

## JOHN PARNELL EXPLAINS

BY KATHARINE PEARSON WOODS

"I give you my word, John Parnell, it was one of the hardest times of my life, even worse than when you and the children all had the measles together. It certainly did seem a mysterious providence that you had to be away from home just that one fortnight out of all the year."

"Not to me," said her husband, gravely, yet with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Well, men are born selfish, and there's no good in expecting anything better from them," replied his wife. "The only use of them is to tell things to when they come home after all the trouble is over, yet they are very apt to complain even of that. However, if you will take the glue pot and your penknife and mend these broken toys while I get my stocking bag I'll tell you all about it. And I certainly am grateful to you, John, for not using tobacco in any form. If you had been a smoker life would not have been worth living, so far as I was concerned, during the Reform Congress and the visit of Cynthia and her children."

Mr. Parnell did not reply. He was used to Polly's arrangements for the combination of business and sociability, and had come to enjoy them as much as she did. She was a busy, active, bustling little woman, and hated idle hands as she did a snake, she often told him, but as she secured plenty of time for his sermon writing, and other pastoral duties, by her ingenious apportionment of the hours, he submitted to such other duties as she laid upon him with only a smile and an amused twinkle in his brown eyes.

"You see," she began, as she deftly drew two strands of darning cotton through her needle, "I have seen so little of Cynthia for the last twelve years that it seemed as though a stranger were coming, and while I wanted to see her I kind of dreaded it, too, for she, being president of half the reform societies in the country, vice-president of the other half, and secretary of the rest, so to speak, would naturally expect perfection from everybody, especially children. And ours have tempers, all of them,

not to speak of Willie and Clara being no respecters of persons, and hating shams and sentimentality as much as you do yourself, John."

"Well, you remember they were to get here just in time for tea; but of course the train was late, and so it was eight o'clock before we sat down to table. I had made desperate efforts to have everything just right for them, for I knew that hygienic food was one of Cynthia's fads—I mean strong points. And I must say I never saw the table look prettier. I had put on great-grandmother's china with the little moss rosebuds and all our prettiest silver and our crystal wedding presents, and so on, and our children were so delighted with the result that they were perfectly good-humored even after their long wait. So no sooner had we taken our seats than Minnie volunteered, in her shrillest treble: 'We don't use these things every day, Cousin Cynthia. Mamma put them on because you are company!'"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Mr. Parnell. "What's the matter with that statement, Polly? It seems to me terse, accurate and very much to the point."

"John Parnell, you're exactly like a man! I suppose you'll say Cynthia's reply was to the point also. 'O Polly,' she said, 'is it possible you allow yourself to have company things? Surely no outsider can be as dear to us as our own. Our most precious things should be reserved for the home circle and not for strangers.'"

"And the vestry haven't spoken of raising my salary either," said Mr. Parnell; "but Mrs. Brenton was always one for speaking her mind."

"The trouble is," said Polly, "she has so much mind! And yet you know in your heart of hearts, John Parnell, that her view was the correct one, and all I could answer was: 'It is the rosebud china, Cynthia; surely you remember great-grandmother's rosebud china. I thought you might like to see it again, but if I were to use it every day there would soon be none of it left.' There I stopped, but Minnie's great eyes were fixed on my face, and I knew that was not the whole truth, so I went on: 'Besides, we are not so well able as you, Cynthia, to replace our pretty things, so the only thing to do is to take care of them.'"

"O Polly, Polly," she said, "don't set your savings bank account against your home happiness; don't, my dear! And as for great-grandmother's china, I should keep it to use as a reward when any of the children had done a good deed—sacrificed their own ease or comfort to the welfare of humanity."

"What's that?" asked Johnny; and, John Parnell, if you had been here and had seen the way in which Cynthia and her children looked at each other and smiled, big man as you are, you would have wanted to sink into the earth. I never was so mortified in my life—to think of the child not knowing the very name of the welfare of humanity!"

"I saw him lending a fly of his kite this afternoon to the raggedest little boy I ever saw," replied Mr. Parnell, quietly. "Sometimes, Polly, it does almost as well to know the things themselves as the names of them."

"Then shall I put out the rosebud china at breakfast, John?"

"I do not think," said Mr. Parnell, "that it would be altogether advisable."

Mrs. Parnell laughed a little as she bent

her face closer over her work. "Well," she said, "I felt so ashamed about the china and humanity that it helped me to bear things when Cynthia found fault with the Graham bread because it wasn't made of Franklin flour."

"How very illogical! In that case it would have been Franklin bread."

