

# Misogynist

by JAMES E. GUNN

*A woman who sees no humor in this story is—hm, would she be likely to read it at all?*

Illustrated by KARL ROGERS

HARRY is a wit. Someone has defined a wit as a person who can tell a funny story without cracking a smile. That's Harry.

"You know," Steve said at the office one day, "I'll bet Harry will walk right up to the flaming gates of Hell, keeping the Devil in stitches all the time, and never change expression."

That's the kind of fellow Harry is. A great guy to have around the office. Makes you laugh just to see him, thinking about the last story he told. Smart, too. Keeps at a thing, digging away, piling up facts and stuff until you finally see something straight for the first time. Everybody says he's going places.

But the kind of story Harry likes—he likes them long. They start kind of slow, you know, and sort of build up with a tickle here and a tickle there until each new touch makes you helpless, you're so weak with laughter. The kind of story you take home to your wife and you get part way through, laughing like a fool, and you notice she's just sitting there, sort of patient and martyred, thinking maybe about tomorrow's dinner or the dress sale downtown, and you stop laughing and sigh and say, "It must be the way he tells it" or "Nobody can tell stories like Harry."

But then women don't think Harry's funny.

Take the other night, for instance. Harry and I were sitting in his living room while the women—Lucille and Jane—were out in the kitchen, whipping up something after the last rubber, and Harry started this story. Only at first I didn't know it was a story.

"Did you ever stop to think," Harry said, "about what strange creatures women really are? The way they change, I mean, after you marry them. You know, they stop hanging on your words, they stop catering to your likes and dislikes, they stop laughing at your jokes."

I have a minor reputation as a humorist myself—oh, nothing in Harry's class, but ready with quip or pun, if you know what I mean. I came in with a laugh and said, "So the honeymoon is over," Harry and Lucille being married only a month or so.

"Yes," said Harry seriously. "Yes, I guess you could say that. The honeymoon is over."

"Tough," I said, feeling sorry for the guy. "The girl you marry and the woman you're married to are two different people."

"Oh, no," Harry disagreed, shaking his head. "They're not. That's just the point."

"The point?" I asked, getting an inkling that Harry's thoughtful face hid a purpose not entirely serious. "You mean there is a point?"

"Of course. It's not just a matter of superficial differences, you see. It's something fundamental. Women think differently, their methods are different, their goals are different. So different, in fact, that they are entirely incomprehensible."

"I gave up trying to understand them a long time ago."

"That's where we make our mistake," Harry said soberly. "We accept when we should try to understand. We must understand why. As the Scotch say: 'All are good lasses, but whe come the ill wives?'"

"Why?" I wanted to know, a little puzzled. "They're built differently, and not just outside. Glands, bearing children — all kinds of differences."

"That's their excuse," said Harry, sneering, "and it's not good enough. They should do best what their differences best fit them for. But their greatest career is marriage—and their greatest failure. A man to them is only the necessary evil they must have before they can get the other things they want."

"Like the black widow spider and her mate?" I suggested. "In a way. And yet not entirely. *The*

*spiders, at least, are of the same species."*

I nodded over that for a moment before it soaked in. "And men and women aren't?" I practically yelled.

"Sh!" he warned, and glanced nervously at the kitchen door.

THEN was when I began to think Harry should have been in the movies. And yet I had to admire the guy, making a joke out of what is—every husband can tell you—one of the greatest and most secret tragedies of life, greater even because no one can talk about it. No one but Harry.

My chuckle must have been the right response, because he nodded, relaxed, and stopped glancing at the door out of the corner of his eye. Or maybe that was after Lucille peeked around the corner and said, "Harry off on one of his stories again? Tell us when he's through, so we can bring in the refreshments."

She was pretty light about it and you could tell it was a running joke and I couldn't help thinking what a lucky guy Harry was—if a fellow has to get married, that is, and most of us do.

"The alien race," Harry whispered and leaned back.

It was a good line and I laughed; there wasn't anything forced about it, either.

