

IMPRUDENT MARRIAGES

By ROBERT BLATCHFORD



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Imprudent Marriages.



Now, here is a letter which I am going to answer. It could be answered in a few lines, but then it would crop up again in another form; I shall, therefore, give it all the space it needs if it takes me a year, and I shall keep on digging until I have dug up every shred of root, no matter how far the roots may spread:

"SIR: Being interested in your letters to workmen, I should like to ask you why, in 'Merrie England' and your other writings, you say nothing about imprudent marriages, the evils of which you must be fully aware of."

Now, it is not quite clear what the writer means by that question. But I take it that he means to imply 'that a great deal of the poverty and misery of the poor is caused by "imprudent marriages."'

At any rate, there are many who think that if all the workers were to give up drink, to work hard, to live sparsely, to save their earnings, and to avoid early marriages and large families, they would all be happy and prosperous without Socialism.

And, of course, these same persons believe that the bulk of the suffering and poverty of the poor is due to drink, to thriftlessness and to imprudent marriages.

I know that many, very many, do believe these

things, because I used to meet such persons when I went out lecturing.

Now, I know that belief to be wrong. I know that if every working man and woman in England turned teetotaler to-morrow, if they all remained single, if they all worked like niggers, if they all worked for twelve hours a day, if they lived on oatmeal and water, and if they saved every farthing they could spare, they would, at the end of twenty years, be a great deal worse off than they are to-day.

Sobriety, thrift, industry, skill, self-denial, holiness, are all good things; but they would, if adopted by *all* the workers, simply enrich the idle and wicked and reduce the industrious and righteous to slavery.

Teetotalism will not do, saving will not do, increased skill will not do, keeping single will not do. Nothing *will* do but *Socialism*.

I mean to make these things plain to you if it takes me till Christmas.

I will begin by answering a statement made by Sir J. W. Maclure, M. P. As reported in the press Sir John said: "There is nothing to prevent the son of a crossing sweeper from rising to be Lord Chancellor of England."

At first sight this would seem to have nothing to do with our friend's letter about "imprudent marriages." But we shall find that it is just part of the same great error. For this error has two faces. On one face it says that any man may do well if he will try, and on the other face it says that those who do not do well have no one but themselves to blame.

The error rises from a slight confusion of thought. Men know that a man may rise from the lowest place in life to almost the highest, and they suppose that because one man can do it *all* men can do it; they know that if one man works hard, saves, keeps sober and remains single, he will get more money than other men who drink and spend and take life easily; and they suppose because thrift, single life, industry and temperance spell success to one man they would spell success to *all*.

I will show you that this is a mistake, and I will show you why it is a mistake. Let us begin with Sir John's crossing sweeper.

Sir John tells us that "*there is nothing to prevent* the son of a crossing sweeper from becoming Lord Chancellor of England." But Sir John does not mean that there is nothing to prevent the son of some one particular crossing sweeper from becoming Chancellor; he means that there is nothing to prevent *any* son of *any* crossing sweeper, or the son of *any* very poor man, from becoming rich and famous.

Now, let me show you what nonsense this is.

There are in all England, let us say, some two millions of poor and friendless and untaught boys.

And there is *one* Lord Chancellor. Now, it is just possible for *one* boy out of the two millions to become Lord Chancellor; but it is quite impossible for *all* the boys, or even for one boy in a thousand, or for one boy in ten thousand, to become Lord Chancellor.

Sir John means that if a boy is clever and industrious he may become Lord Chancellor.

But suppose *all* the boys are as clever and as industrious as he is; they cannot *all* become chancellors.

The one boy can only succeed because he is stronger, cleverer, more pushing, more persistent, or more *lucky* than any other boy.

In my story, "Bob's Fairy," this very point is raised. I will quote it for you here. Bob, who is a boy, is much troubled about the poor; his father, who is a self-made man and mayor of his native town, tells Bob that the poor are suffering because of their own faults. The parson then tries to make Bob understand:

"Come, come, come," said the reverend gentleman, "you are too young for such questions. Ah—let me try to—ah—explain it to you. Here is your father. He is wealthy. He is honored. He is mayor of his native town. Now, how did he make his way?"

Mr. Toppinroyd smiled and poured himself out another glass of wine. His wife nodded her head approvingly at the minister.

