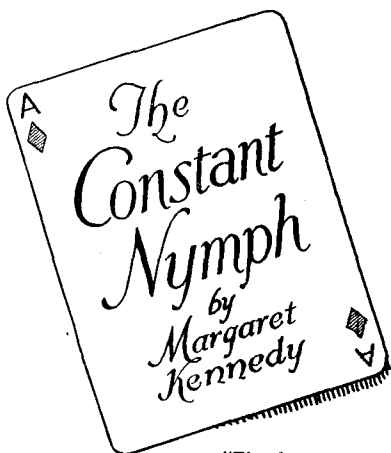
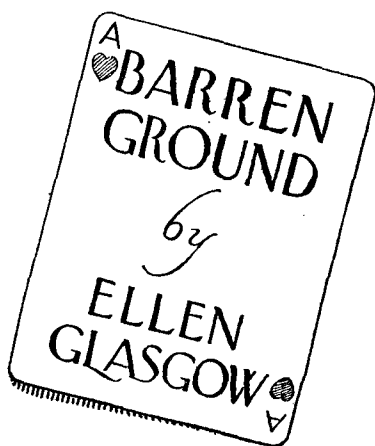


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The Phoenix Nest

WE see that the leading magazine editors, sixteen of them, including Carl Van Doren, Ray Long, Arthur Vance, Karl Harriman, Gertrude Lane, Arthur Sulzberger, etc., have each been selecting the best short story that has appeared in his (or her) magazine during the last year, said stories now being reprinted *seriatim* in the *Sunday Magazine* of the New York World. In our opinion there is one short story they overlooked (which is natural, as it has never appeared anywhere). Not that we intend to compete with the *Sunday Magazine* of the New York World, but we certainly like this Great Short Story, because we wrote it! Hence—here it is. We have called it, "In Praise of Women."

"The enduring praise of a woman," said Peter McCourke, "is in regard to those qualities which she cannot be proved to possess, for with the graces and virtues that she actually does possess we become too familiar, and so to us they fade. Take the notable eulogiums of Laura or Beatrice or those other charming ladies praised in great poetry, and if you can create the shadow of a semblance of one real woman from the laudation of them! But that you can't. Did you, by the bye, ever hear of the sad fate that befell the Three Old Men of Ross Hill?"

I shook my head. "Do you know where Ross Hill may be?" Again I shook my head. "Well, we'll come to that presently."

"How a woman really sees a man I'm blest if I'll be able to tell you, but a man sees a woman he is attracted by, too often as something quite different from what she really is. His praise of her will be for some quality of which he has been given no real evidence at all. Now these three old men I'm remembering, and they at about the most fatuous age of man, (an age I won't tell you, as it's an age I'm approaching myself) they all lived together, anyway, up at the Crooked House (which was the byword for it), and Agatha Nairne waited on them. They all adored her. She was soft-footed, soft-voiced, pretty as a picture, tall and graceful with a fine figger, just turned thirty, and possessed of an abundant common-sense. Secretly they all worshipped her, and one day they fell to arguing. They were named, we'll say, Ben, Dick and John."

"Dick," says Ben, "wherefore now do you admire Agatha?" "I admire her," says Dick, "for the tremendous sweet beauty of her countenance, and that's a fact!" "This from you!" says Ben, and set up a hoarse cackle, which made Dick angry. "Well," he cries, "You're monstrous gracious. Will you kindly tell me why I shouldn't admire her for her countenance?" Ben, seeing him angered, began to soothe him. "Now," he said, "Now, now—surely, but you can't admire it more than I. But it isn't, as it were, a circumstance to the beauty of her voice." "Her voice!" and it was Dick's turn to cackle. "Her voice! Who are you to judge of her voice?" "And why shouldn't I admire her voice?" Ben asks angrily. Now it was for Dick to soothe him. "Why,

