

EXCUSE ME!

RUPERT HUGHES
NOVELIZED FROM THE
COMEDY OF THE SAME
NAME. Y Y Y
ILLUSTRATED FROM
PHOTOGRAPHS OF
THE PLAY AS PRODUCED
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"But, Harry, you wouldn't desert me now—abandon me to my fate?"

"Well, it isn't exactly like abandonment, seeing that you could go home to your father and mother in a taxicab."

She stared at him in horror.

"So you don't want me for your wife! You've changed your mind! You're tired of me already! Only an hour together, and you're sick of your bargain! You're anxious to get rid of me! You—"

"Oh, honey, I want you more than anything else on earth, but I'm a soldier, dearie, a mere lieutenant in the regular army, and I'm the slave of the government. I've gone through West Point, and they won't let me resign respectably and if I did, we'd starve. They wouldn't accept my resignation, but they'd be willing to court-martial me and dismiss me from the service in disgrace. Then you wouldn't want to marry me—and I shouldn't have any way of supporting you if you did. I only know one trade, and that's soldiering."

"Don't call it a trade, beloved, it's the noblest profession in all the world, and you're the noblest soldier that ever was, and in a year or two you'll be the biggest general in the army."

He could not afford to shatter such a devout illusion or quench the light of faith in those beloved and loving eyes. He tacitly admitted his ability to be promoted commander-in-chief in a year or two. He allowed that glittering possibility to remain, used it as a basis for argument.

"Then, dearest, you must help me to do my duty."

She clasped his upper arm as if it were an altar and she an Iphigenia about to be sacrificed to save the army. And she murmured with utter heroism:

"I will! Do what you like with me!"

He squeezed her hand between his biceps and his ribs and accepted the offering in a look drenched with gratitude. Then he said, matter-of-factly:

"We'll see how much time we have when we get to—whatever the name of that street is."

The car jolted and wailed on its way like an old drifting rocking chair. The motorman was in no hurry. The passengers seemed to have no occasion for haste. Somebody got on or got off at almost every corner, and paused for conversation while the car waited patiently. But eventually the conductor put his head in and drawled:

"Hay! Here's where you get off at."

They hastened to debark and found themselves in a narrow, gaudily-lighted region where they saw a lordly transfer-distributor, a profound scholar in Chicago streets. He informed them that the minister's street lay far back along the path they had come; they should have taken a car in the opposite direction, transferred at some remote center, descended at some unheard-of street, walked three blocks one way and four another, and there they would have been.

Mallory looked at his watch, and Marjorie's hopes dropped like a wrecked aeroplane, for he grimly asked how long it would take them to reach the railroad station.

"Well, you'd ought to make it in forty minutes," the transfer agent said—and added, cynically, "if the car makes schedule."

"Good Lord, the train starts in twenty minutes!"

"Well, I tell you—take this here green car to Wexford avenue—there's usually a taxicab or two standin' there."

"Thank you. Hop on, Marjorie."

Marjorie hopped on, and they sat down, Mallory with eyes and thoughts on nothing but the watch he kept in his hand.

During this tense journey the girl perfected her soul with graceful martyrdom.

"I'll go to the train with you, Harry, and then you can send me home in a taxicab."

Her nether lip trembled and her eyes were filled, but they were brave, and her voice was so tender that it wooed his mind from his watch. He gazed at her, and found her so dear, so devoted and so pitifully exquisite, that he was almost overcome by an impulse to gather her into his arms there and then, indifferent to the immediate passengers or to his far-off military superiors. An hour ago they were young lovers in all the bliss and thrill of elopement. She had clung to him in the gloaming of their taxicab, as it sped like a genie at their whim to the place where the minister would unite their hands and raise his own in blessing. Thence the new husband, would have carried the new wife away, his very own, soul and body, duty and beauty. Then, ah, then in their midst the future was an awaiting horizon.

across the continent, a stroll along a lover's lane, the Pacific ocean a garden lake, and the Philippines a chain of Fortunate Isles decreed especially for their Eden. And then the taxicab encountered a lamppost. They thought they had merely wrecked a motor car—and lo, they had wrecked a Paradise.

