

The Wisdom of the Serpent

BY DUFFIELD OSBORNE

YOU who have never met Mrs. Van Santvoord may weary, perhaps, of these hymns in her praise. I cannot help it. She is clever, tactful, logical, truthful—and very feminine; and if you can see no excuse for enthusiasm in such a combination, I would not, for worlds, that you should read a word I write.

Mrs. Van Santvoord is a young woman, but she insists that she has been younger—oh, so *much* younger; and that brings me to the story she tells of her first attempt to regulate the lives of her friends: her first attempt, and, I insist, her only failure. I know several men, now, who would give half they possess to have Mrs. Van Santvoord take an advisory interest in certain affairs; and it is quite likely she may do so, for some of them, out of sheer kindness of heart and an unwillingness to see good hands played badly. I don't know how women feel about her help. They never will tell, and I never could.

Mrs. Van Santvoord does not believe in social traditions, nowadays. She calls them "The Wisdom of the Serpent," which she insists has been greatly overestimated. This story is of the days before her full awakening, when she had been married only about a year, and believed most of the things that other people thought they believed. The position of a young matron impressed her with its dignity and responsibility; she was very happy, and being, as I have said, an ever-gushing fountain of kindness, she felt that her responsibility centred in the mission of making all her friends *nearly* as happy as she and Jack Van Santvoord were.

This is where Tom Kennicott and Mabel Strange come in.

Tom Kennicott was a chum of Jack Van Santvoord's, and a clean, white fellow all around; but Tom Kennicott saw fit to fall desperately, madly in love with Mabel Strange, who was one of Mrs. Van

Santvoord's "most intimate friends," had graduated with honors from Jones College, and was passing through the post-graduate course of "woman-sufficient-unto-herself" philosophy. Therefore she was the best of friends with half a dozen men, but "could never be any more to any of them," including Tom Kennicott.

Now Mrs. Van Santvoord *knew* this was sheer nonsense. She knew that Mabel was not sufficient to herself, any more than Tom was sufficient to himself—which he wasn't in the least; and she liked Mabel, and felt sure that she was enough of a woman to wake up some day to the folly of non-matrimonial missions. Mrs. Van Santvoord did not want her to wake up too late, and realizing that Tom Kennicott was in a condition to lead from a three-suit of spot cards, and to trump his partner's king in the first trick, she undertook to glance over his hand and make a few suggestions.

It was a very good hand too, and Kennicott was grateful to the grovelling-point. He had proposed twice, and attained the full measure of abject humility. He was perfectly sure that Mabel Strange was an angel straight from heaven, and that he was a fool and a worm and an Otos and Ephialtes of impertinent audacity.

Not one of these things was true in the least, and Mrs. Van Santvoord first started in to stimulate the self-esteem of her patient, in order that he might be brought to a condition where he could follow out her suggestions with some degree of spontaneity.

She succeeded in this, too, as she always does, God bless her! There's nothing a good man needs so much or so often as an occasional tonic for his self-esteem, popular prejudice to the contrary notwithstanding.

Then came the application of "The Wisdom of the Serpent."

Mrs. Van Santvoord had always heard—or perhaps the tradition had come into her being through some subtle process of heredity—that the best and the surest way for a man to awaken dormant love in the heart of an obdurate maid was to turn, after a proper season of devotion, and make furious love to some one else. It had never occurred to her to question this axiom, any more than she would have questioned the divine origin of chaperonage, or that the parable of the wedding garment bore directly on the question of Easter bonnets.

Therefore she advised Tom Kennicott accordingly, and when that helpless young man begged her to recommend a competent understudy, during the “indisposition” of his “leading lady,” she promptly suggested Grace Dorrien, the far-and-away belle of the season and the champion flirt of the last three.

Several worldly-wise reasons appeared to sanction this choice. In the first place, it seemed a perfectly natural thing for the blighted Kennicott to do, men being, as Mrs. Van Santvoord then held, and as most women still hold, something of sheep in such matters. This exemplifies the unfortunate tendency of the sex to generalize in their masculine deductions; but never mind that now. Then, too, the surrender of a new man to Grace Dorrien was sure to be noised around more quickly than news of a similar conquest by a less observed young woman, and any feeling of irritation or resentment it might arouse would be intensified by natural dissatisfaction with the “to-them-that-have-shall-be-given” principle. Above all, Grace Dorrien could be absolutely depended upon, despite the many calls on her affections, to manage her end of the affair in a supremely artistic fashion.

