

EXCUSE ME!

RUPERT HUGHES

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

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CHAPTER XIX.

Foiled!

It was late in the forenoon before the train came to the end of its iron furrow across that fertile space between two of the world's greatest rivers, which the Indians called "Iowa," nobody knows exactly why. In contrast with the pallidness of the Mississippi, the Missouri twists like a great brown dragon wallowing in congenial mud. The water itself, as Bob Burdette said, is so muddy that the wind blowing across it raises a cloud of dust.

A sonorous bridge led the way into Nebraska, and the train came to a halt at Omaha. Mallory and Marjorie got out to stretch their legs and their dog. If they had only known that the train was to stop there the quarter of an hour, and if they had only known some preacher there and had had him to the station, the ceremony could have been consummated then and there.

The horizon was fairly saw-toothed with church spires. There were preachers, preachers everywhere, and not a dominie to do their deed.

After they had strolled up and down the platform, and up and down, and up and down till they were faint of their cramped quarters, again, Marjorie suddenly dug her nails into Mallory's arm.

"Honey! look—look!" Honey looked, and there before their very eyes stood as clerical a looking person as ever announced a strawberry festival.

Mallory stared and stared, till Marjorie said:

"Don't you see? stupid! It's a preacher! a preacher!"

"It looks like one," was as far as Mallory would commit himself, and he was turning away. He had about come to the belief that anything that looked like a parson was something else. But Marjorie whirled him round again, with a shrill whisper to listen. And he overheard in tones addicted to the pulpit:

"Yes, deacon, I trust that the harvest will be plentiful at my new church. It grieves me to leave the dear brothers and sisters in the Lord in Omaha, but I feel called to wider pastures."

And a lady who was evidently Mrs. Deacon spoke up:

"We'll miss you terrible. We all say you are the best pastor our church ever had."

Mallory prepared to spring on his prey and drag him to his lair, but Marjorie held him back.

"He's taking our train, Lord bless his dear old soul."

And Mallory could have hugged him. But he kept close watch. To the rupture of the wedding-hungry twain, the preacher shook hands with such of his flock as had followed him to the station, picked up his valise and walked up to the porter, extending his ticket.

But the porter said—and Mallory could have throttled him for saying it: "Excuse me, please, but that's your train ova yonder. You betta move right smart, for it's gettin' ready to pull out."

With a little shriek of dismay, the parson clutched his valise and set off as a run. Mallory dashed after him and Marjorie after Mallory. They shouted as they ran, but the conductor of the east-bound train sang out "All aboard!" and swung on.

The parson made a sprint and caught the ultimate rail of the moving train. Mallory made a frantic leap at a flying coat-tail and missed. As he and Marjorie stood gazing reproachfully at the train which was giving a beautiful illustration of the laws of retreating perspective, they heard wild howls of "Hi! hi!" and "Hay! hay!" and turned to see their own train in motion, and the porter dancing a Sals step alongside.

CHAPTER XX.

Foiled Again.

Mallory tucked Marjorie under his arm and Marjorie tucked Snoozeums under hers, and they did a sort of three-legged race down the platform. The porter was pale blue with excitement, and it was with the last gasp of breath in all three bodies that they scrambled up the steps of the only open vestibule.

The porter was mad enough to give them a piece of his mind, and they were meek enough to take it without a word of explanation or resentment.

And the train sped on into the heart of Nebraska, along the unpopulated valley of the Platte. When lunch-time came, they ate it together, but in gloomy silence. They sat in Marjorie's berth throughout the appalling monotonous afternoon in a stupor of disappointment and helpless dejection, speaking little and saying nothing.

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theory that since most people who looked like preachers were decidedly lay, it might be well to take a gambler's chance and accost the least ministerial person next.

So, in his frantic anxiety, he selected a horsey-looking individual who got on at North Platte. He looked so much like a rawhided ranchman that Mallory stole up on him and asked him to excuse him, but did he happen to be a clergyman? The man replied by asking Mallory if he happened to be a flea-bitten maverick, and embellished his question with a copious flow of the words ministers use, but with a secular arrangement of them. In fact he split one word in two to insert a double-barrelled course. All that Mallory could do was to admit that he was a flea-bitten what-he-said, and back away.

