New Morals for Old
Can Men and Women Be Friends?
By FLOYD DELL

Friendship between men and women is rather a new thing in the history of the world. Friendship depends upon equality and choice, and there has been very little of either in the relations of the sexes, up to the present. A woman does not choose her male relatives, nor is she according to archaic family laws their equal; motives other than personal choice might lead her to become a man's wife; wholly impersonal reasons might place her in the relationship of kept mistress. Only in her role of paramour was there any implication of free choice; and even here there was no full equality, not even of danger. None of these customary relationships of the past can be said to have fostered friendship between men and women. Doubtless it did exist, but under difficulties.

Family bonds, however, are being more and more relaxed, women are no longer the wards of their male relatives, and friendship with a father or brother is more than ever possible. Further, the free personal choice which marked only the romantic amours of the age of chivalry is now popularly regarded in America as essential to any decent marriage, while the possibility of divorce tends to make free choice something besides a mere youthful illusion. More than ever before, husbands and wives are friends.

At the same time the intensity of friendships between people of the same sex appears to be diminishing. This intensity, in its classic instances, as in Greece, we now regard as an artificial product, the result of the segregation of the sexes and the low social position of women. As women become free and equal with men such romantic intensity of emotion finds a more biologically appropriate expression. Friendships between people of the same sex must today compete on the one hand with romantic love and on the other with the more fascinating though often less enduring friendships which can now be enjoyed between men and women. Neglect of these latter opportunities is coming to be regarded as a kind of spiritual cowardice, or at least as a failure in enterprise.

The influences of the machine age, so destructive to fixed authoritarian relationships, appear to foster the growth of friendship between the sexes; so much so that we may expect it to become, in its further developments, a characteristic social feature of the age that lies immediately before us.

Friendship will become a more and more important aspect of marriage itself; but, except in the effects of its wider spread, this will hardly be a new thing—we have friendships between husbands and wives now. Nor will extra-marital friendships between men and women be precisely a new thing. What will be new, furnishing us with an interesting theme for sociological speculation, are the conventions which will gradually come into existence to give social protection and dignity to extra-marital friendships.

Conventions are, doubtless, always rather ridiculous, inevitably a shackle upon the free motions of the soul, being imposed by fear. But it will be remembered that we, in America, with a vast amount of freedom of intersexual association, have thus far only begun to dispense with the locks and bars and whipplings and chaperons which were the appurtenances of a physical segregation of the sexes; the vast paraphernalia of psychic segregation, including sexual taboos which hark back to the primeval darkness, are with us still. Our minds are habituated to unreasoning fears in all matters concerning the relations of the sexes. For a long time, extra-marital friendships of men and women may be expected to be hedged about with elaborate and specific permissions, for the sake of keeping them under social control. Yet these conventions may be very convenient; and however irksome they may seem to the free spirits of a future day, they may still be such as would appear to us generously libertarian.

Today, in the absence of such conventions, it does not suffice that a man and woman, too well married to be afraid of extra-marital friendships, grant them to each other by private treaty; relatives, friends, and neighbors do not fail to be duly alarmed. Extra-marital friendship exists in an atmosphere of social suspicion which a few conventions would go far to alleviate.

As an example in a different field, the convention with regard to dancing may be adduced. If dancing were not a general custom, if it were the enlightened practice of an advanced few, how peculiar and suspicious would seem the desire of Mr. X and Mrs. Y to embrace each other to music; and how scandalized the neighbors would be to hear that they did! No one would rest until the pair had been driven into an elopement.

We build huge palaces for the kind of happy communion which dancing furnishes; we tend more and more to behave like civilized beings about the impulses which are thus given scope. We are less socially hospitable to the impulses of friendship between men and women.

In friendship there are many moods; but the universal rite of friendship is talk. Talk needs no palaces for its encouragement; it is not an expensive affair; it would seem to be well within the reach of all. Yet it isn't. For the talk of friendship requires privacy—though the privacy of a table for two in a crowded and noisy restaurant will suffice; and it requires time. Such talk does not readily adjust itself to the limitations of the dinner hour. It is a flower slow in unfolding; and it seems to come to its most perfect bloom only after midnight. But, unfortunately, not every restaurant keeps open all night. It is satisfied with two comfortable chairs; a table to lean elbows on is good,
too; in winter an open fire, where friendly eyes may stare dreamily into the glowing coals—that is very good; hot or cold drinks according to the season, and a cigarette—these are almost the height of friendship's luxury. These seem not too much to ask. Yet the desire for privacy and uncounted hours of time together is, when considered from that point of view, scandalous in its implications; quite as much so as the desire of Mr. X and Mrs. Y to embrace each other to music. However, Mr. X and Mrs. Y do, under the aegis of a convention, indulge their desire and embrace each other to their heart's content with the full approval of civilized society; and it seems as though another convention might grow up, under the protection of which Mr. X and Mrs. Y might sit up and talk all night without its seeming queer of them.

