



August

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WE SOVIET WIVES

BY ANNA LOUISE STRONG

ON MY recent lecture tour in America, chancing to dine at the home of an old acquaintance, I remarked towards the end of the meal that I had been for two years married in Moscow. There was a sudden, polite accession of interest, a turning towards me as if I had somehow become different. All the others present asked in tones of slight reproval: "Why didn't you tell us? And what is your new name?"

"I didn't tell you, because it had no connection with the discussion of the evening," I answered. "My name and work remain unchanged."

At this there were knowing smiles. "One of those Soviet marriages! Not permanently serious!" was the comment.

"Quite serious," was my rather annoyed rejoinder. "And gives every indication of permanence."

But beyond this I did not try to explain. What was the use?

The complete removal of property and religious encumbrances and of sex inequality from marriage has made our Soviet unions somehow different from that which counts as "proper wedlock" in most homes of the capitalist world. The enemies who charge us with frivolous promiscuity, and those would-be friends who hail us as the world's new Puritans, are almost equally annoying in their lack of comprehension. We ourselves feel that marriage with us has entered a new stage of development, foreshadowed by some of

the friendlier companionships of America, but not widely attainable under capitalism.

In another American city a woman friend pried for some hours, with that cheerful indiscretion which so many American women use in talking of husbands, into what we in the Soviet Union would call my "personal life." I trust I answered politely, but I think she got little information. Later, in discussing a certain admirable human quality, I remarked that my husband possessed it in marked degree. "Why, I believe you 'like' your husband," she said in amazement, and I realized that what to me was normal reticence indicated to her an abyss too deep for discussion.

This time I was really annoyed. "Why on earth should I keep on living with him if I didn't like him?" I answered. But her comment set me to wondering why this woman continued to live with *her* husband. She made it so plain to casual strangers that she had only contempt for his essential quality—a non-grasping kindness which hinders money-making under capitalism but which helps make an agreeable companion. To dine at her home was to be embarrassed by undisguised acrimony in table discussion, beginning with her injured attitude towards an unprofitable husband and extending to involve the time-and-cash-consuming children. What force of tradition, what economic pressure kept her enduring day after day those disagreeable dinners?

If a Soviet family found itself cursed with continuously bitter table talk, so wearing to nerves and work, they would simply split up and have done with it. Life is too short and too interesting to waste with unpleasant companions. Sometimes one must endure them in a job for the sake of discipline and achievement. But why endure them in a home whose purpose is not discipline or achievement, but relaxation and renewed life?

In thus stating the purpose of home in what appears to us Soviet wives a rational manner, I know that I offer a gauntlet both to that ancient view of marriage as "discipline," held by the church, and that feudal-capitalist view of marriage as "achievement," with economic complications of risk or gain. The hostages-to-fortune-view expressed for prudent Englishmen by Bacon, the endure-it-for-the-children view, which has held endless mothers in lifelong torment, the good-provider view and wait-till-you-have-assured-income view, which thoughtful parents in capitalist lands must teach their children—all these views have simply evaporated from our Soviet marriage. So swiftly and completely have they gone that it is only when I visit my native America that I encounter them.

To Soviet wives marriage has no connection with religion, law, property rights or money. None of these things is important in our lives. Property rights are simple, for no one has much property; things owned before marriage remain individually owned, and those acquired after are jointly owned. Money exists for both husband and wife to earn as wages and to spend, but little of it is heaped up for the future. Religion exists for those who still require it; marriages in church still sometimes occur. Law exists; and a large proportion of marriages are duly "registered,"

but by no means all, and one never inquires of friends if they have done so.

The essence of marriage with us is enduring companionship, the rounding out of normal physical, mental and emotional life. How long enduring, only the future can say; we hope it will be for life, but we give no pledges. For those who choose, and this includes practically everyone, marriage is a mutual participation in the future through the rearing of children. No normal person wants to be childless. I recall not a single old maid in all my Soviet acquaintance. But marriage is only one of our many companionships; and children are only *one* of our keys to the future. Personal love itself is, with us, only one aria in an opera whose complex, crashing chords (reminiscent more of Wagner than of the early Italians) leave strictly limited time for mere arias.

