

Chapter Two THE FAMILY

Marriage and Natural Law

“The primary cause of the anarchy that divides society,” the savant began, “is the dismemberment of the family. Before societies were constituted as States, the family was the nucleus around which the generations were successively grouped. Composed of members issuing from the same origin, the same ancestor, having the same worship and the same tomb, the family was a sacred line, which it was sacrilege to break.

“Human ambition had not yet invented politics. Every family governed itself according to its own laws, and recognized no other authority than that of its own patriarch. The insolence of strangers did not cause offense within its customs. Religion was its base, and that religion, which belonged to it alone, informed it with the sentiment of fraternity in regard to others and respect in regard to its chief, the depository of all political, moral and religious power.

“After his death, that family chief became a protective divinity whom posterior generations invoked, with the certainty that he would assist them in their joys as in their difficulties. Superstition in wellbeing is a barrier to the baser human instincts, which are better governed by prejudice than by force. Humans recoil before the dread of the unknown.

“Soon, isolated and independent families felt the need to come together; they were organized into groups, then into tribes, and finally into nations, while conserving their primitive subdivisions. It was then that, envy taking hold of everyone, the religious sentiment that united people weakened over time, and the strongest imposed themselves on the weak. That discord, bursting forth in the bosom of the family, engendered war. War set the weak conclusively beneath the yoke of the strong, and the fragmented family established the State. That was the product of patriarchal life.

“As the centuries went by, the bonds of association broke and egoism proclaimed individual liberty.

“So long as the family was assembled in a cluster, it lived peacefully and happily; it was strong in its unity, because it enclosed within itself all the necessary elements of life. From the day when each member was freed from its laws, society, broken at its base, followed the current of the passions.

“Previously-unknown needs made themselves felt; wealth, held in common until then, was divided and became the source of constant jealousy. Power was the prey of the most audacious,

“Man was created with one objective: relative perfection. Without that objective, there is no reason for being, and the Creator’s work is regulated with too much intelligence for futility within nature to be conceivable. Futility, the fruit of human idleness, is the stigma of his imperfection. It is in progress that we lend ourselves gradually to the objective of human life. A long time will pass before we are permitted to attain it. Human beings can only be purified in the course of a succession of centuries. They are obviously born better than they are today, but, yielding to the penchants of their free will, often enjoying impunity in this world, they have been emboldened in evil and have deviated from the simple and straight path that their conscience, the reflection of a Supreme Being, has clearly traced for them. Life has therefore become an ordeal for them.

“There will, however, come an epoch of reaction, in which the comparison of good and evil, the series of deceptions through which they will have passed, will return them fatally to their primitive state—with the difference, however, that what existed in them to begin with in the form of instinct will be the result of the maturity of their immortal souls. They will reenter eternity happily, as they emerged from it, as perfect as they were meant to be. The future will therefore reconstitute the family.

“For the same reason that humans have declared themselves strangers to one another, the bitterness of their egoism will reunite them again. That is the work of progress.”

“What about Creation?” the Marquise interjected.

“Let us take things in order,” the savant went on, pitilessly. “Everything in its turn. When I get to metaphysics, I shall talk to you about Creation, within the limit of my conceptions.”

This was no longer Monsieur Landet, the diplomat of ambiguities, the political equilibrist, whom one wit had nicknamed “the comfortable sofa-bed of politics,” the man of the world amiable to the point of insipidity. Transfigured, the savant had become curt and incisive.

“Don’t be astonished at the change that has taken place in Monsieur Landet’s manner,” the magnetizer observed. “A man in the power of magnetism loses the urbanity acquired by education; he abruptly sets aside everything that deflects him from his enterprise. It’s better to avoid questions; they will confuse his ideas and injure the lucidity of his double vision.”

“I can see the world in 2000 years,” Monsieur Landet continued. “The age of iron and the age of silver have passed; the age of gold is on the way back. Humans, instructed by the experience of the centuries that have gone by, have discarded their envelope of egoism. They have come together again; the general interest has succeeded individual interest; the family circle has tightened again. That immense progress has brought back mutual confidence.

“No more suspicion, no more ulterior motives, no more fraud; everyone, sensing himself to be honest, assesses others according to his own aspirations. It is rare for any dispute to recall the judges to their post and reawaken laws from their torpor. Justice has shut down and, fortunately for humanity, judges do not work by reason of their appointment.