So Tom Kennicott trotted off obediently to make love to Grace Dorrien, and Mrs. Van Santvoord leaned back to watch the game, with a happy consciousness of well-doing, and a consoling trust that, if the present policy didn't bring things out right, it would be only because things couldn't be brought.

Now it is only fair to Kennicott to say that while, as I have stated, he trotted off obediently enough, he, nevertheless, carried no manner of enthusiasm to his

strategic devotion. Mrs. Van Santvoord admits this very frankly in her pupil's lasting honor. She even goes so far as to add that she was filled with the gravest kind of misgivings that her ruse would prove transparent, and that the last state of that man would be worse than the first.

Here was where Grace Dorrien came to the rescue of the situation, a point which must be set to Mrs. Van Santvoord's credit, since she made her selection of an understudy with the chance of such an emergency well in view.

Grace Dorrien was never known to have too large a flock—from her own stand-point. No member of it was allowed to feel slighted or detached for a single instant, and she was altogether possessed by a kindly and apostolic spirit that would impel her at any moment to leave her ninety-and-nine in the wilderness in order to seek out and recover one that had strayed. Half-hearted or perfunctory devotion she tolerated least of all, or to be more accurate, she had never been called upon to tolerate it; and so it happened that Tom Kennicott was promptly singled out, both as the newest and the most uncertain of her admirers, for radical and personal treatment.

It succeeded, of course. Not that his devotion to Mabel Strange wavered for an instant; but no man lived who could look straight into Grace Dorrien's eyes without being carried through his part with a certain degree of credit.

Society was soon buzzing and humming quite satisfactorily. Mabel Strange saw and heard, and Mrs. Van Santvoord imagined she detected just a suggestion of the “freezing up,” which she looked for as the first symptom of the coming thaw.

Only Grace Dorrien was not satisfied. She had experienced too much real devotion to be deceived for a moment by anything in that line which savored in the least of the histrionic. She was not an analytical young woman, and she would have been the last in the world to hit upon the real truth in the matter. All she knew was that Tom Kennicott's attentions lacked something. She also knew, incidentally, that he was good-looking and clever and well-bred, and that she had always regarded his former affair with unfeignedly sympathetic interest.

You see, Kennicott was constantly alert for Mrs. Van Santvoord's signal to the effect that Mabel Strange was reduced to the approximate melting-point, and Mrs. Van Santvoord could see no sign whatever of the approach of that psychic moment.

After the first impulse of surprise on the part of the deserted maiden, and the unguarded flash of pique indicated by her slightly lowered temperature, she returned precisely to her former attitude of serene friendliness and warm interest.

As I have said, she and Mrs. Van Santvoord were very dear friends, and saw each other three or four times a week. Naturally they discussed everything from creation to crochet, including Tom Kennicott; and when Mrs. Van Santvoord ventured little catty remarks about "men caught on the rebound," etc., Mabel maintained, with just sufficient warmth, that Tom was a dear boy, and she sincerely trusted that, whatever he did, it would lead to his happiness. As for her opinion of Grace Dorrien, she persisted in holding that that young woman had very much more to her than people gave her credit for, and that, after she got through playing, she'd settle down and make one of the sweetest and best of wives.

Mrs. Van Santvoord was in despair. Who could imagine such heartlessness! She waxed indignant when she thought of it, and dropped Mabel down to once or twice a week in sheer disgust.

Meanwhile Grace Dorrien had awakened to a full consciousness that she was having a new experience. "Of course Tom Kennicott loved her. To imagine anything else for the smallest moment would be quite too absurd." And yet—

You and I can readily understand that, besides the advantages intimated above, Kennicott had in his favor (or disfavor) the one inestimable point of *not* being really in love. Therefore he held all his powers at command. When the true slaves of the Dorrien lamp were silent and moody through jealousy or misgivings, he scintillated and amused with the best his wit could proffer; when they, in their despair, became sullen or sharp-tongued, he laughed the more good-naturedly, and was ever thoughtful and rich in all the little politenesses and at-

tentions that women demand. As he felt no rebuff or discouragement, he knew no abstraction or irritation or blue-devils.

