

THE FIRST DAY

by L. Edmond

I ARRIVED last night, in a fog. For years I have felt sorry for the people who live in obscure towns on the Main Trunk, getting on or off its trains in the cold gloom of the middle of the night. After each one I always have a confused impression of blue lights making everything ghastly, of people on the platform stamping up and down because of the cold, collars and ties off and hair dishevelled from sleep; of unknown hands wobbling past the window carrying cups of tea, and the hollow blare of a loud-speaker hammering away at you from every direction at once. It is a relief to resettle your bones into the crevices of the corner seat and go back to grimy nightmares in the darkness of a Second Class carriage.

But this time it was me everyone was sorry for. They couldn't, of course, help the settled passenger's dislike of people who scratch about on the floor in search of lost luggage checks, and the way they dislodge heads and pillows as they squeeze along the passage. But still, there were several glances cast at me which said, unmistakably, "Poor thing. Unbearable. Couldn't be more glad it isn't me."

I emerged, grubby and resigned, in time to be dived into in the dimness by a fat man carrying two pies and two slopping cups of tea. Disgusting, anyway, I thought, to eat all night, as I brushed bitterly at the crumbs sprayed on to my coat. Then a hearty fellow in a wide-brimmed hat rushed up to me, smiled intimately, and picked up and shook my unresponsive right hand.

"How are you?" he said jovially. "I know you must be the new dental nurse: they're all good-looking! My taxi is outside; you hop in and I'll collect your bags."

"It's very —" I began.

"Quite all right. It's the old green Chev. The big new one belongs to one of the mill owners; don't get into it. By the way," he called, starting off up the platform, "my name's Tim Alexander."

"Mine —"

"Yes, I know. Miss Wilkes."

I blinked, straightened my hat and walked out to the darkness beyond the station. I had only time to locate the green Chev. and get into it when he reappeared, staggering under the load of my luggage but still cheerful.

"You city girls have too many smart clothes, eh," he bellowed from where he was banging things about trying to fit them all into the box at the back. "All you need here"—thump—"is a pair of"—thump—"slacks for the winter and"—thump, crash—"lots of woollen underwear. However," he continued as he got into the car, having somehow pushed the bags into place, "it's not winter yet. Best time of the year here just now. There's always plenty happening. As a matter of fact, there's a grand rodeo just out of town next Saturday. You ought to go. Ever seen one?"

"Well, no, but—"

"You'd love it. In the country, you know, you've gotta make your own fun. It starts at ten o'clock. I'll be driving a free bus out there from Jamieson's corner. Now you come. Here's the hotel. Up these steps and you knock on the third door along the passage to wake

up the old lady. It's not like a city place, you know, but nice and friendly. I'll put the bags here inside the door. Good luck. See you Saturday." He was gone.

I PAUSED uncertainly, feeling a degree of sympathy for the old lady. Probably this sort of thing happened nearly every night of her life, poor old bird. Suddenly the third door opened, and there she was, a screwed-up midget of a woman, wearing a long white nightie and an old raincoat over it.

"You'll be Miss Wilkes," she said, in a thin, rasping voice that seemed appropriate with that foxy little face. "Come in and I'll show you your room."

You're next door to an old chap with asthma, but I don't think he'll worry you. Bang on the wall if he does, and that'll fix him. Bathroom's at the far end; you'd better wait till morning to find it."

She opened the door of a tiny room. It was filled with the pungent staleness of boarding house bedrooms, and was cluttered with ancient furniture. There could not have been more than three square yards of unoccupied space.

"Well, goodnight, dear. Joe's bringing the bags."

It seemed that Joe had already brought them, for there he was, peering at me from over the old lady's shoulder.

"Look art for the winder, Miss," he said in deep and sepulchral tones. "It falls on yer if yer try opening it."

"Oh," I felt discouraged. "Well, good-night."

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Miss."

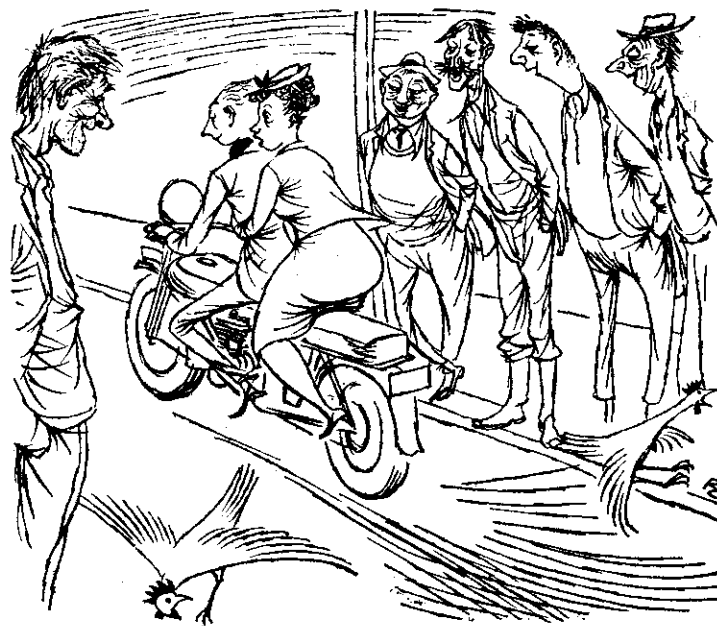
I looked about, and nervously began to open a drawer. I froze at the thunderous rumble this precipitated. It was caused, I found, by rows of empty beer bottles rolling about inside. Well, further investigations could wait; I went to bed. The hours left for sleep were few, and there were other factors against it as well: a receding mattress, my neighbour's asthmatic wheezes, unstable bedclothes which constantly exposed my unhappy feet to the air (chilly in spite of the closed winder.)

