

# EXCUSE ME!

## RUPERT HUGHES

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

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Mallory glanced at his costume: "I look like a rainbow gone wrong. Just my luck to have to borrow from everybody. Look at me! This collar of Mr. Wellington's makes me feel like a pennant in a rubber tire." He turned to Fostick.

"I say, Mr. Fostick, what size collar do you wear?"

"Fourteen and a half," said Fostick.

"Fourteen and a half!—why don't you get a neck? You haven't got a plain white shirt, have you? Our English friend lent me this, but it's purple, and Mr. Ashton's socks are maroon, and this peacock blue tie is very unhappy."

"I think I can fit you out," said Fostick.

"And if you had an extra pair of socks," Mallory pleaded—"just one pair of unemotional socks."

"I'll show you my repertoire."

"All right, I'll see you later." Then he went up to Wellington, with much assistance of manner. "By the way, Mr. Wellington, do you suppose Mrs. Wellington could lend Mrs. Mrs.—could lend Marjorie some—some—"

Wellington waved him aside with magnificent scorn: "I am no longer in Mrs. Wellington's confidence."

"Oh, excuse me," said Mallory. He had noted that the Wellingtons occupied separate compartments, but for all he knew their reason was as romantic as his own.

#### CHAPTER XXIII.

Through a Tunnel.

Mrs. Jimmie Wellington, who had traveled much abroad and learned in England the habit of smoking in the corridors of expensive hotels, had acquired also the habit, as travelers do, of calling England freer than America. She determined to do her share toward the education of her native country, and chose, for her topic, tobacco as a feminine accomplishment.

She had grown indifferent to stares and audible comment and she could fight a protesting head waiter to a standstill. If monuments and tablets are ever erected to the first woman who smoked publicly in this place or that, Mrs. Jimmie Wellington will be proudly remembered and occupy a large place in historical record.

The narrow confines of the women's room on the sleeping car soon palled on her, and she objected to smoking there except when she felt the added luxury of keeping some other woman outside—fuming, but not smoking. And now Mrs. Jimmie had staked out a claim on the observation platform. She sat there, puffing like a major-general, and in one portion of Nebraska two farmers fell off their agricultural vehicles at the sight of her cigar-smoke trailing after the train. In Wyoming three cowboys followed her for a mile, yipping and howling their compliments.

Feeling the smoke mood coming on, Mrs. Wellington invited Mrs. Temple to smoke with her, but Mrs. Temple felt a reminiscent qualm at the very thought, so Mrs. Jimmie sauntered out alone, to the great surprise of Ira Lathrop, whose motto was, "Two heads are better than one," and who was apparently willing to wait till Anne Gattie's head grew on his shoulder.

"I trust I don't intrude," Mrs. Wellington said.

"Oh, no. Oh, yes." Anne gasped in her confusion as she fled into the car, followed by the purple-faced Ira, who slammed the door with a growl: "That Wellington woman would break up anything."

The prim little missionary toppled into the nearest chair: "Oh, Ira, what will she think?"

"She can't think!" Ira grumbled. "In a little while she'll know."

"Don't you think we'd better tell everybody before they begin to talk?" Ira glowed with pride at the thought and murmured with all the ardor of a senile Romeo: "I suppose so, ducky darling. I'll break it—I mean I'll tell it to the men, and you tell the women."

"All right, dear, I'll obey you," she answered, meekly.

"Obey me!" Ira laughed with boyish swagger. "And you a missionary!"

"Well, I've converted one heathen, anyway," said Anne as she darted down the corridor, followed by Ira, who announced his intention to "go to the baggage car and dig up his old Prince Albert."

In their flight forward they passed the mysterious woman in the stateroom. They were too full of their own mystery to give thought to hers. Mrs. Fostick went timidly prowling toward the observation car, suspecting everybody to be a spy, as Mallory suspected everybody to be a clergyman in disguise.

As she stole along the corridor past the men's clubroom she saw her husband—her here-and-there husband—sneaking counting the telegraph posts and sunning them up into

lenses. She tapped on the glass and signalled to him, then passed on.

He answered with a look, then pretended not to have noticed, and waited a few moments before he rose with an elaborate air of carelessness. He beckoned the porter and said:

"Let me know the moment we enter Utah, will you?"

