



HEARTS AND MINDS: CANADIAN ROMANCE AT THE DAWN OF THE MODERN ERA, 1900-1930

by Dan Azoulay

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The Dos and Don'ts of Romance

As important as finding the ideal partner was following the proper *rules* in doing so. This was especially true for “polite society” – for members of the middle and upper classes eager to distinguish themselves from the “rougher” classes. But Canadians of more humble backgrounds, perhaps aspiring to middle-class respectability, felt the need as well. And, once again, the *Family Herald* was there to help. The editor of the Prim Rose column, as it happened, was also available to answer questions about romance etiquette, which she did in a separate column until 1914.¹ Although her advice was always precise and consistent, the basis of her expertise is not entirely clear; it likely came from the British, American, and Canadian etiquette books she sometimes recommended to readers. More certain is that many young Canadians depended on her to guide them through the perilous waters of romance. In fact, with the magazine’s circulation surpassing 200,000 by 1930, she was probably their most important written source of romance etiquette in these years.² No doubt they also sought guidance from the general etiquette manuals popular at the time – such as Maud Cooke’s dauntingly thorough *Social Etiquette*, published by McDermid and Logan of London, Ontario, in 1896, and the more concise *Manners* issued by Toronto’s McClelland & Stewart in 1914 – but these were not nearly as

detailed as Prim Rose when it came to romance.³ Considered alongside her advice, however, they help provide a fascinating snapshot of Canadian romance etiquette before the Great War, from the first advances to the proposal of marriage.

FIRST MOVES

The first thing Prim Rose made clear about young romance was that it should not take place before a girl turned eighteen, the age at which she “came of age” and, if she was of the upper-class, made her “debut” as an eligible bachelorette at a “coming out” party; men were not supposed to pursue girls younger than this and girls were not supposed to accept their advances. “A girl is not permitted to receive attentions from young men,” she explained to a girl “Only Fifteen,” “until she has put on long dresses and put up her hair and been introduced to society,” usually between the ages eighteen and twenty.⁴ Only twice, and somewhat cryptically, did Prim Rose explain why. She told one inquirer that “it injures her [marriage] prospects to do so, as few mothers will encourage their young daughters to associate with a girl who has been talked about in connection with a young man before her debut.”⁵ She told another that “a girl should not be allowed to think or speak of an ‘admirer’ until she is at least eighteen years of age. To do so before that would make a bad impression, and careful mothers would not wish her to associate with their daughters.”⁶ Presumably a girl needed other girls to introduce her to their male friends and relatives or to at least vouch for her character. If her female friends shunned her, however, her marriage prospects would suffer.

Prim Rose gave only two exceptions to this rule: if an under-aged couple was accompanied on their date by a chaperone – perhaps an “an older girl friend or sister” – or if they were together in “a small place and among intimate friends,” presumably in someone’s home.⁷ She also said it was permissible for a close male friend of similar age to occasionally escort an under-aged girl from church, provided he had the permission of the girl’s parents. But he “should not feel offended if they do [object],” added Prim Rose, “because on general principles, it is not advisable to allow a young girl to be seen much in public with a friend of the other sex.”⁸

Once a young woman was eligible to receive male attention, it was then usually up to the man to make the first move; as Prim Rose said many

times, a true gentleman “never compels a lady to take the initiative.”⁹ This almost always meant seeking an “introduction” to a woman through a third person, typically another man (unless, of course, the woman was a long-time acquaintance). At a social gathering, for example, a man wanting to meet a certain woman might ask a mutual friend to make the introduction. The friend, unless he was a close friend or relative of the woman, would first secure her permission for the introduction, for “it is a privilege to be introduced to a lady,” said Prim Rose, and “a self-respecting girl does not admit anyone to the favour unless satisfied that he is in every way deserving of it.” If she agreed, the friend would proceed with the introduction, making sure to introduce the man to the woman, as in “Miss X, may I introduce Mr. Blank?” or “This is Mr. Blank, Miss X.”¹⁰ The man would then say something like “I am delighted to make your acquaintance.” In response, the woman would not shake the man’s hand – presumably this would be too familiar at this point – but would say something cordial. Usually she would say “How are you?,” and the conversation would proceed from there.¹¹ Several etiquette manuals recommended that both man and woman also *bow* to each other (with the man bowing more “deeply”) and that the woman, in response to the man’s grateful greeting, respond either in silence, with a slight smile, or with “a murmured thank you,” since she was the one granting the privilege of the introduction.¹²

But what if a man saw a woman on the street who caught his fancy? How could he secure the proper introduction? This was precisely the dilemma of “Diffident” from Vancouver, who wanted to meet “nice” women in his city but was loath to approach them on the street without knowing, through a proper introduction, whether they were of high moral character. Prim Rose suggested a combination of networking and covert action: “The next time a sweet face attracts you on the street,” she told him, “follow the owner at a respectful distance” to find out where she lives, and then try to strike up a friendship with her father or brother, who might invite him to the house and introduce him to her.¹³ He might also ask his clergyman to introduce him to the family.

Only in rare instances could bachelors avoid the introduction ritual, such as when a man and woman *worked* together. “If a man has met a young girl frequently enough during office hours to be on rather friendly terms with her,” wrote Prim Rose, “he may venture to ask her to accompany him to a concert, or to suggest that an invitation to call at her home would be regarded as a favour.... There may [also] be an opportunity of walking

home with the girl, or of seeing her on Sunday after church.”¹⁴ The etiquette of approaching the “working girl,” in other words, was less formal. Otherwise, the introduction was mandatory.

THE BACKGROUND CHECK

Another hurdle men faced prior to any romantic relationship was the background check. Some etiquette manuals, and no doubt many parents, warned young women to reject the attentions of men whose “past life” and “present circumstances” they knew little about. They warned them, in particular, about men who lacked industry and ambition, spent beyond their means, held women in low regard, and were prone to immoral “dissipation” in all its forms. “Better go down to your grave a ‘forlorn spinster’ than marry such a man,” wrote Cooke.¹⁵ This meant that a man with romantic intentions had to provide proof of his good character and prospects, which he did with a reference letter or with a verbal reassurance from someone who knew him well; this was necessary to prevent him from deceiving a potential girlfriend and her parents. In fact, parents, or a guardian, usually solicited such information, but it could be done by the woman herself, if necessary. As Prim Rose explained,

It is the duty of parents and guardians to make the necessary inquiries about the character, standing and prospects of their future sons-in-law, and when a girl has no one to whom this task can be confided, she is of course bound to undertake it herself. It is not at all a difficult one, because an honourable man recognizes the propriety of the action and is only too willing to furnish the desired information. Any show of reluctance or annoyance in this connection is a suspicious circumstance from which a girl is justified in concluding that there is a screw loose somewhere.¹⁶

The background check was especially important when a woman was carrying on a long-distance relationship – a “courtship by correspondence” essentially – and the man was unknown in her community. Eastern women corresponding with western bachelors, for instance, were warned many times by the column’s readers and by Prim Rose herself to not meet or

accept any proposition from such men without first finding out more about them; this included getting reference letters from reputable persons in the man's community.¹⁷

