

EXCUSE ME!

RUPERT AUGHER
NOVELIZED FROM THE
COMEDY OF THE SAME
NAME.

ILLUSTRATED FROM
PHOTOGRAPHS OF
THE PLAY AS PRODUCED
BY HENRY W. SAVAGE.

CHAPTER I.

The Wreck of the Taxicab.

The young woman in the taxicab scuttling frantically down the dark street, clung to the arm of the young man alongside, as if she were terrified at the lawbreaking, neck-risking speed. But evidently some greater fear goaded her, for she gasped:

"Can't you go a little faster?"

"Can't you go a little faster?" The young man alongside howled as he thrust his head and shoulders through the window in the door.

But the self-created taxi-gale swept his voice at, and the taxi chauffeur perked his ear in vain to catch the vanishing syllables.

"What's that?" he roared.

"Can't you go a little faster?"

The indignant chauffeur simply had to look on in dumb amazement at the passenger. He turned his head and growled:

"Say, do you want to lose me me license?"

For just one instant he turned his head. One instant was just enough. The ungoverned taxicab seized the opportunity, bolted from the track, and flung, as it were, its arms drunkenly around a perfectly respectable lamp-post attending strictly to its business on the curb.

There ensued a convulsion of Fourth of July. Sparks flew, tires exploded, metals ripped, two wheels spun in air and one wheel, neatly severed at the axle, went reeling down the sidewalk half a block before it leaned against a tree and rested.

A dozen or more miracles coincided to save the passengers from injury. The young man found himself standing on the pavement with the unhinged door still around his neck. The young woman's arms were round his neck. Her head was on his shoulder. It had reposed there often enough, but never before in the street under a lamp-post. The chauffeur found himself in the road, walking about on all fours, like a bewildered quadruped.

Evidently some overpowering need for speed possessed the young woman, for even now she did not scream, she did not faint, she did not murmur. "Where am I?" she simply said:

"What time is it, honey?"

And the young man, not realizing how befuddled he really was, or how his hand trembled, fetched out his watch and held it under the glow of the lamp-post which was now bent over in a convenient but disreputable attitude.

"A quarter to ten, sweetheart. Plenty of time for the train."

"But the minister, honey! What about the minister?"

The consideration of this riddle was interrupted by a muffled hubbub of whimpers and canine hysterics. Immediately the young woman forgot ministers, collisions, train-schedules—everything. She showed her first sign of panic.

"Snoozeums! Get Snoozeums!" They groped about in the topsy-turvy taxicab, rummaged among a jumble of suitcases, handbags, umbrellas and minor impedimenta, and fished out a small dog-basket with an inverted dog inside. Snoozeums was ridiculous in any position, but as he said tail foremost from the wicker basket, he resembled nothing so much as a heap of tangled yarn tumbling out of a work-basket. He was an indignant skein, and had much to say before he consented to snuggle under his mistress's chin.

About this time the chauffeur came prowling into view. He was too deeply shocked to emit any language of the garage. He was too deeply shocked to achieve any comment more brilliant than:

"That mess don't look much like it ever was a taxicab, does it?"

The young man shrugged his shoulders, and stared up and down the long street for another. The young woman looked sorrowfully at the wreck, and queried:

"Do you think you can make it go?"

The chauffeur glanced her way, more in pity for her whole sex than in scorn for this one type, as he murmured:

"Make it go? I'll take a steam winch a week to unwrap it from that lamp-post."

The young man apologized.

because you wanted me to take a short cut."

"It's the longest short cut I ever saw," the young man sighed, as he gazed this way and that.

The place of their shipwreck was so deserted that not even a crowd had gathered. The racket of the collision had not brought a single policeman. They were in a dead world of granite warehouse, wholesale stores and factories, all locked and forbidding, and full of silent gloom.

In the daytime this was a big trade artery of Chicago, and all day long it was thunderous with trucks and commerce. At night it was Pompeii, so utterly abandoned that the night watchmen rarely slept outside, and no footpad found it worth while to set up shop.

