

EXCUSE ME!



RUPERT HUGHES

NOVELIZED FROM THE COMEDY OF THE SAME NAME.

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Put just that way, the proposition did not look so alluring as at first. He sank back with a sigh: "I guess I am. I resign."

He was as weary of being "follid again" as the villain of a cheap melodrama. The two lovers sat in a twilight of deep melancholy, till Marjorie's mind dug up a new source of alarm:

"Harry, I've just thought of something terrible."

"Let's have it," he sighed, drearly. "We reach San Francisco at midnight and you sail at daybreak. What becomes of me?"

Mallory had no answer to this problem, except a grim: "I'll not desert you."

"But we'll have no time to get married."

"Then," he declared with iron resolve, "then I'll resign from the army."

Marjorie stared at him with awe. He was so wonderful, so heroic. "But what will the country do without you?"

"It will have to get along the best it can," he answered with finality. "Do you think I'd give you up?"

But this was too much to ask. In the presence of a ruined career and a heroless army, Marjorie felt that her own scruples were too petty to count. She could be heroic, too.

"No!" she said, in a deep, low tone, "No, we'll get married in the smoking room. Go call your drummer!"

This opened the clouds and let in the sun again with such a radiant blaze that Mallory hesitated no longer. "Fine!" he cried, and leaped to his feet, only to be detained again by Marjorie's clutch:

"But first, what about that bracelet?"

"She's got it," Mallory groaned, slumping from the heights again. "Do you mean to say she's still wearing it?"

"How was I to get it?"

"Couldn't you have slipped into her car last night and stolen it?"

"Good Lord, I shouldn't think you'd want me to go—why, Marjorie—I'd be arrested!"

But Marjorie set her jaw hard: "Well, you get that bracelet, or you don't get me." And then her smouldering jealousy and grief took a less hateful tone: "Oh, Harry!" she wailed, "I'm so lonely and so helpless and so far from home."

"But I'm here," he urged. "You're farther away than anybody," she whimpered, huddling close to him.

"Poor little thing," he murmured, soothing her with voice and kiss and caress.

"Put your arm round me," she cooed, like a mourning dove, "I don't care if everybody is looking. Oh, I'm so lonely."

"I'm just as lonely as you are," he pleaded, trying to creep into the company of her misery.

"Please marry me soon," she implored, "won't you, please?"

"I'd marry you this minute if you'd say the word," he whispered.

"I'd say it if you only had that bracelet," she sobbed, like a tired child. "I should think you would understand my feelings. That awful person is wearing your bracelet and I have only your ring, and her bracelet is ten times as big as my ring, boo-hoo-hoo-oo!"

"I'll get that bracelet if I have to chop her arm off," Mallory vowed. The sobs stopped short, as Marjorie looked up to ask: "Have you got your sword with you?"

"It's in my trunk," he said, "but I'll manage."

stead of this trivial girl whom he had looked upon when her cheeks were red.

CHAPTER XXXV.

Mr. and Mrs. Little Jimmie. Mrs. Sammy Whitcomb had longed for the sweet privilege of squaring matters with Mrs. Jimmie Wellington. Sneers and back-biting, shrugs and shudders of contempt were poor compensation for the ever-vivid fact that Mrs. Wellington had proved attractive to her Sammy while Mrs. Wellington's Jimmie never looked at Mrs. Whitcomb. Or if he did, his eyes had been so blurred that he had seen two of her—and avoided both.

Yesterday she had overheard Jimmie vow sobriety. Today his shining morning face showed that he had kept his word. She could hardly wait to begin the flirtation which, she trusted, would render Mrs. Wellington helplessly furious for six long Reno months.

The Divorce Drummer interposed and held Jimmie prisoner for a time, but as soon as Mr. Baumann released him, Mrs. Whitcomb apprehended him. With a smile that beckoned and with eyes that went out like far-cast flashlights, she drew Leviathan into her net.