"Yassah. We'll be comin' along right soon now. We got to pass through the big Aspen tunnel, after that, befo' long, we splounce into old Utah."

"Don't forget," said Fostick, as he sauntered out. Ashton perked up his ears at the promise of a tunnel and kept his eye on his watch.

Fostick entered the observation room with a hungry look in his luscious eyes. His now-and-then wife put up a warning finger to indicate Mrs. Whitcomb's presence at the writing desk.

Fostick's smile froze into a smirk of formality and he tried to chill his tone as if he were speaking to a total stranger.

"Good afternoon."

Mrs. Fostick answered with equal ice: "Good afternoon. Won't you sit down?"

"Thanks. Very picturesque scenery, isn't it?"

"Isn't it?" Fostick seated himself, looked about cautiously, noted that Mrs. Whitcomb was apparently absorbed in her letter, then lowered his voice confidentially. His face kept up a strained pretense of indifference, but his whisper was passionate with longing:

"Has my poor little wife missed her poor old hubby?"

"Oh, so much!" she whispered.

"Has poor little hubby missed his poor old wife?"

"Horribly. Was she lonesome in that dismal stateroom all by herself?"

"Oh, so miserable! I can't stand it much longer."

Fostick's face blazed with good news: "In just a little while we come to the Utah line—then we're safe."

"God bless Utah!"

The rapture died from her face as she caught sight of Dr. Temple, who happened to stroll in and go to the bookshelves, and taking out a book happened to glance near-sightedly her way.

"Be careful of that man, dearie," Mrs. Fostick hissed out of one side of her mouth. "He's a very strange character."

Her husband was infected with her own terror. He asked, huskily: "What do you think he is?"

"A detective! I'm sure he's watching us. He followed you right in here."

"We'll be very cautious—till we get to Utah."

The old clergyman, a little fussy in brain from his debut in beer, continued innocently to confirm the appearance of a detective by drifting aimlessly about. He was looking for his wife, but he kept glancing at the uneasy Fosticks. He went to the door, opened it, saw Mrs. Wellington finishing a cigar, and retreated precipitately. Seeing Mrs. Temple wandering in the corridor, he motioned her to a chair near the Fosticks and she sat by his side, wondering at his flimsy eyes.

The Fosticks, glancing uncomfortably at Dr. Temple, rose and selected other chairs farther away. Then Roger Ashton sauntered in, his eyes searching for a proper companion through the tunnel.

He saw Mrs. Wellington returning from the platform, just tossing away her cigar and blowing out the last of its grateful vapor.

With an effort at sarcasm, he went to her and offered her one of his own cigars, smiling: "Have another."

She took it, looked it over, and parried his irony with a formula she had heard men use when they hate to refuse a gift-cigar: "Thanks. I'll smoke it after dinner, if you don't mind."

"Oh, I don't mind," he laughed, then bending closer he murmured: "They tell me we are coming to a tunnel, a nice, long, dark, dismal tunnel."

Mrs. Wellington would not take a dare. She felt herself already emancipated from Jimmie. So she answered Ashton's hint with a laughing challenge:

"How nice of the conductor to arrange it."

Ashton smacked his lips over the prospect.

And now the porter, having noted Ashton's impatience to reach the tunnel, thought to curry favor and a quarter by announcing its approach. He hustled in and made straight for Ashton just as the tunnel announced itself with a sudden swoop of gloom, a great increase of the train-noises and a far-off clang of the locomotive bell.

Out of the Egyptian darkness came the unmistakable sounds of occlusion in various parts of the room. Doubt-

less, it was repeated in other parts of the train. There were numerous cooling sounds, too, but nobody spoke except Mrs. Temple, who was heard to murmur:

"Oh, Walter, dear, what makes your breath so funny!"

Next came a little wowl of pain in Mrs. Fostick's voice, and then daylight flooded the car with a rush, as if time had made an instant leap from midnight to noon. There were interesting disclosures.

Mrs. Temple was caught with her arms round the doctor's neck, and she blushed like a spoony girl. Mrs. Fostick was trying to disengage her hair from Mr. Fostick's scarf-pin. Mrs. Whitcomb alone was deserted. Mr. Ashton was gazing devotion at Mrs. Wellington and trying to tell her with his eyes how velvet he had found her cheek.

