

FORBIDDEN FRUIT

By Octavus Roy Cohen

THE chap who first proclaimed the impossibility of forecasting, with any degree of accuracy, a woman's next move wasn't much of a prognosticator. He was away off on his deductive theory, and simply because it sounded like a mellow mouthful, he's corraled quite an army of followers who let the words roll wisely from their tongues and let it go at that.

As a matter of fact it's a lead-pipe cinch to tell what a woman is going to do. Start with a given set of circumstances, follow developments to their logical conclusion, discard that conclusion in favor of the one diametrically opposite—and there's your answer.

With a man it's different. There isn't any set rule to follow, whether it be simple or complex; and so of course it's men who spring the real surprises. Take the case of Norvel Ferguson, for instance. I've known Norvel since we were both kids in knee pants. I've been able to read his thoughts, or nearly so, since we broke into the celebrity class at the mutual age of eight by building a bonfire under the village school, thereby earning a vacation and the gratitude of the rest of the student body. I knew him through high school and roomed with him at college. It was only in his *amours* that he put one across on my prophesying powers.

I hardly think the man can be blamed for that, though; he's too confoundedly attractive to women. Let him whistle and they come flocking. And he has a habit of whistling. That is, he had until he first married and settled down.

You know how it is with these amateur Lotharios when they get bitten by the love-bug. The virus runs through their system in record time and then it's all over but the Mendelssohn. Norvel wasn't any exception to the hidebound rule.

He'd been a wild one all right, all right. And who wouldn't, with six-foot-one of handsome looks and iron sinew, a blarneyish tongue and a don't-give-a-hoot manner? In addition to all that he had money which he knew how to spend and motor cars which he knew how to run and yachts which he knew how to sail and a social position that was unimpeachable. In the best circles of our city they discussed the scandals in which he played a leading *role*, but did not disbar him from the social gatherings — although mothers anxiously watched their chicks when the dance wore on and

couples started sitting 'em out under the trees. In such cases they usually remembered that the dear little innocent had forgotten her handkerchief or a wrap or that the breeze was entirely too cool for a dark, unchaperoned out-of-doors.

There was nothing crude about Norvel's love-making. He scorned the easy hurdles and voluntarily chose the hard ones. That was his shibboleth—the attainment of the forbidden; be it bitter or be it sweet. It was the getting he enjoyed, not the possession. Wherein he ran strictly true to psychological form.

All that until Alice Dorrance came into his life. Then—gaflooy! He sent out an S. O. S. for all the virtues which he had deserted at various and sundry times in his speckled past and enlisted them three-fold under his new banner. He could pass the corner of Main and Elm streets on a windy day without taking his eyes down from the clouds—which, believe me, is an achievement.

He fell in love with Alice so hard that he was almost pitiful. I didn't believe that he had it in him. If I were a psycho-analyst I might diverge with a monograph on this particular case; the fact that her mother never let them out of her sight for a minute and that he had just about as much chance for courtship as a captured fly has when it is about to be impaled on the fishing hook of a small boy. At any rate Norvel's *grande passion* appeared to thrive mightily on denial and to blossom marvelously in the face of difficulties. It would probably have ruined his life by forcing him forever into the path of rectitude had not the lady in question happened to return his love.

She didn't throw herself at him—believe me, she didn't. In the first place, she was too clever; and in the second place, her mother saw to it that she didn't have the chance. But she did fall in love with him—hard and all over. And so, in due course of time, their engagement was announced, and when that formality was over, dear *mater* sat back and gave them plenty of foot-room because she knew that Norvel was a gentleman.

He was like a kid on Friday afternoon, when he broke the news to me, and my congratulations were sincere. I had my secret doubts as to the durability of the match for several reasons, none of which did I bother to explain to him. In the first place, while Alice was a nice enough kid she

wasn't by any means a proper foil for Norvel. There was nothing scintillant about her, and Norvel was the type of man who likes his lady friends looked at covetously by others. Oh! she passed muster and then some as an unwed damsel, but she was of just the type which disintegrates after the I-do's are said.

