The Superstition

of Divorce

(Part II-The Story of the Family & the Vow)

By G.K. Chesterton

V The Story of the Family

VI The Story of the Vow

VII The Tragedies of Marriage

VIII The Vista of Divorce

IX CONCLUSION

THE STORY OF THE FAMlLY

The most ancient of human institutions has an authority that may

seem as wild as anarchy. Alone among all such institutions it

begins with a spontaneous attraction; and may be said strictly

and not sentimentally to be founded on love instead of fear.

The attempt to compare it with coercive institutions complicating

later history has led to infinite illogicality in later times.

It is as unique as it is universal. There is nothing in any other social

relations in any way parallel to the mutual attraction of the sexes.

By missing this simple point, the modern world has fallen into

a hundred follies. The idea of a general revolt of women against

men has been proclaimed with flags and processions, like a revolt

of vassals against their lords, of niggers against nigger-drivers,

of Poles against Prussians or Irishmen against Englishmen;

for all the world as if we really believed in the fabulous nation

of the Amazons. The equally philosophical idea of a general

revolt of men against women has been put into a romance by

Sir Walter Besant, and into a sociological book by Mr. Belfort Bax.

But at the first touch of this truth of an aboriginal attraction,

all such comparisons collapse and are seen to be comic.

A Prussian does not feel from the first that he can only

be happy if he spends his days and nights with a Pole.

An Englishman does not think his house empty and cheerless unless

it happens to contain an Irishman. A white man does not in his

romantic youth dream of the perfect beauty of a black man.

A railway magnate seldom writes poems about the personal fascination

of a railway porter. All the other revolts against all the other

relations are reasonable and even inevitable, because those

relations are originally only founded upon force or self interest.

Force can abolish what force can establish; self-interest can

terminate a contract when self-interest has dictated the contract.

But the love of man and woman is not an institution that can be abolished,

or a contract that can be terminated. It is something older than all

institutions or contracts, and something that is certain to outlast

them all. All the other revolts are real, because there remains

a possibility that the things may be destroyed, or at least divided.

You can abolish capitalists; but you cannot abolish males.

Prussians can go out of Poland or negroes can be repatriated to Africa;

but a man and a woman must remain together in one way or another;

and must learn to put up with each other somehow.

These are very simple truths; that is why nobody nowadays

seems to take any particular notice of them; and the truth

that follows next is equally obvious. There is no dispute

about the purpose of Nature in creating such an attraction.

It would be more intelligent to call it the purpose of God;

for Nature can have no purpose unless God is behind it.

To talk of the purpose of Nature is to make a vain attempt to avoid

being anthropomorphic, merely by being feminist. It is believing

in a goddess because you are too sceptical to believe in a god.

But this is a controversy which can be kept apart from the question,

if we content ourselves with saying that the vital value ultimately

found in this attraction is, of course, the renewal of the race itself.

The child is an explanation of the father and mother and the fact

that it is a human child is the explanation of the ancient human

ties connecting the father and mother. The more human, that is the

less bestial, is the child, the more lawful and lasting are the ties.

So far from any progress in culture or the sciences tending to loosen

the bond, any such progress must logically tend to tighten it.

The more things there are for the child to learn, the longer he must

remain at the natural school for learning them; and the longer his

teachers must at least postpone the dissolution of their partnership.

This elementary truth is hidden to-day in vast masses of vicarious,

in direct and artificial work, with the fundamental fallacy of which I

shall deal in a moment. Here I speak of the primary position of

the human group, as it has stood through unthinkable ages of waxing

and waning civilisations; often unable to delegate any of its work,

always unable to delegate all of it. In this, I repeat, it will always

be necessary for the two teachers to remain together, in proportion

as they have anything to teach. One of the shapeless sea-beasts,

that merely detaches itself from its offspring and floats away,

could float away to a submarine divorce court, or an advanced club

founded on free-love for fishes. The sea-beast might do this,

precisely because the sea beast's offspring need do nothing;

because it has not got to learn the polka or the multiplication table.

All these are truisms but they are also truths, and truths that

will return; for the present tangle of semi-official substitutes is

not only a stop-gap, but one that is not big enough to stop the gap.

If people cannot mind their own business, it cannot possibly

be made economical to pay them to mind each other's business;

and still less to mind each other's babies. It is simply throwing

away a natural force and then paying for an artificial force;

as if a man were to water a plant with a hose while holding up

an umbrella to protect it from the rain. The whole really rests

on a plutocratic illusion of an infinite supply of servants.

When we offer any other system as a "career for women," we are really

proposing that an infinite number of them should become servants,

of a plutocratic or bureaucratic sort. Ultimately, we are arguing

that a woman should not be a mother to her own baby, but a nursemaid

to somebody else's baby. But it will not work, even on paper.

We cannot all live by taking in each other's washing,

especially in the form of pinafores. In the last resort,

the only people who either can or will give individual care,

to each of the individual children, are their individual parents.

The expression as applied to those dealing with changing crowds

of children is a graceful and legitimate flourish of speech.

This triangle of truisms, of father, mother and child, cannot

be destroyed; it can only destroy those civilisations which disregard it.

Most modern reformers are merely bottomless sceptics, and have no basis

on which to rebuild; and it is well that such reformers should realise

that there is something they cannot reform. You can put down the mighty

from their seat; you can turn the world upside down, and there is

much to be said for the view that it may then be the right way up.

But you cannot create a world in which the baby carries the mother.

You cannot create a world in which the mother has not authority

over the baby. You can waste your time in trying, by giving

votes to babies or proclaiming a republic of infants in arms.

You can say, as an educationist said the other day, that small children

should "criticise, question authority and suspend their judgment."

I do not know why he did not go on to say that they should

earn their own living, pay income tax to the state, and die

in battle for the fatherland; for the proposal evidently is

that children shall have no childhood. But you can, if you find

entertainment in such games, organise "representative government"

among little boys and girls, and tell them to take their legal

and constitutional responsibilities as seriously as possible.

In short, you can be crazy; but you cannot be consistent.

You cannot really carry your own principle back to the aboriginal group,

and really apply it to the mother and the baby. You will not act on your

own theory in the simplest and most practical of all possible cases.

You are not quite so mad as that.

This nucleus of natural authority has always existed in the midst

of more artificial authorities. It has always been regarded as

something in the literal sense individual; that is, as an absolute

that could not really be divided. A baby was not even a baby apart

from its mother; it was something else, most probably a corpse.

It was always recognised as standing in a peculiar relation to government;

simply because it was one of the few things that had not been made

by government; and could to some extent come into existence with out

the support of government. Indeed the case for it is too strong

to be stated. For the case for it is that there is nothing like it;

and we can only find faint parallels to it in those more elaborate

and painful powers and institutions that are its inferiors.

Thus the only way of conveying it is to compare it to a nation;

although, compared to it, national divisions are as modern and formal

as national anthems. Thus I may often use the metaphor of a city;

though in its presence a citizen is as recent as a city clerk.

It is enough to note here that everybody does know by intuition

and admit by implication that a family is a solid fact,

having a character and colour like a nation. The truth can

be tested by the most modern and most daily experiences.

A man does say "That is the sort of thing the Browns will like";

however tangled and interminable a psychological novel he might

compose on the shades of difference between Mr. and Mrs. Brown.

A woman does say "I don't like Jemima seeing so much of the Robinsons";

and she does not always, in the scurry of her social or domestic duties,

pause to distinguish the optimistic materialism of Mrs. Robinson from

the more acid cynicism which tinges the hedonism of Mr. Robinson.

There is a colour of the household inside, as conspicuous as the colour

of the house outside. That colour is a blend, and if any tint

in it predominate it is generally that preferred by Mrs. Robinson.

But, like all composite colours, it is a separate colour;

as separate as green is from blue and yellow. Every marriage is

a sort of wild balance; and in every case the compromise is as unique

as an eccentricity. Philanthropists walking in the slums often

see the compromise in the street, and mistake it for a fight.

When they interfere, they are thoroughly thumped by both parties;

and serve them right, for not respecting the very institution

that brought them into the world.

The first thing to see is that this enormous normality is

like a mountain; and one that is capable of being a volcano.

Every abnormality that is now opposed to it is like a mole-hill;

and the earnest sociological organisers of it are exceedingly like moles.

But the mountain is a volcano in another sense also; as suggested

in that tradition of the southern fields fertilised by lava.

