

A MYSTERY SOLVED

We had been yarning about old times when, in 'teenage youth, we courted the girls and, is always the case with middle-aged men, there was much claiming of sexual conquest as our glasses were emptied. Bill Matthews, a retired public-servant, had listened quietly in the corner as each tried to out-lie the other, but now he spoke up.

"The mystery of the femininity of women was always a closed book to me in my youth, and it was not solved until I went into the c^ountry. I'll tell you about it, if you like". And this was his story.

After I had been teaching in a city school for a couple of years I was transferredd to a God-forsaken township on the fringe of the Never Never, and a lonely time I had of it associating with about a score of kids of various ages and varying capacity for six hours a day. There was no life about the place and after an evening meal with an elderly woman and her brother, who had no talk, the only thing to do was to return to my couple of rooms attached to the school, and sleep away the interval until the morning. The farming people, most of whom were bowed don^w beneath the weight o^f mortgage, slouched along between heaven and earth as if they didn't care whether they saw another sunrise.

At the suggestion of the woman who provided my meal, I began to go to the weekly Band of Hope meetings and they proved an oasis in that great desert of monotony. I heard the tunel^less attempts at song by the local amateurs and the cold-watery recitations of the youthful prodigies, after which all were invited to come to the front and swear off the accursed drink for ever. Not that anyone had enough money to get drunk on, or the energy to get properly drunk if he had the money; but the necessity for holding these meetings had entered deep into the souls of all within miles of the little schoolhouse where they were held -- partly because of the monotony but mainly because of their possibilities as matrimonial agencies.

One night I was contemplating the Hon. Sec. -- his fa^cial expression, his gestures, his exhortations, and was calculating the amount of horsepower he was wasting when I felt a light^t tread upon my foot. A sweet voice said "Oh, I am sorry and I beg your pardon. The light in here is dim when you first come in".

"That's all right, miss. The light is certainly dim," I replied, glancing at her face. It was very pretty, but it agreed very well^w with the voice. She stood as if she wished to speak but couldn't find sufficient excuse -- and I couldn't. At last she decided to leap the barrier.

"You're the new teacher, aren't you? I haven't had the pleasure of an introduction yet, but Cissie, my eldest sister, told me you were." She told me her name was Guthrie, Susan she added, and she had four sisters, hence the necessity for the distinction. I told her mine, as the Hon. Sec. dismissed us all with the benediction

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On the following Sunday I had dinner at her home, and introductions to her four sisters, all of whom had advanced ideas on women's rights, especially

I discovered later, her right to anything male which crossed her vision. Before I left I was well installed in the family's graces, and the mother cordially invited me to come again. I thought of those four gorgons, and hesitated, but a glimpse of Susan's neat ankles and a flash of her white lace underwear decided me. I came on the following Sunday and on the next one, and soon I became a regular visitor to the Guthrie home.

As a means of monopolising each other's company, Susan and I took long horseback rides, to which the old people gave tacit acquiescence. But, being a cad with a possible Government career before me, I decided Susan wasn't the heart queen to embody my ideal. Nevertheless she was sweet and affectionate and I was inexperienced with women, though the chance of solving the mystery of femininity had a great attraction for me.

We had ridden to Green Creek one afternoon and, her eyes chancing on a shady nook, she called to me "Isn't it a lovely spot. Will we get off?"

I dismounted and, as she removed her foot from the stirrup, caught her in my arms. The little delighted laugh and the sense of dependence with which she clung to me, even on the ground, stirred all that was purely man in me -- and I never had much of the saint to balance. But we idly lounged the afternoon away on the green grass, and when we arrived back home that evening, the mystery was still unsolved for me.

Thinking, in the reactionary time which followed, I concluded that I was a fool to be running head first at temptation as I had been doing -- especially as marriage with Susan was out of the question, considering my hopeful career. So I stayed away for a fortnight, busy with my studies, but the iron of martyrdom ate deeply into me, and soon I found myself at Guthrie's gate, undecided whether to go forward or step back. However the question was decided for me when Susan came flying out into my arms. There followed a heart-to-heart kissing affair and a fierce, clinging wordless embrace. Suddenly the question of the mystery came back with a re-doubled fascination.

"Come to the schoolhouse tomorrow night," I whispered hoarsely. She lunged back in my arms, looked into my eyes, disengaged her arms, and said "No". Then she kissed me hurriedly and ran inside.

As I walked slowly back to my quarters, I considered those four sisters and the awful store of wisdom they must have gathered in their long experience, and I wondered whether Susan had been inoculated. But I was sorry for my question, and she had gone much nearer to the heart queen of my youthful dreams. I determined on the time test, and vowed to stay away for a month. Once more I felt the pleasant [^] sensation of martyrdom.

A week later I was sitting at the table in my quarters busy with my studies, when a knock at the door startled me. I called "Come in", the door handle turned, and in walked Susan, a dignified restraint written all over her. I offered her a chair and sat at a respectful distance. I talked small talk: anything but what I knew was in both our minds.

Then suddenly she covered her face with her hands and burst out crying. I put out the light, took her on my knee, and tried to console her. How

we clung together and what nonsense we murmured to one another; and then the passionate restiveness which disturbed us half sitting, half lying in the dark.

There was a knock at the door. I quietly pushed Susan into the bedroom and opened the door cautiously.

"Sitting in the dark, eh?"

You could have floored me with a feather when I recognised old Guthrie. I said something about just going to bed, and he went on - "I'm looking out for Susan. She went up for the mail sometime after tea, and the old woman got uneasy about her, so I thought I'd stroll up the road and meet her. We'll sit out on the veranda if you don't mind and I'll see her as she comes past".

I let him do all the talking, and he had plenty to say. I did all the hard, heavy thinking a man like me might be expected to do in the circumstances. Now and then he would rise and peer up the road anxiously and ask "Could she have passed me, do you think?"

And then he would launch out on the necessity of a girl having protection at night, and got rid of much general wisdom concerning their proper bringing-up, pointing to Susan and her sisters as awful examples of girls who never went astray.

"I never let them out with any young fellows at night-time," he said, and, reflectively, "There ain't a young fellow within twenty miles of us I'd trust with them, except yourself. You're a good lad."

I felt small enough to go through the eye of a needle, and I was glad to see him prepare to leave. He again peered up the road before saying "Good night, my boy. I must have missed her," and he lounged off into the darkness, and I went inside.

Susan lay on my bed sobbing. The shock which broke in on our opportunity and the awkwardness of her present position, had rendered the poor girl nearly hysterical and I knew that in some way ^{I was} responsible. Her clinging arms were very warm, and soon the sweet face against my shoulder grew restful. The desire of solving the mystery came back to me strongly, checked only by the old man's implicit faith in me.

So then and there I said to hell with ambition and asked her to be my wife, and the delights which encompasseth all lovers was around us all that night. The next day the minister in a nearby town quietly married us.

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"I didn't know you were married, Bill," I said. "Where's the wife now?"

"Dead. She died when our child was born," Matthews said fiercely, as he got to his feet. "Woman always pays the price of man's curiosity".