# THE FACT OF THE FAMILY

THE title I have chosen for this brief essay is both comfortable and soporific. Come what may—like the earth on which we stand—by very reason of our existence, the family will always be with us. But (here's the rub) what do you mean by family? The greatest danger to it is perhaps our complacent disregard of its history. The popular conception of the family as an unchanging political entity is a snare as well as a delusion, for it blinds us to the possibility of another and disastrous stage in its 'evolution.'

Already, the family is regarded by many as a quaint relic (like marriage or Sunday worship) of the Christian era. 'The unit of ancient society,' in the well-known words of Sir Henry Maine, 'was the family, of modern society the individual' (*Ancient Law*, p. 121). The movement of progressive societies has been uniform in one respect. Through all its course it has been distinguished by the gradual dissolution of family dependency and the growth of individual obligation and privilege in its place. The individual, Maine continues, is steadily substituted for the family as the unit of which civil law takes account. Professor F. G. Peabody in his brilliant book (*Jesus Christ and the Social Question*) comments on the fact that this substitution has been for several generations the key of English jurisprudence, philosophy and economics; and to show that this is true also of the spiritual life and thought of Protestantism he quotes the judgement of Hecker's biographer that Protestantism is mainly unsocial, being an extravagant form of individualism whose Christ deals with men apart from each other, furnishing humanity with no cohesive element. Here are two evil extremes, on the one hand we are confronted by a mass of new legislation which deals with man inordinately as a collection, while disregarding the emphasis of Christian theology on the organic life of the world. Yet on the other, divorce amongst more general individualistic tendencies, stands pre-eminently as legislation 'for the one,' unheeding the common good.

We are, indeed, in danger of becoming a little less than the brute and having something to learn even from the jungle. 'From what we know,' said Darwin, 'of the jealousy of all male quadrupeds we may conclude that promiscuous intercourse in a state of nature is extremely improbable.'

We have ever to remind ourselves that the problem of the family is one whose background is the whole history of humankind, and whose consequence is the whole future of civilisation. As for this future, it is true that so zealous an advocate of social industrial ownership as Stein tells us that 'in a socialist state of any civilised character the institution of monogamy must remain undisturbed.' Nevertheless, the most effective attack upon the family is from democracy, delivered in person by the scientific socialist. We are told, for instance, that in the ideal socialist state the contract between man and woman will be of a purely private nature. Or again (this is an improvement on the Soviet) that 'for divorce there will be no need' (*Socialism and Sex*). The current type of sex relationship is, we are told, inconsistent with economic independence and therefore destined to extinction. To the socialist student of to-day, as to Morris and Bax fifty years ago, marriage is based on the general supposition of the woman's economic dependence upon the man; a basis which will no doubt disappear with the advent of social economic freedom! We are assured by the socialist Diaz that when a change in the status of the family on the basis of an association terminable at the will of either party takes place, 'the gain to morality and sentiment will be great.' In short, the family is an historical phenomenon which has been developed in the course of time, and in the course of time will vanish. Thus our modern sociologist. Many, again, have seen the family as an instrument of capitalism consolidated by the desire to transmit property. And it is asked, 'how can we speak of the sanctity of the home when man and wife have no home or possession, and both work all day in the factory and street. Is it not so that for a large part of the working population of our great industrial cities the traditional form of the family no longer exists.' Where does the fault lie? The economic usefulness of the family no longer exists in industrial society. In a bucolic community alone can the family take its place as an effective economic unit; outside, it is a sham, or at least a theoretical standard with a decreasing significance.

The wreck, to be sure, is still bolstered up by convention. But the broad fact remains that only by the Sacrament of Marriage, by the Catholic ideal of parenthood, the rearing of the children and Christian courtship can the further existence of the family be guaranteed. And perhaps the most depressing aspect of the present world conflict is this: that whatever evils would follow a British defeat, our leaders have told us little to dispel the gloom that we see descending upon the family. Divorce, we have recently been assured, will be made easier, not harder; education will be finally freed 'from the fetters

of class and sect,' as for the having of children there are straws in the wind which raise uneasy questionings. It will be seen, for instance, from The Workmen's Compensation (Supplementary Allowances) Act, 1940, that compensation due to an injured workman is to a certain extent increased, but compensation or allowance will be made to children of the injured workman *provided that such children are not born later than nine months after the worker has been injured*. Nor have we any assurance that the family is to be released in any degree from the annihilating grasp of poverty and unemployment. Magistrates will still, we assume, be permitted to reprove honest men and women for fulfilling themselves because they are destitute and workless. A woman may still be penalised because her penury and the rotten existing state of affairs forces her to keep her children in a lousy hovel. It will not be the worker's fault if we make of him a Ptolomaic philosopher of selfishness.

The danger, in short, to the family is this, that on the one hand it is liable to be broken up by self-interested individualism, and on the other to be absorbed and lost in the larger unity of the socialist state. Out of the increasing confusion of cause and effect surrounding the menaced family the principles laid down by Jesus Christ alone provide an escape. And none can fail to perceive the heavy emphasis put by Jesus on the institution of the family when, for instance, the Pharisees came to Jesus tempting him (Matt. xix, 3). He does not refuse to be ensnared by their questions, but rather explains clearly and thoroughly the relation of the New Law of the family to the Mosaic Law. He defines the place of marriage in the spiritual world and 'when the multitudes heard it they were astonished at his teaching' (Matt. xxii, 33). Most significant, remarks Peabody, of the attitude of Christ to the family is his use of the family relationship as the type which expressed all that was most sacred to the Divine Mind. God is the Father, Man the child. The story of sin and repentance is told in the story of the wandering boy returning to the arms of his father. The family is the nearest of human analogies to that Divine order which it was our Lord's mission to reveal. The sociologist observes the family system working its way through the history of tribes and nations and moulding races into a stiffer compound. Christ, with a wider and wholly different horizon before him, sees this same relationship of the family set in the vaster sphere of the Divine Order, and finds in the unity of the family that 'social force which moulds all mankind into one great family under the Fatherhood of the loving God.'

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