It has a creative as well as a destructive side; and it only remains,

in this part of the analysis, to note the political effect of this

extra-political institution, and the political ideals of which it

has been the champion; and perhaps the only permanent champion.

The ideal for which it stands in the state is liberty.

It stands for liberty for the very simple reason with which this

rough analysis started. It is the only one of these institutions

that is at once necessary and voluntary. It is the only check on

the state that is bound to renew itself as eternally as the state,

and more naturally than the state. Every sane man recognises

that unlimited liberty is, anarchy, or rather is nonentity.

The civic idea of liberty is to give the citizen a province

of liberty; a limitation within which a citizen is a king.

This is the only way in which truth can ever find refuge from

public persecution, and the good man survive the bad government.

But the good man by himself is no match for the city.

There must be balanced against it another ideal institution,

and in that sense an immortal institution. So long as the state

is the only ideal institution the state will call on the citizen

to sacrifice himself, and therefore will not have the smallest

scruple in sacrificing the citizen. The state consists of coercion;

and must always be justified from its own point of view in extending

the bounds of coercion; as, for instance, in the case of conscription.

The only thing that can be set up to check or challenge this authority is

a voluntary law and a voluntary loyalty. That loyalty is the protection

of liberty, in the only sphere where liberty can fully dwell.

It is a principle of the constitution that the King never dies.

It is the whole principle of the family that the citizen never dies.

There must be a heraldry and heredity of freedom; a tradition of

resistance to tyranny. A man must be not only free, but free-born.

Indeed, there is something in the family that might loosely

be called anarchist; and more correctly called amateur.

As there seems something almost vague about its voluntary origin,

so there seems something vague about its voluntary organisation.

The most vital function it performs, perhaps the most vital function

that anything can perform, is that of education; but its type of early

education is far too essential to be mistaken for instruction.

In a thousand things it works rather by rule of thumb than rule

of theory. To take a commonplace and even comic example, I doubt

if any text-book or code of rules has ever contained any directions

about standing a child in a corner. Doubtless when the modern

process is complete, and the coercive principle of the state

has entirely extinguished the voluntary element of the family,

there will be some exact regulation or restriction about the matter.

Possibly it will say that the corner must be an angle of at least

ninety-five degrees. Possibly it will say that the converging

line of any ordinary corner tends to make a child squint.

In fact I am certain that if I said casually, at a sufficient

number of tea-tables, that corners made children squint, it would

rapidly become a universally received dogma of popular science.

For the modern world will accept no dogmas upon any authority;

but it will accept any dogmas on no authority. Say that a thing

is so, according to the Pope or the Bible, and it will be dismissed

as a superstition without examination. But preface your remark

merely with "they say" or "don't you know that?" or try (and fail)

to remember the name of some professor mentioned in some newspaper;

and the keen rationalism of the modern mind will accept every word

you say. This parenthesis is not so irrelevant as it may appear,

for it will be well to remember that when a rigid officialism breaks

in upon the voluntary compromises of the home, that officialism

itself will be only rigid in its action and will be exceedingly

limp in its thought. Intellectually it will be at least as vague

as the amateur arrangements of the home, and the only difference is

that the domestic arrangements are in the only real sense practical,

that is, they are founded on experiences that have been suffered.

The others are what is now generally called scientific; that is,

they are founded on experiments that have not yet been made.

As a matter of fact, instead of invading the family with the blundering

bureaucracy that mismanages the public services, it would be far

more philosophical to work the reform the other way round.

It would be really quite as reasonable to alter the laws

of the nation so as to resemble the laws of the nursery.

The punishments would be far less horrible, far more humorous,

and far more really calculated to make men feel they had made

fools of themselves. It would be a pleasant change if a judge,

instead of putting on the black cap, had to put on the dunce's cap;

or if we could stand a financier in his own corner.

Of course this opinion is rare, and reactionary--whatever that may mean.

Modern education is founded on the principle that a parent is more

likely to be cruel than anybody else. It passes over the obvious

fact that he is less likely to be cruel than anybody else.

Anybody may happen to be cruel; but the first chances of cruelty come

with the whole colourless and indifferent crowd of total strangers

and mechanical mercenaries, whom it is now the custom to call in as

infallible agents of improvement; policemen, doctors, detectives,

inspectors, instructors, and so on. They are automatically given

arbitrary power because there are here and there such things as

criminal parents; as if there were no such things as criminal doctors

or criminal school-masters. A mother is not always judicious about

her child's diet, so it is given into the control of Dr. Crippen.

A father is thought not to teach his sons the purest morality;

so they are put under the tutorship of Eugene Aram.

These celebrated criminals are no more rare in their respective

professions than the cruel parents are in the profession

of parenthood. But indeed the case is far stronger than this;

and there is no need to rely on the case of such criminals at all.

The ordinary weaknesses of human nature will explain all the weaknesses

of bureaucracy and business government all over the world.

The official need only be an ordinary man to be more indifferent

to other people's children than to his own; and even to sacrifice

other people's family prosperity to his own. He may be bored;

he may be bribed; he may be brutal, for any one of the thousand

reasons that ever made a man a brute. All this elementary common

sense is entirely left out of account in our educational and social

systems of today. It is assumed that the hireling will not flee,

and that solely because he is a hireling. It is denied that the

shepherd will lay down his life for the sheep; or for that matter,

even that the she-wolf will fight for the cubs. We are to believe

that mothers are inhuman; but not that officials are human.

There are unnatural parents, but there are no natural passions;

at least, there are none where the fury of King Lear dared to find them--

in the beadle. Such is the latest light on the education of the young;

and the same principle that is applied to the child is applied

to the husband and wife. Just as it assumes that a child will

certainly be loved by anybody except his mother, so it assumes

that a man can be happy with anybody except the one woman he has

himself chosen for his wife.

Thus the coercive spirit of the state prevails over the free

promise of the family, in the shape of formal officialism.

But this is not the most coercive of the coercive elements

in the modern commonwealth. An even more rigid and ruthless

external power is that of industrial employment and unemployment.

An even more ferocious enemy of the family is the factory. Between these

modern mechanical things the ancient natural institution is not being

reformed or modified or even cut down; it is being torn in pieces.

It is not only being torn in pieces in the sense of a true metaphor,

like a living thing caught in a hideous clockwork of manufacture.

It is being literally torn in pieces, in that the husband may go

to one factory, the wife to another, and the child to a third.

Each will become the servant of a separate financial group,

which is more and more gaining the political power of a feudal group.

But whereas feudalism received the loyalty of families, the lords

of the new servile state will receive only the loyalty of individuals;

that is, of lonely men and even of lost children.

It is sometimes said that Socialism attacks the family;

which is founded on little beyond the accident that some Socialists

believe in free-love. I have been a Socialist, and I am no longer

a Socialist, and at no time did I believe in free-love. It is true,

I think in a large and unconscious sense, that State Socialism

encourages the general coercive claim I have been considering.

But if it be true that Socialism attacks the family in theory, it is far

more certain that Capitalism attacks it in practice. It is a paradox,

but a plain fact, that men never notice a thing as long as it exists

in practice. Men who will note a heresy will ignore an abuse.

Let any one who doubts the paradox imagine the newspapers formally

printing along with the Honours' List a price list, for peerages

and knighthoods; though everybody knows they are bought and sold.

So the factory is destroying the family in fact; and need depend

on no poor mad theorist who dreams of destroying it in fancy.

And what is destroying it is nothing so plausible as free love;

but something rather to be described as an enforced fear.

It is economic punishment more terrible than legal punishment,

which may yet land us in slavery as the only safety.

From its first days in the forest this human group had to fight

against wild monsters; and so it is now fighting against

these wild machines. It only managed to survive then, and it

will only manage to survive now, by a strong internal sanctity;

a tacit oath or dedication deeper than that of the city or the tribe.

But though this silent promise was always present, it took at

a certain turning point of our history a special form which I

shall try to sketch in the next chapter. That turning point was

the creation of Christendom by the religion which created it.

Nothing will destroy the sacred triangle; and even the Christian faith,

the most amazing revolution that ever took place in the mind,

served only in a sense to turn that triangle upside down.

It held up a mystical mirror in which the order of the three things

was reversed; and added a holy family of child, mother and father

to the human family of father, mother and child.

