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Luther Heym Hofmannsthal Klee Hölty Kleist
Roth Heyse Klopstock Puschkin Homer Mörike Musil
Luxemburg La Roche Horaz Kraus
Machiavelli Kierkegaard Kraft Kraus
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Marx Lassalle Gorki Klett Leibniz Ringelntz
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Broken Homes A Study of Family Desertion and its Social Treatment

Joanna C. Colcord

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PREFACE

No less thoughtful a critic of men and manners than Joseph Conrad has remarked recently that a universal experience "is exactly the sort of thing which is most difficult to appraise justly in the individual instance." The saying might have been made the motto of this book, for in its pages Miss Colcord—with all the eagerness of the newer school of social workers, bent upon understanding, upon making allowances—seeks that just appraisal to which Conrad refers. Marital infelicities and broken homes are not universal, fortunately, but some of the human weaknesses which lead to them are very nearly so.

To one who brings a long perspective to any theme in social work, *Broken Homes* suggests the successive stages through which the art of social case work has progressed. Twenty years ago the editor of this Series was responsible for the following sentences in an annual report: "One of our most difficult problems has been how to deal with deserted wives with children.... One good woman, whose husband had left her for the second time more than a year ago, declared often and emphatically that she would never let him come back. We rescued her furniture from the landlord, found her work, furnished needed relief, and befriended the children; but the drunken and lazy husband returned the other day, and is sitting in the chairs we rescued, while he warms his hands at the fire that we have kept burning."

The passage belongs to the first and what might be termed the "muddling along" period of dealing with family desertion, but the fact that boards of directors actually were willing to print such frank statements about their own shortcomings was a sign that the period was drawing to a close.

This first stage was succeeded by a disciplinary period, in which earnest attempts were made to enact laws that would punish the deserter and aid in his extradition whenever he took refuge across a state line. Laws of the strictest, and these well enforced, seemed for a while the only possible solution.

Then gradually, with the unfolding of a philosophy and a technique of helping people in and through their social relationships, a new way of dealing with this ancient and perplexing human failing

was developed. This third way involved a more careful analysis of relationships and motives, a greater variety in approach, an increased flexibility in treatment, a new faith, perhaps, in the re-creative powers latent in human nature. But it is unnecessary to enlarge upon a point of view which these pages admirably illustrate. Desertion laws continue to serve a definite purpose, as Miss Colcord makes clear, but no longer are they either the first or the second resort of the skilful probation officer, family case worker, or child protective agent.

Just after the Russell Sage Foundation published a treatise on Social Diagnosis two years ago, a number of letters came to the author urging that a volume on the treatment of social maladjustments in individual cases follow. But this second subject is not yet ready for the large general treatise. A topic so new as social case treatment must be developed aspect by aspect, preferably in small, practical volumes each written by a specialist. This is such a volume, and Miss Colcord breaks new ground, moreover, in that her book illustrates the whole present trend of social work as applied to individuals.

Grateful acknowledgment should be made to the social case workers who have furnished valuable contributions to the body of data gathered for the present study. Miss Colcord wishes mention made of her especial indebtedness to Miss Betsey Libbey, Miss Helen Wallerstein and Miss Elizabeth Wood of Philadelphia; Mr. C.C. Carstens and Miss Elizabeth Holbrook of Boston; Mrs. A.B. Fox and Mr. J.C. Murphy of Buffalo; Miss Caroline Bedford of Minneapolis; Mr. Stockton Raymond of Columbus; Mrs. Helen Glenn Tyson of Pittsburgh; Mr. Arthur Towne of Brooklyn; Mr. E.J. Cooley, Mr. Charles Zunsler, Mr. Hiram Myers, and Miss Mary B. Sayles of New York. Many others not here mentioned were untiring in answering questions and furnishing needed information.

MARY E. RICHMOND

Editor of the Social Work Series

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BROKEN HOMES

I

INTRODUCTION

It has frequently been said that desertion is the poor man's divorce but, like many epigrams, this one hardly stands the test of experience. When examined closely it is neither illuminating nor, if the testimony of social case workers can be accepted, is it true. It is true, of course, that many of the causes of domestic infelicity which lead to divorce among the well-to-do may bring about desertion among the less fortunate, but the deserting man does not, as a rule, consider his absences from home as anything so final and definite as divorce.

In a study of desertion made by the Philadelphia Society for Organizing Charity in 1902, [1] it was found that 87 per cent of the men studied had deserted more than once. The combined experience of social workers goes to show that a comparatively small number of first deserters make so complete a break in their marital relations that they are never heard from again, and that an even smaller number actually start new families elsewhere, although no statistical proof of this last statement is available. One social worker of experience says that in her judgment desertion, instead of being a poor man's divorce, comes nearer to being a poor man's vacation.

