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THE PERFECT WOMAN

BY ROBERT SHECKLEY

Somebody once came up with a song title we have never forgotten: "For every man there is a woman, so why did I get stuck with you?"

Not that Mr. Morcheck felt that way about Myra. He not only believed she was absolutely perfect; you could get a punch in the nose for doubting it!

And he was so right — for a while!

MR. MORCHECK awoke with a sour taste in his mouth and a laugh ringing in his ears. It was George Owen-Clark's laugh, the last thing he remembered from the Triad-Morgan party. And what a party it had been! All Earth had been celebrating the turn of the century. The year Three Thousand! Peace and prosperity to all, and happy life. . . .

"How happy is your life?" Owen-Clark had asked, grinning slyly, more than a little drunk. "I mean, how is life with your sweet wife?"

That had been unpleasant. Ev-

eryone knew that Owen-Clark was a Primitivist, but what right had he to rub people's noses in it? Just because he had married a Primitive Woman. . . .

"I love my wife," Morcheck had said stoutly. "And she's a hell of a lot nicer and more responsive than that bundle of neuroses you call *your* wife."

But of course, you can't get under the thick hide of a Primitivist. Primitivists love the faults in their women as much as their virtues — more, perhaps. Owen-Clark had grinned ever more slyly, and said, "You know, Mor-

check old man, I think your wife needs a checkup. Have you noticed her reflexes lately?"

Insufferable idiot! Mr. Morcheck eased himself out of bed, blinking at the bright morning sun which hid behind his curtains. Myra's reflexes — the hell of it was, there was a germ of truth in what Owen-Clark had said. Of late, Myra had seemed rather — out of sorts.

"Myra!" Morcheck called. "Is my coffee ready?" There was a pause. Then her voice floated brightly upstairs. "In a minute!"

Morcheck slid into a pair of slacks, still blinking sleepily. Thank Stat the next three days were celebration-points. He'd need all of them just to get over last night's party.

Downstairs, Myra was bustling around, pouring coffee, folding napkins, pulling out his chair for him. He sat down, and she kissed him on his bald spot. He liked being kissed on his bald spot.

"How's my little wife this morning?" he asked.

"Wonderful, darling," she said after a little pause. "I made Seffiners for you this morning. You like Seffiners."

Morcheck bit into one, done to a turn, and sipped his coffee.

"How do you feel this morning?" he asked her.

Myra buttered a piece of toast for him, then said, "Wonderful darling. You know, it was a per-

fectly wonderful party last night. I loved every moment of it."

"I got a little bit veery," Morcheck said with a wry grin.

"I love you when you're veery," Myra said. "You talk like an angel — like a very clever angel, I mean. I could listen to you forever." She buttered another piece of toast for him.

Mr. Morcheck beamed on her like a benignant sun, then frowned. He put down his Seffiner and scratched his cheek. "You know," he said, "I had a little ruck-in with Owen-Clark. He was talking about Primitive Women."

Myra buttered a fifth piece of toast for him without answering, adding it to the growing pile. She started to reach for a sixth, but he touched her hand lightly. She bent forward and kissed him on the nose.

"Primitive Women!" she scoffed. "Those neurotic creatures! Aren't you happier with me, dear? I may be Modern—but no Primitive Woman could love you the way I do — and I adore you!"

What she said was true. Man had never, in all recorded history, been able to live happily with unreconstructed Primitive Woman. The egoistic, spoiled creatures demanded a lifetime of care and attention. It was notorious that Owen-Clark's wife made him dry the dishes. And the fool put up

with it! Primitive Women were forever asking for money with which to buy clothes and trinkets, demanding breakfast in bed, dashing off to bridge games, talking for hours on the telephone, and Stat knows what else. They tried to take over men's jobs. Ultimately, they proved their equality.

Some idiots like Owen-Clark insisted on their excellence.

Under his wife's enveloping love, Mr. Morcheck felt his hang-over seep slowly away. Myra wasn't eating. He knew that she had eaten earlier, so that she could give her full attention to feeding him. It was little things

like that that made all the difference.

