



FROM A GIRL'S STANDPOINT

By Lilian Bell

*IV—WOMAN'S RIGHTS IN LOVE

THE first right of a woman in love is to be protected from her friends while she considers the man whom she contemplates loving. The well-meant blundering of vitally interested friends has spoiled many a promising love affair which might have resulted in a marriage so much above the ordinary that it could almost be termed satisfactory. At no time in a girl's life has she a greater right to work out her own salvation in fear and trembling than during the period known among girls as

"making up her mind." If she is the right kind of a girl, honest and delicate-minded, it is nerve-racking to be talked about, and sacrilege to be talked to. The bloom is on the grape then which a rude touch mars forever. Yet these kind friends never think of the delicate, touch-me-not influences at work in the girl's soul, or that the instinct to hide her real interest in the man precludes the possibility of her daring to ask to be let alone. So they, in their over-zeal and ambition, either make the path of love so easy and inevitable that all the zest is taken out of it for both, (for lovers never want somebody to go ahead and baste the problem for them; they want to blindstitch it for themselves as they go along,) or else by critical nagging, and balancing the eligibility of one suitor against another, these friends so jar and upset the poor girl that she doesn't know which man she wants, and so turns her back upon all.

In point of fact, when a man is in love, and a girl is trying to return his love—when she is weighing out their adaptability and balancing his love for foot-ball against her passion for Browning—during the delicate, tentative period, when the most affectionate solicitude from friends is an irritation, there ought to be a law banishing the interested couple to an island peopled with strangers, who would not discover the delicacy of the situation until it was too late to spoil it.

"**W**OMAN'S rights." I agree with the men who think that those words have a masculine, assertive, belligerent sound. "Equal suffrage" is much more lady-like, and we are in the way of getting what we want of the men on any subject under the gentlest title by which it may be called. Strange how with strong men force never avails, but the softest methods are the surest and swiftest. However, equal suffrage, wide as it is, isn't all that I want. It does well enough, but it does not cover the entire ground. I never clamored very much for women to be recognized as the equals of men, either in politics or in love, because if I had clamored at all I should have clamored for infinitely more than that. I should have clamored for men to recognize us as their superiors, and not for equal rights with themselves, but for more, many more, rights than they ever dreamed of possessing. 'Tis not justice I crave, but mercy. 'Tis not equality, but chivalry.

In the whole history of the world, from nineteenth century Public Opinion clear back to the age of chivalry, men have never been inclined to deal out justice to women. It is their watchword with each other, but with women it is always either injustice or mercy. And in spite of all wrongs and all abuses I say Heaven bless the men that this is so. Human nature is more fundamental than customs, and what would become of women if we only got our exact deserts or had absolute justice dealt to us either by men or other women?

Woman's rights! Why the very first right we expect is to be treated better than anybody else—better than men treat each other as a body, and better by the individual man than he treats all other women. I abominate the idea of equality and to be mentally slapped on the shoulder and told I am "a good fellow." I shrink from the idea of independence and cold, proud isolation with my emancipated sister-women, who struggle into their own coats unassisted, and get red in the face putting on their own skates, and hang on to a strap in the street car in the proud consciousness that they are independent and the equal of men. I never worry myself when a man is on his knees in front of me putting on my overshoes, as to whether he considers me his equal politically or not. It is sufficient satisfaction for me to see him there. If he hadn't wanted to save me the trouble I suppose he wouldn't have offered. He may even think I am not strong enough for such an arduous duty. That wouldn't hurt my feelings either. I have an idea that he likes it better to think that I cannot do anything troublesome for myself than to believe that I could get along perfectly without him. In fact—here's heresy for you, oh, ye emancipated—I do not in the least mind being dependent on men—provided the men are nice enough. Let them give us all the so-called rights they want to. I shall never get over wanting to get behind some man if I see a cow. Let them give us a vote if they will. I shall want at least three men to go with me to the polls—one to hold my purse, one to hold my gloves, and the third to show me how to cast my vote.

If women are serious in wanting to vote in politics, why don't they apply to the body politic the methods they use with the one man which an all-wise Destiny has committed to their keeping? If all the women in the world should make up their minds that they wanted to vote more than anything else on earth—more even than they want their husbands to go to church with them—and

each woman would put on her prettiest clothes and cuddle up to her own particular man in her softest and most womanish way when she was begging him to get suffrage for her, why you all know they would do it. Men would get it for us exactly as they would buy us a pair of horses.

Have you men ever thought about practicing for suffrage in politics by giving women suffrage in love? Surely you do not doubt that should you do this it would not occur to us to stuff the ballot boxes or to put up a ticket with any but honorable candidates for our hands and hearts. We do not ask nor wish to indicate who shall run for office. Let the men announce themselves candidates. We would not take the initiative there if it were offered to us for a thousand years. All we ask is to be given plenty of time to canvass the honor of the candidates, thoroughly to understand and investigate the platform, and to be allowed to cast a free and untrammelled vote.

