



DREAM WOMEN

by Constance McCutcheon

Hermann the German had dried up like an old sponge. His skin looked abrasive, sore, crumbly. His lips seemed pursed up as if sucking from, his eyes screwed up as if yearning for, that object, once succulent, which his scathing contemplation had desiccated, just as he himself had long ago become desiccated in not being satisfied by it.

The object of his contemplation had not been a beautiful woman. It had been a woman he had wanted with all his might to be beautiful. But beautiful she was not and unbeautiful she remained. After many years of fights and tears, the woman had left him, and gone she remained. He carried to America his memory of her as the most beautiful and fascinating woman in the world. It was his attempt to forget, once and for all, his passion for beautiful women and his failure to possess one. The effort he had put into winning women of beauty, ugly and raw-looking as he was, had been too much.

He was in the United States now, a visiting scientist at a famous university, tolerated by that university because of the money the rich German company paid it to receive its employees as associates. The

company paid the price not for the knowledge the employees were expected to acquire and bring home, but to demonstrate to the world that the company was affiliated with the famous seat of American scientific research. But why send this ugly, red-faced man? Because, although no master in the field of expert systems—his supposed expertise as a visiting scientist—he was a master of paperwork. He could represent anything as impressive and important, even the woman who would not be beautiful. In the United States with his title of visiting scientist, he behaved very much like a visiting scientist. Perhaps more so.

His English was much more than passable, although not fluent. When he had trouble understanding, which occurred frequently, he did not consider that he might have heard incorrectly or misunderstood. Instead he got angry at the people who spoke, thinking them stupid and accusing them of having communication problems. His greatest opportunity to use the language was exercised by the occasional browbeating he dispensed to his fellow workers or bar mates to win them over to his point of view, which he never did, until he found himself out on the empty American streets alone again, his red snub nose proclaiming to the world that he was a man cheated and unrecognized despite all his excellences. Evenings in his quiet, ground-floor apartment, he would listen to his favorite operas seated in a secondhand armchair, pressing a glass of wine to his pursed lips. In the half shadows, the lenses of his glasses glinted like tears when lights from passing cars glided by.

With the approach of the Christmas holidays, his sojourn in the great United States was becoming very lonely. In painful contrast to the happy bustle going on all about him, he hulked about isolated and silent, humiliated and defeated. Then he saw a notice in the neighborhood newspaper that swept all his dissatisfactions aside:

“Looking for a language teacher. You tell me the language and I’ll learn it from you in weekly conversation sessions. Condition: teacher must be native speaker. Call Becky, evenings . . .”

Receiving the telephone call and learning that he lived only a few streets away, Becky enthusiastically suggested that they meet immediately at the corner bar, Harald’s. She would be wearing a white hat, she said, so he would not only know her when he saw her, but would be able to see her in the darkened bar as well.

Despite the fact that Hermann left for the bar right away, a woman wearing something white on her head was already seated at one of the tables on the raised platform at the back of the bar. Filled with unsettling anticipation, Hermann approached her.

“That’s not a hat,” he reproached her without introducing himself, but seating himself opposite her.

Without asking him who he was, she replied flippantly, “What do you call it?”

“It’s not a hat,” he growled angrily, not knowing what the name for a white knitted brimless thing on the head would be in English.

“Sure it’s a hat. I call it a hat. A knitted hat.” Her dark eyebrows lowered in concern, but her green eyes glittered with life.

He grumbled. The matter irritated him, but he let it go. She looked at him doubtfully, then smiled a wide happy smile. He felt uncomfortable. She was very young. He remembered that they had arranged to meet to discuss business: her education.

“So what language do you speak?” she asked. “I can tell you don’t speak English.”

“I do speak English!” he retorted and found himself provoked all over again.

She demurred and stared at her thumbs. She pressed one down over the other and stroked the thumb nail a few times. Then with a deep breath, she looked up at him again, this time as if she were quite determined.

“Don’t get excited about it. I just meant you sound like a native speaker to me—of some other language. I only want to take language lessons from a native speaker. I want to get the accent right.”

Complimented against his will, Hermann cleared his throat, felt through his reddish beard for the skin around his Adam’s apple, and massaged it. Then he found himself provoked for the third time.

“So what language do you speak?”

“German!” he cried, thinking in exasperation that the entire country was full of the stupidest people. “Of course.”

“Not ‘of course.’ You could have been ... Spanish!” she returned playfully. Her lips parted and she smiled her wide smile. Her skin glowed.

“I could not have been Spanish! This is ridiculous! It’s not possible!”

Then came the fourth and final provocation: she was not willing to pay for the lessons. No, she had meant the weekly conversations to be an exchange. She would teach him English at the same time.