“How little resemblance modern Paris bears to the Paris I have before my eyes! Everywhere, activity, work, joy. No more hazardous speculations; utility, always utility. If fortunes have not been leveled out, however, it is because the problem of compensation is insoluble down here; necessity itself is not felt in equal proportion by all human beings. Envy, that needle envenoming passions, has, if not deserted at least considerably neglected the human mind. The finger is pointed at rebels against progressive perfection; they are counted.

“I shall only occupy myself with intelligent Paris, with moral Paris. What good would it do to describe the marvels I am contemplating? You can divine them as well as I can. What is the point of telling you that the streets are lit by electricity, that machines are also powered by electricity, by the force of the wind or the heat of the sun; that balloons have replaced omnibuses, that locomobile carriages have succeeded vehicles drawn by horses, and that submarine vessels are plowing the depths of the seas while hulled vessels are plowing their surface?

“There are as many improvements as modern industry allows us to suppose, and about which I shall tell you when the time comes. Walls are still walls. There is, therefore, no interest in pausing over details that add nothing for the intellect or the heart. Besides, in matters of comfort, is not the present century the last word? As for nature, it only transforms its bark into another bark of the same sort.

“I’m passing through a crowd of busy people going to their occupations or chatting about matters of general interest, trying to improve themselves by communicating the various particularities of their intelligence. I’m going into a building, which seems to me the most appropriate one to bring out the advantages of this peaceful and laborious life.

“The family is gathered around the hearth. It’s evening. The children are playing games in a corner, which are already awakening in their souls the idea of work in an agreeable form. The parents and grandparents are conversing about current events, but they hardly mention politics. It’s a gentle, easy discussion, devoid of acidity. Why should they be dogged in defending their opinions when no partisan hatred divides them? For a long time now, individual ambition has been considered a crime, and people govern themselves by themselves, employing people of their choice for that purpose. A nation without rules eats itself away; leaders are still necessary, in accordance with the fable of ‘The Limbs and the Stomach,’¹ but the leaders are not exempt from the permanent control of those who have appointed them to protect their interests.”

At this point, Monsieur Landet began to smile.

“They are talking about our epoch,” he continued, “and are not sparing us. They consider us to be barbarians, effeminates and bandits. To judge by what I hear, tradition has exaggerated historical truth somewhat. Has it not been the same in all times? The future, grafted on to the past, judges according to its constitution.

“It’s strange: the word ‘money,’ which, in our day, is the motive of all intelligence, the practical emblem of power, has not been pronounced. People make it in order to live, and to help others in need,

¹ The fable in question is attributed to Aesop.

not to become rich. The only luxury that they permit themselves is necessity in a larger measure. Whence comes this indifference to superfluity? From its abuse. It's very true that extremes connect. Humans having reached the ultimate degree of their moral degradation, have turned back on themselves; they reflected on the result of their easy pleasures, and, disgusted, risked a different path. The happiness that they had pursued for so long, which followed them like their shadow, has appeared to them in all its simplicity. They found close at hand what they had sought far and wide. Luxury and debauchery have been a school for them, whose severe instruction they have appreciated. In a word, they have learned to be content with the bounty of nature, the source of true felicity in this world."

"Then you see humankind perfected?" said the Marquise

"Perfected is not the word," the savant replied. "Perfection only belongs to the Creator, the principle of all things. Created beings cannot elevate themselves to the level of their maker. The imperfect cannot conceive the perfect, Saint Anselm says,² because the perfect implies the idea of infinity, and infinity surpasses the bounds of human intelligence, which only has an intuition of it by virtue of the divine imprint engraved in the soul. The human beings I am describing for you have not yet reached their highest level of relative perfection. They are approaching that goal, but many centuries will elapse before the Supreme Being deems their mission accomplished."

"And how long still separates them from that end?" the Marquise put in.

"There are things that ought not to be investigated, Madame," the savant replied, severely. "If I wished to fathom the secrets of destiny, I could not do it. I can only reason from hypotheses. Besides, we'll talk about it when the time comes. Have the patience to wait, Madame—that's all I ask of you."

For the second time, the Marquise pinched her lips.

"I warned you, Madame," Hobson objected. "In the best interests of this communication, it's preferable to let the somnambulistic subject follow his own train of thought."