Therefore and for these things Grace Dorrien liked him better and better, while his rivals, one by one, retired from the field, or, giving ill-advised battle, were driven thence in such confusion as the intensity of their several loves and disappointments ordained.

Now mere liking is not, by any means, the parent of love in a woman's soul. I have heard excellent authorities intimate that there were occasions when an able-bodied hatred was a much more promising sentiment; just as a wild colt will gallop more readily than will a trained trotter; but you must remember that Grace Dorrien's jog-trot liking, founded as it was on most excellent grounds and most fallacious deductions, was spurred constantly toward the mad gallop of love by the enigmatic something in Kennicott's attitude which piqued both her curiosity and her pride, and furnished her, above all, with that foremost desideratum of social femininity—a new sensation.

That was why it happened that she "broke" at last, and being a young woman with somewhat frank methods and a habit of getting what she wanted, it was not long before a realizing sense of this new phase of the situation dawned upon the mind of Kennicott.

Lulled into a false security by the premise with which he and his commander had opened their campaign—that Grace Dorrien's heart was arrow-proof—it came to him very suddenly that, of all the company who had hung on her smile, he alone remained, and that the others had fallen for his sake, who had but to reach out his hand for the woman-love that hung trembling toward him.

Kennicott knew all this as in a second, and he never hesitated or faltered. He had played; now he must pay. It was rank caddishness to argue that he had not realized that he was risking anything. To be sure, he did not love Grace Dorrien as he loved Mabel Strange, but Mabel Strange was lost to him forever: colder than ice to the great passion that had dominated his life. On the other hand, he *liked* Grace immensely. She never bored him, and her little, kittenish

ways both amused and soothed. Above all, his man's heart responded with a great bound to the consciousness that a woman's love had been conferred upon him. He himself had loved, and he knew what love was worth; that it was too glorious a thing to cast aside lightly, even when every motive of chivalry and honor did not join to forbid. Before God, his life should at least mean this much—that he would devote it to the happiness of the one woman who loved him; and strong, nay, even glad in the magic of this dream, he turned from play to earnest, and begged humbly for the heart that was already his.

To say that Mrs. Van Santvoord was dumfounded when she realized the result of her strategy would be putting the case very mildly. First she refused to believe. Then she sent for Tom Kennicott, who, for some reason of his own, had not been bearer of the tidings.

He came, in aspect very like a school-boy whom the principal had ordered to a private interview, and she proceeded, first, to humble herself, and then to pronounce against the sacrifice.

The situation, she said, was most sad and painful, and it was all her fault; but that was no reason for making bad worse. She, in her blindness, had driven him to a point where he must do one of two great wrongs; but the greatest of these, she insisted, the greatest of all such wrongs, the one that he must avoid at any cost, was marrying a woman he did not love, and who accepted him, loving, and believing in his love for her.

Then Kennicott spoke—it was really his first chance—and he spoke very quietly and firmly. All that she said he admitted to be perfectly just and true, but the weakness of her contention lay in the fact that he *did* love Grace Dorrien.

Mrs. Van Santvoord sat aghast. Such inconstancy seemed to her quite unsusposable, and she ventured several gently sarcastic innuendoes. Kennicott answered again, still more quietly and firmly. Possibly he deserved her criticisms—this much he admitted; but the fact remained that, while he had thought that he loved Mabel Strange, until her coldness had revealed to him that he did not, now he *knew* he loved Grace Dorrien—which clinched the revelation.

So he went away, and Mrs. Van Santvoord smiled bitterly and pondered upon the fickleness of men. Kennicott had succeeded even beyond his hopes: I know he must have lied more than well to deceive Mrs. Van Santvoord, and it was not his fault that he failed to deceive me; only *I* was a man, and a just ordinary man can see through another man better than the cleverest woman that ever lived.

So Tom Kennicott married Grace Dorrien, and these are the two really interesting features of the whole affair.