The railroad ceased to be a lover's lane and became a lingering torment; the ocean was a wailing Sahara, and the Philippines a Dry Tortugas of exile.

Mallory realized for the first time what heavy burdens he had taken on with his shoulder straps; what a dismal life of restrictions and hardships an officer's life is bound to be. It was hard to obey the soulless machinery of discipline, to be a brass-buttoned slave. He felt all the hot, quick resentment that turns a faithful soldier into a deserter. But it takes time to evolve a deserter, and Mallory had only twenty minutes. The handcuffs add legions of discipline bobbed him. He was only a little cog in a great clock, and the other wheels were impinging on him and revolving in spite of himself.

In the close-packed seats where they were jostled and stared at, the soldier could not even attempt to explain to his fascinated bride the war of motives in his breast. He could not voice the passionate rebellion her beauty had whipped up in his soul. Perhaps if Romeo and Juliet had been forced to say farewell on a Chicago street car instead of a Venetian balcony, their language would have lacked savor, too.

Perhaps young Mr. Montague and young Miss Capulet, instead of wailing, "No, that is not the lark whose notes do beat the vaulted heaven so high above our heads," would have done no better than Mr. Mallory and Miss Newton. In any case, the best these two could squeeze out was:

"It's just too bad, honey."

"But I guess it can't be helped, dear."

"It's a mean old world, isn't it?"

"Awful!"

And then they must pile out into the street again so lost in woe that they did not know how they were trampled or elbowed. Marjorie's despair was so complete that it paralyzed instinct. She forgot Snootsiums! A thoughtful passenger ran out and tossed the basket into Mallory's arms even as the car moved off.

Fortune relented a moment and they found a taxicab waiting where they had expected to find it. Once more they were cosy in the flying twilight, but their grief was their only baggage, and the clasp of their hands talked all the talk there was.

Anxiety within anxiety tormented them and they feared another wreck. But as they swooped down upon the station, a kind-faced tower clock beamed the reassurance that they had three minutes to spare.

The taxicab drew up and halted, but they did not get out. They were kissing good-byes, fervidly and numerously, while a grinning station-porter winked at the winking chauffeur.

Marjorie simply could not have done with farewells.

"I'll go to the gate with you," she said.

He told the chauffeur to wait and take the young lady home. The lieutenant looked so honest and the girl so sad that the chauffeur simply touched his cap, though it was not his custom to allow strange fares to vanish into crowded stations, leaving behind nothing more negotiable than instructions to wait.

CHAPTER IV.

A Mouse and a Mountain.

All the while the foiled elopers were eloping, the San Francisco sleeper was filling up. It had been the receptacle of assorted lots of humanity tumbling into it from all directions, with all sorts of souls, bodies and destinations.

The porter received each with that expert eye of his. His car was his laboratory. A railroad journey is a sort of test-tube of character; strange elements meet under strange conditions and make strange combinations. The porter could never foresee the ingredients of any trip, nor their actions and reactions.

He had no sooner established Mr. Wedgewood of London and Mr. Ira Lathrop of Chicago, in comparative repose, than his car was invaded by a woman who fung herself into the first seat. She was flushed with running, and breathing hard, but she managed one gasp of relief:

"Thank goodness, I made it in time."

The mere sound of a woman's voice in the seat back of him was enough to disperse Ira Lathrop. With not so much as a glance backward to see what manner of woman it might be, he jammed his—tract into his pocket,

spiced his newspapers and retreated to the farthest end of the car, bouncing down into berth number one, like a sullen snapping turtle.

Miss Anne Gattie's modest and homely valise had been brought aboard by a leisurely station usher, who set it down and waited with a speaking palm outstretched. She had her tickets in her hand, but transferred them to her teeth while she searched for money in a handbag old-fashioned enough to be called a reticule.

The usher closed his fist on the pitance she dropped into it and departed without comment. The porter advanced on her with a demand for "Tickets, please."

