

THE MAGNIFICENCE OF MATRIMONY

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F, when in a reading mood, you wandered over to the family book-case to find something to dip into, and, by chance, your search was halted by a scuffed text-book bearing on the pressed pages between the book's covers a crudely printed slogan which read: "Open All Nite," you might have been intrigued into glancing through this martyred member of the educational hand-maidens placed in the restless hands of your thirteen year old son. You might have found there such doggerel as:

It was a day in balmy September,
That I shall always remember.
Ah! How my heart throbbed as I did gaze
Upon the girl whose face I had seen in a dreamy haze,
Etc., etc., etc.,

You would put that book by with a smile, a wistful smile telling that hazy scenes of your own yipping puppy-love were frolicking across the verdant background which forever shrouds memories of childhood days.

Caught for the moment by reminiscence you might have reached for that bulkier book belonging to your high-school son, with the hope that he, too, might have whiled away some time in creating some such "literary gem" for the lady of his fancy. Surely enough, he, too, has felt the urge and splashed forth with:

Her hair is raven.
Her kisses craven
By him, whose heart
With hers a part
Dost make a haven.

This time kindly pity would tinge your smile. You would think, no doubt: "Why, the big, good-natured lummock! He ought to know better."

Your youngsters' attempts to lure the muse of verse to perch upon their heaving shoulders might have urged you to take down a book

of poems to appease that early desire for something to read.

Perhaps fortune smiled upon you and you found on casually opening your anthology of poems such lines as these:

The love of marriage claims, above
 All other kinds, the name of love,
 As perfectest, though not so high
 As love which heaven with single eye
 Considers. Equal and entire,
 Therein Benevolence, Desire,
 Elsewhere ill-join'd or found apart,
 Become the pulses of one heart,
 And, both to the height exalting, mates
 Self-seeking to self-sacrifice
 (When purest) this one love unites,
 All modes of these two opposites,
 Chiefly God's Love does in it live

Were you not familiar with the poet, immediately you would have wondered who could have penned such thoughts extolling so exquisitely, not the loves of boyhood or youth, but that love of loves, that love found in the union of man and woman, husband and wife.

You would be interested to know that the poet who wrote this poem was extolled by his brilliant contemporary, Francis Thompson, as "the greatest genius of the century." Consequently you should learn much if you pause for a while to consider this particular poem, "A Wedding Sermon," which you have in hand.

As to the man behind the poem it is interesting to note that the Englishman Patmore was born in Woodford, Essex in 1823. At the age of thirty-nine he was converted to Catholicism. Before Patmore's lofty spirit returned to the Source of All Beauty in 1896 his growth in grace was such that his poetry was lifted to heights approaching the mystical magnificence found in the works of St. Theresa of Avila and her spiritual son, St. John of the Cross.

In Coventry Patmore, distinguished no less for his critical essays than for his poems, you have found a poet who made the burden of his song Mary the Virgin Mother and marriage. Consider his appreciation of his Heavenly Queen, the inspiration for his glorification of womanhood: "The Blessed Virgin the holiest and humblest of creatures; crowned with the honor of bearing God in her womb, is the one woman in whom womanhood has been perfected, and in whom the whole of womanhood has been more or less constituted and glorified"—"the creature of God rather the sole than the first"—"in whom are gathered up the ends of everything." Then consider what Eleanor Downing's exhaustive study of Patmore's creed pertaining to marriage reveals: "Man holds to woman the relation that God

holds to man. As the image of God is reflected in man, so is the potential beauty of man's soul mirrored in woman; and as man draws woman to him, so does God 'the great *positive* magnet of the universe,' attract man to Himself."

With the above remarks by Patmore in mind your interest in the lines of "A Wedding Sermon" would be centered on what Patmore would reveal about his beliefs, views and teachings about your own state in life, the married state, all of which are vitally important in a world drugged and enchanted by the passing, perishable appearances of things.

Any thorough investigation into the life and works of Coventry Patmore reveals a man whose works rose out of his consideration of marriage as a state, in the ordinary course of life, which is a symbol of God's Divine Love. The marital union Patmore writes about is sanctified by the sacrament of Matrimony whence comes the grace necessary for the married state. Man is rightly considered by Patmore as the temple and likeness of God. The temple, man's physical body, is dominated by a regent, Soul, which seeks to be united with Him, to whose image it was created. With the help of God each individual soul selects the way by which it will strive to attain union with God. One of these ways is to fetter the soul with the "three-fold golden chain," Poverty, Chastity and Obedience, three vows which bind the soul to God. But the religious state is not chosen by all, and Patmore realizing this discusses another way. This latter is the way which most souls select—the union of marriage, which Patmore holds to be a foreshadowing of the bridal romance between God and the soul. This marriage union is made in the form of a contract. This contract, a blending of two lives into one is written in the spirit. "Lover and Mistress become sensibly one flesh in the instant that they confess to one another a full and mutual complacency of intellect, will, affection and service, with the promise of inviolable Faith." In this union the sexual element finds its proper place, being sublimated to a degree that aids man in grasping the supernatural significance of marital relations. Marriage of the type set forth by Patmore always contains the intention of producing offspring, and this begetting of offspring likens marriage to the Trinity.

