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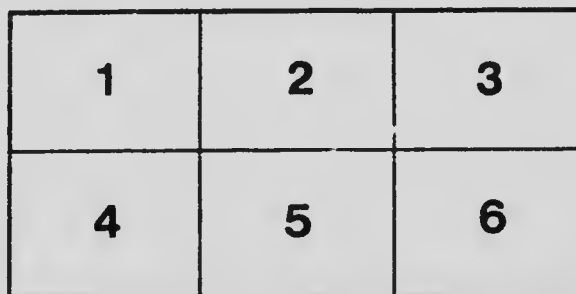
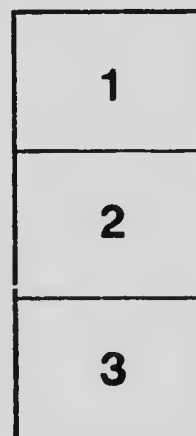
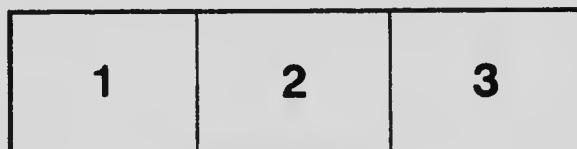
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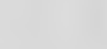
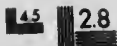
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# Marriage in the States

By Rev. John Talbot Smith



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# *Marriage in the States*

*By*

REV. JOHN TALBOT SMITH

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The American attitude toward marriage has been consistent from the beginning of our history, and differs completely from the European. The main characteristic springs from the common opinion that marriage is chiefly the concern of the young people and should be left to their taste and discretion. The parents and relatives have little or nothing to do with it. They may advise and criticize and oppose, but the less the better. The formalities of European custom have been laid aside deliberately. There is no formal betrothal, no binding engagements, no legal ceremonial; and the marriage ceremony is simpler and easier than getting a job on a railroad. The religious features have all been laid aside. The romantic love idea of the popular novel has had its influence on the situation. The entire American world, with few exceptions of any importance, has surrendered to the new method. The Catholic body has become so infected with the general indifference as to show many signs of decay. It is difficult to prevent hasty and foolish marriages; difficult to persuade the young people to a public marriage; many of them prefer the swift civil ceremony in an office, without sanctification or ceremony; the bans have become odious instead of honorable; the general effort is to sneak into wedlock as if nothing of moment had taken place. It is an artificial condition for the young peo-

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ANNEX  
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ple, born of bad example. They pretend nervousness and shyness, but the girls on tag day and the boys in a fire or police parade display no timidity, seem eager for publicity and display. The real source of this pretended shame or nervousness is to be found in the home training. The indifference or incapacity of the parents to their chief duty is the cause. The young people are no longer trained for marriage as in earlier times, when a girl was taught the housekeeping arts and a boy had his thoughts directed to maintaining a house of his own. The main effort of the parents now is to keep the children with them forever, to deery marriage, to praise bachelorhood, although they dare not yet praise the old-maid state. The married young men often advise the bachelors to remain free, with long descriptions of their home trials. "How lucky!" is the popular comment on bachelor's freedom, and not a few women have passed the same remark on the old maids whom deep in their hearts they pitied and despised.

This indifference of parents does not always remain quiescent. The more resolute oppose by secret or open means the approach of suitors for their girls, and employ the arts of persuasion and satire to delay the marriage of their sons. How cleverly this is done among the simple would surprise the experienced. Here is an illustration: the family had eight children of marriageable age, good examples of the Irish-American stock, bright, alert, sociable. The mother, without a single utterance against the marriage state itself, and behind a cordial reception to suitors, managed a campaign of satire and ridicule against the young men which secured for them a lively rejection of their matrimonial proposals; with the result that the four girls died early and unmarried, quite satisfied that they had



escaped the burdens of married life. Of the four boys one married early, but could never bring his wife to meet his mother; a second married after the mother's death and was then over fifty, for the determined old lady lived long; the other two remained bachelors. The extraordinary prevalence of these instances, and the various forms which they assume must be well known to pastors. A shrewd old father with a good working family, foreseeing his helpless old age, highly appreciative of a comfortable home, but deprived by death of his wife's aid, will play the game himself with success; or an older sister left in charge of the family will scheme against matrimonial invasion of her inheritance. My attention was at first attracted to this strange condition by the apparent failure of certain families in the third generation. For example, here would be a father and mother of Irish birth, whose brothers and sisters numbered perhaps a dozen, who had endured the hardships of emigration and of getting a footing in new lands with splendid strength, who presented the country with ten fine children, and who saw their old age honored with four grandchildren! This phenomenon should open the sleepest eyes, and yet it is as common as our daily bread. Four children in the third generation where there should have been forty. Examination showed many causes for this extraordinary failure, but in my experience the chief was the absence of marriages, or late marriages, among those children; and the source of the trouble was a jealous and foolish old woman, determined to keep her children at her side while she lived. And her old age was as garrulous against the married state as her middle age had been critical of suitors. A large family brought up in this hostile atmosphere, reduced to a comfortable and harmless routine, succumbs more easily to disease than an active marrying family. These determined old women have