The three castaways stared every which way, and every which way was peace. The ghost of a pedestrian or two hurried by in the far distance. A cat or two went furtively in search of warfare or romance. The lamp-posts stretched on and on in both directions in two forevers.

In the faraway there was a muffled rumble and the faint clang of a bell. Somewhere a street car was bumping along its rails.

"Our only hope," said Harry. "Come along, Marjorie."

He handed the chauffeur five dollars as a bribe to his wounds, tucked the girl under one arm and the dog-basket under the other, and set out, calling back to the chauffeur:

"Good night!" the girl called back.

"Good night!" the chauffeur echoed. He stood watching them with the tender gaze that even a chauffeur may feel for young love hastening to a honeymoon.

He stood beaming so, till their foot-steps died in the silence. Then he turned back to the chaotic remnants of his machine. He worked at it hopelessly for some time, before he had reason to look within. There he found the handbags and suitcases, umbrellas and other equipment. He ran to the corner to call after the owners. They were as absent of body as they had been absent of mind.

He remembered the street-number

Henry Mallory and Marjorie Newton.

they had given him for their destination. He waited till at last a yawning policeman sauntered that way like a lonely beach patrol, and left him in charge while he went to telephone his garage for a wagon and a wrecking crew.

It was close on midnight before he reached the number his fares had given him. It was a paragon leaning against a church. He rang the bell and finally produced from an upper window a nightbird topped by a frowny head. He explained the situation, and his possession of certain properties belonging to parties unknown except by their first names. The clergyman drowsily murmured:

"Oh, yes. I remember. The young man was Lieutenant Henry Mallory, and he said he would stop here with a young lady, and get married on the way to the train. But they never turned up."

"Lieutenant Mallory, eh? Where could I reach him?"

"He said he was leaving tonight for the Philippines."

"The Philippines? Well, I'll be—"

The minister closed the window just in time.

CHAPTER II.

The Early Birds and the Worm. In the enormous barn of the railroad station stood many strings of cars, as if a giant young Gulliver stabled his toys there and lavishly amused himself; now whisking this one away, now backing that other in.

Some of the trains were noble equipages, fitted to glide across the whole map with cargoes of Lilliputian ladies. Others were humble and shabby linked-up day-coaches and dingy smoking-cars, packed with workers, like ants.

Cars were bare vehicles, but locomotives have souls. The engines

gines roll in or stalk out with grandeur and ease. They are like emperors. They seem to look with scorn at the suburban engines snorting and grunting and shaking the arched roof with their pebbled choo-choo as they puff from shop to cottage and back.

The trainmen take their cue from the behavior of their locomotives. The conductor of a transcontinental nod to the conductor of a shuttle-train with less cordiality than to a brakeman of his own. The engineers of the limited look like senators in overalls. They are far-traveled men, leading a mighty life of adventure. They are pilots of land-ships across land-oceans. They have a right to a certain condescension of manner.

But no one feels or shows so much arrogance as the sleeping car porters. They cannot pronounce "supercilious" but they have the air of it. Their disdain for the entire crew of any train that carries merely day-coaches or half-baked chair-cars, is expressed as a derisive look and a uniform can express disdain for poor white trash.

Of all the laughing porters that ever curled a lip, the haughtiest by far was the dusky attendant in the San Francisco sleeper on the Trans-American Limited. His was the train of trains in that whole system. His car had the air of a palace, and his passengers the air of angels.

It is train stood now waiting to set forth upon a voyage of two thousand miles, a journey across seven imperial states, a journey that should end only at the margin where the continent dips and vanishes under the breakers of the Pacific ocean.

At the head of his car, with his little box-seat waiting for the foot of the first arrival, the porter stood, his head swelling under his cap, his breast swelling beneath his vest, his blouse, with its brass buttons like reflections of his own eyes. His name was Ellsworth Jefferson, but he was called anything from "Poarr-turr" to "Pawtah," and he usually did not come when he was wanted.

Tonight he was wondering perhaps what passengers, with what dispositions, would fall to his lot. Perhaps he was wondering what his Chicago sweetheart would be doing in the eight days before his return. Perhaps he was wondering what his San Francisco sweetheart had been doing in the five days since he left her, and how she would pass the three days that must intervene before he reached her again.

