

ERNA VITEK

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Erna Vitek by Alfred Kreymborg

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BY

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1914



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I

Three young men, the best of friends, a painter, Bainbridge Breen, a writer, Eric Nielsen, and a composer, John Carstairs, were arguing that three-faced conundrum, morals. Quite an accident had provoked them to it: a waitress, Erna Vitek. From picking at her they had launched into axiomizing, only to come back to her. Her morals were the vital topic of the evening. Carstairs' studio provided the *mise en scène*.

"Well, we've hit a conclusion at last," said Breen with an air of comfortable finality. "Carstairs calls her moral, I say she's unmoral, and Nielsen that she may be moral, unmoral or even both."

"Yes!"

"Now, we've all conceded that Erna's not immoral—at least she doesn't lead a life inconsistent with morality?"

"Yes!"

"Very well then," Breen concluded contentedly. "Now let me make a proposition."

"What kind of a proposition?" Nielson quizzed

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in droll tones and looked at Carstairs, who was frowning.

"There's very little to it. I can dish it out in a few words. It's simply this: that we put Erna to the test."

"What do you mean?" was Carstairs' immediate challenge.

"Don't worry!" Breen responded blandly. "I'm not going to injure the girl."

"Well, what did you mean—"

"Merely this," the painter interrupted quietly. "I don't believe that any of us know her very well. She's only been working at Landsmann's a few months. Of course, Carstairs, you've taken her out on one or two occasions, so you've had an opportunity of studying her at closer range."

"Not of studying her!"

"You don't study her, certainly. You—er—what would you call it, Nielsen?"

"Why, John has been burned a little by the divine flame."

Carstairs blushed angrily. "If you fellows intend to be personal—"

"Never mind, John," Nielsen cut in. "You must allow us the occasional escape of some of our surplus wind. Now, let's drop these bravado poses and get down to business. I want the rest of the

proposition. We know that we're to put Erna to the test. Now, Breen, tell us how."

"There's nothing to explain. I said, put her to the test. Let each one, in his own way and for himself, perhaps, pay her attentions—I don't mean, make love to her—but simply, well, let him take her to the theatre or to supper some evening—she's free nights—and find out how close he can get to her—I don't mean seduction—but that he penetrate her character. Let each, in his own way, learn for himself, and later we'll compare notes and decide whether the respected lady has the moral or the unmoral tendency or even whether she might develop an—er—"

"See here, Breen!" Carstairs exploded.

"Oh, I'd forgotten that we agreed to throw that out," the painter apologized. "You see, I couldn't help thinking of that little affair with the young prize ring gladiator. What was his name? Allen!"

"But that was only a temptation," Carstairs fought back.

"Of course, only a temptation. But we have only her word that it never proved more."

The composer was ready with a hot retaliation when Nielsen interposed: "Now don't let's revert to that topic again, Breen. We can never know the whole story, and it only annoys John to refer to it.

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We know that Erna was down and out at the time—she'd just come to Landsmann's, was unsettled and that sort of thing—that much we know and that young Allen followed her there with an offer of cash. At least, she intimated something like that to John and said it was a case of being good or bad then and there. She chose being good. Even if she had chosen the other, the transaction might have been an unmoral and not an immoral one, for she was fond of Allen."

"But—"

"Now never mind, Breen! We've threshed that out often enough. Erna didn't flop—in fact, she showed Mr. Allen the door, hasn't seen him since and—"

"But we have only *her* word for all that stuff."

"All right. There's no other to contradict."

Breen, although silenced, was busy reflecting; Carstairs' ire was appeased. Nielsen concluded: "Let's take up Breen's proposition, John, each in his own way, whatever that may be, and then we'll compare notes some day and settle the business. After all, Erna's only a waitress; we needn't spend more than an ordinary amount of excitement over her."

"But she isn't a waitress. I tell you, she's a woman."

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"All right, woman let her be," Nielsen conceded gracefully. "Now, we don't want to sit here throwing words and phrases around all evening. We've been at it too long as it is. Why not put the matter to a vote and then drop it?"

"Yes."

"Breen, of course, votes that we put her to the test. Will you vote that way too?"

Carstairs gave in with an effort.

"Fine!" Nielsen applauded. "I'll vote 'yes' too."

"Motion proposed and carried that one Erna Vitek, employed as waitress at the Café Landsmann—"

"That'll do, Breen. We've had enough of your eloquence for one evening. You've given me a headache. Besides, I'm sick of this subject. Let's start something else."

Breen laughed his ever-ready, self-satisfied laugh, and Nielsen, and even Carstairs, joined him. Presently, the studio slept the sleep of the unperturbed. Carefully, Breen filled his pipe and began a deliberate puffing, while Nielsen introduced some new anecdote in his droll, even-tempered way. Carstairs, on the other hand, was meditating gloomily: in an hour or so he would be due at that damnable hole, the Phoenix Music Hall—where he earned his