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Love Is a Fallacy - Written by Max Shulman

Cool was I and logical...My brain was as powerful as a dynamo, as precise as a chemist's scales, as penetrating as a scalpel. And-think of it!-I was only eighteen.

It is not often that one young has such a giant intellect. Take, for example, Petey Burch, my roommate at the University of Minnesota. Same age, same background, but dumb as an ox. A nice enough fellow, you understand, but nothing upstairs...

One afternoon I found Peter lying on his bed with an expression of such distress on his face that I immediately diagnosed appendicitis.

"Don't move," I said.

"Don't take a laxative. I'll get a doctor."

"Raccoon," he mumbled thickly.

"Raccoon?" I said, pausing in my flight.

"I want a raccoon coat," he wailed.

I perceives that his trouble was not physical, but mental.

"Why do you want a raccoon coat?"...

"All the Big Men on Campus are wearing them. Where've you been?"

"In the library," I said, naming a place not frequented by Big Men on Campus.

He leaped from the bed and paced the room,

"I've got to have a raccoon coat," he said passionately.

"I've got to!"

"Peter, why? Look at it rationally. Raccoon coats are unsanitary. They shed. They smell bad. They weigh too much. They're unsightly. They-

"You don't understand," he interrupted impatiently.

"It's the thing to do... I'd give anything for a raccoon

coat. Anything!"

My brain, that precision instrument, slipped into high gear.

"Anything?" I asked, looking at him narrowly.

"Anything," he affirm in ringing tones.

I stroked my chin thoughtfully. It so happened that I knew where to get my hands on a coat. My father had had on one in his undergraduate days; it lay now in a trunk in the attic back home. It also happened that Petey had something I wanted. He didn't have it exactly, but at least he had first rights on it. I refer to his girl, Polly Espy....

I was a freshman in law school. In a few years I would be out in practice. I was well aware of the importance of the right kind of wife in furthering a lawyer's career. The successful lawyers I had observed were, almost without exception, married to beautiful, gracious, intelligent women. With one omission, Polly fitted these specifications perfectly. Beautiful she was...Gracious she was Intelligent she was not. In fact, she veered in the opposite direction. But I believed that under my guidance she would smarten up. At any rate, it was worth a try. It is, after all, easier to make a beautiful dumb girl smart than to make an ugly girl beautiful.

"Petey," I said, "are you in love with Polly Espy?"

"I think she's a keen kid," he replied, "but I don't know if you'd call it love. Why?"

"Do you," I asked, "have any kind of formal arrangement with her? I mean are you going steady or anything like that?"

"No. We see each other quite a bit, but we both have other dates. Why?"

"Is there," I asked, "any other man for whom she has a particular fondness?"

"Not that I know of. Why?"

I nodded with satisfaction. "In other words, if you were out of the picture, the field would be open. Is that

right?"

"I guess so. What are you getting at?"

"Nothing, nothing," I said innocently, and took my suitcase out of the closet.

"Where are you going?" asked Petey.

"Home for the weekend." I threw a few things into the bag.

"Look," I said to Petey when I got back Monday morning. I threw open the suitcase and revealed the huge, hairy, gamy object that my father had worn in his Stutz Bearcat in 1925.

"Holy Toledo!" said Petey reverently. He plunged his hands into the raccoon coat and then his face.

"Holy Toledo!" he repeated fifteen or twenty times.

"Would you like it?" I asked.

"Oh, yes!" he cried, clutching the greasy pelt to him. Then a canny look came into his eyes. "What so you want for it?"

"Your girl," I said, mincing no words...

He flung the coat from him. "Never," he said stoutly...

I sat down in a chair and pretended to read a book, but out of the corner of my eye I kept watching Petey. He was a torn man. First he looked at the coat with the expression of a waif at a bakery window. Then he turned away and set his jaw resolutely. Then he looked back at the coat, with even more longing in his face. Then he turned away, but with so much resolution this time. Back and forth his head swiveled, desire waxing, resolution waning. Finally he didn't turn away at all; he just stood and stared with mad lust at the coat.

"It isn't as though I was in love with Polly," he said thickly, "Or going steady or anything like that."...

"Try on the coat," said I.

He complied. The coat bunched high over his ears and dropped all the way down to his shoe tops. He looked like a mound of dead raccoons.

"Fits fine," he said happily. I rose from my chair.

"It is a deal?" I asked, extending my hand.

He swallowed.

"It's a deal," he said and shook my hand.

I had my first date with Polly the following evening. This was in the nature of a survey. I wanted to find out just how much work I had to do to get her mind up to the standard I required...

