

EXCUSE ME!

Revised from the Comedy of the Same Name

By Rupert Hughes

ILLUSTRATED From Photographs of the Play as Produced By Henry W. Savage

[CONTINUED.]

"Sure thing," said Ashton. "You'll find your blade in the box there."

Mallory then negotiated the loan of one more fresh shirt from the Englishman, and a clean collar from Ashton. He rejoiced that the end of the day would bring him in touch with his own baggage. Four days of foraging on the country was enough for this soldier.

Also he felt, now that he and Marjorie had lived thru what they could survive somehow till evening brought them to San Francisco, where there were hundreds of ministers. And then the conductor must ruin his early morning optimism, though he made his appearance in the washroom with genial good mornings for all.

Mallory acknowledged the greeting, and asked offhandedly: "By the way, how's she running?"

The conductor answered even more offhandedly: "About two hours late—and losing."

Mallory was transfixed with a new fear: "Good Lord, my transport sails at sunrise."

"Oh, we ought to make Frisco by midnight, anyway."

"Unless we lose a little more time."

Mallory realized that every new day managed to create its own anxieties. With the regularity of a milkman, each morning left a fresh crisis on his doorstep.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

The Complete Divorcee.

The other passengers were growing nervous with their own troubles. The next stop was Reno, and in spite of all the wit that is heaped upon the town, it is a solemn place to those who must go there in purgatorial penance for matrimonial error.

Some honest souls regard such divorce-simpliciums as dens of evil, where the wicked make a mockery of the sacrament and assail the foundations of society, by undermining the home. Other equally honest souls, believing that marriage is a human institution whose mishaps and mistakes should be rectified as far as possible, regard the divorce courts as cities of refuge for ill-treated or ill-mated women and men whose lives may be saved from utter ruination by the intervention of high-minded judges.

But, whichever view is right, the ordeal by divorce is terrifying enough to the poor sinners or martyrs who must undergo it.

Little Jimmie Wellington turned pale, and stammered, as he tried to ask the conductor casually:

"What kind of a place is that Reno?"

The conductor, somewhat cynical from close association with the divorce-mill and its grist, grinned:

"That depends on what you're leaving behind. Most folks seem to get enough of it in about six months."

Then he went his way, leaving Wellington red, agape and perplexed. The trouble with Wellington was that he had brought along what he was leaving behind. Or, as Ashton impudently observed: "You ought to enjoy your residence there, Wellington, with your wife on hand."

The only reprieve that Wellington could think of was a rather unimpaired: "You go to—"

"So long as it isn't Reno," Ashton laughed, and walked away.

Wedgewood laid a sympathetic hand on Little Jimmie's shoulder, and said:

"That Ashton is no end of a bounder, what?"

Wellington wrote his epitaph in these words:

"Well, the worst I can say of him is, he's the kind of man that doesn't lift the plug out when he's through with the basin."

He liked this so well that he wished he had thought of it in time to crack it over Ashton's head. He decided to hand it to him anyway. He forgot that the cardinal rule for repartee, is "Better never than late."

As he swung out of the men's room he was buttonholed by an individual new to the little Trans-American colony. One of the camp-followers and sutlers who prosper round the edges of all great enterprises had waylaid him on the way to the battleground of marital freedom.

The stranger had got on at an earlier stop and worked his way through the train to the car named "Snowdrop." Wellington was his first victim here. His pushing manner, the almost vulture-like rapacity of his gleaming eyes, and the very vulture contour of his profile, his palmy gestures, his thick lip, and everything about him gave Wellington his immediate pedigree.

It ill behooves Christendom to need reminding that the Jewish race has adorned and still adorns humanity with some of its noblest specimens; but this interloper was of the type that must have irritated Voltaire into answering the platitude that the Jews are God's chosen people with that other platitude: "Tastes differ."

Little Jimmie Wellington, hot in pursuit of Ashton, found himself checked in spite of himself; in spite of himself deposited somehow into a seat, and in spite of himself confronted with a curvilinear person, who said:

"Excuse, please! but are you getting off at Reno?"

"I am," Wellington answered, curtly, essaying to rise, only to be delicately restored to his place with a gesture and a phrase:

"Then you meet me."

