should attack first.

I should admit in the abstract that what is sauce for the goose is sauce

for the gander; that what is good for the rich is good for the poor;

but my first and strongest impression would be that prussic acid

sauce is not good for anybody. I fear I should, on the impulse

of the moment, pull a poor clerk or artisan back by the coat-tails,

if he were jumping over Shakespeare's Cliff, even if Dover sands

were strewn with the remains of the dukes and bankers who had already

taken the plunge.

But in one respect, I will heartily concede, the cult of divorce has

differed from the mere cult of death. The cult of death is dead.

Those I knew in my youth as young pessimists are now aged optimists.

And, what is more to the point at present, even when it was living

it was limited; it was a thing of one clique in one class.

We know the rule in the old comedy, that when the heroine went

mad in white satin, the confidante went mad in white muslin.

But when, in some tragedy of the artistic temperament,

the painter committed suicide in velvet, it was never implied

that the plumber must commit suicide in corduroy. It was never held

that Hedda Walter's housemaid must die in torments on the carpet

(trying as her term of service may have been); or that Mrs. Tanqueray's

butler must play the Roman fool and die on his own carving knife.

That particular form of playing the fool, Roman or otherwise,

was an oligarchic privilege in the decadent epoch; and even as such has

largely passed with that epoch. Pessimism, which was never popular,

is no longer even fashionable. A far different fate has awaited

the other fashion; the other somewhat dismal form of freedom.

If divorce is a disease, it is no longer to be a fashionable disease

like appendicitis; it is to be made an epidemic like small-pox. As

we have already seen papers and public men to-day make a vast parade

of the necessity of setting the poor man free to get a divorce.

Now why are they so mortally anxious that he should be free to get

a divorce, and not in the least anxious that he should be free to get

anything else? Why are the same people happy, nay almost hilarious,

when he gets a divorce, who are horrified when he gets a drink?

What becomes of his money, what becomes of his children, where he works,

when he ceases to work, are less and less under his personal control.

Labour Exchanges, Insurance Cards, Welfare Work, and a hundred forms

of police inspection and supervision have combined for good or evil

to fix him more and more strictly to a certain place in society.

He is less and less allowed to go to look for a new job;

why is he allowed to go to look for a new wife? He is more and more

compelled to recognise a Moslem code about liquor; why is it made

so easy for him to escape from his old Christian code about sex?

What is the meaning of this mysterious immunity, this special

permit for adultery; and why is running away with his neighbour's

wife to be the only exhilaration still left open to him?

Why must he love as he pleases; when he may not even live as he pleases?

The answer is, I regret to say, that this social campaign,

in most though by no means all of its most prominent campaigners,

relies in this matter on a very smug and pestilent piece of chalk.

There are some advocates of democratic divorce who are really

advocates of general democratic freedom; but they are the exceptions;

I might say, with all respect, that they are the dupes.

The omnipresence of the thing in the press and in political society

is due to a motive precisely opposite to the motive professed.

The modern rulers, who are simply the rich men, are really quite

consistent in their attitude to the poor man. It is the same spirit

which takes away his children under the pretence of order, which takes

away his wife under the pretence of liberty. That which wishes,

in the words of the comic song, to break up the happy home,

is primarily anxious not to break up the much more unhappy factory.

Capitalism, of course, is at war with the family, for the same

reason which has led to its being at war with the Trade Union.

This indeed is the only sense in which it is true that capitalism

is connected with individualism. Capitalism believes in

collectivism for itself and individualism for its enemies.

It desires its victims to be individuals, or (in other words)

to be atoms. For the word atom, in its clearest meaning

(which is none too clear) might be translated as "individual."

If there be any bond, if there be any brotherhood, if there be

any class loyalty or domestic discipline, by which the poor can

help the poor, these emancipators will certainly strive to loosen

that bond or lift that discipline in the most liberal fashion.

If there be such a brotherhood, these individualists will redistribute

it in the form of individuals; or in other words smash it to atoms.

The masters of modern plutocracy know what they are about. They are

making no mistake; they can be cleared of the slander of inconsistency.