He had Othello's ebullient eye. Did he have Othello's green eye? Whatever his thoughts, he chatted gaily enough with his neighbor and colleague of the Portland sleeper.

Suddenly he stopped in the midst of a snoring chuckle.

"Lordy, man, looky what's a-comin'!"

The Portland porter turned to gaze.

"I got my fingers crossed."

"I hope you git him."

"I hope I don't."

"He'll work you hard and cuss you out, and he won't give you even a Much Obligated."

"That's right. He ain't got a usher to carry his things. And he's got enough to fill a van."

The newcomer was plainly of English origin. It takes all sorts of people to make up the British Empire, and there is no sort lacking—glorious or pretty, or sour or sweet. But this was the type of English globe-trotter that makes himself as unpopular among foreigners as he is among his own people. He is almost as unendurable as the Americans abroad who twang their banjo brag through Europe, and berate France and Italy for their innocence of buckwheat cakes.

The two porters regarded Mr. Harold Wedgewood with dread, as he was almost lost in the plethora of his own luggage. He asked for the San Francisco sleeper, and the Portland porter had to turn away to smother his gurgling relief.

Ellsworth Jefferson's part sank. He made a feeble effort at self-protection. The Pullman conductor not being present at the moment, he inquired:

"Have you got yo' ticket?"

"Of course."

"Could I see it?"

"Of course not. Too much trouble to fish it out."

The porter was fuming. "Do you remember yo' number?"

"Of course. Take these." He began to pile things on the porter like a mountain unloading an avalanche. The porter stumbled as he clambered up the steps, and squeezed through the trait path of the corridor into the slender aisle. He turned again, and again to question the invader, but he was motioned and bunted down the car, till he was halted with a "This will do."

The Englishman selected section three for his own. The porter ventured: "Are you sho' this is yo' number?"

"Of course I'm shaw. How dare you question my—"

"I wasn't questionin' you, boss, I was just astin' you."

He resigned himself to the despot, and began to transfer his burdens to the seat. But he did nothing to the satisfaction of the Englishman. Every thing must be placed otherwise; the catch-all here, the portmanteau there, the Gladstone there, the golfsticks there, the greatest coat, the rain-coat there. The porter was puffing like a donkey-engine, and mutiny was growing in his heart. His last commission was the hanging up of the bowler hat.

He stood on the arm of the seat to reach the high book. From here he paused to glare down with an attempt at irony.

got to sit hyah for hair an hour—just waitin'!"

The porter essayed another bit of irony.

"Well," he drawled, "I might tell the conductor you're ready. And mebbe he'd start the train. But the timetable says ten-thirty."

He watched the effect of his satire, but it fell back unheeded from the granite dome of the Englishman, whose only comment was:

"Oh, never mind. I'll wait."

The porter cast his eyes up in despair, and turned away, once more to be recalled.

"Oh, pawtah!"

"I think we'll put on my slippers."

"Will we?"

"You might hand me that large bag. No, stupid, the othah one. You might open it. No, it's in the othah one. Ah, that's it. You may set it down."

Mr. Wedgewood brought forth a soft cap and a pair of red slippers. The porter made another effort to escape, his thoughts as black as his face. Again the relentless recall:

"Oh, pawtah, I think we'll unbutton my boots."

He was too weak to murmur "Yassah!" He simply fell on one knee and got to work.

There was a witness to his helpless rage—a newcomer, the American counterpart of the Englishman in all that makes travel difficult for the foreigner. He was a young man, a zealous to resent anything short of perfection, quick and loud of complaint, apparently impossible to please.

In everything else he was the opposite of the Englishman. He was curly, middle-aged, rough, careless in attitude, uncleanly in speech—as uncleanly and savage as one can well be who is plainly a man of means.

It was not enough that a freeborn Afro-American should be caught kneeling to an Englishman. But when he had knelt this penance, and advanced hospitably to the newcomer, he must be greeted with a snarl.

