The Up-to-Date Sorcerer

Isaac Asimov

Professor Wellington Johns had a large and prominent nose, two sincere eyes and a distinct talent for making clothes appear too large for him. He said, “My dear children, love is a matter of chemistry.”

His dear children, who were really students of his, and not his children at all, were named Alexander Dexter and Alice Sanger. They looked perfectly full of chemicals as they sat there holding hands. Together, their age amounted to perhaps 45, evenly split between them, and Alexander said, fairly inevitably, “Vive la chemie!”

Professor Johns smiled reprovingly. “Or rather endocrinology. Hormones, after all, affect our emotions and it is not surprising that one should, specifically, stimulate that feeling we call love.”

“But that’s so unromantic,” murmured Alice. “I’m sure I don’t need any.” She looked up at Alexander with a yearning glance.

“My dear,” said the professor, “your blood stream was crawling with it at that moment, as the saying is, fell in love. Its secretion had been stimulated by’—for a moment he considered his words carefully, being a highly moral man—’by some environ-" mental factor involving your young man, and once the hormonal action had taken place, inertia carried you on. I could duplicate the effect easily.”

“Why, Professor,” said Alice, with gentle affection. “It would be delightful to have you try,” and she squeezed Alexander’s hand shyly.

“I do not mean,” said the professor, coughing to hide his embarrassment, “that I would personally attempt to reproduce -or, rather, to duplicate—the conditions that created the natural secretion of the hormone. I mean, instead, that I could inject the hormone itself by hypodermic or even by oral ingestion, since it is a steroid hormone. I have, you see,” and here he removed his glasses and polished them proudly, “isolated and purified the hormone.”

Alexander sat erect. “Professor! And you have said nothing?”

“I must know more about it first.”

“Do you mean to say,” said Alice, her lovely brown eyes shimmering with delight, “that you can make people feel the wonderful delight and heaven-surpassing tenderness of true love by means of a ... a pill?”

The professor said, “I can indeed duplicate the emotion to which you refer in those rather cloying terms.” ’Then why don’t you?”

Alexander raised a protesting hand. “Now, darling, your ardor leads you astray. Our own happiness and forthcoming nuptials make you forget certain facts of life. If a married person were, by mistake, to accept this hormone—”

Professor John said, with a trace of hauteur, “Let me explain right now that my hormone, or my amatogenic principle, as I call it—” (for he, in common with many practical scientists, enjoyed a proper score for the rarefied niceties of classical philology).

“Call it a love-philtre, Professor,” said Alice, with a melting sigh.

“My amatogenic cortical principle,” said Professor Johns, sternly, “has no effect on married individuals. The hormone cannot work if inhibited by other factors, and being married is certainly a factor that inhibits love.”

“Why, so I have heard,” said Alexander, gravely, “but I intend to disprove that callous belief in the case of my own Alice.” ’Alexander,” said Alice. “My love.”

The professor said, “I mean that marriage inhibits extramarital love.”

Alexander said, “Why, it has come to my ears that sometimes it does not.”

Alice said, shocked, “Alexander!”

“Only in rare instances, my dear, among those who have not gone to college.”

The professor said, “Marriage may not inhibit a certain paltry sexual attraction, or tendencies toward minor trifling, but true love, as Miss Sanger expressed the emotion, is something which cannot blossom when the memory of a stern wife and various unattractive children hobbles the subconscious.”

“Do you mean to say,” said Alexander, “that if you were to feed your love-philtre—beg pardon, your amatogenic principle—to a number of people indiscriminately, only the unmarried individuals would be affected?”

“That is right. I have experimented on certain animals which, though not going through the conscious marriage rite, do form monogamous attachments. Those with the attachments already formed are not affected.”

“Then, Professor, I have a perfectly splendid idea. Tomorrow night is the night of the Senior Dance here at college. There will be at least fifty couples present, mostly unmarried. Put your philtre in the punch.”

“What? Are you mad?”

