

the decisions of parents as to whether to have children or not. There have been rapid changes in the fashionable size of family. The only child, quite frequent before the war, is now reappearing. After a period of large families in the 1950s and 1960s the French have as suddenly changed their behaviour and are now having only 1.8 children per couple.

Having a baby is still seen, except in the most 'advanced' manuals, as involving the father only in a minor capacity. Laurence Pernoud says firmly: 'The paternal instinct does not exist -- at least before birth. When a man learns that he is to become a father, this news has no emotional effect on him and no reality.' The child needs a mother in its first year: 'it will not really suffer if it does not know its father.' The father is seen as useful to console and encourage the mother: 'Be the guardian of her nerves.' Changing nappies is something that men are instinctively nauseated by, and it is natural to leave that to the mothers, says Dr Cohen-Salal, the very latest expert on *Having a Child*. The man's main role starts at around seven or eight months when he begins playing with the baby for 'a few privileged moments': he is the sugar daddy. But many fathers are undoubtedly challenging this conventional wisdom. Grandmothers, too, are fighting back against the medical experts who used to regard them as representing outdated superstition: they help, but they also argue with their daughters.

There was a time when having babies was regarded as a natural activity which mothers knew instinctively how to cope with. The growth of the medical profession put an end to that, and the doctor became indispensable to the process, issuing rules on what was permissible and what was not. But since 1960 there has been a reaction, and now the country's leading child doctor, Professor Debré, has laid it down that 'the mother is always right.' Maternal instinct is now triumphant. The mother's whims during pregnancy, until recently denounced as superstitious 'cravings' have been given official blessing and must be satisfied. For long, breast feeding has been popular in France: if mothers did not want to do it themselves they sent their children out to wet nurses in the country. In 1966 Pernoud stated firmly: 'You must breast feed.' But now she has taken this back and says it is optional. Increasingly bottle feeding is

6 *How children deal with their parents*

Some would like to explain the difficulties that are upsetting family life by the experiences the French undergo in childhood. But there is no French way of loving babies or bringing them up. Each generation, each class, each family has inherited its own customs, and each has been searching for new approaches. The one constant factor has been the confident advice that doctors, psychiatrists and 'puericulturists' have ceaselessly offered, with a confidence that has never diminished, even though it regularly denounces the advice of previous experts. Child rearing in France takes place in a whirlwind of contradictory opinion and habit. A professor of the Sorbonne has entitled a book that sums up contemporary wisdom: *It is not easy to love one's children*.

Dr Spock is known in France, but he does not rule there. Until about 1960 the leading baby book was Mme Francisque Gay's *How I bring up my child* (1924). It was dethroned by Mme Laurence Pernoud who has now held the field for twenty years, but she has revised her advice almost every year and made several significant changes. Since 1970 numerous rivals have come on the scene, some translated from the American. The educated classes pay much more attention to this kind of advice than the workers, and foreign guides are appreciated only by a small unconformist minority, but the government ensures that every mother gets a jumble of these old and new ideas with a free copy of a booklet entitled *The Golden Book for Expectant Mamas*. The government wants parents to have more babies; it pays them handsomely to have more than three; it warns that an only child, brought up on its own, is in danger of growing up into a 'monster'. But government bribes have not had much effect on

becoming fashionable and slowly working its way down the social scale at the very time when a contrary movement is taking place in Britain and America. The recommended period for breast feeding, which before the war used to be six months, has officially been reduced to only three months. In the space of a generation there has been a complete change on the question of when babies can start eating more or less anything. In the nineteenth century, babies were rapidly turned into gourmets and wine drinkers. Then came a reaction and special baby foods. Now the tide is turning again. Thirty years ago, for example, eggs were considered dangerous for babies of under ten months; they are now thought acceptable at three-and-a-half months. Today the French eat fewer eggs than any comparable nations, but that will change.

