

# When a Man Marries

By

Mary Roberts Rinehart

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## At Least I Meant Well

When the dreadful thing occurred that night, every one turned on me. The injustice of it hurt me most. They said I got up the dinner, that I asked them to give up other engagements and come, that I promised all kinds of jollification, if they would come; and then when they did come and got in the papers and every one--but ourselves--laughed himself black in the face, they turned on ME! I, who suffered ten times to their one! I shall never forget what Dallas Brown said to me, standing with a coal shovel in one hand and a--well, perhaps it would be better to tell it all in the order it happened.

It began with Jimmy Wilson and a conspiracy, was helped on by a foot-square piece of yellow paper and a Japanese butler, and it enmeshed and mixed up generally ten respectable members of society and a policeman. Incidentally, it involved a pearl collar and a box of soap, which sounds incongruous, doesn't it?

It is a great misfortune to be stout, especially for a man. Jim was rotund and looked shorter than he really was, and as all the lines of his face, or what should have been lines, were really dimples, his face was about as flexible and full of expression as a pillow in a tight cover. The angrier he got the funnier he looked, and when he was raging, and his neck swelled up over his collar and got red, he was entrancing. And everybody liked him, and borrowed money from him, and laughed at his pictures (he has one in the Hargrave gallery in London now, so people buy them instead), and smoked his cigarettes, and tried to steal his Jap. The whole story hinges on the Jap.

The trouble was, I think, that no one took Jim seriously. His ambition in life was to be taken seriously, but people steadily refused to. His art was a huge joke--except to himself. If he asked people to dinner, every one expected a frolic. When he married Bella Knowles, people chuckled at the wedding, and considered it the wildest prank of Jimmy's career, although Jim himself seemed to take it awfully hard.

We had all known them both for years. I went to Farmington with Bella, and Anne Brown was her matron of honor when she married Jim. My first winter out, Jimmy had paid me a lot of attention. He painted my portrait in oils and had a studio tea to exhibit it. It was a very nice picture, but it did not look like me, so I stayed away from the exhibition. Jim asked me to. He said he was not a photographer, and that anyhow the rest of my features called for the nose he had given me, and that all the Greuze women have long necks. I have not.

After I had refused Jim twice he met Bella at a camp in the Adirondacks and when he came back he came at once to see me. He seemed to think I would be sorry to lose him, and he blundered over the telling for twenty minutes. Of course, no woman likes to lose a lover, no matter what she may say about it, but Jim had been getting on my nerves for some time, and I was much calmer than he expected me to be.

"If you mean," I said finally in desperation, "that you and Bella are--are in love, why don't you say so, Jim? I think you will find that I stand it wonderfully."

He brightened perceptibly.

"I didn't know how you would take it, Kit," he said, "and I hope we will always be bully friends. You are absolutely sure you don't care a whoop for me?"

"Absolutely," I replied, and we shook hands on it. Then he began about Bella; it was very tiresome.

Bella is a nice girl, but I had roomed with her at school, and I was under no illusions. When Jim raved about Bella and her banjo, and Bella and her guitar, I had painful moments when I recalled Bella, learning her two songs on each instrument, and the old English ballad she had learned to play on the harp. When he said she was too good for him, I never batted an eye. And I shook hands solemnly across the tea-table again, and wished him happiness--which was sincere enough, but hopeless--and said we had only been playing a game, but that it was time to stop playing. Jim kissed my hand, and it was really very touching.

We had been the best of friends ever since. Two days before the wedding he came around from his tailor's, and we burned all his letters to me. He would read one and say: "Here's a crackerjack, Kit," and pass it to me. And after I had read it we would lay it on the firelog, and Jim would say, "I am not worthy of her, Kit. I wonder if I can make her happy?" Or--"Did you know that the Duke of Belford proposed to her in London last winter?"

Of course, one has to take the woman's word about a thing like that, but the Duke of Belford had been mad about Maude Richard all that winter.

You can see that the burning of the letters, which was meant to be reminiscently sentimental, a sort of how-silly-we-were-but-it-is-all-over-now occasion, became actually a two hours' eulogy of Bella. And just when I was bored to death, the Mercer girls dropped in and heard Jim begin to read one commencing "dearest Kit." And the next day after the rehearsal dinner, they told Bella!

There was very nearly no wedding at all. Bella came to see me in a frenzy the next morning and threw Jim and his two-hundred odd pounds in my face, and although I explained it all over and over, she never quite forgave me. That was what made it so hard later--the situation would have been bad enough without that complication.

