

The Troubles of Tidson

By SEWELL
FORD

SPEAKIN' about butlers, you ought to see Tidson, that butler for us. Sure! Why not? Say, you don't think me and Sadie's livin' on the cheap, do you? Had an idea I was lettin' her in for a four-room-flat romance, eh? Well, sponge it off. So long as I was travelin' single, the boardin' house was good enough for me; but when I comes to pick out a place for Mrs. Shorty McCabe to stow her trunks, the best is none too good. We had only one talk about that.

"Well," says Sadie, as we was comin' back from our yachtin' trip. "I suppose I ought to buy a house somewhere."

"For why?" says I.

"For us to live in, stupid!" says she.

"Oh, no, Sadie," says I. "You don't buy any house for me to live in—not yet. I don't care how else you blow in your surplus, but when it comes to providin' the latch keys, that's up to me. And I'm on the job."

Sadie, she just laughs, and reaches out and—well, there wa'n't anyone lookin', and she's got the right. She says if that's the way I feel, why, it goes, and she wa'n't stuck on havin' a house.

"You could worry along with a few furnished rooms for awhile, could you?" says I.

"I'll go wherever you say, Shorty," says she.

"Trainin' you is a cinch," says I. "I'll look up the ads."

That's only a bluff, though. I'd had my eye on this new Hotel Perzazzer ever since they put on the green copper roof, and when I hears how the manager is an old reg'lar of mine I don't lose any time after we've landed in callin' him up on the 'phone.

"Billy," says I, after he's through jollyin' me on the honeymoon business, "how about one of them two-in-the-family-and-no-dog suites of yours? Got the red tin flag up on any of 'em?"

"Why, certainly," says he. "I can give you your choice of half a dozen."

"That's nice," says I. "But do they come so steep I'll have to rob a bank every time I pay the rent?"

Billy says they don't. "Of course," he goes on, "if you wish a Central Park exposure—"

"I don't," says I. "It might be catchin'. What looks good to me is that southeast corner with the windows lookin' down Fifth-ave. Now give me your bargain day figures for a bunch of three and bath."

And say, knowin' that Alf G. and a lot more of the same kind was reg'lar lodgers there, I braced myself for a jolt. At that, too, the figure he names takes more'n half the breath out of me.

"Gee!" says I, "that'd buy a house and lot on Staten Island. Maybe I can stand it, though. We'll come up and look you over."

And when I helps Sadie out of the cab at the carriage entrance, and she finds it's the Perzazzer that I've picked out, she's tickled to death. Billy comes out of his satin finished mahogany office and does the guide act for us himself. When we're let out on the seventh floor he leads us to our corner and explains the good points, like pointin' out that the rooms is all done in Looey Cans.

"I was just noticin' that," says I. "And some of them Dutchmen knew what was what, didn't they? How does it strike you, Sadie?"