Now men seem to think that if they allow women equal suffrage, that the bright, white light of our honesty would be too strong a glare for their weak eyes—so long accustomed to darkness—to bear. Um—possibly in politics. Hardly in love. For myself, I consider absolute honesty most unpleasant. I never knew any really nice, lovable women who were unflinchingly honest. But I have known a few women of severe visage, who were so brutally honest that I have ingloriously fled at the mention of their approach, and solaced myself with a congenial spirit who is in the habit of skirting delicately around painful truth—and a cozy corner in which to abuse the aforesaid severe-visaged carver of helpless humanity who loves to draw blood with her truth. Such a one will get a vote in politics long before she gets it in love.

NO, men need not fear to give us equal suffrage in love. Our honesty will not be disconcerting. (I would even address a private query at this point to the women, begging that the men will skip it, asking women where in the world we should find ourselves if we were unflinchingly honest with the men who love us?) No one will deny that we would even countenance a certain amount of questionable campaigning. We fully agree with those men who tell us weakly-questioning women that campaign funds are a necessity. We never have been able to discover just where the money in politics went to, but the expenses of a campaign in our line are more in evidence. I doubt if the most straight-laced Puritan will gainsay me when I declare that bribery from the candidates in the form of theatres, opera boxes, flowers, bonbons and books, would not only be tolerated, but even, in a modest manner, encouraged, having, of course, a keen eye as to the elasticity of the campaign fund. But, of course, just as vulgar bribery, *per se*, only catches the easy and unthinking vote in politics, so, in like manner, would these evidences of generosity only capture the less desirable voter in love. When you men are trying for a woman's vote you need give yourself no uneasiness. If she is worth having character and brains win every time. You don't believe that. That is why you trust to bribery to do it all. And it is also why so many of you get the girl you try for—which is about the richest punishment you could receive.

I adore "Hamlet" for two reasons. One that he said, "I, myself, am indifferent honest." Oh, the humanity of "Hamlet"! And the other that when under the spell of "Ophelia's" beauty, and in the tentative, interested stage, when he cared for her all but enough to ask her to marry him, he had the wit to discover that she was a fool. Imagine the calamity of "Hamlet" married to "Ophelia"! That would have been a tragedy. Think of a man clever enough to discover that his idol was made of putty! "Hamlet" was a hero. He withdrew in time. Most men have to be married ten years to discover that they have married an "Ophelia."

It is a trite saying that the whole world is behind a woman urging her to marry. But I find much to interest me in trite sayings. I like to get hold of them and look them through, and turn them wrong side out, and pull them to pieces to find how much life there is in them. Psychological vivisection is not a subject for the humane society. A trite saying has my sympathy. It is generally stupid and shop-worn, and consequently is banished to polite society and hated by the clever. And only because it possessed a soul of truth and a wonderful vitality, has it kept from dying long ago of a broken heart. Books could be written of the truth of this particular trite saying. The urging, of course, among people whom we know, is neither vulgar nor intentional. It takes the form of jests, of pseudo-humorous questions, if a man sends flowers two or three times. But it takes its worst and most common form in the sudden melting away of the family if the man calls and finds them all together. If a man has no specific intentions toward a girl, and has not determined in his own mind that he wants to marry her; if he is only liking her a great deal, with but an occasional wonder in the depths of his own heart whether this girl is the wife for him—to call upon her casually and see the family scatter and other callers hastily leave is enough to scare him to death. And the girl herself has a right to be perfectly furious. When eligible young people are in that tentative stage it is death to a love to make them self-conscious.

I, myself, am so afraid of brushing the down from the butterfly wings at this point that occasionally when I have been calling, and the girl's possible lover has caught me before I could escape in a natural manner, I have doggedly remained, even knowing that, perhaps, he wished me well away among the angels, rather than to run the risk of making him conscious that I understood his state of mind. Imagine my feelings of anguish, however, at holding on against my will and against theirs, wanting somebody to help me let go! Much better, I solace

myself afterward, that he should wish me away than to look after my retreating form and wish that I had stayed. Better for the girl I mean. For my own feelings—but I don't count. I am only giving a girl one of her rights in love. A few judicious obstacles but what a man's appetite—if he is worth having. And I don't mind being a judicious obstacle once in a while—if I like the girl.

AS to how far a girl has a right to encourage a man in love, opinions differ. I once asked a clever literary friend of mine, whose husband is so satisfactory that it is quite a delightful shock to discover it, how far men ought to be encouraged to make love.

"Encourage them all you can, my dear. The best of men require all the encouragement one is capable of giving them."