She began to ransack her reticule with hurried haste, taking out of it a small purse, opening that, closing it, putting it back, taking it out, searching the reticule through, turning out a handkerchief, a few hairpins, a few trunk keys, a baggage check, a bottle of salts, a card or two and numerous other maidenly articles, restoring them to place, looking in the purse again, restoring that, closing the reticule, setting it down, shaking out a book she carried, opening her old valise, going through certain white things blushing, closing it again, shaking her skirts, and shaking her head in bewilderment.

She was about to open the reticule again, when the porter exclaimed:

"I see it! Don't look no mo'. I see it!"

When she cast up her eyes in despair, her hatbrim had been elevated enough to disclose the whereabouts of the tickets. With a murmured apology, he removed them from her teeth and held them under the light. After a time he said:

"As neat as I can make out from the—undigested portion of this ticket, yo' numba is six."

"That's it—six!"

"That's right up this way."

"Let me sit here till I get my breath," she pleaded. "I ran so hard to catch the train."

"Well, you caught it good and strong."

"I'm so glad. How soon do we start?"

"In about half a houah."

"Really? Well, better half an hour too soon than half a minute too late." She said it with such a copy-book primness that the porter set her down as a school-teacher. It was not a bad guess. She was a missionary. With a pupil-like shyness she volunteered:

"Yo' berth is all ready whenever you wishes to go to bald." He caught her swift blush and amended it to—"to retiah."

"Retire?—before all the car?" said Miss Anne Gattie, with prim timidity.

"No, thank you! I intend to sit up till everybody else has retired."

The porter retired. Miss Gattie took out a bit of more or less useful fancy stitching and set to work like another Dorcas. Her needle had not dived in and emerged many times before she was holding it up as a weapon of defense against a sudden human mountain that threatened to crush her.

A vague round face, huge and red as a rising moon, dawned before her



Mrs. Jimmie Wellington.

eyes and from it came an uncertain voice:

"Excuzhe me, mad'm, no 'enah intended."

The words and the breath that carried them gave the startled spinster an instant proof that her vis-a-vis did not share her prohibition principles or practices. She regarded the elephant with mouse-like terror, and the elephant regarded the mouse with elephantine fright, then he removed himself from her landscape as quickly as he could and lurched along the aisle, calling out merrily to the porter:

"Chauffeur! chauffeur; don't go so fast 'round these corners."

He collided with a small train-boy singing his nasal lay, but it was the behemoth and not the train-boy that collapsed into a seat, sprawling as helplessly as a mammoth oyster on a table-cloth.

The porter rushed to his aid and hoisted him to his feet with an uneasy sense of impending trouble. He felt as if someone had left a monstrous baby on his doorstep, but all he said was:

"Tickets, please."

There ensued a long search, fat, flabby hands fumbling and fumbling from pocket to pocket. Once more the porter was the discoverer.

"I see it. Don't look no mo'. Here it is—up in yo' husband." He lifted it out and chuckled. "Had it right next his brains and couldn't remember!" He took up the appropriately huge luggage of the bibulous wanderer and led him to the other end of the aisle.

"Numba two is yours, sah. Right head—all nice and cosy, and already made up."

The big man looked through the curtains into the cabin confinement, and groaned:

"That! Haven't you got a man's size berth?"

"Sorry, sah. That's as big a bunk as they is on the train."

"Have I got to be locked up in that pigeon-hole for—how many days is it to Reno?"

"Reno?" The porter greeted that meaningful name with a smile. "We're doo in Reno the—the-maw'nin' of the fo'th day, sah. Yassah." He put the baggage down and started away, but the fat man seized his hand, with great emotion:

"Don't leave me all alone in there, porter, for I'm a broken-hearted man."

"Is that so? Too bad, sah."

"Were you ever a broken-hearted man, porter?"

"Always, sah."

"Did you ever put your trust in a false-hearted woman?"

