

# EXCUSE ME!

## RUPERT HUGHES

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

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### CHAPTER I.

**The Wreck of the Taxicab.**  
The young woman in the taxicab scuttling frantically down the dark street, clung to the arm of the young man alongside, as if she were terrified at the lawbreaking, neck-risking speed. But evidently some greater fear goaded her, for she gasped:

"Can't you go a little faster?"  
"Can't you go a little faster?" The young man alongside howled as he thrust his head and shoulders through the window in the door.

But the self-created taxi-gale swept his voice aft, and the taut chauffeur perked his ear in vain to catch the vanishing syllables.

"What's that?" he roared.

"Can't you go a little faster?"  
The indignant charioteer simply had to shoot one barbed glare of reproach into that passenger. He turned his head and growled:

"Say, do you want to lose me me license?"

For just one instant he turned his head. One instant was just enough. The unguarded taxicab seized the opportunity, bolted from the track, and flung, as it were, its arms drunkenly around a perfectly respectable lamppost attending strictly to its business on the curb. There ensued a condensed Fourth of July. Sparks flew, tires exploded, metals ripped, two wheels spun in air and one wheel, neatly severed at the axle, went reeling down the sidewalk half a block before it leaned against a tree and rested.

A dozen or more miracles coincided to save the passengers from injury. The young man found himself standing on the pavement with the unhinged door still around his neck. The young woman's arms were round his neck. Her head was on his shoulder. It had reposed there often enough, but never before in the street under a lamppost. The chauffeur found himself in the road, walking about on all fours, like a bewildered quadruped.

Evidently some overpowering need for speed possessed the young woman, for even now she did not scream, she did not faint, she did not murmur. "Where am I?" She simply said: "What time is it, honey?"

And the young man, not realizing how befuddled he really was, or how his hand trembled, fetched out his watch and held it under the glow of the lamppost, which was now bent over in a convenient but disreputable attitude.

"A quarter to ten, sweetheart. Plenty of time for the train."

"But the minister, honey! What about the minister?"

The consideration of this riddle was interrupted by a muffled hubbub of yelps, whimpers and canine hysterics. Immediately the young woman forgot ministers, collisions, train-schedules—everything. She showed her first sign of panic.

"Snoozeums! Get Snoozeums!"  
They groped about in the topsyturvy taxicab, rummaged among a jumble of suitcases, handbags, umbrellas and minor impediments, and dashed out a small dog-basket with an inverted dog inside. Snoozeums was ridiculous in any position, but as he slid tall foremost from the wicker basket, he resembled nothing so much as a heap of tangled yarn tumbling out of a work-basket. He was an indignant skeln, and had much to say before he consented to smuggle under his mistress' chin.

About this time the chauffeur came prowling into view. He was too deeply shocked to emit any language of the garage. He was too deeply shocked to achieve any comment more brilliant than:

"That mess don't look much like it ever was a taxicab, does it?"

The young man shrugged his shoulders, and stared up and down the long street for another. The young woman looked sorrowfully at the wreck, and queried:

"Do you think you can make it go?"

The chauffeur glanced her way, more in pity for her whole sex than in scorn for this one type, as he mumbled:

"Make it go? It'll take a steam winch a week to unwrap it from that lamppost."

The young man apologized.

"I oughtn't to have yelled at you."

He was evidently a very nice young man. Not to be outdone in courtesy, the chauffeur retorted:

"I hadn't ought to have turned me head."

The young woman thought, "What a nice chauffeur!" but she gasped: "Great heavens, you're hurt!"

"It's antlia but a scratch on me 'unk."

"Lend me a clean handkerchie, Harry."

The young man whipped out his reserve supply, and in a trice it was a handkerchief to the chauffeur's head. The chauffeur nodded that the young man was all right, and the young man...

man. But he could not settle on a way to say it. So he said nothing, and grinned sheepishly as he said it.

The young man named Harry was wondering how they were to proceed. He had already studied the region with dismay, when the girl resolved:

"We'll have to take another taxi, Harry."

