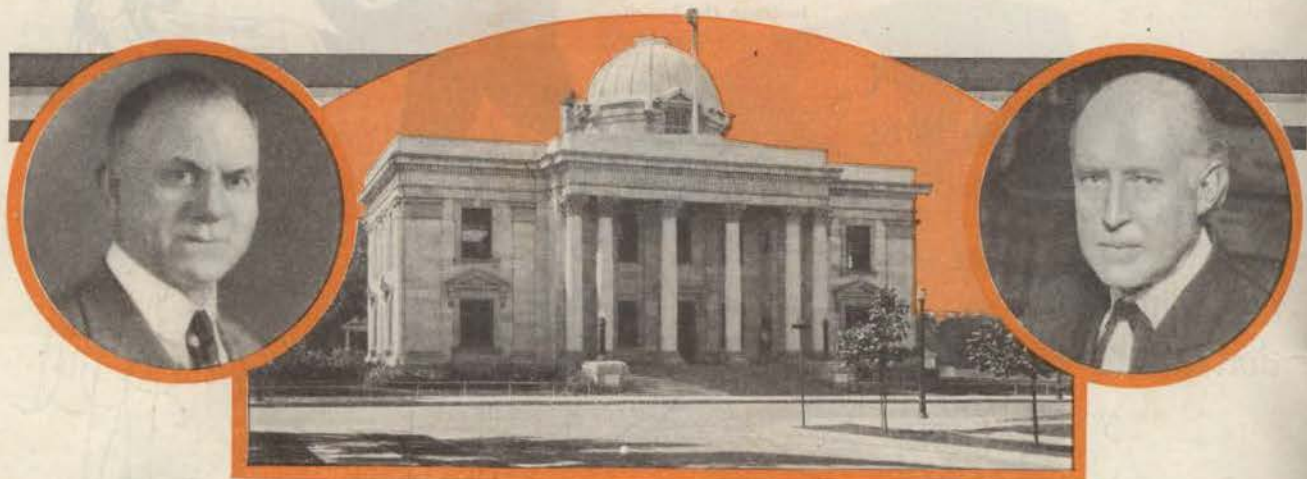


MARY B. MULLETT

tells the truth about



IT WAS night when I arrived at Reno. It was night when I left. In between, there were days and days of unbroken sunshine. Yet, in spite of all the beauty of the town and the culture and charm of its inhabitants, my memories of that sojourn are as somber as the darkness in which I came and left.

Almost the first thing I saw there was an electrically lighted arch. Across the busy main street it flung its proud boast: "The Biggest Little City in the World."

That was the first of many paradoxes I had to assimilate during my visit. For Reno, the City of Easy Divorces, is also the City of Strange Contrasts.

With only about 18,000 inhabitants, it is the largest town in Nevada. But it is built on broken homes and shattered hopes. It is a thriving community with lovely homes and delightful people. But its prosperity is nourished by tragedy.

Its people, to the superficial observer, seem to lead a sane and normal existence. Yet, to a large extent, that existence depends on their tolerating and even exploiting a booming traffic in marital misfits and infidelities.

The town has been made beautiful, largely as a bait for divorce seekers. They spend three or four million dollars a year in Reno. The citizens despise the goose which lays this golden egg; but apparently they have no idea of killing it off.

"Wouldn't it be a good thing," I said to a prominent Reno attorney, "if there were uniform divorce laws throughout the United States?"

"Well—yes—I suppose so," he admitted. "But it would mean simply assassination for *this town*."

I talked with dozens of persons in Reno. And not one of them said that he, or she, wanted the divorce business to go. They know it is their bread and butter.

In Reno, last year, 2,071 divorces were

granted and 35 other marriages were annulled. They call this the "divorce industry;" sometimes the "divorce business." One man casually referred to it as the "divorce trade."

During the past two years, there have been 16 divorces for every 100 marriages in the country. It is an appalling condition; and the Reno "divorce trade" is partly responsible for it—because Reno has done its best to make divorce-getting as easy, as cheap, and as agreeable as possible.