But Alice had caught fire. "Why, it’s a heavenly idea, Professor. To think that all my friends will feel as I feel! Professor, you would be an angel from heaven.—But oh, Alexander, do you suppose the feelings might be a trifle uncontrolled? Some of our college chums are a little wild and if, in the heat of the discovery of love, they should, well, kiss—”

Professor Johns said, indignantly, “My dear Miss Sanger. You must not allow your imagination to become overheated. My hormone induces only those feelings which lead to marriage and not to the expression of anything that might be considered indecorous.”

“I’m sorry,” murmured Alice, in confusion. “I should remember, Professor, that you are the most highly moral man I know -excepting always dear Alexander—and that no scientific discovery of yours could possibly lead to immorality.”

She looked so woebegone that the professor forgave her at once.

“Then you’ll do it, Professor?” urged Alexander. “After all, assuming there will be a sudden urge for mass marriage afterwards, I can take care of that by having Nicholas Nitely, an old and valued friend of the family, present on some pretext. He is a Justice of the Peace and can easily arrange for such things as licenses and so on.”

“I could scarcely agree”, said the professor, obviously weakening, “to perform an experiment without the consent of those experimented upon. It would be unethical.”

“But you would be bringing only joy to them. You would be contributing to the moral atmosphere of the college. For surely, in the absence of overwhelming pressure toward marriage, it sometimes happens even jn college that the pressure of continuous propinquity breeds a certain danger of—of—”

“Yes, there is that,” said the professor. “Well, I shall try a dilute solution. After all, the results may advance scientific knowledge tremendously and, as you say, it will also advance morality.”

Alexander said, “And, of course, Alice and I will drink the punch, too.”

Alice said, “Oh, Alexander, surely such love as ours needs no artificial aid.”

“But it would not be artificial, my soul’s own. According to the professor, your love began as a result of just such a hormonal effect, induced, I admit, by more customary methods.”

Alice blushed rosily. “But then, my only love, why the need for the repetition?”

“To place us beyond all vicissitudes of Fate, my cherished one.”

“Surely, my adored, you don’t doubt my love.”

“No, my heart’s charmer, but—”

“But? Is it that you do not trust me, Alexander?”

“Of course I trust you, Alice, but—”

“But? Again but!” Alice rose, furious. “If you cannot trust me, sir, perhaps I had better leave—” And she did leave indeed, while the two men stared after her, stunned.

Professor Johns said, “I am afraid my hormone has, quite indirectly, been the occasion of spoiling a marriage rather than of causing one.”

Alexander swallowed miserably, but his pride upheld him. “She will come back,” he said, hollowly. “A love such as ours is not so easily broken.”

The Senior Dance was, of course, the event of the year. The young men shone and the young ladies glittered. The music lilted and the dancing feet touched the ground only at intervals. Joy was unrestrained.

Or, rather, it was unrestrained in most cases. Alexander Dexter stood in one corner, eyes hard, expression icily bleak. Straight and handsome he might be, but no young woman approached him. He was known to belong to Alice S anger, and under such circumstances, no college girl would dream of poaching. Yet where was Alice?

She had not come with Alexander and Alexander’s pride prevented him from searching for her. From under grim eyelids, he could only watch the circulating couples cautiously.

Professor Johns, in formal clothes that did not fit although made to measure, approached him. He said, “I will add my hormone to the punch shortly before the midnight toast. Is Mr. Nitejy still here?”

“I saw him a moment ago. In his capacity as chaperon he was busily engaged in making certain that the proper distance between dancing couples was maintained. Four fingers, I believe, at the point of closest approach. Mr. Nitely was most diligently making the necessary measurements.”

“Very good. Oh, I had neglected to ask: Is the punch alcoholic? Alcohol would affect the workings of the amatogenic principle adversely.”

Alexander, despite his sore heart, found spirit to deny the unintended slur upon his class. “Alcoholic, Professor? This punch is made along those principles firmly adhered to by all. young college students. It contains only the purest of fruit juices, refined sugar, and a certain quantity of lemon peel -enough to stimulate but not inebriate.”

“Good,” said the professor. “Now I have added to the hormone a sedative designed to put our experimental subjects to sleep for a short time while the hormone works. Once they awaken, the first individual each sees—that is, of course, of the opposite sex—will inspire that individual with a pure and noble ardor that can end only in marriage.”