In addition, a man who wanted to spend time with a woman had to get the approval of her parents. To do this, he could either meet with the parents, after first stating his intentions towards their daughter, or he could simply gauge their reaction to his romantic overtures, including requests to visit their daughter at her home. If the parents did not discourage these overtures – welcoming him into their home, for example – he could assume they approved and that he was free to pursue the relationship further.¹⁸

COURTSHIP

Once a man had secured the introduction, passed the background check, and gained the approval of a woman's parents, he became one of her male "acquaintances" and could then seek her company in various ways. In other words, he could begin "courting" her, becoming one of her boyfriends or "suitors." There was, incidentally, no limit to the number of suitors a woman could have at one time. A common contemporary expression referred to the number of "pearls on a string" a woman had – that is, the number of suitors or admirers. According to Prim Rose, the more pearls the better, as this increased a woman's chances of securing a marriage proposal. Only when a suitor appeared *serious* about advancing a relationship (and the woman agreed, of course) should she begin to limit the field by discouraging other suitors.¹⁹

Knowing when a man was serious, however, was not always easy. Men often gave small gifts to their girlfriends – typically candy, flowers, or books – or paid a lot of attention to them in other ways. "Were these signs that a suitor was serious?," asked "Red Wing." "No," said Prim Rose. This was simply typical male behaviour, driven by the man's desire to have a good time. "As many young men pay attentions to girls who are agreeable and who give entertainments, simply with the idea of enjoying themselves," she told her, "it would be too much to expect the girls to take such attentions very seriously and to discourage other admirers. Until her engagement is announced, the girl of many friends is privileged to enjoy the attentions of all who please her."²⁰

The same held true for a man. Provided he wasn't engaged to be married, he was free to associate with whomever he wished among his women friends. But what if a man had committed himself in some *other* way to a particular woman, by professing his love for her, for example? Would he still be permitted to have more than one girlfriend, wondered some readers? In a rare display of inconsistency, Prim Rose provided contradictory advice. In the spring of 1907 she said "yes." "If the man's letters [of reference] are satisfactory in every other way," she told a concerned woman, "the girl need not feel uneasy on hearing of his many girl friends in town.... He may even have another girl correspondent without failing in loyalty to the one he professes to love."²¹ Two weeks later, however, she told another inquirer that "a man is at liberty to cultivate the friendship of a number of girls at the same time before making a choice of one as a life partner" and "until he makes a declaration of love or an offer of marriage, a girl has no right to consider that she is entitled to all his devotion."²² Generally speaking, however, single men and women were not expected to be "faithful" to one another during courtship. Rather, they were expected to "play the field" – to keep their options open – in order to maximize the pool of potential life partners.

i. Chance Encounters

Playing the field was easy enough. The opportunities for romantic interaction prior to and during courtship were, with a few notable exceptions, many and varied.²³ But each came with its own set of rules. The most common interaction was probably the chance encounter, as when couples met on the street or at a social function. If a woman saw one of her male friends on the street, for example, she would not approach him or gesture to him. This would be unladylike. But if he happened to see *her*, and wanted to talk, there would be no harm in her indulging him.²⁴ He would not, however, keep her standing in one spot. Instead, and unless they were close friends, he had to ask permission to accompany her, as in "Will you allow me to walk with you" or "May I come with you?"²⁵ Nor should he forget, upon first meeting her, to bow and raise (or tip) his hat, a gesture of politeness and respect that applied to all heterosexual social encounters.²⁶

Dances and balls were also common venues for chance encounters, with rules governing heterosexual interaction here too. Before a bachelor could approach a female friend, for example, he had to wait for her signal or

recognition – usually a bow or a smile; she could withhold such recognition as a way of “discontinuing an undesirable acquaintance,” said Prim Rose, but should only exercise this right in “extreme cases.”²⁷ Her recognition secured, the man could either begin a conversation or ask her to dance.²⁸ If she accepted, he would be sure to thank her at the end of the dance for the pleasure, and she would respond (as she would after a *skate* with a man) by inclining her head and smiling, or by expressing her enjoyment of the dance. She also made sure not to give more than *three* dances to any man other than her fiancé; to dance “too frequently” with one man, even one’s fiancé, wrote another etiquette adviser, was “ill-mannered and indiscreet.”²⁹ And if she declined, she did so politely, by saying “I am sorry, I am afraid I feel too tired to dance this one,” or “I am sorry, I am engaged [to dance with another].”³⁰ What’s more, she wasn’t supposed to say “no” and then immediately grant the favour to another man. “A girl is not obliged to dance with a partner she dislikes,” explained Prim Rose,

but unless she has good reason to object to him, it would be very rude to excuse herself from dancing with one acquaintance, and directly after to give the dance he asked for to a partner she preferred. Self-denial has to be practiced in the ballroom as elsewhere, and a well-bred girl is careful to wound the feelings of none, though she sometimes has to sacrifice her own pleasure to avoid doing so.³¹

Maud Cooke agreed. “Young ladies must never refuse to dance with one gentleman, and afterward give the same dance to a more favoured suitor,” she said. “Nothing so quickly speaks of ill-breeding as this course.”³² Being a “lady” meant being sensitive to the feelings of others.

In fact, how a woman responded to romantic advances during chance encounters, whether at a dance or elsewhere, was important. First of all, she was expected to respond either formally or informally depending on how well she knew the man. If they were good friends, she could accept the advance with pleasure or reject it with regret unreservedly and informally. If they were mere acquaintances, more formality was in order, as in “I shall be very pleased, Mr. Blank” or “I am sorry, Mr. Blank. I have already made other arrangements. Another time I hope I may have the pleasure.” If she disliked the man and wished to discourage further advances, she needed to be more serious and firm, but without being rude.³³ Second, a woman had

to be friendly and polite at all times. So, for example, “when a man asks for the pleasure of a dance,” Prim Rose told one inquirer,

it is usual to say ‘Yes’, or ‘No’, in the prettiest way you know how. Don’t be afraid to look pleased if you mean to grant the request. A good many young girls make that mistake, but it is not good manners.... The least stiffness or indifference is taken as a hint that his attentions are unwelcome, and he promptly discontinues them to bestow them where they will be more graciously received.³⁴

The same advice applied when a man invited a woman on an outing. “It would be in very poor taste to accept an invitation to a concert in an indifferent manner,” she told another. “A well-bred girl is never afraid of appearing pleased to accept a favour. She thanks a man quite cordially for an invitation to attend any kind of an entertainment, and shows that she is frankly appreciative of his kindness.”³⁵

Clearly Prim Rose was concerned that women not burn their romantic bridges by appearing in any way indifferent to male advances. At a time when women desired marriage above all else, this advice was understandable. Women could not afford to harm their chances through rude, unfriendly, or apathetic behaviour. In fact, the only time a woman should appear standoffish with a man, said Prim Rose, was if he was paying her *insufficient* attention. When “Sorrowful Sue” complained that a male friend had done just that at a recent function, Prim Rose told her to appear “cool and indifferent when the man next attempts to monopolize her society, not seeming angry or resentful, but merely uninterested. A man of that type generally appreciates women in proportion as he finds it difficult to win their favour.”³⁶ In other words, she should “play hard to get.”