“It is absurd! I don’t need to learn English!” Completely outraged at what he considered an unabashed attempt to take advantage of him, he left the table, stepped down off the platform, and stalked out of the bar without looking back. Her impish smile followed his retreating figure as if she were not so sure. She sipped her drink. Her white wool cap had slipped back from her young, round face. That night, later than one might expect from a stranger, she received a phone call from him.

“You are asking for a service and you should pay,” Hermann said without preamble as soon as he heard her voice. “I did not put the advertisement in the paper. You did.”

“And you answered it,” Becky replied calmly, showing no surprise in recognizing his voice. “You don’t have to agree to it, for heaven’s sakes. If you don’t feel it’s fair, we can end the conversation right now. I’m okay with that. I’m not one to force people.”

“It’s not fair. It’s not fair at all!” But he didn’t want to end the conversation. “Perhaps we should meet again and discuss the terms,” he suggested, thinking himself quite sly.

“We just did that and you left without a word, which I consider very rude.”

“You are very rude!” he retorted, but at the same time he felt a thrill of happiness.

Despite the fact that each considered the other very rude, she agreed to come by his apartment Wednesday evening at seven for a second meeting to discuss the terms for the language lessons.

She arrived wrapped up in a worn, quilted jacket too large for her and wore shabby mittens that hung down limp from her wrists. Hermann wondered where her hands could be. The white cap was

pulled down low over her forehead. Her dark eyebrows and glittering eyes gave her a ferocious, but friendly look.

“It’s not possible,” he thought to himself taking in her appearance. He couldn’t believe anyone would go out onto the streets dressed that way, but he had to hide a smile. He took her quilted jacket from her, the mittens, and the white cap. When he turned from placing them on the sofa he felt an unpleasant jolt. She was shaking out her long, sandy-colored hair, was dressed totally in white, and looked like a staunch, rather broad young goddess, a very young goddess. Her large, blazing green eyes shone impudently, making him as wary of their light as of their swiftness.

She turned to the single wooden chair he had placed just beyond the rug, within the cross drafts of the large, uncurtained bay window. As she settled herself down on it, she turned towards him just as he had hoped she would, with strong, graceful movements, her challenging eyes fixed on him. She was ready to discuss the terms of the language lessons. He, seated in his secondhand armchair, was also ready to discuss terms. But a hitch occurred.

He had started his blustering with, “I don’t think it is fair if you don’t pay, that would be ridiculous,” but she was already holding up a hand.

“I think we should discuss the terms in German.”

“But you don’t understand German!” It had happened again. This stupid woman, too sturdy and strong to be pretty, instead plain and dazzling at once because of the unsettling glow of her skin, the thick, dark eyebrows, the dash in her brazen eyes, had knocked him completely off-balance.

“In German or I won’t discuss any terms with you at all,” she clarified and stood up to go.

“This is not possible!” he cried. As he began to deride her judgment, she again held up her hand and moved towards the sofa and her quilted jacket. “In German or I don’t hear a word you’re saying. Not a word, not a word, not a . . .” She continued to repeat the phrase, drowning him out in a maddening way.

“Mensch! Das gibt’s doch nicht!”

“Eh? What was that?” A trilling laughter burst out of her, and she moved back to the chair, sat down attentively, nodded towards him, and waited. The German lessons had begun.

Each Wednesday Becky came to Filbert Street to sit on the wooden chair near the drafty bay window to argue with Hermann about whether they should discuss terms in German—which the woman would not be able to understand—or in English, in which case, Becky maintained, she was providing the service for which terms had not yet been discussed.

She didn't take the discussions as seriously as Hermann did, always laughing at him just when he was most agitated. She also saw that in no case would he let her go. For some reason, he wanted her there very much. Finding out why became as much a matter of interest to her as the language lessons themselves.

For Becky, the contentious evenings had already turned into what she had been hoping for: contact with another culture, a look into a foreign mentality, a whisper of its language. As an archaeology student, a living example of another folk was something she found herself craving. Her studies of dead folk, dead civilizations, dead societies had dulled her to what lay behind the descriptions and the artifacts. The Wednesday evenings were for her a very exciting survey of the living.

Although he felt it was ridiculous and pitiful to talk to someone who could have no idea of what he was saying, Hermann allowed himself to be coaxed into speaking more and more of his language to Becky. Her look changed when he spoke German. She held her head differently, jutted her jaw out slightly, and lowered her glance which caused her head to bow. She concentrated with absolute attention on the sound of his words. He had never experienced anything like it before. After a while, unwillingly, he found himself saying things to her that he never dreamed he would say to anyone: he spoke of the woman who had refused to be beautiful for him. Becky was the perfect audience. She couldn't understand a word he said.