She reeled him in and he plumped in the seat opposite. What she took for bashfulness was reluctance. To add the last charm to her success, Mrs. Wellington arrived to see it. Mrs. Whitcomb saw the lonely Ashton rise and offer her the seat facing him. Mrs. Wellington took it and sat down with the back of her head so close to the back of Mr. Wellington's head that the feather in her hat tickled his neck.

Jimmie Wellington had seen his wife pass by. To his sober eyes she was a fine sight as she moved up the aisle. In his alcohol-emanated mind the keen sense of wrong endured that had driven him forth to Reno began to lose its edge. His own soul appealed from Jimmie drunk to Jimmie sober. The appellate judge began to reverse the lower court's decision, point by point.

He felt a sudden recrudescence of jealousy as he heard Ashton's voice unctuously, flirtatiously offering his wife hospitality. He wanted to trounce Ashton. But what right had he to defend from gallantry the woman he was about to forswear before the world? Jimmie's soul was in turmoil, and Mrs. Whitcomb's pretty face and alluring smile only annoyed him.

She had made several gracious speeches before he quite comprehended any of them. Then he realized that she was saying, "I'm so glad you're going to stop at Reno, Mr. Wellington."

"Thank you. So am I," he mumbled, trying to look interested and wishing that his wife's plume would not tickle his neck.

Mrs. Whitcomb went on, leaning closer: "We two poor mistreated wretches must try to console one another, mustn't we?"

"Yes,—yes,—we must," Wellington nodded, with a sickly cheer.

Mrs. Whitcomb leaned a little closer. "Do you know that I feel almost related to you, Mr. Wellington?"

"Related?" he echoed, "you?—to me? How?"

"My husband knew your wife so well."

Somehow a wave of jealous rage surged over him, and he growled: "Your husband is a scoundrel."

Mrs. Whitcomb's smile turned to vinegar: "Oh, I can't permit you to slander the poor boy behind his back. It was all your wife's fault."

Wellington amazed himself by his own bravery when he heard himself volleying back: "And I can't permit you to slander my wife behind her back. It was all your husband's fault."

Mrs. Jimmie overheard this behind her back, and it strangely thrilled her. She ignored Ashton's existence and listened for Mrs. Whitcomb's next retort. It consisted of a simple, icy drawl: "I think I'll go to breakfast."

She seemed to pick up Ashton with her eyes as she glided by, for, finding himself unnoticed, he rose with a careless: "I think I'll go to breakfast," and followed Mrs. Whitcomb. The Wellingtons sat dos-a-dos for some exciting seconds, and then on a sudden impulse, Mrs. Jimmie rose, knelt in the seat and spoke across the back of it:

"It was very nice of you to defend me, Jimmie—or James."

Wellington almost dislocated several joints in rising quickly and whirling round at the cordiality of her tone. But his smile vanished at her last word. He protested, feebly: "James sounds so like a— a butler. Can't you call me Little Jimmie again?"

Mrs. Wellington smiled indulgent. "Well, since it's the last time,

Good-bye, Little Jimmie." And she put out her hand. He seized it hungrily and clung to it: "Good-bye—are you getting off at Reno?"

"Yes, but—" "So am I—Lucretia."

"But we can't afford to be seen together."

Still holding her hand, he temporized: "We've got to stay married for six months at least—while we establish a residence. Couldn't we—couldn't we establish a residence—together?"

Mrs. Wellington's eyes grew a little sad, as she answered: "It would be too lonesome waiting for you to roll home."

Jimmie stared at her. He felt the regret in her voice and took strange courage from it. He hauled from his pocket his huge flask, and said quickly: "Well, if you're jealous of this, I'll promise to cork it up forever."

She shook her head skeptically: "You couldn't."

"Just to prove it," he said, "I'll chuck it out of the window." He flung up the sash and made ready to hurl his enemy into the flying landscape.

"Bravo!" cried Mrs. Wellington. But even as his hand was about to let go, he tightened his clutch again, and pondered: "It seems a shame to waste it."

"I thought so," said Mrs. Jimmie, drooping perceptibly. Her husband began to feel that, after all, she cared what became of him.