Prior to 1913 the Nevada laws required a residence of six months before suit for divorce could be filed. Then the statute was changed, and one year of residence was required. But this caused such a slump in the local divorce industry that the six-months clause was soon restored.

After that, the business grew steadily but not sensationally. Moreover, there was competition. Paris was getting a good deal of the divorce trade. Mexico and Yucatan were prepared to accommodate. It was rumored that Montana and a few other states were going to pass a six-months law. Something had to be done to hold the market.

FOUR years ago, in the closing hours of the legislature, when the final grist of bills was rushed through, Assembly Bill No. 195 was passed. I was told that so far as most of the legislators knew, the bill simply added insanity to the list of causes for which a divorce can be obtained in Nevada. But, somewhere in its progress through committee-rooms, another little clause had been slipped into the bill. And the following morning, to the surprise of many of the legislators, they found they had passed a bill which changed the six-months residence requirement to one of only three months.

For a while there was a great hue and cry. I heard echoes of it even at this late date, but they were pretty faint. The jingle of dollars, which the divorce industry brings to Reno, has drowned them out.

JUST to give you an idea of what the divorce business means to the town's other business: Imagine a place of that size with 47 hotels and 37 apartment houses! It has 35 beauty parlors; 30 dentists; 43 physicians; 14 candy shops; 25 cleaners and dyers; 30 restaurants; 2 riding academies; 150 auto agencies, service stations, accessory dealers, and garages; 6 billiard parlors; and about 120 lawyers.

I compared these figures with those for an Iowa town somewhat larger than Reno. The larger town had only 5 hotels; 20 lawyers; 7 cleaners and dyers; 12 beauty parlors; 17 dentists; and so on throughout the list.

This difference can be explained in a single phrase: Easy divorce! Without the divorce business, thousands of Renonians would have to go elsewhere to make a living.

The divorce colony consists, at any one time, of about 1,000 persons, about 700 of these being actually divorce seekers, the remainder of them being relatives, friends, or servants who have accompanied the principal actors in the drama. Most of the divorce seekers are well-to-do—chiefly rich Easterners. On an average they have been married about ten years. Two thirds of them are women.

Those who can afford it rent a house or an apartment, or live at the Riverside, a modern hotel, conveniently located right next door to the courthouse. I stayed at the Riverside myself, observed many of the divorcees, and came to know some of them.

They were like a bunch of college

RENO

ILLUSTRATED BY
T. D. SKIDMORE

At the left is the Washoe County Courthouse, with District Judges Thomas F. Moran (left) and George A. Bartlett. Here more than 2,000 divorces were granted last year.



girls: visiting one another's rooms in pajama suits and kimonos, having tea or chocolate together, playing bridge together, and as chipper as the traditional cricket.

At least on the surface; but you soon learn that in Reno you must look beneath the surface to find the truth. I saw a few sad faces.

But hang around the courthouse and you see nothing but smiles, hear nothing but congratulations. I wondered if the smiles aren't a bluff.

I was talking with the Reverend Brewster Adams, pastor of the Baptist Church in Reno.

"In this town," I said, "divorce seems to be regarded as a flippant joke."

He shook his head sadly.

"It is no joke!" he said. "It is tragedy. On the surface, it looks as if neither heart nor conscience is involved. All that the public hears is the echo of wild drinking parties, gambling, reckless living. The recklessness is just one symptom of the abandonment of old ties and old standards. Half the time, the wild parties are only an attempt to forget. Women, seeking a divorce, come to me and tell me the actual truth. They don't tell it to their lawyers or to the judge, or even to their friends. But I see them drop the mask. And what I see is stark tragedy."

Between Reno and Virginia City there is a famous mountain road called

the Geiger Grade. I took this ride with a man who had driven for numerous divorcees; and he showed me a point where, on separate occasions, women, waving their divorce decrees aloft, had thrown their wedding rings over the precipice.

Through the heart of Reno runs the Truckee River, straight from the high purity of the Sierras. Under the beautiful concrete bridges it rushes madly along, as if it were trying to sweep away all the sordid tragedies of the town. Women, coming from the courthouse close by, stand on one particular bridge and throw their once cherished wedding rings into the stream. It seemed to me a mean trick to play on that kind of river.