After that, if a vicar in full uniform had marched down the aisle heading a procession of choir-boys, Mallory would have suspected him. He vowed in his haste that Marjorie might die an old maid before he would approach anybody else on that subject.

Nebraska would have been a nice long state for a honeymoon, but its four hundred-odd miles were a dreary length for the couple so near and yet so far. The railroad clinging to the meandering Platte made the way far longer, and Mallory and Marjorie left like Pyramus and Thisbe wandering along an eternal wall, through which they could see, but not reach, one another.

They dined together as dolefully as if they had been married for forty years. Then the slow twilight soaked them in its melancholy. The porter lighted up the car, and the angels lit up the stars, but nothing lit up their hopes.

"We've got to quarrel again, my beloved," Mallory groaned to Marjorie.

Somehow they were too dreary even to nag one another with an outburst to the benefit of the eager-eyed passengers.

A little excitement bestirred them as they realized that they were confronted with another night-robeless night and a morning without change of gear.

"What a pity that we left our things in the taxicab," Marjorie sighed. And this time she said, "we left them." Instead of "you left them." It was very gracious of her, but Mallory did not acknowledge the courtesy. Instead he gave a start and a gasp:

"Good Lord, Marjorie, we never paid the second taxicab!"

"Great heavens, how shall we ever pay him? He's been waiting there twenty-four hours. How much do you suppose we owe him?"

"About a year of my pay, I guess."

"You must send him a telegram of apology and ask him to read his meter. He was such a nice man—the kindest eyes—for a chauffeur."

"But how can I telegraph him? I don't know his name, or his number, or his company, or anything."

"It's too bad. He'll go through life hating us and thinking we cheated him."

"Well, he doesn't know our names either."

And then they forgot him temporarily for the more immediate need of clothes. All the passengers knew that they had left behind what baggage they had not sent ahead, and much sympathy had been expressed. But most people would rather give you their sympathy than lend you their clothes. Mallory did not mind the men, but Marjorie dreaded the women. She was afraid of all of them but Mrs. Temple.

She threw herself on the little lady's mercy and was asked to help herself. She borrowed a nightgown of extraordinary simplicity, a shirt waist of an ancient mode, and a number of other things.

If there had been anyone there to see she would have made a most anachronistic bride.

Mallory canvassed the men and obtained a shockingly purple shirt from Wedgewood, who meant to put him at his ease, but somehow failed when he said in answer to Mallory's thanks:

"God bless my soul, old top, don't you think of thanking me. I ought to thank you. You see, the idiot who makes my shirts, made that by mistake, and I'd be no end grateful if you'd jolly well take the loathsome thing off my hands. I mean to say, I shouldn't dream of being seen in it myself. You quite understand, don't you?"

Ashton contributed a maroon strocity in hosiery, with equal tact:

"If they fit you, keep 'em. I got stung on that batch of socks. That pair was originally lavender, but they washed like that. Keep 'em. I wouldn't be found dead in 'em."

The mysterious Fosdick, who lived a lonely life in the observation car and slept in the other stateroom, lent Mallory a pair of pyjamas evidently

intended for a bedroom of romantic disposition. Mallory blushed as he accepted them and when he found himself in them, he whisked out the light, he was so ashamed of himself.

Once more the whole car gaped at the unheard of behavior of its newly wedded pair. The poor porter had been hungry for a bridal couple, but as he went about gathering up the cast-off footwear of his large family and found Mallory's shoes at number three and Marjorie's tiny boots at number five, he shook his head and groaned.

"Times has suitably changed for the wuss. If this is a bridal couple, gimme divorcees."

CHAPTER XXI.

Matrimony to and Fro.

And the next morning they were in Wyoming—well toward the center of that State. They had left behind the tame levels and the truly rural towns and they were among foothills and mountains, passing cities of wildly picturesque repute, like Cheyenne, and Laramie, Bowie, and Medicine Bow, and Bitter Creek, whose very names imply literature and war whoops, cowboy yelps, barking revolvers, another redskin biting the dust, cattle stampedes, town-paintings, humorous lynchings and bronchos in epileptic frenzy.