"Your father," continued the minister, "made himself what he is by industry, thrift and talent."

"If another man was as clever and as industrious and thrifty as father," said Bob, "could he get on as well?"

"Of course he could," replied Mr. Toppinroyd.

"Then the poor are not like that?" asked Bob.

"I regret to say," said the parson, "that—ah—they are not."

"But if they were like father, they could do what he has done?" Bob said.

"Of course, you silly," exclaimed his mother.

Ned chuckled behind his paper. Kate turned to the piano.

Bob nodded and smiled. "How droll!" he said.

"What's droll?" his father asked sharply.

"Why," said Bob, "how funny it would be if all the people were industrious, and clever, and steady!"

"Funny?" ejaculated the parson.

"Funny?" repeated Mr. Toppinroyd.

"What do you mean, dear?" inquired Mrs. Toppinroyd, mildly.

"If all the men in Loomborough were as clever and as good as father," said Bob, simply, "there would be fifty thousand rich mill-owners, and they would all be mayor of the same town."

Mr. Toppinroyd gave a sharp glance at his son, then leaned forward, boxed his ears and said:

"Get to bed, you young monkey. Go!"

Do you see the idea? The poor cannot all be mayors and chancellors and millionaires, because there are too many of them and not enough high places.

But they can all be asses, and they will be asses if they listen to such perky and stupid men as Sir J. W. Maclure.

You have twenty men starting for a race. You may say, "There is nothing to prevent any man from winning the race," but you mean any one man who is luckier or swifter than the rest. You would never be foolish enough to believe that *all* the men could win. You know that nineteen of the men *must lose*.

So we know that in a race for the chancellorship *only one* boy can win, and the other one million nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine *must lose*.

It is the same thing with temperance, industry and cleverness. Of ten thousand mechanics one is steadier, more industrious and more skillful

than the others. Therefore he will get work where the others cannot. But *why?* Because he is worth more as a workman. But don't you see that if all the others were as good as he, he would *not* be worth more?

Then you see that to tell a million men that they will get more work or more wages if they are cleverer, or soberer, or more industrious, is as foolish as to tell the twenty men starting for a race that they can all win if they will all try.

If all the men were just as fast as the winner, the race would end in a dead heat.

There is a fire panic in a big hall. The hall is full of people and there is only one door. A rush is made for that door. Some of the crowd get out, some are trampled to death, some are injured, some are burned.

Now, of that crowd of people, who are most likely to escape?

Those nearest to the door have a better chance than those farthest, have they not?

Then the strong have a better chance than the weak, have they not?

And the men have a better chance than the women, and the children the worst chance of all; is it not so?

Then, again, which is more likely to be saved—the selfish man who fights and drags others down, who stands upon the fallen bodies of women and children, and wins his way by force; or the brave and gentle man who tries to help the women and the children and will not trample upon the wounded?

Don't you know that the noble and brave man stands a poor chance of escape, and that the selfish, brutal man stands a good chance of escape?

Well, now, suppose a man to have got out; perhaps because he was near the door, or perhaps because he was very strong, or perhaps because he was very lucky, or perhaps because he did not stop to help the women and children, and suppose him to stand outside the door and cry out to the struggling and dying creatures in the burning hall: "Serves you jolly well right if you *do* suffer. Why don't you get out? *I* got out. You can get out if you try. *There is nothing to prevent any one of you from getting out.*"

Suppose a man talked like that; what would you say of him? Would you call him a sensible man; would you call him a Christian; would you call him a gentleman? No; you would say, and you would say truly, that he was as stupid, as conceited and as unfeeling as Sir J. W. Maclure, M. P.

You will say I am severe upon Sir John. I am. I intend to be. Every time a successful man talks as Sir John talks he inflicts a brutal insult upon the unsuccessful, many thousands of whom, both men and women, are worthier and better than himself.

But let us go back to our subject. That fire panic in the big hall is a picture of *life* as it is to-day.

It is a scramble of a big crowd to get through a small door. Those who get through are

cheered and rewarded, and few questions are asked as to *how* they got through.

Now, Socialists say that there should be more doors, and no scramble.

But let me use this example of the hall and the panic more fully.

