BLOODHOUNDS and BADINAGE by BERTON BRALEY

Blundering Sincerity Held More Persuasive Power Than Did the Polished Dialogue of the Dramatist.

"Do I always bore you?"

"YOU'RE dull tonight," plaintively sighed Ada Robson, "and I did so want to be entertained!"

"Well, when it comes to that," answered Jesse Penfield, "you're no Mme. de Stael yourself this evening."

"I don't have to be," retorted Ada; "you're calling on me."

"Meaning that your mere presence should content me," suggested Jesse. "It does. It contents me so thoroughly that I can just sit here silent, satisfied to know you are near and that I can look at you."

"I don't mean that, at all," Ada denied; "but there is a distinction in my mind. When you take me out to a theater or a dance or to dinner I think it's my duty to be as bright and entertaining and chatty as can be, and I don't expect you to be brilliant or even interesting. You've done your part by paying for the party. But when you come to see me, in my house, and sit in my chairs, and use my lights, and get cigar ashes all over my rugs, then you're the one who ought to be entertaining, not I."

"But I brought you a two pound box of candy," Penfield argued; "that ought to let me out of a little entertainingness."

"I've allowed you three-quarters of an hour of dullness for that candy," Ada replied, "and a quarter hour for the carfare you spent coming here. But that's all used up. Now you've got to sparkle."

"Sparkle, sparkle, little beau; it's a duty that you owe," rhymed Penfield cheerfully. "All right, here goes. In the books the clever conversationalist always tosses epigrams about in iridescent showers. Epigram No. 1, 'Life for the summer girl is just one ring after another.' 'Better the last laugh than the first kiss.' 'Rather a Ford in Podunk than a motorcycle on Broadway.' 'Woman is the alpha and omega of life—i. e., she's Greek to all of us.' 'There are just two kinds of women——'"

"I see the epigrams, but not the iridescence," remarked Miss Robson. "Do you expect leaden pellets to sparkle?"

"Time was," said Penfield, "that you thought almost everything I said was clever. But now I am hoist by own petard. I have so accustomed you to my ordinary scintillations that only exceptional jewels of speech appeal to you."

"Yes, there is a tragedy in education and experience," commented Miss Robson. "I once thought 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' the highest effort of dramatic art and the bloodhounds the most thrilling histrions, but now they leave me cold."

"And I am, so to speak, one with the bloodhounds," sighed Penfield. "Only I think your figure is mixed. As I remember it, Eliza crossed the ice and left the bloodhounds cold. They must have been cold in such weather."

"I do not want you to take the flattering unction to your soul," said Ada, disregarding the discussion of the bloodhounds, "that it is you yourself who have educated me beyond the appeal of your ordinary conversation. I have been reading——"

"Oscar Wilde, of course," said Jesse, "than whom no one is than whomer in making life difficult for perfectly acceptable young men who have not learned to lisp in paradoxes."

"Well, he is wonderful," said Ada; "you'll admit that, and his men talk so gorgeously."

"Give me a week's notice," replied Penfield, "and promise to feed me my lines the way I have them written, and I'll guarantee to stack up with Oscar's conversation jugglers. You must remember that he has the stage all set for them and they get their lines out of the book. And you judge my impromptu efforts by his studied product. 'Tisn't fair. Furthermore, besides, and also, let me ask you to weigh Wilde's wily conversationalists on the scale of utility. I know it's a difficult matter to dissect them away from their charm and consider them as units in a practical world, but try it. How would a Wilde hero be to live with? Can you imagine him taking care of the furnace? Would he persuade the roughneck who insulted you on the street to go away with a jet of epigrams? If the income he always seems to have should vanish suddenly would he scare the wolf from the door with explosive paradoxes and keep the movers from taking away the installment furniture by subtle irony?"

"I can't imagine a furniture mover taking away goods and chattels with subtle irony," said Miss Robson, "but I'm not sure a Wilde hero wouldn't be useful in such crises. I imagine he'd be excellent at stalling off the butcher and persuading the man from the tailor's to 'come next week.' Afternoon tea conversation adapted to stern realities might be more effective than throwing collectors down the stairs."

"Personally," continued Penfield, "I would hate to consider life with a Wilde heroine. I mean one of the really clever ones. She'd never be dull—and that would be awful. It would be like skipping along always from lofty crag to lofty crag, instead of walking on the good solid pavement. Dullness is the pavement. It is the contrast which makes the heights and unevenness delightful. But a life all dizzy heights would be both hectic and monotonous. It would be dull from lack of dullness. I shouldn't want a wife who didn't occasionally bore me. I'd hate one I found always adequate, always brilliant, always possessed of sangfroid, aplomb, and nonchalance. The key of existence would be pitched too high. The tension of mind and soul would be always too great. For I should have to keep up to her level—and life would be an intolerable orgy of intellectual superlatives. Either that, or I should go to sleep at the table and yawn at her choicest samples of wit—and she would run away with somebody who 'understood her.'"

"And so, since you don't think you'd like a Wilde heroine, you think I shouldn't like a Wilde hero?" questioned Miss Robson.

"I'm just speaking in a general spirit of irritation," admitted Penfield. "What I started to say before I got carried away on the tide of my own loquacity was that many a fine, clean, straightforward, capable, honest, affectionate, and big hearted young fellow has the very deuce of a time trying to marry a nice girl because she has been reading Wilde's plays and has acquired the idea that without the jovous gift of unlimited gab a man is a worm."