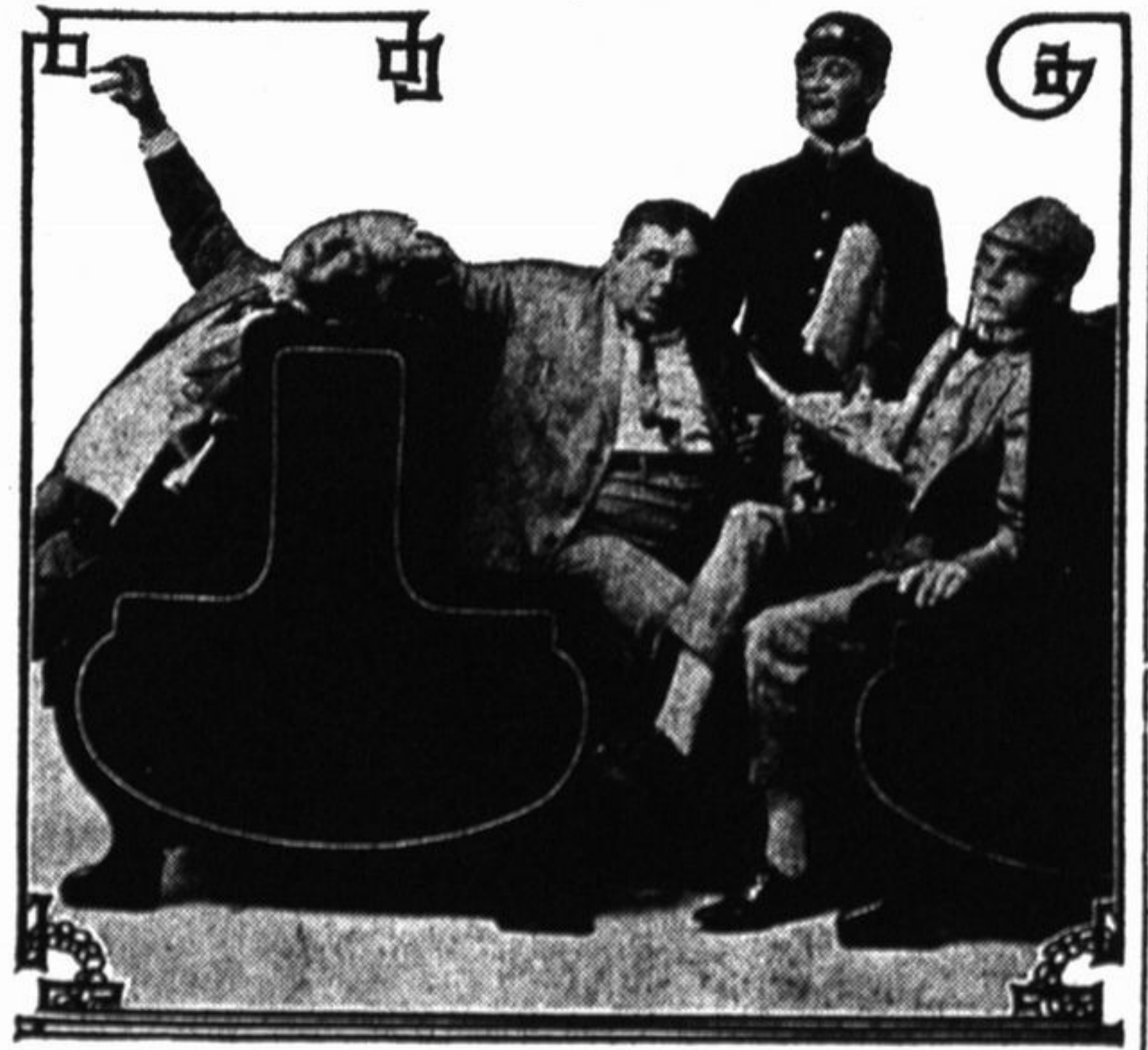
"Orten, sah."

"Was she ever true to you, porter?"

"Never, sah."

"Porter, we are partners in mis-sis-ery."

