

The Husbands of Edith

By GEORGE BARR M'UTCHEON

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SYNOPSIS

Roxbury Medcroft persuades his friend Brock to publicly impregnate him in the arms of Edith, while Medcroft remains in London. Brock meets Edith and, lacking separate accommodations, has to sit up alone all night in the sleeping car.

He makes many amusing mistakes and meets Constance, his alleged sister-in-law, who insists that he call her "Connie."

Brock becomes interested in Constance, cultivates an English accent and has trouble answering to the name Medcroft.

The party meet the Rodneys and Freddie Ulstervelt, who almost discovers that Brock is an impostor.

Freddie annoys Brock by courting Constance, with whom Brock has fallen desperately in love.

Brock meets the Odell-Carneys, London society people. Freddie tells Brock he is in love with Constance and wants to jilt Katherine Rodney.

The Odell-Carneys have unwarranted suspicions of Mrs. Medcroft, and Katherine discovers that Brock is in love with his alleged sister-in-law.

CHAPTER IX.

The Friends of the Family.

BROCK discovered in due time that he was living in a lofty but uncertain place, among the clouds of exaltation. It was not until the close of the succeeding day that he began to lower himself gradually from the height to which Freddie's ill-mannered confession had led him. By that time he was satisfactorily convinced himself that no one but a fool could have suspected Constance of being in love with Ulstervelt, and yet, on the other hand, he was any better off for this cheerful argument? There was nothing to prove that she cared for him, notwithstanding this agreeable conclusion by contrast. As a matter of fact, he came earthward with a rush, weighted down by the conviction that she did not care a rap for him except as a conveniently moral brother-in-law. He was further distressed by Edith's comfortless, though perhaps well qualified, announcement that she believed her



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she plainly could hear what they were saying. She was in love. She could not imagine with whom. She only knew she "loved" as if she were.

"Besides, Roxbury," she said warningly, "it's a most degenerate husband who falls in love with his wife's sister."

They were walking in one of the mountain paths some distance behind the others. They did not know that Mrs. Odell-Carney had stopped to rest at the lady's niche above the path. She was lazily fanning herself on the stone seat that man had provided as an improvement to nature. Being a sharp eared person with a London drawing room instinct, she plainly could hear what they were saying as they approached. These were the first words she fully grasped, and they caused her to prick up her ears:

"I don't give a hang, Edith. I'm tired of being his brother-in-law."

"You're tired of me, Roxbury—that's what it is," in plaintive tones.

"You're happy, you love and are loved, so please don't put it that way. It's not fair. Think of the pitiable position I'm in."

"My dear Roxbury," quite severely, "if there's nothing else that will influence you, just stop to consider the child! There's Tootles, dear Tootles, to think of."

Of course Mrs. Odell-Carney could not be expected to know that Edith was blithely jesting.

"My dear Edith," he said just as firmly, "Tootles has nothing to do with the case. You know, and Constance knows, and I know, and the whole world will soon know that I'm not even related to her, poor little beggar. I don't see why she should come between me and happiness just because she happens to bear a social resemblance to a man who isn't her father. Come, now, let's talk over the situation sensibly."

Just then they passed beyond the hearing of the astonished eavesdropper. Good heaven, what was this? Not his child! The instant later Mrs. Odell-Carney was back at the spring where they had left her somnolent husband, who had refused to climb a hill because all of his breath was required to smoke a cigarette.

"Carney," she said sternly, her lips rigid, her eyes set hard upon his face, "how long have the Medcrofts been married?"

He blinked heavily. "How the devil should I know? 'Pon me word, it's—"

"Four years, I think Mrs. Rodney told me. How old is that baby?"

"'Pon me soul, Agatha, I'm as much in the dark as you. I don't know."

"A little over a year, I'd say. Well, I just heard Medcroft say that she wasn't his child. Whose is it?" She stood there like an accusing angel. He started violently, and his jaw dropped. An expression of alarmed protest leaped into his listless eyes.

"'Pon my word, Agatha, how the devil should I know? Don't look at me like that. Give you my word of honor, I don't know the woman. 'Pon me soul, I don't, my dear."

He was very much in earnest, thoroughly aroused by what seemed to be a direct insinuation.

"Oh, don't be stupid," she cried. "Good heavens, can there be a scandal in that lovely woman's life?"

"There's never any scandal in a woman's life unless she's reasonably lovely," remarked he.

"Whose child is she, if she isn't Medcroft's?" she pursued with a perplexed frown.

"Demme, Agatha, don't ask me," he said irritably, naming his last over his brow. "I've told you that twice. Ask them; I dare say they know."

She looked at him in disgust. "As if I could do such a thing as that! Dear me, I don't understand it at all. Four years married. Yes, I'm sure that's it. Carney, you don't suppose—"

She hesitated. It was not necessary to complete the obvious question.

