

5 The Perfect Woman

by Robert Sheckley

Mr. Morcheck woke up with a bad taste in his mouth and a laugh ringing in his ears. It was George Owen-Clark's laugh, the last thing remembered from the 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, more than a little drunk. "I mean, how is life with your sweet wife?"

That had been unpleasant. Everyone knew that Owen-Clark was a Primitivist, but what right had he to go on about it? Just because he had married a Primitive Woman ...

"I love my wife," Morcheck had told him. "And she's a hell of a lot nicer than that bundle of nerves you call *your* wife."

But of course, you can't shake a Primitivist. They love the faults in their women as much as their good sides – more, perhaps. Owen-Clark had grinned and said, "You know, Morcheck, old man, I think your wife needs a checkup. Have you noticed her reflexes lately?"

Idiot! Mr. Morcheck eased himself out of bed, blinking at the bright morning behind his curtains. Myra's reflexes – there was a grain of truth in what Owen-Clark had said. Lately, Myra's reflexes had seemed rather – uncertain.

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

Morcheck put on a pair of slacks, still blinking sleepily. 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.

Myra buttered a piece of toast for him, then said, "Wonderful, darling. You know, it was a perfectly wonderful party last night. I enjoyed every moment of it."

celebrate *fejre*

pros'perity *riches*

shake *bringe ud af*

fatning

fault *fejl*

checkup *check, kontrol*

grain *gran*

brightly *muntert*

bustle *move around*

busily

napkin *serviette*

bald *skaldet*



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

"I love you when you're tipsy," 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 smiled happily at her, then frowned. He put down his piece of toast. "You know," he said, "I had a little argument 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 cried. "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 Primitive Women. These creatures demanded a lifetime of care and attention. It was a public secret that Owen-Clark's wife made him work around the house. And the fool put up with it! Primitive Women were forever asking for money to buy clothes and jewellery, demanding breakfast in bed, talking for hours on the telephone. They tried to take over men's jobs.

Under his wife's loving care, Mr. Morcheck felt his hangover slowly disappear. 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 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. Something was terribly wrong.

"I love you," she said simply.

Mr. Morcheck felt his heart beating hard. He loved her! Madly! But that stupid Owen-Clark had been right. She needed a checkup. Myra seemed to sense his thought. She seemed to pull herself together and said, "All I want is your happiness, dear. I think I'm sick ... Will you have me cured? Will you take