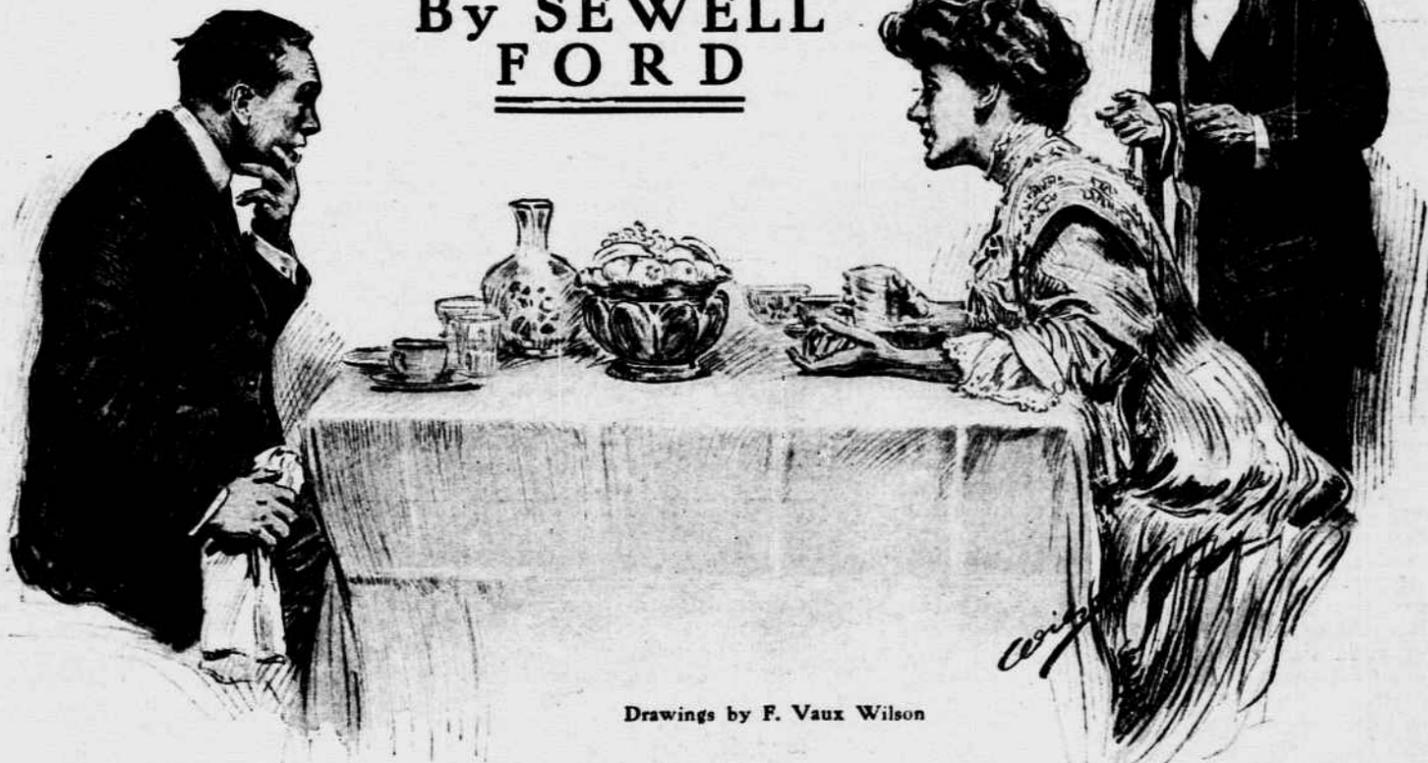
"Oh, it's perfectly bully!" says she.

Well, say, it's all of that. Every chair back has a hand embroidered picture on it, the rugs was handsome enough to frame, and there was more knobs and electric buttons and switches than you could learn how to use in a month. There wa'n't a fancy stunt, from strainin' the air to makin' your own ice, that hadn't been worked in. But the little private dinin' room, with the round table and the candles, gets me. There's no chasin' out for your grub, if you don't want to. All you have to do is write out your bill of fare, drop it in a tube, and inside of half an hour it's lugged in under the silver covers by a butler who is there to do the food jugglin'.

"Home could never be like this, Sadie," says I. "Let's go send up the trunks."

I'll bet Pinckney couldn't have done it quicker himself, for by dinner time next day we're all settled, even to my knowin' which three hooks in the two closets was mine, and just what corner of the third bureau drawer I could keep my laundry in. Then we starts gettin' acquainted with Tidson.

Course, I've seen plenty of butlers before, havin' knocked around more or less among folks that keeps 'em reg'lar, but I never thought to have the bossin' of one myself. So, when this chap in the dinky black coat and red vest shows up the first mornin' and begins handin' out the grape fruit and soft boiled eggs, I gets a bad case of stage fright.



Drawings by F. Vaux Wilson

Sadie catches me watchin' him with my mouth open, and gives me a dig with her slipper under the table.

"Eh?" says I. "Ain't I doing things right?"

"Don't look at him as though he was a curiosity," she whispers.

"But he is, to me," says I.

"Then order him about a bit," says she.

"Gee!" says I, "I ain't got the nerve."

And say, that was straight. I'd as soon think of givin' orders to Marconi about how to call up Poldhu through the air; for if anyone ever knew his business from the ground up, it was this party of the second part. He ain't one of the stiff necked, sour faced kind, same's I've seen. He's limber all the way from his head to his heels, and every time he puts down a plate he bends in four places. That was some surprisin', considerin' that he's gettin' along towards the age where the hinges usually rusts up. You could easy tell he was tryin' to keep within the age limit, for the hair is nicely slicked over his bald spot, and the ear tab whiskers is a lovely blue black, such as you get by usin' restorer reg'lar.

But he sure has the butlin' game down to an art. He moves around without makin' any more noise than a trained nurse, never seemin' to be in any rush, but always on sched. He's got his mind on the work too. Just as you're about to think you need the pepper, you look up and find him handin' you the silver shaker. Along with it he has the mildest voice and gentlest ways, and one of these nice old Joe Jefferson faces.

I couldn't help gettin' int'rested in Tidson right away, and after I've got over bein' skittish I tries to work up a little friendly dialogue. He wa'n't much of a converser, Tidson wa'n't. Sadie says it's because he knows his place too well.