With this introduction to the poet you may turn to "A Wedding Sermon" to cull carefully the exquisite thoughts on the union of husband and wife.

Look to the thoughts that are couched in these lines treating of the bride and bridegroom as the "unwrought material of marriage."

"Lovers once married, deem their bond
 Then perfect, scanning nought beyond
 For love to do but to sustain
 The spousal hour's delighted gain.
 But time and a right life alone
 Fulfill the promise then foreshown."
 ". . . You have heard
 Your bond death-sentenced by His word."

Were this union to be debased to a merely physical thing, lacking the spirit, it would be the repugnant thing set forth by Patmore in the lines:

"Spirit is heavy Nature's wing,
 And is not rightly anything
 Without its burthen whereas this,
 Wingless, at least a maggot is,
 And, wing'd, is honour and delight
 Increasing endlessly with flight."

Then let Love's latest bonded captives behold Patmore's masterly insight and proposal of what must be the true foundation for matrimonial success:

"Love's best is service, and of this
 However devout, use dulls the bliss,
 Though love is all of earth that's dear,
 Its home, my Children, is not here: . . ."

Powerfully Patmore goes on to point out a source whence springs binding power to grapple husband and wife into a closer union. This is the same ageless guidance given throughout the centuries by the wise and holy Mother of men, the Church.

". . . On babes, chief fount
 Of union, and for which babes are
 No less than this for them, nay far
 More, for the bond of man and wife
 To the very verge of future life
 Strengthens. . . ."
 "And though true marriage purpose keeps
 Of offspring, as the centre sleeps
 Within the wheel, transmitting thence
 Fury to the circumference,
 Love's self the noblest offspring is,
 And the sanction of the nuptial kiss; . . ."

For the practical guidance of the groom there are sage words of advice:

“Who tries to mend his wife succeeds
 As he who knows not what he needs. . . .”
 “. . . . Confusing her
 Who better knows what he desires
 Than he, and to that mark aspires
 With perfect zeal, and a deep wit
 Which nothing helps but trusting it.”

Note the majestic sweep and penetrating insight with which
 Coventry Patmore develops the process of marital unification :

“God, who may be well
 Jealous of His chief miracle,
 Bids sleep the meddling soul of man,
 Through the long process of this plan,
 Whereby, from his unweeting side,
 The wife's created, and the Bride. . . .”
 “. . . . He to his glad life did annex,
 Grows more and more, by day and night,
 The one in the whole world opposite
 Of him, and in her nature all
 So suited and reciprocal
 To him especial form of sense,
 Affection, and intelligence,
 That, whereas love at first had strange
 Relapses into lust of change,
 It now finds (wondrous this, but true!)
 The long accustom'd only new,
 And the untried common;”
 “. . . . If, then, years have wrought
 Two strangers to become, in thought,
 Will, and affection, but one man
 For likeness, as none others can,
 Without a like process, shall this tree
 The king of the forest, be,
 Alas, the only one of all
 That shall not lie where it doth fall?”

Our Divine Lord said: “Unless ye become as little children, ye
 shall not possess the kingdom of heaven.” Of the hidden delights
 and the gay games known to every husband and wife, Patmore wrote :

“On pleasures that so childish be
 They're shamed to let the children see. . . .”

Now go on further with Patmore through the years of married
 life to look back in retrospect to that now distant newly-found joy of
 early wedded days. On pining for what used to be and seems to be
 no more :

I do not say love's youth returns ;
 That joy which so divinely yearns !
 But just esteem of present good
 Shows all regret such gratitude
 As if the sparrow in her nest,
 Her wooly young beneath her breast,
 Should these despise, and sorrow for
 Her five blue eggs that are no more.
 Nor say I the fruit has quite the scope
 Of the flower's spiritual hope.

Much, much more is there to be found in this poem. Volumes have been written about the other works of Coventry Patmore. How much has been written, and how much remains to be written about the mystical Patmore! What study there is in tracing the influence of Patmore's years spent in studying the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas. But as you read "A Wedded Sermon" and go on to his other poems you can read through the words of Patmore and find that he has written on the familiar pages of your own wedded life. Patmore, as now you have found, views Matrimony as a Catholic should. Further, in the poet's work marriage is magnificent. Shane Leslie tells you: "Patmore has placed marriage (in entire antithesis to Meredith's *Modern Love*) upon the pinnacle of Romance" and "to him Marriage was not the dull drug that lovers are sugar-snared into swallowing like children in some old-fashioned apothecary's, but the apotheosis of Love itself."

Here then is your wedded troubadour singing of the love of husband and wife with tenderness, thoughtfulness and sweeping grace. It is not given to all to sing of marriage as Patmore sang, but it is given to all to make of marriage a spiritual song with swelling tones that blend with the angelic choirs in a hymn of praise to Him who has joined man and woman together until death.

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