

ON MARRIAGE: A CRITICISM.

MRS. MONA CAIRD'S article in last month's *Fortnightly* seems to have shocked some people very much. It seems to have been considered very daring and very revolutionary. But having read the article carefully more than once, I will venture to affirm—at the risk of seeming offensive and patronising—that it contains much less that is novel, and much more that is sensible, than might at first appear, or than evidently does appear to many readers. Mrs. Caird's meaning is often one in which the majority of her readers would agree with her if they clearly understood it; but she has not, I think, been quite successful in expressing it; it is lost amid denunciations and generalities, and to the average careless reader becomes alarming in proportion as it becomes indistinct. And where she is distinct Mrs. Caird is not always moderate. She inclines to sweeping assertions, and since sweeping assertions are apt to be not only the whole truth but a good deal more, they carry with them the usual weakening effect of over-statement. For instance, every reader is aware that marriage does not universally shut out friendship. Soberly stated, the fact is that in many cases—possibly in most—marriage tends to supersede other friendships; just as when no marriage intervenes, a close friendship tends to supersede a slacker one. But stated thus the fact would not go far in supporting an attack upon marriage. The reader feels this vaguely, and it arouses his distrust. Then, too, Mrs. Caird's style is apt to be figurative. "Similes," as Charles Reade points out, "are not arguments"; and most people are not at all advanced in clearness of perception by passages like the following: "It is a simple truth that the ugly skeleton of fact in the edifice that we call society, above all in the institution which is said to hold it together, is kept out of sight by a mouldy growth of irresponsible sentiment; and we are so taken up in admiring the pleasing details of the ornamental vegetation that we do not consider the rotten rafters on which it grows. That few people *do* know what they are supporting is evident from their criticism of husbands as logical as Guido Franceschini. The mould confuses them!" It may be the mould which confuses Guido Franceschini's critics; but it is the metaphors which confuse Mrs. Caird's.

Carpings at mere manner apart, what is it that remains when we have cleared away from Mrs. Caird's paper all that extraneous rhetoric which we might venture to call, in her own words, "a growth of irresponsible sentiment"?

The article begins with the thesis that a married woman should be economically independent, and that therefore a woman should have a legal claim to a salary when she works in her husband's business. Mrs. Caird goes on to say that because married women are economically dependent they become mothers of far too many children, and this in many cases in spite of their own wishes. She is very eloquent upon the sufferings entailed both on mothers and children by the existence of large families; and in this connection she makes an admission which seems to me to give away her case, and which I for my part believe to be erroneous. "The mother of half-a-dozen children who struggles to cultivate her faculties, to be an intelligent human being, nearly always breaks down under the burden or shows very marked intellectual limitations." If I believed with Mrs. Caird that a woman by becoming the mother of more than three or four children, let us say, must become permanently disabled for the cultivation of her faculties, or for being an intelligent human being, then I for one should feel compelled, however regretfully, to say: "Perish the faculties and the intelligence rather than the children," and I should, I fear, feel tempted to indulge in bitter and unprofitable complaints about the cruel injustice of nature towards women. Experience, however—and in using that phrase I mean, in effect, as we all do, merely my own experience—does not confirm the statement. I do, it is true, observe a considerable intellectual supineness in many mothers of large families, but I observe a similar supineness in many spinsters of the same time of life—and for that matter, in many bachelors and husbands too.

Mrs. Caird proceeds to ask, in terms which must, I am sure, greatly alarm the average Philistine, whether the institution of marriage may be so altered as to make it a companionship of equals without any predominance on either side. That, at least, I gather to be the substance of her question; and she seems to involve, as an essential part of this equal companionship, its easy dissolubility. As immediate steps she desires: less rigid divorce laws, equal for the two sexes, and the right of the mother to control her children; and she looks forward to "contract-marriage under certain limitations" as the next stage to follow upon the practical recognition of equality between the sexes. Finally she discusses the present condition of children, and declares that, "If only for their sakes, the present marriage system stands condemned."