often suffered the double punishment of seeing their children perish before their time, while the marrying family next door multiplied on the earth and trooped back on occasions with companies of children to gladden the home of the grandparents. "My children had every advantage," one old mother said me, "and half of them are dead, and the other half look as old as meself. But the Cronins that lived on potatoes and buttermilk and got no training at all, at all, and married at the cross-roads—there's no end to them." It would be useless to tell her that she had cultivated carefully her own misfortunes, that the married state has been so blessed by the Creator that its duties and responsibilities develop strength, health, longevity, cheerfulness, resource, and that for most people it is the natural condition in the third decade.

The common indifference to marriage condones and favors this unconscious hostility, which passes unnoticed and uncondemned. Among a marrying people like the French-Canadians it would be conspicuous, horrifying, and promptly extirpated. With us it remains an idiosyncrasy, except that it has serious consequences. Our young men are never trained for marriage. Although the bookshops carry a good stock of books on the marriage state, so little are the young men interested that they never read them. In the old-fashioned times when marriage was foreseen and prepared for, the growing youth learned about his coming responsibilities by direct teaching and by listening to the family talk over a particular wedding; a discussion which considered the fitness of bride and groom, their genealogy, the wedding outfit, the possible troubles, and the local histories which illustrated each point; he learned to save for his wedding, to become a wage-earner, to win a good reputa-

tion, so that his parents would have no difficulty in making the contract; his youth was a steady and careful preparation for a great event and a noble responsibility. Talk now with the average young man of any class and he will tell you at the age of twenty-three that he is too young, that married life is too expensive for his salary, that women expect too much luxury, and that thirty-five is a good age for marriage. He has learned this from observation and talk, and home influence has confirmed it. His sisters demonstrate for him the extravagance of their sex, and his parents approve of the thirty-five year, knowing that if he remains a bachelor till then it is unlikely he will ever marry. He spends all his surplus money on pleasure for the next ten years. He knows no more about the married state than what he hears from disgruntled men, whose sufferings prove their marriages failures. His ignorance is simply astonishing. At thirty-five he is as unfit for matrimony as for a voyage in search of the North Pole. The same history may be written for the young women, but not in so marked and emphatic a fashion. The girls still dread to become old maids, and they have made an honest, enthusiastic, but badly directed effort to keep marriage popular. They have spent too much money on dress and too much time on good manners and entertainment; too much time at the piano and too little at the cook-book; too much effort to win the youth and none at all to overcome the forces working against them in the household, and in society. Their parents have made them hypercritical about the young fellows, and they have dismissed the willing youths; public opinion has accused them of extravagance, their dress and behavior have borne out the charge, so that the unwilling youths have been confirmed in their obstinacy; the real values of the matrimonial state have escaped them, and so have the young men. What

pastor has not seen a group of two hundred likely young people smiling at one another in the same town for ten years, between the ages of twenty and thirty, and never getting married? At the close of a decade they sought husbands and wives among strangers: in a French village they would all have been married within the first three years. In such places it comes to be said that our people do not marry.

In large cities there is always a good number of wealthy Catholics, whose sons and daughters have been well brought up, are able to dress well and to indulge in various luxuries, and whose inheritance one day will keep them in plain comfort. However, the sons must learn a business to support themselves in the meantime, and the young women must marry well. There's the rub. There's no one to marry with. The young men of their own set cannot think of marrying until their salaries may match the ladies' style of living. The wealthier young men usually seek wealth. The poorer young men, lawyers, doctors, dentists, business men, of good education but of no social standing, are afraid to venture; the current is against them, indifference and hostility on the part of the parents, pride and ignorance on the part of the girls; yet in a few years, when all can see that these girls must remain old maids, the current will have changed in their favor; among a marrying community this fact would have been well known and welcomed, but with us it is recognized too late to be of service. Nothing would seem more easy and natural than inter-marriage among Catholics of different races, particularly in this country, where racial differences fade so speedily. On the contrary, nothing is more difficult. The Irish long considered it a disgrace to marry with foreigners, and a crime to marry a