But the talk of this train was concerned with none of these wonders, which the novelists and the magazine have perhaps a trifle overpublished. The talk of this train was concerned with the eighth wonder of the world, a semi-detached bridal couple.

Mrs. Whitcomb was eager enough to voice the sentiment of the whole populace, when she looked up from her novel in the observation room and, nudging Mrs. Temple, drawled: "By the way, my dear, has that bridal couple made up its second night's quarrel yet?"

"The Mallorlys?" Mrs. Temple flushed as she answered, mercifully. "Oh, yes, they were very friendly again this morning."

Mrs. Whitcomb's countenance was cynical: "My dear, I've been married twice and I ought to know something about honeymoons, but this honeymoon—" she cast up her eyes and her hands in despair.

The women were so concerned about Mr. and Mrs. Mallory, that they hardly noticed the uncomfortable plight of the Wellingtons, or the curious behavior of the lady from the stateroom who seemed to be afraid of something and never spoke to anybody. The strange behavior of Anne Gattie and Ira Lathrop even escaped much comment, though they were forever being stumbled on when anybody went out to the observation platform.

When they were dislodged from there, they sat playing checkers and talking very little, but making eyes at one another and sighing like furnaces.

They had evidently concocted some secret of their own, for Ira, looking at his watch, murmured sentimentally to Anne: "Only a few hours more, Annie."

And Anne turned geranium-color and dropped a handful of checkers. "I don't know how I can face it."

Ira growled like a lovesick lion: "Aw, what do you care?"

"But I was never married before, Ira," Anne protested, "and on a train, too."

"Why, all the bridal couples take to the railroads."

"I should think it would be the last place they'd go," said Anne—a sensible woman, Anne! "Look at the Mallorlys—how miserable they are."

"I thought they were happy," said Ira, whose great virtue it was to pay little heed to what was none of his business.

"Oh, Ira," cried Anne, "I hope we shan't begin to quarrel as soon as we are married."

"As if anybody could quarrel with you, Anne," he said.

"Do you think I'll be so monotonous as that?" she retorted.

Her spunk delighted him beyond words. He whispered: "Anne, you're so gold-darned sweet if I don't get a chance to kiss you, I'll bust."

"Why, Ira—we're on the train."

"Da—darn the train! Who ever heard of a fellow proposing and getting engaged to a girl and not even kissing her?"

"But our engagement is so short."

"Well, I'm not going to marry you until I get a kiss."

Perhaps innocent old Anne really believed this blood-curdling threat. It brought her instantly to terms, though she blushed: "But everybody's always looking."

"Come out on the observation platform."

"Oh, Ira, again?"

"I dare you."

"I take you—but seeing that Mrs. Whitcomb was trying to overhear, she whispered: 'Let's pretend it's the scenery.'"

So Ira rose, pushed the checkers aside, and said in an unusually positive tone: "Ah, Miss Gattie, won't you have a look at the landscape?"

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Lathrop," said Anne, "I just love scenery."

They wandered forth like the Sleeping Beauty and her princely awakener, and never dreamed what giggles and nudgings and wise head-noddings went on back of them. Mrs. Wellington laughed loudest of all at the lovers whose heads had grown gray while their hearts were still so green.

It was shortly after this that the Wellingtons themselves came into prominence in the train life.

As the train approached Green River, and its copper-hued stream, the engineer began to set the brakes for the stop. Jimmie Wellington, hourly "wink" in the smok-

ing room, wanted to know what the name of the station was. Everybody is always eager to oblige a drunken man, so Ashton and Fosdick tried to get a window open to look out.

The first one they labored at, they could not budge after a biceps-breaking tug. The second flew up with such ease that they went over backward. Ashton put his head out and announced that the approaching depot was labelled "Green River." Wellington burbled: "What a beautiful name for a situation."

Ashton announced that there was something beautiful still on the platform—"Oh, a peach!—a nectarine! and she's getting on this train."

Even Doctor Temple declared that she was a dear little thing, wasn't she?

Wellington pushed him aside, saying: "Stand back Doc, and let me see; I have a keen sense of beautiful." "Be careful," cried the doctor, "he'll fall out of the window."