If our marriages, so informal, without constraint or compulsion, registered so simply in an office and as often not registered at all, seem to people outside our borders no "proper wedlock," we on our part confess that the marriages of the capitalist world, as we meet them in novels and newspapers, seem either appalling or funny. British marriages are the worst; it appears from their novels that the very possibility of legal union may turn on reaching the church before the hour of noon, which to our unpunctual minds seems carrying the rule of clocks too far. The British fiction plot may hinge on whether the village maid who had a son by a noble lord some thirty years ago was able to get him to sign a register in church. This irrelevant action determines the fate of our hero, the son: will he get the estate from the haughty cousins or not, and thereby be able to marry the girl of his choice?

In our Soviet land the estate has passed

through a dozen histories and is now a collective farm; and while we are the last to deny that our hero's life was much affected by whether his parents continued to live amicably together or separated after a brief fit of passion, it doesn't occur to us to connect these "facts of life" with an ancient book.

If you act married, you are married; if you don't, you're not. If a union exists *de facto*, we recognize it *de jure*!

Announcements of marriages in the press seem to us rather quaint. "A marriage is arranged and will shortly take place" is the approved British style—an amusing survival of the old "arranged marriage" with money settlements and joining of family properties for the children thus legally introduced. As for filling a whole "society page" with our marriages, as is done in America, with pictures of ourselves in voluminous white with flowers—we should be highly ashamed thus to flaunt our private emotions. We announce our marriage when we choose to our closest friends—more often after than before. Nor do any persons pry into our actions until we announce them; such prying would be considered by us far more immodest than laxness in legal formulation.

Not that we disdain publicity; we are not so inhuman. If we win honors in science or prove ourselves champion in tractor-driving on some collective farm, or win a production record in our factory, how proud we can be of our names and pictures in the paper! Perhaps, most thrilling of all, our photograph may some day be raised on a pole in the May-day procession, and our comrades in work will announce us to all the world as "champion." These are our public acts, to be blamed or praised. But marriage is our private affair, our personal business.

II

Not by her place as a wife may a Soviet woman win honor. Not even the wives of the greatest men live by reflected glory; official honor shown to their husbands is never shown to them. If diplomatic receptions are sometimes graced by their presence, it is but a concession to the foreign ways of diplomats. In all our internal affairs men go forth to congresses unaccompanied, and travel in private cars to open steel mills without benefit of wives. When Stalin's wife died, the black-bordered condolences in the newspapers gave her own name and work, and only secondarily mentioned that she was "the close companion and comrade" of Stalin. Kalenin's wife has won recognition by creating a state farm and center of culture in the Altai Mountains. Marriage in the Soviet Union may be a source of happiness; it is never the source of a career.

Careers, renown and honor we Russian women win as citizens, and not as wives. Home-making, which has become a real profession in America, with many magazines devoted to its intricacies, is with us a part-time task and very little honored. Our Soviet women are perhaps too careless of its details. The average Soviet home has its furniture stuck anywhere; color-schemes are non-existent; and the daily chores of the house are done by both wife and husband. Such color and art and music as we have (and we have much) are used to ornament our public buildings, our parks of culture and rest, our justly famous theaters, our factory clubs.

This is the aspect of our life that wears most heavily on those few American women who come to the USSR with their engineer or worker husbands to take part in our new industrial life. The man may find vivid interest in his labors, but the women

grow rapidly homesick. The trade they have always clothed with sentimental honor—making a pleasant home for husband—gains no recognition here. It is a thankless task to construct a charming interior in a land which offers no choice in household draperies or paint; or to pamper a man's appetite where food is rationed and where half the items in a simple American *répê* are not to be had. The industrial plant where her husband works often regards her as a nuisance. "These women who bother our offices and think they are 'somebody' because their husbands are useful men! Why, not even Stalin's wife is 'somebody'!" said the head of the Foreign Bureau in a big steel plant to me, adding: "Parasites, just parasites! Draining our food and goods and making no return for them. Just clogging the time of a valuable working man!" In the end such women either get jobs for themselves and become reasonably happy, or tearfully drag their husbands back to the "homes" of America.