And he wrung the rough, black hand with a solemnity that embarrassed the porter almost as much as it would have embarrassed the passenger him-



DREW LATHROP'S HEAD AFTER HIS HAIR ACROSS THE SEAT.

self if he could. "We understood what he was doing. The porter disengaged himself with a patient but hasty:

"I'm afraid you'll have to 'excuse me. I got to he'p the other passengers on bode."

"Don't let me keep you from your duty. Duty is the—the—" But he could not remember what duty was, and he would have dropped off to sleep, if he had not been startled by a familiar voice which the porter had luckily escaped.

"Pawtah! Pawtah! Can't you raise this light—or rather can't you lower it? Pawtah! This light is so infernally dim I can't read."

To the Englishman's intense amazement his call brought to him not the porter, but a rising moon with the profound query:

"Whass a ll' thing like dim light, when the light of your life has gone out?"

"I beg your pardon?"

Without further invitation, the mammoth descended on the Englishman's territory.

"I'm a broken-hearted man, Mr.—Mr.—I didn't get your name."

"Er—ah—I dare say."

"Thanks, I will sit down." He lifted a great carry-all and airily tossed it into the aisle, set the Gladstone on the lap of the infuriated Englishman, and squeezed into the seat opposite, making a sad mix-up of knees.

"My name's Wellington. Ever hear of ll' Jimmie Wellington? That's me."

"Any relation to the Duke?"

"Nagh!"

He no longer interested Mr. Wedgewood. But Mr. Wellington was not aware that he was being snubbed. He went right on getting acquainted:

"Are you married, Mr.—Mr.—?"

"No!"

"My heartfelt congrashlations. Hang on to your luck, my boy. Don't let any female take it away from you." He slapped the Englishman on the elbow amiably, and his prisoner was too stifled with wrath to emit more than one feeble "Pawtah!"

Mr. Wellington mused on aloud: "Oh, if I had only remained single. But she was so beautiful and she swore to love, honor and obey. Mrs. Wellington is a queen among women, mind you, and I have nothing to say against her except that she has the temper of a tarantula." He italicized the word with a light fillip of his left hand along the back of the seat. He did not notice that he filled the angry head of Mr. Ira Lathrop in the next seat. He went on with his portrait of his wife. "She has the 'stravaganza of a suitans'—another title for Mr. Lathrop—"The shoeleath-

of a cobra, the flirtatiousness of a humming bird." Mr. Lathrop was glaring round like a man-eating tiger, but Wellington talked on. "She drinks, swears and smokes cigars, otherwise she's fine—a queen among women."

Neither this amazing vision of woman-kind, nor this beautiful example of longing for confession and sympathy awakened a response in the Englishman's frozen bosom. His only action was another violent effort to disengage his cramped knees from the knees of his tormentor; his only comment a vain and weakening cry for help, "Pawtah! Pawtah!"

Wellington's beary, teary eyes were lighted with triumph. "Finally I saw I couldn't stand it any longer so I bought a tic-het to Reno. I 'stablah a residenah in six months—get a divorce—no shcandal. Even m'own wife won't know anything about it."

The Englishman was almost attracted by this astounding picture of the divorce laws in America. It sounded so barbarically quaint that he leaned forward to hear more, but Mr. Wellington's hand, like a mischievous runaway, had wandered back into the shaggy locks atop of Mr. Lathrop. His right hand did not let his left know what it was doing, but proceeded quite independently to grip as much of Lathrop's hair as it would hold.

Then as Mr. Wellington shook with joy at the prospect of "Dear old Reno!" he began unconsciously to draw Ira Lathrop's head after his hair across the seat. The pain of it shot the tears into Lathrop's eyes, and as he writhed and twisted he was too full of profanity to get any one word out.

When he managed to wrench his skull free, he was ready to murder his tormentor. But as soon as he confronted the doddering and blinking toper, he was helpless. Drunken men have always been treated with great tenderness in America, and when Wel-

lington, seeing Lathrop's white hair, exclaimed with rapture: "Why, hello, Pop! here's Pop!" the most that Lathrop could do was to tear loose those fat, groping hands, slap them like a school teacher, and push the man away.