Then, since it was nearly midnight, he made his way through the happy couples, all dancing at four-fingers distance, to the punch bowl.

Alexander, depressed nearly to tears, stepped out to the balcony. In doing so, he just missed Alice, who entered the ballroom from the balcony by another door.

“Midnight,” called out a happy voice. “Toast! Toast! Toast to the life ahead of us.”

They crowded about the punch bowl; the little glasses were passed round.

“To the life ahead of us,” they cried out and, with all the enthusiasm of young college students, downed the fiery mixture of pure fruit juices, sugar, and lemon peel, with—of course -the professor’s sedated amatogenic principle.

As the fumes rose to their brains, they slowly crumpled to the floor.

Alice stood there alone, still holding her drink, eyes wet with unshed tears. “Oh, Alexander, Alexander, though you doubt, yet are you my only love. You wish me to drink and I shall drink.” Then she, too, sank gracefully downward.

Nicholas Nitely had gone in search of Alexander, for whom his warm heart was concerned. He had seen him arrive without Alice and he could only assume that a lovers’ quarrel had taken place. Nor did he feel any dismay at leaving the party to its own devices. These were not wild youngsters, but college boys and girls of good family and gentle upbringing. They could be trusted to the full to observe the four-finger limit, as he well knew.

He found Alexander on the balcony, staring moodily out at a star-riddled sky.

“Alexander, my boy.” He put his hand on the young man’s shoulder. “This is not like you. To give way so to depression, Chut, my young friend, chut.”

Alexander’s head bowed at the sound of the good old man’s voice. “It is unmanly, I know, but I yearn for Alice. I have been cruel to her and I am justly treated now. And yet, Mr. Nitely, if you could but know—” He placed his clenched fist on his chest, next his heart. He could say no more.

Nitely said, sorrowfully, “Do you think because I am unmarried that I am unacquainted with the softer emotions? Be undeceived. Time was when I, too, knew love and heartbreak. But do not do as I did once and allow pride to prevent your reunion. Seek her out, my boy, seek her out and apologize. Do not allow yourself to become a solitary old bachelor such as I, myself.—But, tush, I am puling.”

Alexander’s back had straightened. “I will be guided by you, Mr. Nitely. I will seek her out.”

Then go on in. For shortly before I came out, I believe I saw her there.”

Alexander’s heart leaped. “Perhaps she searches for me even now. I will go—But, no. Go you first, Mr. Nitely, while I stay behind to recover myself. I would not have her see me a prey to womanish tears.”

“Of course, my boy.”

Nitely stopped at the door into the ballroom in astonishment. Had a universal catastrophe struck all low? Fifty couples were lying on the floor, some heaped together most indecorously.

But before he could make up his mind to see if the nearest were dead, to sound the fire alarm, to call the police, to anything, they were rousing and struggling to their feet.

Only one still remained. A lonely girl in white, one arm outstretched gracefully beneath her fair head. It was Alice Sanger and Nitely hastened to her, oblivious to the rising clamor about him.

He sank to his knees. “Miss Sanger. My dear Miss Sanger. Are you hurt?”

She opened her beautiful eyes slowly, and said, “Mr. Nitely! I never realized you were such a vision of loveliness.”

“I?” Nitely started back with horror, but she had now risen to her feet and there was a light in her eyes such as Nitely had not seen in a maiden’s eyes for thirty years—and then only weakly.

She said, “Mr. Nitely, surely you will not leave me?”

“No, no,” said Nitely, confused. “If you need me, I shall stay.”

“I need you. I need you with all my heart and soul. I need you as a thirsty flower needs the morning dew. I need you as Thisbe of old needed Pyramus.”

Nitely, still backing away, looked about hastily, to see if anyone could be hearing this unusual declaration, but no one seemed to be paying any attention. As nearly as he could make out, the air was filled with other declarations of similar sort, some being even more forceful and direct.

His back was up against a wall, and Alice approached him so closely as to break the four-finger rule to smithereens. She broke, in fact, the no-finger rule, and at the resulting mutual pressure, a certain indefinable something seemed to thud away within Nitely.