UNREFRESHED, but still ready to be co-operative, I emerged next morning and found my way downstairs. I swallowed breakfast in the company of four school teachers, whose most significant piece of advice to me was not, on any account, to speak to the Headmaster of the school till after lunch.

"Teddy'll take you to work on his motor bike," one of the four girls said. "He's been waiting to for days. Lift your knees though, or your feet get caught in the wheel."

"We've put you down for Fridays on the supper rota," said another.

Teddy and I roar off down the road. When we arrive, shaken but composed, at the clinic, there is a blue-eyed and



"Lift your knees . . . or your feet get caught in the wheel"

guileless young man leaning on the door.

"Hullo," he says. "I can't stay long, but just thought I'd get in early—do you tramp?"

"Well, the fact is—" (by now my usual attempt).

"Anyway, even if you haven't, you must try it while you're here. The point is that there's only one seat left in the bus for a trip next Sunday. We go the first few miles by bus," he explains apologetically. "I'll put you down for it, shall I? Look, I'll be late for work if I don't go—I'm in the Post Office, you know. We have a marvellous time, and it'll only cost you thirty bob. Bus leaves about six o'clock—I don't suppose you're used to getting up early in the city? Ha ha! Oh, well, be seeing you. . ."

He dances off towards the gate, but stops to call, "By the way, is your name Gloria or Gladys? We couldn't decide."

"Gert," I say laconically.

At half past nine the phone rings. "Is that Miss Wilkes?" says a penetrating voice.

"Yes." I am learning to be brief.

"My name is Penelope Grigg—Mrs. Grigg—and although I haven't met you yet I've heard so much about you already. I just wanted to tell you that we all feel sure you'll be such an asset to our drama club. We do so need young blood, you know—it's just a pity you aren't a man, but still, beggars can't be choosers, I always say, can they? Anyway, we'd just love to have you; I know you must have lots of new ideas to teach us country bumpkins, and, of course, as I always say, in the country you have to make your own fun. Don't you agree?"

"Of course. What—?"

"Well, Miss Wilkes—er—could I call you Georgina?"

"Gertie," I murmur.

"Oh. So sorry. Somehow that never occurred to us; but never mind. The fact is—er—Gertie, that what we really need is a secretary. It's really very easy, mostly organising and not many letters. Don't answer right now; just think it over and I'll send you the Minute Book in the morning. By the way, do you like our little town?"

"Well, I haven't—"

"Quite, but you'll love it, of course. Oh, well, this is very kind of you, and I'm sure you won't regret it. I'll send you that book—no, I'll bring it myself, and we can have a nice little chat, as long as you don't mind the children. Goodbye."

"Goodbye," I say faintly, and go to open the door to a velvety-eyed little Maori boy who says he's lost his card, but thinks it was today he had to come. It was, and work begins; but my troubles are not yet over. At quarter to twelve the phone rings again.

"Good morning. This is the Senior Woman." I quail. "I'm awfully sorry we forgot to invite you to morning tea this morning, but you know we do want you to feel one of us over at school. So important to hang together; you'll find these country people awfully good at it. We all try to combine to make our own—"

I cannot resist it.

"What was that you said, Nurse?"

"Nothing, I—"

"Well, anyway, do come up to school tomorrow morning. And in the meantime, do you think you'd like to begin your career in our little community by coming along with me to the parish hall this evening? I'm organising a social for young people, and thought you might like to meet people, and get the run of the ropes."

"That would be nice, but I haven't—"

"Unpacked. No, of course not. Still, that will always keep, won't it? So nice to have a co-operative nurse. Of course," she adds hastily, "your predecessor was a charming girl. I'll call for you in my car. Cheerio for now, Nurse Wilkes. Oh, by the way, just a little tip off the record. You will find our Headmaster very helpful, but it is not a good idea to tackle him with your first little problems till after he has had lunch. You understand?"

My tackling power, I reflect, seems negligible, anyway. So far I have not uttered one complete sentence since my arrival. However, more dark and demure faces at the door recall me to the comparative peace of routine.

BY afternoon I feel tired. Tonight I am a wreck, crushed by over-stimulation and nearly twenty-four hours of making my own fun, or having it made for me. Two young men who live in the hotel and work in the town have just gone past my door. I met them at dinner, and thought them quiet and nice. After all, they contented themselves with merely offering to lend me library books any time I liked. Their conversation just now has caused me painful surprise.

"She seems a good sort, doesn't she, this new crow?"

"Yeah. She certainly seems in everything, anyway. But you can't trust these keen women. Before you know where you are they're managing everything and organising you all over the place."

"By Jove, yes, I hadn't thought of that."