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VI

THE STORY OF THE VOW

Charles Lamb, with his fine fantastic instinct for combinations that are

also contrasts, has noted somewhere a contrast between St. Valentine

and valentines. There seems a comic incongruity in such lively

and frivolous flirtations still depending on the date and title

of an ascetic and celibate bishop of the Dark Ages. The paradox lends

itself to his treatment, and there is a truth in his view of it.

Perhaps it may seem even more of a paradox to say there is no paradox.

In such cases unification appears more provocative than division;

and it may seem idly contradictory to deny the contradiction.

And yet in truth there is no contradiction. In the deepest sense

there is a very real similarity, which puts St. Valentine and his

valentines on one side, and most of the modern world on the other.

I should hesitate to ask even a German professor to collect,

collate and study carefully all the valentines in the world, with the

object of tracing a philosophical principle running through them.

But if he did, I have no doubt about the philosophic principle

he would find. However trivial, however imbecile, however vulgar

or vapid or stereotyped the imagery of such things might be, it would

always involve one idea, the same idea that makes lovers laboriously

chip their initials on a tree or a rock, in a sort of monogram

of monogamy. It may be a cockney trick to tie one's love on a tree;

though Orlando did it, and would now doubtless be arrested

by the police for breaking the byelaws of the Forest of Arden.

I am not here concerned especially to commend the habit of cutting

one's own name and private address in large letters on the front

of the Parthenon, across the face of the Sphinx, or in any other nook

or corner where it may chance to arrest the sentimental interest

of posterity. But like many other popular things, of the sort

that can generally be found in Shakespeare, there is a meaning in it

that would probably be missed by a less popular poet, like Shelley.

There is a very permanent truth in the fact that two free persons

deliberately tie themselves to a log of wood. And it is the idea

of tying oneself to something that runs through all this old amorous

allegory like a pattern of fetters. There is always the notion

of hearts chained together, or skewered together, or in some

manner secured; there is a security that can only be called captivity.

That it frequently fails to secure itself has nothing to do with

the present point. The point is that every philosophy of sex

must fail, which does not account for its ambition of fixity,

as well as for its experience of failure. There is nothing to make

Orlando commit himself on the sworn evidence of the nearest tree.

He is not bound to be bound; he is under constraint, but nobody

constrains him to be under constraint. In short, Orlando took

a vow to marry precisely as Valentine took a vow not to marry.

Nor could any ascetic, without being a heretic, have asserted

in the wildest reactions of asceticism, that the vow of Orlando

was not lawful as well as the vow of Valentine. But it is a notable

fact that even when it was not lawful, it was still a vow.

Through all that mediaeval culture, which has left us the legend

of romance, there ran this pattern of a chain, which was felt as binding

even where it ought not to bind. The lawless loves of mediaeval

legends all have their own law, and especially their own loyalty,

as in the tales of Tristram or Lancelot. In this sense we might say

that mediaeval profligacy was more fixed than modern marriage.

I am not here discussing either modern or mediaeval ethics,

in the matter of what they did say or ought to say of such things.

I am only noting as a historical fact the insistence of the

mediaeval imagination, even at its wildest, upon one particular idea.

That idea is the idea of the vow. It might be the vow which

St. Valentine took; it might be a lesser vow which he regarded as lawful;

it might be a wild vow which he regarded as quite lawless. But the whole

society which made such festivals and bequeathed to us such traditions

was full of the idea of vows; and we must recognise this notion,

even if we think it nonsensical, as the note of the whole civilisation.

And Valentine and the valentine both express it for us; even more if we

feel them both as exaggerated, or even as exaggerating opposites.

Those extremes meet; and they meet in the same place.

Their trysting place is by the tree on which the lover hung his

love-letters. And even if the lover hung himself on the tree,

instead of his literary compositions, even that act had about it

also an indefinable flavour of finality.

It is often said by the critics of Christian origins that certain

ritual feasts, processions or dances are really of pagan origin.

They might as well say that our legs are of pagan origin.

Nobody ever disputed that humanity was human before it was Christian;

and no Church manufactured the legs with which men walked or danced,

either in a pilgrimage or a ballet. What can really be maintained,

so as to carry not a little conviction, is this: that where such a Church

has existed it has preserved not only the processions but the dances;

not only the cathedral but the carnival. One of the chief claims

of Christian civilisation is to have preserved things of pagan origin.

In short, in the old religious countries men continue to dance;

while in the new scientific cities they are often content to drudge.

But when this saner view of history is realised, there does remain

something more mystical and difficult to define. Even heathen things

are Christian when they have been preserved by Christianity. Chivalry is

something recognisably different even from the virtus of Virgil.

Charity is something exceedingly different from the plain city of Homer.

Even our patriotism is something more subtle than the undivided lover

of the city; and the change is felt in the most permanent things,

such as the love of landscape or the love of woman. To define the

differentiation in all these things will always be hopelessly difficult.

But I would here suggest one element in the change which is perhaps

too much neglected; which at any rate ought not to be neglected;

the nature of a vow. I might express it by saying that pagan antiquity

was the age of status; that Christian mediaevalism was the age of vows;

and that sceptical modernity has been the age of contracts;

or rather has tried to be, and has failed.

The outstanding example of status was slavery. Needless to say

slavery does not mean tyranny; indeed it need only be regarded

relatively to other things to be regarded as charity.

The idea of slavery is that large numbers of men are meant and made

to do the heavy work of the world, and that others, while taking

the margin of profits, must nevertheless support them while they do it.

The point is not whether the work is excessive or moderate,

or whether the condition is comfortable or uncomfortable.

The point is that his work is chosen for the man, his status

fixed for the man; and this status is forced on him by law.

As Mr. Balfour said about Socialism, that is slavery and nothing

else is slavery. The slave might well be, and often was,

far more comfortable than the average free labourer, and certainly

far more lazy than the average peasant. He was a slave because

he had not reached his position by choice, or promise, or bargain,

but merely by status.

It is admitted that when Christianity had been for some time at work

in the world, this ancient servile status began in some mysterious

manner to disappear. I suggest here that one of the forms which the new

spirit took was the importance of the vow. Feudalism, for instance,

differed from slavery chiefly because feudalism was a vow.

The vassal put his hands in those of his lord, and vowed to be his man;

but there was an accent on the noun substantive as well as on

the possessive pronoun. By swearing to be his man, he proved

he was not his chattel. Nobody exacts a promise from a pickaxe,

or expects a poker to swear everlasting friendship with the tongs.

Nobody takes the word of a spade; and nobody ever took the word of

a slave. It marks at least a special stage of transition that the form

of freedom was essential to the fact of service, or even of servitude.

In this way it is not a coincidence that the word homage actually

means manhood. And if there was vow instead of status even in

the static parts of Feudalism, it is needless to say that there

was a wilder luxuriance of vows in the more adventurous part of it.

The whole of what we call chivalry was one great vow. Vows of

chivalry varied infinitely from the most solid to the most fantastic;

from a vow to give all the spoils of conquest to the poor to a vow

to refrain from shaving until the first glimpse of Jerusalem.

As I have remarked, this rule of loyalty, even in the unruly

exceptions which proved the rule, ran through all the romances

and songs of the troubadours; and there were always vows

even when they were very far from being marriage vows.

The idea is as much present in what they called the Gay Science,

of love, as in what they called the Divine Science, of theology.

The modern reader will smile at the mention of these things as sciences;

and will turn to the study of sociology, ethnology and psycho-analysis;

for if these are sciences (about which I would not divulge a doubt)

at least nobody would insult them by calling them either gay or divine.

I mean here to emphasise the presence, and not even to settle

the proportion, of this new notion in the middle ages.

But the critic will be quite wrong if he thinks it enough

to answer that all these things affected only a cultured class,

not corresponding to the servile class of antiquity.

When we come to workmen and small tradesmen, we find the same vague

yet vivid presence of the spirit that can only be called the vow.

In this sense there was a chivalry of trades as well as a chivalry

of orders of knighthood; just as there was a heraldry of shop-signs

as well as a heraldry of shields. Only it happens that in the

enlightenment and liberation of the sixteenth century, the heraldry

of the rich was preserved, and the heraldry of the poor destroyed.

And there is a sinister symbolism in the fact that almost the only

emblem still hung above a shop is that of the three balls of Lombardy.

Of all those democratic glories nothing can now glitter in the sun;

except the sign of the golden usury that has devoured them all.