"What better way," he continued, "to conquer a race than to breed it out of existence? The Chinese learned that a long time ago. Conqueror after conqueror took the country and each one was passively accepted, allowed to intermarry . . . and eventually was absorbed. Only this case is the reverse. Conquest by marriage might be a good term for it. Breed in the conqueror, breed out the slave. Breed in the alien, breed out the human."

I nodded appreciatively. "Makes sense."

"How did it all start?" asked Harry. "And when? If I knew those answers, I'd know the whole thing. All I've got is a theory. An alien race of women landed on Earth—when man was still a cave-dwelling animal, maybe, or it could even have been in historic times—and my guess is they were dropped here by their men. Jettisoned. Dumped. Why? To get rid of them, obviously."

"But what did their men do then?" I had to ask, feeding him the next point.

"How do I know?" he replied irritably. "They were aliens, remember. Maybe they had some solution, some procreative substitute for women. Maybe these women were just the worst of the lot and the remaining ones were better. Maybe the men didn't give a damn and preferred racial suicide to surrender."

He angrily shoved the coffee table aside, grumbling something about women's ideas of furnishing a home, and pulled his chair closer. "Sure, surrender. They couldn't exterminate the men, could they? Who has the weapons, the military knowledge? Besides, women don't think like that. Their minds work in devious ways; they win what they want by guile and subtlety. That's why they married into the human race."

I looked blink, which is always a good way to push him on.

"Well, look," he said earnestly, just as I figured he would, "how about the Amazons? Once a year, you know, they visited the Gargareans, a neighboring tribe; any resulting male children were put to death. That didn't work very long, of course. Their purpose and their very alienness were too obvious. And the matriarchies—too blatant, you see, might give the whole thing away. Besides, men are useful in ways that women aren't. Men are inventive, artistic, creative—and can be nagged or coaxed into doing what women want them to do."

I LIT a cigarette and looked for an ashtray to put the match. He shoved over some silly little object that would suffocate a cigarette the minute you laid it down. No grooves, either, of course.

"That's what women buy when they're on their own," he pointed out disgustedly. "Lights that they think look pretty and make you blind or put a crick in your back when you try to read. You get a house with a southern exposure so you'll have sunlight, and then they put up heavy drapes to keep the furniture from fading. That's not enough, so they dress the furniture in slipcovers that always get twisted and creased. They shed bobbypins like dandruff, hang stockings over towels to dry, never screw a cap on a bottle or jar, so it always falls and breaks when you pick it up by the top, 'straighten up the house,' as

they call it, by shoving every thing into drawers where you never can find what you want."

I dug an uncomfortable cushion out from behind me and threw it on another chair. "All of them?" I asked. "Are they all alike?"

"I've wondered about that," he admitted, frowning. "There must be some human women left. One hears about happy marriages, although that might just be female propaganda. The women who like to read and use their minds, I'd say. Those who aren't so damned practical that they'd get up off their deathbeds to straighten a crooked picture. Women who can grasp abstract ideas. I don't think the—the aliens can." He looked up, brightening. "Those could be tests for alienness. That is," he added, frowning again, "if I'm right and there actually are any human women."

"How about those," I chipped in, "who prefer men and dislike other women?"

He thought that over seriously. "Most other women. It could be that they sense the aliens better than we can and don't want anything to do with them. Yes, that would—no, the aliens probably stick together, so that's out as a test."

"There are women who are satisfied with just a comfortable life," I suggested. "Those who don't drive their husbands to so much insurance that they're worth more dead than alive and then work them to death. That sounds pretty human to me."

Harry shrugged helplessly. "I guess so, but we'll never really know the answers. Or, if we do, it'll be too late."

"Too late?"

"Well, certainly," he said, tapping me on the knee. That's my ticklish spot and I was having enough trouble not laughing. "It's only in the last few generations that their plans have been coming closer to success. They have the vote, equal rights without giving up any of their privileges, and so forth. They're outliving men—and it's men, of course, who are extending the life span for them. They control about ninety per cent of the wealth. And there's something else men are doing for them." His voice sank to a significant whisper. "We're experimenting with fertilization by salt water, electrical stimulus, that sort of thing. Once we work it out properly . . ."

"We won't be heeded any more," I spluttered.