Now, are the actual *desiderata* set forth by Mrs. Caird so very alarming after all? Does not the feeling of disagreement, which her article undoubtedly arouses in a great number of her readers, refer rather to her manner and attitude than to her practical aims or her ultimate ideals? And is not the disagreement mainly one of terms? When Mrs. Caird uses the word "marriage," I can see that she

limits it to some much narrower range than I, for instance, should. It would almost appear that she reserves the name for those unions which do not correspond with her own ideal of what unions should be. When she writes, for example: "A union really true to the ideas of marriage never works smoothly unless one or both of the yoke-fellows surrender what is strong and individual in the character," I can only ask, "Whose ideas of marriage?" For my own part I observe—and that at pretty close quarters—a considerable number of unions working very smoothly indeed, without any such surrender on either side; and those are precisely the unions which are true to my ideas of marriage. It is, no doubt, quite true that they are very far indeed from the ideas of marriage which prevailed among our earliest monogamous ancestors. Yet the marriage of our savage ancestor in the past and the marriage of our civilised descendant in the future will both be marriages. And of the new marriage, as of the old, it assuredly will remain true that the improvement of the pattern will not greatly avail if the material be bad. We must remember that worthy human relationships can only subsist between worthy human beings. Too many men and women in our so-called civilised life are virtually not civilised at all. They are not controlled by any sense of equal rights on the part of their neighbours; they have no reasoned principles, and are in effect led by the impulse of the moment. People of this sort—there are quite as many such women as men, and no small proportion of them belong to the middle and upper social classes—are incapable of the sort of companionship which seems to me, as to Mrs. Caird, the only sort of marriage worth having. They are also incapable of any worthy friendship, and they are eminently unfitted to have the charge of children. For persons in this stage of social development, equal freedom in intimate relations is not possible. They will inevitably be more or less tyrants or slaves; and they will be happiest, it appears to me, when they are kept under control by a resolute and not unkindly tyrant. On the other hand, a certain degree of freedom is necessary to the development of the partially civilised. Responsibility educates and fits for responsibility.

It is precisely this fact, that our civilisation is in process of growth, which makes the difficulty of adapting the formulas of human relation to the needs of actual life. The ideal of some part of the community is pretty sure to be ahead of the legal formula; on the other hand the legal formula is pretty sure to be in advance of the most backward class of all. This is the case among ourselves in regard to marriage. It is hardly overstepping the mark to say that in the lowest stratum of our population, marriage virtually does not exist at all. The essential elements—fidelity and sense of mutual duty—are absent. Moral chaos reigns as to the relation between man and woman.

At the other end of the scale we find a highly civilised class of self-controlled men and women imbued with respect for one another's freedom of action, and so educated that their principles of conduct, intellectual interests, and general outlook on life are pretty much the same. In Cambridge, some ten years or so back, the regulations by which Fellowships were forfeited on marriage were relaxed, and a considerable number of the younger Fellows shortly married. Quite recently a lady living in Cambridge and associating chiefly with precisely these husbands and wives, said to me, "I can't say that I know one unhappy marriage among my friends here." But then, in the majority of these cases, the wives are highly cultivated women, in the truest sense the equals of their husbands. At this stage I may perhaps step a little out of the main line of my argument to point out in what way, as it appears to me, a high standard of education among women affects their position with regard to marriage. It makes them undoubtedly more independent of marriage; and at the same time raises their standard of marriage. It makes them unwilling to marry men distinctly inferior to them in education or understanding, and it also, I quite believe, makes them less attractive in the eyes of such men. In short, it diminishes slightly the probability of a woman's marrying at all, while it diminishes very greatly the probability of her marrying unsuitably. A student of a ladies' college, summing up the general results of her education, said to me, "I don't exactly see why learning Greek should make one feel it impossible to marry a man one did not respect; but it seems to amount to about that." I thought for my part that this whimsical testimony was the highest possible tribute to her collegiate training.