A very profound and precise instinct has let them to single out

the human household as the chief obstacle to their inhuman progress.

Without the family we are helpless before the State, which in our modern

case is the Servile State. To use a military metaphor, the family

is the only formation in which the charge of the rich can be repulsed.

It is a force that forms twos as soldiers form fours; and, in every

peasant country, has stood in the square house or the square

plot of land as infantry have stood in squares against cavalry.

How this force operates this, and why, I will try to explain in

the last of these articles. But it is when it is most nearly ridden

down by the horsemen of pride and privilege, as in Poland or Ireland,

when the battle grows most desperate and the hope most dark,

that men begin to understand why that wild oath in its beginnings

was flung beyond the bonds of the world; and what would seem

as passing as a vision is made permanent as a vow.

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III

**THE SUPERSTITION OF DIVORCE** (3)

There has long been a curiously consistent attempt to conceal the fact

that France is a Christian country. There have been Frenchmen

in the plot, no doubt, and no doubt there have been Frenchmen--

though I have myself only found Englishmen--in the derivative

attempt to conceal the fact that Balzac was a Christian writer.

I began to read Balzac long after I had read the admirers

of Balzac; and they had never given me a hint of this truth.

I had read that his books were bound in yellow and "quite

impudently French"; though I may have been cloudy about why being

French should be impudent in a Frenchman. I had read the truer

description of "the grimy wizard of the Comedie humaine,"

and have lived to learn the truth of it; Balzac certainly is a genius

of the type of that artist he himself describes, who could draw

a broomstick so that one knew it had swept the room after a murder.

The furniture of Balzac is more alive than the figures of many dramas.

For this I was prepared; but not for a certain spiritual

assumption which I recognised at once as a historical phenomenon.

The morality of a great writer is not the morality he teaches,

but the morality he takes for granted. The Catholic type

of Christian ethics runs through Balzac's books, exactly as

the Puritan type of Christian ethics runs through Bunyan's books.

What his professed opinions were I do not know, any more than I

know Shakespeare's; but I know that both those great creators of a

multitudinous world made it, as compared with other and later writers,

on the same fundamental moral plan as the universe of Dante.

There can be no doubt about it for any one who can apply as a test

the truth I have mentioned; that the fundamental things in a man are not

the things he explains, but rather the things he forgets to explain.

But here and there Balzac does explain; and with that intellectual

concentration Mr. George Moore has acutely observed in that novelist

when he is a theorist. And the other day I found in one of Balzac's

novels this passage; which, whether or no it would precisely hit

Mr. George Moore's mood at this moment, strikes me as a perfect

prophecy of this epoch, and might also be a motto for this book:

"With the solidarity of the family society has lost that elemental

force which Montesquieu defined and called 'honour.' Society has

isolated its members the better to govern them, and has divided

in order to weaken."

Throughout our youth and the years before the War, the current

criticism followed Ibsen in describing the domestic system as a doll's

house and the domestic woman as a doll. Mr. Bernard Shaw varied

the metaphor by saying that mere custom kept the woman in the home

as it keeps the parrot in the cage; and the plays and tales of

the period made vivid sketches of a woman who also resembled a parrot

in other particulars, rich in raiment, shrill in accent and addicted

to saying over and over again what she had been taught to say.

Mr. Granville Barker, the spiritual child of Mr. Bernard Shaw,

commented in his clever play of "The Voysey Inheritance" on tyranny,

hypocrisy and boredom, as the constituent elements of a "happy

English home." Leaving the truth of this aside for the moment,

it will be well to insist that the conventionality thus criticised

would be even more characteristic of a happy French home. It is not

the Englishman's house, but the Frenchman's house that is his castle.

It might be further added, touching the essential ethical view

of the sexes at least, that the Irishman's house is his castle;

though it has been for some centuries a besieged castle.

Anyhow, those conventions which were remarked as making

domesticity dull, narrow and unnaturally meek and submissive,

are particularly powerful among the Irish and the French.

