

MERELY MARJORIE

REGINALD WRIGHT KAUFFMAN

I WON'T marry you!" said Marjorie. Wasn't that just like her? I don't know another woman in all the world who would say that. However, though I would allow such a statement from no one else, a chap must permit something to the girl whom he intends to marry, so I merely answered:

"I had no idea you were so self-sacrificing."

"Poof!" said Marjorie. "If you were the last man in the world, Tom Randolph, I should turn up my nose at you."

I looked at the nose. "No doubt," I told her; "I've always been lucky; I'm used to having pleasant little things turn up for me."

Marjorie tapped her white-shod foot on the veranda floor and pretended to look at the river.

It was one of those gilt-edged evenings in the first flush of real spring, late May, you know, when the air is heavy with new honeysuckle and the vines have just begun to screen the porch; when—Oh, you know!

"What will you give for my thoughts?" asked Marjorie, presently.

I had wanted to make her talk first. That's why I had waited. The surest way to make a woman talk is to give her a chance. "I will give you my heart," I vowed.

"Nonsense," she said. "Why do you want to marry me?"

"Well," I protested, "I've got to do something."

"But there are so many—"

"Not at hand, Marjorie, not at hand; and whatever I do must be done before next spring. Manhattan Power and Electric has swallowed half of my small patrimony, and, now that the time for dividends has arrived, is calmly taking its siesta. The Unimpeachable Life and Casualty Company is still staggering from its last round with the Young Investigator, champion heavyweight of the world. And as for the final quarter of my estate, you ought to know what has become of the Arizona and Montana Land Investment and Bonanza Farm Corporation. I can survive a twelve-month; but after that I haven't the slightest idea what poor robin will do then—do then."

"And so," said Marjorie, "you propose me."

"I propose to you."

"Are you sure it wouldn't be throwing good money after bad?"

"It's throwing an empty purse into the mint. It's only just. Your own father was the man who got me into that glittering Arizona—"

"But you said yourself that took only a quarter of your money."

"Precisely. There are four of you children. I am an equitable man. Your father got a quarter of my money. I shall ask him for only a quarter of his."

Marjorie smiled. "And there's not time to seek elsewhere?"

"Neither time nor capital."

"How about inclination?"

We looked at the moon. "Ah," I said, "as for inclination! Marjorie's hair is golden—"

"You used to call me 'Reddy.'"

"With a passionate tint of red. Marjorie's eyes are violet and serious, and deep and tender—"

"Do you remember the night I winked at Mr. Mallard?"

"I do not."

"You had been—"

"Really, Tommie—"

"Don't call me Tommie! If you do that again I shall stop at once."

"Tommie!"

"Marjorie's mouth is petulant and ingenuous; daring and afraid; tempting and fugitive."

"Tommie, if you don't stop—"

"And if you call me Tommie again I shall kiss you."

"Tommie!" cried Marjorie—and I did it.

After all, I am in love with Marjorie. I cannot remember a time when I was

not. I arose thoroughly satisfied. "I am so glad!" I said.

"About what?" asked Marjorie.

"About your surrender."

"But I haven't surrendered."

"Why, you let me kiss you!"

"Oh, well, a girl can't always avoid—"

"Has ever been another man who—"

Her head shot up, chin thrust forward.

"Well," she said, "I should hope!"

"Girl, girl," said I, "this is a terrible blow, and yet—and yet—" I waved away all her past, heroically—"what do those others matter now?"

"They may matter a good deal. I simply haven't surrendered. You see I let you kiss me, but I didn't kiss you."

"Then I must begin all over again?"

"You mustn't begin at all."

"Marjorie," I said, "I have never left off. Why, we were sweethearts in pinafores! I recollect distinctly how, when our nurses were gossiping and the baby carriages—"

"Go-carts, if you please, Tommie: I came a little after the day of baby carriages."

"That's a detail. I remember, I say, how the go-carts were close together, and you dropped your bottle on the bricks and cried, and I—I handed over mine."

"First the milk to me and then the money to father. Generous boy!"

"Yes. And I remember how in kindergarten—"

But she gave a cry of dismay. "You've skipped five years," she said. "Don't you remember the mud pies?"

"Of course," I answered. "And the dolls' house in the attic!"

"You said my best doll was ugly."