tipsy a little drunk

frown rynke panden

pile stabel, dyng

neu'rotic neurotisk,

nervepræget

creature væsen

a'dore beundre

public offentlig, velkendt

put up with finde sig i

care omsorg

hangover tømmermænd

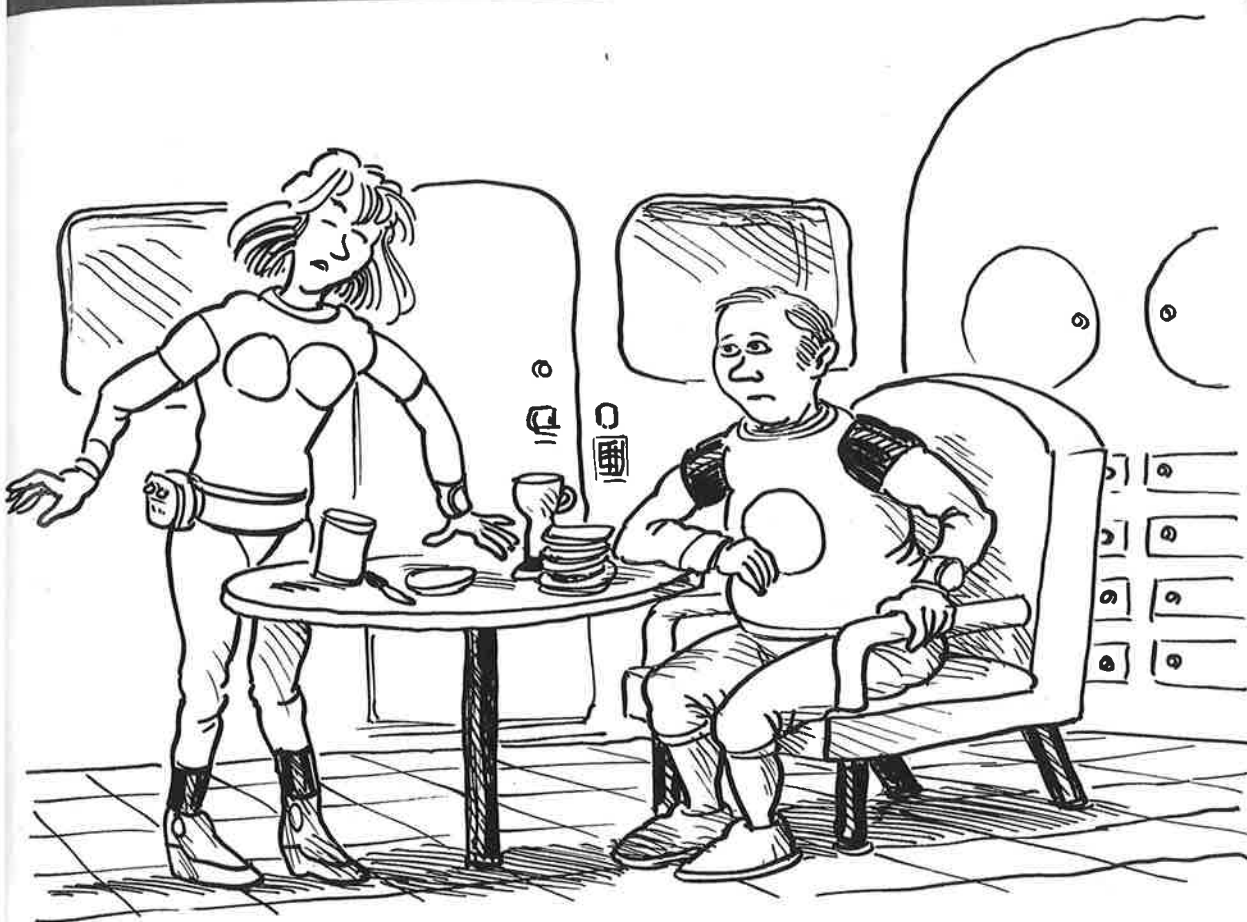
mail post

sense feel, understand

pull herself together

tage sig sammen





me back after I'm cured – and not let them change me – I wouldn't want to be changed!" Her blonde 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 simple mentality, hardly ever knew such troubles, but Modern Woman, with her finely balanced sensibilities, did not have her strength. So unfair! Because Modern Woman had all the finest, dearest qualities of femininity.

Myra got to her feet with an effort. She was very beautiful. Her sickness had put a high colour in her cheeks, and the rays of the morning sun fell on her golden hair.

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

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

dis'turb forstyrre
sensi'bilities sanser,
 følsomhed
effort besvær
caught herself undgik at
 falde
blank udtryksløs



"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 tired, broken. Myra – gone! And modern science, 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 was something I could do."

"Thank you," Morcheck said, glad to have a friend at this moment. "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 kept up a delicate silence on the way back to the factory.

murmur mumle
smoothly med en
glidende bevægelse
delicate discreet

1. Why does he have a bad taste in his mouth (there are at least two reasons!)?
2. In what way was Owen-Clark 'unpleasant'?
3. Try to describe what you think a Primitivist is. How do the others feel about them – and why?
4. What signs are there in the story that Owen-Clark is right about Myra? Do these things matter?
5. What do people like Morcheck feel about 'real women'?
6. Why does he love Myra? What is going to happen to her – and to him?
7. Describe the behaviour of the car, and how you feel about it.
8. The story is called 'The Perfect Woman'. How are the different women described in the story – and what is meant, then, by 'the perfect woman'?
9. If you were asked to describe 'the perfect woman' in today's society, what sort of things would you include in that description?