Suppose the hall to be divided into three parts. First the stalls, then the pit stalls, then the pit. Suppose the only door is the door in the stalls. Suppose the people in the pit stall have to climb a high barrier to get to the stalls. Suppose those in the pit have to climb a high barrier to get to the pit stalls, and then the high barrier that parts the pit stalls from the stalls. Suppose there is, right at the back of the pit, a small, weak boy. Now, I ask you, as sensible men, is there "nothing to prevent" that boy from getting through that door? You know the boy has only the smallest of chances of getting out of that hall. But he has a thousand times a better chance of getting safely out of that door than the son of a crossing sweeper has of becoming Lord Chancellor of England.

In our hall the upper classes would sit in the stalls, the middle classes in the pit stalls, and the workers in the pit. *Whose son would have the best chance for the door?*

I compared the race for the chancellorship just now to a footrace of twenty men; and I showed you that if all the runners were as fleet as greyhounds only one could win, and nineteen *must* lose.

But Sir John's crossing sweeper's son has to

enter a race where there are millions of starters, and where the race is a *handicap* in which he is on scratch, with thousands of men more than half the course in front of him.

For don't you see that this race which the Sir John Maclures tell us we can *all* win is not a fair race? The son of the crossing sweeper has terrible odds against him. The son of the gentleman has a long start, and carries less weight.

What are the qualities needed in a race for the chancellorship? The boy who means to win must be marvelously strong, clever, brave and persevering.

Now, will he be likely to be strong? He *may* be, but the odds are against him. His father may not be strong, nor his mother, for they may have worked hard, and they may not have been well fed, nor well nursed, nor well doctored. They probably live in a slum, and they cannot train, nor teach, nor feed their son in a healthy and proper way, because they are ignorant and poor. And the boy gets a few years at a board school, and then goes to work.

But the gentleman's son is well bred, well fed, well nursed, well trained, and lives in a healthy place. He goes to good schools, and from school to college.

And when he leaves college he has money to pay fees, and he has a name, and he has education; and, I ask you, what are the odds against the son of a crossing sweeper in a race like that?

Well, there is not a *single* case where men are striving for wealth or for place where the sons

of the workers are not handicapped in the same way. Now and again a worker's son wins. He may win because he is a genius like Stephenson or Sir William Herschel; or he may win because he is cruel and unscrupulous, like Jay Gould, or he may win because he is lucky.

But it is folly to say that there is "nothing to prevent him" from winning. There is almost everything to prevent him. To begin with, his chances of dying before he's five years old are ten times as numerous as the chances of a rich man's son.

Look at Lord Salisbury. He is Prime Minister of England. Had he been born the son of a crossing sweeper do you think he would have been Prime Minister?

I would undertake to find a hundred better minds than Lord Salisbury's in any English town of 10,000 inhabitants. But will any one of the boys I should select become Prime Minister of England? You know they will not. But yet they ought to, if "there is nothing to prevent them."

But there is something to prevent them. There is poverty to prevent them, there is privilege to prevent them, there is snobbery to prevent them, there is class feeling to prevent them, there are hundreds of other things to prevent them, and amongst those hundreds of other things to prevent them from becoming prime ministers I hope that their own honesty and goodness and wisdom may be counted; for honesty and goodness and true wisdom are things which will certainly prevent any poor boy who is lucky enough to possess

them from ever becoming what the dirty world of politics and commerce considers a "successful man."

I told you at the beginning that if all the workers were sober and thrifty they would be worse off, and not better. This, at first sight, seems strange, because we know that the sober and thrifty workman is generally better off than the workman who drinks or wastes his money.

But why is he better off? He is better off because, being a steady man, he can often get work when an unsteady man cannot. He is better off because he buys things that add to his comfort, or he saves money, and so grows more independent. And he is able to save money and to make his home more cosy because, while he is more regularly employed than the unsteady men, his wages remain the same, or, perhaps, are something higher than theirs.

That is to say, he benefits by his own steadiness and thrift because his steadiness makes him a more reliable, and therefore a more valuable, workman than one who is not steady.

But, you see, he is only more valuable because other men are less steady. If all the other workmen were as steady as he is he would be no more valuable than they are. Not being more valuable than they are, he would not be more certain of getting work.

That is to say, if all the workers were sober and thrifty, they would all be of equal value to the employer.

