



"Thank heavens you've come around."

Their Wedding Night

Disappointed in his anticipation of marital bliss, a young bridegroom finds adventure with a charming widow elsewhere.

By M. T. PATTIE

YOUNG John Claborn heaved a gusty sigh of relief as the long string of Pullmans glided from the train shed and clattered through the yards, a twinkling labyrinth of steel in the night. The noisy crowd back at the station, insistent on giving Sophelia and him a noisesome sendoff on their honeymoon, had been a trial, one which he gladly would have foregone. In their compartment he wriggled in his seat with the discomfort of the grains of rice that had sifted down his collar and now reposed uncomfortably next to his skin.

"Thank heavens, that's over," he grinned at Sophelia facing him. "That bunch would drive one nuts."

"I rather enjoyed it." Sophelia carefully patted her marcel to be certain it had not become disarranged. "They were mostly my friends, anyway. I didn't see any of yours there."

"They had more sense," retorted John grumpily.

"I wanted to cancel this train, you know, and take a later one. That would have spoiled their plans."

"I'm glad you didn't. I think it was delightful to have such a nice sendoff. It isn't often one gets married."

"Well, we won't quarrel about it. We've only been married a couple of hours and we're fighting already. Hungry?"

"Not much. But it's after seven. I suppose we'd better eat."

In the dining car, after attacking a tender sirloin that slid down his throat comfortingly, John viewed the world in a rosier light. Curly haired, tall and broad shouldered, he looked younger than his twenty-five years. His brown eyes twinkled with good humor as he smiled across the table at Sophelia.

She did look stunning in her wedding outfit. The furred neckpiece of her dress, V-shaped downward to her breasts, caressed her white throat,

heightening the loveliness of her straight, delicate features. Her gray-green eyes, beneath long lashes, sparkled. With her full red lips and artfully rouged cheeks she presented a vision that swelled John's heart with glowing pride.

He trembled in eager anticipation. To think he was married to this beautiful creature. The wonder of it humbled him. No longer must he return to his lonely rooms after an evening with her at a theatre or dance, to lie awake for hours afterward. Often he had dreamed of winning her hand, picturing a wonderland where they strolled hand in hand in an Eden of their own making.



"Aw—Sophie—"

Admiring glances at Sophelia by the other male passengers annoyed him. However, he couldn't blame them. Sophie was enough to require a second glance from any man. But just now he wanted her all to himself. He wanted her alone with him, away from prying eyes, where he could drink his fill of her beauty, hold her in his arms and exult over her soft lusciousness.

In contemplation of such an Elysium, the meal dragged. When Sophelia dawdled over her dessert, he fidgeted in his seat. Apparently she was in no hurry to finish. When at last she pushed her plate aside, he shot to his feet.

"Have you a cigarette, dear?" she asked lazily.

"Certainly." He dived into a vest pocket and brought forth his silver case. "But wouldn't you rather smoke back in our room?"

"It's so much nicer here. I like to watch the others, don't you?"

John didn't, but he nodded politely.

"Aren't you going to light it for me?"

"Of course, dear." He fumbled for a match, lit it and held it to her cigarette. There was no help for it, he decided. He must wait until she was ready to go. He lit a cigarette for himself while he fretted impatiently.

The cigarettes in ashes, Sophelia rose languidly. John stumbled to his feet in his eagerness. Several times, following her down the aisle, he trod on her heels to receive a sharp admonition. They careened across the platform, through another Pullman ahead of theirs and entered the one with their compartment.

Instead of pausing at the door, Sophelia pattered on past it. John stared in consternation. She disappeared around the curving vestibule before he could grasp the fact that evidently she didn't intend to be alone with him for the present. Quite obviously she was bound for the observation car. A trifle piqued at her whim, he compressed his lips and strode after her.

He found her on the rear platform, snuggled down in a folding chair, watching the steel ribbon unreeling from beneath and vanishing into the blackness. All the other chairs were filled. John had to remain inside or stand ignominiously against a window.

His lips went tighter, a thin line across his clouded face. Her seeming disregard for his feelings fed the fires of his mounting irritation. If she didn't care enough for him to desire his companionship on their honeymoon, he fumed, he'd see that she got her wish. Frowning darkly, he snatched a magazine from the rack by the writing desk and flung himself into a padded chair, his back turned deliberately to the platform.

He was on his fourth cigarette when a soft voice over his shoulder startled him.

"Lonesome, dear?"

Without looking up, John choked back a nettled retort and merely grunted. "No—been reading."

"You are cross, I know. Sorry there was no room out there." Her hand stroked his cheek; he felt himself weakening. Despite his firm resolve, Sophelia's nearness abated his anger; her light touch brought a tingle to his nerves. "Shall we go back to the room?" she said in his ear.