"A young man is coming into the family living-room," Monsieur Landet continued. "It's the daughter's fiancé. He's been waiting for two years. Don't be astonished by that delay. The prudent custom of betrothal, lost by us, has resumed its ancient right. Today, it's not hearts that are allied, but matching fortunes. Marriages are concluded in haste, for fear that some unforeseen incident might occur to break the ongoing negotiations. Everyone fears the devaluation of his merchandise.

"It's not the same here; marriages of convenience have fallen into disuse; the happiness obtained from the intimate union of souls is considered more noble than the aggregation of fortunes—but before fusing two individuals in a common existence, they wish to be sure that their natures are compatible, and their souls suitable for combination.

"What is more painful in a household, after all, than two characters in incessant conflict? Youth passes over this discord when the attraction of material pleasure furnishes a sufficient compensation, but on the day when age paralyzes those relations, nothing remains in confrontation but the antipathy of two opposed characters—an antipathy increased by daily contact—and when a shared caprice no longer balances out the dissonance of souls, hatred quickly succeeds antipathy.

"That is why our descendants have returned to the ancient custom of engagement. They only give their children after having studied a suitor profoundly. That study, in order to be scrupulous, requires at least two years. A man who is strong enough to conceal his weaknesses for six months cannot hide the chinks in his armor for two years. These engagements are, therefore, the public consecration of a pledge given on both sides.

"However, as the objective of life is only accomplished by the union of two souls, the serious question of physical aptitude is not neglected. Sparta, whose far-sighted laws we hold up to ridicule, owed its strength to them for as long as its vigor lasted. It ordered that only those individuals recognized as being appropriate to fulfill the duties of marriage be coupled. Our descendants, searching ancient constitutions and collecting what was best from them, have exhumed that forgotten law. It is thus that future centuries will finish off the work of past centuries.

"Humans, as created beings, must employ the sources of life that they bear within them for the reproduction of their species. To dissipate such a precious deposit in futile pleasures is an act of the utmost ingratitude toward the Creator, whose confidence it betrays. It is a sort of misappropriation, prejudicial to humanity. The people of early times, according to the calculations of science, were more

² In the *Proslogium* (1077-78), which sets out the most comprehensive version of the ontological argument for the existence of God.

solidly built and much taller than those of the present day, but the social gangrene of debauchery, corruption, abuse, exhausting the generative principle, have diminished humankind over time; the further we go, the more diminished we are.

“What has enabled the English aristocracy to remain so beautiful and so vigorous is that it has been able to reserve itself for marriage, and has only married within itself. The French aristocracy, by contrast, so strong and powerful in the Middle Ages, has debased itself and bastardized itself by misalliances, and even more so by the scandalous excesses of the reigns of François I, Henri II, Louis XIV and Louis XV, to such a point that the people, ashamed of bowing down before such despicable masters, have shaken off the yoke and proclaimed their independence.

“We are going through an awkward period at present. Society, badly shaken in 1789, has not yet broken with tradition; it is not sufficiently solidly constituted to enjoy its conquest. Accustomed to submit to those whom, in good faith, people believe to be above them, society allows its sage resolutions to be blocked by ancient errors. On the day when it has cast down the ambitious men who undermine it, its work will bear fruit.

“As I said before, there is nothing in creation that resembles a beginning so much as an end. If human morality were to regain its point of departure, human physique would also recover its primitive vigor. Excess has debased it; sobriety will re-elevate it, and generations to come will benefit progressively from the convalescence of their forebears.

“The people of the milieu in which I find myself have already profited from that amelioration. Hideous maladies do not carry them off before old age; they are almost all born healthy and well-built; they die of old age. Disease is the result of human depravity. Medicine has therefore become a sinecure. The lifespan has been extended, the death that youth is spared only strikes before its time by accident. The mean lifespan is fixed at 80 years; people often surpass 100.

“That is not to say that there are no exceptions. The wounds of vice, although much reduced, are not entirely scarred over. Nature itself, unequal in its distributions, does not accord all its privileges to everyone. It disgraces hunchbacks physically but compensates for its negligence by giving them a strong dose of intelligence, and *vice versa*. Then again, the Creator has conserved rights over humans that He has not revealed to us. The retarded minds and abortive beings that I distinguish in this regenerated world do not exist without a reason. Their contrast stimulates other people; their moral inferiority is proof that their time of expiation is less advanced and that they will pass through many more incarnations before their sins are completely effaced.