ii. Calling

Although chance encounters could occur anytime, they were usually the first step in a romantic relationship. If they went well, they would invariably be followed by more deliberate interaction, usually initiated by the man, in the form of a “date.” Such pre-meditated interaction signalled that a relationship had entered the courtship stage, in which the man became the girl’s suitor. He would normally begin his “suit” by “calling” on a

woman at her home, usually with her prior permission and with her parents present.³⁷ He might try dropping by *without* her permission, if he felt confident he would be well-received, but this was risky and required special measures. “A man may take the risk of calling on a lady whom he has met but once,” wrote Prim Rose, “if her manner has seemed friendly and encouraging,” but if he did, he had to immediately seek her blessing. He might say, for example, “I hope you will not think me very bold to come and see you without asking permission.” If she responded in a “stiff or indifferent” way, he would be wise, said Prim Rose, to “make his visit very brief.”³⁸

A woman *was* permitted to ask a man to call on her, even if she had only met him once, “providing he is known to be a desirable acquaintance.”³⁹ This was one of the few romantic initiatives open to a single woman, and she had two proper ways of doing it: she could either have her mother send an invitation to the man (“very young ladies” do not extend invitations, wrote Maud Cooke) or she could extend the invitation herself, in person, by saying “I would be glad to see you at my home” on a particular day, or “I should like you to meet my mother (or father).”⁴⁰ Either way, the man was expected to visit no later than a week after the invitation, or risk appearing discourteous.⁴¹

As for the visit itself, Prim Rose (and others) had little to say. What she did say, however, was directed largely at the woman. It was the woman’s role, for example, to play the gracious and doting host. “He should be made at home in your household, and visit you in your own living room” or “drawing room,” she told a “High School Girl,” and he should be entertained in ways intended to secure his continued interest:

Some [men] enjoy a quiet game of cards or chess, and others are happiest discussing a favourite hobby – football, or snapshotting, music, art or literature. Find out their preferences and indulge them. Give them nice things to eat... Admire their new hats and their neckties and ask their advice.⁴²

The couple could also use the occasion to discuss future outings together, “with mother to help in the planning, and to say when the party shall be made up of three people [i.e. chaperoned] and when it need only be of two.”⁴³ What’s more, if the visit occurred during the evening, the couple had to be supervised by a member of the girl’s family, a point on which Prim Rose



In the pre-war years, “calling” was the most common method of courtship. Here, Saskatchewan’s Joe Zeman is “going courting.”
Library and Archives Canada, Fred Taylor, Joe Zeman Collection, C-030797.

was firm: “If there is a mutual attachment between the young people, and if it meets with the approval of her family, they may sometimes be left for half-an-hour or so together, but under no circumstances should their elders retire for the night leaving them in the drawing-room unchaperoned.”⁴⁴ For the same reason, one manual advised women living on their own, in a boarding house, to receive male callers in the “public drawing room” instead of their living quarters.⁴⁵

At the end of the visit, and if the woman had enjoyed the man’s company, she could suggest, as part of her farewell greeting, a return visit; she might say “Good bye and come again,” for example. Such an invitation, however, should probably come from the woman’s mother, who could also disallow any future visits if she felt the man was unsuitable based on his “appearance, manners, or occupation.”⁴⁶ Either way, the woman would not escort her gentleman caller to the front door – “it is in bad taste for her to go any further than the drawing-room door with him,” observed *Manners* – except if he was an “intimate” friend or the front door was difficult to open.⁴⁷



A typical pre-war “date” for a young Ontario couple: spending time decorously in the family parlour, within view and earshot of the woman’s parents or older siblings. *Courtesy Archives of Ontario, C 7-2-0-2-11.*

Women, however, did not call on men, except for “business” purposes – if the man was a colleague or employer – or if she had received an invitation from the man’s parents.⁴⁸ Otherwise, any visit to a bachelor’s home would entail a loss of “respect” for the woman, even if she was his fiancée. “A lady may always call on another lady with whom she is on calling terms,” stated Prim Rose, “but she must never call on a man under any circumstances, outside of business.... If the object of the visit is to see the bachelor friend residing in the house, it would be an undignified proceeding, resulting in loss of respect on the part of those taking cognizance of the matter.”⁴⁹ The only way a single woman could get away with such a visit was with a bit of deception. She could, for example, make such a visit on the pretext of calling on a “lady friend,” such as the man’s mother or sister. This, said Prim Rose, was acceptable.⁵⁰ Of course where a bachelor lived *alone*, any visit would be scandalous. “An invitation under those circumstances,” warned Prim Rose, “would be an insult,” and “a young girl who



Two hopeful eastern Ontario maidens await gentleman callers in the parlour of their home. *Courtesy Archives of Ontario, C 130-5-0-0-138.*

would accept such an invitation would forfeit the esteem and respect of all her acquaintances.”⁵¹

iii. Dating

The other main courtship ritual was, of course, going out on a “date.” And again, the experts told men to take the initiative. This was, in part, a practical matter: most women lacked the means to ask men out on dates involving any expense and could not simply assume their dates would pay. But mostly it was a matter of custom. So men did the asking. Prim Rose didn’t specify how men should go about doing this – presumably a verbal request was enough – but Cooke, writing a full decade earlier, advised a formal invitation, “written in the third-person, upon white note-paper of the best quality, with an envelope to match,” to which the woman was expected to respond immediately, also in writing.⁵²

For most middle- and upper-class couples, a date usually meant going to dinner, the theatre, a dance, a concert, on a walk or drive, or for a skate. For such public outings, Prim Rose laid down a number of general rules. When out for a walk, for example, men should walk closest to the road or curb, thereby leaving the safer side to the woman.⁵³ For largely the same reason – “the convenience and protection of the lady” – they were to lead the way in certain situations, such as getting off the streetcar first to help the woman dismount, and locating seats in church or at the theatre.⁵⁴

In other instances, male leadership was meant to preserve the supposedly delicate female ego. One etiquette manual recommended that in restaurants, for example, the man should do all the ordering, to save his date “the slight embarrassment it may be for her to make her own selection.”⁵⁵ A man escorting a woman to a dance was told to be equally attentive to his date’s feelings. Not only would he make sure to dance the first dance with her, as well as the one immediately before supper, but at all other times he would find suitable dance partners for her; he would also make sure not to dance with another woman unless his date was also on the dance floor or engaged in conversation elsewhere. At no time, in other words, should he appear to be neglecting her.⁵⁶