But you may say they would still be better off

than if they drank and wasted their wages. They would have better health, and they would have happier lives, and more comfortable homes.

Yes, so long as their wages were as high as before. But their wages would not be as high as before.

You must know that as things now are, where all the work is in the gift of private employers, and where wages and prices are ruled by competition and where new inventions of machinery are continually throwing men out of work, and where farm laborers are always drifting to the towns, there are more men in need of work than work can be found for.

Therefore, there is always a large number of workers out of work.

Now under competition, where two men offer themselves for one place you know that the place will be given to the man who will take the lower wage.

And you know that the thrifty and the sober man can live on less than the thriftless man.

And you know that where two or more employers are offering their goods against each other for sale in the open market, the one who sells his goods the cheapest will get the trade. And you know that in order to sell their goods at a cheaper rate than other dealers, the employers will try to get their goods at the cheapest rate possible.

And you know that with most goods the chief cost is the cost of the labor used in the making—that is to say, the wages of the workers.

Very well, you have more workers than are

needed, so that there is competition amongst those workers as to who shall be employed.

And those will be employed who are the cheapest.

And those who can live upon least can afford to work for least.

And all the workers being sober and thrifty, they can all live on less than when many of them were wasteful and fond of drink.

Then, on the other hand, all the employers are competing for the trade, and so are all wanting cheap labor; and so are eager to lower wages.

Therefore, wages will come down, and the general thrift and steadiness of the workers will make them poorer. Do you doubt this? What is that tale the masters so often tell you? Do they not tell you that England depends upon her foreign trade for her food? And do they not tell you that foreign traders are stealing the trade from the English traders? And do they not tell you that the foreign traders can undersell us in the world's markets because their labor is cheaper? And do they not say that if the British workers wish to keep the foreign trade they will have to be as thrifty and as industrious and as sober as the foreign workers?

Well, what does that mean? It means that if the British workers were as thrifty and sober and industrious as the foreign workers, they could live on less than they now need. It means that if you were all teetotalers and all thrifty, you could work for less wages than they now pay, and so they would be able to sell their goods at

a lower price than they can now; and thus they would keep the foreign trade.

Is not that all quite clear and plain? And is it not true that in France, in Germany, and all other countries where the workers live more sparsely, and are more temperate, than the workers are in England, the wages are lower and the hours of work longer?

And is it not true that the Chinese and the Hindoos, who are the most temperate and the most thrifty people in the world, are always the worst paid?

And do you not know very well that the "Greeners"—the foreign Jews who come to England for work and shelter—are very sober and very thrifty and very industrious men, and that they are about the worst-paid workers in this country?

Take now as an example the case of the cotton trade. The masters tell you that they find it hard to compete against the Indian factories, and they say if Lancashire wants to keep the trade the Lancashire workers must accept the conditions of the Indian workers.

The Indian workers live chiefly on rice and water, and work far longer hours than do the English workers.

And don't you see that if the Lancashire workers would live upon rice and water, the masters would soon have their wages down to the rice and water point?

And then the Indians would have to live on

less, or work still longer hours, and so the game would go on.

And who would reap the benefit? The English masters, and the Indian masters (who are often one and the same) would still take a large share, but the chief benefit of the fall in price would go to the buyers—or users, or “consumers”—of the goods.

That is to say, that the workers of India and of England would be starved and sweated, so that the natives of other countries could have cheap clothing.

If you doubt what I say, look at the employers' speeches, read the newspapers which are in the employers' pay, add two and two together, and you will find it all out for yourselves.

To return to the question of temperance and thrift. You see, I hope, that if all the people were sober and thrifty they would be really worse off than they now are. This is because the workers must have work, must ask the employers to give them work, and must ask employers who, being in competition with each other, are always trying to get the work done at the lowest price.

And the lowest price is always the price which the bulk of the workers are content to live upon.

In my second letter to the Bishop of Manchester I explained this to his lordship. I have also dealt with the same question in “Merrie England,” and I think if you read the two chapters xx and xxi on “Industry” and “Environment” in “Merrie England” you will find this question grow still clearer. In the Bishop's letter I took

the shirtmakers as an example. I will quote from the pamphlet here:—

“The folly of preaching unselfishness to the patient and unselfish poor, my lord, arises from your lordship’s ignorance of the economic fact that wages are regulated by the standard of subsistence; so that the more abstemious the poor become, the smaller the share of the wealth they produce will be left to them by the rapacity of the rich.