There has been a complete switch in the attitude to rubber dummies (Am. 'pacifiers'). In 1910 they passed a law forbidding the manufacture or sale of these: to use them became a sign of backwardness. Today they have come back in fashion. It was more than a matter of hygiene: sucking dummies was considered a sort of 'oral masturbation', a lapse in self-control. But the witch hunt against masturbation is over too, and there is even a psychiatrist (Philippe Nahoun) to say that 'to masturbate signifies learning to love one's body in its totality'.

There used to be a distinction between French and English ways of clothing a baby, and the previous generations used to be worried about the dangers of the 'English' practice of allowing the baby free movement of its legs. French babies were swaddled to resemble a cocoon, not only by bandaging their legs together, but also by putting special bandages round their belly, to keep that warm. These practices have been abandoned, but Laurence Pernoud was still recommending them in 1979 for use at night and in winter. The difficulty this caused for changing nappies may explain why the French gave their babies as little to drink as possible; and why stones in the kidneys of infants are supposedly more common there than, for example, in the United States. Toilet training used to be attempted very early: but in the last fifty years, the recommended date has moved gradually from three months to two years.

Before the war, mothers were advised never to cuddle their

babies just for pleasure; crying was said to be a sign not of unhappiness, but a natural activity. That has changed. So too has the old instruction to feed the baby only at fixed times; now babies are individuals and no longer machines. So each generation has been subjected to new theories.

But different classes listen to this advice very unequally. A French sociologist reported in 1969 that only a third of working-class mothers thought a three-months-old baby should be bathed every day, while two-thirds of the upper class did, and the upper classes visited the doctor about their babies twice as often. The poor are more content to follow the ideas they inherit; they are more easy-going towards their babies, partly because they have less leisure to fuss, and partly because they see them as charming little animals on whom it would be both unfair and useless to try to impose discipline. The petty bourgeoisie have more principles and pretensions; they are keener on establishing order, regularity and routine. The upper class regard children as responsible individuals, who must be taught to distinguish themselves from others, and they are more likely to define each one with a single characteristic, because they prize individualism. These are large generalizations, and time has doubtless blurred whatever truth these distinctions may have had. But an American sociologist, in 1979, came to the conclusion that 'French parents are more like English, Italian, American or Japanese parents of the same social stratum than they are like French parents of a different social background.' What that meant was that the way parents expressed their love depended more on their ambitions, both for their children and themselves, than on any national customs or medical theories. On the basis of carefully marked, though rather simple tests, he ranked the French as average in the matter of leniency and discipline, compared to these other nations. But the French middle class were the most severe of all in their attitude to insolence, though they tolerated other forms of misbehaviour; they were most ready to comply with a child's bid for attention (as when it complains, Baby stepped on my hand), more even than Americans, but they were extremely negative towards its requests for help (e.g. Get me another puzzle) or for comfort (It hurts). The peculiarity of France compared to other nations is that

its middle class is severe, while the workers are more lenient. The French working class resembles only the English working class in its kindness to children; it appears that everywhere else workers are less lenient than middle-class parents. The French resemble the Americans, however, in that fathers are less comforting than mothers, whereas the opposite is supposed to be the case in England. French fathers are harsher to their sons than their daughters, and do not show the egalitarianism Americans favour. Another study, comparing the French speakers of Belgium, France and Canada, showed the French to stand halfway between the Belgians and the Canadians, with the Belgians most severe and demanding; that suggests that some northern regions of France might well differ from other parts of the country.