"Oh, I need you, do it! And who are you?"

"Who ain't I? I am Baumann and Blumen. Our cart, please."

Wellington found a pastebord in his hand and read the legend:

Real Estate Agents Business Traveler

Baumann & Blumen
Divorce Outfitters

223 Highway Avenue, Reno, Nevada

Notary Public Director General
Justice of the Peace Substitution Commission

Wellington looked from the crowded card to the zealous face. "Divorce Outfitters, eh? I don't quite get you."

"Well, in the first place—"

"The first place, eh? You're from New York?"

"Yes, originally. How did you know it? By my fashionable clothing?"

"Yes," laughed Wellington. "But you say I need you. How?"

"Well, you've got maybe some baggage, some trunks—yes?"

"Yes."

"Well, in the first place, I am an expressman. I deliver 'em to your address—yes? Very nice?"

"I haven't got any yet."

"Also I am an addressman. Do you want a nice hotel?—or a fine house?—or an apartment?—or maybe a boarding-house?—yes? How long do you make a residence?"

"Six months."

"No longer?"

"Not a minute."

"Take a fine house, dem. I got some beauties just wasted."

"For a year?—no thanks."

"All the leases in Reno run for six months only."

"Well, I'd like to look around a little first."

"Good. Don't forget us. You come out here for six months. You want maybe a good quick divorce—yes?"

"The quickest I can get."

"Do you want it confidential? or very nice and noisy?"

"What's that?"

"We are press agents and also suppress agents. Some likes 'em one way, some likes 'em another. Vich do you want it?"

"Quick and quiet."

"Painless divorce is our specialty. If you pay me an advance deposit now, I file your claim de minute de train stops and your own wife don't know you're divorced."

"I'll think it over," said Wellington, rising with resolution.

"Don't forget us. Baumann and Blumen. Satisfaction guaranteed or your wife refunded. Avoid substitutes. And then, seeing that he could not extract any cash from Little Jimmie, Mr. Baumann descended upon Mallory, who was just finishing his shave. Laying his hand on Mallory's arm, he began:

"Excuse, please. Can I fit you out with a nice divorce?"

"Divorce?—me!—that's good," laughed Mallory at the vision of it. Then a sudden idea struck him. It took no great genius to see that Mr. Baumann was not a clergyman, but there were other martlets to be had. "You don't perform marriages, do you?" he asked.

Mr. Baumann drew himself up: "Who says I don't? Ain't I a justice of the peace?"

Mallory put out his hand in welcome; then a new anxiety chilled him. He had a license for Chicago, but Chicago was far away: "Do I need a license in Nevada?"

"Why shouldn't you?" said Mr. Baumann. "Don't all sorts of things go to have a license in Nevada, saloons, husbands, dogs—"

"How could I get one?" Mallory asked as he went on dressing.

"Ain't I got a few vitt me? Do you want to get a nice re-marriage license?"

"Re-marriage?—huh!" he looked round, and, seeing that no one else was near: "I haven't taken the first step yet."

Mr. Baumann loved his hands in one another: "A betchelor! Ah, I see you want to marry a nice divorcee lady in Reno?"

"She isn't in Reno and she has never been married, either."

This simple statement seemed to astound Mr. Baumann:

"A betchelor marry a maiden!—in Reno!—oh, oh, oh! It hasn't been done yet, but it might be."

Mallory looked him over and a twinge of distaste disturbed him: "You furnish the license, but—ah—ah—is there any chance of a clergyman—a Christian clergyman—being at the station?"

"Vy do you want it a clergyman? Can't I do it just as good? Or a nice fat alderman I can get you?"

Mallory pondered: "I don't think she'd like anything but a clergyman."

"Well," Baumann confessed, "a lady is liable to be particular about her first marriage. Anyvay I sell you de license."

"All right."

Mr. Baumann whipped out a portfolio full of documents, and as he searched them, philosophized: "A man ought always to carry a good marriage license. It might be he should need it in a hurry." He took a large roll from his side-pocket and stamped the paper and then, with

mountain pen poised, pleaded: "Vat is the names, please?"

"Not so loud!" Mallory whispered. Baumann put his finger to his nose, wisely: "I see, it is a confidential marriage. Sit down once."