They went abroad on their wedding journey, and stayed several months. And when Jim came back he was fatter than ever. Everybody noticed it. Bella had a gymnasium fitted up in a corner of the studio, but he would not use it. He smoked a pipe and painted all day, and drank beer and WOULD eat starches or whatever it is that is fattening. But he adored Bella, and he was madly jealous of her. At dinners he used to glare at the man who took her in, although it did not make him thin. Bella was flirting, too, and by the time they had been married a year, people hitched their chairs together and dropped their voices when they were mentioned.

Well, on the anniversary of the day Bella left him--oh yes, she left him finally. She was intense enough about some things, and she said it got on her nerves to have everybody chuckle when they asked for her husband. They would say, "Hello, Bella! How's Bubbles? Still banting?" And Bella would try to laugh and say, "He swears his tailor says his waist is smaller, but if it is he must be growing hollow in the back."

But she got tired of it at last. Well, on the second anniversary of Bella's departure, Jimmy was feeling pretty glum, and as I say, I am very fond of Jim. The divorce had just gone through and Bella had taken her maiden name again and had had an operation for appendicitis. We heard afterward that they didn't find an appendix, and that the one they showed her in a glass jar WAS NOT HERS! But if Bella ever suspected, she didn't say. Whether the appendix was anonymous or not, she got box after box of flowers that were, and of course every one knew that it was Jim who sent them.

To go back to the anniversary, I went to Rothberg's to see the collection of antique furniture--mother was looking for a sideboard for father's birthday in March--and I met Jimmy there, boring into a worm-hole in a seventeenth-century bedpost with the end of a match, and looking his nearest to sad. When he saw me he came over.

"I'm blue today, Kit," he said, after we had shaken hands. "Come and help me dig bait, and then let's go fishing. If there's a worm in every hole in that bedpost, we could go into the fish business. It's a good business."

"Better than painting?" I asked. But he ignored my gibe and swelled up alarmingly in order to sigh.

"This is the worst day of the year for me," he affirmed, staring straight ahead, "and the longest. Look at that crazy clock over there. If you want to see your life passing away, if you want to see the steps by which you are marching to eternity, watch that clock marking the time. Look at that infernal hand staying quiet for sixty seconds and then jumping forward to catch up with the procession. Ugh!"

"See here, Jim," I said, leaning forward, "you're not well. You can't go through the rest of the day like this. I know what you'll do; you'll go home to play Grieg on the pianola, and you won't eat any dinner." He looked guilty.

"Not Grieg," he protested feebly. "Beethoven."

"You're not going to do either," I said with firmness. "You are going right home to unpack those new draperies that Harry Bayles sent you from Shanghai, and you are going to order dinner for eight--that will be two tables of bridge. And you are not going to touch the pianola."

He did not seem enthusiastic, but he rose and picked up his hat, and stood looking down at me where I sat on an old horse-hair covered sofa.

"I wish to thunder I had married you!" he said savagely. "You're the finest girl I know, Kit, WITHOUT EXCEPTION, and you are going to throw yourself away on Jack Manning, or Max, or some other--"

"Nothing of the sort," I said coldly, "and the fact that you didn't marry me does not give you the privilege of abusing my friends. Anyhow, I don't like you when you speak like that."

Jim took me to the door and stopped there to sigh.

"I haven't been well," he said heavily. "Don't eat, don't sleep. Wouldn't you think I'd lose flesh? Kit"--he lowered his voice solemnly--"I have gained two pounds!"

I said he didn't look it, which appeared to comfort him somewhat, and, because we were old friends, I asked him where Bella was. He said he thought she was in Europe, and that he had heard she was going to marry Reggie Wolfe. Then he signed again, muttered something about ordering the funeral baked meats to be prepared and left me.

That was my entire share in the affair. I was the victim, both of circumstances and of their plot, which was mad on the face of it.

During the entire time they never once let me forget that I got up the dinner, that I telephoned around for them. They asked me why I couldn't cook--when not one of them knew one side of a range from the other. And for Anne Brown to talk the way she did--saying I had always been crazy about Jim, and that she believed I had known all along that his aunt was coming--for Anne to talk like that was sheer idiocy. Yes, there was an aunt. The Japanese butler started the trouble, and Aunt Selina carried it along.

## The Way It Began

It makes me angry every time I think how I tried to make that dinner a success. I canceled a theater engagement, and I took the Mercer girls in the electric brougham father had given me for Christmas. Their chauffeur had been gone for hours with their machine, and they had telephoned all the police stations without success. They were afraid that there had been an awful smash; they could easily have replaced Bartlett, as Lollie said, but it takes so long to get new parts for those foreign cars.