There is probably a circular fashion in attitudes to children. As poor parents rise in the world and aspire to forms of behaviour that education and wealth suggest, so they make more demands on their children. But as these children rebel against the discipline they were subjected to by their pretentious parents and are disillusioned with the latter's ideals, so they rediscover the leniency of the poor. Particularly since 1968, the 'New Parents' are attempting to establish a different kind of relationship with their children from that which they themselves experienced. Father and mother, they believe, should share equally in all the tasks of child rearing; their goal should be purely hedonistic. They see children as a planned and desired investment that must yield the maximum happiness for all. The child has its rights, it is a person from the beginning and everything must be done to allow it to find its own tastes. So they have abandoned bribing children with sweets, forbidding them to watch television too much, they neither bargain nor punish, they allow them to eat what they please as they please. The family is a commune with no hierarchy, authority or formality. They do not aim to teach children what is right. They treat boys and girls alike. They argue as much with reference to American as to French child rearing theorists; they say they are rejecting the new more disciplinarian later Spock. No one can say how many French parents feel quite so militantly iconoclastic; the iconoclasts themselves admit they are a minority. It

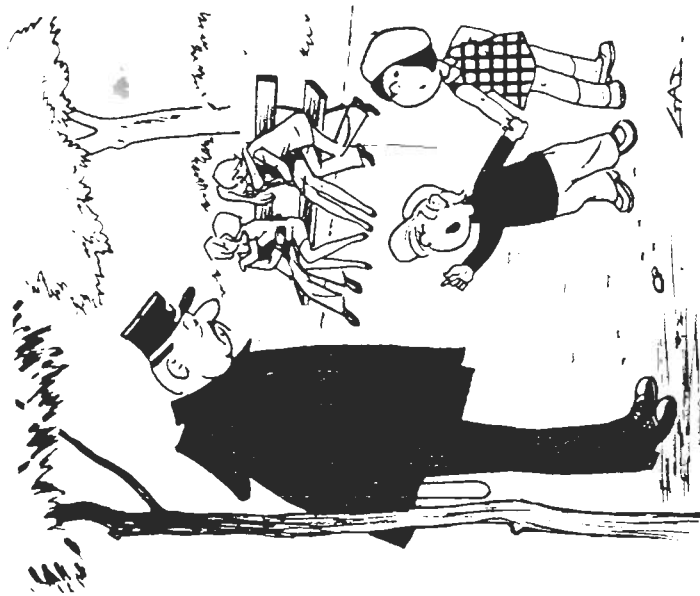
may be that they are already producing a reaction against themselves, and that discipline is becoming 'modern' again. With all these currents at work, France appears to be bathed in conflicting, ever changing solutions to the problem of raising children. That means that parents are increasingly making personal decisions about what path to take; it means also that when one meets a French person, one cannot make any assumptions about how he was brought up, about how much, how little or what kind of love he knew as a child.

What disastrous results follow from all these conflicting recipes for happiness? How do French parents continue to love their offspring as they grow into independent personalities and unpredictable adolescents? How do the children return their love? There is much discussion of these questions, but actual behaviour has probably changed less radically than people imagine. Love, once upon a time, meant first of all obedience and duty. At the end of the last war French schoolchildren, when asked which of the Ten Commandments was the most important, were still answering Honour Your Parents. That was the drill they were brought up on. The ideal family was modelled on a monarchy, in which the father was a benevolent but frightening king, who knew best what was good for his subjects; the home was the one place where the downtrodden, ill-paid clerk, the overworked factory hand was at last master. But that was only the ideal, and in reality the attempt to subjugate children, and wives, was only sometimes successful. When fathers today lament that they do not enjoy the respect that their fathers or their grandfathers received, they are wrong to conclude that the fundamental transformation in the family is the decline of paternal authority. The peasants who supposedly incarnated patriarchal tradition were notorious also for neglecting their children, and for being in return maltreated in their old age, despite the careful precautions they took to hold on to their property. The bourgeoisie were already complaining more than a century ago that they could not keep their children in order, that children answered back rudely, smoked, lorded it over the household, even in their early teens. Parental authority could not be sustained in the past in any case, because parents

security. One poll of sixteen to eighteen-year-olds found only 22% against the family (and only 10% of adults). Their opposition to authoritarianism is not revolutionary, because 60% of them accepted the principle that children could not be properly brought up without considerable punishment (and exactly the same proportion of adults took that view also). The majority of parents see more 'discipline' as the remedy for violence and chaos in the world; but they have trouble imposing it themselves in their own homes because they are so dependent on their children for affection. There is so far no clear victory for either side in the innumerable battles being waged between parents and children, even though parents are always complaining that they are losing. The French *père de famille* may be on the defensive; he may have to argue to get his way, but he still gets his way surprisingly often. Nor is it necessarily only in traditional, Catholic homes that he survives.

