

PART II

To Loosen the Bands of Society

Divorce

ADDIE MAY SPENT her whole life desperately longing for a successful marriage. Born in Pitt County near Farmville in 1863, at the height of the Civil War, she married Francis Dupree in 1882 when she was less than nineteen years old. Her husband began drinking heavily soon after their wedding, often returning home drunk and abusive. On their second wedding anniversary, an intoxicated Francis stumbled home and began verbally abusing his wife and infant son, breaking furniture, and throwing the fragments at his terrified spouse, who shielded their baby in her arms. Luckily for Addie, Francis's drunkenness impaired his aim, and she fled the house, running to her mother's with Francis pursuing them "with an un-sheathed bowie knife in his hand."¹

After receiving a legal separation in 1885 and a divorce in 1889, Addie moved to Texas to work as a governess for the two young children of Lorenzo DeVisconti. Italian-born and twenty-seven years her senior, DeVisconti was the only child of a count from the House of Milan and a French noblewoman. A series of political upheavals forced him to flee Milan, first to Austria, then Venice, then Mexico, and finally to Louisiana in 1863. Arriving in occupied New Orleans in the year of Addie's birth, DeVisconti was impressed into the Union army, though he never saw combat, absconding to New York City masquerading as a ship's cook. DeVisconti's itinerant lifestyle continued after the war. Teaching in several northern states, he married and was widowed twice. After the death of his second wife, by whom he had two young children, DeVisconti decided to move to Texas, where he had procured a teaching position. Placing newspaper advertisements for a governess, he hired the recently divorced Addie Dupree, who brought her own son to live in DeVisconti's house.

Less than a year later, Addie Dupree's relationship with Lorenzo DeVisconti transformed from one based on employment and the care of children to one of mutual romantic interest. After wedding in Texas, Addie and Lorenzo moved to her hometown of Farmville, North Carolina. Less than two years into their marriage, however, Lorenzo came to the conclusion that their union was "a humbug." A lapsed Roman Catholic at the time of their wedding, Lorenzo apparently rediscovered the religion of his childhood, concluding that since divorce was prohibited under Catholic doctrine, his marriage to Addie, although legally binding, had no spiritual or moral validity. Abandoning Addie, who was then pregnant with their second child, Lorenzo returned to Texas in November 1892.

Despite the circumstances under which they separated, Addie and Lorenzo carried on a lengthy and fairly friendly correspondence over the next eight years. In the letters between them, they reflected on their life together, their children, and the meaning of marriage in its social, legal, and religious contexts. Mainly, however, they discussed divorce. Their correspondence reveals deep fissures about the meaning of marriage and the significance of divorce.

Lorenzo maintained that their marriage was invalid because "according to nature's laws, or what is the same, God's laws, *no divorce is valid*."² He later wrote her that "you will see that we have made a great mistake, that we both have sinned, and that this transgression of the Divine law must necessarily have a punishment to follow." His Catholic faith taught him that "a divorced person cannot [re]marry, while the divorced husband is living, and so we have *failed*, greatly sinned."³ At the same time, he was willing to divorce Addie, since in his own mind their marriage had been critically flawed from the start. "My remaining days of my life shall be given to atone," he wrote her. "Before the civil law you are my wife, at least you were, but examine the scripture and [you] will find our error."⁴

Addie's position on divorce revealed little of the convoluted logic and internal contradictions found in Lorenzo's letters. "I think it best that we are divorced," she wrote bluntly. Addie believed that although she had tried to be his "beloved wife," the resulting "life of suffering" necessitated a divorce. For her, the act of terminating their relationship carried little of the moral baggage that Lorenzo described in such detail. Instead, she focused on the practical reality of their divorce. "Now answer me a few plain questions," she wrote; "don't give evasive answers but give plain truthful ones." Addie wanted to know how Lorenzo would respond to a divorce suit and how they would divide their property. "I have had enough of married life," she con-

cluded one letter, “and never intend to live the married life again, with any man on earth.”⁵

Despite her claims to the contrary, Addie did remarry shortly after her divorce from Lorenzo was finalized in March 1901. Although the circumstances of their reintroduction and courtship remain murky, Addie remarried Francis Dupree, her first husband, on 27 August 1901. Whether this marriage would have turned out differently than their first marriage is impossible to say, as Addie died less than a month later from an overdose of morphine.

Although there are many remarkable elements to Addie’s story, one of the most notable is how the broader community responded to her various marriages and divorces. Instead of condemning her for her actions, local and regional newspapers considered her story almost poetic. The *Raleigh Morning Post* applauded Addie’s remarriage to Francis Dupree as a “happy occasion” and believed their marriage “eclipsed . . . the pages of fiction, on which are founded the wild and fanciful imaginings of wonderful minds.” The *Morning Post* justified Addie’s first divorce on the grounds that her husband was “somewhat dissipated” and her second divorce because he “was also dissipated and in addition to his bad habits he was also lazy.”⁶ Several newspapers favorably compared her story to one penned by popular romance author Laura Jean Libbey entitled “Fell in Love with His Wife.”⁷ Addie’s second divorce was considered so routine that her lawyer asked the judge to “withhold calling the docket until a divorce case could be disposed of, which would take only a few minutes. . . . The jury was only three minutes in answering the three issues ‘yes’ and granting the divorce.”⁸

Had Addie lived a generation earlier, the broader community almost certainly would have responded very differently. Although Addie received blanket acceptance of her marital choices from everyone except her second husband, white men and women contemplating divorce in North Carolina during the decades before the Civil War faced prospects far removed from those Addie Dupree experienced. For them, filing for divorce meant public embarrassment, condemnation by religious leaders, politicians, and journalists, and ultimately social ostracism. Just as the Civil War forced a reinterpretation of suicide, the events of the early 1860s pushed white and black North Carolinians to reconsider how they understood divorce. As with suicide, this reinterpretation headed in very different directions for white and black North Carolinians, as whites became more accepting of divorce and blacks began to attach a greater stigma to it.

To be sure, both before and after the Civil War, many North Carolinians

stuck in unhappy marriages found ways to exit those relationships without seeking divorce. They could (and often did) abandon their ill-matched partners, hoping to begin again in a new town or with a new paramour. Although abandonment was an important social phenomenon and may have at times been more numerically prevalent than divorce, divorce required the aggrieved spouse to appear in public before the community to justify his or her desire to be released from the marital bonds that the community had sanctioned.⁹ It forced them to confront their friends and family members, their neighbors, and their clergymen, telling them in essence that they wanted their approval to dissolve a significant social relationship. Thus divorce presented an opportunity for conflict not only between spouses over the particulars of their relationship but also between the individual seeking the divorce and the broader community. By examining who filed for divorce and how they presented their claims and by exploring how their community responded to these arguments and actions, one can observe significant changes over the course of the nineteenth century concerning who felt able to seek divorce and how their actions were viewed by the broader community.