

# BROKEN VOWS

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Whenever a great moral problem has faced society, that problem has remained unsolved until public opinion found the solution. Not the fire of enthusiasm; not the whirlwind of excitement, but the still small voice of a people's convictions has ever met the world's question with an answer. Down thru the ages, public opinion has wielded its weapon of power. It has made and unmade kings. It has placed truth on the scaffold and error on the throne. It has exalted worth, and punished evil. It has been a factor in molding the lives of men, in changing customs of society, thereby accomplishing the world's reforms. Whenever public opinion said to a custom or ideal, "You are wrong," it has been doomed. The task of the reformer ever has been to get public opinion behind his reform. The great reformation waited for the approval of this mighty power. The anti-slavery movement could do nothing until the conviction of a people said, "Slavery must go." Prohibition came only in the wake of a great change in the minds of the people, and today the forces that seek to build or destroy depend for their success upon creating favorable public opinion.

Just now, in America we are confronted by an evil which public opinion is sanctioning by its silence and indifference, an evil that is steadily undermining the foundation of our civilization; yet we are giving little thought to this greatest menace which is uprooting our national life; namely, the chaotic condition and corrupting influence of America's broken homes. The prevalence of broken marriage vows is the greatest menace of today; for it strikes at the center of our civilization, the institution that has been the bulwark of the past and is the hope of our future, the home. Marriage vows are easily made and lightly broken. Statistics show that there is one divorce for less than eight marriages. A half a century ago divorce was almost unknown, and when it did occur, it was deeply regretted by both parties. Today it is looked upon as a usual thing. Marriage is not entered into as a permanent contract, but rather as an experiment. Many marriages today are made with the idea of a possible divorce in the background. "The



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lock has been broken from wedlock." The home fires have burned to ashes. The causes of this great evil are found primarily in the home training of our young people and secondarily in the inadequate marriage and divorce laws. The home fails to inculcate into the child the essential qualities of character. The home fails to teach that fundamental principle, obedience. fails to teach acceptance of responsibility; fails to uphold the ideal of loyalty, and hence fails to prepare the young for marriage or any other serious business. The average American child is selfish; his pleasure, his rights, his self-satisfaction are uppermost in his mind. He is often disobedient, defying the will of his parents and the laws of the land. He refuses to be advised, to recognize responsibility and accept duty. The home alone is responsible for these accusations against the younger generation. Parents are too busy climbing the social ladder, and hence the growth in grace and wisdom to which every child is entitled is sadly neglected. The passion of wealth, luxury, power and social recognition has blinded many a parent to the deathblow such passion deals to a child's heritage of love, comradeship, and faith in both father and mother. The average American home has failed, for it has too often been built upon selfishness and has trained youth to be selfish. Today, we are facing the disastrous consequences of this failure.

The primary failure, the failure to train youth for the responsibilities of life, is strongly seconded by the most abominable system of marriage and divorce laws that could ever be devised. Our marriage laws are lax and vary in every state. In six states girls of twelve are allowed to marry with parents' consent. In one state, without; and in eleven states, no marriage age is defined. Much of the disillusionment of married life is caused by child marriages, another percentage thru hasty marriages. There is the Browning-and-Peaches kind of marriage, the sixty-and-sixteen variety, where the ultimate aim of the woman is alimony. Marriage of minors, legal in one state, is annulled in another. Remarriage is granted in some states after three months separation, in other states, a year. Marriage is a civil contract, and its validity should not be determined by state boundary lines.

Our lax and varied marriage laws are tragic and plainly show a social evil; but our divorce laws are even more to be deplored. There are fifty-two grounds for divorce in the United States, and it goes without saying that any marriage can be dissolved if desired. The variety of divorce laws creates many different problems. Nevada has ten divorces to every nine marriages, because she has only a six months residential requirement. So if Mrs. Brown cannot procure a divorce in Iowa, she will take up her residence in Nevada until she is freed from the marital yoke. Because New York has only one ground for divorce, has she fewer divorced people than Connecticut which has eight grounds? Of course not. Other states are growing fat entertaining their rich New York guests, while the marriage bonds are being severed. Pennsylvania grants a divorce on grounds of cruel and barbarous treatment, New York does not. Should a New York husband have a better right to beat his wife than a Pennsylvania husband? Should a rich man have a better right to a divorce than a poor man because he can pay? Another great tragedy lies in the fact that the states will not recognize each other's laws.