But she was looking reproachfully at him from a chair, and saying, not without regret:

"I heard everybody kissing everybody, but I was cruelly neglected."

Ashton's eyes widened with unbelief, he heard a snicker at his elbow, and whirled to find the porter rubbing his black velvet cheek and writhing with pent-up laughter.

Mrs. Wellington glanced the same way, and a shriek of understanding burst from her. It sent the porter into a spasm of yah-yahs till he caught Ashton's eyes and saw murder in them. The porter fled to the platform and held the door fast, expecting to be lynched.

But Ashton dashed away in search of concealment and soap.

The porter remained on the platform for some time, planning to leap overboard and take his chances rather than fall into Ashton's hands, but at length, finding himself unpursued, he peered into the car and, seeing that Ashton had gone, he returned to his duties. He kept a close watch on Ashton, but on soberer thoughts Ashton had decided that the incident would best be consigned to silence and oblivion. But for all the rest of that day he kept rubbing his lips with his handkerchief.

The porter, noting that the train had swept into a granite gorge like an enormously magnified aisle in a single-up sleeping car, recognized the presence of Echo Canyon, and with it the entrance into Utah. He hastened to impart the tidings to Mr. Fostick and held out his hand as he extended the information.

Fostick could hardly believe that his twelve-hundred-mile exile was over.

"We're in Utah!" he exclaimed.

"Yassah, and the porter shoved his palm into view. Fostick filled it with all his loose change, then whirled to his wife and cried:

"Edith! We are in Utah now! Embrace me!"

She flung herself into his arms with a gurgle of bliss. The other passengers gasped with amazement. This sort of thing was permissible enough in a tunnel, but in the full light of day—!

Fostick, noting the sensation he had created, waved his hand reassuringly and called across his wife's shoulder:

"Don't be alarmed, ladies and gentlemen. She's my wife!" He added in a whisper meant for her ear alone: "At least till we get to Nevada!"

Then she whispered something in his ear and they hurried from the car. They left behind them a bewildered Mallory, that couple spoke to each other at least during the day time. Here was a married pair that did not speak at all for two days and two nights and then made a sudden and public rush to each other's arms!

Dr. Temple summed up the general feeling when he said:

"I don't believe in witches, but if I did, I'd believe that this train is bewitched."

Later he decided that Fostick was a Mormon elder and that Mrs. Fostick was probably a twelfth or thirteenth spouse he was smuggling in from the east. The theory was not entirely false, for Fostick was one of the many victims of the crazy-quit of American divorce codes, though he was the most unwilling of polygamists. And Dr. Temple gave up his theory in despair the next morning when he found the Fosticks still on the train, and once more keeping aloof from each other.

#### CHAPTER XXIV.

The Train Butcher.

Mallory was dragging out a miserable existence with a companion who was neither maid, wife, nor widow and to whom he was neither bachelor, husband, nor relief.

They were suffering brain-fag from their one topic of conversation, and heart-fag from rapture deferred. Marjorie had pretended to take a nap and Mallory had pretended that he would leave her for her own sake. Their contradictory chains were beginning to gail.

Mallory sat in the smoking room, and threw aside a half-finished cigar. Life was indeed nauseous when tobacco turned rank on his lips. He watched without interest the stupendous scenery whirling past the train: granite ravines, infernal grotesques of architecture and diablerie, the Giant's Teapot, the Devil's Slide, the Pulpit Rock, the Hanging Rock, splashes of mineral color, as if titanic paint pots had been spilled or flung against the cliffs, sudden hushes of green pine-woods, dreary graveyards of sand and sagebrush, mountain streams in frothing panics.

His jaded soul could not respond to any of these thrillers, the dime-novels and melodramatic third-acts of nature. But with the arrival of a train-boy, who had in at Evanston with

a bunch of Salt Lake City newspapers, he woke a little.

The other men came trooping round, like sheep at a herd-boy's whistle or chickens when a pan of grain is brought into the yard. The train "butcher" had a nasal sing-song, but his strain might have been the Pied Piper's tune emptying Hamelin of its grown-ups. The charms of flirtation, matrimonial bliss and feminine beauty were forgotten, and the males flocked to the delights of stock-market reports, political or racing or dramatic or sporting or criminal news. Even Ashton braved the eyes of his fellow men for the luxury of burying his nose in a fresh paper.