I went back to my room with a heavy heart. I had gravely underestimated the size of my task. This girl's lack of information was terrifying. Nor would it be enough merely to supply her with information. First she had to be taught to think. This loomed as a project of no small dimensions, and at first I was tempted to give her back to Petey. But then I got to thinking about her abundant physical charms and about the way she entered a room and the way she handled a knife and fork, and I decided to make an effort.

I went about it, as in all things, systematically. I gave her a course in logic...

"Polly," I said to her when I picked her up on our next date, "tonight we are going over to the Knoll and talk,"...

We went to the Knoll, the campus trysting place, and we sat down under an old oak, and she looked at me expectantly.

"What are we going to talk about?" she asked.

"Logic."

She thought this over for a minute and decided she liked it.

"Magnif." she said.

"Logic," I said, clearing my throat, "is the science of thinking. Before we can think correctly, we must first learn to recognize the common fallacies of logic. These we

take up tonight."

"Wow-dow!" she cried, clapping her hands delightedly.

I winced, but went bravely on.

"First let us examine the fallacy called Dicto Simpliciter."

"By all means," she urged, batting her lashed eagerly.

"Dicto Sympliciter means an argument based on as unqualified generalization. For example: Exercise is good. Therefore everybody should exercise."

"I agree," Polly said earnestly, "I mean exercise is wonderful. I mean it builds the body and everything."

"Polly," I said gently, "the argument is a fallacy. EXERCISE IS GOOD is an unqualified generalization. For instance, if you have heart disease, exercise is bad, not good. Many people are ordered by their doctors NOT to exercise. You must QUALIFY the generalization. You must say exercise is USUALLY good FOR MOST PEOPLE. Otherwise you have committed a Dicto Simpliciter. Do you see?"

"No," she confessed. "But this is marvy. Do more! Do more!"

..."Next we take up a fallacy called Hasty Generalization. Listen carefully: You can speak French, I can't speak French, Petey Burch can't speak French. I must therefore conclude that nobody at the University of Minnesota can speak French."

"Really?" said Polly, amazed. "NOBODY?"

I hid my exasperation.

"Polly, it's a fallacy. The generalization is reached too hastily. There are too few instances to support such a conclusion."

"Know any more fallacies?" she asked breathlessly.

"This is more fun than dancing even."

I fought off a ware of despair. I was getting nowhere with

this girl, absolutely nowhere...

"Next comes Post Hoc. Listen to this: Let's not take Bill our picnic. Every time we take him out with us, it rains."

"I know somebody like that," she exclaimed.

"A girl back home- Eula Becker, her name is. It never fails. Every single time we take her on a picnic-

"Polly." I said sharply, "it's a fallacy. Eula Becker doesn't CAUSE the rain. She has no connection with the rain. You are guilty of Post Hoc if you blame Eula Becker."

"I'll never do that again." she promised contritely. "Are you mad at me?"

I sighed deeply.

"No. Polly. I'm not mad."

"Then tell me some more fallacies..."

I consulted my watch.

"I think we'd better call it a night. I'll take you home now and you go over all the things you've learned. We'll have another session tomorrow night."

I deposited her at the girl's dormitory, where she assured me that she had had a perfectly terrific evening, and I went glumly to my room. Petey lay snoring in his bed, the raccoon coat huddled like a great hair beast at his feet. For a moment I considered waking him and telling him that he could have his girl back. It seemed clear that my project was doomed to failure. The girl simply had a logic-proof head. But then I reconsidered. I had wasted one evening: I might as well waste another. Who knew? Maybe somewhere in the extinct crater of her mind, a few embers still smoldered...I decided to give it one more try.

Seated under the oak the next evening I said, "Our first fallacy tonight is called Ad Misericordiam."

She quivered with delight.

"Listen closely," I said. "A man applies for a job. When the boss asks him what his qualifications are, he replies

the he has a wife and six children at home, the wife is a helpless cripple, the children have nothing to eat, no clothes to wear, no shoes on their feet, there are no beds in the house, no coal in the cellar, and winter is coming."

A tear rolled down each of Polly's pink cheeks.

"Oh, this is awful, awful," she sobbed.

"Yes, awful," I agreed, "but it's no argument. The man never answered the boss's questions about his qualifications. Instead of he appealed to the boss's sympathy. He committed the fallacy of Ad Misericordiam. Do you understand?"...

I handed her a handkerchief and tried to keep from screaming while she wiped her eyes.