So, when he held tender confab with me and bemoaned his spotted past, I rubbed it in a little and tried to impress upon him the fact that the only real happiness for the future lay in domesticity and lily-white virtue, all of which I believed, but which I knew Norvel would only agree with so long as the rose-and-rapture period of the marriage lasted. Let the prosaic inevitabilities creep into his existence and . . . As I've mentioned: I knew my man.

And so, as the writer chaps put it, they married and lived happily ever after—that is for a year and a half, which is precisely one year more than I had allowed them. The reason was that I'd misjudged Alice a little; principally had misjudged her ability to plumb the depths of Norvel's harum-scarum nature.

She played to him with every ounce of brain and beauty at her command and it was rather pathetic to watch her after she realized she was waging a losing battle.

As for the workings of Norvel's mind, they were as plain to me as his square jaw; possession had robbed love of its spice. He loved his wife; of course, he loved his wife. It was the conventional thing to do. But after awhile she began to pall on him. I chided him about it one night when he'd horned into our little five-handed fifty-cent game for the fourth consecutive evening.

"You don't understand," said he.

"Well then," I suggested, "suppose you explain."

"It's this marriage business. There's too much surety to it."

"That's the wonderful part of marriage." I quoth wisely.

"Piffle!" he snorted. "You wait, you blasted old bachelor; wait until you've lived with a woman so long that you know every little habit and trick, the meaning of every look, the words of a half-finished sentence. . . Oh! Alice is a nice enough kid, but——"

But! It was a fatal qualifier. I knew that the end was in sight.

As a matter of fact I was a trifle premature; not having counted on the fact that Norvel had

fallen into a domestic rut from which it took him considerable time to extricate himself. And, too, he could not—no more than any other man could have—ignore the utter and absolute devotion that his wife felt for him. She thought him one degree removed from a deity; condoned his faults; and had developed into the sort of woman who looks about for sacrifices to make for the man she loves. Regular fiction lady, she was.

Her chance came soon enough. It came when Norvel developed an affinity.

She was a dandy, little widow in a neighboring city who had fallen as deeply in love with Norvel as had Alice. Bright, she was, too, and deep enough to suit him. Besides, being a widow, she was deft enough and wise enough in the art of love, to completely enslave any man who started out by looking at her through rose-colored lenses.

I learned about it, of course; partly through the remarkably intuitive Alice and partly through Norvel. Then I met the lady in question. Once again I saw rocks ahead because, except in matters of world-wisdom she wasn't in it one-two-twenty with Alice. I didn't tell Norvel that. It'd be as sensible as telling the Kaiser he ought to sink his entire fleet so as to end the world war more speedily.

Marna—that was the affinity's name—was a wise one. She became an affinity only potentially, although goodness know's she cared enough for the man to throw aside all the conventions if he'd pressed hard enough. But you see, marriage had trained Norvel considerably, and he wasn't as impetuous as he used to be. It was a case of forbidden fruit again. He wanted her, and at length—well, he calmly and cold-bloodedly put it up to Alice. He asked her to divorce him so that he could marry Marna. And Alice, bless her loyal, sacrificing, loving little heart smiled bravely and as bravely agreed.

I swore at Norvel, I called him every profane thing which a lifelong chum has a right to call his friend—plus. He answered merely with:

"You don't understand, Jack; you simply do not—cannot—understand."

"Damned rot!" I snorted, "I understand a whole heap better than you do."

"You can't," said he. "It's impossible."

The divorce proceedings, uncontested, caused a bunch of comment. The usual comment, you know, finding scandal where there was none and failing to find it where it did exist. And eventually the decree was granted—Alice as straight-lipped

and brave as anything you ever saw in your life, and Norvel leaving the courtroom to speed in his high-powered roadster to the license bureau in our next-door town in order that he might be legally united for better or for worse with Marna.