"Yes, Marjorie, but we can't take it till we get it."

"You might wait here all night without ketchin' a glimpse of one," the chauffeur ventured. "I come this way because you wanted me to take a short cut."

"It's the longest short cut I ever saw," the young man sighed, as he gazed this way and that.

The place of their shipwreck was so deserted that not even a crowd had gathered. The racket of the collision had not brought a single policeman. They were in a dead world of granite warehouses, wholesale stores and factories, all locked and forbidding, and full of silent gloom.

In the daytime this was a big trade-artery of Chicago, and all day long it was thunderous with trucks and commerce. At night it was Pompeii, so utterly abandoned that the night watchmen rarely slept outside, and no footpad found it worth while to set up shop.

The three castaways stared every which way, and every which way was peace. The ghost of a pedestrian or two hurried by in the far distance. A cat or two went furtively in search of warfare or romance. The lampposts stretched on and on in both directions in two forever.

In the faraway there was a muffled rumble and the faint clang of a bell. Somewhere a street car was bumping along its rails.

"Our only hope," said Harry. "Come along, Marjorie."

He handed the chauffeur five dollars as a poultice to his wounds, tucked the girl under one arm and the dog-basket under the other, and set out, calling back to the chauffeur:

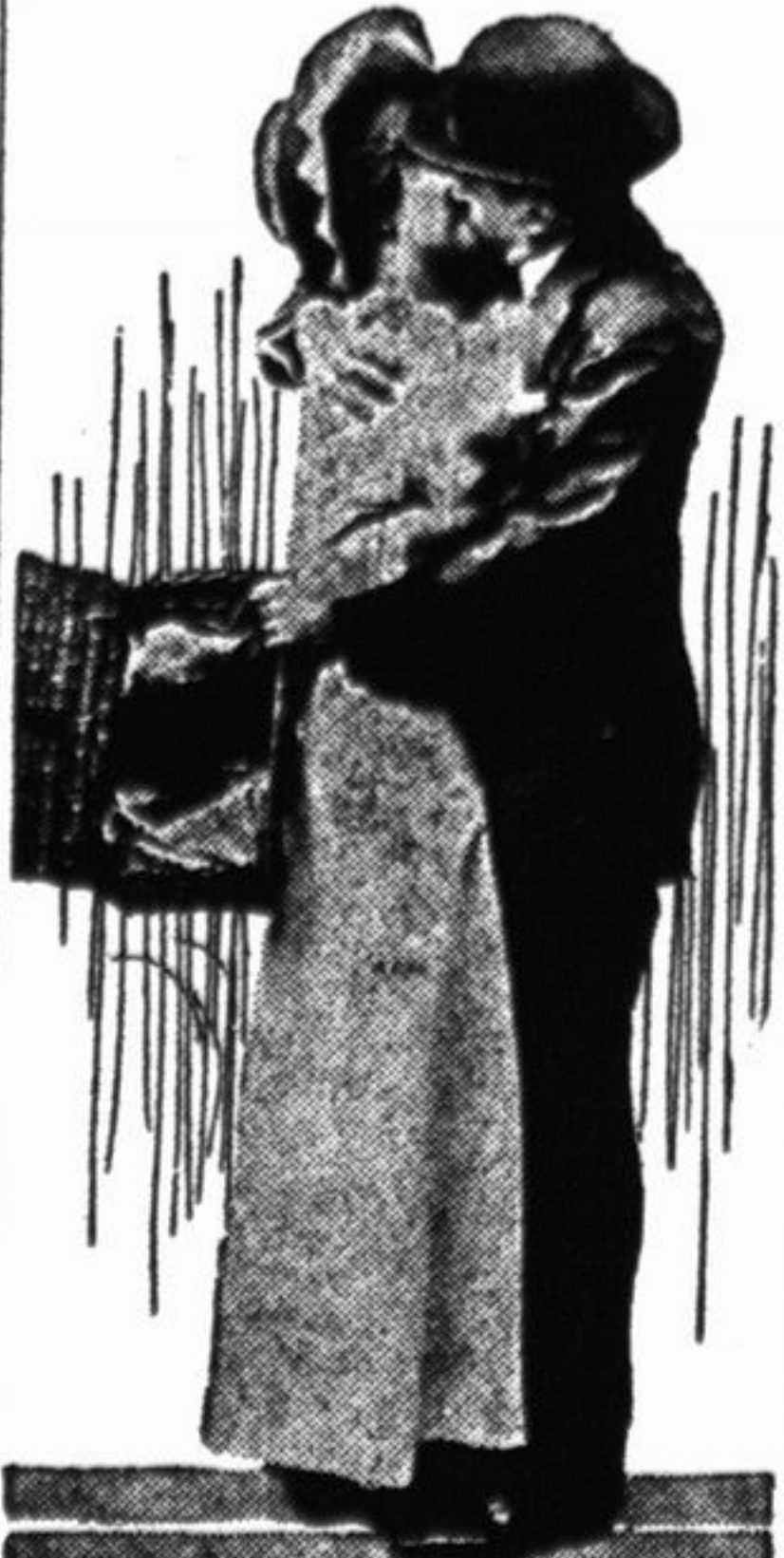
"Good night!"