Typical of the modest Victorian mindset, the experts also instructed couples to be “reserved” in public. Cooke was blunt on this point. “There is no surer mark of a well-bred man or woman,” she said, “than proper and dignified conduct in public.... Loud and boisterous talking, immoderate

laughing and forward and pushing conduct are always marks of bad breeding," particularly in women.⁵⁷ Prim Rose offered similar advice. "A young girl should walk most circumspectly on the street," she told a "Bonny Lady," "especially when with a companion of the other sex. It should be impossible from their demeanor for a stranger to determine the relationship between them."⁵⁸ As a further sign of modesty, the experts told men and women not to address each other by their first names. "It does not do a girl any harm to build a little wall of reserve around herself," explained Prim Rose, "and the free use of Christian names should be avoided except in the case of intimate friends," or if the couple was engaged.⁵⁹

iv. Conversation

Rules existed even for courtship conversation, and, like so many other aspects of romance etiquette, they applied especially to women. Basically, the etiquette gurus told women to be seen and not heard. "The usual topics of conversation among young men and women," wrote Prim Rose, "are their favourite amusements and occupations. Most men like to talk about themselves, and a woman needs only to be a willing and sympathetic listener to earn their admiration."⁶⁰ It was even more important a woman not appear too bright. Appearing knowledgeable was fine, she told a "Country Girl," but

in society ... earnest conversation on profound subjects is not encouraged. One is expected to be cheerful, sympathetic and entertaining, rather than instructive. A sense of humour is the most valuable asset for any one seeking popularity. Most young men like simpler cordial hospitality and a cheerful attitude towards life in general. They also like to speak of themselves – to a sympathetic listener.⁶¹

She advised women to receive compliments in cordial silence as well. "The most graceful way to receive a compliment," she said, "is in silence, but with a smile and slight inclination of the head by way of acknowledgment."⁶² At least one manual also spoke of certain "conversational sins" women should avoid. "Young ladies, especially," wrote Cooke, "should beware of establishing any reputation for punning," and "the too common habit of

exaggeration, on the part of so many school girls and young ladies, is also to be deplored.” The speech of “true ladies,” after all, was unobtrusive.⁶³

v. Gift-giving

Prim Rose had a lot more to say about another romantic exchange: gift-giving. Both the giver and (especially) the gift were important considerations. As regards the giver, the etiquette followed a predictable pattern: it was the man who generally did the giving. On this point, Prim Rose was clear: “A lady should not send a gift, however trifling, to a gentleman unless the conditions are unusual, as when she is under obligation to him which she is unable to repay... Ordinarily a lady would not send a gift to an acquaintance or even a friend of the other sex unless she were engaged to him.”⁶⁴ Nor should a woman return the favour. If a boyfriend gave her a card or present on her birthday, for example, she might respond simply by inviting him to her home – nothing more. Only if she knew him “very well” might she give him a gift, and then only on a special occasion, like his birthday or Christmas. What’s more, the gift had to be both practical and, well, manly. A nice store-bought handkerchief would do fine, said Prim Rose. So would a “silver pencil or penholder.” Women did a lot of sewing then, so a piece of handiwork would also do, provided it was not “fancy work,” but “something plain and solid, without frills and fusses to make him say, ‘What on earth is it?’ – perhaps a silk tie, or towels, or “strong sofa pillows.”⁶⁵

Men had to be careful too. First they had to ask themselves, “Should I send a gift?” After all, giving a single woman a gift usually implied a serious romantic commitment. Even a small “thank you” gift, like a bouquet of flowers or a book, in appreciation for having been entertained in her home, could easily be misinterpreted as a desire for marriage. As Prim Rose explained, “many girls, as well as their mothers, too readily assume that an act of courtesy is the beginning of courtship.”⁶⁶

Before sending a gift, therefore, young men who valued their “single blessedness” should make their intentions clear to either the woman or her mother. If a man *was* interested in courtship, however, he next had to ask himself (or Prim Rose), “What kind of gift should I give?” Again, the rule was clear: during the courtship stage, the gift should be small and inexpensive. “A young man’s gifts to a girl,” wrote Prim Rose, “might be a book, music, flowers, a picture, perhaps any odd little curio the shops show....

And is it necessary to add to the list ‘candies’, chocolates, all sorts of goodies in dainty boxes? There may be a girl who would not be pleased with the latter, but she doesn’t live in Canada.”⁶⁷ Valuable gifts, such as jewellery or clothing, however, were out of the question, except if the couple was engaged. “A well-brought-up girl does not accept presents of any value from young men,” asserted Prim Rose, “nor do well-brought-up young men take the liberty of offering them.”⁶⁸ Why, she never said, but she did imply that such gifts were too “personal” and that jewellery, in particular, was almost the equivalent of an engagement ring. Unstated, perhaps, is the concern that a man who gave valuable gifts to his girlfriend expected certain *physical* favours in return, and that a woman who accepted such gifts would feel pressured to oblige. Such an arrangement would look like prostitution, or “occasional prostitution,” as the middle-class moral reformers of the era liked to call it.⁶⁹

vi. Chaperones

The most important aspect of courtship etiquette, however, was chaperonage: having a third person – usually an older sister or mother – accompany the couple in public. Or as Prim Rose put it, simply: “in society a young girl is not allowed to appear at any function in the company of a young man friend without a chaperone, even in the day time.”⁷⁰ In lieu of a chaperone, being part of a group of young men and women on an outing would suffice, as there would be little chance of the couple being alone; the other members of the group would, in effect, constitute the chaperonage.⁷¹ The only other time a couple could dispense with the chaperone was if they were well-enough acquainted and merely wished to take a walk together – provided it was still light out. The chaperone rule only applied, however, to “well-bred” women “in good society” and not to “girls of a common class,” as long as the latter felt comfortable with the arrangement.⁷² “If the young people are not in society,” said Prim Rose, “the services of a chaperone [may be] dispensed with, but only if there is reason to feel the highest confidence in the man.”⁷³ Widows were also exempt.

But why was chaperonage necessary at all? Judging from the number of times Prim Rose had to explain the rule, this was obviously something many young readers wondered about. It was necessary, she explained, for several reasons: first, it provided a woman with protection, from unscrupulous suitors making unwanted and inappropriate physical advances, and



Here, against the spectacular backdrop of romantic Niagara Falls in 1907, William James Sr. and “friend” stroll together, but respectfully apart. The gentleman following close behind may be their chaperone, unless the couple was well enough acquainted to be without one. *Courtesy City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1244, Item 3506.*



Where couples went courting with other couples, the chaperone rule could be relaxed. “Group courtship” scenes such as this group picnic in Ottawa were common in pre-war Canada. *Library and Archives Canada, James or May Ballantyne, James Ballantyne Fonds, PA-133794.*

also from her *own* “thoughtlessness” or “recklessness”; this would explain Prim Rose’s emphasis (and that of certain etiquette books) on the need for chaperones “after dark” especially.⁷⁴ Second, chaperones preserved a woman’s image of chastity. Prim Rose was cryptic on this point, merely telling women that it was not “good form” for them to be seen in public with men, unchaperoned, and that they risked losing suitors’ “respect” if they were. But the author of *Manners* was more specific. In her advice to single women who went on bicycle rides with men, she warned that true ladies didn’t “ride off alone after dark, nor take long rides in the evening attended only by an escort,” and during *daylight* hours “will avoid stopping to rest under the trees and in out of the way places, [for] ... too much care cannot be taken, especially by young girls, as to appearances.”⁷⁵