"Next," I said in a carefully controlled tone, "we will discuss False Analogy. Here is an example: students should be allowed to look at their textbooks during examinations. After all, surgeons have X-rays to guide them during an operation, lawyers have briefs to guide the during a trial, carpenters have blueprints to guide them when they are building a house. Why then, shouldn't students be allowed to look at their textbooks during an examination?"

"There now," she said enthusiastically, "is the most marvy idea I've heard in years."

"Polly," I said testily, "the argument is all wrong. Doctors, lawyers, and carpenters aren't taking a test to see how much they have learned, but students are. The situations are entirely different, and you can't make an analogy between them."

"I still think it's a good idea," said Polly.

"Nuts."

I muttered. Doggedly I pressed on.

"Next we'll try Hypothesis Contrary to Fact."

"Sounds yummy," was Polly's reaction.

"Listen: If Madame Curie had not happened to leave a

photographic plate in a drawer with a chunk of pitchblende, the world today would not know about radium."

"True, true," said Polly, nodding her head, "Did you see the movie? Oh, it just knocked me out..."

..."I would like to point out that the statement is a fallacy. Maybe Madame Curie would have discovered radium at some later dates. Maybe somebody else would have discovered it. Maybe any number of things would have happened. You can't start with a hypothesis that is not true and then draw any supportable conclusions from it."...

One more chance, I decided. But just one more. There is a limit to what flesh and blood can bear.

"The next fallacy is called Poisoning the Well."

"How cute!" she gurgled.

"Two men are having a debate. The first one gets up and says, 'My opponent is a notorious liar. You can't believe a word that he is going to say.'...Now, Polly, think. Think hard. What's wrong?"

I watched her closely as she knit her creamy brow in concentration. Suddenly, a glimmer of intelligence - the first I had seen - came into her eyes.

"It's not fair," she said with indignation. "It's not a bit fair. What chance has the second man got if the first man calls him a liar before he even begins talking?"

"Right!" I cried exultantly. "One hundred percent right. It's not fair. The first man has POISONED THE WELL before anybody could drink from it...Polly, I'm proud of you."

"Psaw," she murmured, blushing with pleasure.

"You see, my dear, these things aren't so hard. All you have to do is concentrate. Think - examine - evaluate. Come now, let's review everything we have learned."

"Fire away," she said with an airy wave of her hand.

Heartened by the knowledge that Polly was not altogether a cretin, I began a long, patient review of all I had told her. Over and over and over again I cited instances,

pointed out flaws, kept hammering away without let-up. It was like digging a tunnel. At first everything was work, sweat, and darkness. I had no idea when I would reach the light, or even IF I would.

But I persisted. I pounded and clawed and scrapped, and finally I was rewarded. I saw a chink of light. And then the chink got bigger and the sun came pouring in and all was bright. Five grueling nights this took, but it was worth it. I had made a logician out of Polly; I had taught her to think.

My job was done. She was worthy of me at last. She was a fit wife for me, a proper hostess for my many mansions, a suitable mother for my well-heeled children. It must not be thought that I was without love for this girl.

Quite the contrary...I determined to acquaint her with my feelings at our very next meeting. The time had come to change our relationship from academic to romantic.

Polly," I said when next we sat beneath our oak, "tonight we will not discuss fallacies."

"Aw, gee," she said, disappointed.

"My dear," I said, favoring her with a smile, "we have now spent five evenings together. We have gotten along, splendidly. It is clear that we are well matched."

"Hasty Generalization," said Polly brightly.

"I beg your pardon," said I.

"Hasty Generalization," she repeated.

"How can you say that we are well matched on the basis of only five dates?"

I chuckled with amusement. The dear child had learned her lessons well.

"My dear," I said, patting her hand in a tolerant manner, "five dates is plenty. After all, you don't have to eat a whole cake to know it's good."

"False Analogy," said Polly promptly. "I'm not a cake. I'm a girl."

I chuckled with somewhat less amusement. The dear child had learned her lesson perhaps too well. I decided to change

tactics. Obviously the best approach was a simple, strong, direct declaration of love. I paused for a moment while my massive brain chose the proper words. Then I began:

"Polly, I love you. You are the whole world to me, and the moon and the stars and the constellations of outer space. Please, my darling, say that you will go steady with me, for if you will not, life will be meaningless. I will languish. I will refuse my meals. I will wander the face of the earth, a shambling, hollow-eyed hulk."

There, I thought, folding my arms, that ought to do it.

"Ad Misericordiam," said Polly.

I ground my teeth...Frantically, I fought back the tide of panic surging through me. At all costs I had to keep cool.

