

EXCUSE ME!

RUPERT HUGHES

NOVELIZED FROM THE COMEDY OF THE SAME NAME.

ILLUSTRATED FROM PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE PLAY AS PRODUCED BY HENRY W. SAVAGE.

COPYRIGHT 1911 BY H. K. FLY CO.



"Oh, all right," he smiled. And seeing the porter, beckoned him close and asked with careless indifference: "Oh, porter, what time do we reach the Iowa state line?"

"Two fifty-five in the mawning, sah."

"Two fifty-five a. m.," the wretch exclaimed.

"Two fifty-five a. m., yassah," the porter repeated, and wondered why this excerpt from the time-table should exert such a dramatic effect on the lascivious-eyed Fudlick.

He had small time to meditate the puzzle, for the train was about to be launched upon its long voyage. He went out to the platform, and watched a couple making that way. As their only luggage was a dog-basket he supposed that they were simply come to bid some of his passengers good-bye. No tips were to be expected from such transients, so he allowed them to help themselves up the steps.

Mallory and his Marjorie had tried to kiss the farewell or farewells half a dozen times, but she could not let him go at the gate. She asked the guard to let her through, and her beauty was bribe enough.

Again and again, she and Mallory paused. He wanted to take her back to the taxicab, but she would not be so dismissed. She must spend the last available second with him.

"I'll go as far as the steps of the car," she said. When they were arrived there, two porters, a sleeping car conductor and several smoking saunterers profaned the trust. So she whispered that she would come aboard, for the corridor would be a quiet lane for the last rites.

And now that he had her actually on the train, Mallory's whole soul revolted against letting her go. The vision of her standing on the platform sad-eyed and lorn, while the train swept him off into space was unendurable. He shut his eyes against it, but it glowed inside the lids.

And then temptation whispered him its old "Why not?" While it was working in his soul like a fermenting yeast, he was saying:

"To think that we should owe all our misfortune to an infernal taxicab's break-down."

Out of the anguish of her loneliness crept one little complaint:

"If you had really wanted me, you'd have had two taxicabs."

"Oh, how can you say that? I had the license bought and the minister waiting."

"He's waiting yet."

"And the ring—there's the ring." He fished it out of his waistcoat pocket and held it before her as a golden snail.

"A lot of good it does now," said Marjorie. "You won't even wait over till the next train."

"I've told you a thousand times, my love," he protested, desperately. "If I don't catch the transport, I'll be court-martialed. If this train is late, I'm



Rev. Walter Temple.

lost. If you really loved me you'd come along with me."

Her very eyes gazed at this astounding proposal.

"Why, Harry Mallory, you know it's impossible."

Like a sort of benevolent Satan, he laid the ground for his abduction: "You'll leave me, then, to spend three years without you—out among those Maudie women."

She shook her head in terror at this vision. "It would be too horrible for words to have you marry one of those mahogany sirens."

He held out the apple. "Better come along, then."

"But how can I? We're not mar-

ried," he answered airily. "Oh, I'm sure there's a minister on board."

"But it would be too awful to be married with all the passengers gawking. No, I couldn't face it. Good-bye, honey."

She turned away, but he caught her arm: "Don't you love me?"

"To distraction. I'll wait for you, too."

"Three years is a long wait."

"But I'll wait, if you will."

With such devotion he could not tamper. It was too beautiful to risk or endanger or besmirch with any danger of scandal. He gave up his fantastic project and gathered her into his arms, crowded her into his very soul, as he vowed: "I'll wait for you forever and ever and ever."

Her arms swept around his neck, and she gave herself up as an exile from happiness, a prisoner of a far-off love:

"Good-bye, my husband-to-be."

"Good-bye my wife—that-was-to-have-been-and-will-be-maybe."

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

"I must go."

"Yes, you must."

"One last kiss."

"One more—one long last kiss."

And there, entwined in each other's arms, with lips wedded and eyelids clinched, they clung together, forgetting everything past, future or present. Love's anguish made them blind, mute and deaf.

They did not hear the conductor crying his "All Aboard!" down the long wall of the train. They did not hear the far-off knell of the bell. They did not hear the porters banging the vestibules shut. They did not feel the floor sliding out with them.

And so the porter found them, engulfed in one embrace, swaying and swaying, and no more aware of the increasing rush of the train than were other passengers on the earth-express aware of its speed through the ether-routes of its ancient schedule.

The porter stood with his box-step in his hand, and blinked and wondered. And they did not even know they were observed.

CHAPTER IX.

All Aboard!

The starting of the train surprised the ironical decorators in the last stages of their work. Their smiles died out in a sudden shame, as it came over them that the joke had receded on their own heads. They had done their best to carry out the time-honored rite of making a newly married couple as miserable as possible—and the newly married couple had failed to do its share.