"Not out of that window," Ashton sagely observed, seeing the bulk of Wellington. As the train started off again, Little Jimmie distributed alcoholic smiles to the Green Riverers on the platform and called out:

"Good-bye, everybody. You're all absolutely—ow—ow!" He clapped his hand to his eye and crawled back into the car, groaning with pain.

"What's the matter?" said Wedgewood. "Got something in your eye?"

"No, you blamed fool. I'm trying to look through my thumb."

"Poor fellow!" sympathized Doctor Temple, "it's a cinder!"

"A cinder! It's at least a ton of coal."

"I say, old boy, let me have a peek," said Wedgewood, screwing in his monocle and peering into the depths of Wellington's eye. "I can't see a bally thing."

"Of course not, with that blinder on," growled the miserable wretch, weeping in spite of himself and rubbing his smarting orb.

"Don't rub that eye," Ashton counselled, "rub the other eye."

"It's my eye; I'll rub it if I want to. Get me a doctor, somebody. I'm dying."

"Here's Doctor Temple," said Ashton, "right on the job." Wellington turned to the old clergyman with pathetic trust, and the deceiver writhed in his disguise. The best he could think of was: "Will somebody lend me a lead pencil?"

"What for?" said Wellington, uneasily.

"I am going to roll your upper lid up on it," said the Doctor.

"Oh, no, you're not," said the patient. "You can roll your own lids!"

Then the conductor, still another conductor, wandered on the scene and asked as if it were not a world-important matter: "What's the matter—pick up a cinder?"

"Yes. Perhaps you can get it out," the alleged doctor appealed.

The conductor nodded: "The best way is this—take hold of the wipers."

"The what?" mumbled Wellington.

"Grab the wipers of your upper eyelid in your right hand—"

"I've got 'em."

"Now grab the wipers of your lower eyelid in your left hand. Now raise the right hand, push the under lid under the overlid and haul the overlid over the underlid; when you have the overlid well over the under—"

Wellington waved him away: "Say, what do you think I'm trying to do? stuff a mattress? Get out of my way. I want my wife—lead me to my wife."

"An excellent idea," said Dr. Temple, who had been praying for a reconciliation.

He guided Wellington with difficulty to the observation room and, finding Mrs. Wellington at the desk as usual, he began: "Oh, Mrs. Wellington, may I introduce you to your husband?"

Mrs. Wellington rose haughtily, caught a sight of her suffering consort and ran to him with a cry of "Jimmie!"

"Lucretia!"

"What's happened—are you killed?"

"I'm far from well. But don't worry. My life insurance is paid up."

"Oh, my poor little darling," Mrs. Jimmie fluttered, "what on earth ails you?" She turned to the doctor. "Is he going to die?"

"I think not," said the doctor. "It's only a bad case of cinder-in-the-eyetis."

Thus reassured, Mrs. Wellington went into the patient's eye with her handkerchief. "Is that the eye?" she asked.

"No!" he howled, "the other one."

She went into that and came out with the cinder.

"There! It's just a tiny speck."

Wellington regarded the mote with amazement. "Is that all? It felt as if I had Pike's Peak in my eye." Then he waxed tender. "Oh, Lucretia, how can I ever—"

But she drew away with a disdainful: "Give me back my hand, please."

"Now, Lucretia," he protested, "don't you think you're carrying this pretty far?"

"Only as far as Reno," she answered grimly, which stung him to retort: "You'd better take the beam out of your own eye, now that you've taken the cinder out of mine," but she, noting that they were the center of interest, observed: "All the passengers are enjoying this, my dear. You'd better go back to the cafe."

Wellington regarded her with a revelation to wrath. He thundered at her: "I will go back, but allow me to inform you, my dear madam, that I'll not drink another drop—just to surprise you."

Mrs. Wellington observed her about-face at the ancient threat and Jimmie chuckled back to his seat, whether the

men followed him. Feeling sympathy in the atmosphere, Little Jimmie felt impelled to pour out his grief:

"Jellmen, I'm a brok'n-hearted man. Mrs. Well'n'ton is a queen among women, but she has temper of tarant—"

Wedgewood broke in: "I say, old boy, you've carried this ballast for three days now, wherever did you get it?"

