

# Not Married Yet?<sup>1</sup>

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Two preliminary points: the first can be sufficiently made through a series of quotations.

*From the Aylesford Priory News Letter.* 'There was also (at a dinner) a very interesting and lively parish priest from a nearby (French) parish. His work has to do with the "problem" of industrial relationships between employers and employees. He apologized for mentioning the word "problem" to describe his work'.

*From a private letter of an Oxford history graduate and ex-family case worker, now married with two small children.* 'I was asked with five or six others (to the B.B.C.) to discuss problems of new housewives. I always say I haven't had any problems—of course I burn the chips regularly but I accept this as a part of life!'

*From J. B. Priestley in 'Journey Down a Rainbow'.* 'People load themselves with anxiety and grief because they will discuss their lives as if they were engineers on a job. "Problems" for instance. The "Marriage Problem". The "Parent-Child Problem". Nice people talk like this and then worry themselves sick, for here are the "problems" but where are the neat solutions, settling them once and for all? They forget that human relationships don't belong to engineering, mathematics, chess, which offer problems that can be perfectly solved. Human relationships grow, like trees; they can't reach checkmate in four moves; the language of gardeners and artists might help, certainly not the approach of mathematicians and engineers. But this is what happens to nice people in a mechanistic society . . .'

*From a newspaper report.* 'A difficulty arose in the housing problem'.

Observations like these are not, of course, intended to torpedo discussion, but rather to make intelligent discussion possible.

<sup>1</sup>A paper read at the conference on 'Catholic Women in the Modern World' at Spode House, January 1962. A companion paper was published in the April number.

My second point is the necessity of getting our history into perspective and of avoiding what is almost a kind of superstition about women in the past. There is some controversy over this, and I sometimes find myself in the entertaining situation of defending the position of women (that tiresome phrase) in past ages against the pity of men. I do not want to make too much of it here because that is not what this paper is about, but here are some comments. In the first place we must beware the habit of taking the Victorian Age as a kind of absolute standard, which still bedevils so much of our thinking. In so many things that age was peculiar if not unique in history, and, for better or worse, we are much more like almost any of our earlier forefathers than we are like our grandparents. Even so, we should get the Victorian Age, with its theories about the nature of women and what was fitting for her, straight. The women, who, as ladies, did not 'soil their hands' were a small minority in actual numbers. And not only, of course, were there vast numbers who worked in their own little houses or in factories, for instance; but there are the many who wrote fiction, non-fiction, poetry, who composed songs — notably — and who made money out of it.

In so far as there was a rot, it seems to have set in here, as in so many other things, after the Commonwealth and the Restoration. Women then do start becoming 'special' in a rather odd sort of way. We may compare the little girl of good family under the early Stuarts, who did her lessons (Latin, Greek and modern languages) alongside her brother with the family chaplain as a matter of course, with the learned eighteenth century lady who is regarded with suspicion and hilarity as a 'blue-stocking'. The common example of the Anglo-Saxon Abbess Hilda of Whitby is an exception, as is often said, but only because she was great, as Bede was an exception; her learning and position were far from being hers alone.

More markedly, though not only, in Christian times women have played their part in the life of society commensurate with the nature of that society, and with the fact that women are half the population, possessing a nature of their own which masculine nature resembles but not wholly. To come back to the sources of our modern times, the Married Women's Property Act was not primarily a long overdue measure of justice for women, but a very necessary defence for them precipitated by the recent decay of the social and legal organism called marriage. Jobs for all women regardless of social class followed, even accompanied, that very new thing—brought by the Industrial and

Commercial Revolutions—jobs for all men. Many Victorian novels witness the appalling situation of the penniless young man of good family, only comparable to that of the penniless young lady.

In other words, as in the past, we are all involved in this modern age, and we must always remember our common humanity. Unmarried women and young widows, like their masculine counterparts, are now expected normally to keep themselves; the inspired common sense of Jane Austen would have approved mightily—for both sexes.

Certainly this could be said to be the time for the single woman—whether single by choice or by one of those misfortunes which do occur. How various are the tastes and capabilities of the individual, yet can there be one which is not met by some job, whether a ward sister or a doctor, a clipper or a van driver, a seller of books or of bread, or a programme editor on the B.B.C.

This is, of course, no attempt to make silly claims about the superiority of one way of life over another; all have their own conditions, and it would be equally silly to pretend that these conditions are not sometimes difficult. Parents bringing up children in an urban society seem to me to have some quite special ones; at least any who share my convictions as to what constitutes a child's healthy, happy, and indeed human life. No child, above all at the two physically and psychologically bursting out periods, when they first start running round and in their early 'teens', should be unable to go or to be taken easily into some sort of open country. This means towns of not more than say 30,000 population (in industrialized Britain!) Even in my own short life-time, schooling, as against education, has become a legal and social tyranny. And ponder:

*Don't take your ball into the street!*

The Council doesn't allow pets.

Can we risk letting Timmy have a bike?

You must take down your farm, dear, and put it away; there's no space . . .

Where would you *use* a fishing-rod, son?

If you pick the flowers, the policeman will come after you!

Some of these quite basic questions are at least easier for the unmarried woman. Given ordinary circumstances, she can make her own intelligent choice of the job she does and where she does it. It is well known that a training in shorthand typing can take you round the world—or to a small corner in the Devonshire countryside.

Nor is this unimportant. It has its part in the freedom and develop-

ment of the human personality. There is, of course, a tyranny of work today; a compound largely of the greed of modern industrialism and a form of puritanism—it is virtuous to work till you drop and then spend time in hospital being put right again: it is weak-kneed too to go to bed for a day in order to rise refreshed and get on with the job. I think the feminine temperament tends to suffer more from the rigidity, the clocking-in and time-keeping and all the rest of it; but it is all anti-human.