"Good night!" the girl called back.

"Good night!" the chauffeur echoed. He stood watching them with the tender gaze that even a chauffeur may feel for young love hastening to a honeymoon.

He stood beaming so, till their footsteps died in the silence. Then he turned back to the chaotic remnants of his machine. He worked at it hopelessly for some time, before he had reason to look within. There he found the handbags and suitcases, umbrellas and other equipment. He ran to the corner to call after the owners. They were as absent of body as they had been absent of mind.

He remembered the street-number



Henry Mallory and Marjorie Newton.

they had given him as their destination. He waited till at last a yawning policeman sauntered that way like a lonely bench patrol, and left him in charge while he went to telephone his garage for a wagon and a wrecking crew.

It was close on midnight before he reached the number his fares had given him. It was a personage leaning against a church. He rang the bell and finally produced from an upper window a nightshirt topped by a frowny head. He explained the situation, and his possession of certain properties belonging to parties unknown except by their first names. The clergyman drawled murmured:

"Oh, yes. I remember. The young man was Lieutenant Henry Mallory, and he said he would stop here with a young lady, and get married on the way to the train. But they never turned up."

way to the train. But they never turned up."  
"Lieutenant Mallory, eh? Where could I reach him?"  
"He said he was leaving tonight for the Philippines."  
"The Philippines! Well, I'll be—"  
The minister closed the window just in time.

### CHAPTER II.

**The Early Birds and the Worm.**  
In the enormous barn of the railroad station stood many strings of cars, as if a gigantic young Gulliver stabled his toys there and invisibly amused himself; now whisking this one away, now backing that other in.

Some of the trains were noble equipages, fitted to glide across the whole map with cargoes of Lilliputian millionaires and their Lilliputian ladies. Others were humble and shabby linked-up day-coaches and dingy smoking-cars, packed with workers, like ants.

Cars are mere vehicles, but locomotives have souls. The express engines roll in or stalk out with grandeur and ease. They are like emperors. They seem to look with scorn at the suburban engines snorting and grunting and shaking the arched roof with their pebbled choo-choo as they puff from shop to cottage and back.

The trainmen take their cue from the behavior of their locomotives. The conductor of a transcontinental nod to the conductor of a shuttle-train with less cordiality than to a brakeman of his own. The engineers of the limited look like senators in overalls. They are far-traveled men, leading a mighty life of adventure. They are pilots of land-ships across land-oceans. They have a right to a certain condescension of manner.

But no one feels or shows so much arrogance as the sleeping car porters. They cannot pronounce "superdili-

ous," but they can be it. Their disdain for the entire crew of any train that carries merely day-coaches or half-baked chair-cars, is expressed as only a darkey in a uniform can express disdain for poor white trash.