The point here, however, is that the trade or craft had not only

something like the crest, but something like the vow of knighthood.

There was in the position of the guildsman the same basic notion

that belonged to knights and even to monks. It was the notion

of the free choice of a fixed estate. We can realise the moral

atmosphere if we compare the system of the Christian guilds,

not only with the status of the Greek and Roman slaves, but with

such a scheme as that of the Indian castes. The oriental caste

has some of the qualities of the occidental guild; especially the

valuable quality of tradition and the accumulation of culture.

Men might be proud of their castes, as they were proud of their guilds.

But they had never chosen their castes, as they have chosen their guilds.

They had never, within historic memory, even collectively created

their castes, as they collectively created their guilds.

Like the slave system, the caste system was older than history.

The heathens of Modern Asia, as much as the heathens of ancient Europe,

lived by the very spirit of status. Status in a trade has been

accepted like status in a tribe; and that in a tribe of beasts

and birds rather than men. The fisherman continued to be a fisherman

as the fish continued to be a fish; and the hunter would no more

turn into a cook than his dog would try its luck as a cat.

Certainly his dog would not be found prostrated before the mysterious

altar of Pasht, barking or whining a wild, lonely, and individual

vow that he at all costs would become a cat. Yet that was the vital

revolt and innovation of vows, as compared with castes or slavery;

as when a man vowed to be a monk, or the son of a cobbler saluted

the shrine of St. Joseph, the patron saint of carpenters.

When he had entered the guild of the carpenters he did indeed

find himself responsible for a very real loyalty and discipline;

but the whole social atmosphere surrounding his entrance

was full of the sense of a separate and personal decision.

There is one place where we can still find this sentiment;

the sentiment of something at once free and final. We can feel it,

if the service is properly understood, before and after the marriage

vows at any ordinary wedding in any ordinary church.

Such, in very vague outline, has been the historical nature

of vows; and the unique part they played in that mediaeval

civilisation out of which modern civilisation rose--or fell.

We can now consider, a little less cloudily than it is generally

considered nowadays, whether we really think vows are good things;

whether they ought to be broken; and (as would naturally follow)

whether they ought to be made. But we can never judge it fairly

till we face, as I have tried to suggest, this main fact of history;

that the personal pledge, feudal or civic or monastic, was the way

in which the world did escape from the system of slavery in the past.

For the modern breakdown of mere contract leaves it still doubtful

if there be any other way of escaping it in the future.

The idea, or at any rate the ideal, of the thing called a vow is

fairly obvious. It is to combine the fixity that goes with finality

with the self-respect that only goes with freedom. The man is

a slave who is his own master, and a king who is his own ancestor.

For all kinds of social purposes he has the calculable orbit of

the man in the caste or the servile state; but in the story of his

own soul he is still pursuing, at great peril, his own adventure.

As seen by his neighbours, he is as safe as if immured in a fortress;

but as seen by himself he may be forever careering through

the sky or crashing towards the earth in a flying-ship. What

is socially humdrum is produced by what is individually heroic;

and a city is made not merely of citizens but knight-errants.

It is needless to point out the part played by the monastery

in civilising Europe in its most barbaric interregnum; and even

those who still denounce the monasteries will be found denouncing

them for these two extreme and apparently opposite eccentricities.

They are blamed for the rigid character of their collective routine;

and also for the fantastic character of their individual fanaticism.

For the purposes of this part of the argument, it would not matter if the

marriage vow produced the most austere discomforts of the monastic vow.

The point for the present is that it was sustained by a sense of

free will; and the feeling that its evils were not accepted but chosen.

The same spirit ran through all the guilds and popular arts

and spontaneous social systems of the whole civilisation.

It had all the discipline of an army; but it was an army of volunteers.

The civilisation of vows was broken up when Henry the Eighth

broke his own vow of marriage. Or rather, it was broken

up by a new cynicism in the ruling powers of Europe,

of which that was the almost accidental expression in England.

The monasteries, that had been built by vows, were destroyed.

The guilds, that had been regiments of volunteers were dispersed.

The sacramental nature of marriage was denied; and many

of the greatest intellects of the new movement, like Milton,

already indulged in a very modern idealisation of divorce.

The progress of this sort of emancipation advanced step by step

with the progress of that aristocratic ascendancy which has made

the history of modern England; with all its sympathy with personal

liberty, and all its utter lack of sympathy with popular life.

Marriage not only became less of a sacrament but less of a sanctity.

It threatened to become not only a contract, but a contract that could

not be kept. For this one question has retained a strange symbolic

supremacy amid all the similar questions, which seems to perpetuate

the coincidence of the origin. It began with divorce for a king;

and it is now ending in divorces for a whole kingdom.

The modern era that followed can be called the era of contract;

but it can still more truly be called the era of leonine contract.

The nobles of the new time first robbed the people, and then offered

to bargain with them. It would not be an exaggeration to say

that they first robbed the people, and then offered to cheat them.

For their rents were competitive rents, their economics

competitive economics, their ethics competitive ethics;

they applied not only legality but pettifogging. No more was

heard of the customary rents of the mediaeval estates; just as no

more was heard of the standard wages of the mediaeval guilds.

The object of the whole process was to isolate the individual poor

man in his dealings with the individual rich man; and then offer

to buy and sell with him, though it must necessarily be himself

that was bought and sold. In the matter of labour, that is,

though a man was supposed to be in the position of a seller,

he was more and more really in the possession of a slave. Unless the

tendency be reversed, he will probably become admittedly a slave.

That is to say, the word slave will never be used; for it is always easy

to find an inoffensive word; but he will be admittedly a man legally

bound to certain social service, in return for economic security.

In other words, the modern experiment of mere contract has broken down.

Trusts as well as Trades' Unions express the fact that it has

broken down. Social reform, Socialism, Guild Socialism, Syndicalism,

even organised philanthropy, are so many ways of saying that it has

broken down. The substitute for it may be the old one of status;

but it must be something having some of the stability of status.

So far history has found only one way of combining that sort

of stability with any sort of liberty. In this sense there is

a meaning in the much misused phrase about the army of industry.

But the army must be stiffened either by the discipline of conscripts

or by the vows of volunteers.

If we may extend the doubtful metaphor of an army of industry

to cover the yet weaker phrase about captains of industry,

there is no doubt about what those captains at present command.

They work for a centralised discipline in every department.

They erect a vast apparatus of supervision and inspection;

they support all the modern restrictions touching drink and hygiene.

They may be called the friends of temperance or even of happiness;

but even their friends would not call them the friends of freedom.

There is only one form of freedom which they tolerate; and that is the

sort of sexual freedom which is covered by the legal fiction of divorce.

If we ask why this liberty is alone left, when so many liberties

are lost, we shall find the answer in the summary of this chapter.

They are trying to break the vow of the knight as they broke the vow

of the monk. They recognise the vow as the vital antithesis

to servile status, the alternative and therefore the antagonist.

Marriage makes a small state within the state, which resists

all such regimentation. That bond breaks all other bonds;

that law is found stronger than all later and lesser laws.

They desire the democracy to be sexually fluid, because the

making of small nuclei is like the making of small nations.

Like small nations, they are a nuisance to the mind of imperial scope.

In short, what they fear, in the most literal sense, is home rule.

Men can always be blind to a thing so long as it is big enough.

It is so difficult to see the world in which we live, that I

know that many will see all I have said here of slavery as a

nonsensical nightmare. But if my association of divorce with slavery

seems only a far-fetched and theoretical paradox, I should have no

difficulty in replacing it by a concrete and familiar picture.

Let them merely remember the time when they read "Uncle Tom's Cabin,"

and ask themselves whether the oldest and simplest of the charges

against slavery has not always been the breaking up of families.

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VII

THE TRAGEDIES OF MARRlAGE

There is one view very common among the liberal-minded which is

exceedingly fatiguing to the clear-headed. It is symbolised in the sort

of man who says, "These ruthless bigots will refuse to bury me in

consecrated ground, because I have always refused to be baptised."

A clear-headed person can easily conceive his point of view,

in so far as he happens to think that baptism does not matter.

But the clear-headed will be completely puzzled when they ask

themselves why, if he thinks that baptism does not matter,

he should think that burial does matter. If it is in no way imprudent

for a man to keep himself from a consecrated font, how can it

be inhuman for other people to keep him from a consecrated field?