I asked the judges and various lawyers in Reno what is the root of this growing divorce tragedy and what is the remedy.

Several of them claimed it is partly to be explained by the growing economic independence of woman. Formerly, if a wife had a husband who didn't suit her, she stayed married to him, nevertheless, because she couldn't see any other means of support. Nowadays, according to this theory, she quits him and gets a job.

This is probably true in some cases. But most of the Reno divorcees are not looking for a job. They are looking for another husband! And something like seven hundred husbands go there every year intending to get another wife.

"What about these cases?" I asked.

MOST of the answers I received were the usual flippant cynicisms. But from Patrick McCarran, universally known as "Pat" McCarran, I got a different sort of reply. In the course of his career he has acted as attorney in many divorce cases. He is a quiet gentleman with a genial smile. But there was no trace of a smile on his face when I asked him what makes so many marriages go wrong.

"I believe," he said soberly, "it all goes back to the question of early training. Two young people get married. If both of them have been brought up with a proper sense of their responsibility to others—of the obligation on them to do their own best, and to be considerate and kind in their dealings with others—you can be sure that couple is not headed toward a divorce court.

"If a girl with that kind of training marries a selfish and inconsiderate husband, or vice versa, that marriage may go on the rocks; for, more than any other kind of bargain, the marriage bargain needs two to make it a success.

"If neither of the parties in a marriage has been brought up to think of others with kindness and tolerance, their honeymoon is just as certain to be followed by a 'winter of discontent' as June is certain to be followed later by December.

"Another cause is hasty, impulsive marriages. And there you come to a vicious circle. Divorce is becoming easy and common—so easy and so common that people plunge into marriage, knowing that if they don't like what they get they can back out through the divorce courts. They get a divorce, plunge into another marriage, and are on their way to another divorce.

"If you know how to break this vicious circle, you know more than I do. But I do know it would help if parents would pay more attention to the old saying: 'Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.'"

I have mentioned the fact that there are thirty dentists and forty-three phy-

sicians in Reno. This is explained by the constant presence of divorce hunters and their friends with three months of idleness on their hands. Many of them seize the opportunity to have their teeth "fixed up." And as for the doctors—well, nothing is easier for an idle woman than to imagine she is sick. Anyway, it's always nice to confide one's troubles to a sympathetic medical ear.

Still, in spite of doctors, dentists, and the rest, the three-months sentence—a phrase current in the colony—seems long. A not uncommon ornament, in a divorcee's room, is a calendar. On it, a large cross marks the day when the prospective decree will be granted. And leading up to it is a procession of smaller crosses, each marking off one more day as it passes.

To help fill these drifting days some of the women take French lessons. One of my temporary Reno acquaintances told me she knew six women who, while taking what everybody calls "the cure," were taking also a secretarial course.

To the male seekers after divorce, the time seems even longer, a fact which sometimes causes resentment among the local people. For example, one man went into an office and offered to do a certain clerical job for fifty dollars a month. The Reno girl who had the job was getting one hundred and twenty-five dollars a month. Her employers let her go and took the outsider in. He didn't need the job. He was simply bored doing nothing.

GRAHAM SANFORD, editor of *The Reno Evening Gazette*, told me of one man who came to him, asked to mow the lawn, and was hired to do the work regularly. Mr. Sanford said to the man: "I beg your pardon, but you seem to me—well, above this sort of job. I should say you belong in some profession."

MISS MULLETT was sent to Reno by *THE AMERICAN MAGAZINE* to get the true story of the "City of Easy Divorces."

She talked with officials and residents of Reno, observed the life of the city and of its divorce colony, watched the divorce mill in action in the courtroom, chatted with judges, attorneys, and divorcees.

Here are the facts exactly as she found them. Many of them will surprise you, for they are revealed to the public for the first time by a skilled, open-minded reporter of long experience. THE EDITOR.

"That's a good guess," laughed the man. "At home in California I am a physician. But I want something to do while I'm here. I need outdoor exercise. So I am mowing your lawn and also several others."