From this it will surely be easy, for any lucid and logical thinker,

to deduce the fact that the French are dull and narrow,

and that the Irish are unnaturally meek and submissive.

Mr. Bernard Shaw, being an Irishman who lives among English men,

may be conveniently taken as the type of the difference;

and it will no doubt be found that the political friends of

Mr. Shaw, among Englishmen, will be of a wilder revolutionary

type than those whom he would have found among Irishmen.

We are in a position to compare the meekness of the Fenians

with the fury of the Fabians. This deadening monogamic ideal

may even, in a larger sense define and distinguish all the flat

subserviency of Clare from all the flaming revolt of Clapham.

Nor need we now look far to understand why revolutions have been

unknown in the history of France; or why they happen so persistently

in the vaguer politics of England. This rigidity and respectability

must surely be the explanation of all that incapacity for any civil

experiment or explosion, which has always marked that sleepy

hamlet of very private houses which we call the city of Paris.

But the same things are true not only of Parisians but of peasants;

they are even true of other peasants in the great Alliance.

Students of Serbian traditions tell us that the peasant literature

lays a special and singular curse on the violation of marriage;

and this may well explain the prim and sheepish pacifism complained

of in that people.

In plain words, there is clearly something wrong in the calculation

by which it was proved that a housewife must be as much a servant

as a housemaid; or which exhibited the domesticated man as being

as gentle as the primrose or as conservative as the Primrose League.

It is precisely those who have been conservative about

the family who have been revolutionary about the state.

Those who are blamed for the bigotry or bourgeois smugness of their

marriage conventions are actually those blamed for the restlessness

and violence of their political reforms. Nor is there seriously

any difficulty in discovering the cause of this. It is simply

that in such a society the government, in dealing with the family,

deals with something almost as permanent and self-renewing as itself.

There can be a continuous family policy, like a continuous

foreign policy. In peasant countries the family fights, it may almost

be said that the farm fights. I do not mean merely that it riots

in evil and exceptional times; though this is not unimportant.

It was a savage but a sane feature when, in the Irish evictions,

the women poured hot water from the windows; it was part of a final

falling back on private tools as public weapons. That sort of thing

is not only war to the knife, but almost war to the fork and spoon.

It was in this grim sense perhaps that Parnell, in that mysterious pun,

said that Kettle was a household word in Ireland (it certainly ought

to be after its subsequent glories), and in a more general sense it

is certain that meddling with the housewife will ultimately mean

getting into hot water. But it is not of such crises of bodily

struggle that I speak, but of a steady and peaceful pressure from

below of a thousand families upon the framework of government.

For this a certain spirit of defence and enclosure is essential;

and even feudalism was right in feeling that any such affair

of honour must be a family affair. It was a true artistic instinct

that pictured the pedigree on a coat that protects the body.

The free peasant has arms if he has not armorial bearings.

He has not an escutcheon; but he has a shield. Nor do I see why,

in a freer and happier society than the present, or even the past,

it should not be a blazoned shield. For that is true of pedigree

which is true of property; the wrong is not in its being imposed

on men, but rather in its being denied to them. Too much capitalism

does not mean too many capitalists, but too few capitalists;

and so aristocracy sins not in planting a family tree, but in not

planting a family forest.

Anyhow, it is found in practice that the domestic citizen can stand

a siege, even by the State; because he has those who will stand

by him through thick and thin--especially thin. Now those who hold

that the State can be made fit to own all and administer all,

can consistently disregard this argument; but it may be said with

all respect that the world is more and more disregarding them.

If we could find a perfect machine, and a perfect man to work it,

it might be a good argument for State Socialism, though an equally

good argument for personal despotism. But most of us, I fancy,

are now agreed that something of that social pressure from below

which we call freedom is vital to the health of the State;

and this it is which cannot be fully exercised by individuals,

but only by groups and traditions. Such groups have been many;

there have been monasteries; there may be guilds; but there is

only one type among them which all human beings have a spontaneous

and omnipresent inspiration to build for themselves; and this type

is the family.

