

Something New

Clark Ashton Smith

"TELL me something new," she moaned, twisting in his arms on the sofa. "Say or do something original--and I'll love you. Anything but the wheezy gags, the doddering compliments, the kisses that were stale before Antony passed them off on Cleopatra"

"Alas," he said, "there is nothing new in the world except the rose and gold and ivory of your perfect loveliness. And there is nothing original except my love for you."

"Old stuff," she sneered, moving away from him. "They all say that."

"They ?" he queried, jealously.

"The ones before you, of course," she replied, in a tone of languid reminiscence. "It only took four lovers to convince me of the quotidian sameness of man. After that, I always knew what to expect. It was maddening: they came to remind me of so many cuckoo docks, with the eternal monotony of their advances, the punctuality of their compliments. I soon knew the whole repertory. As for kissing--each one began with my hands, and ended with my lips. There was one genius, though, who kissed me on the throat the first time. I might have taken him, if he had lived up to the promise of such a beginning."

"What shall I say?" he queried, in despair. "Shall I tell you that your eyes are the unwaning moons above the cypress-guarded lakes of dream-land? Shall I say that your hair is colored like the sunsets of Cocaigne ?"

She kicked off one of her slippers, with a little jerk of disgust.

"You aren't the first poet that I've had for a lover. One of them used to read me that sort of stuff by the hour. All about moons, and stars and sunsets, and rose-leaves and lotus-petals."

"Ah," he cried hopefully, gazing at the slipperless foot. "Shall I stand on my head and kiss your tooty-wootsies ?"

She smiled briefly. "That wouldn't be so bad. But you're not an acrobat, my dear. You'd fall over and break something--provided you didn't fall on me."

"Well, I give it up," he muttered, in a tone of hopeless resignation "I've done my darndest to please you for the past four months; and I've been perfectly faithful and devoted, too; I haven't so much as looked corner-wise at another woman--not even that blue-eyed brunette who tried to vamp me at the Artists' Ball the other night."

She sighed impatiently. "What does that matter? I am sure you needn't be faithful unless you want to be. As for pleasing me--well you did give a thrill once upon a time, during the first week of our acquaintance. Do you remember? We were lying out under the pines on the old rug that we had taken with us; and you suddenly turned to me and asked me if I would like to be a hamadryad . . . Ah! there is a hamadryad in every woman; but it takes a faun to call it forth . . . My dear, if you had only been a faun !"

"A real faun would have dragged you off by the hair," he growled, "So you wanted some of that caveman stuff, did you? I suppose that's what you mean by 'something new.'"

"Anything, anything, providing it is new," she drawled, with ineffable languor. Looking like a poem to Ennui by Baudelaire, she leaned back and lit another cigarette in her holder of carved ivory.

He look at her, and wondered if any one female had ever before hidden so much perversity, capriciousness, and incomprehensibility behind a rose-bud skin and harvest-coloured hair. A sense of acute exasperation mounted in him--something that had smouldered for months, half-restrained by his natural instincts of chivalry and gentleness. He remembered an aphorism from Nietzsche: "When thou goest to women, take thy whip." "By Jove, the old boy had the right dope," he thought. "Too bad I didn't think to take my whip with me; but after all, I have my hands, and a little rough stuff can't make matters any worse."

Aloud, he said: "It's a pity no one ever thought to give you a good paddling. All women are spoiled and perverse, more or less, but you--" He broke off, and drew her across his knees like a naughty child, with a movement so muscular and sudden that she had neither the time nor the impulse to resist or cry out.

"I'm going to give you the spanking of your life," he growled, as his right hand rose and descended . . . The cigarette holder fell from her lips to the Turkish carpet, and began to burn a hole in the flowered pattern. . . . A dozen smart blows, with a sound like the clapping of shingles, and then he released her, and rose to his feet. His anger had vanished, and his only feeling was an overpowering sense of shame and consternation. He could merely wonder how and why he had done it.

"I suppose you will never forgive me," he began.

"Oh, you are wonderful," she breathed. "I didn't think you had it in you. My faun! My cave-man! Do it again."

Doubly dumbfounded as he was, he had enough presence of mind to adjust himself to the situation. "Women are certainly the limit," he thought, dazedly. "But one must make the best of them, and miss no chances."

Preserving a grim and mysterious silence, he picked her up in his arms.