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by John Todhunter**

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SHELLEY AND MARRIAGE.

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SHELLEY AND THE MARRIAGE QUESTION.

BY

JOHN TODHUNTER, M.D.,



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1889.



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SHELLEY AND THE MARRIAGE QUESTION.

Now that marriage, like most other time-honoured institutions, has come to stand, a thing accused, at the bar of public opinion, it may be interesting to see what Shelley has to say about it. The marriage problem is a complex one, involving many questions not very easy to answer offhand or even after much consideration. What is marriage? Of divine or human institution? For what ends was it instituted? How far does it attain these ends? And a dozen others involved in these.

The very idea of marriage implies some kind of bond imposed by society upon the sexual relations of its members, male and female; some kind of restriction upon the absolute promiscuity and absolute instability of these relations—such restriction taking the form of a contract between individuals, endorsed by society, and enforced with more or less stringency by public opinion. Its object at first was probably simply to ensure to each male member of the tribe the quiet enjoyment of his wife or wives, and the free exploitation of the children she or they produced. The patriarchal tyranny was established, and through the sanction of primitive religion and law became a divine institution. Then, as civilization progressed, the wife and children became less and less the mere slaves, more and more the respected subjects, of the patriarch. The paternal instinct (like the maternal) became developed, and family affection came into existence. At present the whirligig of time is bringing its revenges. The patriarchal tyranny begins to totter; parents are often more the slaves than the masters of their children. And even wives begin to rebel against wifedom, and threaten to revolutionize marriage in their own interest. Woman, like everybody else, is beginning to strike for higher wages. There are more than the first mutterings of that revolution in the Golden City of Divine institutions prophesied of by Shelley in *Laon and Cythna*. There are a good many Cythnas ready to rush about on their black Tartarian hobbies, of whom Mrs. Mona Caird is the one who has recently made most noise.

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There is a little design of Blake's in *The Gates of Paradise*, which represents a man standing on the earth who leans a ladder against the moon and prepares to mount; the motto underneath being: "I want! I want!" This is a type of our own age. Never was such an age of discontent, never such a Babel of voices crying: "I want! I want!" We have become very conscious of our pain, and are not ashamed to cry out and proclaim it on the house-tops in these hysterical times—simply because the ancient sanctions and anodynes have lost their sanctity and comfort for us. The very "priests in black gowns" who used to "walk their rounds and bind with briers our joys and desires," have been themselves corrupted with a longing for a little present happiness, and that Old Woman in the shoe, Mrs. Grundy herself, instead of whipping us all round and putting us to bed in the old summary fashion, when we venture to complain that the shoe pinches here and there, has herself become lachrymose. We cry out because, having neither the old repressions nor the old opiates to restrain us, there is no valid reason why we should hold our tongues. By crying loud enough and long enough we may get some help. We may even find some good-natured person to stop crying himself and help us; and then for very shame we may go and do likewise. In this lies the age's hope. It is really in its best aspect an unselfish age, an age in which sympathy and justice are vital forces, in which the miseries of others are felt as our own. There are thousands now who feel themselves "as nerves o'er which do creep the else unfelt oppressions of the earth." We are not wise enough yet to conceive and organize those vital adjustments between conflicting wants, interests, and principles, which shall be of deeper efficiency than mere superficial compromises; but this wisdom will come in due time, if we do not rush into anarchy through that licentious impatience which is the curse of revolutionary periods.

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Now, of all the bitter cries ringing in the air at the present time, about the bitterest and most persistent is that not merely of women, but of woman with a capital W. It is the most appalling note of change that can pierce the ear of self-satisfied Conservatism. The patient Griselda has begun to protest against the tyranny of her lord and master. Love's martyr has at last begun to think that her martyrdom must have its limits. It is as if the Lamb, whose function we thought was to be dumb before its shearers and even sacrificers, had found a voice of protestation. It is a portent. And even men are constrained to listen to the cry; for it sounds like the birth-cry of regenerated Love. Not now "Love self-slain in some sweet shameful way," but Love the winged angel who shall finally cast out Lust, the adversary. But many things must come to pass before this triumph of love can be brought about; and in many respects the horoscope looks unpropitious enough. The first effect of the birth, or coming to the surface of a higher ideal, gradually evolved by the progress of society, is apparently to make confusion worse confounded. Not peace but a sword is the first gift of the Prince of Peace. Liberty comes masked like Tyranny, and cries "Fraternity or death!" Love goes wantonly about with the Mænads of licentiousness at his heels. But the divine Logos, incarnate as the Son of man, always comes not to destroy but to fulfil.