Wellington drew himself up proudly for a moment before he slumped back into himself. "Well, you see, when I announced to a few friends that I was about to leave Mrs. Well'n'ton forever and that I was getting out to—to—you know."

"Reno. We know. Well?"

"Well, a crowd of my friends got up a farewell sort of divorce breakfast—and some of 'em felt so very sad about my divorce that they drank a little too much, and the rest of my friends felt so very glad about my divorce, that they drank a little too much. And, of course, I had to join both parties."

"And that breakfast," said Ashton, "lasted till the train started, eh?"

Wellington glowered back triumphantly. "Lasted till the train started? Jellmen, that breakfast is going yet!"

CHAPTER XXII.

In the Smoking Room.

Wellington's divorce breakfast reminded Ashton of a story. Ashton was one of the great That-Reminds-Me family. Perhaps it was to the credit of the Englishman that he missed the point of this story, even though Jimmie Wellington saw it through his fog, and Dr. Temple turned red and buried his eyes in the eminently respectable pages of the Scientific American.

Ashton and Wellington and Fosdick exchanged winks over the Britisher's stare of incomprehension, and Ashton explained it to him again in words of one syllable, with signboards at all the different spots.

Finally a gleam of understanding broke over Wedgewood's face and he tried to justify his delay.

"Oh, yes, of course I see it now. Yes, I rather fancy I get you. It's awfully good, isn't it? I think I should have got it before but I'm not really myself; for two mawnings I haven't had my tub."

Wellington shook with laughter: "If you're like this now, what will you be when you get to Sin san frasco—I mean Frisnansisco—well, you know what I mean?"

Ashton reached round for the electric button as if he were conferring a favor: "The drinks are on you, Wedgewood. I'll ring." And he rang. "Awful kind of you," said Wedgewood, "but how do you make that out?"

"The man that misses the point, pays for the drinks." And he rang again. Wellington protested.

"But I've jolly well paid for all the drinks for two days."

Wellington roared: "That's another point you've missed." And Ashton rang again, but the pale yellow individual who had always answered the bell with alacrity did not appear.

"Where's that infernal buffet waiter?" grumbled.

Wedgewood began to titter. "We were out of Scotch, so I sent him for some more."

"When?"

"Two stations back. I fancy we must have left him behind."

"Well, why in thunder didn't you say so?" Ashton roared.

"It quite escaped my mind," Wedgewood grinned. "Rather good joke on you fellows, what?"

"Well, I don't see the point," Ashton growled, but the triumphant Englishman howled: "That's where you pay!"

Wedgewood had his laugh to himself, for the others wanted to murder him. Ashton advised a lynching, but the conductor arrived on the scene in time to prevent violence.

Fosdick informed him of the irretrievable loss of the useful buffet waiter. The conductor promised to get another at Ogden.

Ashton wailed: "Have we got to sit here and die of thirst till then?"

The conductor refused to "back up for a coon," but offered to send in a sleeping-car porter as a temporary substitute.

As he started to go, Fosdick, who had been incessantly consulting his watch, checked him to ask: "Oh, conductor, when do we get to the state-line of dear old Utah?"

"Dear old Utah!" the conductor grinned. "We'd 'a' been there already if we hadn't 'a' fell behind a little."

"Just my luck to be late," Fosdick moaned.

"What you so anxious to be in Utah for, Fosdick?" Ashton asked, suspiciously. "You go on to Frisco, don't you?"

Fosdick was evidently confused at the direct question. He tried to dodge it: "Yes, but—funny how things have changed. When we started, nobody was speaking to anybody except his wife, now—"

"Now," said Ashton, drily, "everybody's speaking to everybody except his wife."

"You're wrong there," Little Jimmie interrupted. "I wasn't speaking to my wife in the first place. We got on as strangers and we're strangerish yet. Mrs. Well'n'ton is a—"

"A queen among women, we know! Dry up," said Ashton, and then they heard the querulous voice of the porter of their sleeping car: "I tell you, I don't know nothin' about the buffet business."

The conductor pushed him in with a gruff command. "Crawl in that case and get busy."

"Still the porter protested: 'Mornin' folks, I'm a stranger here. I don't know nothin' about the buffet business.'"

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