Between these two extremes of the highly cultured on one hand and the socially savage on the other, exist all sorts of degrees of more or less civilised marriage relations, and all sorts of degrees of happiness and misery. On the whole, however, I believe that the married, men and women alike, are more comfortable in their married state than they would be if they had remained single. And here Mrs. Caird clearly differs. She seems to think that a great majority of marriages are unhappy, and also that when they are, it is the wife who is almost invariably the victim. But surely general observation points the other way. Surely if all husbands throughout England were to be carried to-morrow into permanent exile, the incomes of their wives remaining undiminished, the wives would still on the whole regret their removal, and would be in the aggregate not more but less happy than at present. And if this is so, it means that more married women in England to-day are glad to be married than sorry. Of course there are many unhappy marriages, and no doubt some which seem to the outsider to be happy enough are in truth not so.

On the other hand, a good many marriages which may seem to the onlooker intolerable, are not really intolerable at all to those concerned.

Still it cannot be disputed that many unhappy marriages do exist ; nor that it would be well if their unhappiness could be remedied, and better still if it could have been prevented from arising. But before we can attempt a remedy or a preventive, we must have some clear notion of what it is that causes this unhappiness ; for the existence, even in great numbers, of unhappy marriages does not prove that marriage is *per se* a mistake. The relations of parents and children are often unsatisfactory ; still on the whole children with parents are better off than orphans, waifs, and foundlings. What is it, then, that makes marriages unhappy ? Some of them are unhappy because the persons contracting them are virtually uncivilised ; and for that unhappiness no true remedy can be found, except in the improvement of those persons. The law should, however, take care to limit their powers of causing unhappiness ; and might, I think, with advantage, go farther in this direction than it does. Habitual drunkenness, for instance, should surely be a ground upon which husband or wife should be able to claim a divorce. Amongst the poorer classes drunkenness is by far the most frequent cause of unhappiness in married life, and, to speak candidly, I doubt whether the number of inveterately drunken wives is at all smaller than that of inveterately drunken husbands. Among the so-called middle and upper classes, married unhappiness is sometimes due in like manner to some serious fault on either side, but more often to a lack of unity between husbands and wives, which does not necessarily imply any special faultiness in either—in short, to the wrong persons having married. Sometimes, also, unhappiness is due to either having entertained unreasonable expectations of the other ; though I think that very few people have any such expectations as Mrs. Caird seems to attribute to them when she asks : “ How is it possible for two people to satisfy one another in every word and look and deed ? How can one invariably fit every detail of conduct to the preconceptions of the other, affected as each must always be by moods, health, chance influences and hereditary feelings ? ” But friendship can be very sweet and very close without demanding any such miraculous accord as this ; and many a husband and wife live together in the nearest friendship of all, who yet have many conspicuous points of unlikeness. What we do ask of our friends is some fundamental ground of concord, together with some practical similarity of view or taste for the purposes of every-day intercourse. And these are the essentials of a happy marriage also, though they are essentials which are not always carefully regarded beforehand.

