

Matrimonial Adventures

The Tenth Mrs. Tulkington

BY Ellis Parker Butler

I do not believe there are many people in this country who need an introduction to Ellis Parker Butler...

MARY STEWART CUTTING, JR.

It was a habit of his to bathe in lily-pools at midnight, fully clad—as I have no doubt it is.

"Bathing, George?" she said, after she had greeted me—kissed me, mind you!

"Susan attends to the servants," I said reluctantly.

"The trouble," said George, when he had poured himself a chill-preventer,

"None of your business!" I growled. "Ah! He confesses!" said George Tithers.

"Not another word!" I exclaimed, exceedingly angry.

"Whom up?" George said then. "Stop here! The boss says stop. We're through, Amelia. I only meant to tell him of Lord Algy and Lady Mercedes,

"Oh, Lord Algy and Lady Mercedes!" exclaimed George's wife. "The happiest two people! Such a happy pair!"

"So cheery and happy! Always divorcing each other and marrying somebody else, and marrying each other again so gaily!" exclaimed Amelia.

"Because a man gets tired of the dear old wife after twenty years, even if she is his sister," said George.

"And of the dear old reliable husband, even if he is the most respectable old baldy," said Amelia.

"Especially if he is the same dear old reliable husband," George corrected her. "It's the blessed routine that warps 'em, don't you think?"

"Rather," said Amelia heartily. "It's like being married to the bally old Westminster Abbey, what?" said George.

"Act of parliament needed to permit even the riotous innovation of a new tombstone. Not a new hair on Old Bald-Top in thirteen years! Not a new-style hic-cough out of dear old Susie since the wedding bells!"

"Stop it!" I cried irritably, for he was patting the top of my head, the silly donkey. "Leave my head alone! What about this Lord Algy and this Lady Mercedes—if you must talk?"

"Oh, they're just off-again-on-again gaily little marrieds, Augustus!" George said. "Tired of one wife, get another; tired of one husband, get another. It's done in their circle. A man does get tired of the same old wife. Routine stuff, if you get me. Deadly monotonous, what? Sick of the sight of her; hate her—what?"

"It's in us," said Amelia placidly. "The bigamy thing, I mean. Any man who can afford it and is not restrained by convention or his ethics hops about a bit; has a variety. King Solomon, the sultan, Henry Eighth, Lord Byron, and Tithy, here."

"In a way of speaking," said Tithers modestly. "And myself, Tithy," said Amelia. "In a way of speaking, as you remark, darling, and Cleopatra, and the queen of Sheba—by all accounts."

"Now, stop this nonsense!" I said. "You know, both of you, that you do not run about after other men and women—"

"Well, rather not!" cried George. "He don't get us, Amelia; he's a bit dense. Tell him."

"Marriage," said Amelia, "is almost never a failure; married life is. Marriage is the first joining of two people together, and jolly sport it is with the getting acquainted intimately, rubbing sharp points together, and all. Some-thing interestin' all the while, what? And then, in a few years—five, maybe, or ten, or twenty—comes married life; the routine stuff. Awful bore, sometimes; same old wife; same old husband; same old ways and everything! Nothing new! They get jolly well sick of each other, and so wonder."

"A man—a man with a business to attend to—can't be running around divorcing his wife every day or so," I said.

twenty long years. Twenty-four years of the appearance of Hon. Augustus Tulkington and Mrs. Augustus Tulkington in their disgustingly familiar parts of Honorable Augustus Tulkington and Mrs. Augustus Tulkington, what? It's not a wonder you want a divorce; it's a wonder you don't murder each other."

Amelia Tithers was looking at me thoughtfully. "You can't grow new hair," she said, "but you might wear a wig occasionally."

"What ho, yes!" cried Tithers, jumping from his chair excitedly. "When he stages himself as the Conceited Elderly Ass, what? A toupee, what? And white spats! And a monocle! No, not a monocle. A monocle can't be done."

But it was done. It was not a complete success, it would not stick in my eye, but I dangled it from a string and feigned to swing it around my forefinger quite well. Exceedingly well, I may say.

As anything seemed preferable to divorce, Susan and I, after thorough consideration of the matter in company with George Tithers and his wife, agreed to appoint George and Amelia stage managers of our married life and I allowed them a liberal compensation. After a long consultation George and Amelia decided that it would be best for George to be my personal manager while Amelia managed Susan. I agreed to everything in advance, but I was surprised when George presented me with a sheet of paper at the top of which he had written "Cast of Characters."

On this sheet were written six varieties of husbands, all men of my acquaintance, and no two alike. At the head of the list was written "January—Self, prosperous banker."

And following this was "February—H. P. Diggleton, clubman, heavy sport," and "March—Winston Bopple, flirt, lady-chaser," and so on down to "June—Carey S. Flick, concited elderly fusser, etc." July I was again to be "Self, prosperous banker."