"Agatha," said he, weighing his remark carefully, "I've said all along that Medcroft is a fool. Take those windows, for instance. If he—"

"Oh, rubbish! What have the windows to do with it? You are positively stupid. And I'd come to like her too. Yes, I'd even asked her to come and see me. She was really distressed."

"And why not?" he demanded. "Hang it all, Agatha, it's nothing unusual. She's a jolly good sort and a slight too good for Medcroft. He's a stupid ass. I've said so all along. How the devil she ever married him I can't see. But, by Jove, Agatha, I can readily see how she could have loved the father of this child, no matter who he is. Take my advice, my dear, and don't be harsh in your judgment. Don't say a word about what you've heard. If they are reconciled to the—er—the situation, why the devil should we give a hang? And, above all, don't let these Rodneys suspect." Here he lowered his eyes gradually, "they're a pack of letters and they couldn't understand."

"You'd cut her, even if she is a cousin or whatever it is. I'd give a year or two of my life to know positively whether Rodney intends taking those shares or not." He said it in contemplative delight in what he would do if they were definitely settled. "I can't stand them much longer."

"What a great variety of Americans there are!" she reflected. "Mrs. Medcroft and her sister are Americans. Compare them with the Rodneys and Mr. Ulstervelt. No, Carney, I'll not start a scandal. The Rodneys would not understand, as you say. They'd tear her to shreds and gloat over the mutilation. No, I'll have her to see us in London. I like her."

"And by Jove, Agatha, I like her sister!"

"My dear, the baby is a darling."

"But what an ass Medcroft is!"

And thus it proved that Mrs. Odell-Carney was not only a dutiful wife in taking her husband into her confidence, but also that jointly they enjoyed a peculiarly rational outlook upon the world as they had come to know it and to feel for the people thereof. It is of small consequence that they could not find it in their power to be in tune with the virtuous Rodneys—the Rodneys were conditions, not effects.

However that may be, it was Katherine Rodney, pretty, plump and spoiled, who pulled the first stone from the foundation of Medcroft's house of cards. Katherine had convinced herself that she was deeply enamored of the volatile Freddie. The more she thought that she loved him the greater became the conviction that he did not care as much for her as he professed. She began to detect a decided falling off in his ardor. It was no use trying to hide the fact from herself that Constance was the most disturbing symptom in evidence. Jealousy succeeded in the end. Katherine decided to be hateful. She could not help helping it if she had tried.

It was very evident, to her at least, that Freddie was not to blame. He was being led on by the artful Miss Fowler. There could be no doubt of it—none in the least, declared Miss Rodney in the privacy of her own miserable reflections.

Just as she was on the point of carrying a message to her mother an astounding revelation came to her out of a clear sky; an entirely new condition came into the problem. It dawned upon her suddenly, without warning, that Roxbury Medcroft was in love with his sister-in-law.

When she burst in upon her mother half an hour later that excellent lady started from her couch, alarmed by the excitement in her daughter's face. Mrs. Rodney, good soul, was one of the kind who always think the world is coming to an end, or the house is on fire, or the king has been assassinated, if any one approaches with a look of distress in his face.

"My dear, my dear!" she cried as Katherine stepped tragically in the doorway. "What has happened to your father? Speak!"

"Mamma, it's worse than that! I'm—"

"Merciful heaven! The good lady blindly reached for her smelling salts.

"I've made a dreadful discovery," went on Katherine in suppressed tones. "It came to me like a flash. I couldn't

believe my own brain. So I watched them from my window. There's no doubt about it, mamma. It's as plain as the nose on your face. He—"

"My darling, what are you talking about? Is my nose—what is the matter with my nose?" She vaguely felt of her nose, in horror.

"He's in love with her. There's no mistake. And, will you believe me, mamma, she is encouraging him! Fostering! Why—why, it's utterly contemptible! Oh, dear, what are we to do?"

Mrs. Rodney looked blankly at her daughter, who had thrown herself in a chair. She gasped and then gave vent to a tremendous squeak.

"In love! Your father? With whom—"

"Who is she?"

"Father? Oh, Lord, mother, I didn't say anything about father! Don't cry! It's another man altogether."

"Not Freddie Ulstervelt?" quavered Mrs. Rodney, pulling herself together.

"After all he has said to you—"

"No, no, mamma," cried her daughter irritably. "Freddie may be in love with her, but he's not the only one. Mamma! She straightened up and looked at her mother with wide, horror-struck eyes. "Roxbury Medcroft is madly in love with Constance Fowler!"

Mrs. Rodney did not utter a sound for fully a minute and a half. She never took her eyes from her daughter's distressed face. The color was coming back into her own, and her lips were setting their rigid chin.

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