

PLAIN TALK ABOUT ROMANTIC LOVE

BY WAVERLEY ROOT

THESE United States comprise the area in which the institution of divorce has achieved its fullest flowering and its greatest respectability. This nation is also the one in which homage is paid, more incessantly and more blatantly than in any other nation, to romantic love. The two facts are not unconnected.

If divorces have doubled since 1940, if there is now one divorce to every three marriages, it is largely because the worship of the ideal of romantic love, in its most banal and pathetic forms, is widespread in our nation. We are submerged from birth in a bath of the most nauseating sentiment about love. The movies put it before our eyes, the crooners drive it into our ears, and our popular novelists tell us how it is supposed to work.

Love is the be-all and the end-all, the seventh heaven, the achievement of Nirvana, the ultimate goal. It offers perfect bliss, unalloyed happiness, contentment ineffable! Life can be beautiful when boy meets girl and the wedding bells chime them into a happiness that is everlasting.

The fact is that love is one of the major causes of unhappiness in America.

Is it any wonder that marriages break up when young people are lured into them by such absurd saccharine promises? They are led to expect the machine-made chromium-plated shiny new ecstasy of the pulps and the slicks and the Hollywood heaven. When they don't get it they decide they have been cheated. But hope remains. They can try again, just like the temporarily thwarted heroes and heroines of the movies and the magazines. By courtesy of the divorce courts they can try again to win that unalloyed happiness which the romanticists have assured them is the birthright of every good young American. No wonder that he (or she) is so easily dissatisfied, so ready to give up what has been achieved in an attempt to attain the unattainable.

No one has told these poor children that it *is* unattainable. The romanticists have lied to them.

It is time to tell them some harsh facts about love.

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II

Some of the simplest illusions about love are the hardest to put down. Take for instance the theory, dear to romantic writers of a few years ago, that Providence, in its thoughtful way, has provided one ideal mate, and only one, for each person on this earth. One might think that, having taken so much care, Providence would at least see to it that each individual finds that destined mate. The evidence of life about us indicates that many people do not. If we accept the theory of the pairing off, by fate, of all the men and women of this world, we must conclude either that destiny is extremely inefficient in bringing these pairs together or that she takes a malicious pleasure in watching us engage in a damnably awkward game of hide-and-seek.

It is less fashionable today for writers to labor the one-man-for-one-woman theme, which has become somewhat threadbare. If you asked a young couple in love point-blank whether or not they believed that it had been divinely ordered that they should be brought together in the thrilling communion of ecstasy, they would no doubt deny any such belief; and intellectually they would not believe it. But emotionally they would, and it is the emotions that the individual acts upon, his dissenting intellect being limited to the rôle of figuring out after the fact some seemingly rational explanation. However disrespectful they may be in public to

the theory of the destined mate, few young couples have failed to look back upon the series of events which brought them together with a shudder at the realization that if it had not been for a whole series of lucky chances, they might never have met, or never have seen each other a second time, or never have had the opportunity to discover their love. If I had not gone to Cape Cod that summer instead of to Gloucester, Emily thinks, I would never have met Ralph. If I had not forgotten my hat and gone back for it, Ralph reminds himself, I would have left the party before Emily got there. And so, by recalling one lucky chance after another that kept their paths crossing until finally they ran parallel, Ralph and Emily convince themselves that some special fate was at work to prevent the awful doom of their failing to fall in love with each other.

What Ralph and Emily do not tell themselves (it would be most unromantic of them to do so) is that if this particular series of chances had not thrown them together, then Emily would have been led by some other concatenation of events to fix upon William, and Ralph to fix upon Cynthia. Whereupon each young lover would similarly retrace his narrow escapes from not meeting his beloved, and conclude with equal lack of reason that their guardian angels had brought them together and kept them together.

It would be possible, supposing we were in a sufficiently idiotic frame of

mind, to arrive similarly at the conclusion that a personal deity had undertaken to provide each of us with the one employer, the one doctor, the one laundress or the one laundry which, of all the potential employers, doctors, laundresses or laundries in the world, had been predestined for us. What series of chances led to the fact that you go now to the particular doctor who ministers to your ailments? The choice of the man who looks after your health is an important one. Yet you do not blanch at the thought that if Mrs. Johnson's nephew had not happened to meet Dr. Wilson at the country club, you would never have consulted him. You realize that if chance had not led you to your particular medicine man, it would have led you to some other. The point is that we have not swathed doctors in the romantic fog which envelops lovers. We do not believe that nature has ordained one doctor, and only one, to minister to each living individual. We should not believe either that she has selected one lover and only one for each of us.