I had intended this article to be the last of those outlining

the elements of this debate; but I shall have to add a short

concluding section on the way in which all this is missed in

the practical (or rather unpractical) proposals about divorce.

Here I will only say that they suffer from the modern and morbid

weaknesses of always sacrificing the normal to the abnormal. As a fact

the "tyranny, hypocrisy and boredom" complained of are not domesticity,

but the decay of domesticity. The case of that particular complaint,

in Mr. Granville Barker's play, is itself a proof. The whole point

of "The Voysey Inheritance" was that there was no Voysey inheritance.

The only heritage of that family was a highly dishonourable debt.

Naturally their family affections had decayed when their whole ideal

of property and probity had decayed; and there was little love

as well as little honour among thieves. It has yet to be proved

that they would have been as much bored if they had had a positive

and not a negative heritage; and had worked a farm instead of a fraud.

And the experience of mankind points the other way.

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IV

**THE SUPERSTITION OF DIVORCE** (4)

I have touched before now on a famous or infamous Royalist who

suggested that the people should eat grass; an unfortunate remark

perhaps for a Royalist to make; since the regimen is only recorded

of a Royal Personage. But there was certainly a simplicity

in the solution worthy of a sultan or even a savage chief;

and it is this touch of autocratic innocence on which I have mainly

insisted touching the social reforms of our day, and especially

the social reform known as divorce. I am primarily more concerned

with the arbitrary method than with the anarchic result.

Very much as the old tyrant would turn any number of men out

to grass, so the new tyrant would turn any number of women into

grass-widows. Anyhow, to vary the legendary symbolism, it never

seems to occur to the king in this fairy tale that the gold crown

on his head is a less, and not a more, sacred and settled ornament

than the gold ring on the woman's finger. This change is being

achieved by the summary and even secret government which we now suffer;

and this would be the first point against it, even if it were

really an emancipation; and it is only in form an emancipation.

I will not anticipate the details of its defence, which can

be offered by others, but I will here conclude for the present

by roughly suggesting the practical defences of divorce,

as generally given just at present, under four heads. And I will

only ask the reader to note that they all have one thing in common;

the fact that each argument is also used for all that social reform

which plain men are already calling slavery.

First, it is very typical of the latest practical proposals that they

are concerned with the case of those who are already separated,

and the steps they must take to be divorced. There is a spirit

penetrating all our society to-day by which the exception is allowed

to alter the rule; the exile to deflect patriotism, the orphan

to depose parenthood, and even the widow or, in this case as we

have seen the grass widow, to destroy the position of the wife.

There is a sort of symbol of this tendency in that mysterious

and unfortunate nomadic nation which has been allowed to alter so

many things, from a crusade in Russia to a cottage in South Bucks.

We have been told to treat the wandering Jew as a pilgrim,

while we still treat the wandering Christian as a vagabond.

And yet the latter is at least trying to get home, like Ulysses;

whereas the former is, if anything, rather fleeing from home, like Cain.

He who is detached, disgruntled, non descript, intermediate is

everywhere made the excuse for altering what is common, corporate,

traditional and popular. And the alteration is always for the worse.

The mermaid never becomes more womanly, but only more fishy.

The centaur never becomes more manly, but only more horsy.

The Jew cannot really internationalise Christendom; he can only

denationalise Christendom. The proletarian does not find it easy

to become a small proprietor; he is finding it far easier to become

a slave. So the unfortunate man, who cannot tolerate the woman

he has chosen from all the women in the world, is not encouraged

to return to her and tolerate her, but encouraged to choose

another woman whom he may in due course refuse to tolerate.

And in all these cases the argument is the same; that the man

in the intermediate state is unhappy. Probably he is unhappy,

since he is abnormal; but the point is that he is permitted to loosen

the universal bond which has kept millions of others normal.

Because he has himself got into a hole, he is allowed to burrow

in it like a rabbit and undermine a whole countryside.

Next we have, as we always have touching such crude experiments,

an argument from the example of other countries, and especially

of new countries. Thus the Eugenists tell me solemnly that there

have been very successful Eugenic experiments in America.