Of all the haughty porters that ever curled a lip, the haughtiest by far was the dusky attendant in the San Francisco sleeper on the Trans-American Limited. His was the train of trains in that whole system. His car the car of cars. His passengers the surpassengers of all.

His train stood now waiting to set forth upon a voyage of two thousand miles, a journey across seven imperial states, a journey that should end only at that marge where the continent dips and vanishes under the breakers of the Pacific ocean.

At the head of his car, with his little box-step waiting for the foot of the first arrival, the porter stood, his head swelling under his cap, his breast swelling beneath his blue blouse, with its brass buttons like reflections of his own eyes. His name was Ellsworth Jefferson, but he was called anything from "Poarr-turr" to "Pawtah," and he usually did not come when he was called.

Tonight he was wondering perhaps what passengers, with what dispositions, would fall to his lot. Perhaps he was wondering what his Chicago sweetheart would be doing in the eight days before his return. Perhaps he was wondering what his San Francisco sweetheart had been doing in the five days since he left her, and how she would pass the three days that must intervene before he reached her again.

He had Othello's ebon color. Did he have Othello's green eye? Whatever his thoughts, he chatted gaily enough with his neighbor and colleague of the Portland sleeper.

Suddenly he stopped in the midst of a soaring chuckle.

"Lordy, man, looky what's a-comin'!"

The Portland porter turned to gaze.

"I got my fingers crossed."

"I hope you git him."

"I hope I don't."

"He'll work you hard and come you out, and he won't give you even a Muck O'Hand."

"That's right. He can't get a nicker to carry his things. And he's got enough to fill a van."

The oncomer was plainly of English origin. It takes all sorts of people to make up the British Empire, and there is no sort lacking—glorious or pretty, or sour or sweet. But this was the type of English globe-trotter that makes himself as unpopular among foreigners as he is among his own people. He is almost as unendurable as the Americans abroad who twang their banjo brag through Europe, and berate France and Italy for their innocence of buckwheat cakes.

The two porters regarded Mr. Harold Wedgewood with dread, as he bore down on them. He was almost lost in the plethora of his own luggage. He asked for the San Francisco sleeper, and the Portland porter had to turn away to smother his gurgling relief.

Ellsworth Jefferson's heart sank. He made a feeble effort at self-protection. The Pullman conductor not being present at the moment, he inquired:

"Have you got yo' ticket?"

"Of cawse."

"Could I see it?"

"Of cawse not. Too much trouble to fish it out."

The porter was fading. "Do you remember yo' numba?"

"Of cawse. Take these." He began to pile things on the porter like a mountain unloading an avalanche.

The porter stumbled as he clambered up the steps, and squeezed through the strait path of the corridor into the slender aisle. He turned again and again to question the invader, but he was motioned and bunted down the car, till he was halted with a "This will do."

The Englishman selected section three for his own. The porter ventured: "Are you sho' this is yo' numba?"

"Of cawse I'm shaw. How dare you question me—"

"I wasn't questionin' you, boss, I was just astin' you."



THE PORTER FELL ON ONE KNEE AND GOT TO WORK.

He resigned himself to the despot, and began to transfer his burdens to the seat. But he did nothing to the satisfaction of the Englishman. Everything must be placed otherwise; the catch-all here, the portmanteau there, the Gladstone there, the golfsticks there, the greatcoat there, the raincoat there. The porter was puffing like a donkey-engine, and mutiny was growing in his heart. His last commission was the hanging up of the bowler hat.

He stood on the arm of the seat to reach the high hook. From here he paused to glare down with an attempt at irony.

"Is there anything else?"

"No. You may get down."

The magnificent patronage of this witted porter completely. He returned to the lower level, and shuffled along the aisle in a trance. He was quickly recalled by a sharp:

"Pawtah!"

"Yassah!"

"What time does this bally train start?"

"Ten-thutty, sah."

"But it's only ten now."

"Yassah. It'll be ten-thutty a little later."

"Do you mean to tell me that I've got to sit hyah for half an hour—just waitin'?"