It is surely much nearer to mere superstition to attach

importance to what is done to a dead body than to a live baby.

I can understand a man thinking both superstitious, or both sacred;

but I cannot see why he should grumble that other people do not give

him as sanctities what he regards as superstitions. He is merely

complaining of being treated as what he declares himself to be.

It is as if a man were to say, "My persecutors still refuse to make

me king, out of mere malice because I am a strict republican."

Or it is as if he said, "These heartless brutes are so prejudiced

against a teetotaler, that they won't even give him a glass of brandy."

The fashion of divorce would not be a modern fashion if it were

not full of this touching fallacy. A great deal of it might be

summed up as a most illogical and fanatical appetite for getting

married in churches. It is as if a man should practice polygamy

out of sheer greed for wedding cake. Or it is as if he provided

his household with new shoes, entirely by having them thrown

after the wedding carriage when he went off with a new wife.

There are other ways of procuring cake or purchasing shoes;

and there are other ways of setting up a human establishment.

What is unreasonable is the request which the modern man

really makes of the religious institutions of his fathers

The modern man wants to buy one shoe without the other;

to obtain one half of a supernatural revelation without the other.

The modern man wants to eat his wedding cake and have it, too.

I am not basing this book on the religious argument,

and therefore I will not pause to inquire why the old Catholic

institutions of Christianity seem to be especially made the objects

of these unreasonable complaints. As a matter of fact nobody

does propose that some ferocious Anti-Semite like M. Drumont

should be buried as a Jew with all the rites of the Synagogue.

But the broad-minded were furious because Tolstoi, who had denounced

Russian orthodoxy quite as ferociously, was not buried as orthodox,

with all the rites of the Russian Church. Nobody does insist that

a man who wishes to have fifty wives when Mahomet allowed him five

must have his fifty with the full approval of Mahomet's religion.

But the broad-minded are extremely bitter because a Christian who

wishes to have several wives when his own promise bound him to one,

is not allowed to violate his vow at the same altar at which he made it.

Nobody does insist on Baptists totally immersing people who totally

deny the advantages of being totally immersed. Nobody ever did

expect Mormons to receive the open mockers of the Book of Mormon,

nor Christian Scientists to let their churches be used for exposing

Mrs. Eddy as an old fraud. It is only of the forms of Christianity

making the Catholic claim that such inconsistent claims are made.

And even the inconsistency is, I fancy, a tribute to the acceptance

of the Catholic idea in a catholic fashion. It may be that men

have an obscure sense that nobody need belong to the Mormon

religion and every one does ultimately belong to the Church;

and though he may have made a few dozen Mormon marriages in a

wandering and entertaining life, he will really have nowhere to go

to if he does not somehow find his way back to the churchyard.

But all this concerns the general theological question and not

the matter involved here, which is merely historical and social.

The point here is that it is at least superficially inconsistent

to ask institutions for a formal approval, which they can only

give by inconsistency.

I have put first the question of what is marriage.

And we are now in a position to ask more clearly what is divorce.

It is not merely the negation or neglect of marriage; for any one can

always neglect marriage. It is not the dissolution of the legal

obligation of marriage, or even the legal obligation of monogamy;

for the simple reason that no such obligation exists.

Any man in modern London may have a hundred wives if he does

not call them wives; or rather, if he does not go through certain

more or less mystical ceremonies in order to assert that they

are wives. He might create a certain social coolness round

his household, a certain fading of his general popularity.

But that is not created by law, and could not be prevented by law.

As the late Lord Salisbury very sensibly observed about boycotting

in Ireland, "How can you make a law to prevent people going

out of the room when somebody they don't like comes into it?"

We cannot be forcibly introduced to a polygamist by a policeman.

It would not be an assertion of social liberty, but a denial

of social liberty, if we found ourselves practically obliged

to associate with all the profligates in society. But divorce is

not in this sense mere anarchy. On the contrary divorce is in this

sense respectability; and even a rigid excess of respectability.

Divorce in this sense might indeed be not unfairly called snobbery.

The definition of divorce, which concerns us here, is that it

is the attempt to give respectability, and not liberty. It is

the attempt to give a certain social status, and not a legal status.

It is indeed supposed that this can be done by the alteration

of certain legal forms; and this will be more or less true according

to the extent to which law as such overawed public opinion,

or was valued as a true expression of public opinion.

If a man divorced in the large-minded fashion of Henry the Eighth

pleaded his legal title among the peasantry of Ireland, for instance,

I think he would find a difference still existing between respectability

and religion. But the peculiar point here is that many are

claiming the sanction of religion as well as of respectability.

They would attach to their very natural and sometimes very pardonable

experiments a certain atmosphere, and even glamour, which has

undoubtedly belonged to the status of marriage in historic Christendom.

But before they make this attempt, it would be well to ask

why such a dignity ever appeared or in what it consisted.

And I fancy we shall find ourselves confronted with the very

simple truth, that the dignity arose wholly and entirely out

of the fidelity; and that the glamour merely came from the vow.

People were regarded as having a certain dignity because they

were dedicated in a certain way; as bound to certain duties and,

if it be preferred, to certain discomforts. It may be irrational

to endure these discomforts; it may even be irrational to respect them.

But it is certainly much more irrational to respect them, and then

artificially transfer the same respect to the absence of them.

It is as if we were to expect uniforms to be saluted when armies

were disbanded; and ask people to cheer a soldier's coat when it did

not contain a soldier. If you think you can abolish war, abolish it;

but do not suppose that when there are no wars to be waged,

there will still be warriors to be worshipped. If it was a good thing

that the monasteries were dissolved, let us say so and dismiss them.

But the nobles who dissolved the monasteries did not shave

their heads, and ask to be regarded as saints solely on account

of that ceremony. The nobles did not dress up as abbots and ask

to be credited with a potential talent for working miracles,

because of the austerity of their vows of poverty and chastity.

They got inside the houses, but not the hoods, and still less the haloes.

They at least knew that it is not the habit that makes the monk.

They were not so superstitious as those moderns, who think it

is the veil that makes the bride.

What is respected, in short, is the fidelity to the ancient

flag of the family, and a readiness to fight for what I have

noted as its unique type of freedom. I say readiness to fight,

for fortunately the fight itself is the exception rather than the rule.

The soldier is not respected because he is doomed to death,

but because he is ready for death; and even ready for defeat.

The married man or woman is not doomed to evil, sickness or poverty;

but is respected for taking a certain step for better for worse,

for richer for poorer, in sickness or in health. But there is

one result of this line of argument which should correct a danger

in some arguments on the same side.

It is very essential that a stricture on divorce, which is in fact

simply a defence of marriage, should be independent of sentimentalism,

especially in the form called optimism. A man justifying a fight

for national independence or civic freedom is neither sentimental

nor optimistic. He explains the sacrifice, but he does not explain

it away. He does not say that bayonet wounds are pin-pricks,

or mere scratches of the thorns on a rose of pleasure. He does not say

that the whole display of firearms is a festive display of fireworks.

On the contrary, when he praises it most, he praises it as pain

rather than pleasure. He increases the praise with the pain;

it is his whole boast that militarism, and even modern science,

can produce no instrument of torture to tame the soul of man.

It is idle, in speaking of war, to pit the realistic against the romantic,

in the sense of the heroic; for all possible realism can only increase

the heroism; and therefore, in the highest sense, increase the romance.

Now I do not compare marriage with war, but I do compare marriage

with law or liberty or patriotism or popular government,

or any of the human ideals which have often to be defended by war.

Even the wildest of those ideals, which seem to escape from all

the discipline of peace, do not escape from the discipline of war.

The Bolshevists may have aimed at pure peace and liberty; but they

have been compelled, for their own purpose, first to raise armies

and then to rule armies. In a word, how ever beautiful you may think

your own visions of beatitude, men must suffer to be beautiful,

and even suffer a considerable interval of being ugly. And I have

no notion of denying that mankind suffers much from the maintenance

of the standard of marriage; as it suffers much from the necessity

of criminal law or the recurrence of crusades and revolutions.

The only question here is whether marriage is indeed, as I maintain,

an ideal and an institution making for popular freedom; I do not need

to be told that anything making for popular freedom has to be paid

for in vigilance and pain, and a whole army of martyrs.

Hence I am far indeed from denying the hard cases which

exist here, as in all matters involving the idea of honour.