"Well, Polly," I said, forcing a smile, "you certainly have learned your fallacies."

"You're darn right," she said with a vigorous nod.

"And who taught the to you, Polly?"

"You did."

"That's right. So you do owe me something, don't you, my dear? If I hadn't come along you never would have learned about fallacies."

"Hypothesis Contrary to Fact," she said instantly.

I dashed perspiration from my brow. "Polly," I croaked, "you mustn't take all these things so literally. I mean this is just classroom stuff. You know that the things you learn in school don't have anything to do with life."

"Dicto Simpliciter," she said, wagging her finger at me playfully.

That did it. I leaped to my feet, bellowing like a bull.

"Will you or will you not go steady with me?"

"I will not," she replied.

"Why not?" I demanded.

"Because this afternoon I promised Petey Burch that I would go steady with him. I reeled back, overcome with the infamy of it. After he promised, after he made a deal, after he shook my hand!"

"The rat" I shrieked, kicking up great chunks of turf.

"You can't go with him, Polly. He's a liar. He's a cheat. He's a rat."

"Poisoning the Well," said stop shouting. I think shouting must be a fallacy too."

With an immense effort of will, I modulated my voice.

"All right," I said. "You are a logician. Let's look at this thing logically. How could you choose Petey Burch over me? Look at me - a brilliant student., a tremendous intellectual, a man with an assured future. Look at Petey - a knothed, a jitterbug, a guy who'll ever know his next meal is coming from. Can you give me one logical reason why you should go steady with Petey Burch?"

"I certainly can," declared Polly. "He got a raccoon coat."

What Are the Logical Fallacies?

1) UNQUALIFICATION GENERALIZATION (or Dicto Simpliciter).

Note the following example.

All Americans are friendly.

Lawyers never tell the truth.

Women always love babies.

Beware of words like always, all, never, every: complex situations are simply not that black-and-white. Your generalizations will be more credible if you LIMIT them by using qualifiers such as sometimes, seem, in my experience, often, many, or perhaps.

2) HASTY GENERALIZATION. Related to the preceding, this is a conclusion drawn from too few samples.

An example follows:

That the students are smoking in the cafeteria leads me to

conclude that most college students smoke.

3) NAME CALLING (or Poisoning the Well or Ad Hominem, i.e., argument attacking the man rather than the issue).

Note the following example:

Senator X just divorced his wife. How can his proposal be any good?

4) APPEAL TO PITY (Ad Misericordiam).

For instance: We should reelect Senator X; after all, he has a crippled mother, a retarded son, and his wife just died.

5) AD POPULEM (appeal to the people, to what they want to hear or to what they fear).

For example:

We know we can count on you, the generous American. We don't want those people coming with their "red" ideas, do we?

6) BANDWAGON APPEAL.

Closely related to the above fallacy, it's the "everybody is doing it" argument. No one wants to be left out. If "everybody's doing it," then don't you want to "get on the bandwagon," right or wrong?

7) TESTIMONIAL (or association).

For example:

George Washington once made the same point as Senator X. It's the Christian thing to do, because, as Jesus says,...

8) HYPOTHESIS CONTRARY TO FACT.

For example:

The Pony Express stopped running in 1861. It must have been a failure. (The fact that the telegraph and the railroad made it obsolete and therefore unnecessary.)

9) FAULTY CAUSE AND EFFECT (confusing coincidental time

sequence with genuine causation, sometimes called POST HOC).

For example:

Everytime I forget my umbrella, it rains, therefore I cause the rain by leaving my umbrella at home, and I can guarantee a nice day by bringing my umbrella.

10) FALSE ANALOGY (or trying to PROVE a point by analogy).

For instance:

You shouldn't change in midstream; therefore you must reelect Senator X. (He isn't a horse, and the nation's business is not a river. It is no problem changing senators; in fact, if Senator S is doing a poor job, our "ride" will be easier with Senator Y "pulling" us!)

11) EITHER-OR (or the two-alternatives fallacy).

Examples include:

- Would you rather have a senator who is handsome and dumb or one who is ugly and intelligent? (One can be intelligent and hand some; one can be not-bad looking rather than ugly.

Notice that in "Love is a Fallacy" our brilliant student/teacher commits this same fallacy. Can you find the fallacy?)

- You are either FOR the law or against it! (And what if I am for PARTS of it or for it under certain circumstances but not all of them?)

12) BEGGING THE QUESTION (or circular argument).

This fallacy avoids proving the truth of the conclusion by ASSUMING the truth of it in advance.

For example:

In a democracy the people are free because democracies are free countries.



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