When he had asked Mallory the necessary questions and taken his fee, he passed over the document by which the sovereign state of Nevada graciously permitted two souls to be made more or less one in the eyes of the law.

"Here you are," said Mr. Baumann. "Vit dat you can get married anyvay in Nevada."

Mallory realized that Nevada would be a thing of the past in a few hours more and he asked:

"It's no good in California?"

"Himmel, no. In California you bot gotta go and be examined."

"Examined!" Mallory gasped, in dire alarm.

"Vit questions, poisonally," Mr. Baumann hastened to explain.

"Oh!"

"In Nevada," Baumann intimated, still hopeful, "I could marry you myself—now, right here."

"Could you marry us in this smoking room?"

"In a cattle car. If you want it."

"It's not a bad idea," said Mallory. "I'll let you know."

Seeing Marjorie coming down the aisle, he hastened to her, and hugged her good-morning with a new confidence.

Dr. and Mrs. Temple, who had returned to their berth, witnessed this greeting with amusement. After the quarrel of the night before surely some explanation should have been overheard, but the puzzling Mallorys flew to each other's arms without a moment's delay. The mystery was exciting the passengers to such a point that they were vowing to ask a few questions point blank. Nobody had quite dared to approach either of them, but frank curiosity was preferable to nervous prostration, and the secret could not be kept much longer. Fellow-passengers have some rights. Not even a stranger can be permitted to outrage their curiosity with impunity forever.

Seeing them together, Mrs. Temple watched the embrace with her daily renewal of joy that the last night's quarrel had not proved fatal. She nudged her husband:

"See, they're making up again."

Dr. Temple was moved to a violent outburst for him: "Well, that, the darndest bridal couple—I only said darn, my dear."

He was still more startled when Mr. Baumann, cruising along the aisle, bent over to murmur: "Can I fix you a nice divorce?"

Dr. Temple rose in such an attitude of horror as he assumed in the pulpit when denouncing the greatest curse of society, and Mr. Baumann retired. As he passed Mallory he cast an appreciative glance at Marjorie and, tapping Mallory's shoulder, whispered: "No wonder you want a marriage license. I'll be in the next car, should you need me." Then he went on his route.

Marjorie stared after him in wonder and asked: "What did not person mean by what he said?"

"It's all right, Marjorie," Mallory explained, in the highest cheer: "We can get married right away."

Marjorie declined to get her hopes up again: "You're always saying that."

"But here's the license—see?"

"What good is that?" she said; "there's no preacher on board."

"But that man is a justice of the peace and he'll marry us."

Marjorie stared at him incredulously: "That creature!—before all these passengers?"

"Not at all," Mallory explained. "We'll go into the smoking room."

Marjorie leaped to her feet, agape: "Elope two thousand miles to be married in a smoking room by a Yiddish drummer! Harry Mallory, you're crazy."

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 "told 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, drearily.

"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 my 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."

"Now you're speaking like a soldier," Marjorie exclaimed, "my brave, noble, beautiful, fearless husband. I'll tell you! That creature will pass through this car on her way to breakfast. You grab her and take the bracelet away from her."

"I grab her, eh?" he stammered, his heroism wavering a trifle.

"Yes, just grab her."

"Suppose she hasn't the bracelet on?" he mused.

"Grab her anyway," Marjorie answered, fiercely. "Besides, I've no doubt it's washed on." He said nothing. "You did wish it on, didn't you?"

"No, no—never—of course not—"

he protested. "If you'll only be calm. I'll get it if I have to throttle her."

Like a young Lady Macbeth, Marjorie gave him her utter approval in any atrocity, and they sat in ambush for their victim to pass into view.

They had not had their breakfast, but they forgot it. A dusky waiter went by chanting his "Lass call for breakfast in Rining Bar." He chanted it thrice in their ears, but they never heard. Marjorie was gloating over the discomfiture of the odious creature who had dared to precede her in the acquaintance of her husband-to-be. The husband-to-be was miserably wishing that he had to face a tribe of bolo-brandishing Moros, instead 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, shreds 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-emanipated 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 gilded 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—er—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—aren't 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—er—couldn't we establish a residence—er—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 wieldy as a strange baby. Wellington winked: "It may come in handy for—our 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 taking 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