“dago.” The boy or girl who took a French-Canadian husband or wife in New England fifty years ago was ostracized, and the one girl who accepted an Italian husband was all but mobbed at the church. When this racial disdain yielded to better sense, the other parties had acquired their disdain and refused to court or be courted. It is still rare, intermarriage of this kind, though not so rare as formally. Anyone can see what a leverage race-difference gave the indifferents and the malevolents: also how badly the poor professional fared at their hands. Many wise people observed the situation, regretted it, talked about it, but no voice was raised against the hostile, in behalf of the sufferers, and nothing was done to change a situation which everybody regretted when consequences became painfully visible. The most curious feature of the condition was the parental disregard of the sexual factor in human life. Celibacy was supposed to be as easy to their children as to its proper devotees. Rather there were no suppositions whatever. The matter never appeared in court. It never occurred to even the more intelligent and worldly that the constant provocation of the sexual instinct by the corrupt world in this time could have any effect on their obedient and submissive children. There was great astonishment and no forgiveness for the culprits when the inevitable tragedies happened.

When one adds to the traditional American attitude of indifference, the indifference of the State to its most important social institution, there will be no surprise at conditions and consequences. The Federal Government left marriage to the States. The States dealt more with easy marriage and easy divorce than with beneficent, encouraging, and constructive legislation. In fact the suspicion is legitimate that divorce lawyers formulated the laws of marriage,

as pension lawyers drafted out pension laws. One fact in American life is notorious and pre-eminent: that its people have done nothing for the marriage state, and have done very much against it. When we see the growth of the educational system of the Republic, and count the talent, the industry, the millions that went into it, merely to provide a fair education for one section of the people, and then turn to the greater, the more vital factor in the life of a State, and find its legislators spending no money upon it, and doing their best to weaken and defile it, we have a well-founded opinion of their folly and a strong suspicion of their educational zeal. When we see the enthusiasm brought to the conservation of the forests, the irrigation of the deserts, the transformation of the immigrant into an American, the swatting of the fly, the prohibition of alcoholic drinks, and then look in vain for a solitary organization concerned with the institution of marriage, we have a right to consider this people as lacking in balance, perspective, and knowledge of their own true interests. We are no longer astonished that the advocates of crimes against marriage have grown so bold, so well organized, so capably financed, so offensive, so diabolic; that the number of deserting husbands, who leave wives and families to starvation or to public charity, has steadily increased; that criminal practitioners have become so numerous and audacious; that so many drug stores have become secret agencies of their infamies; that their secrets and their methods have become public property; and that a public conscience of extraordinary callousness has developed. With each State quiescent, the marauders have enjoyed a clear field. As for the leaders in our great public movements, so keen in their different enterprises, one wonders why they close eyes and ears and mouths on the most vital question of all. They must see,

they cannot help seeing our approach to the abyss: why then the failure to cry out; why the astounding silence? Is there some secret malign force cleverly working to keep them dumb? Are the legislators who became responsible for easy divorce and other abominations carefully watching their fences? Is there any connexion between the indifference of the State and the economic condition which has so studiously ignored the married man and the parent in the distribution of wages?

It is admitted on all sides that the parents of large families are the chief benefactors, the mainstay of any state. Yet this vital factor in social life receives no recognition for his services. He gets the same pay as the bachelor: because his services to the nation are not considered in the wage system. It is no business of the capitalist that his employe is supporting a family. That is the laborer's concern. In earlier times, when labor was scarce and the children were needed in various industries, such as the cotton mills of New England, the employer was more than solicitous for the father of a numerous family; he found him work at good wages, built him a good house, and kept him in good humor, so that the children would not escape the mills. That day has passed, except for certain limited districts. The older a parent grows the less his wages. The young bachelor is now in demand, for his elasticity, enterprise, and endurance. It is admitted that his fickleness, eagerness for change, independence of spirit, love of travel, fondness for occasional dissipation, are serious blemishes, but not as unprofitable for the employer as the slowness, dullness, conservatism, lack of enterprise, of the middle-aged father of a family. The father's best qualities add nothing to the dividends of modern capitalism. His steadiness, devotion to duty, love of