"That's right," he agreed gravely. "They'll just refuse to marry, use prenatal sex determination to produce nothing but girls, and then you'll have a single race—the female race. That's what I think they want."

"It figures," I answered, trying to crush out my cigarette in the ridiculous tray.

He nodded. "Don't think I haven't got more than vague suspicions. And it's been damned hard; knowledge of the female conspiracy has died out in the last fifty years or so. There's no longer even that subconscious knowledge that alerted the centuries of men before—that body of tradition and folklore which is a sort of inherited wisdom of a people. We've been taught to scorn all that as superstition. Most teachers are women, of course."

"Before our time, men knew?" I gave him his straight line.

"Oh, yes," Harry said. "Homer, Ovid, Swift—'A dead wife under the table is the best goods in a man's house,' said Swift. Antiphanes, Menander, Cato—there was a wise one. 'Suffer women once to arrive at an equality with you, and they will from that moment become your superiors.' Plautus, Clement of Alexandria, Tasso, Shakespeare, Dekker, Fletcher, Thomas Browne—the list is endless. The Bible : 'How can he be clean that is born of woman?'; 'All wickedness is but little to the wickedness of a woman' ; 'I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence'.. ."

For fifteen minutes he continued, covering the Greeks, the Romans, the Renaissance, and hadn't begun to run dry. Even for Harry this was digging deep for a story. *This is Harry's peak* I said to myself, a little awed

*He will never do anything better than this.*

THEN Harry began getting to modern times.

" 'Women are much more like each other than men,' said Lord Chesterfield. And Nietzsche 'Thou goest to women? Don't forget thy whip.' Then there was Strindberg, touched by a divine madness which

gave him visions of hidden truths. Shaw concealed his suspicions in laughter lest he be torn to pieces—"

"Ibsen?" I suggested, chuckling, dredging a name out of my school days that I vaguely remembered was somehow connected with the subject.

Harry spat, as if he had something vile in his mouth.

"Ibsen! That traitor! That blind fool! It was he who first dramatized the insidious propaganda which led, eventually, to the so-called emancipation of women, and was really the loosing of the chains which kept them from ravening unrestrained."

"Ravening," I chortled. "That's the word, all right—ravening!"

"You must go back to folk sayings to get real truth," Harry went on, quieting a little. "'A man is happy only two times in his life,' say the Yugoslavs, 'when he marries a wife and when he buries her.' Or the Rumanians: 'When a man takes a wife, he ceases to dread Hell.' Or the Spanish: 'Who hath a wife hath also an enemy.' 'Never believe a woman, not even a dead one,' advise the German peasants. The wisdom of the Chinese: 'Never trust a woman, even though she has given you ten sons.'"

He stopped, not as if he were near the end of his material, but to begin brooding.

"Did you ever look for something," he asked, "a collar button, say, or a particular pair of socks—and it isn't there and you tell your wife? Why is it that she can come and pick it up and it's been right under your nose all the time?"

"What else have they got to think about?"

"It makes you wonder," he insisted. "It makes you wonder if it really was there when you looked."

I agreed with him, and thought,

*Strange, the odd truths that Harry can link into something excruciatingly funny.*

"They have no respect for logic," said Harry. "No respect at all for the sanctity of a man's mind, for what his world is built upon. They argue as it suits them, waving away contradictions and inconsistencies as meaningless. How many of us have our Xanthippes, bent on dragging us down from our contemplation of divine truth to the destructive turmoil of daily strife? It's maddening, maddening!"

A thought struck me. So far, Harry had a number of strings, amusing in themselves, but lacking the climax that would wind them all up into a neat ball of laughter.

"What would they do," I asked, smiling, "if they discovered that someone knew their secret? They couldn't let it get around, could they?"

Harry smiled in return. For one unwary second, I thought he was slipping, giving the joke away.

"There," said Harry, "you have hit upon the crux. If my surmises are true, why has no one else discovered it? And the answer is—they have!"

"They have?" I repeated, a little surprised.

"Oh, yes," Harry answered, nodding. "And it provides the clincher. The women would have to do away with them, of course. Silence them. And it would have to show up somewhere—if one knew where to look."