Other men and a few women work, not from choice, but from necessity. Some get jobs on the highways, or as truck drivers. Some find work as waiters. A few lucky ones are hired as stenographers. Others do canvassing. One young man, the son of a former Cabinet member, peddled children's play tents.

THE most curious case was that of a woman who kept a little restaurant near my office," Mr. Sanford related. "I used to stop in there occasionally for hot cakes and coffee, but I knew nothing then about the woman herself. I barely noticed that she was a middle-aged person, very simply dressed.

"One morning she came here to see me. When I failed to recognize her, she said: 'You ought to know me. You've often eaten my hot cakes.'

"I remembered her then and asked what I could do for her.

"My name is Mrs. —," she said. "I am getting my divorce decree today, and I wanted to ask you if you will give it as little publicity as possible."

"Not long after she left, my court reporter came in, much excited.

"Who do you think is getting a decree today?" he demanded. "Mrs. —! The wife of the famous millionaire! She's giving a swell farewell dinner and leaves in her private car tonight. There's a big story in it."

"The wife—or ex-wife—of the famous millionaire was the very woman who had been running the little hot-cakes-and-coffee restaurant! Don't ask me why she did it. These people who come here for divorce do all kinds of things. I suspect that they are simply trying to keep from thinking."

That seems to be the general feeling in Reno. Many of the real Renonians said to me: "The men and women who come here for divorce are in an abnormal state of mind. They are here because they are breaking ties which once seemed sacred. Many of them are haunted by memories. Many are secretly ashamed of what they are doing. And, whether unhappy or ashamed, they don't want to think about it. So they abandon themselves to a feverish search for excitement."

"I came out here," an Ohio divorcee told me, "with the idea that, as I was to spend three months in the backwoods, it would be a fine chance for me to wear out my old clothes. But I found myself in a charming town, full of well-dressed people. I found other divorcees riding horseback, playing golf at the country club, going to card parties, dining, and dancing. I felt positively shabby; so I investigated the shops. To my surprise I discovered that I could get a complete



E. E. Roberts, Mayor of Reno, and one of the town's most active divorce lawyers. He claims a record of winning all but one of more than two thousand cases

wardrobe right here in town. And I did."

The children are the saddest feature of the Reno passing show. There were a dozen of them at the Riverside during my comparatively short stay. They played together under the trees, paddled in the water around the fountain in the grassy yard, laughed together, and also—as I happened to overhear one day—discussed together their respective domestic situations. I was told that almost every one of those children through divorces and remarriages, already had more than one father or mother. Some of them had a regular galaxy of three fathers!

No wonder most of them looked bewildered. And this puzzled look, in what should be the clear and confident eyes of a child, is the saddest of Reno's many paradoxes.

MOST Reno divorces are uncontested; and it takes just three months and a day to get one—three months to establish residence and one day to get the decree. The whole thing suggests a game of cards. Shuffle and deal again.

A year ago, in one of the two courtrooms, the wife of an Eastern banker was granted a divorce from her husband. Five minutes later, in the same room, a well-known author received a decree from his wife. The two went downstairs to the county clerk's office, procured a marriage license, returned to the upstairs room, and were joined in what we

used to call "the holy bonds of matrimony." And the entire business, two divorces and a wedding, was all over inside of half an hour!

One woman had three names in one day. She entered the courthouse as, let us say Mrs. Smith. Her divorce was granted and also her plea to resume her maiden name, Brown. But before the day was over she remarried and became Mrs. Jones.

Here is another example of how the merry-go-round works. Two women hid themselves to Reno to take "the cure." They went together. During the prescribed three months they lived together. When their decrees had been granted they returned home together, and each one married the other's ex-husband. The quartet had arranged the trade in advance.

In fact, nine out of ten of the suits filed have the consent of both parties. During the preliminary three-months period, details about property, alimony, and the custody of children—if there are any—are arranged. Then, when the case comes up before the judge, it is settled in a few minutes.

Four persons enter the judge's room: the plaintiff, his or her lawyer, the lawyer representing the defendant, and a witness. After the witness has testified that the plaintiff has resided in Reno, or at least in Washoe County, for three months, there are a few routine questions such as: "Where do you

live?" and "When were you married?"