But that one shove upset Mr. Wellington and sent him toppling down upon the pit of the Englishman's stomach.

For Wedgewood, it was suddenly as if all the air had been removed from the world. He gulped like a fish drowning for lack of water. He was a long while getting breath enough for words, but his first words were wild demands that Mr. Wellington remove himself forthwith.

Wellington accepted the banishment with the sorrowful eyes of a dying deer, and tottered away wagging his fat head and wailing:

"I'm a broken-hearted man, and nobody gives a—." At this point he came over into Ira Lathrop's berth and was welcomed with a savage roar:

"What the devil's the matter with you?"

"I'm a broken-hearted man, that's all."

"Oh, is that all," Lathrop snapped, vanishing behind his newspaper. The desperately melancholy seeker for a word of human kindness beared at the blurred newspaper wall a while, then waded into a new attempt at acquaintance. Laying his hand on Lathrop's knee, he stammered: "Excuzhe me, Mr.—Mr.—"

From behind the newspaper came a stony answer: "Lathrop's my name—if you want to know."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Lathrop."

"Lathrop!"

"Lathrop! My name's Wellington. Ll'l Jimmie Wellington. Ever hear of me?"

He waited with the genial smile of a famous man; the smile froze at Lathrop's curt, "Don't think so."

He tried again: "Ever hear of well-known Chicago belle, Mrs. Jimmie Wellington?"

"Yes, I've heard of her!" There was an ominous grin in the tone.

Wellington waved his hand with modest pride. "Well, I'm Jimmie."

"Serves you right."

"This jolt was so discourteous that Wellington decided to protest: "Mister Latham!"

"Lathrop!"

The name came out with a whip-snap. He tried to echo it, "Lathrop!" "I don't like that Throp. That's a kind of a senack name, isn't it?" Finding the newspaper still intervening between him and his prey, he calmly tore it down the middle and pushed through it like a—

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CHAPTER V.

A Queen Among Women.

Miss Anne Gattie, seated in Mrs. Jimmie Wellington's seat, had not heard Mr. Jimmie Wellington's sketch of his wife. But she needed hardly more than a glance to satisfy herself that she and Mrs. Jimmie were as hopelessly antipathetic as any two polite women can be.

Mrs. Jimmie was accounted something of a snob in Chicago society, but perhaps the missionary was a trifle the snobbisher of the two when they met.

Miss Gattie could overlook a hundred vices in a Zulu queen more easily than a few in a fellow countrywoman. She did not like Mrs. Jimmie, and she was proud of it.

When the porter said, "I'm afraid you got this lady's seat," Miss Gattie shot one glance at the intruder and rose stiffly. "Then I suppose I'll have to—"

"Oh, please don't go, there's plenty of room," Mrs. Wellington insisted, pressing her to remain. This nettled Miss Gattie still more, but she squawked back, while the porter piled up expensive traveling-bags and hat boxes till there was hardly a place to sit. But even at that Mrs. Jimmie felt called on to apologise:

"I haven't brought much luggage. How I'll ever live four days with this, I can't imagine. It will be such a relief to get my trunks at Reno."

"Reno?" echoed Miss Gattie. "Do you live there?"

"Well, theoretically, yes."

"I don't understand you."

"I've got to live there to get it."

"To get it? Oh! A look of sudden and dreadful realisation came over the missionary. Mrs. Wellington inter-



Jimmie Wellington.

preted it with a smile of gay defiance: "Do you believe in divorce?"

Anne Gattie stuck to her guns. "I must say I don't. I think a law ought to be passed stopping them."

"So do I," Mrs. Wellington eagerly agreed, "and I hope they'll pass just such a law—after I get mine." Then she ventured a little shift of her own. "You don't believe in divorce, I judge you've never been married."

"Not once!" The missionary snapped out, but Mrs. Wellington, who sat up with an air of interest, said: