

by Joe Sobran

What Was a Chaperone?

I confess it: My television is always on. I seldom watch the news, the talking heads, the public-spirited uplift, *Masterpiece Theater*, or the educational stuff. No, I watch old movies. Constantly.

I watch them because they bring back the good old days. I think, for instance, of a film (whose title I forget) in which Humphrey Bogart gets into a serious car accident; in the next scene, he is lying in a hospital bed—puffing a cigarette. The good old days.

Now of course, the moment you utter the phrase “the good old days,” you cross your arms over your skull to ward off the blows it is sure to provoke from the knowing cynics. Yes, I know all about child labor, racial segregation, infant mortality, medieval torture, and the myriad other things that make liberal lips curl when you dare to praise the past. But when people talk about the good old days, they nearly always mean something specific: The era of good manners.

Can anyone deny that American manners have declined from the age of William Powell and Cary Grant to that of Marlon Brando and Dennis Hopper? From the bow tie and the tuxedo to the T-shirt and the leather jacket? From the ballroom and the chaperone to the easy lay? (How do you explain to today's youth what a chaperone is—or was? “A primitive method of birth control”?) Censors debated like Scholastic theologians when Clark Gable used the word “damn” on the screen; it seems silly now only because we have become inured to hearing obscenities—not from screen villains, but from heroes.

It's not just that manners have gotten worse; it's that bad manners have become a positive moral ideal, a mark of “authenticity.” Brando has even carried this ideal over from movies into real life, as have his countless imitators. Today's movies observe a rigid code of bad manners, and life, as Oscar Wilde put it, imitates art.

At least Brando knew what he was doing. He was rude on purpose, for dramatic effect. He may even have (barely) qualified as a gentleman, according to Wilde's definition: one who never hurts another's feelings unintentionally. Today, you encounter young people who

don't even know when they're being rude. You thank a waiter (though, in the good old days, it was poor form, according to the etiquette books, to thank servants) and he replies not “You're welcome” but “No problem,” as if you were apologizing for having bothered him and he were absolving you. No, he doesn't think he's being rude; he thinks he's being gracious!

Presiding over the old movies, in the era of the Hays Office, was the principle of chastity. Men and women kept their distance and their secrets; that was part of the tense, and intense, pleasure of courtship. Love had to be a dream before it could come true. Lovers could achieve intimacy only if they had first been strangers, almost aliens; today's instant intimacy isn't really *achieved*, because there was never any distance to overcome in the first place. Neither lover's personality holds any mysteries; their coupling can occur as casually as that of two moths meeting at a streetlight, and it is about as permanent.

In the old romantic comedy, from Benedick and Beatrice to Astaire and Rogers, the first stage of romance was often bickering—an ostensibly hostile way of “getting to know you.” This presupposed that there was something to know, apart from the plumbing: a specific human being, like unto, yet unlike, all others. This view of romance lent itself naturally to songs and serenades, love expressed in art—the expression being an essential part of the lover's delight in the experience of love itself. But today, we are all equal—which is to say, interchangeable.

Is the sexual revolution cause or effect of American crassness? Hard to say. It may be rash to blame fast sex on fast food, but there must be some obscure connection. Deferred gratification, Catholic or



Calvinist, is passé; even the cunning wiles of the seducer are outdated, because, after all, seduction takes time, waiting. A lusty woman, who surrenders without waiting to be assaulted, is hardly a “conquest.” Life spans may be longer than ever, but patience isn't. Orgasms delayed are orgasms denied.

The modern world tries to eliminate distance between persons, in order to reduce them to convenient political and commercial units. In the name of “civil rights,” it denies even the primal freedoms of privacy and association. We are all directly answerable to the state.

But our plight isn't only political. Entertainment and mass culture also force intimacy on us. Nothing is private anymore. Decency and modesty used to serve as a moat around privacy and morality, protecting the person from undue exposure. Today's movies trap the audience into psychic nakedness; by now we expect them to, and nobody dares take offense at the soft porn and instant fornication that have become conventional. What was once “daring” is now routine.

What has all this done to our souls? The question hardly comes up, because the unspoken premise of today's vulgar culture and politics is that the soul is indistinguishable from the libido. There was a time, not so long ago, when mass culture had at least a vestigial respect for the soul, and the old movies are a healthy reflection, and reminder, of that time. The good old days.

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Lord, I Got Those Grays Ferry Blues

Gonna Fly Now

by E. Michael Jones



When I called Mike Rafferty to arrange a meeting to discuss a possible symposium on the demise of the local community, I had to choose a different date from the one I wanted because Mike was busy that night. He was boxing at the Spectrum. Like Rocky Balboa, Mike Rafferty lives ten minutes from the Spectrum. Unlike Rocky, Mike Rafferty is a lightweight—and a cop. Unlike Rocky, he will never make enough money fighting to move out of the neighborhood, which may explain why he is interested in preserving it—what is left of it, at least.

Grays Ferry, a working-class neighborhood in Philadelphia, lies across the Schuylkill River from the University of Pennsylvania, a geographical fact that has saved it from the University's penchant to gobble up Catholic neighborhoods where no geographical barrier intervenes, as it did to the west in St. Francis de Sales Parish. The Irish in Grays Ferry used to unload the coal barges that came down the Schuylkill from the mines in the mountains. Then they became cops and firemen and worked for the utilities and the mills until the mills all left town in search of slave labor in the southern hemisphere. But their penchant for fighting remained constant. The young men who hang out in bars in Grays Ferry are avid sports fans in general and fans of the Notre Dame "Fighting Irish" in particular, probably because the team name suits their pugnacious ethnic heritage.

Johnny Lynch had the Fighting Irish Leprechaun tattooed to his forearm when I interviewed him on a barstool at 29th and Tasker, the social hub of the neighborhood. Johnny had been arraigned the day before on charges of aggravated assault, simple assault, ethnic intimidation, terroristic threats, burglary, riot, and related charges in a case that came to be known as the "Annette Williams Story."

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The official version of the story, the one repeated in all the newspaper accounts, is that a mob of "20 to 50" drunken white men beat up a black woman in her nightgown after she had been awakened from a sound sleep in her home. Once the story got out in that form, it solidified like wet concrete.

"She was dozing in her bedroom about 1:30 a.m.," wrote Michael Matza of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, "when a commotion snapped her awake." (Journalists favor the *faux*-novelist style when they want to create an aura of verisimilitude and sympathy. The pseudodramatic tone of the article indicates that the reader is supposed to accept her version of the event as the true one.)

"Squinting through the window of her Grays Ferry rowhouse," Matza continues (causing the alert reader to wonder what he was doing in her bedroom at that hour of the night), "Annette Williams, a black housekeeper, saw a pile of white men atop her son, Raheem, pounding the 17-year-old in the middle of the street. She tore downstairs in her nightgown. It was cold, she was barefoot, and mayhem was erupting, she said."

At this point, the truth of the story begins to emerge. The real focus of the incident was not Annette Williams at all but her son, who had gotten into a fight in the street outside his mother's house. Only after Matza sets the tone in the article's first paragraph does he return to conventional newspaper reporting and reveal that this account was based on Williams' first sworn statement. Then Matza slips into editorial-page style by telling the reader that the melee brought "shame" to the neighborhood.

Yvonne Latty's account in the *Philadelphia Daily News* takes virtually an identical approach: "Barefoot and wearing only a nightgown," Latty begins in her best "you-are-there" manner, "Annette Williams ran into the cold February night as a mob of white men yelled racial slurs while they kicked and punched