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The Last Word

By KEITH GORDON

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"As if marriage were the only end and aim of a girl's life!" she threw off scornfully. Her companion smoked imperturbably into the night for several seconds before replying.

"All the little rippling, purring brooks," he said slowly, "and all the ordinary rivers, even the great majestic streams, wind somewhere to the sea."

"Some rivers plunge underground and lose themselves," she argued stubbornly.

"I said 'ordinary rivers,'" This with laconic patience from the gloom.

A quick, flashing smile touched her lips and vanished as if frightened to find itself out in the dark. She wondered—well, a number of things; as, for instance, what he was thinking of at that very instant, whether he had ever really been in love and, if so, what she was like, how deeply love would stir him, whether—

She made a little impatient movement to brush away the thoughts which buzzed through her mind like gnats, but still they hovered about, scattered, but not dispersed. He was one of the men a woman simply had to think about—broad of shoulder and exasperatingly masculine, a sort of unexplored country of manliness that forever challenged. She drew a sharp, piqued sigh. However much the feminine mind paid tribute, he apparently preserved a Jove-like calm. Ruthlessly she prodded him again.

"But why hasn't a girl just as good a right to contemplate the joys of bachelorhood as a man?" she demanded.

"A man marries if he wants to, when

compacted this time by an audible sound that started as a flicker, but was deftly turned into a snuff of scorn. It was the latter that the man recognized and greeted with an amused laugh.

"Ever hear about the little buttercup that pined to be a daisy, or the rose that swore it was a potato, and if it wasn't it would be—there now?" Inquired the man, with bland curiosity. Again the point of light shifted. He had replaced the cigar in his mouth and settled a little more luxuriously in his chair as if in mere sybaritic enjoyment of his extraordinary luck in having been born as he was.

"Your illustrations are beside the facts," she retorted at last, with dignity. "I was not asserting that girls wish to be men!"

"Well, then"—his tone implied an amiable desire to please—"ever hear of the little buttercup that insisted that it was a daisy in spite of appearances and the testimony of its yellow petals? Well, that's like the foolish little girls who want to be judged by man's standard."

Two slender hands were clasped noiselessly, but their owner enunciated with some heat. "How would you like to be a woman yourself and be put upon and—and snubbed and forever taunted with the fact of your inferiority? Oh, not in so many words," she went on hurriedly, lest he should interrupt her speech. "Not that, of course, but by being told that you couldn't understand, being patronized, having allowances made—'Oh, well, she's only a woman!' Just tell me, honor bright, how would you like it?"

The man chuckled. The vision of himself in the predicament suggested was not without its humorous side. The figure of speech he had used a few minutes earlier came back to him with a new force. It was like being caught under a net, though the meshes were aliken.

"Well?" she demanded, with a ring of triumph in her voice.

"I don't suppose I should like it," he admitted between puffs. "But that doesn't prove anything, you know," he went on hastily. "That's because I'm a man." Then, as an afterthought, "When you're once used to being a woman—or—I should think you might get used to it—grow to like it. Man's good angel, you know, and all that!"

"But what if one wearies of the role of good angel—what if one longs to be just oneself? For my part, I don't see why man shouldn't be woman's good angel for awhile—he's so strong and brave and, above all, superior!"

Her voice was deceptively mocking. Being only a man, and a man in the dark at that, he had no way of knowing that her eyes were dancing mischievously and she was wondering if he were horribly shocked. What he did know, however, was that the voice, with its youthful, almost boyish treble, was the sweetest in the world to him, that he would rather be mocked and flouted by those lips than flattered by any others. Still he had a point to prove, and he tossed the dwindled cigar off into the bushes that flanked the porch, squared his shoulders aggressively and demanded:

"Would you propose to a man if—er—you loved him?"

His listener gasped. This was carrying the war into the enemy's country with a vengeance. Propose to a man she loved! Not for rubies and diamonds—not for principalities and powers! One might propose to a man one didn't love, but to the man—never!

"No," came the answer in a voice grown suddenly small and meek. "And she talks about wanting a man's rights!" he groaned to some invisible person. "And she hasn't the nerve to do a little thing like that. My, oh, my!"

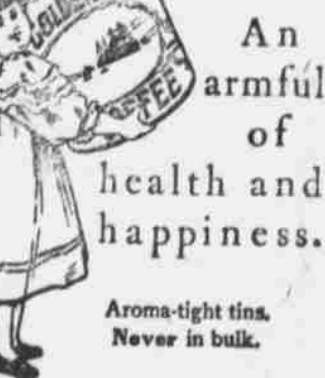
"I'm afraid you'll have to stay in the good angel business awhile yet—until, for instance, you can stand up and tell a man you love him. I don't see any other way."

There was a pause, in which he waited for her to speak, but she said nothing. Then he leaned forward, and in the gloom she could see the shining of his eyes. He, too, must have seen some secret thing in her face, for, with a laugh—soft, exultant—he took her hands in his and pressed them fervently to his lips.

"You are such funny, helpless, ridiculously superior creatures," were her last words upon the subject a little later, "that I suppose it will have to be—yes."

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