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French Marriages

The Fall In The Birth Rate

The statesmen of France, alarmed by the steady fall of the birth rate in their country, are considering a number of amendments to the marriage laws, which have come down unchanged from Napoleonic times, and make marriage extremely difficult. Whether or not these laws are responsible, save in small part, for France's low birth rate is a matter upon which experts disagree, but that the French people are not increasing in number is very plain. In 1870, when they met the Germans in war, they numbered 36,000,000 souls, and the population of all Germany was but 5,000,000 more. But since, then the Germans have increased to more than 60,000,000, while the French still number less than 40,000,000. In other words, a difference in birth rates has well-nigh wiped out all of France's old hope of getting revenge for Sedan. In Germany each succeeding year bears the squawk of 37 new Germans for each 1,000 of population, but in France the arrivals number but 22. In 20 years there will be 73,000,000 or 80,000,000 Germans and but 40,000,000 Frenchmen—and France will be so far outnumbered in the field that an advance upon the Rhine will be a sheer impossibility.

The French marriage laws are in strong contrast to those of the United States, which, at least in most states, make marriage the easiest of all human enterprises. The young Frenchman, even after he becomes of age, cannot marry without the consent of his parents. Until he is 23, indeed, their refusal of permission, or even the refusal of his father alone, is an unsurmountable obstacle to his union with his fair Juliet. Even after he has passed 25 he must serve formal notice on his parents when he wishes to marry and ask for their permission in writing. If they refuse, he must ask again, and if they refuse again, he must ask a third time. After he is 30 he need ask but once, but even if he is 60 and one of his parent happens to be still living the formal request must be made. If both parents are dead, the bridegroom-elect's petition must be addressed to his surviving grandparents and if he is without such relatives and is less than 21 years old, he must get permission to marry from the head of his family, who is usually, in such cases, an uncle or elder brother.

Papa Must Say "Yes"

With his application for a marriage license the applicant must file attested copies of all of these formal requests and answers. If he is less than 23, as has been said, his father's refusal of consent is an absolute bar to his marriage, but after 25, provided he asks three times, in due legal form, he may marry despite such refusal. In the case of the bride the ages of transition are 21 and 25 instead of 25 and 30. No male of less than 18 and no girl of less than 15 may be married in France, either with or without parental consent.

These complex rules and regulations constitute Articles 144-226 of the Code Napoleon. To the Anglo-Saxon mind they may seem grotesquely oppressive, but a brief inspection is sufficient to show that there is merit as well as humor in them. It has been found by experience, in fact, that the rule of parental consent is an effective bar to the sort of marriage called “romantic” in the United States—to that sort, in other words, which almost always ends in misery for all concerned. It is impossible in France for a young jackass to marry a chorus girl; it is impossible again for an heiress to marry her father’s coachman. Yet, again, the marriage of mere children—an intolerable curse in this country—is effectively prohibited. The laws make such marriages utterly impossible in France, and declare them void when contracted beyond the border. It is thus useless for young French fools to elope to Belgium or England, for the French marriage laws apply to all French subjects, at home or abroad.

Stern Father’s Good Sense

The parental consent clause, in practice, works no hardship. Parents in France as elsewhere, are eager to see their children happy, and so they seldom withhold their consent when a proposed marriage holds out any prospect of permanent happiness. It must be manifest, indeed, that even in the United State, parental opposition when it is voiced at all is nearly always well founded. The stern father in brief commonly has prudence and good sense on his side. When he objects to his daughter’s marriage with a clerk whose income gives no sign of ever getting beyond \$18 a week, he is merely proving his affection for his daughter and his respect for the family honor. In this country the daughter elopes with her impecunious Romeo despite papa’s protest—and soon afterward begins to regret it heartily. In France the fiat of the head of the house is sufficient to save her for a better fate.

It must be plain, therefore, that the parental-consent clause, despite its antagonism to romance, works much more good than harm. We have become so accustomed in this country to the maudlin idea that no marriage is decent unless it is based upon romantic love that we ascribe all marital happiness without further inquiry to the existence of such love. As a matter of fact, romantic love is scarcely a secure basis in itself for marriage. Nine-tenths of all marriages that come to an end in the divorce courts began as love matches. Mutual affection, true enough, works toward amity and happiness, but unless it is accompanied by more worldly motives and incentives, it is very apt to perish in the course of the struggle for existence.

Thought Of The Future

The French system, contrary to popular opinion in America, does not seek to abolish love. Love matches are very common in France, even among the worldly wise peasants. But the French law makes it necessary for young people embarking upon the connubial sea to take thought of other things beside their sentiments of the moment, and French public opinion supports the law. The young Frenchwoman who proposed to marry a consumptive with no income would be set down by her friends as a fit candidate for a lunatic asylum; but in the United States, among large classes of quite respectable folk, such an enterprise would be regarded as a proof of lofty idealism. By the same token, the young Frenchman who made no inquiries as to the size of the dowry his bride was to bring him would be regarded by his fellows as an improvident and irresponsible ass, whereas in this country it would be considered indecent for a young man to make such inquires.

The French, in other words, approach marriage from an angle greatly differing from ours. We look upon it as a sort of romantic delirium—as a transcendental state in which all the grosser laws of substance and economics are suspended. The French take a less romantic view. They believe that society as a whole is a partner in every marriage, and that the rights of society should be considered and respected—that some account should be taken of the other partners' capacity to pay their way in life, to become the parents of healthy children and to rear those children properly.

The "Dot" And Its Uses

This accentuation of prudence works against emotional, haphazard marriages and large families, but it also works against improvidence and unhappiness. The average Frenchman, when he approaches marriage, takes full thought of the future. He realizes that he and his wife and their children must eat every day in order to live, and he is eager to arrange beforehand a more or less regular supply of victuals. He sees nothing indecent in accepting a "dot" from the bride's father. That money, invested in bonds, will help the new household over many a difficulty and later on it will pay, perhaps, for the education of the sons and with its natural increment, supply "dots" for the daughters. The French family, in other words, always has money in the bank. And that is why the French people, despite their enormously costly wars and their small birth rate, remain the richest people, by long odds, that the world has ever known.

(Source: Iowa State University, Parks Library Media Center, Microfilm Collection)