“Miss Sanger. Please.”

“Miss Sanger? Am I Miss Sanger to you?” exclaimed Alice, passionately. “Mr. Nitely! Nicholas! Make me your Alice, your own. Marry me. Marry me!”

All around there was the cry of ’Marry me. Marry me!” and young men and women crowded around Nitely, for they knew well that he was a Justice of the Peace. They cried out, “Marry us, Mr Nitely. Marry us!”

He could only cry in return, “I must get you all licenses.”

They parted to let him leave on that errand of mercy. Only Alice followed him.

Nitely met Alexander at the door of the balcony and turned him back toward the open and fresh air. Professor Johns came at that moment to join them all.

Nitely said, “Alexander. Professor Johns. The most extraordinary thing has occurred—”

“Yes,” said the professor, his mild face beaming with joy. “The experiment has been a success. The principle is far more effective on the human being, in fact, than on any of my experimental animals.” Noting Nitely’s confusion, he explained what had occurred in brief sentences.

Nitely listened and muttered, “Strange, strange. There is a certain elusive familiarity about this.” He pressed his forehead with the knuckles of both hands, but it did not help.

Alexander approached Alice gently, yearning to clasp her to his strong bosom, yet knowing that no gently nurtured girl could consent to such an expression of emotion from one who had not yet been forgiven.

He said, “Alice, my lost love, if in your heart you could find—”

But she shrank from him, avoiding his arms though they were outstretched only in supplication. She said, “Alexander, I drank the punch. It was your wish.”

“You needn’t have. I was wrong, wrong.”

“But I did, and oh, Alexander, I can never be yours.”

“Never be mine? But what does this mean?” And Alice, seizing Nitely’s arm, clutched it avidly. “My soul is intertwined indissolubly with that of Mr. Nitely, of Nicholas, I mean. My passion for him—that is, my passion for marriage with him—cannot be withstood. It racks my being.”

“You are false?” cried Alexander, unbelieving.

“You are cruel to say "false",” said Alice, sobbing. “I cannot help it.”

“No, indeed,” said Professor Johns, who had been listening to this in the greatest consternation, after having made his explanation to Nitely. “She could scarcely help it. It is simply an endocrinological manifestation.”

“Indeed that is so,” said Nitely, who was struggling with en-docrinological manifestations of his own. “There, there, my—my dear.” He patted Alice’s head in a most fatherly way and when she held her enticing face up toward his, swooningly, he considered whether it might not be a fatherly thing—nay, even a neighborly thing—to press those lips with his own, in pure fashion.

But Alexander, out of his heart’s despair, cried, “You are false, false—false as Cressid,” and rushed from the room.

And Nitely would have gone after him, but that Alice had seized him about the neck and bestowed upon his slowly melting lips a kiss that was not daughterly in the least.

It was not even neighborly.

They arrived at Nitely’s small bachelor cottage with its chaste sign of justice of the peace in Old English letters, its air of melancholy peace, its neat serenity, its small stove on which the small kettle was quickly placed by Nitely’s left hand (his right arm being firmly in the clutch of Alice, who, with a shrewdness beyond her years, chose that as one sure method of rendering impossible a sudden bolt through the door on his part).

Nitely’s study could be seen through the open door of the dining room, its walls lined with gentle books of scholarship and joy.

Again Nitely’s hand (his left hand) went to his brow. “My dear,” he said to Alice, “it is amazing the way—if you would release your hold the merest trifle, my child, so that circulation might be restored—the way in which I persist in imagining that all this has taken place before.”

“Surely never before, my dear Nicholas,” said Alice, bending her fair head upon his shoulder, and smiling at him with a shy tenderness that made her beauty as bewitching as moonlight upon still waters, “could there have been so wonderful a modern-day magician as our wise Professor Johns, so up-to-date a sorcerer.”

“So up-to-date-’ Nitely had started so violently as to lift the fair Alice a full inch from the floor. “Why, surely that must be it. Dickens take me, if that’s not it.” (For on rare occasions, and under the stress of overpowering emotions, Nitely used strong language.)

“Nicholas. What is it? You frighten me, my cherubic one.”