He was out of the chair before the last word was fully across her lips. His hand shook grasping her arm. Her disarming smile broke down the last of the barrier he had raised between them.

"Sure," he said hastily. "It's getting late. Everybody retires early on a train. Tired?"

"A little. It's been a pretty strenuous day."

By the time they reached the compartment his pulse was pounding as though he had just finished a race. He followed her inside. With shaking fingers he carefully closed and locked the door. The next instant he held her close, straining her hungrily to him. Her kiss aroused him to a dizzy pitch. His strong hands bent her body backward until her whole weight reposed in his arms.

As he bent to lift her clear of the floor, she drew quickly away. She appeared quite cool and composed in contrast to his flushed, eager face. She even yawned, and somehow that homely act dampened John's enthusiasm. He fell back, eyes narrowed.

"Which bed do you want to sleep in?" she asked composedly.

Which bed? John darted a quick glance at the berths on either side of the compartment, already made ready by the porter for retiring, the covers neatly turned back. Which bed? He almost snorted aloud. His bride of a few short hours was asking him that, as though he hadn't lived for the time when Sophie and he would occupy the same one together.

Was his marriage to be one of those companionate things in which the husband and wife led separate lives and lived together with less intimacy than most young couples without benefit of marriage ties? He gritted his teeth together at the thought.

"Why—aren't we going to—"

"Sleep together?" she finished coolly. "Of course not. Not tonight anyhow. It's too old-fashioned these days. I hope you haven't any silly ideas in your head about that sort of thing."

John subsided weakly into the nearest chair. He

wanted to digest the barrage of words Sophie had hurled at him. The beautiful ideal he had fashioned in his dreams had just been toppled from its pedestal into the dust of oblivion by her cruel discourse. Quite obviously she had married him solely to shield herself from the sordidness of the world, intending to live a life of ease without bothering to carry out her marital vows or devote herself to trying to make things comfortable for him.

While John sat stunned by the cruel practicality of her future plans, Sophelia calmly unlocked her bag and proceeded to extract therefrom her toilet necessities and night clothing. Then as composedly as though she were retiring for the night in the privacy of her own room, she disappeared into the tiny lavatory adjoining the compartment. John heard the key grate in the lock.

He wasn't even to be granted the pleasure of watching her disrobe and prepare for bed, he fumed inwardly. He had pictured that moment ever since she had whispered "Yes" to his ardent proposal a few months before. Now he stared at a narrow aperture of imitation wood grain on cold steel, behind which Sophie at that moment was doubtless slipping from clinging silken garments; perhaps surveying herself in the mirror or freshening her velvet skin with warm water and soap, a gleaming Aphrodite denied his sight.

The irony of it lashed a swath of anger through his brain. What had been the use of marriage if not to blot out the intense lonesomeness of bachelordom; to appease the call of nature for a mate? He was intensely in love with Sophelia and he had thought she had requited the affection. But thinking back over the period of his courtship he could see he had been the one who had been demonstrative. He had believed the few kisses he had managed from her were all that could be desired or expected.

All along he had felt certain it was only because of her maidenly shyness that she had not responded more warmly to his passionate wooing. She had merely kidded him along, he felt, until after they were safely wedded.

The click of the lavatory door lock blotted out any further introspection. A vision of shimmering loveliness, pink and white from her toilette, stood framed in the doorway. Like the perennial flowers of spring, John's blasted hopes ascended once more. He shot out of his chair as though propelled

by a hidden spring and spanned the intervening space to Sophelia in one leap.

She held up a warning finger, evading; his outstretched arms.

"Now, John, be sensible. You kissed me just a few minutes ago. Isn't that enough for tonight? I'm all ready for bed and I don't want my marcel all mussed up."

"Aw, Sophie!" John's voice sounded hoarse and strained. "Don't be so damned cold."

"That will do. I'm not accustomed to hearing gentlemen swear. Let me pass, please."



No!

A word considerably more profane passed his lips as he stepped savagely aside. Without a backward glance, Sophelia marched silently to the far bed where she quickly wriggled from her thin negligee. He caught a fleeting glimpse of frilly silk, scantily covering tempting white skin as she slid under the covers. A bare arm reached out, extinguishing the reading lamp above her head. She turned her face to the wall.

Somehow, through a reddish haze that nearly blinded him, John, stumbled across the room to the door. He felt like jumping off the train. He wished heartily there might be a wreck. Perhaps if he were badly injured she might show a little sympathy for him. He fumbled for the lock and flung the door open.

"John!"

He hesitated, his hand on the knob. "Well?" he snapped.

"Where you going?"

"Out—to—to cool off!"

The door slammed behind him.

He stamped blindly down the corridor toward the observation car. If he passed anyone he was not aware of it. Suddenly a myriad stars showered around his head. Dimly he realized he had collided with something exceedingly hard and unyielding. He fell back, slanting sidewise to the wall, and slowly slid downward. A strange dizziness he couldn't shake off palsied his legs.