A factory worker with five children at Vallourec (Nord), who considers himself politically 'advanced', is very much the boss in his family. His wife runs the house: he does nothing at home. When they first got married, it is true, he used to lay the table, because in those days she worked and came home an hour later than he; but now she finds it natural that when he gets home he should find all the housework done and his meal ready. 'Because the factory is a sort of a prison,' she explains. 'I've been there, I know what it is. I do not feel a slave, as he does in the factory. That is what I tell him. I feel privileged, compared to a factory worker. The only thing I regret about not working is that one can have friends in the factory.' Besides, her husband had an unhappy childhood: 'he does not come from the same background as myself.' When they first got married 'I tended to feather-pillow him too much, I realize I was wrong to, I got him comfortable in his slippers, and I think I made him selfish. So things are not at all egalitarian between us but it is entirely my fault, I got it wrong, but I wanted to give him a little happiness, I put him before me in everything. I got him comfortable.'

The husband takes little interest in the children's education: he might argue with them for five minutes, but once he gets himself in front of the television, no one is allowed to move. He takes them fishing, because he wants them to enjoy that as he



Gad

The spirit of rebellion is spreading among the young. Things will come to a bad end if you don't give us more benches!

died younger; nearly half of adolescents, at the beginning of the century, were orphans. The old ideal of love implied breaking the will of children, eradicating their original sinfulness, preventing them from temptation. But the traditional family, in practice, also represented the custom of the father ignoring his children, either because he was at work all day, or because he was drunk, or because he treated children as the responsibility of the wife.

Authoritarianism and neglect are probably the two most common complaints that children make about family life. They would like to modify their relations with their parents, but they are nevertheless not hostile to the family as an institution, indeed they mostly wish to strengthen it; they often want more not less family life, provided it gives them freedom as well as

does, but, 'to play with them, do things with them, all that, no.' From time to time he gives them a spanking. For example, a neighbour knocked at the door and complained that the children had let the tyres of her car down. He at once got out his belt. 'I do not want them to be vandals, to destroy other people's goods, one has enough trouble earning money to buy them.' You see, adds his wife, 'we are revolutionaries, but even so, we respect other people's property.' But that was the only hard beating they had given their children and they regretted it afterwards. One boy was in trouble with the police for stealing from the school canteen, but the parents did not worry; they do not believe in interfering much with what the children do at school. As for school homework, they do not have enough education themselves to follow it: 'It is beyond us.' They do not go to see the school much, because they find the teachers disagreeable, even the communist one is as unfair as the rest. The children are given pocket money only when they earn it by helping in the house.

The eldest boy is now married, and he behaves exactly like his father: when he gets home, he flops into his armchair, and leaves the housework to his wife. He regrets that he was never able to have any real communication with his father, and hopes to do better with his own child. Though his parents give the impression of having been lenient to their children, he thinks they were severe with him. This is a very frequent tale. The traditional father sets things up so that he is left in peace, which means things are done to suit him. He feels he is liberal because he does not bother with what does not affect him.