The two lieutenants glared at each other in mutual contempt. They had studied much at West Point about ambushes, and how to avoid them. Could Mallory have escaped the pit they had dug for him? They looked at their handiwork in disgust.

The cosy-corner effect of white ribbons and orange flowers, gracefully masking the concealed rice-trap, had seemed the wittiest thing ever devised. Now it looked the silliest.

The other passengers were equally downcast. Meanwhile the two lovers in the corridor were kissing good-byes as if they were hoping to store up honey enough to sustain their hearts for a three years' fast. And the porter was studying them with perplexity.

He was used, however, to waking people out of dreamland, and he began to fear that if he were discovered spying on the lovers, he might suffer. So he coughed discreetly three or four times.

Since the increasing racket of the train made no effect on the two hearts beating as one, the small matter of a cough was as nothing.

Finally the porter was compelled to reach forward and tap Mallory's arm, and stutter:

"Excuse me, but co-could I git b-by?"

The embrace was untied, and the lovers stared at him with a dazed, where-am-I? look. Marjorie was the first to realize what awakened them. She felt called upon to say something, so she said, as carelessly as if she had not just emerged from a young gentleman's arms:

"Oh, porter, how long before the train starts?"

"Train's done started, Missy."

This simple statement struck the wool from her eyes and the cotton from her ears, and she was wide enough awake when she cried: "Oh, stop it—stop it!"

"That's mo'n I can do, Missy," the porter expostulated.

"Then I'll jump off," Marjorie vowed, making a dash for the door.

But the porter filled the narrow path, and waved her back.

"Vestibule's done locked up—train's going liberty-ship!" Feeling that he had safely checkmated any

rashness, the porter squeezed past the dumbfounded pair, and went to change his blue blouse for the white coat of his chambermaidly duties. Mallory's first wondering thought was a rapturous feeling that circumstances had forced his dream into a reality. He thrilled with triumph: "You've got to go with me now."

"Yes—I've got to go," Marjorie assented meekly; "then, sublimely, 'It's fate. Kismet!'"

They clutched each other again in a fiercely blissful hug. Marjorie came back to earth with a bump: "Are you really sure there's a minister on board?"

"Pretty sure," said Mallory, sobering a trifle.

"But you said you were sure?"

"Well, when you say you're sure, that means you're not quite sure."

It was not an entirely satisfactory justification, and Marjorie began to quake with alarm: "Suppose there shouldn't be?"

"Oh, then," Mallory answered carelessly, "there's bound to be one tomorrow."

Marjorie realized at once the enormous abyss between then and the tomorrow, and she gasped: "Tomorrow! And no chaperon! Oh, I'll jump out of the window!"

Mallory could prevent that, but when she pleaded, "What shall we do?" he had no solution to offer. Again it was she who received the first inspiration.

"I have it," she beamed.

"Yes, Marjorie?" he assented, dubiously.

"We'll pretend not to be married at all."

He seized the rescuing ladder: "That's it! Not married—just friends."

"Till we can get married—"

"Yes, and then we can stop being friends."

"My love—my friend!" They embraced in a most unfriendly manner.

An impatient yelp from the neglected dog-basket awoke them.

"Oh, Lord, we've brought Snoosiums."

"Of course we have," she took the dog from the prison, tucked him under her arm, and tried to compose her bridal face into a merely friendly countenance before they entered the car. But she must pause for one more kiss, one more of those bitter-sweet good-byes. And Mallory was nothing loath.

Hudson and Shaw were still glumly perplexed, when the porter returned in his white jacket.

"I bet they missed the train; all this work for nothing," Hudson grumbled. But Shaw, seeing the porter, caught a gleam of hope, and asked anxiously:

"Say, porter, have you seen anything anywhere that looks like a freshly married pair?"

"Well," and the porter rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand as he chuckled, "well, they's a mighty lovin' couple out there in the corridor."

"That's them—they—!"

Instantly everything was alive and in action. It was as if a bugle had shrilled in a deserted camp.

"Get ready!" Shaw commanded.

"Here's rice for everybody."

"Everybody take an old shoe," said Hudson. "You can't miss in this narrow car."

"There's a kazoo for everyone, too," said Shaw, as the outstretched hands were equipped with wedding ammunition. "Do you know the 'Wedding March'?"

"I ought to by this time," said Mrs. Whitcomb.

Right into the tangle of preparation, old Ira Lathrop stalked, on his way back to his seat to get more cigars.

"Have some rice for the bridal couple?" said Ashton, offering him of his own double-handful.

But Lathrop brushed him aside with a romance-hater's growl.

