

EXCUSE ME!

RUPERT HUGHES

NOVELIZED FROM THE COMEDY OF THE SAME NAME. I I I

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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I.—Lieut. Harry Mallory is ordered to the Philippines. He and Marjorie Newton decide to elope, but wreck of tactical prevents their seeing minister on the way to the train.

CHAPTER II.—Transcontinental train is taking on passengers. Porter has a lively time with an Englishman and Ira Lathrop, a Yankee business man.

CHAPTER III.—The elopers have an exciting time getting to the train.

CHAPTER IV.—"Little Jimmie" Wellington, bound for Reno to get a divorce, boards train in muddled condition. Later Mrs. Jimmie appears.

CHAPTER V.—She is also bound for Reno with same object. Likewise Mrs. Sammy Whitcomb.

CHAPTER VI.—Latter blames Mrs. Jimmie for her marital troubles. Classmates of Mallory decorate bridal berth.

CHAPTER VII.—Rev. and Mrs. Temple start on a vacation. They decide to cut loose and Temple removes evidence of his calling.

CHAPTER VIII.—Marjorie decides to let Mallory proceed alone, but train starts while they are lost in farewell.

CHAPTER IX.—Passengers join Mallory's classmates in giving couple wedding bazing.

CHAPTER X.

Excess Baggage.

Never was a young soldier so stumped by a problem in tactics as Lieutenant Harry Mallory, safely aboard his train, and not daring to leave it, yet hopelessly unaware of how he was to dispose of his lovely but unlabelled baggage.

Hudson and Shaw had erected a white satin temple to Hymen in berth number one, had created such commotion, and departed in such confusion, that there had been no opportunity to proclaim that he and Marjorie were "not married—just friends."

And now the passengers had accepted them as that enormous fund of amusement to any train, a newly wedded pair. To explain the mistake would have been difficult, even among friends. But among strangers—well, perhaps a wiser and a colder brain than Harry Mallory's could have stood there and delivered a brief oration restoring truth to her pedestal. But Mallory was in no condition for such a stote-delivery.

He mopped his brow in agony, lost in a blizzard of bewilderment. He drifted back toward Marjorie, half to protect and half for companionship. He found Mrs. Temple cuddling her close and mothering her as if she were a baby instead of a bride.

"Did the poor child run away and get married?"

Marjorie's frantic "Boo-hoo-hoo" might have meant anything. Mrs. Temple took it for assent, and murmured with glowing reminiscence:

"Just the way Doctor Temple and I did."

She could not see the leaping flash of wild hope that lighted up Mallory's face. She only heard his voice across her shoulder:

"Doctor? Doctor Temple? Is your husband a reverend doctor?"

"A reverend doctor?" the little old lady repeated weakly.

"Yes—a preacher?"

The poor old congregation-weary soul was abruptly confronted with the ruin of all the delight in her little escapade with her pulp-it-fagged husband. If she had ever dreamed that the girl who was weeping in her arms was weeping from any other fright than the usual fright of young brides, fresh from the preacher's benediction, she would have cast every other consideration aside, and told the truth.

But her husband's last behest before he left her had been to keep their precious pretend-secret. She felt—just then—that a woman's first duty is to obey her husband. Besides, what business was it of this young husband's what her old husband's business was? Before she had fairly begun to debate her duty, almost automatically, with the instantaneous instinct of self-protection, her lips had uttered the denial:

"Oh—he's—just a—plain doctor. There he is now."

Mallory cast one miserable glance down the aisle at Dr. Temple coming back from the smoking room. As the old man paused to stare at the bridal berth, whose preparation he had not seen, he was just enough befuddled by his first cigar for thirty years to look a-trifle tipsy. The motion of the train and the rakish tilt of his unwonted crimson tie confirmed the suspicion and annihilated Mallory's new-born hope, that perhaps repentant fate had dropped a parson at their very feet.