“‘A Certain Agitator,’ my lord, one Frank Fairman, reminds us that whereas the Hindoos are the most thrifty and abstemious race on earth, their wages are lower than those of any other people; and your lordship may observe that the immigrant Jews, whose industry, thrift, and sobriety are frequently pointed out as models to our workers, are paid miserable wages for long hours of labor.

“In all foreign nations where the standard of living is lower than in England, your lordship will find that the wages are lower also.

“Has not your lordship often heard our manufacturers tell the English workers that if they would emulate the thrift and sobriety of the foreigner they might successfully compete against foreign competition in the foreign market? My lord, what does that mean but that thrift would enable our people to live on less, and so to accept less wages?

“Your lordship knows that our shirtmakers here in Manchester are miserably paid.

“This is because capitalism always keeps the

wages down to the lowest standard of subsistence which the people will accept.

“So long as our English women will consent to work long hours, and live on tea and bread, the ‘law of supply and demand’ will maintain the present condition of sweating in the shirt trade.

“If all our women became firmly convinced that they could not exist without chops and bottled stout, the wages must go up to a price to pay for those things.

“Because there would be no women offering to live on tea and bread, and shirts must be had.

“But what, my lord, is the result of the abstinence of these poor sisters of ours? Low wages for themselves, and, for other—

“A young merchant wants a dozen shirts. He pays 10s each for them. He meets a friend who only gave 8s for his. He goes to the 8s shop and saves 24s. This is clear profit, and he spends it in cigars, or champagne, or in some other luxury; and the poor seamstress lives on toast and tea.”

But although I say that sobriety and thrift if adopted by all the workers would result in lower wages, you are not to suppose that I advise you all to be drunkards and spendthrifts.

No. The proper thing is to do away with competition. At present the employers, in the scramble to undersell each other, actually fine you for your virtue and self-denial by lowering your wages, just as the landlords fine a tenant for improving his land or enlarging his house or

extending his business—fine him by raising his rent.

And now we may, I think, come to the question of imprudent marriages.

The idea seems to be that a man should not marry until he is "in a position to keep a wife." And it is a very common thing for employers and parsons, and other well-to-do persons, to tell working men that they "have no right to bring children into the world until they are able to provide for them."

Now, let us clear the ground a little before we begin to deal with this question on its economic side—that is as it affects wages.

It is bad for men and women to marry too young. It is bad for two reasons. Firstly, because the body is not mature, and, secondly, because the mind is not settled. That is to say, an overearly marriage has a bad effect on the health, and since young people must, in the nature of things, change very much as they grow older, an overearly marriage is often unhappy.

I think a woman would be wise not to marry before she is about four-and-twenty; and I think it is better that the husband should be from five to ten years older than the wife.

Then it is very bad for a woman to have many children, and not only is it bad for her health, but it destroys nearly all the pleasure of her life, so that she is an enfeebled and weary drudge through her best years, and is old before her time.

These points being done with, we come to face

the main question. It is very like the question of sobriety and thrift. Of two poor workers, the one who is single is better off than the one who is married and has a large family. That is to say, the married man with many children is poorer and has more anxiety and trouble than the single man. Again, the man with the wife and children is in a more dependent state than the single man. He is less able to change homes or to seek work. He is in greater dread of losing his work. He is less able to save against bad times, and he often bears things and puts up with things which the single man would not endure.

So the single man is really better off than the married man, just as the steady and thrifty man is better off than the thriftless and unsteady man.

And again, if you think it out, you will see that if all our men and women workers kept single the result would be that wages would fall, just as they would if all our workers were thrifty and sober, and for the same reason; because the workers could live on less.

And now I have answered that question so far as it concerns your wages, let me say a few words about it as it concerns your happiness and your manhood.

It seems that a very large number of our working men and women in this rich, enlightened, and prosperous country cannot afford to have a wife or child. And it seems that many of them accept this state of things as natural and as un-

changeable, and tamely give up all hope of love in order to be able to make a living.

