The Eyes of Cupid

By KEITH GORDON

"Give me a sensible girl," said Billy as he unconsciously began to respond to Mrs. Jack's artful promptings of the last half hour, which had, however, been so deftly administered that he did not so much as suspect that he was being pumped dry on the subject of his ideal woman. "Give me a girl with no nonsense about her."

He paused impressively and stared dreamily into the haze of blue smoke that surrounded them as if striving to call his ideal clearly up before his mind's eye.

"Venus de Milo waist and common sense shoes?" suggested Mrs. Jack, who for reasons of her own wished to get the outer semblance of Billy's ideal woman clearly impressed upon her memory.

Billy's glare withdrew itself from the shadowy haze and rested upon his friend's wife. For a brief moment his taste wavered, deflected by the bewitching thinness of her daintily shod foot, which had an apologetic air of being more ornamental than useful. Then he reverted sternly to his ideal once more.

"Er—yes," he began—"that is, if it is necessary," he added weakly, finding his companion's appearance fatally antagonistic to his theories.

As she had explained to her husband while dressing for dinner that evening, she felt responsible for Billy, and, though the former had assured her that Billy was a "husky brute" and could take care of himself, she had not been convinced.

"I took you away from him," she had argued with soft persistence, "and of course he must be awfully lonely up there in the old rooms. It isn't as if he had you," she had ended, with an inflection that had caused her husband, who was at the moment deftly manipulating his hairbrushes, to flash a half humorous glance at his image in the mirror and then cross the room to her side.

With an orange wood stick in one hand and the finger tips of the other rosy with pomade, she had reached up and recklessly pulled his head down beside her own. Temporarily the lonely Billy had been forgotten. Then the very excess of their happiness had made her heart smite her.

"It must be awfully lonely for him," she had resumed as if their conversation had received no interruption, "and since it's all my fault I feel as if I ought to find him a wife."

Now, encouraged by Mrs. Jack's sympathetic, questioning eyes, Billy rambled on, explaining that, though he was not a marrying man, there were moments when he hoped that some time he might have a hearth of his own, etc. Though apparently listening with sweet interest, his hostess was in reality reviewing the list of her friends in search of the possible girl. One by one they seemed to pass before her, a smiling, teasing procession of blonds and brunettes. But none of them, she realized with some disappointment, could exactly be described as a "girl with no nonsense about her," and from the fervor of Billy's convictions it was apparent that no other need apply.

Then, just as two worried lines of thought began to appear on her smooth forehead and as Billy was winding up with, "You see how it is, Mrs. Jack—the girls of today are too brilliant and worldly for a humdrum fellow like me!" the face of Virginia Blair arose before her, and the lines disappeared in the radiance of a bright, assured smile.

"She certainly is good looking in a dreadfully noble manner," the young matchmaker thought to herself as she revolved schemes for bringing the two together, "but I suppose Billy admires that type. And she doesn't pinch her feet or her waist. Obviously she was made for Billy."

At the dinner party which she gave soon after for that particular though unexpressed purpose of bringing them together Billy took Miss Blair out. She was a tall, handsome girl, with dark, serious eyes and smooth, heavy hair. Before the first course had disappeared Billy had discovered that she and life took each other seriously, and he had an uncomfortable feeling when her serious gaze fell upon him that he was a trivial soft of fellow after all. When she asked for his views upon municipal reform, he was sure of it. He was as confused and nonplused as if a canary bird had suddenly begun to bark.

For years he remembered that dinner with a sort of horror. He and Miss Blair, it seemed to him afterward, had worked like galley slaves, discussing all the knotty problems of the day. Around them were lightness, gayety and laughter, especially on the other side of the table, where Tessie Loring, who was the very embodiment of feminine frivolity, bubbled and dimpled and cast languishing glances about her.

Mrs. Jack had often wondered whether there would be anything left of Tessie should the dainty gown, hats, shoes and veils be swept away, for she seemed nothing more than a spirit born of a collection of filmy garments.

"Swish of silk, flutter of lace, odor of violets, flash of eyes and teeth and eternal chatter!" Mrs. Jack summed up ungraciously as she keenly noted Billy's wandering glances. "What possessed me to include her in a party for the benefit of a man who likes sensible girls! I can see that he's growing so disgusted that he wants to escape the entire sex." And with a shade of suppressed annoyance she rose, formulating an intention to keep Tessie as far as possible from Mr. Staunton for the rest of the evening.

It seemed, therefore, almost too unfortunate that the two should happen to meet again at her house late one afternoon of the following week, having been moved to make their bread and butter call at the same hour of the same day.

Tessie was at her best—or worst—and rattled away in the patois of society in a manner that would have been appalling had it been less picturesque. Billy's face was a study, but whatever his thoughts were his attention was unmistakable. Not one of Tessie's glances—sometimes merry, sometimes coquettish and sometimes brimming with a babyish sweetness intended to make him feel how big and strong and different he was—failed of its mark. Tessie did not know much, but that what she knew she knew remarkably well was slowly borne in upon Mrs. Jack during that half hour.

When the distant thud of the front door at last proclaimed her departure from the premises Billy, who had outstayed her, burst into an uncontrollable guffaw, in which his hostess joined him somewhat ruefully. But the outburst was not followed by any of the caustic remarks that might have been expected from a bachelor of his views and standing. On the contrary, a genial, amused gleam lingered in his eyes, the amusement of a grownup with a dainty, foolish, attractive child.

"Tessie is such a silly little thing," observed Mrs. Jack apologetically, "you mustn't mind her."

"Mind her!" ejaculated her visitor warmly. "I should say not! She's great!" And he chuckled reminiscently.

But on the subject of Miss Blair Mrs. Jack found him unresponsive.

"Do you suppose he's interested and doesn't want to show it?" she demanded of Jack, that fountain of wisdom, at the dinner table. "Because Virginia's precisely the sort of girl he pretends to admire. Now that I've found his ideal for him he doesn't seem to appreciate her."

Her husband laughed at the chagrin in her voice.

"If he doesn't fall in love with the lady we've provided"—

"According to his plans and specifications," giggled his wife.

"According to his own plans and specifications—why, I'll punch his head."

But in spite of his opportunities Billy remained cold to the charms of the sensible Miss Blair. In time Mrs. Jack noticed that it became increasingly difficult to throw them together. Billy simply would not be thrown.

"Provide a man with what he pretends to like and he immediately finds out that he doesn't want it," she reflected, with justifiable cynicism. "He says he likes sensible girls, but he won't look at Virginia, though he will hover about that little idiot, Tessie Loring, like a moth about a flame."

And indeed there was plenty of foundation for her statement. Far from causing Billy to take to the woods, as Mrs. Jack had feared she might, Tessie seemed to exercise some subtle influence over him. The two were forever meeting, both at Mrs. Jack's and elsewhere, by the merest chance, of course. And it was noticeable as time went on that, though they arrived separately, they invariably left together.

A month later he came to tell her of their engagement.

"A good many persons misjudge Tessie," he began, as if he felt that she might be one of the number, "but in reality she is one of the most sensible little girls in the world."

He said much more, and Mrs. Jack, swallowing hard, accepted it all, agreeing with him at every point. But when she was alone again she laughed until the tears streamed down her cheeks, and thus her husband found her.

"What under the heavens?" he inquired, but he got no further.

"Billy's going to marry Tessie Loring!" she announced breathlessly. "He says she is so sensible!"

Jack gave a low, incredulous whistle.

"Talk about love being blind!" he blurted out at last. "Why, love has an X ray eye! Nothing short of an X ray could see anything sensible in Tessie."

And he thrust his hands in his pockets and roared with her.