He sank into the seat opposite Marjorie, who gave him one terrified glance, and burst into fresh sobs:

"Oh—oh—boo-hoo—I'm so unhappy—"

Perhaps Mrs. Temple was a little miffed at the couple that had led her astray and opened her own honeymoon with a wanton fib. In any case, the best consolation she could offer Marjorie was a perfunctory pat, and a

cynicism:

"There, there, dear! You don't know what real unhappiness is yet. Wait till you've been married a while."

And then she noted a startling lack of completeness in the bride's hand.

"Why—my dear!—where's your wedding ring?"

With what he considered great presence of mind, Mallory explained: "It—it slipped off—I—I picked it up. I have it here." And he took the little gold band from his waistcoat and tried to jam it on Marjorie's right thumb.

"Not on the thumb!" Mrs. Temple cried. "Don't you know?"

"You see, it's my first marriage."

"You poor boy—this finger!" And Mrs. Temple, raising Marjorie's limp hand, selected the proper digit, and held it forward, while Mallory pressed the fatal circlet home.

And then Mrs. Temple, having completed their installation as man and



THE WEDDING RING IS FOUND.

wife, utterly confounded their confusion by her final effort at comfort: "Well, my dears, I'll go back to my seat, and leave you alone with your dear husband."

"My dear what?" Marjorie mumbled inanely, and began to snifle again. Whereupon Mrs. Temple resigned her to Mallory, and consigned her to fate with a consoling platitude:

"Cheer up, my dear, you'll be all right in the morning."

Marjorie and Mallory's eyes met in one wild clash, and then both stared into the shades, and did not notice that the shades were down.

CHAPTER XI.

A Chance Encounter.

While Mrs. Temple was confiding to her husband that the agitated couple in the next seat had just come from a wedding-factory, and had got on while he was lost in tobacco land, the people in the seat on the other side of them were engaged in a little drama of their own.

Ira Lathrop, known to all who knew him as a woman-hating snapping-turtle, was so busily engaged trying to drag the farthest invading rice grains out of the back of his neck, that he was late in realizing his whereabouts. When he raised his head, he found that he had crowded into a seat with an uncomfortable looking woman, who crowded against the window with old-maidenly timidity.

He felt some apology to be necessary, and he snarled: "Disgusting things, these weddings!" After he heard this, it did not sound entirely felicitous, so he grudgingly ventured: "Excuse me—you married?"

She denied the soft impeachment so heartily that he softened a little: "You're a sensible woman. I guess you and I are the only sensible people on this train."

"It—seems—so," she giggled. It was the first time her spinsterhood had been taken as material for a compliment. Something in the girlish giggle and the strangely young smile that swept twenty years from her face and belied the silver lines in

her hair, seemed to catch the old bachelor's attention. He stared at her so fiercely that she looked about for a way to escape. Then a curiously anxious, almost a hungry, look softened his leonine fangs into a boyish eagerness, and his growl became a sort of gruff purr:

"Say, you look something like an old sweetheart—er—friend—of mine. Were you ever in Brattleboro, Vt.?"

A flush warmed her cheek, and a sense of home warmed her prim speech, as she confessed: "I came from there originally."

"So did I," said Ira Lathrop, leaning closer, and beaming like a big sun: "I don't suppose you remember Ira Lathrop?"

The old maid stared at the bachelor as if she were trying to see the boy she had known, through the mask that time had modeled on his face. And then she was a girl again, and her voice chimed as she cried:

"Why, Ira!—Mr. Lathrop!—is it you?"

She gave him her hand—both her hands, and he smothered them in one big paw and laid the other on for extra warmth, as he nodded his savage head and roared as gentle as a sucking dove:

"Well, well! Annie—Anne—Miss Gattie! What do you think of that?"

They gossiped across the chasm of years about people and things, and knew nothing of the excitement so close to them, saw nothing of Chicago slipping back into the distance, with its many lights shooting across the windows like hurled torches.