"Say, are you the porter of this car, or that man's nurse?"

"I can't tell yet. What's yo' number?"

The answer was the ticket. The porter screwed up his eyes to read the pencilled scrawl.

"Numba se'm. Heah she is, boss."

"Right next to a lot of women, I'll be bound. Put me in the men's end of the car."

"Not ve'y well, suh. I reckon the cah is done sold out."

With a growl of rage, Ira Lathrop slammed into the seat his entire hand baggage, his ancient and rusty valise. The porter gazed upon him with increased depression. The passenger list had opened inauspiciously with two of the worst types of travelers the Anglo-Saxon race has developed.

But their anger was not their worst trait in the porter's eyes. He was, in a limited way, an expert in human character.

When you meet a stranger you reveal your own character in what you ask about his. With some, the first question is, "Who are his people?" With others, "What has he achieved?" With others, "How much is he worth?" Each gauges his cordiality according to his estimate.

The porter was not curious on any of these points. He showed a democratic indifference to them. His one vital inquiry was:

"How much will he tip?"

His inspection of his first two charges promised small returns. He gauged his cordiality, and determined upon the irreducible minimum of attention.

It would take at least a bridal couple to restore the balance. But bridal couples in their first bloom rarely fell to the lot of that porter, for what bridal couple wants to be a bride couple, and to catch this train.

But the Englishman was restive again:

"Pawtah! I say, pawtah!"

CHAPTER III.

In Darkest Chicago.

The castaways from the wrecked taxicab hurried along the downtown street. Both of them knew their Chicago, but this part of it was not their Chicago.

They halted a pedestrian, to ask where the nearest street car line might be, and whether it might run. He answered indistinctly from a discreet distance, as he hastened away.

Perhaps he thought their question merely a footpad's introduction to a sandbagging episode. In Chicago at night one never knows.

"As near as I can make out what he said, Marjorie," the lieutenant pondered aloud, "we walk straight ahead till we come to Umptymum street, and there we find a Rarara car that will take us to Hloptyblop avenue. I never heard of any such streets, did you?"

"Never," she panted, as she jogged trotted along his military pace. "Let's take the first car we meet, and perhaps the conductor can put us off at the street where the minister lives."

"Perhaps." There was not much confidence in the "perhaps."

When they reached the street-carred street, they found two tracks, but nothing occupying them, as far as they could peer either way. A small shoekeeper in a tiny shop proved to be a delatessen merchant so busily selling foreign horrors to aliens, that they learned nothing from him.

At length, in the far-away, they made out a headlight, and heard the grind and squeal of a car. Lieutenant Mallory waited for it, watch in hand. He boosted Marjorie's elbow aboard and bombarded the conductor with questions. But the conductor had no more heard of their street than they had of his. Their agitation did not disturb his stolid calm, but he invited them to come along to the next crossing, where they could find another car, and more learned conductors; or, what promised better, perhaps a cab.

He threw Marjorie into a panic by ordering her to Jettison Snoozeums, but the lieutenant bought his soul for a small price, and overlooked the fact that he did not ring up their fares.

The young couple squeezed into a seat and talked anxiously in sharp whispers.

"Well, I tell you—take this here green car to Wexford avenue—the're usually a taxicab or two standin' there."

"Thank you. Hop on, Marjorie."

Marjorie hopped on, and they sat down, Mallory with eyes and thoughts on nothing but the watch he kept in his hand.

During this tense journey the minister perfected her soul with graceful martyrdom.

"I'll go to the train with you, Harry, and then you can send me home in a taxicab."

Her nether lip trembled and her eyes were flamed, but they were brave, and her voice was so tender that it wooed his mind from his watch. He gazed at her, and found her so dear, so devoted and so pitifully exquisite, that he was almost overcome by an impulse to gather her into his arms there and then, indifferent to the immediate passengers or to his far-off military superiors. An hour ago they were young lovers in all the likeliest and most romantic of places. She had clung to him in the gloaming of their taxicab, as it sped like a genie at their whim to the place where the minister would unite their hands and raise his own in blessing. Thence the new husband would have carried the new wife away, his very own, soul and body, duty and beauty. Then, ah, then in their minds the future was an unwaning honeymoon, the journey across the continent, a stroll along a lover's lane, the Pacific ocean a garden lake, and the Philippines a chain of Fortunate Isles decreed especially for their Eden. And then the taxicab encountered a lamp-post. They thought they had merely wrecked a motor car—and lo, they had wrecked a Paradise.