The porter essayed another bit of irony:

"Well," he drawled, "I might tell the conducta you're ready. And mebbe he'd start the train. But the timetable says ten-thutty."

He watched the effect of his satire, but it fell back unheeded from the granite dome of the Englishman, whose only comment was:

"Oh, never mind. I'll wait."

The porter cast his eyes up in despair, and turned away, once more to be recalled.

"Oh, pawtah!"

"Yassah!"

"I think we'll put on my stippahs."

"Will we?"

"You might hand me that large bag. No, stipld, the othah one. You might open it. No, it's in the othah one. Ah, that's it. You may set it down."

Mr. Wedgewood brought forth a set of a pair of red slippers. The porter made another effort to speak, his thoughts as black as Mr. Jefferson's. Again the retort came:

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"Oh, pawtah, I think we'll unbutton my boots."  
He was too weak to murmur "Yassah." He simply fell on one knee and got to work.

There was a witness to his helpless rage—a newcomer, the American counterpart of the Englishman in all that makes travel difficult for the fellow travelers. Ira Lathrop was zealous to resent anything short of perfection, quick and loud of complaint, apparently impossible to please.

In everything else he was the opposite of the Englishman. He was burly, middle-aged, rough, careless in attire, careless of speech—as uncouth and savage as one can well be who is plainly a man of means.

It was not enough that a freeborn Afro-American should be caught kneeling to an Englishman. But when he had escaped this penance, and advanced hospitably to the newcomer, he must be greeted with a snarl.

"Say, are you the porter of this car, or that man's nurse?"

"I can't tell yet. What's yo' numba, please?"

The answer was the ticket. The porter screwed up his eyes to read the pencilled scrawl.

"Numba se'm. Heah she is, boss."

"Right next to a lot of women, I'll bet. Couldn't you put me in the men's end of the car?"

"Not ve'y well, sah. I reckon the cah is done sold out."

With a growl of rage, Ira Lathrop slammed into the seat his entire hand baggage, one ancient and rusty valise.

The porter gazed upon him with increased depression. The passenger list had opened inauspiciously with two of the worst types of travelers the Anglo-Saxon race has developed.

But their anger was not their worst trait in the porter's eyes. He was, in a limited way, an expert in human character.

When you meet a stranger you reveal your own character in what you ask about his. With some, the first question is, "Who are his people?"

With others, "What has he achieved?"

With others, "How much is he worth?"

Each gauges his cordiality according to his estimate.

The porter was not curious on any of these points. He showed a democratic indifference to them. His one vital inquiry was:

"How much will he tip?"

His inspection of his first two charges promised small returns. He buttoned up his cordiality, and determined to waste upon them the irreducible minimum of attention.

It would take at least a bridal couple to restore the balance. But bridal couples in their first bloom rarely fell to the lot of that porter, for what bridal couple wants to lock itself in with a crowd of passengers for the first seventy-two hours of wedded bliss?

The porter banished the hope as a vanity. Little he knew how eagerly the young castaways from that wrecked taxicab desired to be a bridal couple, and to catch this train.

But the Englishman was restive again:

"Pawtah! I say, pawtah!"

"Yassah!"

"What time are we due in San Francisco?"

"San Francisco? San Francisco? We are due thah the evenin' of the fo'th day. This bein' Monday, that ought to bring us in abote Thursday evenin'."

The Yankee felt called upon to check the foreign usurper.

"Porrterr!"

"Yassah!"

"Don't let that fellow monopolize you. He probably won't tip you at all."

The porter grew confidential:

"Oh, I know his kind, sah. They don't tip you for what you do do, but they're ready letter writers to the Scoopintendent for what you don't do."

"Pawtah! I say, pawtah!"

"Here, porrterr."

The porter tried to imitate the Irish bird, and be in two places at once. The American had a coin in his hand. The porter caught the gleam of it, and flitted thither. The Yankee growled:

"Don't forget that I'm on the train, and when we get to Frisco there may be something more."

The porter had the coin in his hand.

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