To judge just how authoritarian parents are, one must ask the children, and not just believe the liberal claims of the parents. Some thirteen-year-olds in a secondary school were made to write essays about their families. One girl wrote 'My relations with my parents are average. With my mother all goes well, but I don't feel the same about my father. He is not interested in us: he does not actually try to cause trouble; he shouts to frighten us. We must never speak when something interests him; but when we are interested, we have to shut up.' But she concludes, 'My children will respect their parents.' Sometimes it is the other way round. 'My father plays with us as though he were a

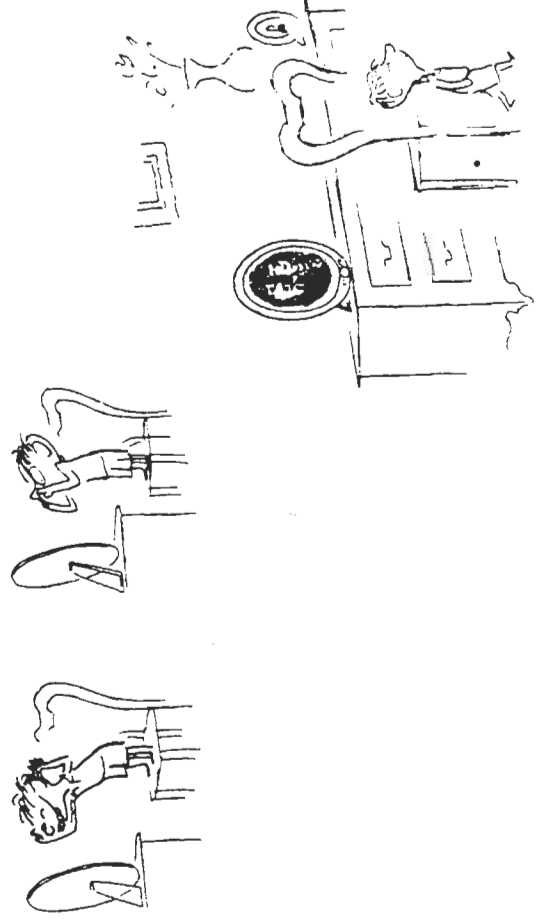
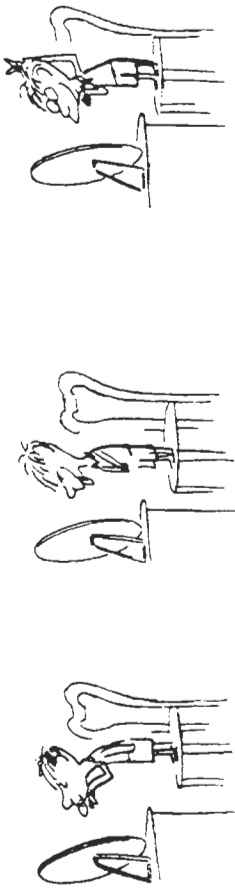
child of our age. My mother is not like that, she forbids me to speak to boys, she does not like my going out and when she sees my father amusing himself with us, she shouts: "You are worse than your children!" She gets cross easily.' Even a father who obviously enjoys family life, who discusses every subject with his children freely, and who gives them almost complete independence, is accused of neglect: Gérard Barthélemy (described in a later chapter) is friends with his children, but they complain that he is friends with too many people, he has too many other interests, and is always bringing guests home for meals. They would like him to give them more time; they want to eat together as a family more often, without guests. But when children try to imagine how they would treat their own children when they grow up, their imaginations are limited: they hover between promising to give their children everything they ask for, and simply reproducing their parents' ideals, being strict but fair, teaching what is right and wrong, as though they knew.

One of the pressures which children are particularly conscious of is their parents' continuing obsession with their passing examinations and obtaining diplomas. Here is an essay by a fourteen-year-old attending a lycée in the suburbs of Paris. 'I like my family. My parents are always with me, they support all my wishes. They are always ready to help me, though they are of no use outside the family, i.e. at school. When it comes to school, they have their hobby horse. They want me to work hard, so that I achieve something in life. When I do not work, punishment! I am forbidden to go out on Sunday, I am no longer allowed to do what I like. They give me liberty provided I work at school. Since at the moment I am not working, I stay indoors and twiddle my thumbs. Now in class I am no longer saying a word, so that I can get better reports, and my parents will be satisfied and I shall once again be allowed to go out. At present, I am not on speaking terms either with my father or mother. They are angry, we have quarrelled about school, and so I live my own life. In the evening, it is supper with scowling faces. Order will have to be restored one day, I hope so profoundly. At home, life is impossible when it comes to school. My parents are doing their best to educate me as well as

