

Marriage

Excerpts from *Mrs Parkinson's Law and other studies in Domestic Science*, ch 2, pp. 37ff), by C. Northcote Parkinson (1909-1993), Penguin Books, 1968. Emphasis added. Remember, this is from 1968.

LIVING TOGETHER depends, above all, on **courtesy**. The affection we have for other people should often make us more than courteous but it should never, surely, make us less. Kindness goes beyond politeness; it should not fall short of it. And it is the more important if we have children, for their ideas of politeness will derive mainly from example. The courtesy which they offer to others will be a reflection of what they experience at home. There is no greater mistake than to suppose that marriage frees us from the need to be polite...

Beyond the forms of courtesy there is the more fundamental problem of who is to lead and who is to follow. Relevant to this question are three characteristics of mankind going back as far as men, recognizable as such, can be traced. Man is carnivorous, first of all, some of his food having always been trapped or pursued, fished or shot. Man is social in the second place, used to living in a family group or tribe. Last of all, the young of human species (born singly, as a rule, not in a litter) are helpless for an exceptionally long period, as contrasted with other animals, maturing very slowly and needing protection and care for anything up to twenty years. Among carnivores with slowly maturing young there must be a difference of function as between the sexes. With the young to be fed and nursed, protected and taught, the more active pursuits must be left to the male. As hunters at least men have always, therefore, regarded themselves as superior to women. But they have also realized from the outset that the survival of the family group must depend upon keeping the women and children out of danger. If men are killed in hunting or drowned in fishing, the survivors may still be enough for breeding purposes. This cannot be said of the women, upon whose number the natural increase must depend. Men are thus at once superior but expendable, women at once more valuable and subordinate. The basic specialization of the sexes is then given further emphasis by the prolonged differentiation between the adult and the immature. **The young of the human species must be protected and taught for so long that their obedience — upon which their mere safety depends — becomes habitual, and remains so, to some extent, after they have reached maturity.** In the extended family or tribe it is essentially the older men who rule, their authority being further emphasized in the special relationship — when it comes to be recognized — of father and child.

So far, then, as nature and tradition are concerned, the man's authority is established. But marriage is a partnership, nevertheless, into which two people have entered for a common purpose, and while there is a sense in which the man's leadership must be assumed it is clear that the woman's is the bigger

investment. She has given up (as he has not) her potential career and freedom. She faces (as he never will) the discomforts, dilemmas and dangers of maternity. Granted that the financial success of the partnership must depend upon the man's efforts, its failure could bear more heavily on the wife and mother. Marriage involves, therefore, this central paradox that man, normally the more active partner, is at once superior and subordinate. If he is responsible for the family's income he must have a certain control over the partnership. If he is to do productive work he must make the decisions. The executive power is in his hands and that is where the Christian [Anglican] marriage service puts it.

But if the wife is to obey her husband because he is the more active partner, **the husband is responsible to his wife because she is the larger shareholder; which makes him, to that extent, her inferior.** As men tend to forget that they hold their power in trust, they remind themselves of it (in some countries) by always treating women as their superiors; and it is a mark of our Western civilization that they should do so. Men thus rise when a woman enters the room and hold the door open when she leaves. The woman precedes the man in a doorway and is served before him at table. Her wishes are consulted as to where they shall sit or when they will go. There is an element in medieval chivalry which thus makes every girl a princess and every man her servant. Underlying it, nevertheless, was the law which made every husband the possessor and every wife a person possessed. From all this we may fairly conclude that **the traditional relationship, in Christendom, was one of extreme complexity;** the obedience owed by a wife to her husband being nicely balanced by the deference owed to a woman by a man. Far from ending at that point, the niceties of tradition ensured that the formal deference on the one hand should be met by a ladylike hesitation on the other. The girl who was entitled to consideration and compliments was not expected to be opinionated or headstrong. So far as decision-making went, she was not to accept more than a part of the power she was ceremonially offered.

IN A SOCIETY where social relationships had become as complex or refined as this the women suddenly revolted in the name of equality. In the early twentieth century they began to exchange their skirts for trousers. This was, in theory, to demonstrate a new democratic relationship between the sexes. It represented, in later practice, the wartime shortage of men. Women were being employed, and even enlisted, as men and often used in a role where skirts would have been practically inconvenient or dangerous. **The trousers, which were the symbol of defiance, were soon the outward sign of a new servitude, the factory taking the place of the home.** With the trousers came the

new freedom and comradeship between the sexes. In the brave new world they were to meet at last as equals. Had the revolution been complete, as in some communist countries it would seem to have been, the subtle relationships of tradition would have been wholly supplanted by the arithmetical crudities of the age. In the English-speaking world there was, however, a compromise. Women were entitled but not compelled to wear trousers. Given the vote, given access to the legislature and to most of the professions, they were also allowed and encouraged to retain the privileges which went with their previous state of subservience. They were allowed to be equal in areas where they had once been submissive and regarded as superior still in the areas where their superiority had always been acknowledged. **In this most subtle of all relationships the earlier sense of balance had been lost.**

If a woman is to be treated as a comrade, G.K. Chesterton once pointed out, she is liable to be kicked as a comrade. She will be exposed, in fact, to jeers, curses and horseplay. But such treatment runs so much against all our customary attitudes that we seldom allow logic to take its course.