The railroad ceased to be a lover's lane and became a lingering torment; the ocean was a weeping Sahara, and the Philippines a Dry Tortugas of exile.

Marjorie realized for the first time what heavy burdens he had taken on with his shoulder straps; what a dismal life of restrictions and hardships an officer's life is bound to be. It was hard to obey the soulless machinery of discipline, and she was a brave-souled girl. She felt all the hot, quick resentment that turns a faithful soldier into a deserter. But it takes time to evolve a deserter, and Mallory had only twenty minutes. The handcuffs and legions of discipline hobbled him. He was only a little cog in a great clock, and the other wheels were impinging on him and revolving in spite of himself.

In the close-packed seats where they were jostled and stared at, the soldier could not even attempt to explain to his fascinated bride the war of motives in his breast. He could not voice the passionate rebellion beauty had whipped up in his soul. Perhaps if Romeo and Juliet had been forced to say farewell on a Chicago street car instead of a Venetian balcony, their language would have lacked savor, too.

Perhaps young Mr. Montague and young Miss Gattie, instead of waiting "No, that is not the lark whose notes do beat the vaulty heaven so high above our heads," would have done no better than Mr. Mallory and Miss Newton. In any case, the best these two could squeeze out was:

"It's just too bad, honey."

"But I guess it can't be helped, dear."

"It's a mean old world, isn't it?"

"Awful!"

And then they sat still, but with the latest again so late in time that they did not know how they were cramped or elbowed. Marjorie's head sank against the seat, and she murmured:

"I wish I could see you again, Harry. You wouldn't accept my resignation, but they'd be willing to court-martial me and dismiss me from the service in disgrace. Then you wouldn't want to marry me—and I shouldn't have any way of supporting you if you did. I only know one trade, and that's soldiering."

"Don't call it a trade, beloved, it's the noblest profession in all the world, and you're the noblest soldier that ever was, and in a year or two you'll be the biggest general in the army."

He could not afford to shatter such a devout illusion or quench the light of faith in those beloved and loving eyes. He tacitly admitted his ability to be promoted commander-in-chief in a year or two. He allowed that glittering possibility to remain, used it as a basis for argument.

"Then, dearest, you must help me to do my duty."

She clasped his upper arm as if it were an altar and she an Iphigenia about to be sacrificed to save the army. And she murmured with utter heroism:

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"I will! Do what you like with me!"

He squeezed her hand between his biceps and his ribs and accepted the offering in a look drenched with gratitude. Then he said, matter-of-factly:

"We'll see how much time we have when we get to—whatever the name of that street is."

The car jolted and waited on its way like an old drifting rocking chair. The motorman was in no hurry. The passengers seemed to have no occasion for haste. Somebody got on or got off at almost every corner, and paused for conversation while the car waited patiently. But eventually the conductor put his head in and drawled:

"Hay! Here's where you get off at."

They hastened to debark and found themselves in a narrow, gaudily-lighted region where they saw a lovely transfer-distributor, a profound scholar in Chicago streets. He informed them that the minister's street lay far back along the path they had come; they should have taken a car in the opposite direction, transferred at some remote center, descended at some unheard-of street, walked three blocks one way and four another, and there they would have been.

Mallory looked at his watch, and Marjorie's hopes dropped like a wrecked aeroplane, for he had asked how long it would take them to reach the railroad station.

"Well, you'd ought to make it in forty minutes," the transfer agent said—and added, cynically, "if the car makes schedule."

"Good Lord, the train starts in twenty minutes!"

"Well, I tell you—take this here green car to Wexford avenue—the're usually a taxicab or two standin' there."

"Thank you. Hop on, Marjorie."

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