possible. I am not independent, I eat at the same time as them, I go to bed when they tell me to. I have to do what they want me to. Apart from that, I very much like family life and my parents, and their way of living. We are a united family, and on fairly good terms.

A recent enquiry among managers and their children showed that 28% of these parents thought that their first duty as parents was to ensure that their children studied well; 29% of their sons took the same view, but only 13% of their daughters. What the girls wanted from their father was more affection (24%), but only 6% of fathers thought fulfilling their need for affection was their prime duty. (Only 8% of their sons took that view.) The most widely accepted aim of these managers was to allow their children 'to develop their personalities' (50%). And on the whole their children were satisfied. The subject on which they were most satisfied was the amount of pocket money they got (90%). Most parents have bought peace. The price is quite low; even the well-to-do managers most frequently pay less than fifty francs a month to their children under sixteen.

There certainly are children who feel the victims of their parents' confusions and private problems. Gaby, a welder in the naval dockyards of St Nazaire, is full of utopian plans to reform industry and society, but he philosophically accepts that the war his wife Michèle wages with their eleven-year-old son is inevitable. Michèle complains 'the boy maltreats me. He calls me a prostitute.' She tells the boy: 'You ought not to speak to me like that, we ought to be friends.' When she smacks him, he takes it very badly and complains: 'You bash me because you are stronger than me,' and she cannot bring herself to say 'I am sorry, I was carried away.' Gaby's political views prevent him from exercising any authority over the children, but he says he understands that Michèle cannot behave otherwise. If she has no power at home, then she would be nothing. She says: 'If the children do not want to obey me, what do I become? I am just reduced to cooking and making the beds.' They have stormy rows about television. He feels he has no right to force programmes on the children just because they are interesting to him. She insists: 'You must intervene. They must go to bed.' His friends' advice is: 'Give the children a smack and there'll be



Sempé

Sempé

no more to say.' He is deeply distressed by his inability to apply his beautifully clear political ideas to his home, and to get his family out of the rut of rows and power struggles. She thinks she could solve her problems if she had a job, but she has no qualifications, and does not really want to work; she is rather frightened by the outside world.

Michèle always punishes her son, but not her daughter. Gaby says 'it is healthy' that she should do this, even though she is simply taking out on him her revolt against her husband and her father. 'For her,' he explains, 'men are swine. The boy is a little male, demanding his rights to behave as he wishes, and she cannot bear it; that is to be expected.' Many other families say that in the old days 'the son had the right to do as he pleased.' Michèle replies that has nothing to do with it. 'I would like my son to be nice to me, to accept everything I say, even if I am wrong. But he is not like that. So we row all the time. But my daughter Natacha always wants to be protected.' So mother and daughter get on very well.

On the other hand there are probably as many parents who feel that they just cannot understand their children. They believe they have done all the right things, made all sorts of concessions; talked with them and tried to see their point of view. A primary school headmistress in the Nord, Catholic by upbringing and by conviction, but cured of all dogma in the matter of bringing up children as a result of her own experience, says: 'We have no influence on the evolution of the relations between parents and children. Those relations are imposed on us by the children. We are always faced by *faits accomplis*.' She is a jovial and extrovert woman in her early forties, ready to talk freely. But she is baffled by her daughters' behaviour: 'Why do the girls not take us into their confidence? We always try to discuss with them . . . But on the essential things, they say nothing to us . . . Or we listen and we do not understand properly.' Her husband says he is sure their eldest daughter speaks more freely with her friends than with him, and that he himself (a gymnastics instructor) is more at ease with other girls than with his own daughter.