I pondered over that statement. From her standpoint it was, of course, perfectly proper. Married men need all the encouragement they can get to keep them making love to their own wives. But from our standpoint, of being girls—and very nice girls, too, some of us, if I do say it myself—how far have we a right to encourage men to make love to us?

Now, I like men. And I like girls, so that I never want anybody to be hurt at this very delicate and dangerous game of love-making. But somebody always is getting hurt, and although she never makes any fuss about it it is generally the girl. There are two reasons for this. One is that love means twice, yes, twenty, forty times as much to a girl as to a man, and the second is that we are a believing set of human geese, and we believe a whole lot of what you men say, which is wrong of us, and a good deal more of what your insane actions over us imply, which is worse. Girls are just the same along the main lines of sentiment, and hope, and trust, and belief in men now that they ever were, and most of this talk about the new woman is mere nonsense.

Now the men come in right at this point and declare that we ought not to believe so much; that until they have actually proposed marriage, often they don't know their own minds themselves; that a man has a perfect right to withdraw, *à la* "Hamlet," if he finds insurmountable flaws in the girl's nature, or, what is oftener the case, somebody he likes better; and they intimate pretty strongly that broken hearts or even slightly damaged affections are largely our own fault, which, from their standpoint, is perfectly true, and if we were men we should all say so too.

BUT looking at it from ours, doesn't it seem as if the men had all the rights on their side? In order to make ourselves desirable we are not to be forward nor unduly prominent. We are to sit at home and wait to be asked. We are not to take a man's words uttered under the magnetism of our presence for truth. We are not to judge by his manner if he does not speak. We are not to encourage any other men when one man is considering us as a possible wife (although we don't know that he is, and it is dangerous to guess), because he does not like that. It shows, he thinks, "a frivolous nature," or "a desire to attract," or "a tendency to flirt," or it is "unwomanly," or "unworthy a true woman." There are some other things men say to us if several men are attentive to one at the same time, but I have forgotten the rest. They are very convincing, however. Then when the man has made up his mind that he wants us as his wife (that grammar sounds polygamous, but my whole philosophy of life is against that idea) why we are to be ready to drop into his arms like a ripe plum and not keep him on tenterhooks of anxiety, because only flirts do that.

Now I am not endeavoring to do an exceptional man justice who will resent that somewhat broad platform. I am only presenting the attitude of man in general from a girl's standpoint. And if you will view it as referring to "other men," and not to yourself, you will be quite willing to admit that it is, in the main, true.

Now, if in order to avoid heartaches, and so be able to blame you for something you never intended and which you are not willing to shoulder, we are not to let ourselves go when we feel like falling in love with you, do you give us leave to allow every one of you to get clear up to the proposing point and come flatly out with the words, "Will you marry me?" before we let you know whether we want you or not, or before we begin to let ourselves go?

COME now! Own up, you men! How well do we girls know you when you have called on us three hundred and sixty-five times in succession? Not at all. We know only what we can see and hear. How well do we know you when we have been engaged to you six months? Not at all. We know only what you have been unable to conceal of your faults, and the virtues you have displayed in your show windows. How long must a woman be married to a man before she understands him thoroughly—as thoroughly as she ought to have understood him before she ever dared to stand up at an altar and promise to love him and live with him until death did them part?

A broken engagement ought to be considered a blessed thing as a preventive of further and worse ills, like vaccination. But it is not. It militates dreadfully against a girl. Not so much with men as with women. That is one of the times, and there are many others, when men are broader and more just than women. The ordinary man, taken at random, will say, "Probably he was a worthless fellow." The ordinary woman will say, "She ought to have known her own mind better."

The odd part of all this is that, even if you men, as a body, should say to all the girls, "Go ahead, encourage us to the top of your bent, let us propose without any knowledge based on your past actions or words as to whether we are going to be accepted or not, and we will take the result cheerfully and won't rage nor howl about it"—not one of us would do it. "How conscience doth make cowards of us all!" We might consider that you were only giving us our rights in love. We might theorize beautifully about it, and even vow we were going to take you at your word and do it. But we couldn't. It simply isn't in us. We could not be so unjust to you—so untrue to ourselves. The great maternal heart of woman, which bears the greater part of all the sufferings in this world that the men and little children may go free, prevents us from taking any such so-called rights from you at the expense of suffering on your part. Women have tenderer hearts than men for a purpose, and if they are hurt oftener than men's, why that is for us to bear. We cannot make ourselves over and turn Amazons at your expense.

"I believe in woman's suffrage," declared Josh Billings. "Let 'em suffer. We men have to."

* The fourth of a series of articles written by Miss Bell for the JOURNAL. The first article, "The Man Under Thirty-five," appeared in the December, 1895, issue; the second in February, 1896, and the third in the April number. Others will be published during the year.