Jim had a house well up-town, and it stood just enough apart from the other houses to be entirely maddening later. It was a three-story affair, with a basement kitchen and servants' dining room. Then, of course, there were cellars, as we found out afterward. On the first floor there was a large square hall, a formal reception room, behind it a big living room that was also a library, then a den, and back of all a Georgian dining room, with windows high above the ground. On the top floor Jim had a studio, like every other one I ever saw--perhaps a little mussier. Jim was really a grind at his painting, and there were cigarette ashes and palette knives and buffalo rugs and shields everywhere. It is strange, but when I think of that terrible house, I always see the halls, enormous, covered with heavy rugs, and stairs that would have taken six housemaids to keep in proper condition. I dream about those stairs, stretching above me in a Jacob's ladder of shining wood and Persian carpets, going up, up, clear to the roof.

The Dallas Browns walked; they lived in the next block. And they brought with them a man named Harbison, that no one knew. Anne said he would be great sport, because he was terribly serious, and had the most exaggerated ideas of society, and loathed extravagance, and built bridges or something. She had put away her cigarettes since he had been with them--he and Dallas had been college friends--and the only chance she had to smoke was when she was getting her hair done. And she had singed off quite a lot--a burnt offering, she called it.

"My dear," she said over the telephone, when I invited her, "I want you to know him. He'll be crazy about you. That type of man, big and deadly earnest, always falls in love with your type of girl, the appealing sort, you know. And he has been too busy, up to now, to know what love is. But mind, don't hurt him; he's a dear boy. I'm half in love with him myself, and Dallas trots around at his heels like a poodle."

But all Anne's geese are swans, so I thought little of the Harbison man except to hope that he played respectable bridge, and wouldn't mark the cards with a steel spring under his finger nail, as one of her "finds" had done.

We all arrived about the same time, and Anne and I went upstairs together to take off our wraps in what had been Bella's dressing room. It was Anne who noticed the violets.

"Look at that!" she nudged me, when the maid was examining her wrap before she laid it down. "What did I tell you, Kit? He's still quite mad about her."

Jim had painted Bella's portrait while they were going up the Nile on their wedding trip. It looked quite like her, if you stood well off in the middle of the room and if the light came from the right. And just beneath it, in a silver vase, was a bunch of violets. It was really touching, and violets were fabulous. It made me want to cry, and to shake Bella

soundly, and to go down and pat Jim on his generous shoulder, and tell him what a good fellow I thought him, and that Bella wasn't worth the dust under his feet. I don't know much about psychology, but it would be interesting to know just what effect those violets and my sympathy for Jim had in influencing my decision a half hour later. It is not surprising, under the circumstances, that for some time after the odor of violets made me ill.

We all met downstairs in the living room, quite informally, and Dallas was banging away at the pianola, tramping the pedals with the delicacy and feeling of a football center rush kicking a goal. Mr. Harbison was standing near the fire, a little away from the others, and he was all that Anne had said and more in appearance. He was tall--not too tall, and very straight. And after one got past the oddity of his face being bronze-colored above his white collar, and of his brown hair being sun-bleached on top until it was almost yellow, one realized that he was very handsome. He had what one might call a resolute nose and chin, and a pleasant, rather humorous, mouth. And he had blue eyes that were, at that moment, wandering with interest over the lot of us. Somebody shouted his name to me above the Tristan and Isolde music, and I held out my hand.

Instantly I had the feeling one sometimes has, of having done just that same thing, with the same surroundings, in the same place, years before, I was looking up at him, and he was staring down at me and holding my hand. And then the music stopped and he was saying:

"Where was it?"

"Where was what?" I asked. The feeling was stronger than ever with his voice.

"I beg your pardon," he said, and let my hand drop. "Just for a second I had an idea that we had met before somewhere, a long time ago. I suppose--no, it couldn't have happened, or I should remember." He was smiling, half at himself.

"No," I smiled back at him. "It didn't happen, I'm afraid--unless we dreamed it."

"We?"

"I felt that way, too, for a moment."

"The Brushwood Boy!" he said with conviction. "Perhaps we will find a common dream life, where we knew each other. You remember the Brushwood Boy loved the girl for years before they really met." But this was a little too rapid, even for me.

"Nothing so sentimental, I'm afraid," I retorted. "I have had exactly the same sensation sometimes when I have sneezed."