For indeed I could not deny them without denying the whole

parallel of militant morality on which my argument rests.

But this being first understood, it will be well to discuss in a

little more detail what are described as the tragedies of marriage.

And the first thing to note about the most tragic of them is that they

are not tragedies of marriage at all They are tragedies of sex;

and might easily occur in a highly modern romance in which marriage

was not mentioned at all. It is generally summarised by saying

that the tragic element is the absence of love. But it is often

forgotten that another tragic element is often the presence of love.

The doctors of divorce, with an air of the frank and friendly

realism of men of the world, are always recommending and rejoicing

in a sensible separation by mutual consent. But if we are really

to dismiss our dreams of dignity and honour, if we are really to fall

back on the frank realism of our experience as men of the world,

then the very first thing that our experience will tell us is

that it very seldom is a separation by mutual consent; that is,

that the consent very seldom is sincerely and spontaneously mutual.

By far the commonest problem in such cases is that in which one

party wishes to end the partnership and the other does not.

And of that emotional situation you can make nothing but a tragedy,

whichever way you turn it. With or without marriage,

with or without divorce, with or without any arrangements

that anybody can suggest or imagine, it remains a tragedy.

The only difference is that by the doctrine of marriage it remains

both a noble and a fruitful tragedy; like that of a man who falls

fighting for his country, or dies testifying to the truth.

But the truth is that the innovators have as much sham optimism

about divorce as any romanticist can have had about marriage.

They regard their story, when it ends in the divorce court,

through as rosy a mist of sentimentalism as anybody ever regarded

a story ending with wedding bells. Such a reformer is quite

sure that when once the prince and princess are divorced

by the fairy godmother, they will live happily ever after.

I enjoy romance, but I like it to be rooted in reality; and any

one with a touch of reality knows that nine couples out of ten,

when they are divorced, are left in an exceedingly different state.

It will be safe to say in most cases that one partner will fail

to find happiness in an infatuation, and the other will from

the first accept a tragedy. In the realm of reality and not romance,

it is commonly a case of breaking hearts as well as breaking promises;

and even dishonour is not always a remedy for remorse.

The next limitation to be laid down in the matter affects certain

practical forms of discomforts on a level rather lower than love

or hatred. The cases most commonly quoted concern what is called "drink"

and what is called "cruelty." They are always talked about as matters

of fact; though in practice they are very decidedly matters of opinion.

It is not a flippancy, but a fact, that the misfortune of

the woman who has married a drunkard may have to be balanced

against the misfortune of the man who has married a teetotaler.

For the very definition of drunkenness may depend on the dogma

of teetotalism. Drunkenness, it has been very truly observed,

"may mean anything from delirium tremens to having a stronger

head than the official appointed to conduct the examination."

Mr Bernard Shaw once professed, apparently seriously, that any man

drinking wine or beer at all was incapacitated from managing a motorcar;

and still more, therefore, one would suppose, from managing a wife.

The scales are weighted here, of course, with all those false weights

of snobbishness which are the curse of justice in this country.

The working class is forced to conduct almost in public a normal

and varying festive habit, which the upper class can afford to conduct

in private; and a certain section of the middle class, that which

happens to concern itself most with local politics and social reforms,

really has or affects a standard quite abnormal and even alien.

They might go any lengths of injustice in dealing with the working

man or working woman accused of too hearty a taste in beer.

To mention but one matter out of a thousand, the middle class reformers

are obviously quite ignorant of the hours at which working people begin

to work. Because they themselves, at eleven o'clock in the morning,

have only recently finished breakfast and the full moral digestion

of the Daily Mail, they think a char-woman drinking beer at that hour is

one of those arising early in the morning to follow after strong drink.

Most of them really do not know that she has already done more than half

a heavy day's work, and is partaking of a very reasonable luncheon.

The whole problem of proletarian drink is entangled in a network

of these misunderstandings; and there is no doubt whatever that,

when judged by these generalisations, the poor will be taken

in a net of injustices. And this truth is as certain in

the case of what is called cruelty as of what is called drink.

Nine times out of ten the judgment on a navvy for hitting a woman

is about as just as a judgment on him for not taking off his hat

to a lady. It is a class test; it may be a class superiority;

but it is not an act of equal justice between the classes.

It leaves out a thousand things; the provocation, the atmosphere,

the harassing restrictions of space, the nagging which Dickens

described as the terrors of "temper in a cart," the absence of certain

taboos of social training, the tradition of greater roughness even

in the gestures of affection. To make all marriage or divorce,

in the case of such a man, turn upon a blow is like blasting

the whole life of a gentleman because he has slammed the door.

Often a poor man cannot slam the door; partly because the model

villa might fall down; but more because he has nowhere to go to;

the smoking-room, the billiard room and the peacock music-room

not being yet attached to his premises.

I say this in passing, to point out that while I do not dream

of suggesting that there are only happy marriages, there will

quite certainly, as things work nowadays, be a very large number of

unhappy and unjust divorces. They will be cases in which the innocent

partner will receive the real punishment of the guilty partner,

through being in fact and feeling the faithful partner.

For instance, it is insisted that a married person must at least

find release from the society of a lunatic; but it is also true that

the scientific reformers, with their fuss about "the feeble-minded,"

are continually giving larger and looser definitions of lunacy.

The process might begin by releasing somebody from a homicidal maniac,

and end by dealing in the same way with a rather dull conversationalist.

But in fact nobody does deny that a person should be allowed some

sort of release from a homicidal maniac. The most extreme school

of orthodoxy only maintains that anybody who has had that experience

should be content with that release. In other words, it says he should

be content with that experience of matrimony, and not seek another.

It was put very wittily, I think, by a Roman Catholic friend of mine,

who said he approved of release so long as it was not spelt

with a hyphen.

To put it roughly, we are prepared in some cases to listen to the man

who complains of having a wife. But we are not prepared to listen,

at such length, to the same man when he comes back and complains

that he has not got a wife. Now in practice at this moment

the great mass of the complaints are precisely of this kind.

The reformers insist particularly on the pathos of a man's

position when he has obtained a separation without a divorce.

Their most tragic figure is that of the man who is already free of all

those ills he had, and is only asking to be allowed to fly to others

that he knows not of. I should be the last to deny that, in certain

emotional circumstances, his tragedy may be very tragic indeed.

But his tragedy is of the emotional kind which can never be

entirely eliminated; and which he has himself, in all probability,

inflicted on the partner he has left. We may call it the price

of maintaining an ideal or the price of making a mistake;

but anyhow it is the point of our whole distinction in the matter;

it is here that we draw the line, and I have nowhere denied that it

is a line of battle. The battle joins on the debatable ground,

not of the man's doubtful past but of his still more doubtful future.

In a word, the divorce controversy is not really a controversy

about divorce. It is a controversy about re-marriage; or rather

about whether it is marriage at all.

And with that we can only return to the point of honour

which I have compared here to a point of patriotism; since it

is both the smallest and the greatest kind of patriotism.

Men have died in torments during the last five years for points

of patriotism far more dubious and fugitive. Men like the Poles

or the Serbians, through long periods of their history, may be said

rather to have lived in torments. I will never admit that the vital

need of the freedom of the family, as I have tried to sketch it here,

is not a cause as valuable as the freedom of any frontier.

But I do willingly admit that the cause would be a dark and terrible one,

if it really asked these men to suffer torments. As I have stated it,

on its most extreme terms, it only asks them to suffer abnegations.

And those negative sufferings I do think they may honourably be called

upon to bear, for the glory of their own oath and the great things

by which the nations live. In relation to their own nation most normal

men will feel that this distinction between release and "re-lease"

is neither fanciful nor harsh, but very rational and human.

A patriot may be an exile in another country; but he will not be

a patriot of another country. He will be as cheerful as he can

in an abnormal position; he may or may not sing his country's songs

in a strange land; but he will not sing the strange songs as his own.

And such may fairly be also the attitude of the citizen who has

gone into exile from the oldest of earthly cities.

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VIII

THE VISTA OF DIVORCE

The case for divorce combines all the advantages of having it

both ways; and of drawing the same deduction from right or left,

and from black or white. Whichever way the programme works

in practice, it can still be justified in theory. If there

are few examples of divorce, it shows how little divorce need

be dreaded; if there are many, it shows how much it is required.

The rarity of divorce is an argument in favour of divorce;

and the multiplicity of divorce is an argument against marriage.