“In contrast to our era, the majority holds sway. In anticipation of exceptions society has elaborated laws full of wisdom, and, among others, stipulates an examining committee formed of members of two families, with matching numbers of men and women, assisted by a government inspector. This committee is responsible for establishing, in view of marriage, the physical aptitudes of the future spouses. No more secret affections, consequences of irregular conduct, which are only revealed when the most important of life’s actions has been accomplished! The young man and the young woman are subjected by the competent commission to a minute inspection, and when they are declared fit for the duties of marriage, the engagement begins.

“In marrying their children, the parents are working to ensure the work of generation. Any other consideration would seem monstrous to them. No importance is attached to love if it is devoid of utility, even less to fortune; everyone’s work is sufficient for them; they only make use of that of others, without preference, in order to assist one another to live; there is no unemployment. Protective law appoints suppliers for everyone, organized by a supervising council. It thus regulates the provenance of resources and makes the accumulation of disproportionate fortunes impossible.

“The aspirant spouse who is deemed inappropriate for marriage by the examining committee is condemned to celibacy. He is permitted, however, by way of compensation, to espouse a woman afflicted by the same ostracism, on condition that they adopt a young orphan. Both devoid of utility, they are, at least, good for bring up poor individuals deprived of their parents and educating them in the duties of life.

“A man, once married, is the master of his household; he has the upper hand in all things, but he has enough common sense to leave domestic sovereignty to his wife and to content himself with the role of provider for the family. Nearly 4500 years before the epoch of which I speak, a man of superior merit—Xenophon, a disciple of Socrates—drew up an admirable plan for household life in his treatise on *Economics*. And, surprisingly for that time, if one considers that the ancients placed their wives at

the rank of servants or household utensils, the husband he places center stage elevates his own to his own level. He treats her as an equal and informs her of the first principles of order, the bases of domestic economy:

““Nothing, my wife—the most beautiful in the world—is more useful than order. A choir is a union of individuals; were each one to sing the part that pleased him, what a disagreeable confusion there would be for the audience! But when all are carrying out the prescribed measures and singing in harmony, what charm there is for the ears and eyes alike!

““It is the same with an army; if all its components behave independently—donkeys, hoplites, light troops, baggage-carts, cavalry, chariots—everything will be in disorder; hence, universal confusion and all service become impossible, with dishonor assured and victory certain for the enemy. In any maneuver carried out, everything gets mixed up; runners are impeded by marchers, those in ranks by runners, horsemen by chariot, chariots by mules, hoplites by baggage-carts. How can a battle be fought in the midst of such chaos? Those who are constrained to flee the enemy that is coming at them inevitably collide with armed men in their flight.

““By contrast, what is more beautiful than a well-organized army? What enemy will not tremble, on seeing hoplites, cavaliers, peltasts, archers and pikemen all distributed in distinct bodies following their officers? I believe that I form an accurate idea of the confusion when I imagine a laborer heaping barley, cheese and legumes together in the same store-room, and then being obliged, if he wants pastry, bread or a plate of vegetables, to make a triage in order to find what he needs

““Spare yourself such confusion, my wife; will you please administer our house in such a way that, if I ask for something, you can find what is necessary, and offer it to me easily? Let us try to put everything in a suitable place. That triage once made, my wife, regard yourself as the preserver of the law in our household. Like the commandant of a garrison inspecting his troops, or the Athenian Council its horses and cavaliers, proceed, when you deem it necessary, to inspect our furniture, to see whether the items are sound. A queen in your house, use all your power to honor and praise whosoever merits it, to reprimand and chastise those who provoke your severity.’³

“To describe the duties of the wife in the household, I do not believe I can do better than borrow that sublime passage from Xenophon. He was the first to make woman the companion of man, at a time when she was merely a machine indispensable to reproduction. That profound thinker was certainly ahead of his time. Who knows whether the Supreme Being might send beings superior to their contemporaries among us in order to activate, thanks to their genius, the march of Progress?

³ The author adds a footnote here crediting this quotation to chapters VIII and IX of Xenophon’s *Economics*.