

Bangs John Kendrick

A Proposal Under Difficulties: A Farce



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A PROPOSAL UNDER DIFFICULTIES

The scene is laid in a fashionable New York drawing-room. The time is late in October, and Wednesday afternoon. The curtain rising shows an empty room. A bell rings. After a pause the front-door is heard opening and closing. Enter Yardsley through portière at rear of room.

Yardsley. Ah! So far so good; but I wish it were over. I've had the nerve to get as far as the house and into it, but how much further my courage will carry me I can't say. Confound it! Why is it, I wonder, that men get so rattled when they're head over heels in love, and want to ask the fair object of their affections to wed? I can't see. Now I'm brave enough among men. I'm not afraid of anything that walks, except Dorothy Andrews, and generally I'm not afraid of her. Stopping runaway teams and talking back to impudent policemen have been my delight. I've even been courageous enough to submit a poem in person to the editor of a comic weekly, and yet here this afternoon I'm all of a tremble. And for what reason? Just because I've co-come to ask Dorothy Andrews to change her name to Mrs. Bob Yardsley; as if that were such an unlikely thing for her to do. Gad! I'm almost inclined to despise myself. (*Surveys himself in the mirror at one end of the room. Then walking up to it and peering intently at his reflection, he continues.*) Bah! you coward! Afraid of a woman – a sweet little woman like Dorothy. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Bob Yardsley. *She* won't hurt you. Brace up and propose like a man – like a real lover who'd go through fire for her sake, and all that. Ha! That's easy enough to talk about, but how shall I put it? That's the question. Let me see. How *do* men do it? I ought to buy a few good novels and select the sort of proposal I like; but not having a novel at hand, I must invent my own. How will it be? Something like this, I fancy. (*The portières are parted, and Jennie, the maid, enters. Yardsley does not observe her entrance.*) I'll get down on my knees. A man on his knees is a pitiable object, and pity, they say, is akin to love. Maybe she'll pity me, and after that – well, perhaps pity's cousin will arrive. (*The maid advances, but Yardsley is so intent upon his proposal that he still fails to observe her. She stands back of the sofa, while he, gazing downward, kneels before it.*) I'll say: "Divine creature! At last we are alone, and I – ah – I can speak freely the words that have been in my heart to say to you for so long – oh, so long a time." (*Jennie appears surprised.*) "I have never even hinted at how I feel towards you. I have concealed my love, fearing lest by too sudden a betrayal of my feelings I should lose all." (*Aside.*) Now for a little allusion to the poets. Poetry, they say, is a great thing for proposals. "You know, dearest, you must know, how the poet has phrased it – 'Fain would I fall but that I fear to climb.' But now – now I must speak. An opportunity like this may not occur again. Will you – will you be my wife?"

[*Jennie gives a little scream of delight.*]

Jennie. Oh, Mr. Yardsley, this is so sudden like and unexpected, and me so far beneath you!

[*Yardsley looks up and is covered with confusion.*]

Yardsley. Great Scott! What have I done?

Jennie. But of course it ain't for the likes of me to say no to —

Yardsley (rising). For Heaven's sake, Jennie – do be sensi – Don't – say – Jennie, why – ah – (*Aside.*) Oh, confound it! What the deuce shall I say? What's the matter with my tongue? Where's my vocabulary? A word! a word! my kingdom for a word! (*Aloud.*) Now, Jen —

Jennie (cooly). I has been engaged to Mr. Hicks, the coach gentleman, sir, but —

Yardsley. Good! good! I congratulate you, Jennie. Hicks is a very fine fellow. Drives like a — like a driver, Jennie, a born driver. I've seen him many a time sitting like a king on his box — yes, indeed. Noticed him often. Admired him. Gad, Jennie, I'll see him myself and tell him; and what is more, Jennie, I'll — I'll give Hicks a fine present.

Jennie. Yes, sir; I has no doubt as how you'll be doin' the square thing by Hicks, for, as I was a-sayin', I has been engaged like to him, an' he has some rights; but I think as how, if I puts it to him right like, and tells him what a nice gentleman you are (*a ring is heard at the front-door*), it'll be all right, sir. But there goes the bell and I must run, Mr. Yardsley. (*Ecstatically kissing her hand.*) Bob!

Yardsley (with a convulsive gasp). Bob? Jennie! You — er — you misun — (*Jennie, with a smile of joy and an ecstatic glance at Yardsley, dances from the room to attend the door. Yardsley throws himself into a chair.*) Well, I'll be teetotally — Awh! It's too dead easy proposing to somebody you don't know you are proposing to. What a kettle of fish this is, to be sure! Oh, pshaw! that woman can't be serious. She must know I didn't mean it for her. But if she doesn't, good Lord! what becomes of me? (*Rises, and paces up and down the room nervously. After a moment he pauses before the glass.*) I ought to be considerably dishevelled by this. I feel as if I'd been drawn through a knot-hole — or — or dropped into a stone-crusher — that's it, a stone-crusher — a ten-million horse-power stone-crusher. Let's see how you look, you poor idiot.

[*As he is stroking his hair and rearranging his tie he talks in pantomime at himself in the glass. In a moment Jennie ushers Mr. Jack Barlow into the room.*]

Jennie. Miss Andrews will be down in a minute, sir.