Just now that highly moral being, Man in the masculine gender, is much shocked at the strangely immoral conduct of his feminine counterpart. In the first place, she has dared to look at the realities of things with her own eyes, not through the rose-coloured spectacles with which he has been at pains to provide her; and not only that, but to peep behind the sacred veil which man has modestly cast over many ugly things. Secondly, she has begun to talk openly about these ugly things, and to call them by non-euphemistic, ugly names, in a manner quite unprecedented. Thirdly, she has dared to attempt her own solution of things insoluble, her own achievement of things impossible. And fourthly, she has dared to formulate a demand for liberty, equality, fraternity on her own account—a demand which every day comes more and more within the sphere of practical politics. Here are pure women making common cause with prostitutes, married women crying out against the holy institution of matrimony, mothers rebelling against the tyranny of the beatific baby—nay, absolutely on strike against child-bearing, or at least demanding limited liability as regards that important function. Finally, here is Woman, whether as virgin, wife, or widow, demanding independence as to property and a fair share of the world's goods in return for a fair share of the general work of the world outside of her special womanly functions. "D——n it, sir, I say that women are unsexing themselves—unsexing themselves, by Jove!" as Major Pendennis might exclaim. And the worst of it is that there are so many men, traitors to their sex, who are casting in their lot with women in this terrible Women's Rights movement—"unsexing themselves," too, no doubt—so that we shall all soon become either a-sexual or hermaphrodite beings! And here let us leave for a moment the more or less limited and prosaic Cythnas of the day, the terrible women who ride about upon Tartarian hobby-horses in novels and magazine articles, who spout on platforms and practise medicine and other dreadful trades—the scientific Mrs. Somervilles, and medical Mrs. Garrett Andersons, and pious Mrs. Josephine Butlers, and impious Mrs. Mona Cairds, and get back to Shelley himself, the poet of this shocking social aberration.

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Shelley, as Mr. Cordy Jeafferson has taken great pains to demonstrate, was an exceedingly immoral young man. He outraged the conventional morality of his day by his actions as well as in his writings in the most shameless manner; but this shamelessness was due to his intense conviction that he thus outraged *conventional* in the interests of *ideal* morality. His life and writings are so full of the paradoxical character which I have ascribed to the social agitation of the present day, and some of his utterances are so prophetic of it, that we may fairly regard him as its precursor.

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Shelley, as we know, started rather as an anarchist than as a mere reformer. His ideas were cataclysmal rather than evolutionary. But he was an optimistic not a pessimistic anarchist, and he endeavoured to destroy in order to rebuild with all possible expedition. The kingdom of heaven was, for him, at the very doors, ready to take shape as soon as man willed it; and man *would* will it as soon as the mind-forged fetters of his mind were loosed. Accordingly he endeavoured to loose them. He dethroned God that the Spirit of Nature might be enthroned; and then he proceeded to abolish marriage that free love might regenerate mankind. He believed in regeneration by incantation—a few words murmured in men's ears would make them as obedient to the ideas those sacred words represented as spirits to the spells of a magician. Abolish marriage (and what could be easier?), and love, being set free, prostitution would cease. We may pass by such puerilities of inexperienced idealism, to be found by the score in *Queen Mab*, and pass on to Shelley's more mature utterances, always remembering that he died, as the *Triumph of Life* shows, in the very process of maturation. His whole history is that of an idealist, who first seeks his ideal in the actual, and not finding it endeavours to bring the actual into harmony with his ideal. His imagination hacks at the rude block of the world with the divine fury of a Pygmalion; thinking at first that he has but to remove the dull superfluous husks of custom to find the living idea in the centre; but gradually perceiving it was but created an inanimate image, which can only come to life by the invocation of Venus Urania. All the weaknesses, faults, and follies of his life and his writings, as well as that "power in weakness veiled" which he felt himself to be, come from this. He is driven to reform society by attacking the conventional morality of marriage, because he is first a transcendental lover; just as Mr. William Morris is driven into socialism, because he is first a very practical decorative artist. To speak irreverently, both men want elbow-room for their fads. But Shelley's fad is of even more importance to us than Morris's.