If we lack all chance of honor as wives and home-makers, we have on the contrary every honor open to us that is open to any man, through our labor as citizens. You meet our women, scattered throughout the length and breadth of the Soviet land, presidents of villages and of collective farms, chairmen of shop committees, directors of factories, judges of people's courts, doctors and engineers. There is not the slightest trace of sex discrimination in work; schools and universities take women with equal readiness; they enter all jobs and professions, receiving equal pay for equal labor.

No less than one hundred women have won the Order of the Red Star, given for high attainment in the armed forces of the country. Many hundreds have won civilian honors, the Order of Lenin, the Order of the Red Banner. Six thousand women are presidents of collective farms, 100,000 are

elected members of courts, 400,000 are members of local governing soviets. In the medical colleges 71.4% of the students are women, foreshadowing perhaps a day when most of our physicians will be of the "nursing sex." Women storm the Arctic. Irene Ruzhnova was our first woman polar explorer; she wintered four seasons in frozen seas and made the first northwest northeast passage around Asia on the famous *Sibiria-kov*. Nina Demmie has managed for two years the Polar Station on North Land. One meets Russian women geologists on the Roof of the World. A woman bore her child on the Arctic-bound *Chelushkin*!

The independence of woman which in most of the world is a slow growth, resulting from the industrial revolution, is with us incredibly rapid as our industrialization is rapid. Even our farms, last stronghold of the patriarchal household, have in five years been combined into great collective farms, on a mechanized, industrialized base, in which women's labor is paid equally with that of their husbands. Peasant women, last of all to feel the new women's equality under the Soviets, are suddenly awakening to the implications of their independent income.

Two women, members of a collective farm, were displaying their purchases in the town market. I asked them: "Well, how's your life?" The first one waved her new shawl and pointed to new shoes in token, adding: "And a new suit for my husband and new clothes for the children."

"And what did you buy for your husband?" I asked the second.

"Nothing at all. I gave him eighty rubles from the family income to buy himself a suit. But he drank it up and now he gets no more. I got for myself a warm new coat, a dress and shoes; I got for the children clothes. But my man gets no new suit this year and I've furthermore told him that if

he gets drunk again I'll throw him out of the house. I can get along without him now in the collective farm."

Some thirty million women in peasant homes from Leningrad to Vladivostok are awakening to the amazing fact that they can "get along" without their husbands through the organization of the new collective farm. Equality and independence for women threaten man's last stronghold; the old style home, the male-dominated patriarchal home, is really doomed. It is perhaps this that the moralists of the non-Soviet lands resent most.

III

Three mighty social changes affect our Soviet marriage. If the passing of private property has broken the old contractual "bond" of wedlock, and woman's political equality and economic independence has overthrown the male-dominated home, a third change has cut even deeper. New lands to conquer, new worlds to create—this call to the pioneer which has always had power to lure adventurous men from their women, has come to us women, too. Our husbands go down to the Polar Seas or dare the plateaux of earth's highest ranges; they bring up new metals, create new plants, win new empires. But we do not wait at home; we go with them or on similar expeditions of our own. The adventure of revolution, the organized conquest by man of his world, is a flaming excitement before which personal love affairs grow rather pale. The vaster emotions of our lives are not individual but social.

I found Bill Shatoff ill in bed once in a hotel room in New Sibirsk where he was building railroads. The terrific drive of his life was wearing him out. I asked why he didn't bring his wife out, have a home. I shall never forget his words.

"The greatest thing in life," he said, "is work. No, not just work—creation! And in this particular piece of time in which we live, there is the chance to create without end or limit. Do you think I could turn aside from an hour of creation to be nice to a wife or to come to dinner on time?"—He paused, then added: "She would be lonesome here; she has her own work."