[*Barlow takes arm-chair and sits gazing ahead of him. Neither he nor Yardsley perceives the other. Jennie tiptoes to one side, and, tossing a kiss at Yardsley, retires.*]

Barlow. Now for it. I shall leave this house to-day the happiest or the most miserable man in creation, and I rather think the odds are in my favor. Why shouldn't they be? Egad! I can very well understand how a woman could admire me. I admire myself, rather. I confess candidly that I do not consider myself half bad, and Dorothy has always seemed to feel that way herself. In fact, the other night in the Perkinses' conservatory she seemed to be quite ready for a proposal. I'd have done it then and there if it hadn't been for that confounded Bob Yardsley —

Yardsley (turning sharply about). Eh? Somebody spoke my name. A man, too. Great Heavens! I hope Jennie's friend Hicks isn't here. I don't want to have a scene with Hicks. (*Discovering Barlow.*) Oh — ah — why — hullo, Barlow! You here?

Barlow (impatiently, aside). Hang it! Yardsley's here too! The man's always turning up when he's not wanted. (*Aloud.*) Ah! why, Bob, how are you? What're you doing here?

Yardsley. What do you suppose — tuning the piano? I'm here because I want to be. And you?

Barlow. For the same reason that you are.

Yardsley (aside). Gad! I hope not. (*Aloud.*) Indeed? The great mind act again? Run in the same channel, and all that? Glad to see you. (*Aside.*) May the saints forgive me that fib! But this fellow must be got rid of.

Barlow (embarrassed). So'm I. Always glad to see myself — I mean you — anywhere. Won't you sit down?

Yardsley. Thanks. Very kind of you, I'm sure. (*Aside.*) He seems very much at home. Won't I sit down? — as if he'd inherited the chairs! Humph! I'll show him.

Barlow. What say?

Yardsley. I — ah — oh, I was merely remarking that I thought it was rather pleasant out to-day.

Barlow. Yes, almost too fine to be shut up in-doors. Why aren't you driving, or — or playing golf, or — ah — or being out-doors somewhere? You need exercise, old man; you look a little pale.

(*Aside.*) I must get him away from here somehow. Deuced awkward having another fellow about when you mean to propose to a woman.

Yardsley. Oh, I'm well enough!

Barlow (solicitously). You don't look it – by Jove, you don't. (*Suddenly inspired.*) No, you don't, Bob. You overestimate your strength. It's very wrong to overestimate one's strength. People – ah – people have died of it. Why, I'll bet you a hat you can't start now and walk up to Central Park and back in an hour. Come. I'll time you. (*Rises and takes out watch.*) It is now four-ten. I'll wager you can't get back here before five-thirty. Eh? Let me get your hat.

[Starts for door.

Yardsley (with a laugh). Oh no; I don't bet – after four. But I say, did you see Billie Wilkins?

Barlow (returning in despair). Nope.

Yardsley (aside). Now for a bit of strategy. (*Aloud.*) He was looking for you at the club. (*Aside.*) Splendid lie! (*Aloud.*) Had seats for the – ah – the Metropolitan to-night. Said he was looking for you. Wants you to go with him. (*Aside.*) That ought to start him along.

Barlow. I'll go with him.

Yardsley (eagerly). Well, you'd better let him know at once, then. Better run around there and catch him while there's time. He said if he didn't see you before half-past four he'd get Tom Parker to go. Fine show to-night. Wouldn't lose the opportunity if I were you. (*Looking at his watch.*) You'll just about have time to do it now if you start at once.

[*Grasps Barlow by arm, and tries to force him out. Barlow holds back, and is about to remonstrate, when Dorothy enters. Both men rush to greet her; Yardsley catches her left hand, Barlow her right.*

Dorothy (slightly embarrassed). Why, how do you do – this is an unexpected pleasure – both of you? Excuse my left hand, Mr. Yardsley; I should have given you the other if – if you'd given me time.

Yardsley. Don't mention it, I pray. The unexpectedness is wholly mine, Miss Andrews – I mean – ah – the pleasure is —

Barlow. Wholly mine.

Dorothy (withdrawing her hands from both and sitting down). I haven't seen either of you since the Perkinses' dance. Wasn't it a charming affair?

Yardsley. Delightful I – ah – I didn't know that the Perkinses —

Barlow (interrupting). It was a good deal of a crush, though. As Mrs. Van Darling said to me, "You always meet – "

Yardsley. It's a pity Perkins isn't more of a society man, though, don't you think?

Dorothy. Oh, I don't know. I've always found him very pleasant. He is so sincere.

Barlow. Isn't he, though? He looked bored to death all through the dance.

Yardsley. I thought so too. I was watching him while you were talking to him, Barlow, and such a look of ennui I never saw on a man's face.

Barlow. Humph!

Dorothy. Are you going to Mrs. Van Darling's dinner?

Barlow. Yes; I received my bid last night. You?

Dorothy. Oh yes!

Yardsley (gloomily). I can't go very well. I'm – ah – engaged for Tuesday.

Barlow. Well, I hope you've let Mrs. Van Darling know. She's a stickler for promptness in accepting or declining her invitations. If you haven't, I'll tell her for you. I'm to see her to-night.

Yardsley. Oh no! Never mind. I'll – I'll attend to it.

Barlow. Oh, of course. But it's just as well she should know in advance. You might forget it, you know. I'll tell her; it's no trouble to me.

Dorothy. Of course not, and she can get some one to take your place.

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