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It is better to have a beautiful love, than to have a beautiful house to put him in. Shelley is, above all things, the poet of modern love. Dante's love, fantastic and supersensuous, was not modern love. We do not want angels, either in heaven or in the house, to condescend to our depravity and lead us upward. We do not want the divine school-mistress to bring us to something not ourselves which may or may not make for righteousness, but the divine mistress, passionate as well as pure, to bring us to our best selves, and live with us in perfect union. Shakespeare showed us glimpses of this love defeated by circumstances in *Romeo and Juliet*, triumphant over circumstances in Posthumus and Imogen; but Shelley has had a fuller vision of it. Since Shakespeare's time both manhood and womanhood, and especially womanhood, have by pressure of circumstances become more self-conscious, and the conditions of their union through love more complex.

And what is this modern ideal of love, of which Shelley is the exponent? What is this strange affection, love, whether ancient or modern? It is that most paradoxical of passions, that compound of selfishness and self-renunciation, that forlorn desire which strives to reconcile all things, and found an eternal home on the shifting sands of time, of which we all know something. Blake has expressed this paradoxical character of love once for all in his little poem "The Clod and the Pebble."

"Love seeketh not itself to please,
Nor for itself hath any care,
But for another gives its ease,
And builds a heaven in hell's despair.

Love seeketh only self to please,
To bind another to its delight,
Joys in another's loss of ease,
And builds a hell in heaven's despite."

We may call these the masculine and feminine elements in love; though of course both exist in all love, whether of man to woman or woman to man. Both sexes give more than they receive, and receive more than they give. In all love, from the first step beyond mere physical appetite, to the most transcendental Platonism, there are these two antagonistic elements. If the merely self-indulgent element prevails, we tend in the direction of lust, one of the most cruel diseases that plague humanity, which Milton rightly places "hard by hate." If the merely self-renouncing, we tend in the direction of monastic chastity, which though not so distinctly an evil thing, may become cruel and inhuman, and a bar to human progress. Asceticism is not, like lust, a disease, physical and spiritual, but it may lead to disease, spiritual if not physical. There is an asceticism, the Greek *ασχησις*, a training of the lower faculties to act in subordination to the higher, which is the strait gate by which we enter upon the arduous ascent toward noble passion and noble action. There is another asceticism which if not truly Christian, came in the wake of Christianity, which, denying the rights of the body, was less a training than a mortification. Both unrestrained sensuality and monastic chastity, in their injustice to the body outrage the sexual principle, the former by regarding it as a toy to be polluted by base pleasure, the latter by regarding it as a thing unclean in itself to be cast out and killed, or at best tolerated and cleansed by the Church's holy water. To the present day the average man's, or at least the average Englishman's great temptation is to sin against love, through dull unimaginative lust, the average Englishwoman's through dull unimaginative chastity. Men live too much in the sensuous, and women in the supersensuous, to meet fairly. Love, the reconciler, himself is too weak fully to reconcile them and to bring them together in that perfect ecstasy, body to body, spirit to spirit, soul to soul, that "unreserve of mingled being," which Shelley, giving a voice to the desire of all ages, but especially to modern desire, sighed for. To understand Shelley's protest against marriage, we must understand his ideal of love—the unconstrained rush together of two personalities of opposite sexes, in whom the body is but the vehicle of the spirit. This love is not born merely of the flickering fire of the senses. It is a divine flame, kindled alike in body, soul, and spirit, and fusing them into unity. Of course, if this love is to be the great end of life, marriage is somewhat of an impertinence. While the divine fire burns, what need of artificial ties to keep the two lovers together? If it goes out why should they be kept together? To which the prosaic moralist replies: "Your ideal of love is very beautiful, no doubt. Get as much as you can of this divine flame into your Hymen's torch; and after all, every young couple start with some such high-flown notions in their heads; but I must have some guarantee that your wife and children are not left as burdens upon the parish, when you begin to feel the pinch of real life, and the glamour of your imagination fades from your 'divine mistress.' Marriage was not ordained to be the paradise of ideal love, but for the sober discipline of the affections of men and women, and above all for the production and rearing up of good citizens of the commonwealth. To judge by your own writings, Mr. Shelley, you seem to have been running after a will-o'-the-wisp all your life in this ideal love. And if *you* did not catch it, is it likely that Tom, Dick, and Harry will? In any case the pursuit of it seems just as likely to make inconstant lovers as that sensuality you affect to look down upon. You always had the word 'for ever' on your tongue; but how long did your for evers last? No, no, my dear sir, the good of society demands fidelity to incurred responsibilities, and we find by practical experience that both men and women, but especially men, are inclined to shirk the responsibilities which indulgence of the sexual passion brings in its train. Hence the marriage contract. It does not concern itself primarily with either love or lovers, but it helps to keep husbands and wives together, and women and children