"Papers, gents? Yes? No?" the train butcher chanted. "Salt Lake papers, Ogden papers, all the latest papers, comic papers, magazines, periodicals."

"Here, boy," said Ashton, snapping his fingers, "what's the latest New York paper?"

"Last Sat'day's."

"Six days old? I read that before I left New York. Well, give me that Salt Lake paper. It has yesterday's stock market, I suppose."

"Yes, sir." He passed over the sheet and made change, without abating his monody: "Papers, gents. Yes? No? Salt Lake pa—"

"Whash latest from Chicago?" said Wellington.

"Monday's."

"I read that before—that breakfast began," laughed Little Jimmie. "Well, give me Salt Lake Bazaar. It has baseball news, I s'pose."

"Yes, sir," the butcher answered, and his tone grew reverent as he said: "The Giants won. Mr. Mattyson was pitching. Papers, gents, all the latest papers, magazines, periodicals."

Wedgewood extended a languid hand: "What's the latest issue of the London Times?"

"Never heard of it."

Wedgewood almost fainted, and returned to his Baedeker of the United States.

Dr. Temple summoned the lad: "I don't suppose you have the Ypsilanti Eagle?"

The butcher regarded him with pity, and sniffed: "I carry newspapers, not poultry."

"Well, give me the—" he saw a plink weekly of rather picturesque appearance, and the adventure attracted him. "I'll take this—also the Outlook." He folded the pink within the green, and entered into a new and startling world—a sort of journalistic slumming tour.

"Give me any old thing," said Mallory, and flung open an Ogden Journal till he found the sporting page, where his eyes were attracted. "By jove, a ten-hundred-dollar bet on the lawson in the last!"

"Mattie is most intellectual pitcher in the world," said Little Jimmie, and then everybody disappeared behind paper ramparts, while the butcher lingered to explain to the porter the details of the great event.

About this time, Marjorie, tired of her pretense at slumber, strolled into the observation car, glancing into the men's room, where she saw nothing but newspapers. Then Mrs. Wellington saw her, and smiled: "Come in and make yourself at home."

"Thanks, said Marjorie, bashfully, "I was looking for my—my—"

"Husband?"

"My dog."

"How is he this morning?"

"My dog."

"Your husband."

"Oh, he's as well as could be expected."

"Where did you get that love of a waist?" Mrs. Wellington laughed.

"Mrs. Temple lent it to me. Isn't it sweet?"

"Exquisite! The latest Ypsilanti mode."

Marjorie, suffering almost more acutely from being badly frocked than from being duped in her matrimonial hopes, threw herself on Mrs. Wellington's mercy.

"I'm so unhappy in this. Couldn't you lend me or sell me something a little smarter?"

"I'd love to, my dear," said Mrs. Wellington, "but I left home on short notice myself. I shall need all my divorce trousseau in Reno. Otherwise—I—but here's your husband. You two ought to have some place to sponoon. I'll leave you this whole room."

And she swept out, nodding to Mallory, who had divined Marjorie's presence, and felt the need of being near her, though he also felt the need of finishing the story of the great ball game. Husbandlike, he felt that he was conferring sufficient courtesy in throwing a casual smile across the top of the paper.

Marjorie studied his motley garb, and her own, and groaned:

"We're a sweet looking pair, aren't we?"

"Mr. and Miss Ft.," said Mallory, from behind the paper.

"Oh, Harry, has your love grown cold?" she pleaded.

"Marjorie, how can you think such a thing?" still from behind the paper.

"Well, Mrs. Wellington said we ought to have some place to sponoon, and she went away and left us, and there you stand—and—"

This pierced even the baseball news, and he threw his arms around her with glow of devotion.

She snuggled closer, and cooed: "Aren't we having a nice long engagement? We've traveled a million miles, and the preacher isn't in sight yet. What have you been reading—wedding announcements?"

"No—I was reading about the most wonderful exhibition. Mattie was in the box—and in perfect form."

"Mattie?" Marjorie gasped unseeingly.

"Mattie!" he raved, "and in perfect form."