And they rigidly retain their solemnity (while refusing with many

rebukes to believe in mine) when I tell them that one of the Eugenic

experiments in America is a chemical experiment; which consists

of changing a black man into the allotropic form of white ashes.

It is really an exceedingly Eugenic experiment; since its chief object

is to discourage an inter-racial mixture of blood which is not desired.

But I do not like this American experiment, however American;

and I trust and believe that it is not typically American at all.

It represents, I conceive, only one element in the complexity

of the great democracy; and goes along with other evil elements;

so that I am not at all surprised that the same strange social sections,

which permit a human being to be burned alive, also permit

the exalted science of Eugenics. It is the same in the milder

matter of liquor laws; and we are told that certain rather crude

colonials have established prohibition Laws, which they try to evade;

just as we are told they have established divorce laws, which they

are now trying to repeal. For in this case of divorce, at least,

the argument from distant precedents has recoiled crushingly upon itself.

There is already an agitation for less divorce in America,

even while there is an agitation for more divorce in England.

Again, when an argument is based on a need of population, it will

be well if those supporting it realise where it may carry them.

It is exceedingly doubtful whether population is one of the advantages

of divorce; but there is no doubt that it is one of the advantages

of polygamy. It is already used in Germany as an argument for polygamy.

But the very word will teach us to look even beyond Germany

for something yet more remote and repulsive. Mere population,

along with a sort of polygamous anarchy, will not appear even

as a practical ideal to any one who considers, for instance,

how consistently Europe has held the headship of the human race,

in face of the chaotic myriads of Asia. If population were

the chief test of progress and efficiency, China would long ago

have proved itself the most progressive and efficient state.

De Quincey summed up the whole of that enormous situation in a

sentence which is perhaps more impressive and even appalling than all

the perspectives of orient architecture and vistas of opium vision

in the midst of which it comes. "Man is a weed in those regions."

Many Europeans, fearing for the garden of the world, have fancied

that in some future fatality those weeds may spring up and choke it.

But no Europeans have really wished that the flowers should become

like the weeds. Even if it were true, therefore, that the loosening

of the tie necessarily increased the population; even if this were

not contradicted, as it is, by the facts of many countries, we should

have strong historical grounds for not accepting the deduction.

We should still be suspicious of the paradox that we may encourage

large families by abolishing the family.

Lastly, I believe it is part of the defence of the new proposal

that even its defenders have found its principle a little too crude.

I hear they have added provisions which modify the principle;

and which seem to be in substance, first, that a man shall be made

responsible for a money payment to the wife he deserts, and second,

that the matter shall once again be submitted in some fashion to

some magistrate. For my purpose here, it is enough to note that there

is something of the unmistakable savour of the sociology we resist,

in these two touching acts of faith, in a cheque-book and in a lawyer.

Most of the fashionable reformers of marriage would be faintly

shocked at any suggestion that a poor old charwoman might possibly

refuse such money, or that a good kind magistrate might not have

the right to give such advice. For the reformers of marriage

are very respectable people, with some honourable exceptions;

and nothing could fit more smoothly into the rather greasy groove

of their respectability than the suggestion that treason is best treated

with the damages, gentlemen, heavy damages, of Mr. Serjeant Buzfuz;

or that tragedy is best treated by the spiritual arbitrament

of Mr. Nupkins.

One word should be added to this hasty sketch of the elements of

the case. I have deliberately left out the loftiest aspect and argument,

that which sees marriage as a divine institution; and that for

the logical reason that those who believe in this would not believe

in divorce; and I am arguing with those who do believe in divorce.

I do not ask them to assume the worth of my creed or any creed;

and I could wish they did not so often ask me to assume the worth

of their worthless, poisonous plutocratic modern society.

But if it could be shown, as I think it can, that a long historical

view and a patient political experience can at last accumulate

solid scientific evidence of the vital need of such a vow, then I

can conceive no more tremendous tribute than this, to any faith,

which made a flaming affirmation from the darkest beginnings,

of what the latest enlightenment can only slowly discover in the end.