

Should the Foreign Secretary's Wife Become a Counsellor?

Commissioned by the Daily Mail - 19th June 1991

If you had a terrible personal problem would you ask Margaret Cook to help? This week, the Foreign Secretary's ex-wife embarks on a new career as an advice columnist. Here, the experienced agony uncle Phillip Hodson imagines how she might reply to her nearest and dearest.

Q1: Dear Margaret,

I am a senior Government Minister whose ex-wife is hell-bent on sabotaging my career. But for this person, I would by now be the Prime Minister. She has caused irreparable damage, not only to myself, but to the country and must be stopped.

A1: Dear Robin,

Have you had these impotent feelings for long? Well, in the dark days ahead, I fear you will have to learn to live with them. When a man of overwhelming personal arrogance finds himself lucky enough to be cosseted by a beautiful, charming, intelligent and qualified Scottish doctor, and yet still makes a play for a colourless filing-clerk, what can you expect? I understand you have had numerous extra-marital flings with women variously named Thelma, "Heather Honey" and Gaynor. Do you NOT appreciate the justice in the saying "He who lives by the sword must die by it?" If I may cite the classics, think Salomé and John the Baptist. Or think Sara Keays and Cecil Parkinson. Your head will remain on a platter for so long there really is no point in telephoning the Impotence Helpline (which as we all know otherwise does such splendid work). Your chief tormentor is going to be making more and more media appearances, many on a monthly basis, or indeed a weekly basis, to ensure that you can never forget the damage you have wreaked on a slight and delicate creature who did you no wrong at any time. PS - You will never become Prime Minister.

Q2: Dear Margaret,

I have recently fallen for a beguiling woman I met through a dating agency. She appears to have had a "bit of a past" and I must say I wasn't quite prepared for all the media attention surrounding her family. Do you think I am doing the right thing by persisting with this relationship or should I go back to the agency and ask them to fix me up with someone more quiet and homely? She also has a really high libido and I am wondering whether I can keep pace.

A2: Darling "Greater than Robin",

It was so good of you to write to me at work! Wasn't last night fantastic? Who could have believed that sex could last right through "Newsnight?" You know, you may be 60 but you have the body of a man of 50 and the performance and panache of a teenager. I'm a doctor and even I'm somewhat impressed. In all my previous experience of marital relations, well those with my husband anyway, I've never known such bliss. I can't make this point often or loudly enough. In the privacy and intimacy of this column I have to state that my ex-husband is a much, much worse lover than you could ever be. In bed, as everywhere else, he let me down and obviously thinks it's okay to share Chevening with THAT woman to the point of having marital relations in a state boudoir that ought to be mine. But enough about me. Let's talk about you. What do you think of me so far? Isn't it fabulous that we've found each other and I can tell all the world what a wonderful lover you are, comparatively speaking, and report that you make love to me more and

more often every single day? I don't think you've got anything to worry about so long as you keep up the good work. Your taste in women, by the way, is flawless.

Q3: Dear Margaret,

My husband left his ex-wife for me but I now find myself being ignored the way he ignored her for 20 years. He spends as much time out of the country as he can. What am I to do? I've tried speaking to the Minister for Women but she no longer seems to be answering her phone and when I consulted a clairvoyant she frowned and muttered "Hell hath no fury like a haematologist with a column". What could she possibly mean? Buying your magazine and writing to you is my last hope.

A3: Dear Alleged Reader,

You've got some nerve. You even pretend to buy this magazine when I bet you go about snaffling other people's copies. That's what the clairvoyant was obviously trying to tell you about your character in a message as clear as the test tube I'm mixing these strong chemicals in: "Stealing medics' husbands is wrong!" Now you reap what you sow. Are you surprised that the Minister whose affections you pinched is desperate to stay away from you whenever he is able? You, who constantly remind him of the one woman he can never again possess, the woman by now he must surely realise was too good for him? Incidentally, it's the same woman who could never get him to come home either! Can't you see that if his ex-wife lacked the pulling power of a cracker magnet there's absolutely zero chance of you persuading Her Majesty's Principal Secretary for Foreign Affairs to roll in for supper? No, your cause is forlorn and I suggest you learn how to play a good card game like Solitaire on your computer. There is, perhaps, an information line to help explain the rules should you get stuck. Good luck.

Q4: Dear Margaret,

My mum recently got divorced because my dad, whose job I can't reveal, was having an affair with the Foreign secretary's secretary. I'm still haunted by the horrid scene that took place in our house when mum burst into tears and said "Peter, he is leaving me!" and I didn't know what to do. Do you think it's all my fault?

A4: Dear Peter,

You have nothing with which to reproach yourself. Mummy is sure to be sorry for having dumped on you in her moment of trial but perhaps you may have noticed the sudden absence of a strong male figure on whom she could depend. It's sad when families break up and of course the children will always take some of the responsibility upon themselves. I'm here to reassure you this is rarely deserved. There is, a psychological process at work called "Displaced Guilt" which, in fact, will always belong to any man who has cheated upon his innocent wife, not the kids. However, if you should spend too much time with a woman whose name begins with G, and don't come home and tell Mummy how dull, boring and hopeless she is when compared to your natural parent, the process does change a bit. Under those circumstances, several world authorities are of the view that the children can be called to account for their deplorable contribution to a family crisis. To ensure you make no such mistakes, I'd like you to read a new book called "Families And How To Survive Them Without Upsetting Your Mummy" written by John Cleese and Margaret Cook. See you later.

Q5: Dear Margaret,

I'm terribly sorry to bother you but my son Robin has got himself into a dreadful muckle. It all began when Robin nearly lost his job on the grounds of wilful misconduct with his

secretary. As a result, he's been divorced by his wife. Between you and me I see her point of view but he's still my son and I cannot dump him. My loyalties are, therefore, torn in two and I don't know how to go on. If his father were alive he'd kill him.

A5: Dear Granny C.,

Look, nobody's blaming you or your late husband for what your son has done. Genetics, a complex science, isn't that simple. Though we can agree that Robin is riddled with inferior impulses and has a weak moral character, we don't have to blame the parents since there were also grandparents and great-grandparents. You see, sometimes the damage skips a generation. Nor does anyone expect your righteous anger to make you break off all contact with Robin. The difficulty in choosing between the past and present wives of what we ought to call your ex-son, however, won't go away unless you examine the case in detail. Then I find things are easier. On the one hand, there is a woman who has always let you help around the house and happily liberated space in your Edinburgh flat by taking some furniture off your hands at the commencement of her marriage. On the other is the nameless incumbent who has done nothing but generate bad press for all. I find the case proved and I think agony columns provide a splendid opportunity for people like you to get things off their chests. Thanks so much for writing - I feel better already.

(Phillip Hodson would like to make it clear that although he hadn't quite finished with his job as the problem-page columnist of Woman's Journal he does hope Margaret Cook enjoys being his successor).