A man who had always been a good husband and father was discharged from hospital after a long and exhausting illness and returned to his family—wife and seven children—in their five-room tenement. Ten days later he disappeared suddenly, but reappeared some two weeks later in very much better health and ready to resume his occupation and the care of his family. His explanation of his apparent desertion was that he was unable to stand the confusion of his home and "had needed rest." He had "beaten his way" to Philadelphia and visited a friend there.

The reporter of the foregoing remarks that it illustrates "unconscious self-therapy," and that the patient's disappearance might have been avoided if the services of a good medical-social department had been available at the hospital where the man was treated.

It is more difficult to justify the thirst for experience of another deserting husband who came to the office of a family social agency after an absence of a few months, with effusive thanks for the care of his family and the explanation that he "had always wanted to see the West, and this had been the only way he could find of accomplishing it."

In fact, case work has convinced social workers that there are few things less permanent than desertion. In itself this provisional quality tends to create irritation in the minds of many of the profession. It is upsetting to plan for a deserted family which stops being deserted, so to speak, overnight. But in their understandable despair social workers sometimes overlook essential facts about the nature of marriage. The *permanence* of family life is one of the foundation stones of their professional faith; yet they may fail to recognize certain manifestations of this permanence as part and parcel of the end for which they are striving. They would see no point in the practice adopted by a certain social agency which deals with many cases of family desertion. This society, when it has had occasion to print copies of a deserter's photograph to use in seeking to discover his present whereabouts, often presents his wife with an enlargement of the picture suitable for framing. The procedure displays, nevertheless, a profound insight not only into human nature but into the human institution called marriage.

In the next chapter will be considered some of the causes that make men leave their homes. To deal effectively with the situation created by desertion, however, we have need of a wider knowledge than this. Not only what takes men away but what keeps them from going, what brings them back, what leads to their being forgiven and received into their homes again, are matters that seriously concern the social case worker. What is it that makes this plant called marriage so tough of fiber and so difficult to eradicate from even the most unfriendly soil?

It is fortunate (since the majority of case workers are unmarried) that simply to have been a member of a family gives one some understanding of these questions. The theorist who maintains that marriage is purely economic, or that it is entirely a question of sex, has either never belonged to a real family or has forgotten some of the lessons he learned there.

Many volumes have been written upon the history of marriage, or rather of the family, since, as one historian justly puts it, "marriage has its source in the family rather than the family in marriage." [2] In all these studies the influence of law, of custom, of self-interest, and of economic pressure, is shown to have molded the institution of marriage into curious shapes and forms, some grievous to be borne. But is it not after all the crystallized and conventionalized records of past time which have had to be used as the source material of such studies, and could the spiritual values of the family in any period be found in its laws and learned discourses? We might rather expect to find students of these sources preoccupied with the outward aspects, the failures, the unusual instances. It is as true of human beings as of nations, that the happy find no chronicler. "Out of ... interest and joy in caring for children in their weakness and watching that weakness grow to strength, family life came into being and has persisted." [3] It is hardly conceivable that in any society, however primitive, there were not some real families—even when custom ran otherwise—in which marriage meant love and kindness and the mutual sharing of responsibilities. And these families, today as always, are the creators and preservers of the spiritual gains of the human race. It has been beautifully said of the family in such a form, that "it is greater than love itself, for it includes, ennobles, makes permanent, all that is best in love. The pain of life is hallowed by it, the drudgery sweetened, its pleasures consecrated. It is the great trysting-place of the generations, where past and future flash into the reality of the present. It is the great storehouse in which the hardly-earned treasures of the past, the inheritance of spirit and character from our ancestors, are guarded and preserved for our descendants. And it is the great discipline through which each generation learns anew the lesson of citizenship that no man can live for himself alone." [4] It follows that the most trying and discouraging feature of social work with deserted wives;

namely, their determination to take worthless men back and back again for another trial, is often only a further manifestation of the extraordinary viability of the family.

It is true that, into this enduring quality, many elements enter, some homely or merely material. A desire for support, or for a resumption of sex relations, may play a part in a wife's decision to forgive the wanderer. There are many other factors—use and wont; pride in being able to show a good front to the neighbors; a feeling that it is unnatural to be receiving support from other sources. Just the mere desire to have his clothes hanging on the wall and the smell of his pipe about, the hundreds of small details that go to make up the habit of living together, have each their separate pull on the woman whose instinct to be wife and mother to her erring man is urging her to give in; Home is, in both their minds,

" ... the place where when you have to go there
They have to take you in...
Something you somehow haven't to deserve." [5]

A woman who had left her home town and found clerical work in a strange city, in order not to be near her syphilitic husband from whom she had determined to separate, said, "When you've been married to a man, you can't get over feeling your place is with him."