The lawyer then gets down to the main point: the grounds for filing the suit. If his client is a woman—and twice as many women as men go to Reno—he asks her:

"What has been your husband's attitude?"

"He has been very cruel."

"How did he show this cruelty?"

"Well, he was very morose. Sometimes he wouldn't even speak to me."

"Did this affect your health?"

"Yes, it made me very nervous."

"You think your health would suffer if you continued to live with your husband?"

"Yes."

IF THE lawyer asks many more questions, the judge is likely to show signs of impatience. He knows that another case is due in five minutes!

One woman, when I was present, still continued to sit in her chair.

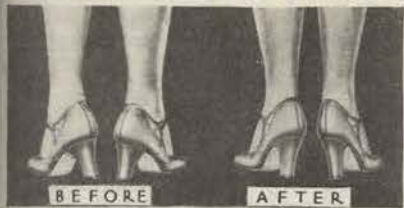
"That's all!" said the judge briskly.

"You can go now, Mrs. Blank. You're a free woman."

And the "free woman" got up, dazedly, and walked out. She had been married ten years. She was de-married in ten minutes.

The presence of the defendant's lawyer in court constitutes what is called a "personal appearance" on the part of the defendant. Sometimes no such "personal appearance" is (Continued on page 149)

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-Mechanical Engineer
-Steam Engineer
-Draftsman & Designer
-High School Graduate

Name.....Age.....
St. and No.....
Town.....State.....

The Truth About Reno

(Continued from page 29)

made and the case goes to the plaintiff by default.

Certain Reno attorneys admitted to me that these default decrees are dangerous. In some states a divorce is not legal unless the defendant has been present himself or has been represented by an attorney. Consequently, if the Reno case goes by default and if the defendant decides later to contest it, he or she may win the case. And if the plaintiff, meanwhile, has remarried, this remarriage turns out to be bigamy.

Apparently this prospect does not alarm many applicants, for on Mondays, the day when most of the default cases come up, the courts fairly hum with activity. Local people call it "divorce wash-day."

THE first Monday of my stay in Reno thirty-six divorces were granted in the two courts, presided over by Judge George A. Bartlett and Judge Thomas F. Moran. Late that afternoon I was talking with Mayor E. E. Roberts, who is also one of the most active of Reno's divorce lawyers.

"I made a record this morning," the Mayor proudly informed me. "In Judge Moran's court, I appeared for the plaintiff in six cases and represented the defendant in a seventh case. The seven cases were heard and the decrees granted inside of thirty minutes."

Except in special instances, Judge Moran hears his cases in open court and curiosity seekers can easily drift in; but Judge Bartlett, across the hall, hears most of his cases in his private room, or chambers. The private room is reached through the library and an anteroom. While one case is being heard by the judge, the little group concerned with the following case waits in the library. The next group is somewhere on the way. There is no congestion of traffic.

Strolling into the anteroom one Monday afternoon, I found a middle-aged woman waiting there alone.

"Just one divorce after another!" I said by way of starting a conversation.

"Yes," she replied genially. "Are you taking the cure yourself?"

"No," I said; and not to be outdone in politeness, I added: "Are you?"

"Not today," with a cheerful laugh. "My husband sued me and got a decree several months ago. But then he went off to California without paying the costs. He wants to make me pay them. But he filed the suit, and I think he ought to pay the bills. So the decree is being held up until one of us pays.

"I'm keeping a rooming-house now. That young fellow in there is getting a divorce because his wife hit him over the head with a loaf of bread. He rooms in my house and I came as his residence witness."

A few minutes later, the "young fellow" emerged from the judge's room. He was beaming. So was the middle-aged woman as she shook him by the hand and congratulated him. Except for the absence of a bride, you would have thought it was a wedding.

Under the Nevada statutes, divorce may



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(Above) The million-dollar "proving ground" of the Laundry Industry at Joliet, Illinois

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be obtained for any one of eight causes; but a single one of these causes, "extreme cruelty," furnishes more business than all the others put together. Spend a few days in a Reno divorce court and you will have enough novel definitions of "extreme cruelty" to fill a page in the dictionary.