She married him all right. What woman wouldn't have? And then she proceeded to finish the job hitherto only half completed, of falling as deeply in love with him as had his first wife.

I used to call frequently. She made him a good housewife, and seemed to relish the domestic atmosphere after her rather stormy career before. And for a few months—more than a year in all—he was happy as a clam at high tide. Being a man of independent means he'd transferred his legal residence to the city which was Mama's home, and had forsaken all his old haunts.

Alice went into social service work, and instead of becoming less the woman, her domestic tragedy seemed to have put on the finishing touch needed to make her really worth while. Once or twice when she'd meet me she'd ask me about Norvel—loving him now more than she ever had before—and then, after about a year, she quit asking about him.

That's the way conditions were when I was sent across the Big Pond by the firm to close out some war orders that meant considerable to all of us. I was in London and Paris for seven months, and during that time I grew a bit apart from the domestic mess in which I had been acutely interested.

However, in spite of my numerous extraneous interests I was never able, not for a single hour, to forget Alice and her ever-growing love for the man who had been her husband and who had cast her so ruthlessly aside to gratify his passion for a seemingly otherwise unattainable widow.

At length I returned to this country, and in due course found myself in the city which was Norvel's home: I immediately telephoned his apartment, but received no answer. Then I spoke to the man at the switchboard. Yes, he told me, the Fergusons had lived, there, but they'd moved away some time before. Oh! sure . . . he was quite certain Mr. Ferguson was in town, as he'd seen him himself not more than three hours previously.

I tried to find the man and could not. I didn't know his new friends in his new home, and he had no business connections. The city directory and the telephone book gave his address at the apartments to which I had just been speaking over the 'phone.

I went to a vaudeville show and then dropped around to a club of which I had for many years been an out-of-town member. And there, at last. I found Norvel.

It was the same Norvel I had known

—yet somehow different. He seemed calmer and more settled. And he was sitting there, staring raptly at nothing at all.

I flopped down beside him, and of one thing I am sure; he was genuinely glad to see me. He opened up and commenced to question me about my trip, how had I made out and wouldn't I arrange things to stay with him for several days? I informed him that I would be glad to make such arrangements.

"I tried to get you at your apartments," I vouchsafed, "but the boy told me you had moved away."

He flushed and fidgeted.

"Yes. We moved away some time ago."

"And how's Marna?"

He glanced at me peculiarly.

"Marna? Oh—er—she's all right."

"Glad to hear it." I tried to make it hearty, and failed miserably because I knew there was something else to hear, and that he'd tell me in his own sweet time.

Conversation languished. Then he invited me to have a drink. At the bar we chatted about generalities, the real subject of common interest looming in the background as a spectre—coming ever nearer and nearer.

Back to the lounge we went, and then over big black cigars I dared broach the subject again.

"You say Mania is well?"

"Uh-huh! Quite well."

"Glad to hear it," I repeated inanely.

Again that peculiar, inquiring glance. But no words of explanation. I blundered onto the trail.

"I left my bags at the station," I said. "Suppose we send a boy after them."

"Good idea," he grunted.

"Where shall I tell him to take 'em?"

"Here."

"Here?" I echoed. "Why here?"

"I'm staying here!"

"Staying here? Isn't Mania in town?"

"Yes—she's in town."

"Then—what the devil. . .?"

"I'll tell you," he swung on me somewhat viciously, "I've made an ass of myself—balled things up all 'round. I may as well tell you now as later: Marna is suing me for divorce."

“A-a-ah! What grounds?”

“Statutory!”

“Phew!” I whistled. “A co-respondent in the case? You can’t mean it!”

“Yes,” he snapped, “and when the suit’s over I’m going to marry her—the co-respondent.”

“Do I know her?”

“Yes.”

“Who is she?”

“The best woman who ever lived,” he beamed. “The finest woman on God’s green earth. It’s—it’s *Alice!*”