Suddenly a twinge of ancient jealousy shot through the man's heart, recurring to old emotions.

"So you're not married, Annie. Whatever became of that fellow who used to hang round you all the time?"

"Charlie Selby?" She blushed at the

name, and thrilled at the luxury of meeting jealousy. "Oh, he entered the church. He's a minister out in Ogden, Utah."

"I always knew he'd never amount to much," was Lathrop's epitaph on his old rival. Then he started with a new twinge: "You bound for Ogden, too?"

"Oh, no," she smiled, enraptured at the new sensation of making a man anxious, and understanding all in a flash the motives that make coquettes. Then she told him her destination. "I'm on my way to China."

"China!" he exclaimed. "So'm I!"

She stared at him with a new thought, and gasped: "Oh, Ira—are you a missionary, too?"

"Missionary? Hell, no!" he roared. "Excuse me—I'm an importer—Anne, I—"

But the sonorous swear reverberated in their ears like a smitten bell, and he blushed for it, but could not recall it.

CHAPTER XII.

The Needle in the Haystack.

The almost-married couple sat long in mutual terror and a common paralysis of ingenuity. Marjorie, for lack of anything better to do, was absently twisting Snoozeleum's ears, while he, that pocket abridgment of a dog, in a well meaning effort to divert her from her evident grief, made a great pretense of ferocity, growling and threatening to bite her fingers off. The new ring attracted his special jealousy. He was growing discouraged at the ill-success of his impersonation of a wolf, and detected at being so crassly ignored, when he suddenly became, in his turn, a center of interest.

Marjorie was awakened from her trance of inanition by the porter's voice. His plantation voice was ordinarily as thick and sweet as his own New Orleans sorghum, but now it had a bitterness that curdled the blood: "Excuse me, but how did you-all get that tealh dog in this tealh cah?"

"Snoozeleums is always with me," said Marjorie briskly, as if that set

him, and turned for confirmation to the dog himself, "aren't you, Snoozeleums?"

"Well," the porter drawled, trying to be gracious with his great power, "the rules don't 'low no live stock in the sleepin' cars, 'ceptin' humans."

Marjorie rewarded his condescension with a blunt: "Snoozeleums is more human than you are."

"I p'sume he is," the porter admitted, "but he can't make up berths. Anyway, the rules says dogs goes with the baggage."

Marjorie swept rules aside with a defiant: "I don't care. I won't be separated from my Snoozeleums."

She looked to Mallory for support, but he was too sorely troubled with greater anxieties to be capable of any action.

The porter tried persuasion: "You betta lemme take him, the conducta is wuss'n what I am. He th'owed a couple of dogs out the window trip befo' last."

"The brute!"

"Oh, yassum, he is a regulah brute. He j'ust loves to hear 'm splosh when they fight."

Noting the shiver that shook the girl, the porter offered a bit of consolation: "Better lemme have the pore little thing up in the baggage cah. He'll be in charge of a lovely baggage-smasher."

"Are you sure he's a nice man?"

"Oh, yassum, he's death on trunks, but he's a natural born angel to dogs."

"Well, if I must, I must," she sobbed. "Poor little Snoozeleums! Can he come back and see me tomorrow?"

Marjorie's tears were splashing on the puzzled dog, who nestled close, with a foreboding of disaster.

"I reckon p'haps you'd better visit him."

"Poor dear little Snoozeleums—good night, my little darling. Poor little child—it's the first night he's slept all by his 'ittle lonesome, and—"

The porter was growing desperate. He clapped his hands together impatiently and urged: "I think I hear that conducta comin'."

The ruse succeeded. Marjorie fairly forced the dog on him. "Quick—hide him—hurry!" she gasped, and sank on the seat completely crushed. "I'll be so lonesome without Snoozeleums."

