

HER FIRST PROPOSAL

By Keith Gordon

It was the softest of spring days and Mowbray and Miss Farrar strolled through the greenery of the park with the languid abstraction born of the first warm weather, and a friendship of several years' standing. Though their eyes drank in the beauty of the scene about them—the great stretches of greenward, the trees and bushes that were bursting into the tender green of the season as into a sort of silent song—neither of them was thinking of it. Miss Farrar, indeed, was living over other days inevitably brought back by the warm breeze and the smell of growing things—other springtimes when life meant only the beautiful possibility of love. And Mowbray was thinking of her and wondering if by any chance it would be worth while to tell her. For in spite of her unquestionable attractiveness he could not help feeling that he would find it hard to look into those calm, clear eyes and talk of love. Yet he was neither cowardly nor inexperienced. He simply had a natural shrinking from being regarded with suppressed amusement by the woman he loved. And in her apparent immunity from such emotions that was what he feared. She would, in all probability, only laugh at his light, frothy laugh and say, "Nonsense, Clark don't be silly!"

He sent a speculative glance toward her as she walked beside him looking off into the distance with the preoccupied air of a woman whose whole mind was given to some engrossing and persistent thought. "Let us sit for a while," she proposed as they reached the top of a knoll where, under a solitary tree, a bench invited relaxation. Siting the bench to the word, she seated herself comfortably with her elbows placed deliberately on the back of the bench—her attitude peculiar to her aggressive moods and one which Mowbray had learned to recognize as a preliminary of an intention to talk things out to a finish. He wondered what it would be this time for he had long since dropped into the role of listener.

He waited patiently with eyes that roved carelessly over the mansions in the far side of Fifth avenue, watching them turn back a well-bred stare, knowing that her feelings would soon reach the point of overflow. At last she broke the silence.

"Do I look to you like a person selected by Fate to be distinguished among women?" she demanded, turning toward him with a directness which challenged a truthful answer. He regarded her in a manner intended to convey that he was making an expert examination.

"No," he admitted, "I can't say that you do. That is—"

"I haven't the least idea what it is about, but I am glad that there is going to be no animosity," Mowbray observed politely. Then he settled himself to listen. It was one of his virtues that he never missed a cue.

Her next words came out rather abruptly. "I'm not especially plain, do you think?"

Her tone was deprecating, but she turned her face toward him in a manner as impersonal as if she were calling his attention to the landscape. Then she continued impatiently:

"That is, I suppose I would be classed as 'fair to middling.' He nodded assent with a gleam of mischief in his eye.

"To tell you the truth—her tone had dropped into the peculiarly confidential key—"I'm not at all conceited about my looks, but I've always flattered myself that I am rather interesting."

The statement ended with a rising inflection which made it a question, and it was evident that she was awaiting his decision with some anxiety.

"Rather interesting, I think we may say," he agreed suavely.

"And I'm sure I'm affectionate and fairly good-tempered, and—"

Mowbray encouraged her by a nod. "And I shall have to take your word for that."

"Well, I am domestic. I know I am. So I want you to explain to me whether you are growing tumultuous—but first promise on your honor that you'll never tell how it is that I've reached the age of six without ever having had a proposal!"

Mowbray threw himself back and roared, while her face fell down off the bench, and she dropped her face upon her hands and sat looking at him with the puzzled air of a pupil at the feet of a master.

"When you've done laughing," she began with dignity.

"Pardon, dear, a thousand pardons. He had never called her that before, and there was something in her voice which bespoke a new hope and confidence, but she was too engrossed in her pursuit of self-knowledge to notice.

"I forgot to say, that I'm sensible. Men always like that, you know. Any way, they pretend to."

She finished in a tone that suggested that she had no doubt of their sincerity. With a mighty effort her companion swallowed his mirth and prepared to face the situation with her.

"Is it because you haven't wanted anyone to ask you?" he inquired diplomatically.

"No, indeed!"

"And no man has ever told you that he loved you?" he murmured in a thoughtful tone.

"Well—now—I didn't say just that, you know!"

There was a faint suspicion of a blush on Miss Farrar's smooth cheeks, but her glance met Mowbray's with its usual unflinching honesty.

"Men have told me that they loved me—several of them! But that's not a proposal, you know, any more than it is a purchase when I say that I love a string of pearls at once."

"A—h—!"

The circulation was full of enlightenment. Mowbray was beginning at last to understand things that had always puzzled him, as his next question showed.

"Would it be impertinent to ask how you have received these declarations?"

"Why, I just listened! You see, it's embarrassing. It makes one feel so terribly conscious."

"What about the man?" Mowbray asked quietly. "Doesn't it occur to you that perhaps he might need a little encouragement—that perhaps he might be a trifle conscious, too?"

For a moment there was silence between them. The point of view was utterly new to Miss Farrar, and she was obviously impressed by it.

"I never thought of that," she admitted slowly. "I thought that sort of thing was so in a man's line—his nature."

A squirrel darted swiftly across the grass, and turning its head just to look upon them. Then with a saucy wave of its beautiful tail it scurried away.

"I fear it may be any day," said Mowbray. "I have it! Learn from the squirrel. Lightness, airiness, coquettishness! Don't you see what I mean?" and he looked at her teasingly.

But she was not to be diverted. "I am serious," she assured him. "There's always a reason for everything, and there must be a reason for this. There's Alice Nixon. She's not so awfully pretty. I heard her make a proposal to me. I have it! Learn from the squirrel. Lightness, airiness, coquettishness! Don't you see what I mean?" and he looked at her teasingly.

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