

# CURTAINS for the MARRIAGE MILLS

By Madelin Blitzstein

**T**HOUGH everyone knows that eloping couples always seek out a Gretna Green where the marital knot can be tied with a minimum of red tape, not everyone knows why these hasty marriage Meccas are called Gretna Green.

The reason is that when, in 1754, eloping English lads and lassies were prevented from having the ceremony performed, as it had been previously, in the Fleet prison in London, they had to look for hospitality elsewhere.

The cordial reception these runaway pairs sought was offered to them just across the border in the nearest village on the Scottish side; there, at Gretna Green or Graitney Green, as it was often called, all they had to do to become man and wife was to declare their wish to marry in the presence of witnesses.

The ceremony was usually performed by the village blacksmith, but the toll-keeper, the ferryman, or any other adult might officiate.

As many as 200 couples were married at the toll-house in a single year.



This photo, taken in 1917, shows an eloping couple being met in Elkton, Md., by a runner for the "marriage syndicate."

In 1856, however, this romantic traffic came to a sudden end when the law suddenly was revised to require that one of the contracting parties be a resident of Scotland for at least three weeks prior to the event.

And just as 1856 spelled doom for the marriage business of Gretna Green, the summer of 1937 has written a large and ominous Finis over the lucrative elopement business which served to bring countless dollars into the little town of Elkton, Md.

While the Scottish Green counted its eloping couples in the hundreds, the energetic "marrying parsons" of Elkton, allied as they were with the taxicab syndicate and street "runners," all equipped for fast service, figured their trade in the thousands.

Last year, as a matter of fact, this town of 3331 population bore witness to 11,512 marriages; it was estimated that the town made between \$100,000 and \$150,000 a year out of these eloping couples. And the state, in its turn, took in a revenue of two bucks a couple, making \$23,024 in all in 1936.

**B**UT today all that glory is a thing of the past. The hasty wedding industry has been ruined by the passage of Maryland's "gin marriage act," which Senator W. F. Davis of Denton introduced last February, and which went into effect on June 1.

Thus the marriage reformers who sought for years to do away with the evils of "bargain matches" and "mar-

rying parsons" in Elkton have won their fight. Thus the syndicate which conducted the marrying parlors at East Main street and Delaware avenue has applied to the Elkton Town Council for a permit to build a gas station. And thus the Revs. Charles M. Cope, Edward Minor and Joseph T. Baker, who did most of the actual marrying, find that they are now in the ranks of the unemployed.

The funny thing is that not so long ago these marrying parsons were having a good laugh at the expense of Justices of the Peace in Pennsylvania's own Gretna Green, Media, in Delaware County, close to Philadelphia. But now it becomes the turn of Fred Cooper, Alan C. W. Mathues, Amos A. Keiser and William Morgan to return the hilarity in good measure.

You see, the Keystone State, before Oct. 1, 1935, had no law about delayed marriages. All you had to do was to go to the City Hall, get a license and then take it to a magistrate, a judge or a minister, as you desired.

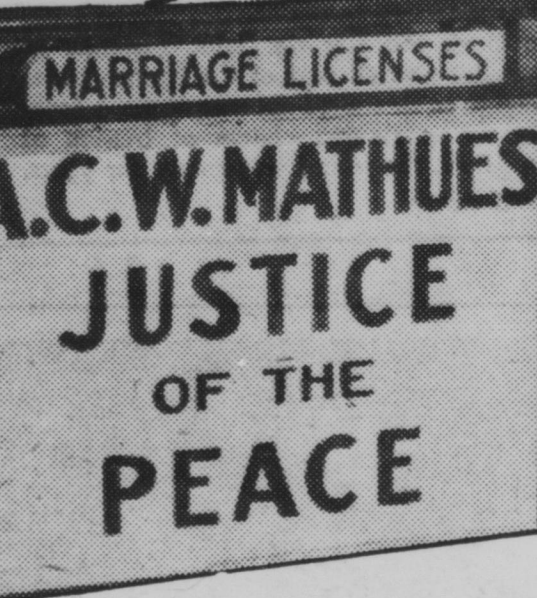


**F**OR 12 years, reformers had been trying to put legislation through for delayed marriages; the lobbyists for the Justices of the Peace and marrying parsons managed to defeat the bills.