"Well, she thinks no other kind is fit to eat, and Walter Baker's breakfast cocoa is the only preparation that could possibly be used by any self-respecting person. As for the sorts that are prepared at table, she says that nothing can take the place of boiling, and that most of them are medicated—with potash! Just think of drinking potash for tea!"

"There might be a difference in the taste," admitted her husband, gravely, "and of the two, Polly, I prefer tea. One soon tires of potash."

"But don't mention tea or coffee to Cynthia, John Parnell, if you love a quiet life! Let us see! Twice fourteen are twenty-eight—yes, twenty-eight times, morning and night, did that woman discourse upon the subject of stimulants, until she made me feel worse than any professional drunkard! But to go back to that first tea-time. I had not ordered oatmeal porridge because I thought people of advanced thought ate it for breakfast. But it seems Cynthia belongs to the school who think it is better to sleep on it, and so her children cannot eat their supper without it, and all of them grumbled audibly, while little Cynthia was carried away shrieking with rage. I knew they were all tired and sleepy; but, John, why isn't one kind of slavery almost as bad as another?"

"I really don't know," said Mr. Parnell. "Well, it is a question that I asked myself several times even before bedtime," said his wife. "I had provided separate beds for the children, of course, but their baths and their rubbings and their ventilation and their coverings were all just as wrong as wrong could be. I do think, John Parnell, when people train up their children in the way of bondage to porridge and olive oil and Jaeger blankets, they ought to carry the things along when they pay visits; but Cynthia seemed to consider me an outer barbarian because I did not have all of them ready for her. I shouldn't want our children to tithe massage and physical culture and neglect the weightier matters of courtesy and regard for the feelings of their hostess. And that is the solemn truth, John Parnell."

"Well?"

"Well, that is only the beginning. I never was so—so!"

"Called to order?"

"That's it exactly. I tell you what, John Parnell, it made me sympathize with your parishoners; but as a minister's wife it came kind of hard to me to consider myself in the light of a heathen and a fit subject for conversion. And then the meetings of the congress which I had looked forward to expecting to learn so much! Well, I did hear a great deal that was true, to be sure, but the trouble was that the very next moment some one would get up and expound the very opposite doctrine."

"That's what they were here for—free discussion, Polly."

"Then they should not have admitted me, for it is awfully confusing to the mind of a heathen. How did you ever grow to be the man you are, John Parnell? For I know

your mother never heard of the psychology of childhood and the development of the spiritual sense. And as for menticulture and all the rest of it!"

"She knew the value of obedience," said Mr. Parnell, "and when we failed to come up to time, she developed our spiritual sense with a good stout hickory switch."

"But corporal punishment was the one thing the whole congress was agreed in denouncing," said Mrs. Parnell; "and it really was refreshing, because it was the only thing they were united upon, except the advocacy of physical culture, and each of them had her own brand of that and considered all the rest deleterious. What brand was yours, John? It didn't do ill by you!"

"Hunting, fishing, climbing trees, and especially splitting wood. Best sort, too; trade-mark unnecessary. Wish we could get it for our boys. Go on," said Mr. Parnell.

"Well, the worst of all was the session on religious education. Cynthia, you know, is very religious, and her children are members of Junior Endeavor Societies, Bands of Mercy, and all sorts of things; but another woman read a paper on the Evils of Superstitious Education, which went to prove that children ought to be left alone to choose their own religion after they grew up. And, do you know, I heard Horace Brenton whisper to Hal that, if mother were to try that plan, his choice would be none at all, and that it would be pretty good fun anyway."

"The speaker would have scored one if she had heard that," said Mr. Parnell. "Were Willie and Clara there?"

"Why, you know, I thought they need not bother about going," said their mother, "especially as they did not want to. In fact, I was rather sorry I went myself after I heard that speech, for the speaker scored some very strong points and it made me wonder whether our plan were the best after all, though of course in your position we could hardly do differently."

"But were you not reassured," asked her husband, "by your cousin's success in developing the spiritual sense of her own family?"

"Now, John Parnell! After what I've told you! Besides, I don't want to speak evil of the poor children, who are surely not responsible for their own bringing up, but, benighted as I am and away behind the times, I wouldn't, no, that I wouldn't, change families with Cynthia!"

"I suppose," said Mr. Parnell, "that Mrs. Brenton is too busy reforming the world to have time to reform her own family."