Mallory felt called upon to remind her of his presence. "I—I'm here, Marjorie." She looked at him just once—at him, the source of all her troubles—buried her head in her arms, and resumed her grief. Mallory stared at her helplessly, then rose and bent over to whisper:

"I'm going to look through the train."

"Oh, don't leave me," she pleaded, clinging to him with a dependence that restored his respect.

"I must find a clergyman," he whispered. "I'll be back the minute I find one, and I'll bring him with me."

The porter thought he wanted the dog back, and quickened his pace 'till he reached the corridor, where Mallory overlooked him and asked, in an effort at casual indifference, if he had seen anything of a clergyman on board.

"Ain't seen nothin' that even looks like one," said the porter. Then he hastened ahead to the baggage car with the squirming Snoozeleums, while Mallory followed slowly, going from seat to seat and car to car, subjecting all the males to an inspection that rendered some of them indignant, others of them uneasy.

If dear old Doctor Temple could only have known what Mallory was hunting, he would have snatched off the mask, and thrown aside the secular scarlet tie at all costs. But poor Mallory, unable to recognize a clergyman so dyed-in-the-wool as Doctor Temple, sitting in the very next seat—how could he be expected to pick out another in the long and crowded train?

All clergymen look alike when they are in convention assembled, but sprinkled through a crowd they are not so easily distinguished.

In the sleeping car bound for Portland, Mallory picked one man as a clergyman. He had a lean, ascetic face, solemn eyes, and he was talking to his seat-mate in an oratorical manner. Mallory bent down and tapped the man's shoulder.

The effect was surprising. The man jumped as if he were stabbed, and turned a pale, frightened face on Mallory, who murmured:

"Excuse me, do you happen to be a

clergyman?"

A look of relief stole over the man's features, followed closely by a scowl of wounded vanity:

"No, damn you, I don't happen to be a parson. I have chosen to be—well, if you had watched the bill-boards in Chicago during our run, you would not need to ask who I am!"

Mallory mumbled an apology and hurried on, just overhearing his victim's sigh:

"Such is fame!"

He saw two or three other clerical persons in that car, but feared to touch their shoulders. One man in the last seat held him specially, and he hid in the turn of the corridor, in the hope of eavesdropping some clue. This man was bent and scholastic of appearance, and wore heavy spectacles and a heavy beard, which Mallory took for a guaranty that he was not another actor. And he was reading what appeared to be printer's proofs. Mallory felt certain that they were a volume of sermons. He lingered timorously in the environs for some time before the man spoke at all to the dreary-looking woman at his side. Then the stranger spoke. And this is what he said and read:

"I fancy this will make the bigots sit up and take notice, mother: 'If there ever was a person named Moses, it is certain, from the writings ascribed to him, that he disbelieved the Egyptian theory of a life after death, and combated it as a heathenish superstition. The Judaic idea of a future existence, was undoubtedly acquired from the Assyrians, during the captivity.'"

He doubtless read much more, but Mallory fled to the next car. There he found a man in a frock coat talking solemnly to another of equal solemnity. The seat next them was unoccupied, and Mallory dropped into it, perking his ears backward for news.

"Was you ever in Moline?" one voice asked.

"Was I?" the other muttered.

"Wasn't I run out of there by one of my audiences. I was givin' hypnotic demonstrations, and I had a run-in with one of my 'horses,' and he done me dirt. Right in the midgy of one of his cataleptic trances, he got down from the chairs where I had stretched him out and hollered: 'He's a bum faker, gents, and owes me two weeks' pay.' Thank Gawd, there was a back door openin' on a dark alley leadin' to the switch yard. I caught a caboose just as a freight train was pullin' out."

Mallory could hardly get strength to rise and continue his search. On his way forward he met the conductor, crossing a vestibule between cars. A happy thought occurred to Mallory. He said:

"Excuse me, but have you any preachers on board?"

"None so far."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"How can you tell?"

"Well, if a grown man offers me a half-fare ticket, I guess that's a pretty good sign, ain't it?"