Not only great railway builders enjoy this thrill of creation; it is available even to tractor-drivers on new collective farms. I met a delightful girl who was champion tractor-driver on a Siberian farm and who had married in March a tractor-driver of another "brigade." They spent their honeymoon twelve miles apart working on different field gangs, but once a week the youth walked over to spend part of the night with his bride, doing the twenty-four miles between sundown and sunrise in order to combine wedlock with loyalty to his brigade. Since he always returned on time his romance was respected; but lateness would have made him a target for ribald jests from his fellows. The girl never went to meet him half-way; she was boss of the winning brigade and took no chances. When I asked why they didn't get into the same field-gang and thus work together, both exclaimed: "Desert my brigade in sowing-time!"

A similar romance occurred in Tver between two chauffeurs in the postal service. Ducia, one of the best drivers, was awarded the care of the bright new Ford car, D—94—73. Young Vaniushka took the Ford on the second shift. Ducia and Vaniushka are in love with each other and expect to marry soon. But both are also in love with D—94—73, which unites yet separates them. When Ducia comes in Vaniushka goes out; if either would change to another machine they might spend their evenings in parks and theaters together. But neither wishes

to change to a "less honorable" Ford; and neither wishes to share D-94-73 with any third person. This is a real "triangle" of the modern Soviet variety.

It often happens that wives of responsible Communists have a type of work which separates them from their husbands for months at a time. The choice of work for man and wife, both of whom are able, is one of the most serious problems of our Soviet homes. It is not considered in line with the best ethics for them to work in the same institution, lest charges of favoritism creep in. Sometimes this leads to their being assigned to "competing" work.

During the irrigation season last summer in Central Asia—where women went veiled less than ten years ago—a husband and wife, both skilled in the organization of farming, were assigned to different "politodels" in neighboring tractor stations. In the course of her work, it became the duty of the wife to write to her husband: "Your collective farmers are badly taught the care of water; they are stealing our share of water as well as their own. This is not only theft, but an outrage against the interests of collective farming, due to bad management in your office."—Brothers have exchanged such reprimands in the history of business; but not often husbands and wives.

A rising young teacher of my acquaintance came to Moscow, leaving his wife and children in temporary residence on the Volga in his wife's home town. For the sake of his family he sacrificed the opportunities offered him for wider study, and toiled long hours at a routine job to send them money. Two years of such lonely slaving won him a place of residence in Moscow; his wife, however, refused to join him or let the children go without her.

The man's hysterical despair over this abandonment by his family recalls the more

sentimental moments of Victorian fiction, in which, however, the despair was usually reserved for the softer sex. Night after night he sobbed; he contemplated suicide; most serious in Soviet eyes, he actually stayed away from his job two days without doctor's certificate! He called one night on an older woman who had known his family for years; she sharply reproved his weakness.

"I am amazed," she said, "that an experienced social worker and a man of culture should let himself be so broken by a personal loss. You disgracefully talk of suicide as if there were nothing left in life. Consider all we have to do in education for the Second Five Year Plan!"

Strange as it may seem to an outsider, this was the proper and effective method of consolation. The man's hysteria passed; he gasped through drying tears: "Yes, truly, I do wish to see how the Second Five Year Plan comes out." Nor would any Soviet citizen find anything surprising in his reaction.

IV

What are the standards by which we Soviet wives judge such questions as virginity, promiscuity, divorce? They are not standards of tradition, but considerations of personal dignity and social worth. The family is for us not One Against the World, but a unit whose value is judged by its share in the larger whole. This was once put for me very crudely by a handsome young glass worker from the Donetz Basin who beguiled his month at a health resort with strenuous flirtation and who once, in an idle evening, told me how he wished to embrace a certain girl. Since he had previously expressed an equal wish for an apple and a cigarette, I felt nettled on behalf of my sex. "You seem to have many desires," I said.

Unwittingly I used a word which implies

strong, intense passion, and he repudiated it with indignation. "My only passion is for the revolution," he said. "These others are only wishes."

"The girl also?" I asked with unappeased annoyance. "Is she only a little wish like the apple?"