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maintained decently without coming upon the rates. And, mind you, it does not by any means leave love out in the cold. It may not rise to your transcendental ecstasy; but it is love all the same, good honest domestic affection, when your young couples get well broken to harness. Did you not say yourself that one might as well go to a gin-shop for a leg of mutton as to you for anything human? Well, give me the wholesome leg of mutton—none of your gin for me. Egad, sir, when I see some honest couple going to church of a Sunday morning, with half-a-dozen pretty children about them, I call that a poem—ay, and a better poem, Mr. Shelley, than all the fantastic Epipsychidions you ever put upon paper. Hang it all, sir, let a man make love to his own wife, and stick to her when he has got her. I'm a plain man, sir, but I hope a moral man, and them's my sentiments." To all which, let Shelley reply as best he may. The fact is that he has given no satisfactory reply, simply because it was only just before his death that he realised the complexity of the problem of life. He did, however, see clearly that the bringing of men and women into more complete harmony, by raising the ideal of love, was the most important step towards that renewal of the world, that living of the most perfect life attainable by man, for which he sighed and after which he strove; and he saw clearly that our solution of the marriage problem was imperfect, not merely in practice, but to some extent in theory. As regards the subjection of women, he seems to have considered this wholly an artificial product of religious dogma, and not, as it is, the natural result of an imperfect civilization. Man protects woman because, on the whole, she adds to his comfort. Protection implies subjection, and subjection to a tyrant is slavery; and man, if not altogether a tyrant in these later times, has always the temptation to become one, and the tyrannical traditions of bygone times have a strong tendency to persist. Laws and even customs lag far behind the highest public opinion of the day.

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Now, men being in possession of the capital of the world, the material means of life, women stand to them in the position of what the socialists call wage-slaves. They must do what their employers require of them on pain of starvation, and there is no true freedom of contract. And so far men have almost without exception required of them concubinage or menial service, or a mixture of both. English marriage, while recognizing the existing fact of the subjection of women, has done something to raise their status, chiefly by making the bond between the contracting parties theoretically, and to a great extent practically, one of love and mutual service. It has indeed been much more than Shelley seems to have realized, the *nidus* of a love pure and wholesome, if not very passionate. Theoretically strictly monogamic, it has been so practically to a very respectable extent. It has put a perceptible curb upon the strong polygamous instinct of men, and it has fostered the monogamous habit in women enormously. English women are for the most part faithful wives. Even transitory prostitution does not kill the monogamous propensity in them. They settle down into marriage, or live faithfully with one man, if they get the chance.

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Still, Englishwomen are not satisfied with marriage as it exists. Let us hear Mrs. Mona Caird on the subject. She is much more prosaic than Shelley; she looks at the subject, chiefly from the standpoint of practical comfort. She sees that from this standpoint, from various reasons, which may be summed up in the phrase "incompatibility of temper," marriage does not induce even that amount of mutual toleration, not to say happiness, without which it is impossible for man and wife to live decently together. She therefore asks, What good purpose is served by keeping two people together who are evidently unfit to live together? Why indeed? if, as Mrs. Caird says, "The matter is one in which any interposition, whether of law or society, is an impertinence." But, unfortunately, law and society are the most impertinent things in the world, always binding with briers our joys and desires, and poking their ugly noses into our private affairs in the interests of the British ratepayer. We shall never be happy until we have got rid of them—if even then, and it is quite impossible to get rid of them for some time to come. Now the British ratepayer cares nothing about women and children, except in so far as there is a danger of their coming upon the rates. And he is a little scared about giving greater liberty of divorce, "saving for the cause of adultery," as he piously ejaculates. He does not like stray women and children going about the world. But after all, adultery is only a particular, perhaps even a minor, case of incompatibility. Marriage was made for man, and not man for marriage, and although marriage may work well in nine cases out of ten, the tenth case must be considered, and relief given if possible. The individual is right to demand relief, and the mode of giving relief is a question for the legislator. Greater facility of divorce must come, and will come, now that both men and women demand it.