Mallory guessed that it was, and turned back, hopeless and helpless.

CHAPTER XIII.

Hostilities Begin.

During Mallory's absence, Marjorie had met with a little adventure of her own. Ira Lathrop finished his re-encounter with Anne Gattie shortly after Mallory set out stalking clergymen. In the mingled confusion of finding his one romantic flame still glowing on a vestal altar, and of shocking her with an escape of profanity, he backed away from her presence, and sank into his own berth.

He realized that he was not alone. Somebody was alongside. He turned to find the great tear-spent eyes of Marjorie staring at him. He rose with a rudeness of his woman-hating wrath, and dashing up the aisle, found the porter just returning from the baggage car. He seized the black factotum and growled:

"Say, porter, there's a woman in my berth."

The porter chuckled, incredulous: "Woman in yo' berth?"

"Yes—get her out."

"Yassah," the porter nodded, and advanced on Marjorie with a gentle, "Excuse me, missus—yo' berth is numba one."

"I don't care," snapped Marjorie. "I won't take it."

"But this un belongs to that gentleman."

"He can have mine—ours—Mr. Mal-

lory's," cried Marjorie, pointing to the white-ribbed seat in the farther end of the car. Then she gripped the arms of the seat, as if dazing attention. The porter stared at her in helpless chagrin. Then he shrugged back and murmured: "I reckon you betta put her out."

Lathrop withered the coward with one contemptuous look, and strode down the aisle with a determined grimace. He took his ticket from his pocket as a clinching proof of his title, and thrust it out at Marjorie. She gave it one indifferent glance, and then her eyes and mouth puckered, as if she had munched a green persimmon, and a long low wail like a distant engine-whistle, stole from her lips. Ira Lathrop stared at her in blank wrath, dodged irresolutely, and roared:

"Agh, let her have it!"

The porter smiled triumphantly, and said: "She says you kin have her berth." He pointed at the bride and groom. Lathrop almost exploded at the idea.

Now he felt a hand on his shoulder, and turned to see Little Jimmie Wellington emerging from his berth with an enormous smile:

"Say, Pop, have you seen lovely rice-trap? Stuck around till she flops." But Lathrop flung away the smoking room. Little Jimmie turned to the jovial negro:

"Porter, porter."

"I'm right by you."

"What time d'you say we get to Reno?"

"Mawwin' of the fo'th day, sah."

"Well, call me just before we get in."

And he rolled in. His last words floated down the aisle and met Mrs. Little Jimmie Wellington just returning from the Women's Room, where she had sought penitence in more than one of her exquisite little cigars. The familiar voice, familiarly blubbery, smote her ear with amazement. She beckoned the porter to her anxiously: "Porter! Porter! Do you know the name of the man who just boarded in?"

"No'm," said the porter. "I reckon he's so broken up he ain't got any name left."

"It couldn't be," Mrs. Jimmie mused. "Things can be sometimes," said the porter.

"You may make up my berth now," said Mrs. Wellington, forgetting that Anne Gattie was still there. Mrs. Wellington hastened to apologize, and begged her to stay, but the spinster wanted to be far away from the disturbing atmosphere of divorce. She was dreaming already with her eyes open, and she sank into number six in a lotus-eater's reverie.

Mrs. Wellington gathered certain things together and took up her handbag, to return to the Women's Room, just as Mrs. Whitcomb came forth from the curtains of her own berth, where she had made certain preliminaries to disrobing, and put on a light, decidedly negligee negligee.

The two women collided in the aisle, whirled on one another, as women do when they jostle, recognized each other with wild stares of amazement, set their teeth, and made a simultaneous dash along the corridor shoulder wrestling with shoulder. They reached the door marked "Women" at the same instant, and neither would have dreamed of offering the other a courtesy, they squeezed through together in a Kib-kenny jumble.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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N. R. Goodale



"QUICK—HIDE HIM—HURRY!" SHE GASPED.