Quer, at the least, it does seem nowadays, except under the conventions of courtship; friends who happen to be married to each other can of course talk comfortably in bed. These bare facts are sufficient to explain why so many men and women who really want to be friends and sit up all night occasionally and talk find it easy to believe that they are in love with each other. They find it all the easier to believe this, because friendship between the sexes is usually spiced with some degree of sexual attraction. But a degree of sexual attraction which might have kept a friendship forever sweet may prove unequal to the requirements of a more serious and intimate relationship. Disillusionment is the penalty, at the very least. Society could well afford to grant more freedom to friendship between men and women, and save the expense of a large number of broken hearts.

It is worth while to wonder if a good deal of "romance" is not, after all, friendship mistaking itself for something else; or rather, finding its only opportunity for expression in that mistake. Among civilized people, after the romance has ended, the friendship remains. It may perhaps have been worth while to imagine oneself in love, in order to enjoy a friendship; but it seems rather a wasteful proceeding.

Yet those who, taking a merely economical view of the situation, attempt to enjoy such friendships without becoming involved or involving others in such waste, may with some embarrassment discover—what Mrs. Grundy could have told them all along—that friendship and sexual romance may sometimes be difficult to relegate to previously determined boundaries. Friendship between the sexes may, if only for a moment, seem to demand the same tokens of sincerity as romantic love. Does not this fact threaten the traditional, jealousy-guarded dignity of marriage?

Perhaps it does. At present, in any conflict of claims between a marriage and a friendship, there is "nothing to arbitrate"; marriage has all the rights, friendship none. If the rights of friendship are to be at all considered and protected, marriage may have to yield something. It may not be good manners for husbands and wives to be jealous of the quite possible momentary exuberances of each other's friendships; it may be that such incidents will be regarded as being within the discretion of the persons immediately concerned, and not quite proper subjects for inquiry, speculation, or comment by anybody else.

And this might have an effect unsuspected by those whom such a prospect of liberty would most alarm today. When a moment's rashness does not necessarily imply red ruin and the breaking up of homes, when sex is freed to a degree from the sense of overwhelming social consequences, it may well become a matter of more profound personal consequence; and with nothing to fear except the spoiling of their friendship, men and women in an ardent friendship may yet prefer talk to kisses.

"But what if they don't?" A complete answer to that question, from the Utopian point of view, would take us far afield from the subject of friendship; yet some further answer may seem to be required, if only by way of confessing to Mrs. Grundy that the problem is not so simple as it may seem. Well, then, out of many possibilities which the future holds, I offer this one for what it may be worth. Such friendships, let us agree, tend to merge insensibly into romantic sexual love. But if marriage may be conceived as yielding some of its traditional rights, extra-marital romance may well be called upon for similar concessions. The first thing that extra-marital romance might be asked to surrender would be its intolerable and fatuous airs of holiness. Yes, "holiness" is the word—a holiness all the more asserted by such extra-marital lovers because their relations are likely to be taken disrespectfully by a stupid world. Oh, unquestionably, if you ask them, never was any legal and conventional love so high and holy as this romantic passion of theirs! Its transcendental holiness calls for sacrifices. So they sacrifice themselves—and, incidentally, others—to it. Anything less, they feel, would be cowardly. They must not palter with these sacred emotions—not even by the exercise of their dormant sense of humor!—So it is today: but perhaps in a future where extra-marital romance is made room for with a tender and humorous courtesy, it may give up these preposterous and solemn airs, and actually learn to smile at its illusions—illusions which will still give the zest of ultimate danger to relationships of merely happy and light-hearted play. Thus life will continue to be interesting.

As for the talk of friendship, my Utopian speculations uncover for me no respect in which the thing itself can be improved upon. The circumstances can be made happier, the attitude of society can foster it; but the talk of friendship has already reached a splendid perfection beyond which my imagination is unable to soar. At its best it has, despite its personal aspect, an impersonal beauty; it is a poignant fulfillment of those profound impulses which we call curiosity and candor; it serves human needs as deep as those which poetry and music serve, and is in some sense an art like them. The art exists, and it remains only for the future to give it an adequate hospitality.

Islands

By LAURA BENÉT

Let islands be never discovered,
Leave them to loneliness
And loneliness again, unutterable:
Enchanted wreckage of chaos
Born of mystery burdened foam.
Seek the far water
When in sight of the tree tops,
But never discover, O sailors!
The secret of beauty the sea hides
Is drowned in the finding.