In the cases where unhappiness is due to serious fault on either

side, I believe the total proportion of faultiness is pretty evenly balanced between the two sexes. My own impression is that among marriages which are actual shipwrecks of happiness, the greater number have been wrecked by the faults of wives, but that, of the more numerous marriages which drag on, not altogether intolerable, but very uncomfortable, the greater number are made unhappy by the faults of husbands ; and I will go so far with Mrs. Caird as to admit that the prevailing fault is a tendency to domineer, to tyrannize, to enforce a surrender more or less complete of the wife's will and individuality. This fault is one which can only gradually disappear before the growth of a slowly changing public feeling. That it is slowly disappearing I do not doubt, and I think that it would disappear a little faster if the law were more resolute in asserting independence on the wife's part. There is ground for Mrs. Caird's complaint of the position of many wives in regard to money. Indeed, the complaint might fairly include many sisters and daughters living with their brothers or fathers. It is a painful thing for a woman to have always to ask a male relation for money before she can have it, even although that relation be her husband ; and though she may feel that there is no sort of division between her interests and his, she would assuredly be happier with a fixed sum assigned to her, and put into her own control. But this is true not only of women who work for a husband in his business, but also of those who work for him by looking to his house and his children, and I should greatly regret any legislation which, by assigning payment to the one sort of service, seemed by implication to deny the money value of the other. It seems to me that when a wife does not possess a separate income she ought to be able to claim by law a certain proportion of her husband's ; and that for the following reasons : A woman who marries is likely to be in a worse position for earning a regular livelihood outside her home ; she sacrifices to wifehood and motherhood a portion of her chance of earning an income for herself. The new duties, however, which she takes upon herself are at least as worthy and important as the duty of self-support ; and it is neither just nor wise that her position should be made in any way less dignified or less assured than that of the spinster. The law does, at present, recognise this principle, and imposes on the husband the duty of maintaining his wife. The change which I should like to see, and which would, I should imagine, meet the views of Mrs. Caird also, would be that the law should assign a definite proportion to the wife as hers. The position of the husband is not analogous, since marriage renders a man liable to no such special disadvantages. There is no need therefore to consider the case of a man who virtually occupies a post in a wealthy wife's affairs. But I should think that no man married to a wealthy

woman would find endurable the position in which many wives stand to-day, who have to ask for a separate cheque, not fixed by any rule, every time that they want money. Such a position on the wife's part does, no doubt, tend to foster the slowly dying feeling of husbands who incline to consider themselves as the absolute rulers of their wives.

As to marriages, then, which are rendered unhappy through some radical fault of disposition on either side, remedy from outside is impossible; but the law can and should intervene to prevent the bondage of the other partner from becoming intolerable, and, in extreme cases, should open a way of escape. The boundary line of "extreme" would no doubt be set in different places by different people. Personally I am inclined to think that the dangers to society from drawing the bond too close are more serious than those from leaving it too slack.

The greatest amount of unhappiness in marriage among the better-off in England is undoubtedly due to a lack of unity between husband and wife. The two partners do not think alike, have not the same interests, the same point of view, the same ideals or standards; their likings and dislikings are altogether diverse, and the company of the one affords no pleasure to the other. We may as well confess plainly that such marriages may be numbered by hundreds. The problem is how to put them right; and we must own, sadly, that it is not possible to make the marriage of two such persons anything but a more or less tolerable compromise. Is it better, then, to let such people be at liberty to part without disgrace or discredit? To me, at least, it seems better; and I feel convinced that that view of marriage which sees in it the closest possible equal friendship will, as it grows, cause unsympathetic unions of this sort to be regarded with horror, will lead husbands and wives to feel themselves degraded by their continuance, and will insensibly cause such incompatibility to be held a ground for dissolution of marriage. Whenever a real inward unity comes to be generally regarded as the essence of marriage, its mere outward imitation will become intolerable.

Thus marriage will inevitably come to be more readily dissoluble as the ideal of marriage rises. It will be more readily dissoluble, but in practice less frequently dissolved; because the very existence of the higher ideal implies the existence of highly civilised persons who are approximately fit to fulfil it. But although it may be better to let such marriages be dissolved than continued, it would obviously be better still if they had never been formed. The axiom that prevention is better than cure applies with great force to unhappiness in marriage, and the question, "How comes it that such marriages are made?" is perhaps even more pertinent than the question, how, having been made, they may be bettered.