"Yes?" I prompted, breathlessly.

"Why," he said, pointing a finger at me, "are there more men in asylums than women?"

"You mean—?"

He nodded.

I collapsed, hysterical. I choked with laughter. It was only with difficulty that I was able to speak when the women came in a moment later with their bowls and potato chips and glasses of beer.

"Hi, alien," I spluttered at Jane.

And I laughed some more, especially when I looked at Harry and saw the stricken face he was putting on, horrified, terribly frightened, sort of all sunk in on himself—better, much better, than I've seen a professional actor do it on the screen.

Finally the look on the women's faces brought me around—the bored look—and I tried to share the joke. Harry was laughing, too, kind of weakly—surprising, because he always is sort of bland and mildly

curious when one of his stories gets everybody writhing.

So I started telling it and got part way through and—well, you know the way it ends. I looked at Harry for help, but he wasn't giving any, and I kind of died away slowly.

"It must be the way he tells it," I sighed. "Nobody can tell stories like Harry."

You see what I mean. Women don't think Harry's funny.

The evening turned out all right, though. A little flat at the end, the way evenings usually are.

As we were going out, I heard Lucille say, kind of sharp, "Harry, there's something wrong with the hot water heater. You've been promising to look at it for days, and you've just got to do something about it tonight because I'm going to be washing tomorrow," and I heard Harry answer, "Yes, dear," mild and obedient, and I thought, *The guy's got to blow off steam somewhere*, and figured that I'd be hearing the story again at the office.

Which goes to show how wrong a man can be.

NEXT morning, Lucille called up and said Harry was sick—a stroke or a heart attack or something—and couldn't come to work. I called there a couple of times, but Lucille told me he was too sick to see anybody. I knew Harry was really sick because Lucille had Dr. Clarke, that woman doctor, and Harry's said he wouldn't have her treat his sick dog if he wanted the dog to get well. So I knew Harry was too sick to care.

It's funny how quick a fellow can go, and I got to thinking what a shame it was that Harry's finest effort, the climax of his wit, so to speak, should go with him, and how it's too bad that great vocal art should vanish without leaving a trace.

So I began trying to remember—and I couldn't remember very good, particularly the quotations—so I did a little research of my own, just to be able to give a sample. I ran across a couple Harry missed.

One of them everybody knows. The one of Kipling's that begins, "The female of the species . . ." The other one I worked up by myself, just thinking. *Why*, I asked myself one day, *are there more widows than widowers?* Of course, I couldn't think of an answer.

It's a shame about Harry. A great guy like that, a humorist who never was given the chance to share his gift with the world—if you ask me, funnier than anybody on radio or TV or the stage; anywhere, for that matter—and here he is getting set to kick off. The least I can do is reconstruct this biggest gag he ever put together as a kind of monument to him.

Well, it's finished. I'll show it to the boys in the office tomorrow. They'll get a real kick out of it. No sense showing it to the girls, even Jane—like I said, women never thought Harry was funny.

Something else he left out, but probably only because he didn't have enough time to develop the gag the way he usually does. What kind of planet did the aliens come from? It must have a lot of carbon dioxide. Ever notice how women always complain when you open a window; It must be a hot world, too they're cold all the time, especially their feet, which they like to put against their husband's legs, making the poor guy practically leap out of bed. I'm an expert on that—Jane's toes would chill any highball. But their world can't be that hot, because women can trot around in the coldest weather with practically nothing underneath their coats. And how about those open-toe shoes?

It doesn't add up at all. I suppose Harry would shrug it off as another proof of their alienness. Possibly he'd say it was just *outside* that women were warm; it's *in the house* that they're cold.

Well, there you are—Jane is calling me to come down to the 1 cellar and fix the furnace. There isn't a thing wrong with it. I'm sweating, as a matter of fact. But if I don't go down and monkey around with the grate and draft, I'll never hear the end of it. And I'd better go just to save the furnace; Jane's banging it with a poker, yelling up to me that she'll fix it if I don't.

Jane with a poker; there's a laugh for you. She can't even wind a clock without breaking the mainspring.

—JAMES E. GUNN