

Cactus wives – a psychological profile (Part 2)

Presentation given on 5th December 2014 by Emeritus Professor Maria-Theresa Krankenkopf on the occasion of the opening of the Krankenkopf Annexe to the Phyllobolic Institute, Isle of Dogs.

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen and students. It is the great honour to be asked back to the opening of the Annexation for myself named. I was expecting to speak about my especial subject, but since I have the work of my life “The Sense of Humour – A Paradigmatic Psychopathology” in the Institute library deposited, you all must have read it. Thank you for keeping so clean the pages. But our Principal has asked me to say more about “Cactus Wives” as an illustration of clinical methodology.

Many years ago, before my English is become completely idiotic, a woman was to me referred showing symptoms apparently of a hysterical nature. For some years she had visited her General Practitioner every six months complaining that she has the sensations in her fingers lost and is from the palpitations suffering. But during the course of putting her at her ease while strapping her down on the couch and shining the bright light in her face, I learn that she a cactus grower is. So with the clinician’s perspicacity for which I am renowned, I ask of her: “What are the months of the year when you these attacks suffer?” She is replying: “April and September.” And I now hit the nail with the head: “What are the months when you your plants with insecticide water?” “April and September – Oh!”

I give one more example of the need to keep open the bowels of the mind. A married woman is to me referred showing the classical symptoms of agoraphobia. She says she dare not leave the house for more than two hours. So I put her to the question: “What do you think will happen if you are the house for more than two hours leaving?” She replies: “My husband will put up another greenhouse.” “But,” I ask, “Surely this is a fear not on reason based.” And she replies, and here I refer to my case notes: “Last year I went out in the morning to visit my Aunt Flossie, and when I came back at teatime there was another greenhouse in the garden. And it was already full of cacti. And they were new cacti, because the ones on the windowsills and on the kitchen table and in the hallway were still there.”

One patient came to me very distressed. She had her husband instructed never into her conservatory any cactus plants to bring. The very next day she finds a very big prickly plant in a large tub in the middle of the conservatory floor. “I thought I told you never to bring any of your horrible cacti into my conservatory!” The husband replied: “That’s not a cactus, that’s a Pachypodium”. Here I must be explaining: a Pachypodium is a plant horrible like a cactus, prickly like a cactus, obtrusive like a cactus, but it belongs to another family of plants so it is not a cactus.

One very charming and pleasant patient told me that she had many times her husband punched and kicked, every time he said he was wanting another greenhouse. “Why is it that you are not for your ever-loving husband a new greenhouse desiring?” I asked in my English now perfect. “Because he will never be out of it, “she is shouting. So I drew upon my professional wisdom from years of clinical experience distilled, and advised thus: “It is better that your husband is always in the house green than in the house public or the house disorderly. That way you can always find him if you should ever want him.” And I can tell

you, that is a marriage that I preserved, thus saving two other partners from a lifetime of misery.

A former patient, while she was packing her bags to leave her husband, happened to catch sight of this advertisement in the local newspaper. It reads (let me read it out to you): “Fit and handsome gentleman, temperate, young at heart, new teeth, wltm (*das bedeutet* Would Like To Meet) woman with GSOH with her own cactus collection. Please send photograph of greenhouse.” GSOH indicates Good Sense Of Humour. What is meant in this sort of advertisement is that when the man tells what is called “joke” the woman must be responding with the big “Ha Ha!”

Colleagues have asked me if there are existing any cactus women whose monomania disturbs the mental harmony of their husbands. Of course the experienced clinician will never be surprised or shocked at the complexes and complexities of the human Ego. One such cactus woman, when I am asking her the routine preliminary questions about her marital relationship, said (and I now read from my case notes): “When my greenhouse got too small I chucked my old man out and erected staging in the bedroom.” You will now be knowing, ladies and gentlemen, what the cactus woman is always wanting. She is wanting the man with the biggest.... What is that grinning baboon at the back mumbling? The biggest estate car? You have been paying attention not at all. It is greenhouse, greenhouse, greenhouse. What do you think I am saying? I will come down and put your ears in a box.

Mr Chairman, such insubordination is like a wet rag to a bull, so before I get on my goat, I will say thank you to you all from the heart of my bottom. I close with the wise advice of a Chinese former student of mine: “Man in house is like Oxalis in greenhouse.”