"I was comparing her with her mistress."

"And—and you always would throw spit-balls at father."

"I don't recollect that," I said. But I did: I should, just then, have liked to throw a sixteen-pound shot at father for selling me that Arizona gold brick.

"Oh, yes!" insisted Marjorie. "Don't you recall how he caught you and spanked you before all the girls and boys, and how we all laughed, and how you cried?"

"No," said I shortly. "But I remember how my mother used to have to wash your face and hands the instant you came within her reach. And, at any rate, I am now, by way of getting square with your father—I am going to marry you."

Marjorie shook her glowing head.

"No," she whispered.

"Oh, hang it! Don't be so selfish! It's unwomanly."

But she only shook her head.

"Stop that!" said I. "It's annoying; I'm not used to it, and it argues a poor vocabulary. Marjorie, is there another man?"

"All of them."

"Bosh! Nowhere so much as in love is there safety in numbers. And it can't be because I'm poor, since your father is rich enough for seven."

"It's not that," said Marjorie.

"Then—oh, but this is impossible! It can't be that you're not in love with me?"

Marjorie's little hands gripped the porch rail. Bending toward her—so that her hair brushed my cheek—I caught her scented whisper:

"Tom" (she said "Tom"!), "are you never really, truly serious?"

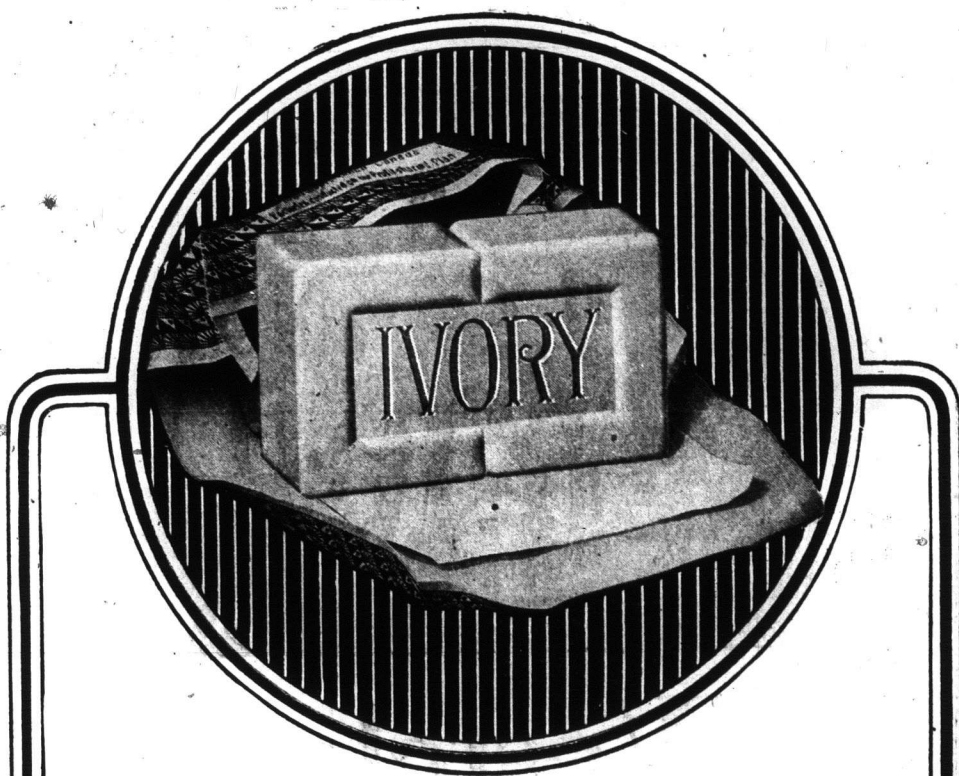
"Marjorie, when you use that tone I am really, truly anything you happen to want. I can't help myself, and it's not fair, because you know I can never hold out when you talk that way!"

She looked up at me. "It doesn't much matter, Tom; whether I'm in love with you or not; the point is that I'm not certain of you."

"Prove me!" said I.

She gave me, swiftly, her little hand, firm, throbbing, warm. "I will prove you," she said.

I cast one pitiful glance over my shoulder as if to bid farewell to my last bridge burning in the rear, and then valiantly murmured, "Try!"



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