

THE GREAT HUSBAND HUNT

by MABEL BARNES-GRUNDY

PART XII.

THAT he should have elected to go first for a wash was unpardonable, Miss Oakwood considered. "He saw that we were ready, yet he brushed past us with his towel and soap and sponge. You are going to have a more selfish husband than I imagined, Peronelle. I had always thought Martin a particularly considerate, unselfish young man, but—what was that?" The sound of angry voices and the kicking of a door came to our ears along the corridor. "Why, it's Martin!"

She tore out. I tore after her; and I noticed the people in the next compartment, aroused from their slumber, were peering through their windows.

Martin, his face purple with temper, was shouting outside a door at the end of the corridor, rattling the handle and kicking the lower panels with his boot.

"Come out of this, sir! Have you taken this place for good? Remember there are other people on the train who will be glad of a wash. . . . What's that?" (A sound of an aggrieved, choking voice from within.) "You say you haven't been five minutes! Well, I say it's a lie!"

"Martin, Martin!" Miss Oakwood had flung herself upon him, reasoning with him, expostulating; but firmly, though gently, he pushed her away.

"Please don't interfere. This gentleman, no, unmannerly cub, within, must be taught a lesson. I say, sir, are you coming out?" Again he assaulted the door with heavy kicks (several persons by this time had arrived with bulging eyes and open mouths to find out the cause of the disturbance). "Or are you not? If you've not finished having your bath in ten seconds from now, I shall summon an attendant. Please, Miss Oakwood, don't interfere. This is my affair and not yours. This scoundrel must be made to understand there are other people in the universe besides himself. You are waiting, Peronelle is waiting. I am waiting. All these patient persons are waiting."

"But," reasoned Miss Oakwood, "there's another lavatory at the other end."

"That, too, is occupied by another blighted blighter."

"I beg your pardon, sir," came a shrill voice from a pointed-nosed, freckled lady, whose head was tied up in purple tulle, "it is occupied by my daughter, who has not been there a couple of minutes. I must ask you immediately to withdraw your most outrageous and unmannerly assertion."

Martin apologised, and the freckled lady snifflingly withdrew. Again he attacked the door, and then nearly fell forward on to his nose as it suddenly opened and a furious-looking young man emerged and brandished his sponge in Martin's face. "How dare you, sir?" he shouted, "how dare you insult me in this monstrous fashion?"

"Insult you! Why, your behaviour calls for more than words. If we

were not so unfortunately placed in the confined space of this train I should ask, nay, insist, upon settling it in a more practical fashion. In fact—" he squared his fists.

"Martin, oh, Martin," screamed Miss Oakwood, "don't! You can't fight here. What are you thinking of? And this poor young man hasn't been very long."

"I have not been five minutes, madam. I think your friend, if friend he is, is demented." The young man's nostrils dilated with suppressed anger, and his face was scarlet. "I have never been so insulted in my life, never, and for two pints I would give him in charge when we reach Paris."

"Oh, don't! Let me entreat you! It would be terrible!" In her emotion Miss Oakwood pressed her sponge-bag to her eyes. "Believe me, Mr. Sygne is usually most peaceable and polite and considerate to everybody. I cannot imagine what has come over him."

To my dismay I saw Martin's lips begin of a sudden to quiver and his chest to heave, and then the young stranger's did the same, and I knew they were threatened with laughter. Each turned his back on Miss Oakwood, and I shivered with apprehension. Were they going to give the show away? Miss Oakwood was staring anxiously at Martin's back. I believe she thought he was about to have a fit, the result of his outburst of passion.

"What is it?" she inquired. "Martin, what is the matter? Are you ill?"

In a rather shaky voice Martin answered: "I think I am. This has been rather too much for me. I must sit down." He staggered toward the carriage, and with an expression of immense relief, Miss Oakwood followed him. The young man, with one look at me, disappeared as fast as his legs would carry him, the audience melted away, and I went and had a wash.

The only comment Miss Oakwood made to me about the affair was that she thought Martin had temporarily gone off his head, another phase of his queer moods, another distressing result of the War. "I had a serious talk with him, and he was very penitent and ashamed. He said he felt he could not bear that you and I should be kept waiting, that he had conceived the idea I was a little impatient as a traveller—I suppose because I was annoyed at the waiter refusing me tea—and so forth, and the very thought of that poor young man keeping us standing in the corridor made him 'see red.' I believe he has apologised to him, but the whole affair has been very distressing. I only hope he won't give way to these sudden gusts of temper with you." I replied that I sincerely hoped he wouldn't.

Her behaviour throughout the remainder of the journey was so exemplary that Martin and I were quite touched.

I make my Confession

IT was over. I had screwed up my courage between Dover and London, and told them my reason for taking a companionship and going to Mentone. For some moments they sat round-eyed, open-mouthed, and stared at me. They stared till my pulses beat convulsively, my chest heaved, and I felt as though a stream of liquid fire had poured into my cheeks, staining them as scarlet as a pillar-box. How were they going to take it?

"Oh," I cried at length, "say something! Don't look like that. I know how you must feel and think, but just say it, or—I shall sob."

And Martin then, regardless of Miss Oakwood, and with an "Oh, my dear, my dear!" took me in his arms and kissed me. And then if he didn't fall into laughter, and if Miss Oakwood didn't join him, and if they didn't laugh so much—Martin's convulsive movements actually caused me to bob up and down—that I felt compelled to join them, and we all laughed together!

It was Martin who was the first to regain control of himself; mopping his eyes, he murmured: "I know you'll be the death of me some day, Peronelle!"

Miss Oakwood agreed. "And all for the sake of supplying her with an endless succession of silk stockings. To think you have been caught for that! Deliberately hunted, pursued, caught, landed, Martin! And she looked so innocent."

"I know. Those eyes, that air of ingenuousness, that candid manner! And all the time she was viewing me through a foreground, a setting, a background, a framework of silk stockings! And when silk stockings possibly palled through their ubiquity—I can conceive that the mental eye might tire even of silken hose—a thousand pounds has filled the visionary outlook."

"And you, like the proverbial pound of tea, have been thrown in, as a husband, because the other two—the stockings and thousand pounds—would have been unobtainable without you," chipped in Miss Oakwood. "Poor Martin! I've heard of the eup of humiliation being drunk to the dregs, but this . . .!"

"I know," he sighed.

I said nothing.

They continued in this strain, till, becoming bored, I essayed to get up, but Martin clutched at me.

"And you have nothing to say—no apology?"

"None."

"You're hardened, just hardened!"

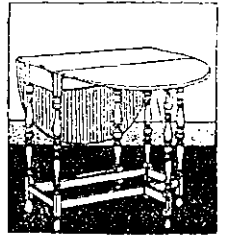
"Yes, if you like to put it that way."

"What other way can it be put?"

"Any other, because it's not true. I'm not hardened. I'm not even ashamed. I am ashamed that I accepted Uncle Tom's challenge and went out to Mentone solely to look for a husband, but I'm not ashamed of what happened after."

"And what did?"

"I met you. I could hunt no longer. I wrote to tell Agatha so."



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