Most important, chaperonage protected a woman's reputation. Because appearing in public with a male acquaintance, unchaperoned, was a *faux pas* in higher social circles – it was considered undignified – a chaperoned outing precluded any gossip or unflattering comments from the woman's female friends. Such comments could harm the woman's social standing and, in turn, alienate other suitors. A "common girl," on the other hand, had little social standing to lose and so had more freedom in this respect. Even so, warned Prim Rose, if such a woman had any ambitions at all to climb the social ladder, she had best abide by the chaperone rule or else risk facing the gossip and its results. "It must always be borne in mind," she wrote, "that a girl who adopts the manners or the usages of 'Bohemia' cannot expect to be approved of by conventional mothers and daughters, so she must be prepared to take the consequences of exclusion from their society."⁷⁶

At no time was the chaperone rule more important than when a man invited a woman to go for a "drive" in his car. As the popularity of automobiles spread and they became, in effect, mobile "Love Seats" – one critic called them "house[s] of prostitution on wheels" – they eventually shouldered much of the blame for the so-called decline of adolescent morality. But even when the automobile was in its infancy, Canadians understood its romantic possibilities and "perils." Certainly Prim Rose did, for she made a point of emphasizing that single women of *all* classes should never accompany men on automobile drives without a chaperone, especially after dark. "It may be perfectly safe," she said, "or it may not. The risk is too great to be incurred except in some emergency" and "many a girl has bitterly rued her own imprudence in this direction."⁷⁷

Just as perilous as too few people on a driving date was too *many*. A crowded automobile, Prim Rose insisted, was rife with danger. First of all, it posed a hazard to a woman's dignity. "Under no circumstances – short of an earthquake – should two girls agree to drive with two men in a one-seated vehicle," she asserted, for "to do so would be to forfeit their own self-respect and the respect of their companions."⁷⁸ Furthermore, the physical closeness of the vehicle's mixed-company occupants presented a *moral* hazard:

The practice of overcrowding a small vehicle is a very reprehensible one. There is nothing to recommend it. It is uncomfortable, undignified, and dangerous.... No really nice girl

image not available

In the pre-war years, Prim Rose considered unchaperoned automobile outings such as this morally dangerous and advised young women against them. *Courtesy Glenbow Archives, NA-1665-7.*

would countenance such an arrangement as sitting on the knee of another person in a carriage, nor would she allow any one but a child to sit on her knee.⁷⁹

Either way, such transgressions debased a woman's reputation and weakened her marital prospects.⁸⁰

vii. Physical Intimacy

If a concern about physical intimacy lay behind part of the chaperonage rule, it also coloured much of courtship etiquette in general. Generally speaking, any physical contact between single men and women (or "familiarity," as it was called), prior to engagement, was strictly forbidden; "it is considered vulgar to reveal any sign of intimacy in public," wrote Prim Rose.⁸¹ This included even the benign act of walking arm-in-arm. The



The physical distance between the bachelors and maidens of these Ontario couples says much about the prudishness of the pre-war years. Physical contact between unmarried couples was unacceptable, especially in public. *Courtesy Archives of Ontario, C 130-5-0-0-108.*

only time a “well-bred” woman could accept a man’s arm was after dark, when few could witness such a brazen display of intimacy, and only if her escort was protecting her from some hazard, such as a slippery pavement or a crowd, or if she was debilitated in some way; even in such “emergencies,” a woman would not take a man’s arm, but would wait until it was offered. And when crossing the street, she added, a man “should not touch a woman’s arm to assist her, unless she is old or infirm or there is danger.”⁸² The rules were only slightly more lenient for engaged couples. “After dark, a man walking with his fiancée may take her arm,” said Prim Rose, “as this gives a slight assistance to a lady,” but “he would do so in a dignified way, not as if he were caressing her, which would be very bad form and would make her appear common. It would be unpardonable to put his arm around her waist in any public place.”⁸³ In short, and except for dancing – which most Canadians considered good, clean fun – the arbiters of romance strongly discouraged public displays of physical contact between men and women, particularly in the light of day.⁸⁴

Of course, Prim Rose and the others found more amorous forms of physical contact, public or otherwise, even less tolerable. Kissing, for example, was “an unpardonable familiarity before an engagement,” she snapped, and “very few men would care to become engaged to a girl who would countenance it”; the same went for holding hands, hugging, and caressing.⁸⁵ These were really the outer limits of the “physical liberties” most couples contemplated, and from the many inquiries she received on the subject, Prim Rose was well aware that many couples wanted to take them. She was aware, in particular, that men were making physical advances on their girlfriends, or pressuring them to engage in certain activities, and that they were not sure how to respond. A young Ontario woman, for example, complained to Prim Rose about the “familiarity” shown by a male friend. “I prefer my young man to help me when help is necessary,” she wrote, but “otherwise I prefer him to keep his hands off. Am I right or wrong, and how shall I tell him?”⁸⁶ Prim Rose was outraged:

Only a vulgar or an unprincipled man attempts familiarity towards a young girl to whom he is not engaged. A gentleman or any well-brought up youth feels too deep a respect for any girl whom he likes or admires to urge her to do anything unbecoming or of which her parents would disapprove. It is regrettably true that many frivolous and unscrupulous men do

not hesitate to assume a lover-like attitude to trusting and ignorant girls, who are too ready to be deceived by a man paying them such attentions.⁸⁷

In other words, a “well-bred man” would not make physical demands of his girlfriend. He wouldn’t even *ask* a woman he wasn’t engaged to if, for example, he could kiss her. This would be “equivalent to an insult.”⁸⁸

At the same time, Prim Rose encouraged women to resist their boy-friends’ pressure and to rebuff any physical advances. “Before her engagement,” she told one inquirer, “a self-respecting girl will not allow a young man to indulge in any familiarities whatever, such as holding her hand, putting his arm around her, etc.”⁸⁹ If she did, the consequences could be dire:

It is true that many girls in sheer innocence and ignorance of possible consequences think it is ‘just fun’ to be kissed or caressed by a young man when no one is looking. Unfortunately, the ‘fun’ often leads to bitter repentance and heartbreakings, and when too late the girl would give worlds to undo the harm wrought in the first moment of folly.⁹⁰

Prim Rose even told women how to respond to unwanted advances. “A girl can easily check the least tendency to undue familiarity,” she explained, “by merely looking surprised and bringing the interview to as speedy a termination as possible. If a man has merely been indiscreet and thoughtless, he will promptly apologize when reminded of his fault”; if this fails, she should simply “tell him plainly, [and] he will most likely see the matter as you wish him to.”⁹¹ “But what if he ends the courtship because of her stance?,” asked several women. Not to worry, Prim Rose assured them, for such a man is not worth having. “The man who fails to appreciate and honour and safeguard the innocence and delicacy of feeling of a young girl before their engagement,” she said, “will certainly not make a model husband.”⁹² Nor could he care much for his girlfriend – other than physically – if he is willing to end the relationship over the issue. If he is truly a gentleman, however, he will respect her all the more for her stance, for her “modesty and dignity.”⁹³