Ben," he tells him, "No one could appreciate the beauty of her voice better than I, but how can it ever compare to me with the beauty of her lineaments?" "Indeed I can recognize them a good deal better than you!" answers Ben hotly. "I merely ask you for your own recognizance." "Whatever that may be then," returns Dick, hitching his chair up. "I will give it to you. First, it is the pallor of her skin—" Ben hoots. "She's as red as a cherry," says he. "She is not that at all," returns Dick hotly. "What's more, it's the beautiful gazelle eyes, deep and brown, in the face of my dream—" "The face of your dream indeed!" squabbles Ben. "Her eyes are as blue as my mother's apron." "You that have no true sight," orates Dick loftily, "you that have eyes and see not—" "Harkee," says Ben. "Do you recall in your inventory the mole under her left ear and the freckles on her nose?" "Freckles, your grandmother!" shouts Dick, real annoyed. "She has no more freckles than a swan. And the swan's neck is not so beautiful and white and long, nor is the swan's plumage more immaculate to look upon than the white dress of my tiny little darling!" "Tiny little fiddlesticks!" sputters Ben. "She's the tallest girl in seven counties, and the dress she commonly wears is a green one, as green as the grass that'll soon be growing over you." Dick makes an exalted wave of his hand. "You have never seen her," he tells Ben, leaning close. "Pray you proceed with your paltry account of her voice!"

"Her voice," says Ben, and he almost chokes on it, "is as sweet and melodious as a nightingale—" "It is not then," Dick bawls. "It is no more like a nightingale than it is like a jewsharp. It is a fair voice, at that, but she has a lisp—" "And when have you truly heard her voice!" jeers Ben, "you who have ears but hear not—" It is the sighing of the wind in the grass and the bubble of the skylark and the clear brook over chuckling stones and the lyric rapture of the—of the—" And well may your wit fail you," cries Dick. "I could praise her voice a lot truer if I cared, for I have listened to it keenly enough and I know its every semitone. But you are describing something you have read about in a book. Well, thank God that books are not my pabulum. All I say is, man, that you have no ear for her actual voice and you do not realize that there is a grave defect in the upper register when she sings. So if you will but keep still!"

"And who's doing all the talking, by your leave?" squawks Ben, beside himself with irritation. "Hold your clack for once and let your betters have the say!" So they argued till suddenly Ben quite lost his temper and swung off and caught Dick a clip with his trumpet—"

"His trumpet?" I interrupted, mystified. Peter opened one eye lazily.

"Why surely," he said. "Ben's ear-trumpet. The old fellow was as deaf as a post and Dick had been bellowing into it all this time. Well, the heavy trumpet

sailed straight at Dick's head—"

"Did he dodge?" I breathed.

"Dodge?" Peter overheard me. "How could the poor man dodge when he was as blind as a bat? The trumpet caught him one awful welt over the temple and down he fell dead. And just then up comes John who had been sitting nearby, but taking no part at all in the conversation. Struck aheap he was by Dick lying dead there, and it seemed that he wanted to say something, and certainly he shook his head most reprovingly at Ben. But Ben, still beside himself, shrieks out, 'Well, I suppose you'll be arguing with me next about Agatha!' and makes a leap for his throat. So they grappled, and stormed about, till Ben's heel caught in a corner of the rug and down he went and fractured his skull on the hearth and died instantly."

The expedition with which Peter was disposing of the three old men struck a chill through my blood.

"That being so," he went on imperterritably. "Up staggers John just as Agatha is coming into the room. He stands swaying before her, and suddenly a miracle happens. He swallows and gurgles and gulps—and then he utters two loud words, 'Both wrong!' and drops dead of an apoplexy at her feet."

"But why a miracle?" I objected faintly, still stunned by this holocaust.

"Because old John had always been as dumb as a fish. Really dumb. Couldn't talk. And this Ross Hill as you must know is an institution up the Hudson for the aged with a permanent infirmity. But there you are."

"You see," added Peter, reaching for his tobacco pouch. "You see, as I keep saying, they were men. And however fine the reality is, unconscionable Man must have his dream!"

"Yet I suppose," I said, "she was, as you have remarked already, a fine presentable girl, and a girl with a strong character, an excellent conscience and a beautiful heart?"

"O, she was that—she is," said Peter. "That's why I married her."

I sat without words. I had never had the pleasure of meeting his wife.

"I was superintendent of the Ross Hill Institution at the time," he explained.

"And," he went on more dreamily, filling his pipe slowly, "the mole is not so noticeable, after all, though it's not under the left but under the right ear. That was Ben's mistake. And if her voice is a trifle lisping, as Dick said, why what's the differ? Nor is the defect in her upper register any great matter either, for I have no musical ear. But it's her silence I like best," and here he suddenly looked up at me with a face transfigured. "Ah, it's the divine silence of the woman, the deep mystery of it, when she just will sit with her head cocked to one side, gazing at me, across at fire!"

"And sometimes—sometimes," he added, his voice sinking, while I watched him as one under a spell, "do you know—do you know—it comes to remind me sometimes—of the silence of poor old John!"

W. R. B.

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