regularity, interest in the work which supports his family, trained intelligence, have been found wanting in the matter of dividends. His wife and he get no return from their direct service to the State and to Industry in educating and training a family. The gross and terrible Capitalism of this time turns from the father and mother to the cheap labor of Asia, and sees its dividends swelling when that sort of labor comes in. It is a curious comment on American thought that criticism of this situation is so rare and barren among the professional reviewers. The new industrialism and the old capitalism alike seem to avoid the subject. Is it an intuition that not very far off new conditions, like the invasion from Asia, will leave the parent as complete a cipher actually as he now is morally? Some forms of Socialism plan his disappearance and hope to make the State the trainer of the child, leaving the father and mother to the honors without the cares of paternity. It is not strange that so many should approve that idea, seeing how little appreciated is the work of the working parent to-day. In laboring populations the position of the father has become pitiable through the mere working of the economic scheme. His family despise him almost as much as his employer. He can earn but little more than his younger children. He is played out in the world's estimation at the moment when intelligence, skill, interest, steadiness, and fidelity are at their best in him, when his success in bringing up his family has merited reward and acknowledgment; and the world labels him a supernumerary, jeers at him coldly, and throws him a ten-dollar-a-week job in contempt. It is easy to see what effect such a condition has upon the young man thinking of marriage. It is discussed widely among the workers. When the question of marriage comes up in the local clubs, or on the curb, here is the young man's statement: "What should I



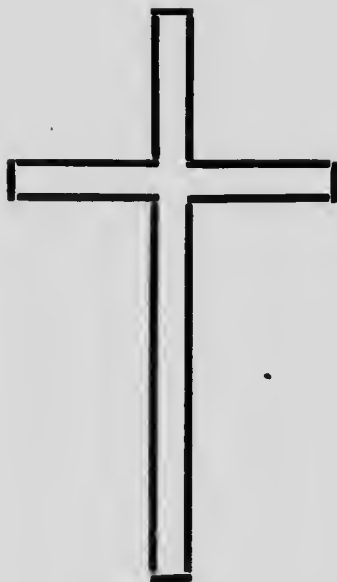
do marrying, when it costs so much to keep a wife, and more to keep her family? And what chance has a married man these times? Look at old Morris, after raising ten children; the company gives him ten a week and everybody gives him the cold shoulder!" An expert economist could sum up no better. Wages are graded for expertness, for efficiency, for increased production, for the mere stimulating of industry; but who ever heard of wages increased for each child born, either from the State or the employer, the direct beneficiaries?

Now line up all these influences working against marriage at the present moment, and compare them with the forces in favor of the married state. The American idea of non-interference, the consequent indifference of all concerned, the hostility of certain parents, the lack of direction in so important a matter, the economic hostility to marriage, the indifference of the State, the indifference of the leaders, the prevailing immorality, the easy divorce and easy re-marriage, amounting to concubinage, on one side; and on the other, what? Nothing clearly visible but the natural tendency of men and women to marry, and the ease with which the contract can be made. It is a fine tribute to the natural law of sex that its working has so long resisted the assaults upon it. At the same time thoughtful men are alarmed at the increasing percentage of divorces, of desertions, of matrimonial failures, and of erratic teachers, and they are convinced that the time has come for a direct and efficient defence of the marriage bond, the marriage state, and the family. They are also convinced that measures should be taken by all the interested parties, State, leaders, teachers, parents, relatives, and matrimonial candidates, for such a promotion of marriage as shall lessen the prevail-

ing evils and increase the benefits of married life. As Catholics have a deeper and holier interest in what for them is the indissoluble bond, and also a Sacrament, they should naturally be first and foremost in a movement of this kind. We have all seen the success of such societies as the Propagation of the Faith for missionary work; we have admired the methods of Church Extension in building up home missions; the League of the Sacred Heart, the Holy Name Society, the Knights of Columbus, the various aid societies, have proved the interest which the people take in their spiritual and temporal welfare; the Encyclical of Leo XIII. on Labor and that of Pius X. on Frequent Communion illustrate what powerful pontiffs can achieve in social and religious matters: now here is a matter of deeper importance than all these mentioned, and why should not similar agencies be set working in its behalf? In fact it may be asked, honestly and pointedly, so far as this country is concerned, why have they not been in action long ago? The evil conditions have been apparent for over two decades. Can anyone recall a single measure employed extensively and effectively to remove or relieve them? As we live in a country and a time when organization has become a mania, chiefly because of its successes, and when the Catholic body has won some glory in that field, is it not more than curious that marriage has received no attention from the experts or the enthusiasts? It seems advisable under the circumstances that our leaders should consider the situation and make a beginning of systematic and persistent effort. The simplest for a beginning would be marriage conferences in connexion with the ordinary parish work, at which the points touched upon here could be examined at leisure. Steady discussion and observation and report will convince the most indifferent and skeptical that no fancy picture has been drawn in

this article. If all our existing societies found a need for their activities, and were astounded at the details which lay behind the need, the matrimonial need and its details will cast all others in the shade. The student of social conditions, as his eye wanders over the field, will speculate sadly on the queer tendency of human effort to take up the minor enterprise first, and in the very dust of its success lose sight of the essential and necessary enterprise, waiting like a poor scholar for the attention and encouragement lavished on his inferiors.—Ecclesiastical Review.





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*From the Library of  
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