A girl in the army should be treated, in theory, like a private soldier, addressed by her surname and ordered curtly to do this or that. A minute's thought, however, or five minutes experience is enough to convince any male officer that such treatment would be lunacy.

It may be theoretically correct to say, "Corporal Baker, you are to have these letters ready for signature by midday," but one's actual approach is quite different. "Have you a minute, Valerie? Look, we have to get these done quickly. If you don't want me to face a court-martial, have them finished by twelve. Be a dear and save us all from the firing squad!" This sort of appeal will produce results where the brusque order would gain nothing. All this is perfectly obvious, but it illustrates the way in which the egalitarian theory is practically unworkable. The revolution may succeed in abolishing the gentleman but the woman still wants to be treated as a lady. With the situation thus changed in her favour she is not always so ladylike as to refrain from using her advantage. In the USA this is the age of the hen-pecked husband and the age, in consequence, of the deserted wife.

The realities of the situation are only made apparent when the enlightened folk of the new age choose to visit some more traditional society in which the older values are still upheld. The first instinct of the educated woman is to show a ready sympathy for the downtrodden.

"How dreadful!" she exclaims. "Does your husband really order you about? It reminds me of the fairy story about Bluebeard! I never heard of anything so utterly fantastic!" Gradually, however, she is made to realize that her own example is the subject not of envy but of pity. This is made clear to her by the first local woman she comes to know, whose derision is expressed somewhat as follows: "All you husband says is, 'Yes, darling,' and 'No, darling,' and 'What do you think, darling?'" Here in Esperanto we like a man who will decide for us and stick to his decision. "But that is positively medieval! My husband and I decide things together without any real disagreement. He is too nice a man to oppose me just for the love of argument and he will freely acknowledge, if you ask him, that I often know best. But ours is a true partnership.

© The Rev. B.J.H. Tierney. Handouts are free and may be copied for any non-profit teaching purpose. However, donations to defray costs are welcome and should be made to the publisher and distributor, the Cardinal Newman Faith Resources Inc. PO. Box 359, St Marys NSW 1790; phone 02 9673 2235; fax 02 9623 3181; email fr@cardinalnewman.com.au

you know, and not a tyranny of one over the other." All this is received, however, with amusement. The women of Esperanto do not regard the "Yes, darling," husband as a man at all. They suspect, to begin with, that he is impotent. When reassured on this point they doubt whether his virility would come up to an acceptable standard. They prefer a man, in short, who behaves like one. Their rejection of the American ideal is outspoken and prompt and they soon turn from this subject to talk of something else.

Given a normally civilized relationship the wife has her own way in making about three decisions out of four, two of the choices being probably trivial. When she most commonly goes wrong is not in demanding her way every time but in openly grasping what she would in any case be given. The lady of tradition saw to it that her husband's final and Napoleonic decision was the result of her previous advice. She prettily yielded to her lord and master, applauding his wisdom and deferring to his deeper knowledge, openly overruled but still aware that the choice was originally her own. The advantages of this manoeuvre were twofold. In the first place she gave her husband the sense of dominance without yielding to his foolish ideas. In the second place she avoided being solely responsible if the decision made were to prove disastrous. It would then have been *his* decision — very natural in the circumstances, mind you, and apparently wise at the time — to which she had innocently yielded without giving the matter too much thought. **When the women of today have sufficiently studied the art of marriage, as their grandmothers did, they will come to realize that they can exert more influence by an attractive diffidence than they will ever achieve by militant assertion.**

The characteristic mistake made by the wives of today are partly the result of the female revolt with which this century began but they are also the result of their schooling. There is a tendency for girls to receive their instruction mainly from female teachers at school and college who are often (not always) unmarried. So far as their formal education goes, they are thus introduced to life by people whose own ignorance is practically complete. The senior professional career woman is a menace in this context, being a rebel against male exclusiveness and an advocate for sex equality. A wiser and more worldly teacher would assure the girls that any such equality is useless and that **the better policy is to offer an open submission in return for a usually decisive influence.** Were but a single school to teach this lesson the demand for its pupils in marriage would be such as to ensure that the example would spread. It is significant in this context that several of the most exclusive colleges for women have professors who are men. There is something in this idea and it seems preferable, at least, to the plan by which co-educational colleges are staffed (as they sometimes are) by old women of either sex. If there is to be a truce in the sex-war it might come through women being educated so as to be themselves.

[That was 1968: what do you think?]