"Poor, tongue tied mortal," sympathized Miss Robson. "I feel for you. You have only used 520 words in the last two minutes."

"I'm not speaking for myself," said Penfield hastily. "I'm speaking for the comparatively inarticulate ones who——"

"But, my dear boy," said Miss Robson, "you described yourself so minutely—'a fine, clean, straightforward, capable, honest, affectionate, and big hearted young fellow.' Why, I'd recognize you out of a thousand with all those adjectives."

Penfield ducked his head as though avoiding a blow.

"Don't spoof me," he said. "I'm really in earnest about this. I think Wilde and all the rest of the sparkling dialogue folks have made life difficult for the average lover."

"The average lover," Miss Robson contended, "ought sometimes to read a little of sparkling dialogue himself, so as to learn how. I don't know that I'd care for a Wilde hero right along, but I don't see why fine, clean, straightforward, etc., young men can't occasionally try to be a little bit interesting, too. I'm willing to be bored sometimes by my husband, but not always. Furthermore, you can't marry all the fine, clean, etc., young men you know, and you have to talk with most of them. Why shouldn't they help you more?"

"I don't know why; shouldn't they?" returned Penfield. "Perhaps because it's a gift. Anyway, the conversation has got away from me. I want to go back to the bloodhounds again. I've thought of a perfectly good wheeze I could extract from them. It's elaborate, but good. You will recall that I said the bloodhounds were the ones who were left cold. And then I said something about my being a bloodhound, as it were. After which we talked about an Oscar Wilde hero keeping the wolf from the door. Well, my joke is that I'd like to be a Wilde bloodhound keeping the wolf from your door."

Miss Robson heaved a deep, deep sigh.

"Sometimes," she said, "you are an awful bore."

"Always?" he asked. "Do I always bore you?"

"No, not always."

"Then my conversation is of a sufficiently intelligent nature to be tolerated by even a devotee of Wilde and the Dolly Dialogues?" he asked.

"Sometimes."

"Ah," cried Penfield, and, though his lips were smiling, his eyes had a light in them that had not been there before. "Then you will marry me, won't you?"

Miss Robson looked at him in sheer amazement.

"Marry you!" she exclaimed. "Who said anything about marrying you?"

"I think I did," replied Penfield, "but perhaps I merely imagined I had. Anyhow I do now. Mention marriage, I mean. Surely I meet the requirements you lay down. You wouldn't care for a Wilde hero right along—well, I'm not one; you don't mind a husband who bores you occasionally, but he mustn't always—and you said that fitted me. I don't see where there is any requisite lacking."

Miss Robson emitted something perilously close to a sniff.

"That description," she commented, "would fit nearly anybody. And I'm not marrying men for negative qualities, just now, thank you."

"Quite right, quite right," Penfield agreed, "but I was simply pointing out as a beginning that I was not the type of man you didn't want to marry. To prove I'm not only the type but the man you do want to marry is something else again. I will now enumerate the positive characteristics I possess. First, I am comparatively young. I have very little past and a lot of future. Second, I am moderately successful, and if the wolf howled outside our door we could afford to throw him a bone. Third, I am a husky sort of a brute who would be handy around the house to chop wood or tackle tramps. Fourth——"

"You said," interrupted Miss Robson, "that you wanted a wife who would bore you occasionally. Then you propose to me, or pretend to propose to me. I don't think that's tactful."

Penfield floundered a little. "Well, you see, I meant—I—I—should say—." He paused an instant to collect his thoughts.

"Well, suppose you did, once in a while?" he queried at last, defiantly. "It would only be reprisal for the times I bored you. That's the theory of it—the fact is that I can't imagine being bored by you. You might be prosy as an old time minister—I've never known you to be, but you might be—and I wouldn't notice it because I'd be thinking how lucky I was to own you. But you interrupted me in my statement of positive qualities I possess. Fourth—I am of an easy temper, seldom ruffled, and comfortable to get along with. Fifth—I am fond of the same sort of books and music that you are. Sixth——"

Miss Robson's lip had begun to tremble and her eyes to glow dangerously as Penfield talked on, and at this juncture she fairly jumped to her feet and cried.

"Jesse Penfield, you're a brute. To think that you would dare talk marriage in that frivolous fashion. Why—why, one of a girl's most sacred memories is a proposal, and you—you've made a joke of it. I—I wouldn't marry you now in a million years. Good night, Mr. Penfield."

She turned and flung from the room, but with a shout of sheer vigorous joy he followed her, and, as she started up the stairs, caught her and crushed her close to him and kissed her on the lips, smothering her protests.

"I love you, I love you," he said, and after he had said it times enough Ada Robson stopped struggling, her arms crept about his neck and she whispered, "And I love you, too, Jesse. But why did you start to propose in that way?"

"My dear," said Penfield, "that was the nearest approximation I could make to the Wildean manner of proposal. Casual, humorous, lighthearted. I thought you'd like it."

"In books," said Miss Robson, "it reads well. But in life—a little less polish and a little more passion is preferable."

"A little less Wilde and a little wilder," suggested Penfield.

She nodded.

"In the blundering but sincere manner of a 'fine, clean, capable, etc.,'" she began, but she failed to finish. The words were arrested on her very lips. And she didn't seem to mind.