"I expect I'll never get to know mine," says I; "for I'm goin' to teach Tidson to be sociable if I go hoarse tryin'."

It's a week or ten days, though, before I makes any headway. And then one night after dinner, just as I starts to go into the next room, where Sadie was chinnin' Mrs. Purdy Pell, I accident'ly brushes a fork off on the floor. Course, I don't know any better'n to make a dive for it. Tidson dives too, my shoulder takes him in the breastbone, and then somethin' rattles out of his pocket.

Missin' the fork, I picks up the other thing. It's a curious kind of a trinket for a butler to be carryin',—a round, carved bone affair, about a foot long, like the handle to something. I was just heftin' it, when my thumb hits some sort of a button, and out comes a long, slim, wicked lookin' blade, as sharp and shiny as a new razor.

"Hello!" says I. "What kind of a patent can opener is this, Tidson?"

Say, of all the sickly attempts at a grin, the one he tries was the worst failure I ever watched. He gets real ashy around the gills, the hand he sticks out trembles like he was havin' a chill, and them sharp little eyes of his was glued to what I was holdin' up.

"It's—it's only a keepsake, sir," says he.

"So?" says I. "Strikes me it's one of the kind that calls for explanations. Now what are you walkin' around loaded up this way for, eh?"

Tidson, he mumbles something about bein' sorry.

"Now see here, Tidson!" says I. "I ain't one to pry into anybody's private fads; but so long as you have the run of these rooms I can't stand for any assassination hardware like this. Why, I'm surprised—you such a mild, tame, house broke Englishman too!"

"Pardon," says he, "but I am not English."

"But you're an aitch dropper," says I.

Tidson's shoulders go up and his palms go out.

"That I have learn," says he.

"Oh!" says I. "Goes with the business, does it?"

Well, I thought you was odd colored for a Cockney. Just where do you hail from, then?"

"Corsica," says he.

"You don't say!" says I. "Well, that explains the cutlery. But who was it you was plannin' to use this keepsake on? Me?"

"Non, non, non!" says he, wavin' his hands and shakin' his head.

"Well, who then?" says I. "A knife like that means business. Come, give up!"

It was like pullin' a cork out with your fingers; but I backs him into a corner, throws a scare into him about ringin' up the house detective, and fin'ly he unloosens. And say, it's almost as good as readin' it out of a ten-cent magazine.

The tale begins way back when Tidson—Jules something, he says his real name is—was a gay young Corsicite, wearin' a red sash and herdin' goats, and tendin' out on all the chowder parties from his ward. Also there's Felice. She's the only daughter of a district boss, or some big gun, but she's more or less of a mixer. Anyway, Jules gets to know her real well, takin' her to matinees and so on; but all on the quiet, for he wa'n't hardly in her class. Accordin' to his description, Felice was one of the cherry ripe kind, all curves and red tints, a reg'lar brunette Maizy May. Jules must have been a likely lookin' lad then himself, for Felice turns down a lot of swell dressers, wears the brass breastpin he gives her, and lets him hold her hand while they're partin' at the gate.

It was all goin' lovely, when the old folks gets wise, and then there's ructions. Felice is shut up in the back chamber while her old gent gets out the carvin' knife and chases the merry goatherd into the next county on the jump. Takin' that as a hint, Jules keeps right on till he gets to Paris. Then, with the old homestead crossed off the map and nothin' comin' in, he looks around for some easy job with good pay.

By rights that was where he should have found himself sore eyed and sorry. But before he has time to starve he gets himself knocked down by a cab horse on the Rue de Bombom, and the gent that yanks him out from under the wheels in time to save his ribs is so worked up with gratitude over the chance that he sets up a pint of red wine, listens to Jules's hard luck story, and ends by tellin' him where to call next mornin' before the whistle blows. The noble rescuer turns out to be Emil Bourdonne, none other. New one on you, eh? Never mind. Look at the next bottle of brilliantine you see on the barber's shelf—none genuine without the signature. That's him. He takes Jules into the shop, givin' him a label pastin' job, with a chance to double as night watch and sleep behind the boiler.

The whole thing is a cinch. About twice a day Jules is paraded in the front office as the man that Emil rescued from a horrible death, and every now and-then his pay is raised. If it hadn't been that he kept worryin' about Felice he'd been happy as a clam. But the longer he's away from her the worse he feels. Emil begins to kick because he don't look cheerful enough for an exhibit; so Jules lets out what's the matter.

"Well, well!" says Emil. "That's too bad."

Then he fixes up a scheme for Jules to take a trip home, have a talk with Felice, and maybe bring her on to the brilliantine fact'ry, where there's a