The weeks went by. In the spring, the atmosphere changed pleasantly from the cold, dark evenings with street lamps sparkling against the panes of the bay window to cheering evenings suffused with smoky light. Hermann sat as ever in his armchair, dressed in beige-colored clothes that did not become his reddish hair and raw-

looking complexion. Becky, on the other hand, changed with the season. She had discarded her snow-white winter garments for sweaters and corduroy trousers of green pastels, the colors of the tender, new leaves emerging on the trees, a color that flattered her skin and eyes. The weather seemed to have pepped her up more than ever. On arriving, she would knock at his door much more vigorously than was necessary, knowing he would make a tremendous fuss because she was so loud. When he opened the door, she would sweep into the room humming a tune, pull off her boots, and move in her stockings feet to the wooden chair and wait.

Hermann, having thought the entire week about how he could better express himself, would start in, not with an explanation of German grammar, but with a refinement of some observation he had made the previous Wednesday about the unbeautiful woman. He needed to add a detail to his description of the arguments he had had with her, wanted to provide yet another defense for his insistence on experimenting with other women, why it had been natural, why the unbeautiful woman should have understood and accepted this. Becky listened attentively, never contradicting, never correcting, never questioning, to all his most intimate thoughts as if she understood. Although, he reminded himself repeatedly, she did not understand. Nevertheless the feeling that it was absurd to speak to her in a language she couldn't understand had long left him. His anticipation of the language evenings filled his days pleasantly with a tantalizing touch, as the fragrance of ripe melon had haunted his palette during the winter.

Hermann's soliloquies gradually became so intense, his trains of thought so compulsive that he found himself caught unpleasantly by surprise each Wednesday evening when Becky rose slightly from her chair, hands placed lightly on her thighs in a hesitating half-crouch, forewarning him that her time to go had come, that she was about to leave.

The inclination to cry no! not yet! just a minute! there's still one thing!; to reproach her with not caring about him, with superficiality—something so easy to reproach Americans with, all had to be stifled, he knew. And he stifled them, but his panicky feeling remained. He began to get nervous about her leaving not when he felt the time for her to go drawing near, but at the very moment she pounded at his door.

Then came a day in summer when Becky, his perfect, silent audience, acted strangely during a language session: she spoke back. Hermann had been telling her about the greatest love of his life, which by unhappy accident had occurred at the very time when the woman who would not be beautiful had said she wanted to marry him. How could he possibly marry her now when a truly beautiful woman, a woman who *knew how*, had just entered his life? The unbeautiful woman had been unreasonable to expect him to commit himself to her. His refusal was simply a testimony to his honesty.

Becky interrupted him. She sat forward, and asked in halting German: “Du hast ‘nein’ gesagt?—” but shook her head and switched to English, “You told her you had met the most interesting woman in the world?” She sat back, resuming her silence as he continued with his German narrative. He couldn’t acknowledge her contribution because it had come so unexpectedly, and he was intent on finishing his account of this, the most exciting incident in his life, the single time that a really beautiful woman ... But Becky’s attitude had changed. Although she remained pensive, her look grew puzzled, then disturbed. After a few minutes, she sat forward again. “In the basement?” she asked.

He nodded, smiling absently, romantically, lost in the memories of that rainy afternoon. “Her husband was in the apartment just above. Can you imagine how bold—”

Becky was no longer listening. She had flushed a deep red. When he tried to continue his story, the young lady stood up. She was nervous. Her face retained the deep flush which had so suddenly diffused it. Her fingers anxiously explored the back of the wooden chair as she looked out the window. She then pressed the palm of her hand hard against her forehead. Her eyes widened, her gaze seemed fixed on something outside. A moment later she moved quickly to the door where she slipped on her shoes, lifted her pale salmon-colored sweater from the back of the sofa, excused herself, and left. She never came back. Only one telephone call was ever made between the two afterwards: Hermann called to accuse her of exhibiting extremely bad behavior. She had only said, “Oh, well,” and that she had to go.

“No! You must explain to me. I have spent every week teaching you German, and then you leave. No word! No explanation! Nothing! This is completely unacceptable behavior. I demand an explanation.

I have worked all this time for something. I have been cheated. You have cheated me!”

“Oh, well,” was again all he received for his energetic scolding.

Then he began to speak to her in German, expressing all the intimacy that suddenly came to his lips, of how he had come to depend on her, look forward to the evenings, even of how she looked in the early evening light of summer, that she was a funny-looking, ravishing creature who ... She hung up on him. He never heard from her, and he never called her again. A few months later a notice appeared in the neighborhood paper, a notice he couldn't help but read with a mild thrill:

“Looking for a language teacher. You tell me the language and I'll learn it from you in weekly conversation sessions. Condition: teacher must be native speaker, not German. Call Becky, evenings ...”