More interesting are the reasons Prim Rose gave for her advice: by withholding physical affection until she was engaged, a woman found out

if her suitor really cared for her, or if he was only interested in physical gratification. She also avoided the “humiliation” that would inevitably follow from granting physical liberties to a man she did not eventually marry, as well as the perception that she was – to use an opprobrious modern term – “used goods.”⁹⁴ Most important, said Prim Rose, physical abstention preserved a woman’s “honour” and “dignity,” and therefore her image in the eyes of her suitor and potential suitors; to all concerned, she remained “a lady.” Permitting physical contact, however, made her appear “coarse-minded” or “common,” “as if she belonged to quite a different class.”⁹⁵

But for all of her talk about women protecting their honour, dignity, modesty, and innocence, by denying their boyfriends physical pleasures, this wasn’t the main reason for Prim Rose’s advice. If it were, she would not have made the distinction between engaged and pre-engaged couples – condoning some “familiarity” for the former, but not the latter – for surely a woman’s modesty, innocence, and so on, were equally vulnerable in either case. Rather, she told women to withhold physical favours mainly to better their chances of securing a marriage proposal. As she told one inquirer, “when a man realizes that the only way to acquire the right to kiss the girl he loves is by becoming formally engaged to her, he will not take long to secure the right.”⁹⁶ “Nothing hastens an engagement,” she told another correspondent, “like a determination on the girl’s part to withhold all the privileges claimed by a lover until an offer of marriage has been made and accepted.”⁹⁷ In other words, Prim Rose advised women to use their bodies as bait to elicit a marriage commitment from men.

viii. Correspondence

Almost as unacceptable as physical intimacy during courtship was the exchange of letters. “It is better that a man and woman should not correspond until they are engaged to be married,” said Prim Rose, “or at least have an understanding.”⁹⁸ This was necessary for the woman’s protection. Letters, after all, represented a permanent record of an association, and certain associations could prove embarrassing to an unsuspecting woman – if the man turned out to be an unsavoury character, for example. So might the letters’ more *personal* contents, which could come to light long after the woman’s feelings and the relationship had changed. “Some young men” might also share the contents of their girlfriend’s letters with other men. This, too, could prove embarrassing.⁹⁹

If an unengaged couple did begin corresponding, however, they had to observe a particular etiquette. In fact, the rules governing this simple ritual were excessive, even by the fastidious standards of the day. "In writing letters," noted one etiquette manual, "certain and specific rules of etiquette ... hold *despotic sway*, and unless one is acquainted with these, he must be considered by those who are, as more or less uncultivated."¹⁰⁰ To begin with, the man was expected to initiate the process. Either he would ask the woman, in person, to write to him or, more likely, he would write first, usually after first getting her permission to do so.¹⁰¹ A woman, however, would never ask a man to write to her; this "would be rather lacking in delicacy and good taste" said Prim Rose. Nor would she *open* a correspondence with a man, "except in some emergency," such as "unconquerable shyness" on the man's part; otherwise, "only a foolish girl seeks to begin a correspondence with a man friend."¹⁰²

Before a woman could begin what was, in effect, a correspondence courtship, however, she had to get permission from her parents, who were responsible for protecting her from undesirable suitors; this was especially necessary when the relationship was primarily a long-distance one and where the man was unknown in the woman's community. She had to make sure, as well, to write nothing in her letters "to which they [her parents] might take exception" and had to allow her parents to read the letters she received, at least until she was twenty-five.¹⁰³ Even so, Prim Rose advised unengaged couples to exchange letters no more than "once or twice a month."¹⁰⁴

Just as important were the contents of the letters. Men were instructed to be courteous and respectful, as always, but women were told to be this, and more. In particular, they were told to be dignified and reserved at all times, which essentially meant avoiding personal comments, gossip, and jokes. "The only way a lady might injure herself by writing letters," wrote Prim Rose, "is to descend to flippancy, familiarity, or personalities such as are only permissible among relatives or very intimate friends. But a 'lady' does not usually forget her dignity to that extent."¹⁰⁵ In another instance, Prim Rose told an inquirer that "in writing to a man, the greatest reserve and delicacy should be maintained. This does not mean that a letter should be stiff and formal. It may be cheery and amusing, but not undignified, familiar, or sentimental."¹⁰⁶ A letter of the wrong sort would not only reflect badly on the woman, making her appear less than ladylike, but might also come back to haunt her. "The occasional note, gracefully worded, may

be safely sent to any male acquaintance or friend,” suggested Prim Rose, but a letter that “becomes confidential or intimate may be produced at an inconvenient time.”¹⁰⁷ She gave no examples, but implied that a woman’s documented feelings might one day be used against her, after those feelings had changed.

For reasons unstated, Prim Rose also advised *men* to be somewhat reserved in their letters. The letters should be “friendly, but formal,” she said, and offered the following sample:

Dear Miss Brown,

You were kind enough to say I might write to you, and I am glad to avail myself of the privilege. First, I must thank you and all the family for the charming hospitality which made my visit to your home such a real pleasure.... Since my return I have been hard at work, etc, etc....

Please give my regards to your family. I hope for the honour of a reply before long....

Your sincerely,
Mr. Blank¹⁰⁸

The opening and closing of such a letter, however, depended on the degree of intimacy between the couple. Unless the woman had granted her suitor the privilege of addressing her by her Christian name, he would open with “Dear” so-and-so and would close with “Yours sincerely” or “Yours faithfully,” except where the couple was close, in which case he would sign it “Yours very faithfully,” or “With love, yours affectionately”; presumably a woman had the right to do the same.¹⁰⁹ And as far as when he might expect a reply, he should be patient. “A lady is not expected to reply as promptly as a man,” she told one anxious fellow, “so no offence should be taken if two or even three weeks elapse without bringing the desired missive.”¹¹⁰

Perhaps the strangest rule Prim Rose felt obliged to emphasize concerned women giving photographs of themselves to their suitors, or being photographed with them. She strongly advised against both practices. Her explanation, however, was unclear. “Giving one’s photograph to a young man is ... a very foolish act,” she told “Motherless Jane”:

Its usual fate is to be displayed on his dressing-table with a number of others, or to be thrown in a bureau drawer where it is soon forgotten – or occasionally inspected by a curious chambermaid.... Girls should keep this fact in mind. It will help them to be prudent about scattering proofs of their regard in various directions.¹¹¹

What Prim Rose was probably saying is that a lady's *image* – like a lady herself – should not be treated so cavalierly. More understandable was her warning about being photographed with a man. Should the man be found to be unsavoury, such a photograph could prove awkward or embarrassing. “Not long ago I was shown a photograph of a defaulting bank employee in a group with two young girls,” she wrote. “The authorities were trying to trace his whereabouts by following up his connection with these girls – rather an unpleasant situation for the latter to find themselves in.”¹¹² In short, a single woman, especially one “aspiring to social recognition,” had to exercise great caution in the presence of a camera and should only give her picture to her fiancé or a near relative.¹¹³

ENGAGEMENT

After courtship came engagement. After all, when a man began courting a woman, everyone expected he would eventually propose marriage and that she would agree. When a woman accepted a man's invitation to accompany him on various outings, noted Prim Rose, it was “an indication that his suit is favoured and he may take an early opportunity of making a formal offer of marriage.”¹¹⁴ Indeed “it would be an impertinence to ask the consent of the parents to court their daughter and subsequently to decide that the girl would not do for a wife.”¹¹⁵ Courtship, in other words, was a serious business; once entered into, it was an almost certain prelude to marriage.