And now the sudden surfeit of jealousy, which promised to enliven their future, lifted its head for the first time, and Mallory caught his first glimpse of an unsuspected member of their household. Marjorie demanded with an ominous chill:

"And who's Mattie? Some former sweetheart of yours?"

"My dear," laughed Mallory.

But Marjorie was up and away, with apt temper: "So Mattie was with you, was she? What is it to you, where she sits? You dare to read about her and rave over her perfect form, while you neglect your wife—or your—oh, what am I, anyway?"

Mallory stared at her in amazement. He was beginning to learn what ignorant heathen women are concerning so many of the gods and demi-gods of mankind. Then, with a tenderness he might not always show, he threw the paper down and took her in his arms: "You poor child. Mattie is a man—a pitcher—and you're the only woman I ever loved—and you are liable to be my wife any minute."

The explanation was sufficient, and she crawled into the shelter of his arm with little noises that served for apology, forgiveness and reconciliation. Then he made the mistake of mentioning the sickening topic of deferred hope:

"A minister's sure to get on at the next stop—or the next."

Marjorie's nerves were frayed by too much enduring, and it took only a word to set them jangling: "If you say minister to me again, I'll scream." Then she tried to control herself with a polite: "Where is the next stop?"

"Ogden."

"Where's that? On the map?"

"Well, it's in Utah."

"Utah!" she groaned. "They marry by wholesale there, and we can't even get a sample."

#### CHAPTER XXV.

The Train Wrecker.

The train-butcher, entering the Observation Room, found only a loving couple. He took in at a glance their desire for solitude. A large part of his business was the forcing of wares on people who did not want them.

His voice and his method suggested the mosquito. Seeing Mallory and Marjorie mutually absorbed in reading each other's eyes, and evidently in need of nothing on earth less than something else to read, the train-butcher decided that his best plan of attack was to make himself a nuisance. It is a plan successfully adopted by organ-grinders, street pianists and other blackmailers under the guise of art, who have nothing so welcome to sell as their absence.

Mallory and Marjorie heard the train-boy's hum, but they tried to ignore it.

"Papers, gents and ladies? Yes? No? Paris fashions, lady?"

He shoved a large periodical between their very noses, but Marjorie threw it on the floor, with a bitter glance at her own borrowed plumage:

"Don't show me any Paris fashions!" Then she gave the boy his conge by resuming her chat with Mallory: "How long do we stop at Ogden?"

The train-boy went right on auctioning his papers and magazines, and poking them into the laps of his prey. And they went right on talking to one another and pushing his papers and magazines to the floor.

"I think I'd better get off at Ogden, and take the next train back. That's just what I'll do. Nothing, thank you!" this last to the train-boy.

"But you can't leave me like this," Mallory urged excitedly, with a side glance of "No, no!" to the train-boy.

"I can, and I must, and I will," Marjorie insisted. "I'll go pack my things now."

"But, Marjorie, listen to me." "Will you let me alone!" This to the gaddy, but to Mallory a dejected wail: "I—I just remembered. I haven't anything to pack."

"And you'll have to give back that waist to Mrs. Temple. You can't get off at Ogden without a waist."

"I'll go anyway. I want to get home."

"Marjorie, if you talk that way—I'll throw you off the train!"

She gasped. He explained: "I wasn't talking to you; I was trying to stop this phonograph." Then he rose, and laid violent hands on the annoy, shoved him to the corridor, seized his bundle of papers from his arm, and hurled them at his head. They fell in a shower about the train-butcher, who could only feel a certain respect for the one man who had ever treated him as he knew he deserved. He bent to pick up his scattered merchandise, and when he had gathered his stock together, put his head in, and sang out a sincere:

"Excuse me."

But Mallory did not hear him, he was excitedly trying to calm the excited girl, who, having eloped with him, was preparing now to elope back without him.

"Darling, you can't desert me now," he pleaded, "and leave me to go on alone!"

"Well, why don't you do something?" she retorted, in equal desperation. "If I were a man, and I had the girl I loved on a train. I'd get her married if I had to wreck the—" she caught her breath, paused a second in intense thought, and then, with sudden radiance, cried: "Harry, dear!"

"Yes, love!"

"I have an idea—an inspiration!"

