

"In Praise of Polygamy"

Going Steady

By Barry Bingham

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EVERY American family with teen-agers in the house has faced the problem of "going steady." Nobody ever heard of such a



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grammatical monstrosity twenty-five years ago. Now the custom bids fair to become an American institution in the same category with apple pie and baseball. I'm not at all sure it is as nourishing as the one or as

wholesome as the other.

There has been a social revolution in the matter of "dating" since my salad days. It is as hard for parents to talk about this phenomenon to their young as for an American to discuss democracy with a Russian. The two participants use different terms to mean the same thing, or the same terms to mean things quite apart.

For instance, there is the problem of what to call the situation when John has several engagements with Jane. Many parents gag at the very expression "going steady." They dredge up such relics of the ice age as "John is going with Jane" or "seeing a lot of Jane," or even, embarrassingly, "John is sweet on Jane." The scorn of the young for such usage is withering. It is obvious that John is either going steady with Jane, is pinned to Jane, or in the stately culmination of the process, is engaged to her.

THE young are likely to express moral shock over the social customs of their parents in that far-off time when they too were in school or college.

The stag line at parties now is visticial, more an empty gesture to tradition than a living organism. Young couples dance together throughout an entire evening.

The teens are a difficult age, under any conditions. There is no way to eliminate the pain of the cracking voice, the blind panic of trying to introduce people and forgetting their names, the bad skin, the gawky legs, the aching uncertainties of growing up in public. Getting stuck at a dance was not a pleasant experience. But is it the right solution to arrange for every couple to be stuck all the time?

In my day a boy could take several different girls to parties during Christmas vacation without being considered a Don Juan or a Jack

the Ripper. He might like one girl because she was a "snappy" dancer, another because she was fun to talk to, yet another because she was pretty or her family kept superior provender in the ice box for the after-party snack. Girls, no doubt, had the same range of tastes among boys. It was perfectly fair game to see something of a number of people and try to match up the combination of qualities you found most attractive. When you discovered one person who combined them all, or made them all seem unimportant, you thought about getting married.

NOW the process is entirely different. Boys and girls often start an exclusive courtship in junior high school. They may see each other continuously right through high school and college. At the end of the long, long trail looms the inevitable goal, the altar.

Of course there are breaks in the continuity of going steady in some cases. But the breaking up of a relationship so deeply rooted is more painful than the situation really justifies. A girl who "axes" her partner or is axed by him is left without anybody to take her anywhere. If she is not required to emulate the Hindu widow and climb upon the funeral pyre of the romance, she is certainly expected to sit things out for awhile before starting off with another swain, when she can find one who is unattached.

IT IS my personal male opinion that the system of going steady is an invention of, by and for the less attractive girls. It is true that the "rush" some girls got at a party in the '20s left some other girls sitting in the dressing room or dismally listening to the radio at home. The system of going steady seems to insure that every duck can find her drake, and can swim off sedately on the social pond. If no girl has as good a time as the best used to have, no girl has as bad a time as the worst.

How this can be pleasing to the average boy, however, is beyond my comprehension. He does not have to be a wolf with dripping fangs to enjoy cutting in on a dozen girls at a party, seeing what they have to say for themselves, and asking any of them he gets along with for a date.

My real hope lies in the good sense of a rising generation, to whom going steady may seem a tedious and elderly custom.

Once it gets around that the routine is followed only by the pills, the drips, the goons, or whatever the current name may be for the type, its usage will be shunned by all who hope for popularity. And isn't that everybody?