When a suitor was “quite sure” of his feelings towards his girlfriend, and those of his girlfriend towards him, and provided he was (or would soon be) in a position to *support* a wife, he would profess his love for her and propose marriage.¹¹⁶ What's more, he would not be vague about his feelings and would not usually do one without the other. “It is not fair to a girl to make love to her without becoming engaged,” Prim Rose told a “Bashful Bachelor,” and “a man should not be faint-hearted about his wooing, [for]

nothing pleases a woman more than a straightforward avowal of love and admiration for her.”¹¹⁷ He was also expected to do these things without delay. There was, after all, his girlfriend’s *health* to consider. “A long period of suspense and uncertainty,” wrote Prim Rose, without elaborating, “is very injurious to a girl’s health and spirits.”¹¹⁸ It could also prove harmful in other respects:

When a man’s attentions to a girl become marked so that their names are coupled together and other men kept at a distance, it is quite time for him to reveal his intentions. It is very embarrassing for a girl to be unable to say whether a devoted admirer is in love with her or not, and it is unfair to spoil the chances of other men and perhaps prevent the girl from making a satisfactory marriage.¹¹⁹

Prim Rose also considered an expeditious proposal a show of respect. “Kubelik, the violinist, was engaged to his present wife ten minutes after he was introduced to her,” she told one writer. “The average man makes up his mind more slowly, but the sooner he offers marriage to the girl of his choice, the higher the compliment to the lady.”¹²⁰

As for the proposal itself, “it is a very simple thing,” she said. “All that is necessary is to tell the girl you love her very much and want her to be your wife.” The man might say, for example, “Mary, you know I love you. Do you think you could be happy as my wife?” or “I love you better than any one else in the world. I want you for my wife.”¹²¹ If the woman said “no,” she should be courteous about it and also provide an explanation. Cooke’s counsel was similar. “A woman must always remember that a proposal of marriage is the highest honour a man can pay her, and, if she must refuse it, to do so in such a fashion as to spare his feelings as much as possible.”¹²² If the proposal took her by surprise and she was unsure how to respond, she should defer her answer, telling her suitor that “the matter is too important to be decided without reflection.”¹²³ Even so, said Prim Rose, her suitor would be fully justified in ending the relationship and directing his affections elsewhere.

If the woman said “yes,” but was under twenty-one – the age of majority – the man then needed the consent of her parents. This consent was likely a formality, for had the parents disapproved of him as a potential son-in-law they would have made their feelings known early in the courtship.¹²⁴

Nevertheless, said Prim Rose, he had to observe a certain etiquette. In his meeting with the parents, and without his fiancée present,

the man states simply that he has had the good fortune to win her affections, and that he hopes for the approval of her parents. He then gives an account of his position and prospects, mentions how soon he will be ready to marry, and describes briefly the kind of home he expects to offer his bride. If the parents decide favourably, he thanks them and asks to be allowed to make known their decision to his fiancée at once. It is customary after a few words of congratulation, to leave the young couple together to enjoy their new happiness and to seal the engagement in the time-honoured way.¹²⁵

But parents could withhold their consent, if they felt, for example, that the man was incapable of supporting their daughter. They might also do so if they felt the period of engagement was too long. “A girl’s family are naturally opposed to a long engagement,” wrote Prim Rose. “It is inconvenient for them in many ways, and makes the girl a subject for gossip and comment to an extent that becomes very tiresome to her relations”; generally speaking, anything more than a year was too long.¹²⁶ And whether or not the underage daughter agreed with her parents’ decision, she would have no choice but to abide by it and retract her acceptance of the marriage proposal.

When a woman turned twenty-one, of course, she no longer needed her parents’ consent to marry. But Prim Rose advised her to seek this consent anyway, out of love and respect for them, especially if she still lived at home. If her parents disapproved of the engagement, but for reasons the daughter felt were poor, she should feel free to marry without their consent. If, however, she considered her parents’ objections valid, she should “at least wait for some time to see whether it will be possible for her to give up the lover who is considered unworthy of her.”¹²⁷ Either way, securing the approval of a woman’s parents to the union was an indispensable ritual, regardless of her age or living circumstances.¹²⁸

With parental approval secured, and within a day or two after the proposal, the man would then give his fiancée an engagement ring. The ring was a visible reminder of the couple’s duty to one another as well as a signal to others of their bond. Prim Rose did not recommend, however, that the

woman choose the ring, “as she would naturally select the most costly one shown by the jeweler, and perhaps one beyond the means of the buyer.”¹²⁹ Once purchased, the man was to give the ring to his fiancée informally, quietly slipping it on the third finger of her left hand “the first time the lovers meet tête-à-tête after their engagement has been sanctioned by the girl’s parents.”¹³⁰ Only then would the man inform his own family of the engagement. They would, in turn, congratulate his fiancée, either in writing or in person, and welcome her into the family. Otherwise no official announcement was made, and no formal affair or reception was held to mark the occasion. Relatives and friends of the couple would be told of the engagement informally, through notes or in person, and could either visit the bride or send congratulatory cards or flowers.¹³¹

Once a couple became engaged, the rules of romance changed. Because each was now more firmly bound to the other, for example, they were not permitted to “pay or accept attentions” from the opposite sex as much as before.¹³² “When a girl becomes engaged,” explained Prim Rose,

she *usually* declines the attentions of her other men friends, giving her fiancé the preference on every occasion. When he is not at liberty to accompany her, she may accept an offer of escort from an intimate friend, but not from the same friend on *successive* occasions, as that might cause jealousy or even gossip.... [And] it would not be fair to her fiancé if a girl received young men visitors *frequently* alone. Neither should she carry on a *regular* correspondence with other young men.¹³³

An engaged man was bound by the same restriction. At dances, for example, he could not dance with any woman he pleased. In particular, he could not appear to be courting another woman. So if his fiancée was dancing with another man, and “if he wishes to flatter ... [her],” said Prim Rose, “he will devote himself to the elder ladies, or to the quiet girls who are not much in request.” He could only dance with the “prettiest” and “gayist” girls if they were the hosts.¹³⁴

Although engaged couples surrendered certain freedoms, they gained others: they could call each other by their given names, exchange photographs of themselves, correspond freely and less formally, and could see each other without a chaperone.¹³⁵ The gift-giving rule changed too. The man still did most of the gift-giving, but the more expensive and personal

items were no longer off-limits. He could now give his fiancée “kid gloves, a lace handkerchief, articles of jewellery, silver accessories for the work bag, dressing-table, or desk, a handsome purse or shopping bag, a dainty clock, a silver photo frame, a cut glass flower vase, or any dainty article which he thinks she will like.”¹³⁶ Prim Rose said nothing about what a woman could give her fiancé – presumably something small, but manly, as before – but engagement clearly had its material advantages.