That, indeed, is not nature's way. It would be inconsistent with all her known habits. Nature is prodigal. She throws new life into the world in such quantities that all cannot possibly survive. She uses a shotgun, not a rifle. She makes sure of hitting the target by showering it with a swarm of pellets instead of by aiming carefully with a single cartridge. She proceeds in the same way in the matter of love.

It is not necessary to find any one

man or woman for success in marriage. Within the reasonable limitations imposed by common interests, almost any pair of fairly decent young people should be able to get along if their heads are not filled with impossible ideas concerning a romantic love that never could be a reality. That fact has been demonstrated in the many societies, past and present, in which parents select their children's mates. Brides and grooms who have never seen each other before marriage are quite as successful in it as we who insist on doing our own picking.

The truth is that our young people do not blunder along unscathed until a beneficent fate confronts them with the one and only, whereupon they fall head over heels in love. On the contrary, when the time comes for them to fall in love, they fasten upon whatever is available. The passion comes first and an object for it is found thereafter. How unworthy an object will do is often clear to the friends of the stricken parties.

III

The current adulation of love is abetted assiduously by Hollywood. One of the queerest by-products of this worship may be observed in the standard method of presenting biographical stories of great men. Without exception, one discovers (with a certain amount of surprise), their achievements were due entirely to the encouragement provided by a loving woman, usually, Hollywood morals being what they are, a wife. In fact,

more often than not the genius is shown to have cribbed his ideas from his wife who, with patient self-abnegation, passes them on to him and stands admiringly in the background when he develops them as his own. The great men of Hollywood come off as rather poor sticks.

I have no doubt that it is true that some great men were aided in their achievements by the devotion of their wives. It is to be suspected, however, that in most cases that help was provided mainly by creating an atmosphere in which the men could work without distractions, rather than by prediscovering everything which was later to be produced triumphantly as his own by the husband. But it is also true that many great men have succeeded in spite of their wives. In fact, it is to be suspected that in the majority of cases masculine achievements have been attained, or at least assisted, by a talent for ignoring women, including wives. Women are often jealous, not only of other women, but of all male interests which attract attention away from themselves. Many women are jealous of their husbands' work, and resentful if it absorbs them too completely.

Thus, quite contrary to the Hollywood theory that love sparks genius, it is more often the truth that genius manages to manifest itself by minimizing love.

Love has long been touted as the most unselfish of the emotions. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

The popular speech, which often demonstrates an unconscious wisdom that is not perceived by those who use it, has classified love more accurately in the maxim, "All's fair in love and war."

We feel no great admiration for advocates of war, often precisely because in its pursuit we throw justice, honor and decency to the winds. Why should we feel any greater admiration for those who preach or practice the theory that love conquers all, that love excuses all, that to gain one's objective in love, as in war, ruse, deception, hypocrisy and treachery are all permissible, that, in short, in matters of love all scruples may be thrown to the winds?

I suggest that the reason we condone the excesses of love is that all of us, at one time or another and in one way or another, have been smitten by the same madness, and to condemn the acts committed under the influence of love would be to condemn ourselves.

Madness, indeed, is exactly what we are confronted with in the case of love, and courts of law recognize the fact. They do not put it in precisely these terms, to be sure, for judges are caught up in the same romantic tradition as the rest of us, but the law acts in a fashion which presupposes the irresponsibility of persons under the impulse of love. Insanity is one defense against execution for the crime of murder, and in many countries the *crime passionel* similarly is rewarded either with an acquittal or a softer

sentence than can be understood on any other basis than the feeling that love and insanity are akin. The insane, though absolved of responsibility for crime, are commonly committed to asylums, their dementia being adjudged more or less permanent. The authors of crimes of love are usually more fortunate, the mis-called tender passion being usually temporary.

Insanity takes the form, often enough, of perfectly logical deduction and action based on a false premise. Love does the same. But the common tradition does not agree with the false premises of the insane. It does agree with the false premises of lovers. What does all our popular romantic fiction tell us if it is not that love is primarily a noble passion; that, consequently, whatever is done under its goad is excusable, if not always commendable; that, in short, all's fair in love and war?

Occasionally, there is an exceptionally revolting crime of love, one which horrifies us to such an extent that we inflict the extreme penalty on those who commit it — a rank injustice on the part of a society which provides the standard which the criminals only apply. Very recently the press has been filled with the sordid details of a crime in which two young persons were charged with killing the parents who opposed their love affair. It is with no wish to excuse such crimes that it is pointed out here that the society which is demanding an accounting from these individuals itself

subscribes to the basic philosophy behind their alleged acts. All's fair, etc. . . .