Now, I ask you who are keeping single in order to make a living, to think seriously what that means. Do you call it manly? I don't. Do you call that a living which is so spare that it denies you the love of a woman, and the joy of children? I don't.

I speak in all calmness and in all seriousness when I say that if I loved a woman, and if I had to own that I could not marry her because I could not keep her, I would kill myself as a coward and a failure.

But, mind you, it would be very hard to convince me that I could not keep her. I should try very hard first, and I should most likely begin by marrying her, and then proceed to try the issue afterward. That, as a matter of fact, is what I did.

But I cannot understand the men who tamely give up their right to a woman's love and to the blessing of children in order to "make a living."

It is not a living. It is worse than the state of a savage, or an animal, or a slave. I am a man of peace, and love quietness and retirement; but if I loved a woman, and if she loved me I would go out cheerfully and fight the whole British army for her. It would amuse me to do it. I should die happy.

I am afraid some of you prudent bachelors don't love very warmly; or that you are wonderfully feared of death.

I cannot really understand a man selling his

love, and his manhood, and talking like a coward or a slave about "Imprudent Marriages," and all for permission to drudge at an unwelcome task and to eat and sleep for a few lonely and dishonorable years in a loveless and childless world.

I would work my fingers off, craze my brains, break my heart, tramp the whole face of the globe, and die like a man before I would repeat that coward's lesson that I could not afford to marry the woman I loved.

You don't think that is going to save you, men, do you? You don't think you are going to make the best of life by selling for the sake of drudgery and bread and butter your proud man's right to work for, fight for, and die for the woman you love?

Old Socrates was right when he said that virtue consisted in a contempt for death.

When you workmen have grown wise enough to fear neither death nor devil, you will be well able to marry the woman you love and to keep and defend them. While you fear death, or fear failure, or fear employers, or fear any thing, you will not deserve to be prosperous and free.

For, having sold your love for permission to work, how long will it be before you sell your honor? Nay, is it not true that many of you have sold it already?

For every man who works at jerry work, or takes a part in any kind of adulteration, scamp-ery, or trade rascality is selling his honor for wages, and is just as big a scamp and a good deal

more of a coward than a burglar or a highwayman.

And the commercial travelers and the canvassers and agents who get their living by telling lies—as some of them do—do you call them men?

And the gentlemen of the Press who write against their convictions for a salary, and for the sake of a suburban villa, a silk hat, and some cheap claret, devote their energies and talents to the perpetuation of falsehood and wrong, do you call them men?

They seem to me less honorable, less reputable, more base, than the poor painted women who sell their honor for gin and cheap finery.

No, it is better to die honest than to live a rogue. It is far better to spill your blood on the road, or to starve in a desert, free and manly, than to sit tamely down to the bench or to the loom to drudge for dirty bread under a taskmaster's eye, and to feel that you have sold a woman's love and got her scorn in exchange.

Is he a man who will leave his love to face a lonely life and fight a cruel world alone? Or is he a man who will for paltry wages go into the den of a money-lender, or a jerry-builder, or a whiskey hoccusser, or a calico sizer, and do the rascal's dirty work for him?

No, men, there are times when it is better to die than to live. If you have to choose between love and life, it is better to give up life; if you are to choose between honor and life, it is better to give up life.

Do you doubt this? Go and ask any good

woman you know, and see what she will say to you.

If the state of things in England today make it impossible for men and women to love and marry, then the state of things in England today will not do.

If we cannot keep our foreign trade without giving up our love and our manhood and our honor, it is time the foreign trade went to the devil and took the British employers with it.

For my part, I would cheerfully sacrifice all the trade and all the fame, and all the wealth, culture and art, and every bulwark and institution of this great empire, with my own life thrown into the bargain, before I would sacrifice that oldest, noblest and dearest institution of manhood—the right to love the woman that pleases me, and to marry the woman I love.

Indeed, if I could listen to such a proposition as that of giving up woman's love and the pride and delight of children for the sake of "a situation," if I could listen to such a proposition without feeling it as an insult, I should despise myself as a coward and would never look a woman in the face again.

No, my friends, let us be men. If we cannot live as men we can always die. And who is afraid of dear old Death; the refuge, the rest, the peace-giver?

Well, I hope I have made quite plain my feelings about the question of imprudent marriages.

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