However we may deplore the results in a given case, the spineless woman who takes her husband back many times may nevertheless be giving a demonstration of the thing we are most interested in conserving—the durability and persistence of the family. And so the social worker who is enabled by experience or imagination to enter into the real meaning of family life is neither scornful nor amused when Mrs. Finnegan is found, on the morning when her case against Finnegan is to come up in the domestic relations court, busily washing and ironing his other shirt in order that he may make a proper appearance and not disgrace the family before the judge.

An attempt will be made in this small book to analyze some causal factors in the problem of the deserter, to touch upon recent changes in the attitude of social workers toward deserted families,

to present illustrations from the best discoverable practice in the treatment of desertion, and to suggest certain possible next steps, both on the legal and on the social side. For lack of space, it will be impossible to consider the closely related problems of the deserting wife, the unmarried mother, or the divorced couple. It is assumed throughout that the reader is familiar with the general theory of modern case work; and no more is here attempted than to give a number of suggestions which will be found to be practical, it is hoped, when the social worker deals with the home marred and broken by desertion, or when he seeks to prevent this evil by such constructive measures as are now possible.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] Twenty-fourth Annual Report of the Philadelphia Society for Organizing Charity, p. 25.

[2] Goodsell, Willystine: *The Family as a Social and Educational Institution*, p. 8. New York, The Macmillan Co., 1915.

[3] Byington, Margaret F.: Article on "The Normal Family," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, May, 1918.

[4] Bosanquet, Helen: *The Family*, p. 342. London, Macmillan & Co., 1906.

[5] Frost, Robert: *North of Boston*, p. 20. New York, Henry Holt & Co., 1915.

II

WHY DO MEN DESERT THEIR FAMILIES?

"Before the deserter there was a broken man," said a district secretary who has had conspicuous success in dealing with such men. By this characterization she meant not necessarily a physical or mental wreck, but a man bankrupt for the time being in health, hopes, prospects, or in all three; a man who lacked the power or the will to dominate adverse conditions, who had allowed life to overcome him. Such an unfortunate may not be conscious of his own share in bringing about the difficulties in which he finds himself, but he is always aware that something has gone seriously wrong in his life. His grasp of this fact is the one sure ground upon which the social worker can meet him at the start.

We should distinguish between the *causes* that bring about a given desertion, and the *conscious motives in the mind of the deserter*. It is well for the social worker to make the latter the starting point in dealing with the man, accepting the most preposterous as at least worthy of discussion. The absconder is often too inarticulate and ill at ease to give a clear picture of what was in his mind when he went away. If he was out of work, it may have been a perfectly sincere belief that he would find work elsewhere, or perhaps only a speculative hope that he might. (These are not in the beginning genuine desertions, but often become so later on.) It is possible that, beset by irritations and perplexities, the thought of cutting his way out at one stroke from all his difficulties made an appeal too strong to be resisted. Or perhaps he flung out of the house and away, in a passion of anger and jealousy which later crystallized into cold dislike. The spell of an infatuation for another woman might well have been the cause; or he may have been mentally deranged through alcohol. Simple weariness of the burden which he has not strength of body or mind to carry and ought never to have assumed is one attitude to be reckoned with, and failure to realize or in his heart accept the binding nature of his obligations is another.

His temperamental instability may have been such that the desire for a change—the "wanderlust"—was driving him to distraction. Or perhaps, under the urge of his own subconscious feeling of failure,

he may have convinced himself that if he could "shake" the old environment and all in it that hampered him, he could take a fresh start and make good. "If I could only get to California," sighed Patrick Donald, [6] "I have a feeling things would be different." With too much imagination to be content with the situation in which he found himself, Donald had not imagination enough to realize that he would have to take his old self with him wherever he went, and that he might better fight things out where he stood. Men of his sort yearn constantly for the future, not realizing that in its truest sense the present *is* the future.

Only in rare instances will the deserter accept the entire responsibility for his act. To try to find justification for doing what we want to do is characteristic of human beings, and the deserter is no exception. He attempts to "rationalize" his conduct and so regain his sense of self-approval and well-being by finding excuses and justifications in the conduct of others. Even when the fault is all his, he usually succeeds in making himself believe that his wife is more to blame than he for his having left home. [7] The social worker who attempts to deal with the situation the deserter creates should know this attitude in advance and be prepared, through some simple rule-of-thumb psychology, to attack the obsession and bring him, first of all, to see and face squarely his own responsibility.