"I'll tell you," he said, "I'll give it to old Doc Temple. He takes his straight."

"Fine!"

He turned towards the seat where the clergyman and his wife were sitting, oblivious of the drama of reconciliation playing so close at hand. Little Jimmie paused, caressed the flask, and kissed it. "Good-bye, old playmate!" Then, tossing his head with bravado, he reached out and touched the clergyman's shoulder. Dr. Temple turned and rose with a questioning look. Wellington put the flask in his hand and chuckled: "Merry Christmas!"

"But, my good man—" the preacher objected, finding in his hand a donation about as welcome and as wily as a strange baby. Wellington winked: "It may come in handy for—your patients."

And now, struck with a sudden idea, Mrs. Wellington spoke: "Oh, Mrs. Temple."

"Yes, my dear," said the little old lady, rising. Mrs. Wellington placed in her hand a small portfolio and laughed: "Happy New Year!"

Mrs. Temple stared at her gift and gasped: "Great heavens! Your cigars!"

"They'll be such a consolation," Mrs. Wellington explained, "while the doctor is out with his patients."

Dr. Temple and Mrs. Temple looked at each other in dismay, then at the flask and the cigars, then at the Wellingtons, then they stammered: "Thank you so much," and sank back.

Wellington stared at his wife: "Lucretia, are you sincere?"

"Jimmie, I promise you I'll never smoke another cigar."

"My love!" he cried, and seized her hand. "You know I always said you were a queen among women, Lucretia."

She beamed back at him: "And you always were the prince of good fellows, Jimmie." Then she almost blushed as she murmured, almost shyly: "May I pour your coffee for you again this morning?"

"For life," he whispered, and they moved up the aisle, arm in arm, bumping from seat to seat and not knowing it.

When Mrs. Whitcomb, seated in the dining car, saw Mrs. Little Jimmie pour Mr. Little Jimmie's coffee, she choked on hers. She vowed that she would not permit those odious Wellingtons to make fools of her and her Sammy. She resolved to telegraph Sammy that she had changed her mind about divorcing him, and order him to take the first train west and meet her half-way on her journey home.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A Duel for a Bracelet. All this while Marjorie and Mallory had sat watching, as kingfishers shadow a pool, the door where-through the girl with the bracelet must pass on her way to breakfast.

"She's talking forever with her toilet," sniffed Marjorie. "Probably trying to make a special impression on you."

"She's wasting her time," said Mallory. "But what if she brings her mother along? No, I guess her mother is too fat to get there and back."

"If her mother comes," Marjorie decided, "I'll hold her while you take the bracelet away from the—the—from that creature. Quick, here she comes now! Be brave!"

Mallory wore an aspect of arrant cowardice: "Er—ah—I—"

"You just grab her!" Marjorie explained. Then they relaxed into attitudes of impatient attention, Kathleen floated in and, seeing Mallory, she greeted him with radiant warmth: "Good morning!" and then, catching sight of Marjorie, gave her a "Good morning!" coated with ice. She flounced past and Mallory sat inert, till Marjorie gave him a ferocious pinch, whereupon he leaped to his feet:

"Oh, Miss—er—Miss Kathleen." Kathleen whirled round with a most hospitable smile. "May I have a word with you?"

"Of course you can, you dear boy," Marjorie winced at this and writhed at what followed: "Shan't we take breakfast together?"

Mallory stammered: "I—I—no, thank you—I've had breakfast."

Kathleen froze up again as she snapped: "With that—train-acquaintance, I suppose."

"Oh, no," Mallory amended, "I mean I haven't had breakfast."

But Kathleen scowled with a jealousy of her own: "You seem to be getting along famously for mere train-acquaintances."

"Oh, that's all we are, and hardly that," Mallory hastened to say with too much truth. "Sit down here a moment, won't you?"

"No, no, I haven't time," she said, and sat down. "Mamma will be waiting for me. You haven't been in to see her yet?"

"No, you see—"

"She cried all night."

"For me?"

"No, for papa. He's such a good traveler—and he had such a good start. She really kept the whole car awake."