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Mrs. Caird's demand for greater laxity of the marriage bond *ab initio*, the nature of the contract being left to the contracting parties, like a marriage settlement, is quite outside the sphere of practical politics, as she is herself quite aware. If men were but educated up to the Shelleyan ideal, then we might try all sorts of delightful experiments in marriage, and gradually arrive at absolute freedom of contract, which would *not* mean that absolutely unsentimental hygienic promiscuity which is the ideal of the highly advanced physiologist. But men are not yet harmonious creatures, like Wordsworth's cloud, which "moveth altogether if it move at all." They are torn by their lusts which war in their members. Hence these bonds. Lust, lust, lust: this is the most concentrated form of selfishness—the undying worm at the root of the Tree of Life. This is the tyrant that women have at last begun to recognize as their deadly adversary and to fight against. Shelley, a better physician than Goethe, laid his finger on this plague-spot, and told the age plainly: "Thou ailest here." But he did not see that instead of saying, "Abolish marriage and prostitution will cease," he ought to have said, "Abolish prostitution and marriage will cease"—marriage without love

being only a particular form of prostitution. He did not see that the abolition of marriage would no more get rid of lust than the abolition of private property would get rid of selfishness. We have already, in monogamic marriage, struggled painfully upward to the level of the higher animals; let us not imperil this progress rashly.

The Cythnas of the present day have felt their burthens more directly than Shelley did. Hence their demand for economic independence, that they may not be forced into marriage or prostitution by the various degrees of starvation. Their demand is a just one, and must be satisfied somehow, even if we have to put a bonus upon womanhood and pay women, not merely fair wages for their work of all kinds, but a tribute to them as women, as potential mothers, which shall fairly handicap the sexes in the struggle for existence, and put men more on their good behaviour.

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Shelley, the mystic, who looked for a miraculous change in nature coincident with a miraculous change in man, seems to have seen, almost as little as the average socialist of the present day, who believes in the spiritual efficacy of a purely material revolution, that the ideals and interests of the two sexes are widely apart, more so now than ever before probably. He, like the socialist, in his impatience to arrive at a practical solution of the life-problem, did not take the trouble to understand the true bearing of the doctrine of Malthus. He did not see that whether Malthus's figures be right or wrong, it is a fact that the population of any given district (be it an English barony, or the world itself) tends to increase up to the limits of its food-supply, taking the word *food* in its very widest sense to signify all the means of well-being; and that this tendency is a fundamental element in all social problems, just as friction is in all mechanical problems. He did not see that, other things being the same, a higher standard of comfort, while, finally tending to diminish the rate of increase of population, first increases its pressure. He did not contemplate that strike against child-bearing on the part of women, which is induced, not merely by the desire for personal comfort, but is largely due to the vague influence of those new ideals of which he was himself the prophet. He, like the socialist, thought that we might go on increasing and multiplying *ad libitum*, till we reached the ultimate limit of standing-room on the earth, and of miraculous chemical food out of the air, and began, as astral bodies, to emigrate to Mars. Women know better than this; and feel the pinch of population, when what they just now consider their higher life is hampered by children. The woman who has one child more than she wants is an over-populated woman; and the advanced woman of the present day, having her own higher culture, and the culture of humanity, on the brain, possibly with a high ideal of the duties of maternity, and frequently a sickly and weary creature, morbid in body and mind, is very easily over-populated. Hence much social discomfort. Shelley does not seem to have contemplated this, nor seen that the good-natured acceptance of the feminine ideal by man might lead him, like poor St. Peter in his old age, "whither he would not." How all this is going to end I confess I don't know. I trust in more delicate adjustments, a higher and more wholesome life all round; but the ascent of man is always a painful process. Meanwhile it is quite time for this bald, disjointed chat of mine to come to an end.

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Transcriber's note:

A dull gray underscore in the text indicates where a correction was made. Hover the cursor over the underscored text to see the nature of the correction.

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