Betty Mercer captured him then and took him off to see Jim's newest picture. Anne pounced on me at once.

"Isn't he delicious?" she demanded. "Did you ever see such shoulders? And such a nose? And he thinks we are parasites, cumberers of the earth, Heaven knows what. He says



every woman ought to know how to earn her living, in case of necessity! I said I could make enough at bridge, and he thought I was joking! He's a dear!" Anne was enthusiastic.

I looked after him. Oddly enough the feeling that we had met before stuck to me. Which was ridiculous, of course, for we learned afterward that the nearest we ever came to meeting was that our mothers had been school friends! Just then I saw Jim beckoning to me crazily from the den. He looked quite yellow, and he had been running his fingers through his hair.

"For Heaven's sake, come in, Kit!" he said. "I need a cool head. Didn't I tell you this is my calamity day?"

"Cook gone?" I asked with interest. I was starving.

He closed the door and took up a tragic attitude in front of the fire. "Did you ever hear of Aunt Selina?" he demanded.

"I knew there WAS one," I ventured, mindful of certain gossip as to whence Jimmy derived the Wilson income.

Jim himself was too worried to be cautious. He waved a brazen hand at the snug room, at the Japanese prints on the walls, at the rugs, at the teakwood cabinets and the screen inlaid with pearl and ivory.

"All this," he said comprehensively, "every bite I eat, clothes I wear, drinks I drink--you needn't look like that; I don't drink so darned much--everything comes from Aunt Selina--buttons," he finished with a groan.

"Selina Buttons," I said reflectively. "I don't remember ever having known any one named Buttons, although I had a cat once--"

"Damn the cat!" he said rudely. "Her name isn't Buttons. Her name is Caruthers, my Aunt Selina Caruthers, and the money comes from buttons."

"Oh!" feebly.

"It's an old business," he went on, with something of proprietary pride. "My grandfather founded it in 1775. Made buttons for the Continental Army."

"Oh, yes," I said. "They melted the buttons to make bullets, didn't they? Or they melted bullets to make buttons? Which was it?"

But again he interrupted.

"It's like this," he went on hurriedly. "Aunt Selina believes in me. She likes pictures, and she wanted me to paint, if I could. I'd have given up long ago--oh, I know what you think of my work--but for Aunt Selina. She has encouraged me, and she's done more than that; she's paid the bills."

"Dear Aunt Selina," I breathed.

"When I got married," Jim persisted, "Aunt Selina doubled my allowance. I always expected to sell something, and begin to make money, and in the meantime what she advanced I considered as a loan." He was eyeing me defiantly, but I was growing serious. It was evident from the preamble that something was coming.

"To understand, Kit," he went on dubiously, "you would have to know her. She won't stand for divorce. She thinks it is a crime."

"What!" I sat up. I have always regarded divorce as essentially disagreeable, like castor oil, but necessary.

"Oh, you know well enough what I'm driving at," he burst out savagely. "She doesn't know Bella has gone. She thinks I am living in a little domestic heaven, and--she is coming tonight to hear me flap my wings."

"Tonight!"

I don't think Jimmy had known that Dallas Brown had come in and was listening. I am sure I had not. Hearing his chuckle at the doorway brought us up with a jerk.

"Where has Aunt Selina been for the last two or three years?" he asked easily.

Jim turned, and his face brightened.

"Europe. Look here, Dal, you're a smart chap. She'll only be here about four hours. Can't you think of some way to get me out of this? I want to let her down easy, too. I'm mighty fond of Aunt Selina. Can't we--can't I say Bella has a headache?"

"Rotten!" laconically.

"Gone out of town?" Jim was desperate.

"And you with a houseful of dinner guests! Try again, Jim."

"I have it," Jim said suddenly. "Dallas, ask Anne if she won't play hostess for tonight. Be Mrs. Wilson pro tem. Anne would love it. Aunt Selina never saw Bella. Then, afterward, next year, when I'm hung in the Academy and can stand on my feet"--("Not if you're hung," Dallas interjected.)--"I'll break the truth to her."

But Dallas was not enthusiastic.

"Anne wouldn't do at all," he declared. "She'd be talking about the kids before she knew it, and patting me on the head." He said it complacently; Anne flirts, but they are really devoted.

"One of the Mercer girls?" I suggested, but Jimmy raised a horrified hand.

"You don't know Aunt Selina," he protested. "I couldn't offer Leila in the gown she's got on, unless she wore a shawl, and Betty is too fair."

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