Now, in truth, if we were confined to considering this alternative

in a speculative manner, if there were no concrete facts but only

abstract probabilities, we should have no difficulty in arguing our case.

The abstract liberty allowed by the reformers is as near as possible

to anarchy, and gives no logical or legal guarantee worth discussing.

The advantages of their reform do not accrue to the innocent party,

but to the guilty party; especially if he be sufficiently guilty.

A man has only to commit the crime of desertion to obtain the reward

of divorce. And if they are entitled to take as typical the most

horrible hypothetical cases of the abuse of the marriage laws,

surely we are entitled to take equally extreme possibilities in the abuse

of their own divorce laws. If they, when looking about for a husband,

so often hit upon a homicidal maniac, surely we may politely introduce

them to the far more human figure of the gentleman who marries as

many women as he likes and gets rid of them as often as he pleases.

But in fact there is no necessity for us to argue thus in the abstract;

for the amiable gentleman in question undoubtedly exists in the concrete.

Of course, he is no new figure; he is a very recurrent type of rascal;

his name has been Lothario or Don Juan; and he has often been

represented as a rather romantic rascal. The point of divorce reform,

it cannot be too often repeated, is that the rascal should not

only be regarded as romantic, but regarded as respectable.

He is not to sow his wild oats and settle down; he is merely to settle

down to sowing his wild oats. They are to be regarded as tame

and inoffensive oats; almost, if one may say so, as Quaker oats.

But there is no need, as I say, to speculate about whether the looser

view of divorce might prevail; for it is already prevailing.

The newspapers are full of an astonishing hilarity about the rapidity

with which hundreds or thousands of human families are being broken up

by the lawyers; and about the undisguised haste of the "hustling judges"

who carry on the work. It is a form of hilarity which would seem

to recall the gaiety of a grave-digger in a city swept by a pestilence.

But a few details occasionally flash by in the happy dance;

from time to time the court is moved by a momentary curiosity

about the causes of the general violation of oaths and promises;

as if there might, here and there, be a hint of some sort

of reason for ruining the fundamental institution of society.

And nobody who notes those details, or considers those faint hints

of reason, can doubt for a moment that masses of these men and women

are now simply using divorce in the spirit of free-love. They

are very seldom the sort of people who have once fallen tragically

into the wrong place, and have now found their way triumphantly

to the right place. They are almost always people who are

obviously wandering from one place to another, and will probably

leave their last shelter exactly as they have left their first.

But it seems to amuse them to make again, if possible in a church,

a promise they have already broken in practice and almost avowedly

disbelieve in principle.

In face of this headlong fashion, it is really reasonable to ask

the divorce reformers what is their attitude towards the old

monogamous ethic of our civilisation; and whether they wish to

retain it in general, or to retain it at all. Unfortunately even

the sincerest and most lucid of them use language which leaves

the matter a little doubtful. Mr. E. S. P. Haynes is one of the most

brilliant and most fair-minded controversialists on that side;

and he has said, for instance, that he agrees with me in supporting

the ideal of indissoluble or, at least, of undissolved marriage.

Mr. Haynes is one of the few friends of divorce who are also real

friends of democracy; and I am sure that in practice this stands

for a real sympathy with the home, especially the poor home.

Unfortunately, on the theoretic side, the word "ideal" is far from being

an exact term, and is open to two almost opposite interpretations.

For many would say that marriage is an ideal as some would say that

monasticism is an ideal, in the sense of a counsel of perfection.

Now certainly we might preserve a conjugal ideal in this way.

A man might be reverently pointed out in the street as a sort of saint,

merely because he was married. A man might wear a medal for monogamy;

or have letters after his name similar to V.C. or D.D.; let us say

L.W. for "Lives With His Wife," or N.D.Y. for "Not Divorced Yet."

We might, on entering some strange city, be struck by a stately

column erected to the memory of a wife who never ran away with

a soldier, or the shrine and image of a historical character,

who had resisted the example of the man in the "New Witness"

ballade in bolting with the children's nurse. Such high

artistic hagiology would be quite consistent with Mr. Haynes'

divorce reform; with re-marriage after three years, or three hours.

It would also be quite consistent with Mr. Haynes' phrase about

preserving an ideal of marriage. What it would not be consistent

with is the perfectly plain, solid, secular and social usefulness

which I have here attributed to marriage. It does not create

or preserve a natural institution, normal to the whole community,

to balance the more artificial and even more arbitrary institution

of the state; which is less natural even if it is equally necessary.

It does not defend a voluntary association, but leaves the only

claim on life, death and loyalty with a more coercive institution.

It does not stand, in the sense I have tried to explain, for the

principle of liberty. In short, it does not do any of the things

which Mr. Haynes himself would especially desire to see done.

For humanity to be thus spontaneously organised from below,

it is necessary that the organisation should be almost as universal

as the official organisation from above. The tyrant must find

not one family but many families defying his power; he must find

mankind not a dust of atoms, but fixed in solid blocks of fidelity.

And those human groups must support not only themselves but each other.

In this sense what some call individualism is as corporate as communism.

It is a thing of volunteers; but volunteers must be soldiers.

It is a defence of private persons; but we might say that the private

persons must be private soldiers. The family must be recognised as well

as real; above all, the family must be recognised by the families.

To expect individuals to suffer successfully for a home apart

from the home, that is for something which is an incident but not

an institution, is really a confusion between two ideas; it is a verbal

sophistry almost in the nature of a pun. Similarly, for instance,

we cannot prove the moral force of a peasantry by pointing to one peasant;

we might almost as well reveal the military force of infantry

by pointing to one infant.

I take it, however, that the advocates of divorce do not mean that

marriage is to remain ideal only in the sense of being almost impossible.

They do not mean that a faithful husband is only to be admired

as a fanatic. The reasonable men among them do really mean that a

divorced person shall be tolerated as something unusually unfortunate,

not merely that a married person shall be admired as some thing

unusually blessed and inspired. But whatever they desire,

it is as well that they should realise exactly what they do;

and in this case I should like to hear their criticisms in the matter

of what they see. They must surely see that in England at present,

as in many parts of America in the past, the new liberty is being

taken in the spirit of licence as if the exception were to be

the rule, or, rather, perhaps the absence of rule. This will especially

be made manifest if we consider that the effect of the process is

accumulative like a snowball, and returns on itself like a snowball.

The obvious effect of frivolous divorce will be frivolous marriage.

If people can be separated for no reason they will feel it all the easier

to be united for no reason. A man might quite clearly foresee

that a sensual infatuation would be fleeting, and console himself

with the knowledge that the connection could be equally fleeting.

There seems no particular reason why he should not elaborately calculate

that he could stand a particular lady's temper for ten months;

or reckon that he would have enjoyed and exhausted her repertoire of

drawing-room songs in two years. The old joke about choosing the wife

to fit the furniture or the fashions might quite logically return,

not as an old joke but as a new solemnity; indeed, it will be found

that a new religion is generally the return of an old joke.

A man might quite consistently see a woman as suited to the period

of the hobble skirt, and as less suited to the threatened

recurrence of the crinoline. These fancies are fantastic enough,

but they are not a shade more fantastic than the facts of

many a divorce controversy as urged in the divorce courts.

And this is to leave out altogether the most fantastic fact of all:

the winking at widespread and conspicuous collusion.

Collusion has become not so much an illegal evasion as a legal fiction,

and even a legal institution, as it is admirably satirised

in Mr. Somerset Maugham's brilliant play of "Home and Beauty."

The fact was very frankly brought before the public, by a man

who was eminently calculated to disarm satire by sincerity.

Colonel Wedgewood is a man who can never be too much honoured,

by all who have any hope of popular liberties still finding champions

in the midst of parliamentary corruption. He is one of the very few

men alive who have shown both military and political courage;

the courage of the camp and the courage of the forum. And doubtless

he showed a third type of social courage, in avowing the absurd

expedient which so many others are content merely to accept and employ.

It is admittedly a frantic and farcical thing that a good man

should find or think it necessary to pretend to commit a sin.

Some of the divorce moralists seem to deduce from this that he ought

really to commit the sin. They may possibly be aware, however,

that there are some who do not agree with them.

