

## THE FAMILY—THE PIVOT

THE family depends on two people, a man and a woman. It is probable, in our present pattern of culture, that they marry because they fall in love with one another, wish to spend their lives together, and consciously or unconsciously desire children. Before marriage, each is likely to be a self-supporting adult individual, earning and laying out money at his or her own discretion; rooted in his or her own nationality; a citizen able to subscribe to the funds of whatever political party he or she thinks likely to bring about the public good; a worker contributing in the vast majority of cases to the national health insurance scheme, with a call on the services of a doctor if he is ill; a person able to give to personal relationships the un-self-conscious love, co-operation, sympathy, respect and self-respect of a responsible and independent human being.

After marriage, however, everything changes; and most vividly of all, the economic position. If there are to be children, the personal relationship between two equal, different and delighted selves has to be run very awkwardly in double harness with an economic relationship of absolute power on the one side and utter dependence on the other. It should be said at once that this relationship has not always been a result of marriage. It has grown up since the Industrial Revolution, which had two evil consequences for married women. The first was the development of a habit of regarding work not as a means of getting things done—houses built, children clothed, food grown—but as a method of getting money; so that its worth came to be assessed not in terms of achievement, but in terms of exchange. Now the work of a woman running a house and bringing up a family is entirely a matter of getting things done, and brings in no financial reward whatever; and its worth, in the eyes of the general public, men and women alike, is therefore automatically depreciated.

The second evil result of the industrial revolution, in this connection, has been to deprive the average woman of the chance to earn at home a margin of money that she can consider her own. The spinning wheel has gone, the laundry has absorbed the customers from whom it was once possible to take in washing, and chickens cannot be kept in County Council flats.

Here is then a situation in which one partner contributes money to the home, and the other partner services; and this in a society in which money is considered to be of far greater significance. The partner who contributes services has been accustomed as a matter of

course to earning her own living and to controlling her own expenditure, but now finds herself in the embarrassing position of having to ask as a favour for money with which to pay not only for the most commonplace of civilised personal needs—bus fares, stamps, cobbling—but also for, say, a subscription to a political party (with whose aims her husband may not sympathise), Christmas cards for her friends (whom he may not know) and even birthday presents for himself. And this although, if she is responsible and conscientious, she will be devoting herself, gladly and with a deep satisfaction, to a variety of skilled occupations, and working longer and harder than ever before. Lady Simon has pointed out, in a recent article in the *New Statesman*, that when the authorities attempt to make arrangements for others to do the work of the married woman while she goes to a munition factory, no less than eight different centres may have to be set up. The article ends with an appeal, on the score not of human values and affections, but of financial economy, that the State should leave women to continue their unpaid labour in the home; an appeal not calculated to diminish that sense of being exploited which many such unpaid workers are unwillingly conscious of feeling.

It seems probable that this sense, with its concomitant repressed guilt, frustration and resentment, is one cause of that flight from the family which the last twenty years have seen. It is a sense with which most women are familiar; and which many men, mistakenly, regard as a bitter slur on their own generosity. It is worth examining.

In normal times the married woman will be unable in most cases and unwilling in many to undertake paid work outside her own home until her children are at least of school age; for her children need not only to be fed by her milk until the age of weaning at nine months, but also to be fed with security and continuity by the sense of her presence until the age of psychological weaning at seven years. Yet, however much she contributes in services to the family well-being, she can never claim the reciprocal right to spend a penny on her own purposes; though paradoxically enough, if there is a separation, and she ceases to work for her husband's household, she is entitled, whether she has children or not, whether she is able to earn on her own or not, to a monetary allowance. For here, as in several other instances, the law puts a premium on the disintegration rather than the maintenance of the family. So long as the family coheres, then, the housewife has no claim even to the wages of the general servant it would be necessary to employ if she died; she must exist on generosity rather than recompense, on indulgence rather