One area where the rules of engagement changed little was physical intimacy. Here men were still expected to take the initiative. “Even when engaged, a well-bred girl never makes advances to her future husband,” wrote Prim Rose. “Modesty and a becoming reserve should characterize all her actions. It is the man’s part to take the initiative,” and for her “to invite endearments would probably displease, and certainly disappoint him.”¹³⁷ Not that Prim Rose *encouraged* male initiative. Despite her belief that women should reward their boyfriends physically for proposing marriage, she placed strict limits on what those rewards should be. Some hand-holding and kissing was fine – “a certain amount of silliness is allowed to engaged couples” she told one reader¹³⁸ – but overt and excessive displays of affection were inappropriate for true gentlemen and ladies. She advised engaged couples, when amongst others, “to act with discretion”:

It is quite possible for a man to show every conceivable attention to his fiancée, and yet avoid committing the slightest offence against good taste. Without being capricious or exacting, an engaged girl should maintain a pleasing reserve, and cultivate in herself the deeper graces of true sympathy.¹³⁹

Even in private, said Prim Rose, a woman should be “incessantly watchful and firm” in dealing with the inevitable male quest for physical gratification.¹⁴⁰ If she wasn’t, she would forfeit her fiancé’s respect and drive him away. “In most European countries an engaged man would not dare to ask the privileges which a fiancé in England and America claims as a matter of course,” she told one inquirer, and

if a girl permitted or encouraged him to do so, she would forfeit his respect and he would not care to marry her. Our conventions are not so strict, and parents seem to take for granted that after engagement a young man may kiss and caress his

sweetheart as often as he feels inclined to do so. Too much freedom in this direction is undesirable and dangerous. A girl who does not wish to cheapen herself in the eyes of her love will be modest and reserved during the whole period of engagement, so that her bridegroom will indeed be eager for his wedding day.¹⁴¹

As for sexual intercourse, she told engaged couples they should wait until their wedding day. Couples should “not ... anticipate the happiness which it will be theirs to enjoy unreservedly after marriage,” and men who expected their fiancées to have sex with them before then were thinking only of their own selfish needs.¹⁴²

DISENGAGEMENT

Sometimes, however, the much-anticipated day never came. Although engagement was almost always followed by marriage, engagements could be broken. If the man's financial prospects changed, for example, the woman might reconsider her commitment or her parents might withdraw their consent. If one of the partners refused to stop seeing, or corresponding with, members of the opposite sex, this, too, was grounds for disengagement.¹⁴³ Or perhaps the feelings of one, or both, of the partners had changed; and as Prim Rose said, “no self-respecting man or woman ... wants to be deceived by a continued pretense of love that has ceased to exist.”¹⁴⁴ Nor should a man or woman's commitment to marry someone for whom their feelings had changed come before their long-term happiness. Better to remain single, she told readers, “than in an unfortunate union which is bound to grow more and more irksome as the years go by.”¹⁴⁵

Fortunately for all concerned, the process of disengagement was governed (for once) by a few simple rules. It was to be effected, first of all, by a gracious letter from either person. This letter “should be very carefully worded to produce an effect of kindness and dignity,” explained Prim Rose:

If the man takes the initiative, the note should breathe deep respect for the lady, and express regret for the pain the contents may cause her. The writer should also thank her for the

confidence reposed in him and other past favours, and ask to be permitted to wish her much future happiness and to have the privilege of serving her as a friend on any occasion his services may be required.¹⁴⁶

“If a quarrel has preceded the final rupture,” she hastened to add, “the working of the note will be more formal.”¹⁴⁷ Prim Rose said nothing more about the note’s contents, but Cooke felt that a *woman* who broke an engagement might want to cite her reasons, so as to not seem capricious, whereas a man should do so only if the reason was a change in his financial circumstances; blaming his fiancée for his decision would be unchivalrous.¹⁴⁸ The engagement broken, the woman would then collect the gifts her fiancé had given her and return them to him “by special messenger or by express”; he would, in turn, acknowledge receipt of these gifts.¹⁴⁹ Each person would then be free to go their separate way.



What, then, can be said about romance etiquette before the Great War? It was certainly complex. The Victorian and early Edwardian years were known for their ornateness and clutter – in style, in decor, in manners – and romance etiquette was no exception. The long list of rules also illustrates the era’s fondness for regulating personal behaviour, particularly morals.¹⁵⁰ As a result, almost every aspect of romance was subjected to a specific code of behaviour, from how a couple behaved on a date to their exchange of letters, gifts, and conversation. To the young men and women of the time, especially those in the highest social circles, the legalities of romance must have seemed truly daunting.

More important is what these rules tell us about the assumptions of those who promoted and, in turn, followed them. These individuals assumed, for example, that men should take the initiative. As Prim Rose said more than once, “a man always likes and respects a woman much more for letting him go more than half-way in making any advances.”¹⁵¹ So it was up to bachelors to initiate relationships, courtship, gift-giving, correspondence, physical intimacy, and engagement; men made the moves, women responded. Perhaps this was to be expected in a highly paternalistic social

order, where men came first, both by law and by custom. More likely, men took the initiative because they revered women for their supposedly innate special qualities, like compassion and moral rectitude. A true “ladylike” woman was, therefore, a prize to be pursued, and, while in their presence, said Prim Rose, men were to adopt an attitude of “extreme respect and deference under all circumstances.”¹⁵² Because Canadian society considered the average woman almost royalty, in other words, it was natural that men did the “wooing.”

Given the exalted position of women, and their presumed frailty and innocence, the rule-makers and their followers also assumed that single women needed protection. They needed protection against dangers to their person. So men were expected to walk closest to the road when escorting them, offer them their arms in hazardous or uncomfortable situations, and not delay in making their feelings known and proposing marriage. They needed protection against pernicious gossip that might harm their social standing and marital prospects. And so there were rules about women calling on, being photographed with, and appearing in public with men. And to preserve their honour and sexual purity, they needed protection from the lascivious advances of their boyfriends; hence the chaperone requirement and the strict rules about physical intimacy. Where a double standard existed in the romance rules, it was usually rooted in the need to safeguard the physical and moral well-being of the “fair sex.”

Perhaps the most prominent feature of pre-war romance etiquette, however, was the power it assigned to a young woman’s parents. This power was substantial, especially among the middle and upper classes. Among other things, a mother had the power to either delay or advance her daughter’s “debut” and could, along with her husband, deny invitations to male or female callers, refuse to consent to potential suitors they deemed unsuitable, establish curfews for outings, and withhold her consent to marriage. Sometimes parental authority was absolute, as when the girl was underage or still lived in her parent’s home. In most cases it was merely powerful, based as it was on the widespread belief that children had to “respect” their parents by obeying their wishes. Or as Prim Rose told one inquirer flat out, “it is contrary to good breeding and to the Christian conception of filial duty to ignore a parent’s wishes, especially in an open and flagrant manner.”¹⁵³ Either way, pre-war parents exercised an enormous influence over the romantic destinies of their children. Granted, this influence was weaker than in the previous century, when youth had spent more time at home

than among their peers, but it was still strong.¹⁵⁴ This sometimes made romance difficult. So did the many rules and stifling formality of courtship. But these were minor irritations. In the quest for romance, Canadians of this generation faced much greater difficulties.