One old man came up from Florida to take "the cure." As he was over eighty, he realized that he had not long to live. And he knew exactly where he wanted to be buried. It seems that his wife had another six feet of real estate in view for him. Once dead, he knew he couldn't get the better of her. So he went to Reno and divorced her on the ground of extreme cruelty, because she wouldn't let him choose his own burial place!

One divorce was granted in which the only evidence of extreme cruelty was trouble over the husband's necktie.

Another woman applied for a divorce because, when she had company, her husband, arrayed in pajamas, would stalk into the room, ostentatiously winding an alarm clock. He would place this on the mantel, and without a word stalk out again. She got her decree.

There are hundreds of cases where the evidence of cruelty is ridiculously trivial. The lawyers explain that in many of these cases the interested parties don't want to air their genuine troubles in court. They agree to hide them under the mask of "extreme cruelty." The judges accept this routine plea because to them it means simply that two people have agreed that their marriage is a failure.

THE one detail that seems all important is that of residence. You need no witness to corroborate your charge of cruelty. But you do have to produce a witness who will testify, under oath, that you have lived in Washoe County three months. Keepers of rooming-houses and of apartments patronized by divorce seekers pick up tidy sums by acting as residence witnesses for their tenants. So do maids and other domestic servants.

The usual fee for a witness is about ten dollars. A residence witness swears that he "saw the defendant every day for three months." His sworn statement may not be literally true. But no one questions it.

The plaintiff must testify that he, or she, came to Reno "intending to reside there." Sometimes people balk at this. But they are soon convinced that a person can "reside" in a place one month, or even only one day. When the case comes up, with trunks packed and railroad tickets in their pockets, they swear that they "reside" in Reno.

Before a case is tried in court, the lawyer and his client have a dress rehearsal, as they call it. The lawyer has written out the questions which will be asked and the answers which the client is to give. The rehearsal is intended to make the client letter-perfect, but a lawyer told me of a woman who almost lost her case because she slipped up on one answer.

"Where do you reside?" her attorney asked her at the trial.

To his dismay, she blithely replied, "Harmon on the Hudson."

That was her real home, and the truth popped out.

"One moment, madam!" interrupted the judge. "Where did you say you live?"

The woman instantly realized her slip

and suavely replied, "I said that I *did* live in Harmon on the Hudson. But I was about to add that I live in Reno now."

Her lawyer, who told me of the incident, glowed with admiration of her quickness. "Her case would have been thrown out in ten seconds," he said, "if she had repeated her mistake."

The alleged minimum fee of \$250 for a divorce is largely a myth. The big lawyers charge "whatever the traffic will bear." The little fellows charge whatever they can get—and sometimes that is as low as twenty-five or fifty dollars a case. One of the leading attorneys told me that his firm received \$200,000 for representing a millionaire who divorced his wife in order to marry another woman.

It is frankly admitted in Reno that most of the divorce suits are brought because one or both of the parties want to marry someone else. But the Renonians told me, with cynical laughter, how these well-laid plans sometimes go wrong. There was the case, for instance, of a wealthy woman who sued for divorce, expecting to marry a popular musical comedy tenor. Just as her decree was to be granted, the tenor married a stage dancer; and the newly divorced woman found herself with only a past husband and no future one in prospect.

Some people seem to get the Reno habit. They appear there, not only once, but two or three times. As the years go by, they will probably stretch this to four or five times. The Nevada courts are just as hospitable to old customers as to new ones.

The average age of the divorce seekers is around thirty. But Mayor Roberts told me he has had several clients who were in their eighties, the oldest being eighty-seven years old. All of these veterans were men. And almost without exception they wanted to marry a younger woman. The oldest woman divorcee I heard of was in her seventies. She didn't want another husband. She merely wanted to get rid of the one she had.

OF THE men and women seeking "the cure," the largest contingent comes from New York. The other chief sources of supply are New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Illinois, and Canada. But the whole world seems to be represented. It is the Mecca, for instance, for Americans and English living in China.