But Nitely walked rapidly into his study, and she was forced to run with him. His face was white, his lips firm, as he reached for a volume from the shelves and reverently blew the dust from it.

“Ah,” he said with contrition, “how I have neglected the innocent joys of my younger days. My child, in view of this continuing incapacity of my right arm, would you be so kind as to turn the pages until I tell you to stop?”

Together they managed, in such a tableau of preconnubial bliss as is rarely seen, he holding the book with his left hand, she turning the pages slowly with her right.

“I am right!” Nitely said with sudden force. “Professor Johns, my dear fellow, do come here. This is the most amazing coincidence—a frightening example of the mysterious unfelt power that must sport with us on occasion for some hidden purpose.”

Professor Johns, who had prepared his own tea and was sipping it patiently, as befitted a discreet gentleman of intellectual habit in the presence of two ardent lovers who had suddenly retired to the next room, called out, “Surely you do not wish my presence?”

“But I do, sir. I would fain consult one of your scientific attainments.”

“But you are in a position—”

Alice screamed, faintly, “Professor!”

“A thousand pardons, my dear,” said Professor Johns, entering. “My cobwebby old mind is filled with ridiculous fancies. It is long since I—” and he pulled mightily at his tea (which he had made strong) and was himself again at once.

“Professor,” said Nitely. “This dear child referred to you as an up-to-date sorcerer and that turned my mind instantly to Gilbert and Sullivan’s The Sorcerer.”

“What,” asked Professor Johns, mildly, “are Gilbert and Sullivan?”

Nitely cast a devout glance upward, as though with the intention of gauging the direction of the inevitable thunderbolt and dodging. He said in a hoarse whisper, “Sir William Schwenck Gilbert and Sir Arthur Sullivan wrote, respectively, the words and music of the greatest musical comedies the world has ever seen. One of these is entitled The Sorcerer. In it, too, a philtre was used: a highly moral one which did not affect married people, but which did manage to deflect the young heroine away from her handsome young lover and into the arms of an elderly man.”

“And,” Asked Professor Johns, “were matters allowed to remain so?”

“Well, no.—Really, my dear, the movements of your fingers in the region of the nape of my neck, while giving rise to undeniably pleasurable sensations, do rather distract me.—There is a reunion of the young lovers, Professor.”

“Ah,” said Professor Johns. “Then in view of the close resemblance of the fictional plot to real life, perhaps the solution in the play will help point the way to the reunion of Alice and Alexander. At least, I presume you do not wish to go through life with one arm permanently useless.”

Alice said, “I have no wish to be reunited. I want only my own Nicholas.”

“There is something”, said Nitely, “to be said for that refreshing point of view, but tush—youth must be served. There is a solution in the play, Professor Johns, and it is for that reason that I most particularly wanted to talk to you.” He smiled with a gentle benevolence. “In the play, the effects of the potion were completely neutralized by the actions of the gentleman who administered the potion in the first place: the gentleman, in other words, analogous to yourself.”

“And those actions were?”

“Suicide! Simply that! In some manner unexplained by the authors, the effect of this suicide was to break the sp—”

But by now Professor Johns had recovered his equilibrium and said in the most sepulchrally forceful tone that could be imagined, “My dear sir, may I state instantly that, despite my affection for the young persons involved in this sad dilemma, I cannot under any circumstances consent to self-immolation. Such a procedure might be extremely efficacious in connection with love potions of ordinary vintage, but my amatogenic principle, I assure you, would be completely unaffected by my death.”

Nitely sighed. “I feared that. As a matter of fact, between ourselves, it was a very poor ending for the play, perhaps the poorest in the canon,” and he looked up briefly in mute apology to the spirit of William S. Gilbert. “It was pulled out of a hat. It had not been properly foreshadowed earlier in the play. It punished an individual who did not deserve the punishment. In short, it was, alas, completely unworthy of Gilbert’s powerful genius.”

Professor Johns said, “Perhaps it was not Gilbert. Perhaps some bungler had interfered and botched the job.”

“There is no record of that.”

But Professor Johns, his scientific mind keenly aroused by an unsolved puzzle, said at once, "We can test this. Let us study the mind of this—this Gilbert. He wrote other plays, did he?”