The chance of the one might be fairly foreseen by a good many people: that Kennicott, being a man, with a fine, chivalric nature, should really and truly cease to love Mabel Strange, and come to love his wife as much as she loved him. That developed very quickly, and I do not know of a happier marriage among all my friends, who have run the gamut of marriages for love, for money, for convenience, and—just for instance. Kennicott married for honor; possibly under a mistaken sense of it, but best, according to his lights, and he had his reward. The other interesting feature of the affair—one that I learned long afterward, no matter how, but to a *certainly*—was that, as a matter of fact, Mrs. Van Santvoord's little plot worked *exactly* as she had planned it should—with one fatal omission. Mabel Strange found out that she loved Tom Kennicott, when she thought she had lost him; and Mabel Strange, like nineteen women out of twenty, took the most careful and effective precautions against any one suspecting her discovery. She has never married, and she never will, because she will always love Tom Kennicott.

Now it seems to me there is a very pitiful lesson that runs through this history; only it is not altogether easy to apportion the blame and the credit. Just one principle occurs to me, upon which the council of the gods may have distributed rewards and punishments. Grace Dorrien was natural, and won. Mabel Strange and Mrs. Van Santvoord were artificial, and lost. Tom Kennicott should have lost on the same score, but, doubtless, his advocate before the Court of Heaven pleaded "honor" in extenuation, and the plea saved him.

Pawns

BY E. S. CHAMBERLAYNE

IN the clearings of the tangled woodland that was being made famous by their struggles the two armies lay panting. They would get their breath soon and renew the battle, but the rest, while it lasted, was welcome.

Sheltered by a little pile of fence rails, I lay on the ground fifty yards in advance of the picket reserve. In the edge of the woods a few rods away were the Confederate outposts. It was a drowsy morning. Bits of gray mist—remnants of the night that was past—still lingered under the distant trees and in the edge of the nearer woods, clinging about the underbrush like sleep about the heavy eyes of a reluctant riser.

Suddenly a battered slouch hat bobbed up from behind a log a few yards in front of me, and the gun came to my shoulder instinctively.

“Don’t shoot,” said a voice. And I saw a thin, boyish face under the hat. The rebel held up his hand to show that he was unarmed. “Do you want some tobacco?” he inquired with a slow drawl. “I’ll trade you for some coffee.”

I glanced back at the reserve, looked up and down the line, and smothered my scruples. A moment later I had dropped my gun and had crept forward on hands and knees to the little hollow where the Confederate lay concealed. It was midway between the two picket-lines, and hid us from the sight of both. I found him a pale, hollow-eyed young fellow, apparently about my own age.

“I been watchin’ you for half an hour,” he remarked with a grin. “I could o’ picked you off easy. But I reckon we done enough shooting yeste’day. You got any coffee?”

I opened my haversack and displayed my store. His eyes lighted up hungrily, but in the interest of trade he refrained from audible comment.

“There’s a prime lot o’ tobacco,” he said, producing a quantity of Virginia

“twist.” “Good as they is. Trade you even for what yo’ got.” We bickered a few moments and the trade was completed.

He took the coffee in both hands and held it up to his nose with a long, satisfying sniff. “Oh Lord!” he murmured impressively. Then he explained: “I ’ain’t had a cup o’ coffee for ’mos’ three months—real coffee—and I been missin’ it since you fellows crossed the river.” He spread it out on the cover of his haversack and feasted his eyes on it.

“Was you in it yeste’day?” he inquired, looking at me curiously.

“Yes,” I answered. “We went in towards night.”

“Lose many?”

“No. It was ’most all over before we could get up. The woods were so thick,” I added.

He nodded understandingly.

“Well,” he remarked a moment later, “I reckon the No’t’h’s about got us licked now.”

“Why don’t you quit, then?” I demanded.

He grinned a little, and looked at me with tired, determined eyes. “Oh, we’ll never quit,” he said, cheerily. “And *we* ain’t licked any—Uncle Robert ain’t. It’s jes the gove’nment. We took a heap o’ you fellows yeste’day. We’ll get some more to-morrow. We’re jes beginnin’ to fight.” He laughed a soft low laugh.

“I was watchin’ you a while back,” he said, as if to change the subject. “You ’peared to be actin’ mighty careless—looked like you was watchin’ the sky, or the trees, or something. I was goin’ to shoot, but I didn’t. I reckoned mebbe you was thinkin’ o’ some other mornings you’d seen that was like this one—sort o’ quiet and still and sleepy—back yonder at home, mebbe. I didn’t know.”

I flushed with surprise and displeasure at this reading of my thoughts.