Even Australia sends its quota. Mayor Roberts had three Australian preachers among his clients last year. He added that he always has several preachers in his annual grist of cases. But preachers' wives are few and far between.

A curious sidelight on the abnormal atmosphere of the colony is the fact that Reno is honeycombed with fortune tellers of all kinds; palmists, crystal gazers, Hindu seeresses, readers of tea leaves and of cards, and what have you. Women who are about to abandon one matrimonial experiment seem strangely eager to be told that there is a dark horse somewhere in the offing.

Many of the summer grist of divorce seekers spend very little time in the town itself. Some of them go to near-by resorts, like the Willows, or Lawton Springs. In the summer they motor up to Lake Tahoe, on the boundary line between California and Nevada. There they can spend as much time as they like at Calneva, a name

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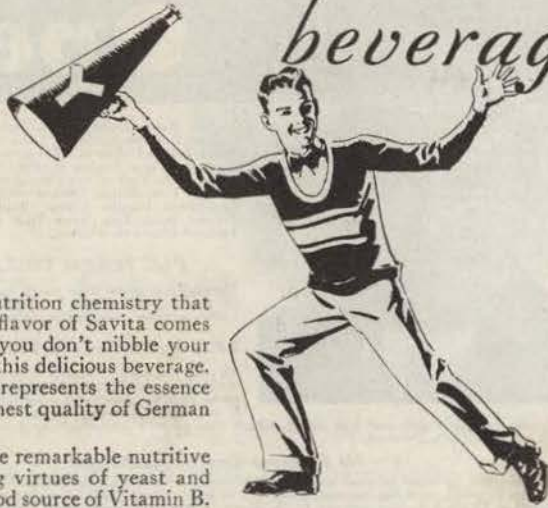
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compounded out of the names of the two states. Across the floor of the huge main room of the hostelry runs a broad, dark line; and on one side of that line, they are in Washoe County, Nevada, the required place of residence while they are taking "the Reno cure."

A dozen "dude ranches," in secluded valleys among the surrounding mountains, are frequented solely by members of the divorce colony.

I went to one of these dude ranches, close to the marvelous Pyramid Lake, about thirty miles from town. The wife of the proprietor was, herself, a divorcee. Several years ago, while taking her own "cure," she stayed at a dude ranch. She fell in love with one of the cowboys, married him after she got her decree, and they set up their own establishment.

MAYOR ROBERTS told me that he has had as many as fifteen of his clients working on his own ranch (not of the dude variety) while getting their decrees. Most of these workers were men who needed the money. But there was one woman, whom he hired as a cook. He told me that he has been attorney in more than two thousand cases and has lost only one.

"That was the case of a doctor who came down from Canada," the Mayor explained. "He wanted to divorce his wife and marry a nurse; but he didn't tell me that his hands were not clean and that his wife would contest the suit. She did; and the court very properly denied the decree. That spoiled my record. Still," he added proudly, "I have won more divorce cases than any other man alive."

To those of us who retain the old ideas about the sanctity of marriage, there is something sordid and revolting about the Reno divorce mill. When I said as much to the Reno people themselves, the answers ran about like this:

"Why revolting? The men and women who come here for divorce have made a failure of marriage. Are you going to condemn them all to keep on being miserable?"

To which I made bold to reply: "If it were not for easy-divorce courts, people would try harder to make a success of marriage. The grass in another pasture always looks greener. You, in Reno, pull down the fence and invite all and sundry to pick out a new pasture. When the grass there turns out to be no better, perhaps worse, than in the old home field, you tear down that fence and say: 'Try another!'"

"If, instead, people were told to stay at home and to make an honest effort to cultivate their own domestic pastures, they probably would raise at least a fair crop of happiness."

"Possibly," they reply—but with a smile of cynical tolerance.

And this baffling smile is so characteristic of Reno that sometimes it seemed to me that the very sunshine itself smiled down upon the town with the same tolerant cynicism.

As I said before, the town is clean and beautiful. The people are delightful. But—they have given up a good deal in exchange for the divorce revenue which makes possible their boast of being "The Biggest Little City in the World." They think they have made a good bargain. But I wonder.

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