Is it an unselfish passion which, for its gratification, pushes those enthralled by it to murder and lesser crimes? It would be unreasonable to place on the other side of the scale the stories we hear of the sacrifices made for love, the "selfless" service given by lovers to the objects of their adoration. The acceptance of sacrifices is merely one way of gratifying a passion for another person. The service of love is by no means selfless; it is a means of self-indulgence. The example of selfless love cited most often is actually the most striking instance of our own theory — of the complete selfishness of love. We are referring here to mother love, deemed often to be sacrosanct, beyond attack or reproach. Yet the woman who imposes no restraints on her natural maternal affection is almost certain to endow her children with psychological disabilities which may very easily wreck their whole lives. Since the psychoanalysts began dissecting mother-love, its claims to unlimited respect have fallen off sadly.

For what is the ultimate objective of mother-love, as of sexual love? It is the complete possession of the object adored, which, since the object is also a human being, means the enslavement of that being. Jealousy is the concomitant of this objective, for it denies to the object of affection the right to any experience, any interest, any expression of self, which is not

shared and controlled by the lover. Love, in short, is, like most other manifestations of the human spirit, a good when it is kept within reasonable limits, an evil when it is permitted to exceed the bounds. Our misfortune is that we have too long been taught that in the case of love excess is not only permissible, but often admirable.

IV

Romantic literature is largely responsible for the plight we are in; and it would be my guess that a great deal of what we accept as true about love is utter nonsense, built up over a number of centuries by that literature. Its daydreams and wishful thinking must respond to a fairly universal human hunger, for not only has this fiction covered a considerable area in space and lasted over a considerable period of time, but it exists even where it bears no relation to everyday life. Oriental literature, for instance, provides examples of romances which have as their necessary points of departure the freedom of women to meet with men, even though some of them were composed in societies where no such freedom existed.

If love is not the romantic affair which the story-tellers picture, what is it?

It is, I would hazard, a malady of adolescence, as measles and chicken pox are maladies of childhood. You will object that love is a normal development, disease an abnormal one. To which I would answer, is it usual or unusual for an individual to escape

the children's ailments? Some do; but some persons also escape the pangs of love. Disease, you will continue, is an interruption of the natural state of things, love a necessary part of it. But is that true? Is not the function of children's diseases to build up in the system a greater immunity to infection and an ability to resist the attacks of disease? It might be desirable, indeed, if more lovers developed similarly, after their first attack, an immunity from later onslaughts of the same fever, as most, but not all, victims of measles develop immunity from renewed infection.

Surely a man of sense, looking back upon his loss of all sense of proportion during his first love affair, should be able to learn from it how to avoid making so complete an ass of himself the next time. For a man in his thirties to fall in love, in the romantic sense, would seem to me to indicate a state of arrested development, just as the failure to continue, for some time after the thirties, to experience the normal and natural sexual attraction for women which constitutes love in a quite different sense would indicate no development at all. It would certainly be less fatiguing for men who have been through the game if the tradition established by popular fiction did not require them, for the satisfaction of these natural desires, to act elaborately the rôle of the romantic lover which fiction-steeped women demand of them. Ultimately, boredom at the process or a distaste for its basic hypocrisy may decide them to

content themselves with lighter and, no doubt, less desirable loves. One recalls the very old Russian in Isak Dinesen's *The Old Chevalier*, who, when asked if he could have any illusions about the feelings toward him of the young dancers with whom he surrounded himself, answered: "I do not think, if my chef succeeds in making me a good omelette, that I bother much whether he loves me or not."

Thus the glamorizing of love ulti-

mately leads the mature man to cynicism about it. It is perhaps a better exit than is possible for those who refuse to be disillusioned. They flit from marriage to divorce to remarriage, endlessly seeking the promise of everlasting bliss, the elysium in which ecstasy is maintained endlessly, unfailingly, without diminution of ardor or sating of appetite. It does not exist; and it would be as boring as any other paradise if it did.

OLD PEOPLE IN ROCKING CHAIRS

BY DANIEL WEBSTER SMYTHE

On the clean front porch,
Forward and back,
The chairs run,
Each with a form
Hunched and prim,
Watching the sun.

O let the wooden
Rocker speak,
As the crickets whir,
Sing high, sing high:
Squeak, squeak!
And the wheel rolls.
The world is over,
But it hovers near
To these old souls;
For time has clutched
Each by the hand:
They have not many
Seasons to spare.
They watch and they wait
For Time to stop
The squeaking chair.