"Too bad," Mallory consoled, perfunctorily, then with sudden eagerness, and a trial at indifference: "I see you have that bracelet still."

"Of course, you dear fellow. I wouldn't be parted from it for worlds."

Marjorie gnashed her teeth, but Kathleen could not hear that. She gushed on: "And now we have met again! It looks like Fate, doesn't it?"

"It certainly does," Mallory assented, bitterly; then again, with zest: "Let me see that old bracelet, will you?"

He tried to lay hold of it, but Kathleen giggled coyly: "It's just an excuse to hold my hand." She swung her arm over the back of the seat coquettishly, and Marjorie made a desperate lunge at it, but missed, since Kathleen, finding that Mallory did not pursue the fugitive hand, brought it back at once and yielded it up:

"There—be careful, someone might look."

Mallory took her by the wrist in a gingerly manner, and said, "So that's the bracelet? Take it off, won't you?"

"Never!—it's wished on." Kathleen protested, sentimentally. "Don't you remember that evening in the moonlight?"

Mallory caught Marjorie's accusing eye and lost his head. He made a ferocious effort to snatch the bracelet off. When this onset failed, he had recourse to entreaty: "Just slip it off."

Kathleen shook her head tantalizingly. Mallory urged more strenuously: "Please let me see it."

Kathleen shook her head with sophistication: "You'd never give it back. You'd pass it along to that—train-acquaintance."

"How can you think such a thing?" Mallory demurred, and once more made his appeal: "Please, please, slip it off."

"What on earth makes you so anxious?" Kathleen demanded, with sudden suspicion. Mallory was stumped, till an inspiration came to him: "I'd like to—to get you a nicer one. That one isn't good enough for you."

Here was an argument that Kathleen could appreciate. "Oh, how sweet of you, Harry," she gurgled, and had the bracelet down to her knuckles, when a sudden instinct checked her: "When you bring the other, you can have this."

She pushed the circlet back, and Mallory's hopes sank at the gesture. He grew frantic at being eternally frustrated in his plans. He caught Kathleen's arm and, while his words pleaded, his hands tugged: "Please—please let me take it—for the measure—you know!"

Kathleen read the determination in his fierce eyes, and she struggled furiously: "Why, Richard—Chauncey!—er—Billy! I'm amazed at you! Let go or I'll scream!"

She rose and, twisting her arm from his grasp, confronted him with bewildered anger. Mallory cast toward Marjorie a look of surrender and despair. Marjorie laid her hand on her throat and in pantomime suggested that Mallory should throttle Kathleen, as he had promised.

But Mallory was incapable of further violence; and when Kathleen, with all her coquetry, bent down and murmured: "You are a very naughty boy, but come to breakfast and we'll talk it over," he was so added that he answered: "Thanks, but I never eat breakfast."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

Down Brakes! Just as Kathleen flung her head in baffled vexation, and Mallory started to sink back to Marjorie, with another defeat, there came an abrupt shock as if that gigantic child to whom our railroad trains are toys, had reached down and laid violent hold on the Trans-American in full career.

Its smooth, swift flight became suddenly such a spasm of jars, shivers and thuds that Mallory cried: "We're off the track!"

He was sent flopping down the aisle like a bolster hurled through the car. He brought up with a sickening slam across the seat into which Marjorie had been jounced back with a breathtaking slam. And then Kathleen came flying backwards and landed in a heap on both of them.

Several of the other passengers were just returning from breakfast and they were shot and scattered all over the car as if a great chain of human beads had burst.

Women screamed, men yelled, and then while they were still struggling against the seats and one another, the train came to a halt.

"Thank God, we stopped in time!" Mallory gasped, as he tried to disengage himself and Marjorie from Kathleen.

The passengers began to regain their courage with their equilibrium. Little Jimmie Wellington had been

the whole long—of the car, clinging to his wife as if she were Francesca da Rimini, and he Paolo, sitting through inferno. The flight ended at the station door with such a thump that Mrs. Fosdick was sure a detective had come for her at last, and with a battering ram.