For this latter fact is the next step in the speculative progress

of the new morality. The divorce advocates must be well aware

that modern civilisation still contains strong elements,

not the least intelligent and certainly not the least vigorous,

which will not accept the new respectability as a substitute

for the old religious vow. The Roman Catholic Church,

the Anglo-Catholic school, the conservative peasantries, and a large

section of the popular life everywhere, will regard the riot of divorce

and re-marriage as they would any other riot of irresponsibility.

The consequence would appear to be that two different standards

will appear in ordinary morality, and even in ordinary society.

Instead of the old social distinction between those who are

married and those who are unmarried, there will be a distinction

between those who are married and those who are really married.

Society might even become divided into two societies, which is perilously

approximate to Disraeli's famous exaggeration about England divided

into two nations. But whether England be actually so divided or not,

this note of the two nations is the real note of warning in the matter.

It is in this connection perhaps, that we have to consider most

gravely and doubtfully the future of our own country.

Anarchy cannot last, but anarchic communities cannot last either.

Mere lawlessness cannot live, but it can destroy life.

The nations of the earth always return to sanity and solidarity;

but the nations which return to it first are the nations which survive.

We in England cannot afford to allow our social institutions to go

to pieces, as if this ancient and noble country were an ephemeral colony.

We cannot afford it comparatively, even if we could afford it positively.

We are surrounded by vigorous nations mainly rooted in the peasant

or permanent ideals; notably in the case of France and Ireland.

I know that the detested and detestably undemocratic parliamentary clique,

which corrupts France as it does England, was persuaded or bribed by a Jew

named Naquet to pass a crude and recent divorce law, which was full

of the hatred of Christianity. But only a very superficial critic

of France can be unaware that French parliamentarism is superficial.

The French nation as a whole, the most rigidly respectable

nation in the world, will certainly go on living by the old

standards of domesticity. When Frenchmen are not Christians they

are heathens; the heathens who worshipped the household gods.

It might seem strange to say, for instance, that an atheist

like M. Clemenceau has for his chief ideal a thing called piety.

But to understand this it is only necessary to know a little Latin--

and a little French.

A short time ago, as I am well aware, it would have sounded very

strange to represent the old religious and peasant communities

either as a model or a menace. It was counted a queer thing

to say, in the days when my friends and I first said it;

in the days of my youth when the republic of France and the religion

of Ireland were regarded as alike ridiculous and decadent.

But many things have happened since then; and it will not now be

so easy to persuade even newspaper readers that Foch is a fool,

either because he is a Frenchman or because he is a Catholic.

The older tradition, even in the most unfashionable forms,

has found champions in the most unexpected quarters.

Only the other day Dr. Saleeby, a distinguished scientific critic

who had made himself the special advocate of all the instruction

and organisation that is called social science, startled his friends

and foes alike by saying that the peasant families in the West

of Ireland were far more satisfactory and successful than those

brooded over by all the benevolent sociology of Bradford. He gave

his testimony from an entirely rationalistic and even materialistic

point of view; indeed, he carried rationalism so far as to give

the preference to Roscommon because the women are still mammals.

To a mind of the more traditional type it might seem sufficient to say

they are still mothers. To a memory that lingers over the legends

and lyrical movements of mankind, it might seem no great improvement

to imagine a song that ran "My mammal bids me bind my hair,"

or "I'm to be Queen of the May, mammal, I'm to be Queen of the May."

But indeed the truth to which he testified is all the more arresting,

because for him it was materialistic and not mystical.

The brute biological advantage, as well as other advantages,

was with those for whom that truth was a truth; and it was all

the more instinctive and automatic where that truth was a tradition.

The sort of place where mothers are still something more than mammals

is the only sort of place where they still are mammals. There the people

are still healthy animals; healthy enough to hit you if you call

them animals. I also have, on this merely controversial occasion,

used throughout the rationalistic and not the religious appeal.

But it is not unreasonable to note that the materialistic advantages

are really found among those who most repudiate materialism. This one

stray testimony is but a type of a thousand things of the same kind,

which will convince any one with the sense of social atmospheres

that the day of the peasantries is not passing but rather arriving.

It is the more complex types of society that are now entangled in their

own complexities. Those who tell us, with a monotonous metaphor,

that we cannot put the clock back, seem to be curiously unconscious

of the fact that their own clock has stopped. And there is nothing

so hopeless as clockwork when it stops. A machine cannot mend itself;

it requires a man to mend it; and the future lies with those who can

make living laws for men and not merely dead laws for machinery.

Those living laws are not to be found in the scatter-brained scepticism

which is busy in the great cities, dissolving what it cannot analyse.

The primary laws of man are to be found in the permanent life of man;

in those things that have been common to it in every time

and land, though in the highest civilisation they have reached

an enrichment like that of the divine romance of Cana in Galilee.

We know that many critics of such a story say that its elements are

not permanent; but indeed it is the critics who are not permanent.

A hundred mad dogs of heresy have worried man from the beginning;

but it was always the dog that died. We know there is a school of prigs

who disapprove of the wine; and there may now be a school of prigs

who disapprove of the wedding. For in such a case as the story

of Cana, it may be remarked that the pedants are prejudiced against

the earthly elements as much as, or more than, the heavenly elements.

It is not the supernatural that disgusts them, so much as the natural.

And those of us who have seen all the normal rules and relations

of humanity uprooted by random speculators, as if they were abnormal

abuses and almost accidents, will understand why men have sought

for something divine if they wished to preserve anything human.

They will know why common sense, cast out from some academy of fads

and fashions conducted on the lines of a luxurious madhouse,

has age after age sought refuge in the high sanity of a sacrament.

IX. CONCLUSION

This is a pamphlet and not a book; and the writer of a pamphlet

not only deals with passing things, but generally with things which

he hopes will pass. In that sense it is the object of a pamphlet

to be out of date as soon as possible. It can only survive when it

does not succeed. The successful pamphlets are necessarily dull;

and though I have no great hopes of this being successful, I dare

say it is dull enough for all that. It is designed merely to note

certain fugitive proposals of the moment, and compare them with certain

recurrent necessities of the race; but especially the necessity

for some spontaneous social formation freer than that of the state.

If it were more in the nature of a work of literature, with anything

like an ambition of endurance, I might go deeper into the matter,

and give some suggestions about the philosophy or religion of marriage,

and the philosophy or religion of all these rather random departures

from it. Some day perhaps I may try to write something about

the spiritual or psychological quarrel between faith and fads.

Here I will only say, in conclusion, that I believe the universal

fallacy here is a fallacy of being universal. There is a sense

in which it is really a human if heroic possibility to love everybody;

and the young student will not find it a bad preliminary exercise

to love somebody. But the fallacy I mean is that of a man who is not

even content to love everybody, but really wishes to be everybody.

He wishes to walk down a hundred roads at once; to sleep

in a hundred houses at once; to live a hundred lives at once.

To do something like this in the imagination is one of the occasional

visions of art and poetry, to attempt it in the art of life is not only

anarchy but inaction. Even in the arts it can only be the first hint

and not the final fulfillment; a man cannot work at once in bronze

and marble, or play the organ and the violin at the same time.

The universal vision of being such a Briareus is a nightmare of nonsense

even in the merely imaginative world; and ends in mere nihilism

in the social world. If a man had a hundred houses, there would

still be more houses than he had days in which to dream of them;

if a man had a hundred wives, there would still be more women

than he could ever know. He would be an insane sultan jealous

of the whole human race, and even of the dead and the unborn.

I believe that behind the art and philosophy of our time there

is a considerable element of this bottomless ambition and this

unnatural hunger; and since in these last words I am touching

only lightly on things that would need much larger treatment,

I will admit that the rending of the ancient roof of man is

probably only a part of such an endless and empty expansion.

I asked in the last chapter what those most wildly engaged in the mere

dance of divorce, as fantastic as the dance of death, really expected

for themselves or for their children. And in the deepest sense I

think this is the answer; that they expect the impossible, that is

the universal. They are not crying for the moon, which is a definite

and therefore a defensible desire. They are crying for the world;

and when they had it, they would want another one. In the last resort

they would like to try every situation, not in fancy but in fact,

but they cannot refuse any and therefore cannot resolve on any.

In so far as this is the modern mood, it is a thing so deadly

as to be already dead. What is vitally needed everywhere,

in art as much as in ethics, in poetry as much as in politics,

is choice; a creative power in the will as well as in the mind.

Without that self-limitation of somebody, nothing living will ever

see the light.