than on justice; she must renounce, through all her fruitful years, the economic freedom, the modicum of private property, without which political liberty is a soul without a body. It is not that she is avaricious, or desires to regard work done in affection as a source of rich profit, any more than anyone else with a definite vocation to a special calling, musician, farmer, sculptor, doctor, scientist; but that she needs to be recognised as a grown adult, with the responsibilities of a grown adult as to torts, debts, and so on, and with a grown adult's rights. The first of these is the right of the worker to a small margin of money beyond board and lodging; money to dispose of at her own discretion; without having to feel that it is only given to her by favour and on sufferance. 'The right of the worker' may seem a curious phrase; yet this particular kind of worker has taken no vow of poverty; indeed, the mutual vows of the calling to which she is dedicated include a pledge of sharing property, 'with all my worldly goods I thee endow.' Yet, as things are, she is compelled to dependence, helplessness, and to the renunciation of all individual earning and spending power. That all this, being enforced rather than chosen, leads to humiliation rather than humility, breeds grievance and dissatisfaction rather than creative happiness, is an idea to which an intense resistance is felt; witness Mr. Graham Greene's recent answer to Dr. Edith Summerskill's article on the subject in *World Review*. Yet, if our culture were transformed into a matriarchy, it seems probable that the average man would find it hard to accept the position that, because he had married a beloved wife, he must therefore, however hard he worked, be resigned to depend upon her, for the rest of his life, for money for his personal expenditure—a drink, a library subscription, a haircut. That, however, is the position of the majority of married women; who, even in the happiest of marriages, resent it from time to time; tend to feel an inferiority complex *vis-a-vis* their unmarried and self-supporting contemporaries; and, anxious to restore their economic self-respect, often plan to go back to work rather than to yield their vitality to family and household.

It is often argued that if husband and wife love one another generously enough, these problems will not arise; but the old proverb holds good, 'you must be just before you are generous,' and love needs to be rooted in justice before it can give and receive itself in fullness. If the very love of God flows through natural law, fulfilling but not destroying human equity, it is surely not outrageous to attempt to find an equitable basis for continuing human love. The true co-operation in diversity, the true unity in difference; the true sharing in affection and sacrifice which form the perfection of mar-

riage, cannot fully develop when one partner is economically or emotionally absorbed by the other: each must be able to contribute in continuing freedom, from continuing identity, every aspect of a grown human character.

Other adult rights denied to the married woman at present are the right to determine her own nationality, a right especially vital in time of war; the right to contribute to and draw benefit from the National Health Insurance organisation as a worker in her own home; and the right to be responsible for her own debts and her own torts.

Most of these, except for the quite indefensible denial of the right to nationality, hinge on her economic position. For this, several interlinking remedies may be suggested.

The first, which has been sponsored by the Married Women's Association, is based upon the principle of those marriage-settlements which used, in rich families, to be employed to ensure that the wife should have an income of her own. It is proposed that legislation should be enacted under which husbands and wives should pool their resources, the rich woman contributing her dividends, the professional woman her earnings, the poor woman her work in the home, the husband his income, salary or wage; and that after whatever is required for the maintenance of a household and children has been put aside, the residue should be equally divisible between the spouses. Each would then be held responsible for his or her own debts, fines, insurance contributions, and so on; neither would acquire any legal right by means of the marriage to pledge the other's credit; each would have the pleasure of being able to buy things for the other with money that was really his or her own.

This scheme should, for people below a certain income level, be combined with two others. The first is a system of Family Allowances to be paid, as a recognition of the value of her work, direct to the mother; either by the State, as in New Zealand, or, preferably, through a branch of her own guild, the Married Women's Association. Such branches should be formed in conjunction with representatives of employers and employed in each major industry; in conjunction with the Women's Co-operative Guilds in the Co-operative movement; and possibly in conjunction with the Women's Institutes in rural districts. Members of these branches should pay, in conjunction with the workers and employers in each section, regular contributions, based on their residual incomes, to a Family Allowance Fund. This arrangement would not only begin to restore economic self-respect to the married woman, and to ensure the well-being of children; it would help to destroy some of the present bitterly felt anomalies such as the fact that the only remedy of a wife and children