The main causes of the occurrence of uncongenial marriages seem to be, firstly, that a genuine unlikeness, either inborn or acquired, does exist between men and women; and, secondly, that in many cases, the opportunities afforded to men and women of knowing one another before they marry are quite insufficient. Now what the inherent differences of disposition may be between the two sexes, it is fruitless to inquire, since our power of removing them is evidently so small. I have, for my own part, a shrewd suspicion that these original differences are often extremely minute. Be they, however, great or small, it is pretty clear that the more we widen them by diversity of education and by keeping one sex apart from the other, the more difficult is it likely to become for any member of the one to dwell in unity with any member of the other. And it can hardly be denied that in a good many circles a difference like that of class or nationality does exist between the two sexes. Again, supposing no such division of sex to exist at all, it is obvious that a considerable amount of more or less confidential intercourse is necessary to enable any two persons to judge whether they are suited for permanent association; and it is also obvious that in a large number of cases no sufficient opportunity of such intercourse exists between men and women. A man and woman who are virtually strangers are attracted towards each other, and that attraction inclines each to believe in their mutual suitability. They may be perfectly right in that belief; if so, each interview will confirm it, and a sufficiently long acquaintance will substitute for a happy conjecture a far happier certainty. If they are mistaken—and the most ardent believer in love at first sight can hardly deny that such mistakes do occur—sufficient opportunity of acquaintance will enable them to find out their error before it has been made more or less irrevocable by marriage. Of course there is a chance that while one may incline to draw back, the other may incline to go on; and from this may arise distress, heartache, and reproach. But surely, at the worst, the broken courtship will cause less pain than the unhappy marriage.

To sum up the whole position, marriage, like all other human institutions, is not permanent and unalterable in form, but necessarily changes shape with the changes of social development. The forms of marriage are transitional, like the societies in which they exist. Each age keeps getting ahead of the law, yet there are always some laggards of whom the law for the time being is ahead. The main tendency of our own age is towards greater freedom and equality, and the law is slowly modifying to match. At this moment the statute book and the prayer-book are both in the rear of the feeling and conduct of the younger generation at least of the more cultivated class in England; and this fact tends more or less to

hinder marriage in that class. At present the strict letter of the law denies to a married woman the freedom of action which more and more women are coming to regard not only as their just right but also as their dearest treasure; and this naturally causes a certain unwillingness on the part of thoughtful women to marry. Moreover, the customs of education and social intercourse are, taken on the whole, such as to render rather difficult the preliminary steps of such marriage as alone satisfies the most highly civilised. That law and custom should alike enlarge so as to suit the growing ideal is evidently desirable; it is also, if that growth continues, inevitable, and the best way to secure the advance is to foster and promote the growth and spread of that better ideal. We must also bear in mind, however much we may prefer to forget it, that there are dangers in allowing the law to outrun the general feeling; and that even freedom is a dangerous weapon in the hands of those who have no sufficing inward law to guide them.

But to do our best towards improving the customary ideal is at least safe. We can all of us influence custom a little, since custom, after all, is only made up of many individual examples. We can all promote in our own small sphere a fuller and freer intercourse between men and women of all sorts, and thus help to enlarge that opportunity of friendship between man and woman which is also the opportunity of the best and most enduring kind of love, and of the happiest marriage. But no opportunity and no form of marriage that can be devised can make beautiful or civilised the relations of those who are themselves unbeautiful and uncivilised; nor can any machinery of law or custom avert the suffering brought on human beings by their own faults and follies, or by the faults and follies of those who stand nearest to them. Even as marriage stands now, it remains substantially true, in spite of striking exceptions, that men and women reap as they sow. In this, as in every department of life, to enter rashly upon serious undertakings is to invite ruin. In marriage, as in other relations, peace, confidence, and affection can only be bought by paying justice and gentleness in return. In this, as in every other affair of life, faultiness and folly bring, and will continue to bring, their own retribution; but in this, even more conspicuously, perhaps, than in others, it is folly of which the retribution is the more certain and the more severe.

It is not, I think, mitigation of the penalty at which the reformer should aim, so much as alteration of the environment in which faults and follies naturally grow. Easier divorce may be necessary, but the opportunity of making wiser and happier marriages is more necessary still—partly, though not chiefly, because in that direction lies the only safe path towards less stringent legal conditions.

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