But when Jimmie got back breath enough to talk, he remembered the train-stopping excitement of the day before and called out:

"Has Mrs. Mallory lost that pup again?"

Everybody laughed uproariously at this. People will laugh at anything or nothing when they have been frightened almost to death and suddenly relieved of anxiety.

Everybody was cracking a joke at Marjorie's expense. Everybody felt a good-natured grudge against her for being such a mystery. The car was ringing with hilarity, when the porter came stumbling in and paused at the door, with eyes all white, hands waving frantically, and lips flapping like fannel, in a vain effort to speak.

The passengers stopped laughing at Marjorie, to laugh at the porter. Ashton sang out:

"What's the matter with you, porter? Are you trying to crow?"

Everybody roared at this, till the porter finally managed to articulate: "T-t-train rob-rob-robbers!"

Silence shut down as if the whole crowd had been smitten with paralysis. From somewhere outside and ahead came a pop-popping as of fire-crackers. Everybody thought, "Revolvers!" The reports were mingled with barbaric yells that turned the marrow in every bone to snow.

These regions are full of historic terror. All along the Nevada route the conductor, the brakemen and old travelers had pointed out scene after scene where the Indians had slaked the thirst of the arid land with white man's blood. Ashton, who had traveled this way many times, had made himself fascinatingly horrifying the evening before and ruined several breakfasts that morning in the dining-car, by regaling the passengers with stories of pioneer ordeals, men and women massacred in burning wagons, or dragged away to fiendish cruelty and obscene torture, staked out supine on burning wastes with eyelids cut off, bound down within reach of rattlesnakes, subjected to every misery that human deviltry could devise.

Ashton had brought his fellow passengers to a state of ecstatic excitability, and, like many a recounter of burglar stories at night, had tuned his own nerves to high tension.

The violent stopping of the train, the heart-shaking yells and shots outside, found the passengers already apt to respond without delay to the appeals of fright. After the first hush of dread, came the reaction to panic.

Each passenger showed his own panic in his own way. Ashton whirled round and round, like a horse with the blind staggers, then bolted down the aisle, knocking aside men and women. He climbed on a seat, pulled down an upper berth, and scrambling into it, tried to shut it on himself.

Mrs. Whitcomb was so frightened that she assailed Ashton with fury and seizing his feet, dragged him back into the aisle, and beat him with her fists, demanding that he protect her and save her for Sammy's sake.

Mrs. Fosdick, rushing out of her stateroom and not finding her luscious-eyed husband, laid hold of Jimmie Wellington and ordered him to go to the rescue of her spouse. Mrs. Wellington tore her hands loose, crying: "Let him go, madam. He has a wife of his own to defend."

Jimmie was trying to pour out dying messages, and only spluttering, forgetting that he had put his watch in his mouth to hide it, though its chain was still attached to his waistcoat.

Anne Gattie, who had read much about Chinese atrocities in missionaryaries, gave herself up to death, yet rejoiced greatly that she had provided a timely man to lean on and should not have to enter Paradise a spinster, providing she could manage to convert Ira in the next few seconds, before it was everlastingly too late. She was begging her first heathen to join her in a gospel hymn. But Ira was roaring curses like a pirate captain in a hurricane, and swearing that the villains should not rob him of his bride.

Mrs. Temple wrung her twitching hands and tried to drag her husband to his knees, crying:

"Oh, Walter, Walter, won't you please say a prayer?—a good strong prayer!"

But the preacher was so confused that he answered: "What's the use of prayer in an emergency like this?"

"Walter!" she shrieked.

"I'm on my va-cation, you know," he stammered.

Marjorie was trying at the same time to compel Mallory to crawl under a seat and to find a place to hide Snootsiums, whom she was warning not to say a word. Snootsiums, understanding only that his mistress was in some distress, refused to stay in his basket and kept offering his services and his attentions.

Suddenly Marjorie realized that Kathleen was trying to faint in Mallory's arms, and forgot everything else in a determined effort to prevent her. After the first blood-sweat of abject fright had begun to cool, the passengers came to realize that the invaders were not after lives, but loot. Then came a panic of misery effort to conceal treasure.