He seemed naïvely surprised. "Of course, the wish for the girl is much more serious, since it lies at the foundation of life and affects the future. But if I should marry the girl—a man does not always wish to lie with his wife. That is also a transient wish; it comes, is satisfied and goes. Only one passion is permanent in me, and that is to work for the Soviet Power with all my strength so that the revolution may come throughout the world."

"Hasn't the girl anything to do with that passion?" I persisted, my American sentimentality outraged by his realism.

"Let us hope she would share it," he said quite coolly. "Otherwise my feeling for her could not last long."

A similar socialization of outlook is indicated by a discussion I had with a twenty-year-old girl on the subject of her virginity. I had lived in the same apartment with her for more than a year. Having noticed that on several occasions a youth who was clearly in love with her spent the night in her room, I was surprised to learn that she was still a virgin. She was surprised at my surprise, and no doubt considered me as prurient as chaperonless young Americans consider those adults who suspect all unwatched chastity. She explained that the youth had stopped for the night, just as her girl friends did, because he had come to see her from another town and had nowhere else to stay.

"Nearly all the girls at the laboratory where I work are virgin," she added. "There are two or three who let themselves go and have many relations with men; but

they are scatterbrained and neglect their work and we don't think much of them. Most of us girls are rather afraid—we have often discussed it—about the first time."

"Physically afraid?" I asked.

"Not exactly. Afraid of what it will do to us. One of the girls, Anna, got married. It's clear she has changed. She hasn't left the Young Communists and she doesn't exactly neglect her work; nothing as bad as that. But somehow, she lacks the former interest and energy. Maybe it's because she's just had a baby; we're waiting to see if it's just her health. You see, this personal life can be terribly engulfing; you can drown in it and lose all thought for social things. That's why we're afraid. We want to test ourselves and be sure we are firmly grounded, before we let ourselves go too far in personal life."

This attitude would be understood by any Soviet maiden, though most of them, I think, are somewhat less timid. The many students who marry while still in the universities, when the youth lives in a dormitory room with ten other boys and the girl in another dormitory with half a dozen girls, and the arriving baby is placed in the day nursery maintained by the university, indicate a rather amazing confidence on the part of many Soviet young people in their ability to combine personal life with social duties. Not everyone finds in personal love a threat to wide social interests; fully as many find their social interests doubled. But our final criterion for any marriage is not the faithfulness of mates to each other, but their mutual faithfulness to our great community tasks.

When marriages break in the Soviet Union, as they sometimes do in other lands as well, our ethic on divorce is in sharp contrast to that which is held by the rest of the world. Divorce with us is open to any married person at any moment; our legal

theory holds it unlawful to compel a person to even a single sexual act against his or her will. But we respect most those divorces which take place in silence, where a dignified "collusion" buries mutual mistakes. This, our "primer of propriety," is immoral in New York.

If we scandalize New York, the feeling is mutual. The American divorce, where each separating mate accuses the other of cruel and shameful conduct in the publicity of open court, is to our moral judgment humiliating and indecent. What can our rational morality think of that husband who made the front page of the New York papers by sitting all of a winter night outside his wife's apartment in order to see her lover emerge at dawn? "What a damned fool—or perhaps only crazy," is our surprised judgment. "Wasting a whole night in discomfort to learn something unpleasant. If he wants to win his wife back, is that likely to do it? If he doesn't want to, why not get rid quickly of the past?" Jealousy is not prized with us as a virtue but deplored as a painful survival.

Since causes for divorce are never asked for or published, it was only by chance that I was able to note two contrasting divorces in Moscow, through my search, shortly after my marriage, for a joint apartment. Since my husband was legal possessor of two rooms and I of two more, we sought by Moscow custom to trade these for a four-room apartment, which naturally meant an apartment whose inmates were getting divorced. In the present housing shortage of Moscow, this is the routine means of getting a larger apartment.

We found one excellent apartment of three large rooms whose mistress said, with dignity: "I am not sure that you will wish to trade four rooms for our three. But we have a good apartment and shall wait till we can get two satisfactory two-room flats.

My husband and I are old revolutionary comrades; though we are separating, neither of us would be willing for the other to suffer in the transfer."—Other countries would call this the immoral living together of divorced people; our Soviet morality judges it a decent divorce between civilized human beings.