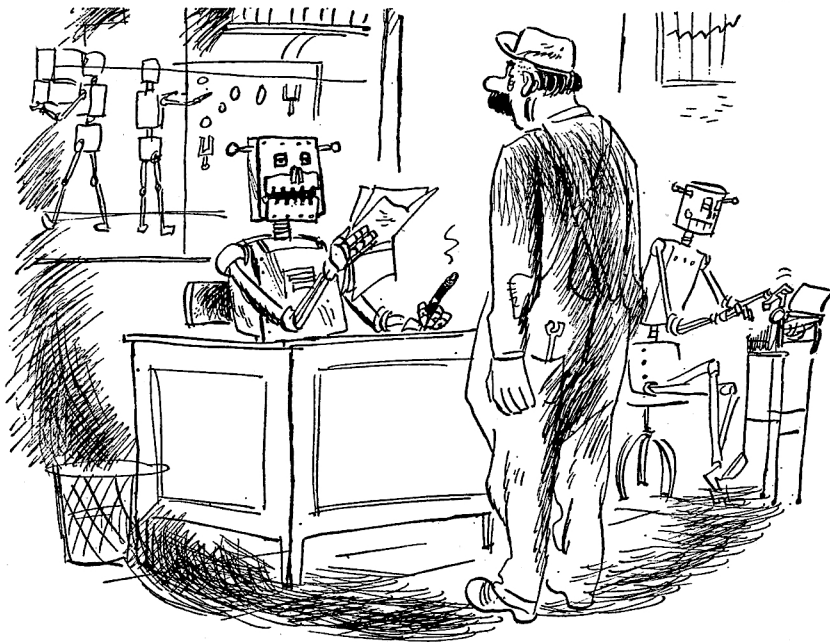
"He said your reaction time had slowed down."

"He did?" Myra asked, after a pause. "Those Primitives think they know everything."

It was the right answer, but it had taken too long. Mr. Morcheck asked his wife a few more questions, observing her reaction time by the second hand on the kitchen clock. She *was* slowing up!

"Did the mail come?" he asked her quickly. "Did anyone call? Will I be late for work?"

After three seconds she opened her mouth, then closed it again.



"I'm afraid the job takes an iron constitution, Hornsley."

Something was terribly wrong.

"I love you," she said simply.

Mr. Morcheck felt his heart pound against his ribs. He loved her! Madly, passionately! But that disgusting Owen-Clark had been right. She needed a checkup. Myra seemed to sense his thought. She rallied perceptibly, and said, "All I want is your happiness, dear. I think I'm sick . . . Will you have me cured? Will you take me back after I'm cured — and not let them change me — I wouldn't want to be changed!" Her bright head sank on her arms. She cried — noiselessly, so as not to disturb him.

"It'll just be a checkup, darling," Morcheck said, trying to hold back his own tears. But he knew — as well as she knew — that she was really sick.

It was so unfair, he thought. Primitive Woman, with her coarse mental fibre, was almost immune to such ailments. But delicate Modern Woman, with her finely balanced sensibilities, was all too prone. So monstrously unfair! Because Modern Woman contained all the finest, dearest qualities of femininity.

Except stamina.

Myra rallied again. She raised herself to her feet with an effort. She was very beautiful. Her sickness had put a high color in her cheeks, and the morning sun highlighted her hair.

"My darling," she said. "Won't you let me stay a little longer? I may recover by myself." But her eyes were fast becoming unfocused.

"Darling . . ." She caught herself quickly, holding on to an edge of the table. "When you have a new wife — try to remember how much I loved you." She sat down, her face blank.

"I'll get the car," Morcheck murmured, and hurried away. Any longer and he would have broken down himself.

Walking to the garage he felt numb, tired, broken. Myra — gone! And modern science, for all its great achievements, unable to help.

He reached the garage and said, "All right, back out." Smoothly his car backed out and stopped beside him.

"Anything wrong, boss?" his car asked. "You look worried. Still got a hangover?"

"No — it's Myra. She's sick."

The car was silent for a moment. Then it said softly, "I'm very sorry, Mr. Morcheck. I wish there were something I could do."

"Thank you," Morcheck said, glad to have a friend at this hour. "I'm afraid there's nothing anyone can do."

The car backed to the door and Morcheck helped Myra inside. Gently the car started.

It maintained a delicate silence on the way back to the factory.