Kathleen, finding herself banished from Mallory's protection, ran to Mrs. Whitcomb, who had given Ashton up as a hopeless task.

"What shall we do, oh, what shall we do, dear Mrs. Wellington?" she cried.

"Don't you dare call me Mrs. Wellington!" Mrs. Wellington

then she began to suffer. "I hope the better hide what we can. I hope the rah-rah-robbers are gentlemen."

She pushed a diamond brooch containing a small portrait of Sammy up to her back hair, leaving part of the chain dangling. Then she tried to stuff a large handbag into her steaming.

Mrs. Fosdick found her husband at last, for he made a wild dash to her side, embraced her, called her his wife and defied all the powers of Nevada to tear them apart. He had a brilliant idea. In order to save his fat wallet from capture, he tossed to through an open window. It fell on the feet of one of the robbers as he ran along the side of the car, shooting at such heads as were put out of windows. He picked it up and dropped it into the feed-bag he had swung at his side. Then running on, he clambered over the brass rail of the observation platform and entered the rear of the train, as his confederate, driving the conductor ahead of him, forged his way aft from the front, while a third masquerader aligned the engineer, the fireman, the brakemen and the baggagemen.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

Hands Up! All this time Lieutenant Mallory had been thinking as hard as an officer in an ambush. His harrowing experiences and incessant defeats of the past days had unnerved him and shattered his self-confidence. He was not afraid, but intensely disgusted. He sat absent-mindedly patting Marjorie on the back and repeating:

"Don't worry, honey; they're not going to hurt anybody. They don't want anything but our money. Don't worry, I won't let 'em hurt you."

But he could not shake off a sense of nausea. He felt himself a representative of the military prowess of the country, and here he was as helpless as a man on parole.

The fact that Mallory was a soldier occurred to a number of the passengers simultaneously. They had been trained by early studies in those beautiful works of fiction, the school histories of the United States, and by many Fourth of July, to believe that the American soldier is an invincible being, who has never been defeated and never known fear.

They surged up to Mallory in a wave of hope. Dr. Temple, being nearest, spoke first. Having learned by experience that his own prayers were not always answered as he wished, had an impulse to try some weapon he had never used.

"Young man," he pleaded across the back of a seat, "will you kindly lend me a gun?"

Mallory answered sullenly: "Mine is in my trunk on the train ahead, damn it. If I had it I'd have a lot of fun."

Mrs. Whitcomb had an inspiration. She ran to her berth, and came back with a tiny silver-plated revolver.

"I'll lend you this, Sammy gave it to me to protect myself in Nevada!"

Mallory smiled at the .33-caliber toy, broke it open, and displayed an empty cylinder.

"Where are the pills that go with it?" he said.

"Oh, Sammy wouldn't let me have any bullets. He was afraid I'd hurt myself."

Mallory returned it, with a bow. "It would make an excellent snuff-tracker."

"Aren't you going to use it?" Mrs. Whitcomb gasped.

"It's empty," Mallory explained. "But the robbers don't know that! Couldn't you just overawe them with it?"

"Not with that," said Mallory, "unless they died laughing."

Mrs. Wellington pushed forward: "Then what the devil are you going to do when they come?"

Mallory answered meekly: "If they request it, I shall hold up my hands."

"And you won't resist?" Kathleen gasped.

"Not a rest."

"And he calls himself a soldier!" she sneered.

Mallory writhed, but all he said was: "A soldier doesn't have to be a jackass. I know just enough about guns not to monkey with the wrong end of 'em."

"Coward!" she flung at him. He turned white, but Marjorie red, and made a leap at her, crying: "He's the bravest man in the world. You say a word, and I'll scratch your eyes out."

This rebuffed Mallory a little, and he laughed nervously, as he restrained her. Kathleen retreated out of danger, with a parting shot: "Our engagement is off."

"Thanks," Mallory said, and put out his hand: "Will you return the bracelet?"