Finally Anna Brancato, the only woman in the Pennsylvania Legislature, and a bachelor girl herself, sponsored the bill which became a law on Oct. 1, 1935; it requires three days' notice before the issuance of a license to wed. Thus almost two years ago Media was ruined as a marriage mart.

The marrying parsons of Elkton, several of whom were employed by the taxi syndicate, started on a large advertising campaign. The Rev. Edward Minor, who, after nine years as a marrying parson had been defrocked by the Baptist Church, helped to proclaim the wares of the Rev. Joseph T. Baker, who split the fees with him. And the taxi company, for whom the Rev. C. M. Cope worked at a salary of \$3000 per annum, refurbished the billboards in bigger and bolder type.

But in Elkton itself there were elements opposed to the marriage traffic. The Town Council issued an edict forbidding all advertising billboards and signs. Men were sent around to take down the signs and several tussles en-



Alan Mathues, one of the former "marrying justices" of Media, Pa., who now has the laugh on the Elkton parsons who last year were laughing at him.

**E**LKTON got its first chance in 1913, when both New Jersey and Delaware tightened their marriage laws. As a matter of fact, Maine was the pioneer for all delayed marriage legislation when it passed a delayed marriage law as early as 1858. A number of states followed, but four of them—Colorado, Iowa, Wyoming and Tennessee—later repealed their delayed marriage legislation.

In Delaware, where once marriage was easy and Wilmington was the scene of midnight weddings, licenses are now issued by Clerks of Peace and Justices of the Peace in the various counties. They must be obtained 24 hours before the certificate if either party is a resident of the state, but if both are non-residents, then 96 hours must elapse between license and altar.

If Philadelphians want a hasty wedding, their best bet is Washington, D. C., where, with the consent of parents or guardians, boys can marry as young as 16 and girls as early as 14. Notice or residence is not required; licenses are good immediately after issued.

From Philadelphia it is 142 miles to the nation's capital with stop-offs, if desired, at Pimlico, Laurel and Bowie for the races these warm days.

This delayed marriage idea seems to be catching on very quickly; Washington may soon become the center for hasty weddings just as it is for many other quick changes. New York, where one could always get a license and get married with it the same day, resident or not, recently adopted a law requiring a 72-hour interval. West Virginia, which had a little Gretna Green of its own in Wellsburg, has just passed a new law similar to Maryland's.

The future looks dark for marrying parsons. It promises even more stringent laws, requiring affidavits and health examinations. Since Connecticut's required "blood test marriage law," marriages in that state dropped by two-thirds, and Greenwich, the Connecticut Gretna Green, suffered a total and probably permanent eclipse in that capacity.

In the meantime, Elkton is little more than a historic landmark as far as marriage is concerned. The "gravy" from Pennsylvania has evaporated. The theme song is not wedding bells but the blues. It's curtains for the marriage mills unless would-be elopers raise such a hue and cry that the delayed marriage laws get repealed.



Pennsylvania State Representative Anna Brancato, who sponsored the bill which ruined Media as a marriage mart.

sued. The signs did come down in the fall of 1935.

With their signs barred in Elkton, the marrying parsons erected their outdoor advertising paraphernalia in Delaware, just across the state line, four miles from Elkton. Business boomed. Pennsylvanians flocked and Quaker City inhabitants found the distance of 49 miles to the first county seat over the Maryland state line a pleasant motor trip.

But all that is a story of past grandeur and Elkton, like Media, is today a city of sadness where the "marrying gentlemen" have had to return to whatever prosaic jobs they could find.