"Watch out for your head, then," cried Hudson, and Lathrop ducked just too late to escape a neck-filling, hair-filling shower. An old shoe took him a clip about the ear, and the old woman-hater dropped raging into the same berth where the spinster, Anne Gattie, was trying to dodge the same downpour.

Still there was enough of the shrapnel left to overwhelm the two young "friends," who marched into the aisle, trying to look indifferent and prepared for nothing on earth less than for a wedding charivari.

Mallory should have done better than to entrust his plans to fellows like Hudson and Shaw, whom he had known at West Point for diabolically joyous hazers and practical jokers. Even as he sputtered rice and winced from the impact of flying footgear, he was cursing himself as a double-dyed idiot for asking such men to engage his berth for him. He had a sudden instinct that they had doubtless bedecked his trunk and Marjorie's with white satin furbelows and ludicrous labels. But he could not shelter himself from the white sleet and the black thumps. He could hardly shelter Marjorie, who cowered behind him and shrieked even louder than the romping tormentors.

When the assailants had exhausted the rice and shoes, they charged down the aisle for the privilege of kissing the bride. Mallory was dragged and bunted and shunted here and there, and he had to fight his way back to Marjorie with might and main. He was tugging and striking like a demon, and yelling, "Stop it! stop it!"

Hudson took his punishment with uproarious good nature, laughing: "Oh, shut up, or we'll kiss you!"

But Shaw was scrubbing his wry lips with a sea-sick wall of:

"Wow! I think I kissed the dog."

There was, of necessity, some pause for breath, and the combatants draped

themselves limply about the seats. Mallory glared at the twin Benedict Arnolds and demanded:

"Are you two thugs going to San Francisco with me?"

"Don't worry," smiled Hudson, "we're only going as far as Kedzie avenue, just to start the honeymoon properly."

If either of the elopers had been calmer, the solution of the problem would get off at this suburban station and drive home from there. But their wits were like pied type, and they were further jumbled, when Shaw broke in with a sudden: "Come, see the little dove-cote we fixed for you."

Before they knew it, they were both haled along the aisle to the white satin atrocity. "Love in a bungalow," said Hudson. "Sit down—make yourselves perfectly at home."

"No—never—oh, oh, oh!" cried Marjorie, darting away and throwing herself into the first empty seat—Ira Lathrop's berth. Mallory followed to console her with caresses and murmurs of, "There's there, don't cry, dearie!"

Hudson and Shaw followed close with mawkish mockery: "Don't cry, dearie."

And now Mrs. Temple intervened. She had enjoyed the initiation ceremony as well as anyone. But when the little bride began to cry, she remembered the pitiful terror and shy shame she had undergone as a girl-wife, and she hastened to Marjorie's side, brushing the men away like gnats.

"You poor thing," she comforted. "Come, my child, lean on me, and have a good cry."

Hudson grinned, and put out his own arms: "She can lean on me, if she'd rather."

Mrs. Temple glanced up with indignant rebuke: "Her mother is far away, and she wants a mother's breast to weep on. Here's mine, my dear."

The impudent Shaw tapped his own military chest: "She can use mine."

Infuriated at this bride-baiting, Mallory rose and confronted the two limps with clenched fists: "You're a pretty pair of friends, you are!"

The imperturbable Shaw put out a pair of tickets as his only defense: "Here are your tickets, old boy."

And Hudson roared jovially: "We tried to get you a stateroom, but it was gone."

"And here are your baggage checks," laughed Shaw, forcing into his fists a few pasteboards. "We got your trunks on the train ahead, all right. Don't mention it—you're entirely welcome."

It was the porter that brought the first relief from the ordeal.

"If you gemmen is gettin' off at Kedzie avenue, you'd better step smart. We're slowin' up now."

Marjorie was sobbing too audibly to hear, and Mallory swearing too indubitably to heed the opportunity Kedzie avenue offered. And Hudson was yelling: "Well, good-bye, old boy and old girl. Sorry we can't go all the way." He had the effrontery to try to kiss the bride good-bye, and Shaw was equally bold, but Mallory's fury enabled him to beat them off. He elbowed and shouldered them down the aisle, and sent after them one of his own shoes. But it just missed Shaw's flying coat-tails.

Mallory stood glaring after the departing traitors. He was glad that they at least were gone, till he realized with a sickening slump in his vitals, that they had not taken with them his awful dilemma. And now the train was once more clackety-clackety into the night and the west.

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 stolid 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 raptures of all the delight in her life—escape with her gossamer-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, froth 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?"

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 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 inane, and began to sniffle 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 window, 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 shipping-tackle, 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 an 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 belled 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 jaws 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 goss