

The Romantic Impulse and Family Disorganization

By ERNEST W. BURGESS

“**F**ALLING in love” is, with Americans, the natural, expected, and, above everything else, the proper prelude to marriage. On the other hand, “love before marriage” has been tabooed by all peoples in the past and is frowned upon by the overwhelming majority of contemporary societies as foolish, shameless, even indecent. We are so committed to the idea that marriage is legitimate only when it is the culmination of a romance that a candid inquiry into the merits of marriage systems which make no provision for courtship is, to say the least, not easy. Courtship is, as a matter of fact, a natural phenomenon; it is a type of behavior that man shares with the lower animals. May we not, therefore, regard the attempt to limit the free choice of mates as, in some sense, a crime against nature?

At any rate, the conviction that marriage is but the formal sanction, which society is bound to give, to a deep and mystical experience—an experience so intimate and personal that any attempt to scrutinize or question it must be regarded as an impertinence—has assumed in the United States, and elsewhere in comparatively recent years, the character of a social dogma. As such it has played the role of a psychic censor, inhibiting inquiry not only into the nature of the marriage relation, but into the sources of the present alarming increase of familial disorganization, disclosed even by the most external measures, such as the court records reported by the United States Census. There was, for example, one divorce to every 6.9 marriages in 1924, as contrasted to one divorce for every 17.1 marriages in 1890.

In two original, if not in all respects scholarly volumes (*Romantic Love and Personal Beauty*—1887—and *Primitive Love and Love Stories*, New York, 1889), Henry T. Finck has proposed and elaborated the audacious thesis that romantic love “is a modern sentiment, less than a thousand years old, and not to be found among savages, barbarians, or Orientals.” Certainly in the Orient today, except where Occidental culture has penetrated, society does not encourage romance in connection with, nor as a prelude, to marriage.

IN Japan, as in China and India, parents emphasize practical considerations—social status and economic standing—and ignore, on the whole, sentiment

and personal preferences in arranging the marriages of their children. How completely the individual may accept marriage as a family affair rather than as a personal matter is delightfully portrayed in *A Daughter of the Samurai*, the autobiography of a Japanese girl who became an American woman. Etsu Inagaki Sugimoto was betrothed at thirteen:

There was a meeting of the family council, the largest that had been held since father's death. Two gray-haired uncles were there with the aunts, besides two other aunts, and a young uncle who had come all the way from Tokyo on purpose for this meeting. They had been in the room a long time, and I was busy writing at my desk when I heard a soft “Allow me to speak!” behind me, and there was Toshi at the door, looking rather excited.

“Little Mistress,” she said, with an unusually deep bow, “your honorable mother asks you to go to the room where the guests are.” I entered the big room. Tea had been served and all had cups before them or in their hands. As I pushed back the door they looked up and gazed at me as if they had never seen me before. I made a low, ceremonious bow. Mother motioned to me, and I slipped over beside her on the mat.

“Etsu-jo,” mother said very gently, “the gods have been kind to you, and your destiny as a bride has been decided. Your honorable brother and your venerable kindred have given much thought to your future. It is proper that you should express your gratitude to the Honorable All.”

I made a long, low bow, touching my forehead to the floor. Then I went out and returned to my desk and my writing. I had no thought of asking, “Who is it?” I did not think of my engagement as a personal matter at all. It was a family affair.

Not alone in the Orient, but in ancient Greece and Rome and, indeed, among modern European peoples, marriage is still more a matter of family arrangement than of personal choice. Matrimony begins and continues in feelings and attitudes of respect between husband and wife, rather than love.

Yet, although romantic love has become but lately the first consideration in *marriage*, nevertheless, the thesis of its recent origin as the basis of association between men and women cannot be accepted.

America, turning its back upon the traditions of the Old World, has emphasized romantic love as the reason for marriage. This emphasis has strengthened with the growth of cities, the increase in leisure time, the social and economic emancipation of women, the freedom of modern youth. But perhaps the tide is turning from the doctrine of romantic love as the sole and only basis of marriage, to include a mingling of romance, comradeship and mutuality of interest in due and perhaps changing proportions.

ROMANTIC love, or something closely akin to it, was seen in Athenian life, but not in the relations of husband and wife. Indeed, “a wife,” according to Menander, “is a necessary evil.” “The tender, unselfish solicitude for the welfare of the beloved was felt sometimes by men for promising lads; the enthusiasm of passion was sometimes kindled by a gifted courtesan.”

san, educated by the conversations of the great men of her time." (Emily James Putnam, *The Lady*, p. 12.) The *hetaerae*, skilled entertainers in dancing and music, were not infrequently friends of statesmen, artists, and philosophers. Most famous of all was Aspasia, the companion, mistress, and finally, the wife of Pericles.

In Cicero's day there arose in Rome, under Grecian influences, a new type of woman, the woman of *cultus*. "More and more the notion gained ground that a clever woman who wished to make a figure in society, to be the center of her own *monde*, could not well realize her ambition simply as a married woman. She would probably marry, play fast and loose with the married state, neglect her children, if she had any, and after one or two divorces, die or disappear. . . ." (W. W. Fowler, *Social Life at Rome*.) The *hetaerae* of Greece and the women of *cultus* of Rome were forerunners of the "new woman" of our time.

The origin of romantic marriage has often been attributed by scholars to the chivalrous knight and the courteous lady of feudal society. But the love of the lady of the castle was not, as was due, for her liege and lord, her husband, but was bestowed upon some gallant knight, or wandering troubadour, or adoring poet.

A MORE tenable theory derives the romantic basis of modern marriage from the social life of royal courts in the seventeenth century, particularly from that of France. The brilliance of the court with its punctilious etiquette and freedom of morals attracted an outer circle of ladies-in-waiting and courtesans, sometimes of gentle birth, not infrequently of lowly origin, who by their loveliness of face and figure, charm of manner, or vivacity of mind, might well evoke the grand passion in courtier, nobleman, or king. The romance thus engendered might terminate in a temporary alliance, or in a long attachment as mistress, or even in permanent union in marriage. Louis XIV, *le grand monarque*, matrimonially allied with the Hapsburgs, had a succession of mistresses, the last and most famous of whom, the Marchioness de Maintenon, born in prison and reared in poverty, he secretly wedded, although he never raised her to the throne vacated by the death of his queen. Most romantic of all was the dizzy rise of the illiterate daughter of a Lithuanian peasant on the uncertain stepping-stones of masculine favor: the bride of a Swedish dragoon; the war-prize of a Russian general; the purloined favorite of a prince; the mistress and then wife and consort of Peter the Great; and finally, after his death, Catherine I, the regnant empress of the Russias.

In the next century in France with its highly artificial social life developed to a degree of perfection previously unknown the art of *politesse* as a basis of social intercourse between the sexes. The *liaisons* of its ladies were only one phase of this new and daring adventure of women into the realm of masculine literary, philosophic, and political interests, invaded before only by the *hetaerae* and courtesans.

While in that same eighteenth century in England the intellectual "ladies of blue stockings" were unromantic not only in their marriages but also in their associations with the great men of their time, the meteoric career of five or six ladies of the demi-monde fascinated and shocked the nation. But fashions in the demi-monde of fair and frail ladies and gallant and spirited gentlemen changed—and the romantic association rose in esteem.

[By 1769] it had ceased to be the mode to make a *fille de joie* a universal toast. Now the man of spirit flaunted his own mistress, and a score of famous liaisons, dating from this time or a little later, indicate a variation from the previous custom. Lord Sandwich and Martha Ray, Lord Seaforth and Harriet Powell, Lord Egremont and Rosalie Duthé—these are among the most famous alliances of that period. The change was salutary in another respect, for the patron often married his paramour. [Horace Bleackley, *Ladies Fair and Frail*, p. 144.]

In the past the romantic impulse and matrimony were disassociated. True, mad infatuations on occasion have led into happy married life, but these are the exceptions that might be taken to prove the rule. And unfortunately in many of these instances the wife before marriage had been a notorious woman. In the Old World romance was kept apart from marriage because of its seeming incompatibility with any prudent consideration of family interests. Therein lies the unique interest in the attempt in the New World of America to reconcile the romantic impulse with family well-being.

IT is in the United States that perhaps the only, at any rate the most complete, demonstration of romantic love as the prologue and theme of marriage has been staged. The explanation lies not far afield. The relaxation of parental control over courtship has changed marriage into a romantic adventure instead of a serious and responsible undertaking in which not merely the family but the state was concerned.

The natural setting for romantic love is freedom of choice, but that is not all that is implied. The meaning of the term "romantic" gets its essential nuances in a contrast with the terms "conventional," "formal," "decorous," and "constrained." For the romantic impulse manifests itself in feelings and sentiments that are profoundly personal and imperious. In its more passionate expression it knows neither limits nor restraints, but possesses the lover so completely that reputation, honor, truth, and loyalty seem as nothing to the smile of the loved one. It is the essence of romantic love that it is unlimited and unrestrained, and the consequence is that it releases all the other elementary passions, jealousy and revenge, so intimately associated with it. That is one significance of the proverb, "All is fair in love and war."

Naturally, then, romantic love tends to consider the person, not the type, and personal traits, as beauty, charm, individuality, rather than family wealth and social standing. Accordingly, love overcomes, or seeks to overcome, all the barriers of wealth, class, and culture. The romantic aspect of courtship is heightened wherever an attempt is made to limit freedom of choice, as when parental opposition results in an elopement.

THERE seems to be no doubt that romantic love has, from an early period, been accepted as the sole basis for marriage by practically all classes in this country. In his *Social History of the American Family*,¹ Arthur W. Calhoun gives unmistakable evidence in the decades after the Revolutionary War of the "non-commercial character of American marriage" and of "carelessness as to social rank." In the United States as nowhere else in the world has headstrong

¹ See R. De Maulde la Clarière, *Les Femmes de la Renaissance*. The chapters on "Marriage" and "The Married Woman." An interesting philosophical conception of romanticism is elaborated by T. E. Hulme in *Speculation, Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, pp. 113-40.

² Vol. II, pp. 27-32.

and heedless youth literally exemplified the amusing admonition of Gilbert and Sullivan:

"Never mind the why and wherefore,
Love can level ranks, and therefore."

The public appetite is insatiable for news of marriage, with or without the parental blessing, of a scion of millions with a servant maid; of a Harvard graduate with a chorus girl; of an heiress from New York's most exclusive social circle with a self-made song writer whose boyhood was spent on the East Side.

The romantic impulse as it finds its expression in love-making and marriage in this country has had a history in which at least three main trends may be distinguished: the termination of romance with marriage and its conversion into conjugal affection; the formulation of the doctrine that the validity of marriage inheres in the continuance of romantic love; and a widespread reaction against romantic love and the emergence of a cynical attitude toward courtship and the marriage institution.

AT first, and typically in rural communities, romance parallels courtship and terminates with marriage. The convention is maintained, however, that "they live together happily ever afterward." No one will deny that in the open country, in villages and towns, husband and wife, with few exceptions, "live together ever afterward," whether happily or not, but probably more happily than their city cousins. The romance of courtship mediates the early adjustments of married life and remains an enthralling memory in the family annals. Before the advent of the automobile, courtship and marriage took place in the country within a small geographical area where "everyone knew everyone else." For a youth to escort a girl home from evening service at church on three successive Sundays made him her "steady." Engagement and then marriage almost inevitably followed. With marriage, the newly wedded couple "settled down," the husband to the regular round of farming, the wife to the routine of the activities of the house and garden. Their common interests centered in the management of the farm and the rearing of children.

Ernest Mowrer, in a book soon to be printed (Family Disorganization, University of Chicago Press), explains why the family in rural America absorbed practically all the interests of both husband and wife. Outside of marriage there was no career for women.

In the rural environment of the New World the family was an essential economic unit. The wife played the part of a partner in wresting a livelihood from the soil. Woman found her true sphere in the home as a wife and mother. Spinsterhood was feared because there was no place for the single woman except the status of a household drudge. The prime motive in marriage was to have a home—to be economically secure.

The industrial revolution, the growth of cities, the increase in leisure time, and the forward strides in popular education could not but have their effect upon marriage and the family. The taking of work out of the home and the consequent economic and social emancipation of women served in one way or another to heighten the emphasis upon romantic love, not only before but after marriage.

Romance no longer was taken for granted. It became the theme of a vast literature. The "best sellers" of E. P. Roe, Laura Jean Libbey, and Harold Bell Wright had an enormous influence in defining, particularly for rural dis-

tricts, romantic notions of courtship and marriage. The love stories in popular magazines, with a circulation running into hundreds of thousands, have tended more and more to "play up" the stimulating and the exciting in the adventure of love. The daily newspapers have followed suit with thrilling and sensational "true" stories from "life." Finally the motion picture portrays romance, with all the semblance of reality, so that the stars of the screen have become the models for millions of devotees. Significant also is the appearance of the so-called "problem" novel and "problem" play with the discovery that the real issues in romantic love arise after rather than before marriage. All this interest and reflection, although largely based on vicarious experience, crystallized into a popular philosophy.

THE central idea of this prevalent doctrine was that love and love alone was competent to bring together in marriage the persons best fitted to establish a family. Supreme happiness was to be found in marriage, but only with the predestined loved one. The theory of the "soul-mate" soon was elaborated to include belief in "love at first sight" and in the necessity of meeting and marrying one's affinity for the fullest expansion of one's personality or the accomplishment of one's best work.

Naturally there was, even where passion was deep and sincere, disillusionment, notoriously when romantic impulses led to unions of persons with widely different cultural backgrounds and philosophies of life. It became only too evident that in many marriages even if respect remained, the romance faded. The affinity theory was modified to demand either the continuance of romantic love in marriage or the dissolution of marriage.

"Incompatibility of temperament," while not a legal ground for divorce, gained wide popular sanction, especially in cities, as a justification for dissolving an existing union in order to pursue ideal happiness in a new matrimonial venture. Rudolph Valentino, who in his acting symbolized to the public *par excellence* the romantic conception of love, is reported to have made this confession of his faith (Chicago Daily American, September 21, 1926):

I set out in the belief that I had achieved union with my ideal mate, and I thought there could be no greater happiness for a man than to be united to his soul mate. I soon realized that marriage and the artistic temperament could not harmonize and I lived in hell for the days in which I could not adjust myself to the extent of regaining my freedom. I pray you may never suffer as I have suffered. You may think it strange that I should have risked a second [marriage], but I was under the delusion that it would be different, and for some weeks everything suggested that I was right. This is the way that fate mocks us artists and it was not long until I realized that the second marriage was going the way of the first.

The popular philosophy of romantic love was always more or less tempered by common sense. But certain social reformers and advanced thinkers carried this doctrine to its logical extreme of "free love." "As a guiding principle of morality, the unity of marriage and love must be maintained," declares Ellen Key, the ablest exponent of these new ideas. In her *Love and Marriage* may be found all the familiar articles of faith of romantic love, rationalized and emotionalized in support of "love's freedom," "the right of motherhood," "free divorce," and "a new marriage law."

"Those who belong to each other come together in the end; those whom chance parts, never belonged to each other" (p. 114). "There can be no other standard of morality for him

who loves more than once than for him who loves once only: that of the enhancement of life" (p. 39). "In our time ethical obtuseness betrays itself first and foremost by the condemnation of those young couples who freely unite their destinies. When one soul has found another soul, when the senses of both have met in a common longing, then they consider that they have a right to the full unity of love (p. 108).

The theories and conclusions of such radical idealists have had little or no influence upon the masses of mankind, but they powerfully affected the small but influential group of the *intelligentsia*. Many individual attempts were made to demonstrate the validity of this rational program, as in experiments in New York's Bohemia, Greenwich Village, where social conditions were most favorable. In *Love and Greenwich Village*, Floyd Dell pays a tribute to the enthusiasm, courage and intellectual conviction with which these social rebels sought to carry out their unconventional program.

We met each other at the Liberal Club and became good friends. We were very fond of talk. We talked over everything in the wide world. . . . And incidentally, of course, we agreed in disbelieving in marriage. We considered it a stupid relic of the barbaric past, a ridiculous and tyrannical convention. We were altogether enchanted with each other's enlightened opinions.

One evening, as Rosemary and I talked, there came in the midst of our intellectual discussion, a pause—a moment in which we gazed at each other in one of those silences that can end only in a kiss. And a moment later we knew—what anybody else, no doubt, could have told us all along, that we were in love.

The occasion seemed to demand a pledge of some kind. And so, instead of promising, in the old-fashioned way, to be true to each other, we promised, in a more modern fashion, that each would be true to himself. "And," said Rosemary, "when the time comes, and one of us falls in love with somebody else, we won't lie about it. We will tell each other, and part. Freely, and without regrets or recriminations!"

These were our vows—to be courageously candid in our expected and inevitable unfaithfulness. For we knew, intellectually, that the time would come when we would no longer love each other. Instinctively, we could not believe it—to speak of such a thing at a time like this was secretly a hurt to our deepest feelings. But we believed in facing the facts. We were reasonable, intellectual, modern young people. And—there is no doubt about it—we felt superior to the common run of mankind.

It was true that our relationship would be condemned by nasty-minded people. However, we knew scarcely any nasty-minded people. Our friends were all modern young people like ourselves, many of whom, secretly or openly, had dispensed with ceremony in their love-arrangements. And we had no anxious relatives to come snooping around, asking to see our wedding certificate. Moreover, being poor, we were obscure; no one in New York would care how we lived; the reporters would not camp on our doorstep asking for interviews on "free love." It was not necessary for us to pose on the one hand as martyrs to an ideal, nor on the other to skulk about in secret rendezvous under the disguise of false names and a wedding ring. We need neither argue about our conduct, nor lie about it. We could be lovers openly and fearlessly.

Regretfully the ex-villagers of the story confess the failure of their romance because they found in it, to their surprise, all, or nearly all, the problems of institutional marriage, and also other problems. Finally, after several similar disillusioning episodes the ex-villagers find happiness in marriages based upon comradeship and common interests.

The Greenwich Village experiment marks the ebb of American romanticism. No environment more propitious for the success of so radical an experiment could have been asked for. Its failure convinced the participants, if

we may put credence in Mr. Dell's narrative, that romantic adventures in free love did not realize the promised enhancement of personality without at the same time entailing losses that offset or more than counterbalanced the gains. These losses in disillusionment and in more tangible values naturally fell more heavily upon the women than upon the men. For one thing, these unions were predicated upon the absence of children, and if a child arrived, its interests and that of its mother had not been provided for.

Love in Greenwich Village suggests another interesting conclusion. The free unions seem to have been successful to the degree that the doctrine of free love was held as a matter of theory rather than of practice. Mr. Dell tells an astounding story under the title *A Piece of Slag*, of the shattering of a union through an audacious although sincere attempt to submit the theories held by the lovers to the acid test of experience.

THE romantic impulse by itself and unsupported by other sentiments and interests is not, it seems, sufficient to maintain the permanence of even a free union. The disillusioned rebels against society, themselves completely freed from conventions, have sought—each in his own way—a substitute or a supplement for the romantic impulse, and it seems to have been found in the comradeship and the mutuality of interests of married life.

This conception of a new basis for marriage upon something more than a mere love adventure has been excellently stated by Elton Mayo (*Should Marriage Be Monotonous?* Harper's Magazine, September, 1925):

Adolescent love is an event; married love is a situation. The first is a critical phase of development, the second is sustained romance. Love for the wife implies an inability to conceive of life without her. For both man and woman the domestic atmosphere should hold rest, and understanding, and sympathy.

The exaggerated wonder of adolescence at the mysterious revelation of the loved one represents a stage of development that cannot be perpetuated. The irregular union is committed to the hopeless attempt to perpetuate this atmosphere—an attempt which invariably fails. The few that apparently succeed do so by reason of the fact that they become marriages in fact if not in law; the woman, as a novelist has said, ceases to be herself an adventure and goes with the man upon a joint adventure. The necessary condition of a continued intimacy of living for a man and woman is the development of external and objective group interests. These interests tend gradually to minimize, if not to supplant, the mutual preoccupation with each other of two lovers on a honeymoon. To the young and ardent I have no doubt that middle-aged matrimony seems unduly monotonous. To those who are middle-aged and happy it seems to hold a serenity and a complexity of interest that compare well with the passing fevers of youth. If for no other reason, this apparent monotony might be justified by the single consideration of the disastrous effect which any alternative situation has upon the growing child.

The reaction against the romantic conception of marriage is largely confined to the intellectuals, whether conservative or radical; there has been, as yet, no corresponding popular revolt against romantic doctrines. There are symptoms, however, even here, of a coming explosion of the romantic dogma: among others, the restlessness of modern women, the insurgency of youth, a growing interest in getting at the underlying causes of family disorganization.

Of all these symptoms, the results of the new freedom of youth are most alarming to parents and to the public alike. In speech, in manner, and in attitude, boys and girls still in the teen age show heedless disregard for convention; a contempt for the advice of their elders—or,

worse yet, a smug indifference to it; a sublime faith in their own opinions about life and conduct; and a cynicism for "the sacred things of life" that shock the older generation and render its occasional efforts at intervention futile, if not absurd.

This attitude of youth does not represent any intellectual reaction against the doctrine of romantic love, but it may involve skepticism, if not cynicism, about love and marriage, which is likely to cause real and permanent loss because of the close interdependence of personal development with family life. For this additional reason the formulation of a new conception of a workable basis for family life is imperative. But parents and other representatives of the older generation find it difficult if not impossible to talk with the younger generation. "It is not so much what young people do, but the revolutionary and outrageous things they say, and the smart and smug way in which they say them," is the exasperated comment of many an older person. The very mothers who found the advice of their own mothers helpful in affairs of the heart are bewildered and helpless in their few and vain attempts to advise their daughters.

Mrs. Wilberforce confided in her own mother the progress of her early love affairs. She was guided in them by the older woman's advice. Vivienne (her daughter), with a long procession of admirers, rarely speaks of any of them, except in the most casual tone. Once or twice, in sentimental bewilderment, she has turned to her mother for counsel and during the ensuing interview has given rather than taken advice. Mrs. Wilberforce becomes dumb and horribly ill at ease when her daughter listens to her, smiles and says: "Oh, mother, you're so awfully mid-Victorian!" Mid-Victorianism, inability to keep up with the times, are things Mrs. Wilberforce dreads above all others. She has grown accustomed to permitting Graham and Vivienne to express, unchallenged, beliefs she considers revolutionary, to do things she believes unwise, because of a fear that protest will make them regard her as they look upon Grandma. Her constant dread is that her children will consider her old-fashioned and reactionary. (A Family Outline of Sin, by Fr deric F. Van de Water, The Ladies Home Journal, October, 1926, p. 18.)

IT follows that the youth of our time is not likely to accept without question the counsel of age. The change in attitude even of the cultivated people described by Mr. Dell who have passed through the experiences of radical

romanticism, disillusionment, and cynicism to a reconstructed philosophy of life will probably not be entirely convincing to young people of today. They will not cease to demand the autonomy of youth in working out their personal problems, and, as far as they are concerned, no problem is more personal than marriage.

THE emancipation of youth, like the emancipation of women and the freeing of the slaves, is a situation which must, I am forced to conclude, be recognized, whether or not we approve of it. For its acceptance is a precondition of any communication with, or assistance to, the younger generation. In the long run, the only way any of us learn is by experience, and it has always been the function of the older generation to transmit its experience to the younger generation. The rapidity of social change in the last decade has become so great, however, that the experience of the past, at least in the details of conduct and morals, is of little or no use, and probably only a hindrance, to modern youth. Youth must solve its own problem of love and marriage and it must be largely in the light of its own experiences, with whatever of perspective that experience gives.

In the accumulation of this experience, and in rendering it available to the adolescent and the youth, parents, teachers, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, and sociologists can function, not as the moral preceptors of youth, but as fellow students of the complex and complicated problem of life.

THIS resumé of the r le of the romantic tradition in love and marriage should not be taken as implying or prophesying its future disappearance from family life. Quite the contrary. The romantic impulse is an inveterate human trait which seeks expression in every field of man's activity, particularly in the love life. Its expression in courtship and marriage will continue. But there is even now every indication that the *doctrine* of romantic love as the supreme if not the sole *raison d'etre* of marriage and the family is being replaced by the conception that romance, comradeship, and mutuality of interests, in due and perhaps changing proportions, are all necessary for satisfying relationships in courtship and marriage.



Drawing by Helen B. Phelps

The romantic impulse is an inveterate human trait