And so on for the second six months. As the month was now August I was to be, not myself, but a person resembling as nearly as possible H. P. Diggleton. For the month of August Susan was to have as her husband not myself but to all intents and purposes, some one equivalent to H. P. Diggleton. George Tithers saw that I was fully equipped with manners and habits; when he could not be sure what H. P. Diggleton would do he invented something new for me to do instead.

I admit that as the day approached when I was to become a practically new and unknown husband to Susan I became keenly excited. This was not because I was to be another man but because I knew I was to have in Susan an entirely new wife. I had never been so interested in anything in my life.

When the thirteen trunks, containing the thirteen complete sets of costumes Susan was to wear in her thirteen impersonations came into the house and were carried to the storeroom I actually trembled with excitement as I saw them and noticed the huge white numerals painted on their sides. I say thirteen trunks because Amelia Tithers had decided that, month by month, Susan should be thirteen women. She felt that Susan, being a woman, was equal to the task and by letting Susan be a different woman each month for thirteen months while I ran, so to speak, in a cycle of but six months, it would be many years before the same husband could have the same wife. If, for example, Susan should be Mary P. Miller in August to my H. P. Diggleton, there would be no danger that she would be Mary P. Miller to my H. P. Diggleton the next August, because if Mary P. Miller was wife No. 1, when August came again Susan would be wife No. 13, and the next August she would be wife No. 12. Thus a continuous novelty was assured.

On the glorious August morning when our experiment was to begin I opened my eyes and raised myself on my elbow to take a last look—of twelve months—at the old Susan Tulkington. She was not there. I leaped from bed, bathed and hurried into the clothes George Tithers had supplied for my Diggleton impersonation and hastened down stairs.

"Your wife?" Amelia Tithers said pleasantly. "Oh, you'll not see your wife this month at all. She is, this month, one of the giddy ladies who marry from their husbands in the summer. Susan has gone to Newport, thence she goes to Alaska. You can expect her as the second Mrs. Tulkington on or about the first of September."

I can assert that Susan and I did not quarrel that August. In fact, I never loved and longed for Susan as truly as I did toward the end of that month. I wanted, so to speak, my H. P. Diggleton role on the desert air, but George Tithers kept me spurred to the role and I am sure I did well. I made use of all my clubs and I did enjoy them. I played more auction bridge than in all my previous life.

"Gus," one of my friends said, "I hardly know you! You're like a different man. Maybe you didn't know it, but you were getting stupid and stodgy—you were getting in the 'old family man' rut. Well, bid 'em up; bid 'em up!"

I met, toward the end of August, the banker from Nome. He had met Susan at Portland.

"Some wife!" he said enthusiastically. "Some lively lady, Mr. Tulkington! Just shows how folks can be mistaken—Henry Torker, who was down here last year, said your lady was one of these house-broke ladies, one of the nice old family persons. Oh, boy!"

It was with some expectation that I recalled Susan's return in September.

I was grateful to Amelia Tithers for taking Susan far away while she was impersonating such a lively lady as Mr. Hutchins of Nome had suggested she was impersonating, and I admit that I was glad I was to give her tit for tat, so to speak, since my September schedule called for me to be a Winston Bopple, lady killer and flirt. After a few evenings of coaching by George Tithers I was sure I would be able to carry my Bopple role in a manner that would not cause Susan the least monotony. Two or three of the ladies in our summer colony seemed quite willing to assist me in giving the part verisimilitude.

When Susan arrived she gave me one kiss and hurried to her room, but Amelia Tithers paused a moment. "You'll be surprised!" she whispered. "Susan is doing it so wonderfully! And our little practice trip came off splendidly. You'll never again think of Susan as a stodgy, stupid married-old-time sort of person. You just wait!"

When Susan came down to dinner I was indeed surprised. I turned from Amelia Tithers, with whom I had been doing my best to flirt, and gasped. Such—well, such lack of clothes! Such abundance of long earrings!

"The vampire-type!" breathed Amelia Tithers. "Doesn't she do it well?" She did! For a few September days I did try to flirt with some of our female neighbors, but before a week was up I found I had enough to do in making love to Susan and in trying to crowd between her and the men who seemed to take her masquerading in earnest. We had one row, with Susan in slithy coils—so to speak—on the chaise longue, when I told her what I thought of her conduct and she called attention to mine, but we kissed and made up like young lovers. The next minute she was vamping old Horatio Peabody, the silly old fool! And I had to make eyes at his stuffy old wife in self-defense. It was, indeed, a hasty and hectic month, as George Tithers said.

"Thank Heaven," I said to George, on the last day of September, "this month is over, I hope Susan is to be something respectable in October."

"I say, you know!" George exclaimed. "You don't know that wife of mine. Up and doing, what? Always a little bit more, what? Spread a bit more sail—that's her motto, if you get me."

"You mean to tell me—" I gasped. "Well, rather!" exclaimed George Tithers. "Upward and onward, so to speak."

He was right; Amelia must have told him. "Well educated show-girl who is not just sure she has married the right man," was what Amelia had cast Susan for in October. It was with the greatest difficulty that I was able to maintain my role of a man who regretted his past and was seeking his solace in good books. It was indeed hard for me to sit with the second volume of Henry Esmond and see Susan making merry with half a dozen brainless noodles while her clothes were practically an incitement to unseemly levity.