The other divorce we found was of contrasting character. An excellent four-room apartment had been bestowed on the husband, by reason of his high position. His divorced wife had dispossessed him and held strategically the two rooms through which he must pass to use the others; she made it plain that he would get no abode until she should be satisfied. Even to us, casual strangers, she freely stated that she cared only for her own future flat; he might worry about his. She was clearly grabbing the best furniture; every allusion she made to her former husband was vindictive in the best American divorce-court manner. Such a divorce we in the Soviet Union call "indecent," as we consider indecent any similar display of human greed. It is greed and not sex which with us is indecent.

V

We also, you see, have our ethic. If Americans condemn our easy divorces and our ready acceptance of any open relation as "marriage," we disapprove the American orgy of sex in drama and movies. ("I know your American movies—much kissing," sneered a Soviet youth.) We have equally little use for the hypocritical suppressions in what to us is prehistoric marriage, for the sugary sex romances in which the end of all life is the ceremony at the altar, or for the modernistic prying into endless sex problems in which the post-war Western world indulges. All are alike alien to us. O'Neill's "Strange Interlude" has for us no

message; his "Desire Under the Elms" became on our Soviet stage an excellent drama showing the tragedy of young desire corrupted by the family property of the "Elms." No drama devoted to the triangle of three people, whether cynical or sentimental, seems to us worth a whole evening's analysis. "Triangle" with us connotes not sex but factory management, which consists of director, shop committee and party secretary; this is our "triangle" in daily speech. It is perhaps symbolic of our lives.

For if there is any just criticism of our ethic, it is not that we think too much of sex but perhaps too little. Absorbed in our outer world of war and wonder we miss perhaps both the abysses and greater ecstasies of personal life. Our young men and maids become briefly aware of the glory of a new intimacy; our older married folk know a companionship more free and friendly than the world elsewhere can show; but the mystic exaltations which at times we come upon in the verses of old poets seem rather alien. Shall I confess it? The great lovers of tradition, the Tristans and Iseults, Paolos and Francescas, Heloïses and Abelards—we wonder if they were quite sane and normal? Were they real, or only romance like American movies of today? Certainly an Iseult of our time would be condemned by us, not for betraying King Mark but for giving "all for love." To give "all" for love, whether in or out of marriage, would seem to us anti-social, immoral. We do not even give up our jobs!

For we are worker bees of a working hive. The drone whose end of life is copulation is an object for our stings. Our dreams are for great farms and factories, our passions for over-fulfilled programs, our beatific vision is man's marching conquest of his world. Sexual life is a campfire which lights and warms the halts along this march. If you should ask us whether we

are personally happy, we should say that we have forgotten to inquire and have not time to know. For our whole life faces outward, and our thrill for each new gain of science, each new airplane through the Arctic, each new conquest of malarial marshes, is no mean thing.

Is there anything we miss, lacking this emphasis on heights and depths of personal life? When we think of it at all we recall that the noted American alienist, Dr. Frankwood Williams, traced most of America's neuroses to her "hot-house homes." We note that psychoanalysts find in the grasping, possessive male or mother a source of mental ills. We note that neuroses and psychoses are lessening in our country, in our healthier, non-possessive intercourse, our outward-looking absorption. There are those of us who hold that great personal ecstasies, like their religious counterparts, are products of starved nerves.

Yet one of our oldest Bolsheviks said some years ago to me: "Our pre-war generation fought in terms of right and justice; this hard, new generation fights in terms of tractors and tooth-brushes. For me the ultimate reality will always be the human soul; but we shall not come back to that for another fifty years. This generation and the next have the planning and building of the mechanism; it must and should absorb them. Our children's children will have time to explore the deeper world within."

Will they? Or were the speaker's words heretical? They would be judged so by the Soviet generation of today. Of one thing we feel certain. Whether our way of life and love is the new healthy way for future generations, or but a temporary revolt against the grasping property loves of the past, to be some day swallowed in a new synthesis of richer personal and social life—there is on earth no happier, sounder path in this age.