But, as long as they are recognized as what they are and no more, jobs are a good thing. I find a marked difference—on the whole of course—in the older generation, where it can be more clearly seen, between the married women who have never worked, and those who have at some time had jobs or the single working women (now often retired). Those who have been responsible for a job seem, if I may say so, also more responsible for themselves: the world does not seem to them so full of mysterious things which have no right to impinge, let alone to be coped with. This can still be traced today in closed communities like service families, where a girl's job is still usually only a preliminary to getting married—the whole thing financially cotton-woolled. And as she, and often her husband too, have never really grown up, that is only too often the preliminary to a divorce in which again the young woman is shielded from hard facts by a levy on her husband's pay until she can find someone else to look after her.

There are a number of other points which need also to be borne in mind. That there are a number of reasons why a young woman may not get married is one: some actively choose not to, and they are some of the most vital personalities and contented people. That there is no non-marrying age is another. A life may be rich in one way up to the age of fifty, and enriched in another way by marriage then: we must beware superstitions. Another superstition—much canvassed by the press—is that of the 'feminine' woman. The most de-sexed (and therefore we must remember de-humanized) women I have met are admittedly 'career women'—but precisely those the newspapers would call 'delightfully feminine', distinctly pretty in appearance (though not beautiful), well made-up, with a *penchant* for pink and soft blues. Let a woman be herself, in ancient suits and heavy shoes if she feels like it; then, being a woman, she will be feminine—in her way, a genuinely delightful way as memories of my university tutors remind me. There is also the very modern notion that we can eat our cakes and have them; though this damages married women rather than single. Yes, we have our Mrs

Jellabys (a Victorian lady, by the way) and how angry one gets for their children. And I have seen marriages breaking up because the wife realized too late that—in our jargon—her vocation lay in independent outside work. This kind of thing needs a good deal more serious thought and direct teaching than it has yet been given.

It is up to us to make the most of the advantages this extremely mixed modern world gives us. A great one for the single woman is the lack of conventions. (This is not to say it is a good thing all round. A good deal of our trouble with 'teen-agers'—in so far as it has not been exaggerated—is simply due to the fact that they have been deprived of a supporting and protective convention of behaviour at the exact moment, for girls especially, when they need it.) It is again no doubt a superstition to suppose that women in any age have not had men friends who were—I won't say 'just' with so august a word—fully friends. But the physical freedoms of today—the kind of plain fact that one can take a man back to one's flat for a drink after a play as a matter of course—are not only very pleasant but of real value to the individual person, to the men as well as the women.

Catholics, even more than Christians as a whole, have enormous advantages here. A proper understanding, for instance, that you *can* not—rather than 'must not' or 'ought not'—in hard fact destroy a marriage, illuminates and enriches your whole relationship with your friend and her husband or your other friend who has married a wife. Chastity is not just a safeguard against those recurrent *affaires* which do disintegrate the lives of some unmarried women; it teaches you something about the oneness of love. All these things set your feet on a path which goes somewhere; they enable you to love and be loved by your friends, married or single, men or women: 'such is the freedom Christ has won for us'.

We must not pretend, of course, that tragedies do not happen. But there is no reason why single women—because of their state or for some other mysterious reason—should expect to be exempt from the conditions of human life, by which indeed we all learn to be more fully human. I think this is one of the dangers of the 'problem' obsession—'Solve this, and no one will ever die again'. And we have just been talking about Christians . . .

For, above all, the Catholics among our single women—and for our purposes here we may include older married women with some time, active widows and retired women—this is a time of vast and wonderful opportunities for themselves and in the world.

I do not want here to go into all the things that are waiting to be done—though again they suit all tastes and capabilities—whether in the community of the parish or of their town around them. If one is the person one should be, the Christian human being, then the world's needs will beat a path to one's door. A bit of serious thinking does no harm, of course. How often is the single lady, known to be a 'good Catholic', asked casually to be godmother to a child in a socially isolated family who cannot produce anyone suitable. And how often does she (or the priest either for that matter) remember that by doing so she has acquired a relation, and to some degree a whole family, her duties to whom cannot be dismissed with the (truthful) remark that if the child ceases to practice you cannot go along there like a policeman. The younger working woman especially can do a great deal by her personal relations with older girls in the parish. She has not retired into marriage, but is working in the world which now looms so largely; she is not (let us say) a teacher nor, and at this stage perhaps above all, is she a nun. But she must have grown up herself, in her knowledge of the world and of people, in humour and detachment, in her knowledge and experience of the Christian Church. The kind of person I have in mind here has, I may say, *no* vocation to a secular institute.

A word, finally, about this very important question of the 'psychological state' of 'bachelor men' and 'bachelor girls', which has been raised and, about which, as about so many other things here, so much could be said. I think again it resolves itself into the necessity of being—and developing—that which by nature you are meant to be. The question of inner marriage is not answered simply by marrying or by entering a religious order. In a sense, those things happen first through a fairly simple process; the fulfilling of the marriage in the human personalities involved may come—as we often observe—after time and even struggle. It is significant that the Church frowns with a great frown on what we may call not only arranged marriages but arranged vocations to a religious order. This is all equally true, though not so clear cut, for those—men as well as women—about whom I have been talking. Marriage is, after all, a relationship with God and with his creation. It cannot be forced; nor is it necessarily ratified by formal or public vows:

Ah! need I say, dear Friend! that to the brim  
 My heart was full; I made no vows, but vows  
 Were then made for me; bond unknown to me  
 Was given, that I should be, else sinning greatly,  
 A dedicated Spirit.