"Yes, pet," rather dubiously from him, but with absolute exultation from her: "Let's wreck the train!"

"I don't follow you, sweetheart."

"Don't you see," she began excitedly.

ly. "When there are trains wrecked a lot of people get killed, and then a minister always turns up to administer the last something or other—well—"

"Well!"

"Well, stupid, don't you see? We wreck a train, a minister comes, we nab him, he marries us, and—there we are! Everything's lovely!"

He gave her one of those looks with which a man usually greets what a woman calls an inspiration. He did not honor her invention with analysis. He simply put forward an objection to it, and, man-like, chose the most hateful of all objections:

"It's a lovely idea, but the wreck would delay us for hours and hours, and I'd miss my transport—"

"Harry Mallory, if you mention that odious transport to me again, I know I'll have hydrophobia. I'm going home."

"But, darling," he pleaded, "you can't desert me now, and leave me to go on alone?" She had her answer glib:

"If you really loved me, you'd—"

"Oh, I know," he cut in. "You've said that before. But I'd be court-martialed. I'd lose my career."

"What's a career to a man who truly loves?"

"It's just as much as it is to anybody else—and more."

She could hardly controvert this gracefully, so she sank back with grim resignation. "Well, I've proposed my plan, and you don't like it. Now, suppose you propose something."

The silence was oppressive. They sat like stouptown bottles. There the conductor found them some time later. He gave them a careless look, selected a chair at the end of the car, and began to sort his tickets, spreading them out on another chair, making notes with the pencil he took from atop his ear, and shoved back from time to time.

Ages seemed to pass, and Mallory had not even a suggestion. By this time Marjorie's temper had evaporated, and when he said: "If we could only stop at some town for half an hour," she said: "Maybe the conductor would hold the train for us."

"I hardly think he would."

"He looks like an awfully nice man. You ask him."

"Oh, what's the use?"

Marjorie was getting tired of depending on this charming young man with the very bad luck. She decided to assume command herself. She took recourse naturally to the original feminine methods: "I'll take care of him," she said, with resolution. "A woman can get a man to do almost anything if she flirts a little with him."

"Marjorie!"

"Now, don't you mind anything I do. Remember, it's all for love of you—even if I have to kiss him."

"Marjorie, I won't permit—"

"You have no right to boss me—yet. You subside." She gave him the merest touch, but he fell backward into a chair, utterly agast at the shameless siren into which desperation had altered the timid little thing he thought he had chosen to love. He was being rapidly initiated into the complex and versatile and fearfully wonderful thing a woman really is, and he was saying to himself, "What have I married?" forgetting, for the moment, that he had not married her yet, and that therein lay the whole trouble.

#### CHAPTER XXVI.

Delliah and the Conductor.

Like the best of women and the worst of men, Marjorie was perfectly willing to do evil, that good might come of it. She advanced on the innocent conductor, as the lady from Borek must have sidled up to Samson, coquetting with one arch hand and snipping the shears with the other.

The stupefied Mallory saw Marjorie in a startling imitation of herself at her sweetest; only now it was brazen mimicry, yet how like! She went forward as the shyest young thing in the world, pursed her lips into an ecstatic simper, and began on the unsuspecting official:

"Isn't the country perfectly—"

"Yes, but I'm getting used to it," the conductor growled, without looking up.

His curt indifference jolted Marjorie a trifle, but she rallied her forces, and came back with: "How long do we stop at Ogden?"

"Five minutes," very bluntly.

Marjorie poured maple syrup on her tone, as she purred: "This train of yours is an awfully fast train, isn't it?"

"Sort of," said the conductor, with just a trace of thaw. "What followed made him hold his breath, for the outrageous little hussy was actually saying: "The company must have a great deal of confidence in you to entrust the lives and welfare of so many people to your presence of mind and courage."

"Well, of course, I can't say as to that—"

Even Mallory could see that the man's reserve was melting fast as Marjorie went on with relentless treacle:

"Talk about soldiers and firemen and life-savers! I think it takes a braver man than any of those to be a conductor—really."

"Well, it is a kind of a responsible job." The conductor swelled his chest a little at that, and Marjorie felt that he was already hers. She hammered the weak spot—his error:

Continued next week.