living at home, if they have not so much as enough to eat, is to apply for outdoor relief. To cite a case in point: in 1938 a woman with seven children asked an infant welfare centre to make her a grant of free milk for the three youngest, who were not yet of school age, and who were badly under-nourished. The Committee enquired, as a matter of routine, what her husband earned; and found that though his income was £6 a week, all he allowed her was 27/6, out of which 17/6 rent had to be paid; and that if she needed more than the remaining 10/- to feed herself and seven children, she had to go out and earn it. She was fond of her husband; she did not want to leave him; she did not want to break up the family. Precisely *because* she did not want to break up the family she had no legal redress at all. Hers was, of course, an extreme case; but mild versions of it are commoner than is usually known. The very fact that legislation of the kind outlined above was known to exist should prevent the occurrence of such situations.

The second interlocking scheme would admit the married woman working in her own home to the benefits of National Health Insurance. At present, however ill she feels, she usually works till she collapses. The resultant chronic ill-health is fully and dreadfully documented in Mrs. Spring-Rice's admirable Pelican *Working Class Wives*. Though she has the benefit of the advice of ante-natal clinics when she is expecting a child, and may even be allowed free milk, for strictly medical services payment is still asked; and as she has no money, it is asked of her husband, who may merely think she is being 'fussy' and refuse it. Thus (to cite another example) again just before the war, a young married woman who had two children, and was on her feet all day long looking after them and her flat, became pregnant a third time, and developed very bad varicose veins. The ante-natal clinic she attended sent her to the out-patient department of a local hospital, where she was told that treatment was imperative in case the veins should rupture. The almoner enquired what her husband's earnings were, and explained that a small contribution to the cost would have to be paid by him. She went home, and met with a stone-wall refusal. His reasons for this decision were in actual fact purely snobbish; the point is that he should not have had the power to make it, and to deprive of medical treatment another hard-working and responsible adult. This, once more, is an extreme case; yet, once more, there are more mild instances than are usually realised.

Enough has been said to show that the position of the married woman—the necessary pivot of household and family—is at present inequitable. A dual change is required; a change in law, interacting

with a change in public opinion. The nature of the first has been indicated. The complexities of the second need consideration.

In public opinion at least as large a part is played by what is taken for granted as by what is consciously thought or felt. Though war has brought home that the poorly-paid exertions of the soldier are of importance to victory, it has failed to make apparent that the unpaid work of the housewife is of any consequence whatever, a fact vividly realised by country housewives burdened—not as the result of unforeseen emergency, but under a long-term official scheme—with the care of two or three children beside their own, children who have to have their meals cooked, their beds made, their rooms cleaned, their clothes mended and washed and ironed. That these things are done for them with affection, does not mean that the doer fails to reflect that garage hands working to repair a broken-down army lorry, cobblers mending evacuees' shoes, munition workers making shells are not—as she is—required by law to yield their time, energy and skill without any pay whatsoever.

The strength of these housewives' feelings may do something to alter public opinion on this count, and on a kindred one.

One new idea which is coming to be taken for granted is the driving conviction of the early feminists that women as individuals can do almost any kind of work that men can do. This conviction, shown by time to be rooted in truth, deeply necessary to the emancipation of women, and still deeply necessary to their continuing freedom, arose in a culture certain that the varieties of work being done by men were more important than the varieties of work traditionally assigned to women; and tends still to be tainted by that certainty. It is all to the good that women should be able to support themselves as earners; that they should fulfil their duties as citizens; that they should be free to enter the professions; but it is not enough. It is time that, secure in their capacity to do these things, women should lose all sense of inferiority about their own specialised aptitudes, and realise with happiness that these are just as important as the work that can be done by either sex. It is time that they realised and insisted that the work of the ordinary housewife in a fruitful marriage is as deeply significant as the work she was doing as a single individual; that the mother running a house and bringing up children is not, as a person, a citizen, and an economic unit automatically inferior to the single, wage-earning woman; and that she should be restored to the same rights, responsibilities, and social service facilities as are enjoyed by any other person, citizen, and economic unit.

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