"That is a cheap thing to say, but it isn't one bit true. Cynthia just wears herself out on her own family, and as for that maid of hers, she has the most patient look out of her eyes that I ever saw in woman. If she tries to make her family a model by which to reform the world, that is only because it embodies in her theories and plans the best things she knows. Now, John Parnell, explain it to me. You know you can, for all you pretend to misunderstand. I do want to do the best by our boys and girls, but with twenty different theories on every point of their education, from the multiplication table up to truthfulness and temperance, what is a poor heathen body to do? Am I to flavor my mince pies with brandy, and give them a taste for liquor, or be a fanatic and have them turn drunkards out of pure contrariness?"

"Poor Polly!" said John Parnell. "Cannot you satisfy yourself, my dear, with the farmer's invective against theoretical agriculturists and the proverb about old maids' children?"

"These women, John Parnell, were all mothers of families. And as for theories, one must have them, of one sort or another. Your mother has often told me that she brought up her children as she was raised herself, and that if I succeeded half as well with mine it would be all the Lord would ask and more than the neighbors expected. That was her theory, and it was simple and short, anyway."

"It is true that one must have theories," said her husband, "but their value only begins, little woman, when we cease to be conscious of them. I do not know whether I make myself clear?"

"You don't," said Mrs. Parnell, succinctly.

"Then let me try to do better. When you thread your needle do you theorize as to the process? Must you think out the position of each piano key and the value of every note before you can play Schumann's *Träumerei* to me in the twilight? Is there any difference of opinion among civilized people as to the necessity of washing one's face in the morning? Yet certainly the last case that I have cited, in its day, represented a reform, and its advocates were wild theorists in the opinion of outer barbarians like yourself and myself, Polly. This age of ours is a wonderful one, but it has not yet learned to play in the twilight; its theories are too numerous and, as you have discovered, too contradictory to have been assimilated even by their discoverers, far less to have become a part of the heritage of the race. A generation or two hence they will have been sifted out, and such as have proved most serviceable will have become instinctive. They will have passed into the care of the sub-conscious self, the feminine half of the intellect, which is said to reside in the back of your head, my Polly."

"I can tell with the front of my head that you are talking nonsense. What do I care for what will happen a generation or two hence? Though of course it is satisfactory to know that something will have been settled by that time. But what am I to do about it now, John? That is the question for me, for really life is too short to solve all these problems."

"Life is the only solution of them, Polly. We may experiment as much as we like with this theory or that; we must, if we are intelligent beings, be more or less modified, intellectually, by modern views of education and the like, but what we really impart to our children—yes, not only to them, but to every one with whom we come in contact—is the self that has grown up within us and been nurtured by education, environment and our own self-discipline or self-indulgence. It is the sub-conscious self, Polly, that does the work of influence."

"If you were to call it character, John Parnell, it might not sound so learned and wise, but I should understand better what you mean."

"It may be, Polly, that character exactly expresses what modern psychology calls by the name I have used. For certainly we cannot love what is opposed to our characters, and it is the thing we love that we are able to give to those about us. A taste for good literature, for example, is an excellent

heritage, but the books that you yourself really love are those which you can teach your children to like also. If you try to force upon them something which you have been told is good, though of yourself you would never choose it, you will surely find that they will reject it also, and that you would have done better to let it alone, be it Shakespeare, or be it even the Bible, that they might have come to it in after years unbiassed by your dislike. Learn all you can, but remember that the key to life is not to know, but to *be*. Even in the kitchen department, I believe that unconscionableness is a much more important factor than is generally recognized, and that many of our experiments fail simply because we are so conscious of applying a test. As between Franklin and Graham flour, for example, that which we eat deliberately, for its nourishing qualities, is the least likely to be wholesome. This quality of wholesomeness is the province of the house-mother, and of her alone; the family should be able, through her care and wisdom, to eat what is set before them, asking no questions either for conscience or digestion's sake."

"Well, that's about what we have always done," said Mrs. Parnell, "but it is of no use to speak of Franklin flour, for the children detest the very name of it on account of Cynthia. After all, John, it seems to me that her greatest mistake is that she is always 'travelling in soul,' as she calls it, with her children and never seems to let them alone for a single moment. Don't you think a child wants room to grow as much as a flower? Then, too, I am sure our children have taught me more than ever I taught them, but Cynthia never seems to care for what her children can teach her."

"And Jesus took a little child and set him in the midst of them," said Mr. Parnell. "You have reached the center, Polly. The proper attitude towards our children, as towards the rest of the world, is the attitude of humility. It is not as philanthropists, but as humble students and imitators, that we should open the door of a nursery or schoolroom. It is to the likeness of the Child of Nazareth that we must conform both ourselves and our little ones if we with them would enter the kingdom of heaven."

"Well, said Mrs. Parnell, "I felt sure you could explain it to me, John Parnell, and so you have, and now let us ring the bell for prayers."

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