"It has been a lovely month," Susan said at its close. "I did feel so free. I hope you're to be something retiring in November. I'm to be—"

"What?" I snarled. "I do believe I snarled."

"Wait and see!" she said. The next evening when I returned from my bank and met Susan I fell into a chair and stared at her. She who had never used rouge had used it too, too abandonedly. Her gown—I can only describe it by saying that even Mrs. Hinterberry, who goes what is practically the limit, would have hesitated to wear it.

"Like the countess of Duxminster!" Amelia Tithers breathed in my ear. "Chic, yes?"

I shuddered. I had read of the countess of Duxminster; it was she who gave the notorious party at which she lost thirty thousand pounds sterling and then bet all her garments—and lost! And this was but November, and Amelia Tithers' motto was "Spread a bit more sail," and there were nine more impersonations on Susan's list!

I closed my eyes and groped for the stair bannisters. When I reached the upper floor I dodged for the stairs that led to the storeroom. There, in a row, were the twelve trunks. Number 4 was not there; was evidently in Susan's boudoir. For a moment I stood before trunk Number 5. It was unlocked; so were they all. I put my hand on the lid and hesitated. After all I could guess what might be in trunk Number 5. I might as well know the worst. I staggered to trunk Number 13.

Now, I trust I am not a coward, but I did not dare open the lid of that trunk. A dozen times I drew a deep breath and a dozen times I hesitated. I turned to trunk Number 12, to Number 11.

"Augustus," I said to myself, "be a man! Face this thing!"

I threw open the lid of the trunk containing what was to be, in effect, the tenth Mrs. Tulkington. At first the trunk seemed to hold nothing but a few red artificial flowers and some hay, lumped in one small corner. I lifted these. There was nothing else in the trunk! The red flowers, as I looked at them, assumed a meaning; they were a wreath for the head; the hay was sewed to a narrow band. There was extremely short hay. Pictures of Hawaii and the South Sea Islands flashed on my brain. I saw my Susan on a sandy beach. In my imagination I could see nearly all of the beach—and nearly all of Susan! I felt sick; suddenly and extremely sick! So this was to be my wife! This was to be the tenth Mrs. Tulkington! I could feel the cold perspiration coming out of my pores. My

Susan in a hay bump shade and a wreath of red potatoes!

I hardly dared turn my eyes toward trunk Number 11. I dared not raise the lid; I could think of nothing but Eye—Eye in the Garden of Eden. I lifted the trunk by the handle and shook it. Nothing! There was absolutely nothing in that trunk! And beyond it stood trunk Number 12. I was sure I would be able to carry my Bopple role in a manner that would not cause Susan the least monotony.

I went down the stairs slowly. Five times I stopped and stood, trying to overcome the trembling of my limbs; trying to regain my usual composure. This unseemly business had gone far enough; trunk Number 10 might do for a Lady Mercedes, but for a respectable American wife—no! The tenth Mrs. Tulkington might please Lord Algy but as for pleasing Augustus Tulkington—no! I met Susan in the hall. I grasped her arm firmly.

"Susan," I said, "I have had enough of this! I have had plenty of Susan."

"Augustus!" she cried, and threw her arms around me. "Augustus, I have had more Augustuses than I could bear. I want just my old Augustus! I want my plain old Augustus!"

"And I," I said briskly, "want nothing but my same old Susan. This whole business has been nothing but a lousy. We can vary the monotony of our married existence without committing imitation bigamy by retail and wholesale."

I was tremendously relieved, for I admit now that I had been tremendously frightened. The tenth Mrs. Tulkington had upset me.

"Susan," I whispered firmly, for I was not going to let her come under the influence of Amelia Tithers another moment, "go up to your room and prepare for a journey—a journey with your own husband. You are going to Palm Beach with your Augustus, a respectable banker and married man. In five minutes the car will be at the door. Hurry—for we have no time to waste. But Susan!" I added as she turned to hurry up the stairs. "Susan! Will you tell me one thing? What was in the eleventh trunk?"

"Nothing, Augustus," she said, her hand on the rail. "And in the twelfth trunk?" I asked with a deep breath. "Less than nothing, Augustus," said Susan.

I shuddered to think of what a wife may be capable when driven to it by deadly routine.

"And in the thirteenth trunk, Susan?" I asked hoarsely. "Why, you old silly, my own clothes," said Susan with a laugh; "the clothes I was wearing when Amelia and George came."

"Oh!" I said stupidly. "Oh! Well, you've no time to pack anything; you'll take the thirteenth trunk."

From Palm Beach I sent a large check to George Tithers, and he and Amelia were gone when we returned. That was several years ago, but I cannot persuade Susan to allow me to have those twelve trunks thrown out of the storeroom in the attic.

"No, Augustus dear," she always says, "I know now that monotony is the one great curse of married life, and I love you so dearly, Augustus, that I want always to have a few of dear Amelia's trunks to windward."

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