

Paris as the New Reno

By LAURENCE HILLS.

PARIS, the French "Reno," with its divorce mill turning at full speed under the guidance of a Franco-American clique of divorce lawyers, for the benefit of wealthy Americans who fail to find conjugal happiness, is fast developing into a scandal of astounding proportions. Respectable society folk of the Continent are aghast at the simplicity of obtaining a French divorce. "Painless and silent," one legal expert facetiously terms it, and with the exception of a bit of gossip when decrees are finally handed down, the filthiest of family linen, thanks to the power of American dollars, remains effectively hidden from the world. While this may be desirable from the viewpoint of the family itself, it has the effect of sending the guilty party in a divorce back into the social world without a smudge on his character to warn his or her fellows. Moralists, headed by the French clergy and not a few of the lawyers who do not specialize in divorces, are renewing their efforts for a radical revision of the French divorce laws and the system of secrecy which may eventually result in American millionaires seeking a new Reno in their own country.

There are perhaps a score of American lawyers now in Paris, and of these not more than a half dozen offices specialize in divorces. The remainder, anxious to get their finger into the millionaire pudding and pull out some of the richest plums, never lose an opportunity for an introduction to wealthy American tourists who have been rumored as possible divorce seekers. But their efforts are usually in vain, for the inner circle is controlled from America, and built up on an endless chain basis whereby a successful divorcee is pledged to tell her closest friends of the exquisite secrecy which Mr. Etcetera was able to obtain during her trying experience. As a matter of fact, the credit is due entirely to the divorce parties' American checkbook, as in minor divorce suits, not of interest to the general public, details are easily obtainable; it is only in the case of highly placed American applicants, employing a whole staff of American and French attorneys, that the legal procedure is kept veiled until weeks after the judgment has been rendered, and then entered in the official records in a garbled form.

Of course, the conditions of French law are all met, but the significant fact is that court officials are not so strict regarding secrecy of routine save in the case of American applicants brought before them by members of the "legal clique," and numerous French lawyers are beginning to ask "Who is getting the dollars—and what is the tariff?"

Reno, with merely its compulsory period of residence, never was able to develop absolute secrecy. That is why the American society woman or her husband has turned to Paris. It is interesting to follow the routine of a French divorce as revealing the possibility that many boasting of the French mill's "silent justice" may not have the absolute angel-like character that is gratuitously given to successful plaintiffs. For instance, certain counter charges, although virtually admitted in court, may be overbalanced by the defendant openly resuming marital relations with the plaintiff. For, after all, that is the gravest injury which the Paris judges seem to conceive possible.

First, it is necessary for the applying party to establish residence in Paris. This may be done by merely renting an apartment for a year, even if it is to be occupied less than half the time while the social divorcee is hitting the high spots of the Channel resorts, the Riviera or Biarritz, with an occasional week at Aix-les-Bains or in the Swiss Alps. Of course, it is better when the husband also takes a separate apartment in Paris, as he must, in most cases, appear at least once for a more or less humorous meeting in the Judge's Chambers for what the French call "an effort of reconciliation." This apartment renting is the first link in the chain of dollar spending, for concierges in the social quarters of Paris have a knack of "smelling out" divorce seeking clients. Some are even said to keep a number of lawyers' cards ready in case their services may be useful. But the average American has her choice well fixed before he or she arrives in the French capital. The husband defendant in some cases is known to guarantee his wife's lawyer's bill in advance.

The American lawyer selected, the attempt at secrecy commences. He is called to her apartment so that office employees may not know all the details. Notes are

carefully sealed, and a liberal supply of dollars is demanded—to be used in retaining a capable French advocate, for the American lawyer himself does not plead in any of the ten tribunals hearing divorce suits. The French lawyer thereafter does most of the work—and woe be to the divorce expert who happens to slip a cog and let the details of a case become known to the public! The complaint is drawn up much as in the United States, with the exception that the charges are made as severe as possible, whether true or not, to satisfy the qualms of the judge as to the propriety of interfering with the sacred bonds of marriage. But here occurs the first vital difference as compared with the American code—the complaint is not a public document. The French court considers that everything possible must be done to avoid divorce and leaves the way open until the very last minute for the case to be amended or withdrawn without a public record. The complaint is merely handed to the Judge, frequently in his private offices, and arrangements are made for the summons to be issued. If a detective is ready to give evidence as to the husband's wrongdoings so much the better—the court's judicial honor is all the more insured against criticism. But this does not mean that the detective's story will be included in the official judgment when handed down—not at all, as that would interfere with the system of secrecy and the ring of Franco-American divorce hounds would find their clientele steadily diminishing.

And then comes the most pathetic incident in this effort at silence! The court pleads—sometimes the act is spread over three sessions—that the couple make up their differences. Sitting *tete-a-tete*, each tells a story of hardships, injustice, infidelities, &c., until the judge is finally assured that the reconciliation is not even devoutly to be wished. These meetings are fixed for anywhere from three weeks to three months from the filing of the original complaint. There is no docket to attract the attention of the curious. Frequently the husband, if he is unwise enough to try to talk the divorce "ring" by a series of counter charges, attends with an "avoué"—or embryonic legal adviser. This in most cases merely delays the final decision, and as the French judge has his traditionally national sympathy for a woman



Photo by Ira L. Hill.

Mrs. Milton Graves, formerly Mrs. Robert Graves.

in distress, alleged or otherwise, the result is the same—a verdict for the woman.

But in most cases the husband merely attends, listens to what is said, repeats what he has been instructed to say, "that under no circumstances is a return to marriage life possible," and walks out, while stage tears of satisfaction coursing down cheeks already paled by the latest Rue de la Paix powder convince the judge that here is a case which well merits his sympathy and favorable decision. In other cases the husband even does not attend, merely declaring in the presence of a bailiff who has been sent to escort him before the "effort of reconciliation" that there is no use in such a procedure; his mind is made up and it is "quits forever." The effect is the same, and the men who provide the grist for the divorce mill chuckle quietly and await the final chapter, knowing well that no clerk of the court would dare to reveal the contents of the official process-verbal of the faked "effort to reconcile." The court itself notifies the plaintiff's lawyer that everything is all right and that if the husband does not change his mind within a given period, usually sixty days, and thereby upset the whole system of secrecy, the divorce will be finally adjudicated. It may be said for the constance of American husbands that their "no" remains definitely negative—and the plaintiff has her way, at a considerable expense, for each of the filings, issuing of summons, reconciliation meetings, private counsels to the lawyers on both sides, spells more expenditure, the legal ring insisting this is necessary if the magic silence is not to be disturbed. Apparently in French cases this is not so customary, at least the funds do not reach to the clerks' offices, for it is comparatively simple to get a clerk to talk about an unimportant but risqué divorce action among his own compatriots, but just mention an American case and the reply is, immediately, "*Monsieur, ici on n'en sait rien!*"

But the court insists on secrecy even up to the day of the final hearing, which really isn't a hearing at all, for in many cases the plaintiff, certain that the defendant has no intention of opposing the divorce in open court, takes passage back to her home town in the U. S. A. and waits for the storm of gossip to break. When

Continued on Page Eleven.



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Mrs. B. Benjamin Pratt, formerly Mrs. Preston Gibson.