Many blanket theories have been developed to explain desertion—that it is due to economic pressure; that it is the result of bad housekeeping; that its causes can all be reduced to sex incompatibility. All these factors: undoubtedly have their bearing on the problem, but there is no one cause or group of causes underlying breakdowns in family morale. The ratio of desertions has been observed to decrease rather than to increase in "hard times"; [8] moreover, it is a matter of common observation that not all slovenly and incompetent wives are deserted, and that many married couples in all walks of life whose sex relationships are unsatisfactory, nevertheless maintain the fabric of family life and support and bring up their children with an average degree of success. None of these three factors alone will serve, therefore, as a fundamental causation unit in desertion. Many statistical attempts have been made to study the causes of desertion, and to assign to each its mathematical percentage of influence. The report of a court of domestic relations gives

such an analysis of over 1,500 cases, listing 25 causes, and carefully calculating the percentage of cases due to each. A summary of these percentages grouped under five heads is as follows:

	<i>Percentage</i>
1. Distinct sex factors	39.03
2. Alcohol and narcotic drugs	37.00
3. Temperamental traits	15.40
4. Economic issues	6.27
5. Mental and physical troubles	2.30
	— — —
	100.00

It would be easy to criticize the foregoing on the score of grouping. Can alcoholism and drug addiction be separated from mental and physical disorders? And how distinguish infallibly between sex factors, temperamental traits, and mental disabilities? But the main defect in such statistical studies is that they assume in each case one cause, or at least one cause sufficiently dominant to dwarf the rest; and few of the causes listed are really fundamental. The mind instinctively begins to reach back after the causes of all these causes. The social worker who made the sweeping assertion that there are two great reasons for marital discord—"selfishness in men and peevishness in women,"—came a good deal nearer to an accurate statement of fact with infinitely less trouble.

Looked at from the point of view of the social worker, desertion is itself only a symptom of some more deeply seated trouble in the family structure. The problem presented, if it could have been recognized in time, is not essentially different from what it would have been before the man's departure. Without attempting, therefore, any statistical analysis of the causes of desertion, we may nevertheless be able to examine one by one a number of possible *contributory factors* in marital unhappiness and therefore in desertion. No attempt will be made in the list that follows to distinguish between primary and secondary causes, nor to arrange them in any order of

importance. An effort to get from case workers lists so arranged resulted only in confusion, each person emphasizing a different set of factors. The groupings here given, therefore, are no more than a placing of the more obviously related factors together and a leading from past history up to the present.

Considering first the personal as distinguished from the community factors in desertion, these may be listed as follows:

CONTRIBUTORY FACTORS IN THE MAN AND WOMAN

1. Actual Mental Deficiency.—Character weaknesses such as were spoken of earlier in this chapter grade down by degrees into real mental defect or disorder, and not even the psychiatrist can always draw the line.

A physician connected with the Municipal Court in Boston gives as his opinion that while the percentage of actually insane or feeble-minded among deserters is no higher than among other offenders they are extremely likely to present some of the phenomena of psychopathic personality. Such people have to be studied by the social worker and the psychiatrist, and not from the behavior side only, but with a view to discovering what sort of equipment for life was handed down to them from their family stock.

The plan for the future of a fifteen-year-old boy which was made by a society for family social work was markedly modified when it was discovered that not only his father but his grandfather had been a man of violent and abusive temper, who drank habitually and neglected their family obligations. With this sort of heredity and an ineffective mother, whom he was accustomed to seeing treated with abuse and disrespect, it was felt important to remove the boy, who showed some promise, to surroundings where he could be under firm discipline and learn decent standards of family life.

Feeble-mindedness, closely connected as it usually is with industrial inefficiency in the man, bad housekeeping in the woman, and lack of self-control in both, is of course, a potent factor in non-support and probably also in desertion.

2. Faults in Early Training.—To low ideals of home life and of personal obligation, which were imbibed in youth, can be traced much family irresponsibility. It is by no means the rule, however, for children always to follow in the footsteps of weak or vicious parents; and it is the experience of social workers that such children, taught by observation to avoid the faults seen in their own homes, often make good parents themselves. Perhaps even more insidious in its effect on later marital history is the home in which no self-control is learned. The so-called "good homes" in which children are exposed to petting, coddling, and overindulgence—and these homes are not confined to the wealthy—produce adults who do not stand up to their responsibilities. A probation officer in Philadelphia tells of the mother of a young deserter who could not account for her son's delinquency. "He *ought* to be a good boy," she complained; "I carried him up to bed myself every night till he was eleven years old."

3. Differences in Background.—Even though both man and wife come from good homes, if those homes are widely different in standards and in cultural background strains may develop in later life between the couple. Differences in race, religion and age are recognized as having a causative relation to desertion. Miss Brandt [9] found that, in about 28 per cent of the cases where these facts were ascertained, the husband and wife were of different nationality. "In the general population of the United States in 1900 only 8.5 per cent was of mixed parentage, and for New York City the proportion was less than 13 per cent.... A difference in nationality was more than twice as frequent among the cases of desertion as among the general population of the city where it is most common." Miss Brandt's figures for difference of religion are less significant, but it existed in 19 per cent of the total number of cases for which information on this point was available. In 27 per cent of the families where age-facts were learned, there were differences of over six years between the two; in 15 per cent the woman was older than the man.