A professor at a southern university believes likewise that he has brought up his children sensibly; he would do exactly the

same if he had to do it again; but at forty he suddenly finds that they no longer have any use for him. He got a letter from his son of seventeen to say that there was no point in their trying to communicate. He can no longer talk with his daughter of fifteen. And yet when they were younger he used to talk a lot with them, about everything. 'We were never pals,' he admits; 'I always rejected laxity, the idea of the child as king, just as I refused to give them too much protection. I disapprove of children being sat upon or knocked about by adults, but in return I refused to allow my children to oppress me . . . I tried to respect them and to make them worthy of respect, especially in their own eyes. And I always appreciated that their most violent anger against adults was produced by a feeling that they were treated like babies, despised . . . Now we have not quarrelled. I think we still love each other as much as before, but as for our "relations", they are finished — at least for the time being.' He concludes that parents cannot win. It is all very well to say they should try to understand: that is easier said than done.

The new factor in the relations of parents and children is that sex has ceased to be unmentionable. The degree to which freedom is now allowed is seen in the family of the St Nazaire welder. Michèle once found her children, at the age of six, playing at 'making love' with their friends — imitating their parents, kissing on the mouth, masturbating each other and lying on top of each other. She decided she had no right to interfere. That was partly because she had grown up in a tradition of active juvenile sex, except that in those days it was done secretly. A technician says that as a boy 'I would rather have chopped myself into slices of sausages than talk about masturbation. We never discussed it, even among friends.' Now he has a son of fourteen and a daughter of ten. He speaks freely to them about sex, telling them it is quite normal to have sexual impulses. When his son reached puberty at thirteen, he gave him a packet of contraceptives: he has since given him another, and 'I shall slip him a third when he goes to England. My daughter knows I shall give her some when she starts having periods.' Among themselves, at home, the family are not worried by nakedness. But this kind of behaviour is probably

still that of a minority. *Pudeur* still rules. A forty-six-year-old chicken farmer confesses it took him ten years of marriage before he could talk freely about sex with his wife: she says the women in the village do not even talk about taking the pill; their daughter adds she would certainly be shocked to see her parents naked; at her school, she is sure at least half the girls feel uncomfortable just undressing with others present. Parents who claim they have told their children all there is to know about sex are often disconcerted to find their children denying it.¹

Do the French succeed in palliating their family frictions by their physical warmth, their lack of inhibition about touching each other? That is probably something they have learnt quite recently. Once upon a time kissing as a form of casual greeting was not a peculiarity of the French, but of the English. 'To salute strangers with a kiss is considered but civility (in England) but with foreign nations immodesty,' wrote an Englishman in 1620; and the English kiss was upon the lips. French visitors used to marvel at this. There are people in Brittany who recall that among peasants in their own lifetime, 'love was not demonstrative'; parents and children kissed only on special occasions, once or twice a year, at Christmas or on family feasts. But whether the warm touching and hugging that French southerners delight in now, even among males, goes back to the Romans, or is much more recent, is not known. Nor has anybody found out how much influence the hygienists had when they forbade mothers to fondle their babies.

It is not necessarily in the direction of more warmth that the young generation is moving. Girls of between fourteen and eighteen are the first generation to have passed their whole lives in mixed schools. One observes that 'the boys play at being hard. It is out of date to court, to show one's feelings. Everything moves too fast: three compliments, a non-alcoholic mint drink, and immediately they get to the point.' The pill makes the girls feel they have become interchangeable; adolescent love

¹ Hélène d'Istria and J. J. Breton, *Les Relations parents-enfants* (Belfond, 1978), an excellent enquiry.

has not become any easier. Most want their men now to be companions. They nearly all (91%) aspire to being economically independent of their men. They want jobs, moreover, which give them plenty of 'human contact'. They are moving towards a society of pals, away from the ideal of passion.