“Fourteen, in collaboration with Sullivan.”

“Were there endings that resolved analogous situations in ways which were more appropriate?”

Nitely nodded, “One, certainly. There was Ruddigore.”

“Who was he?”

“Ruddigore is a place. The main character is revealed as the true bad baronet of Ruddigore and is, of course, under a curse.”

To be sure,” muttered Professor Johns, who realized that such an eventuality frequently befell bad baronets and was even inclined to think it served them right.

Nitely said, “The curse compelled him to commit one crime or more each day. Were one day to pass without a crime, he would inevitably die in agonizing torture.”

“How horrible,” murmured the soft-hearted Alice.

“Naturally,” said Nitely, “no one can think up a crime each day, so our hero was forced to use his ingenuity to circumvent the curse.”

“How?”

“He reasoned thus: If he deliberately refused to commit a crime, he was courting death by his own act. In other words, he was attempting suicide, and attempting suicide is, of course a crime—and so he fulfills the conditions of the curse.”

“I see. I see,” said Professor Johns. “Gilbert obviously believes in solving matters by carrying them forward to their logical conclusions.” He closed his eyes, and his noble brow clearly bulged with the numerous intense thought waves it contained.

He opened them. “Nitely, old chap, when was The Sorcerer first produced?”

“In eighteen hundred and seventy-seven.”

“Then that is it, my dear fellow. In eighteen seventy-seven, we were faced with the Victorian age. The institution of marriage was not to be made sport of on the stage. It could not be made a comic matter for the sake of the plot. Marriage was holy, spiritual, a sacrament—”

“Enough”, said Nitely, “of this apostrophe. What is in your mind?”

“Marriage. Marry the girl, Nitely. Have all your couples marry, and that at once. I’m sure that was Gilbert’s original intention.”

“But that”, said Nitely, who was strangely attracted by the notion, “is precisely what we are trying to avoid.”

“I am not,” said Alice, stoutly (though she was not stout, but, on the contrary, enchantingly lithe and slender).

Professor Johns said, “Don’t you see? Once each couple is married, the amatogenic principle—which does not affect married people—loses its power over them. Those who would have been in love without the aid of the principle remain in love; those who would not are no longer in love—and consequently apply for an annulment.”

“Good heaveris,” said Nitely. “How admirably simple. Of course! Gilbert must have intended that until a shocked producer or theater manager—a bungler, as you say—forced the change.”

“And did it work?” I asked. “After all, you said quite distinctly that the professor had said its effect on married couples was only to inhibit extra-marital re—

“It worked,” said Nitely, ignoring my comment. A tear trembled on his eyelid, but whether it was induced by memories or by the fact that he was on his fourth gin and tonic, I could not tell.

“It worked,” he said. “Alice and I were married, and our marriage was almost instantly annulled by mutual consent on the grounds of the use of undue pressure. And yet, because of the incessant chaperoning to which we were subjected, the incidence of undue pressure between ourselves was, unfortunately, virtually nil.” He sighed again. “At any rate, Alice and Alexander were married soon after and she is now, I understand, as a result of various concomitant events, expecting a child.”

He withdrew his eyes from the deep recesses of what was left of his drink and gasped with sudden alarm. “Dear me! She again.”

I looked up, startled. A vision in pastel blue was in the doorway. Imagine, if you will, a charming face made for kissing; a lovely body made for loving.

She called. “Nicholas! Wait!”

“Is that Alice?” I asked.

“No, No. This is someone else entirely: a completely different story.—But I must not remain here.”

He rose and, with an agility remarkable in one so advanced in years and weight, made his way through a window. Thefeminine vision of desirability, with an agility only slightly less remarkable, followed.

I shook my head in pity and sympathy. Obviously, the poor man was continually plagued by these wondrous things of beauty who, for one reason or another, were enamored of him. At the thought of this horrible fate, I downed my own drink at a gulp and considered the odd fact that no such difficulties had ever troubled me.

And at that thought, strange to tell, I ordered another drink savagely, and a scatological exclamation rose, unbidden, to my lips.