Mr. A. cannot procure a divorce in Illinois, his home state, on the ground he presents, but can in Missouri, so he breaks his marriage tie there. But Missouri will not allow him to marry again within a year, so he goes to Minnesota where this time limit is not required, and remarries. Now, if on his honeymoon trip, he stops in Missouri he is a single man and living with a woman not his wife. If he goes to Illinois he becomes a bigamist, because according to the law of the state, he is not divorced. By payment of a railroad fee Mr. A. has the thrill of being a married man, a single man, and a bigamist. Comedy or tragedy, which? Now suppose there are children involved. Because of the difference in laws the courts have at times declared these children to be illegitimate. Think of it! "The right to be sure of legitimacy bandied about in such a precarious fashion!" Can the child be protected if the civil status is not protected? Can people be asked to respect laws when these laws challenge ridicule and disrespect?

The states have failed miserably in planning and executing the marriage and divorce laws. In the past, whenever state laws proved inadequate to solve a problem, the federal law has taken over the functioning of these state laws and bettered conditions everywhere. If America wishes to cure the evils resulting from broken homes, she must establish a uniform marriage and divorce law. "Law against drinking does not prevent drinking; law against murder does not prevent murder; but it certainly decreases the number of murderers and drunkards." Law establishes a standard of conduct. Marriage laws must be made uniform in order that marriage may be legal everywhere and respected. This law must provide an age and time limit so that hasty marriages and radical difference in age may be abolished. This law should have a stricter requirement as regards physical and mental fitness for marriage. A dentist must have several years of dental instruction before he is allowed to pull a tooth; a doctor must have several years of medical instruction before he is allowed to treat a patient; but a couple can establish a home, the foundationstone of society, with hardly any restrictions or qualifications. A few of the states are beginning to realize their responsibility regarding the chaotic conditions of marriage and divorce laws, but can accomplish little alone. The Wisconsin Eugenic law is evaded by crossing the line to Michigan or Illinois. The Connecticut law, delaying hasty marriages five days, is likewise evaded by the same method. The need of a uniform marriage law is self-apparent. However, such a law will not solve the problem of broken homes, for marriage does not seem worth saving in these days of easy divorce. Equally important with a Federal marriage law is a federal divorce law, so that divorce, if granted, will be legal in all states. This law must prevent divorces sought on the slightest pretext, because of having made a foolish choice or because of selfishness or irresponsibility. This law must give justice to the poor as well as rich. Since no reform of the institution of marriage is offered, since no reform in the realm of divorce is considered, the remedy for this evil must be the reform of the people. Society has evaded the responsibility by fastening the blame upon the changes brought about thru time. "Yes it is true that manners vary with social conventions, but truth does not vary; yes, it is true that behavior is largely governed by changing

times, but great fundamental principles remain the same," yet truth and fundamental principles cannot rise to power unless lifted by the convictions of a people. Public opinion has its first, its Herculean task in the homes of our land, the place for training and molding our youth. How can public opinion be made to crucify selfishness and inspire a desire for unselfishness in the home? What premium can it put upon obedience that shall honor its practice in the eyes of the nation? How can it lift responsibility to the high place of privilege and give it the meaning of a sacred trust? To do these things is to save our nation, to leave them undone is to sanction its death. When our convictions have been aroused society will frown upon the tendency of parents to shift responsibility to servants, to teachers and to questionable entertainments, while they, the natural guardians of childhood, seek wealth or pleasure. When our ideas of home and its sacredness have been exalted, then will men and women refuse to laugh at the slurs on love and marriage portrayed in the movies and the theatre. Then will public taste reject that fiction which dallies with the false, the vulgar, the vile as if they were harmless playthings; then will it be possible for us to secure laws that will safeguard marriage and deal with divorce wisely.

To arouse the giant public opinion and set him at his task is an undertaking that challenges every educational force in our country. Let every true home get busy, let every lecture platform do its part, let every religious organization assume the burden, let the press, that is patriotic, speak out the truth, let every school from kindergarten to university make its honest contribution to the saving of our homes. Yes, let every individual who loves the name of country and of home accept a share of the responsibility, for it is your task and my task, your privilege and my privilege to create this public opinion that shall save that most sacred of institutions, the home.

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