With returning consciousness, he discovered a soft, cool hand gliding across his forehead, an equally comforting arm cradled about his shoulders. A delightful fragrance tantalized his nostrils. He stared up in the dim light into anxious blue eyes.

"Thank heavens, you're coming around all right. I thought I had killed you."

John watched with lazy wonder a pair of red lips close above pour out the hurried words. A little ashamed of his position, he struggled to his feet and gazed down at a diminutive slip of matured womanhood. Silvery blonde hair streamed unfettered around her shoulders. Her sole attire consisted of a night dress, over which a revealing lacy affair clung half-heartedly.

"I—I guess it was all my fault," he stammered. "I wasn't looking where I was going. Did I bump into you?"

The woman laughed with evident relief. "I'm the one who should apologize," she dimpled. "I was looking for the porter and threw the door open suddenly. You ran into it."

"Oh!" John could think of nothing else to say at the moment.

"You look pretty white. Come on in my room and let me give you something to brace you up."

"Well—" John felt he shouldn't, but undoubtedly a drink was the thing he needed to straighten him out quickly. He followed her meekly

inside the compartment. She closed the door quietly.

"Sit down in that chair. You're pretty wobbly yet. I'll have you a drink in a jiffy."

John collapsed weakly and felt of his forehead. His hand encountered a sizeable lump that made him wince at the touch. He heard a cork pop, a gurgle, and an instant later his hostess stood before him holding out a glass filled with an amber liquid. He downed it in a hasty gulp.

"Feel better?"

"Yes, thanks." John grinned. His head was clearing rapidly. Funny how quickly alcohol took effect, he mused.

"Have another?"

"I guess not. I'll be all right in a minute. I'd better be going." He felt just the least bit guilty alone with a strange woman.

"Just a little one. I'll drink with you."

"Well—" Again John wavered and was lost. This mite of a woman had a compelling sort of way about her. She wasn't young by any means, he decided, appraising her as she poured out another drink from a silver flask she produced from a bag by the bed. Her face had lost some of its youthful roundness. She was forty, at least, he figured. But she had preserved herself well. Her figure was youthful and well formed.

When she returned to his chair with the glasses John's head had cleared sufficiently to enable him to take further stock of her charms. Her negligee was all but falling from her shoulders and as she bent forward to hand him his glass his heart pounded. If she noticed his confusion she paid it no attention. She made no effort to pull her wrap closer.

By the time the potent liquor of the second drink had penetrated throughout his whole being, John accepted a third without a semblance of protest. He sipped it slowly, the while he eyed her approvingly.

"Didn't I see you with a young woman in the dining car this evening?" she asked, reclining gracefully on the bed a few feet away. One bare leg, uncovered to the thigh, hung tantalizingly over the edge, much to the discomfort of John's peace of mind.

"Yes; that was my wife. Just married this afternoon."

"Well, well! Congratulations. On your honeymoon. That's sweet. But aren't you neglecting her—leaving her alone, and at night,

too?"

John's lip curled slightly. "Sophelia prefers it," he said stiffly.

A cynical laugh rang out. "Quarreling already, are you? What's the matter—doesn't she want your company on your wedding night?"

"That's just the trouble." His tongue loosened by the fumes clouding his head, John poured forth the whole story. The slight figure on the bed listened to it without comment until he had finished.



"Shall I take Sophelia's place?"

"I don't blame you for feeling sore about it," she said comfortingly. "I know what it is to be lonesome." Her blue eyes met his with an appealing light.

John leaned closer. "You travel alone?" he asked curiously.

"Yes. I often make this trip to New York. I'm a buyer for Erdenheim Brothers in St. Louis—women's apparel. I go East about a dozen times a year."

“Doesn’t your husband ever—”

She laughed again, musically this time. “I’m a widow,” she said demurely.

“Why a widow? A woman as good-looking as you shouldn’t have any trouble finding another husband.”

“Listen, big boy, you’re not hard on the eyes yourself. I’m rather glad I bumped you with that door. Gave me a chance to meet you.”

John reddened. “You’re kidding—”

“Not a bit. I like your eyes—and that curly head of yours.”

With a swift, lithesome movement she came to his side and tousled his head with slim fingers. A quiver ran up and down John’s spine. Almost without realizing the act, his arm encircled her pliant waist. With astonishing ease she slid into his lap.

The touch of her fragrant, glowing body unleashed the long-pent-up fires within him. His starved arms drew her slender form against his masterfully. The frail negligee skidded farther back from her sloping shoulders.

Everything else faded into nothingness for John in the knowledge he held a luscious, desirable bit of femininity, passionate, responsive, eager for his caresses. He bent his head and crushed his mouth against her red lips.

“God!” he breathed, releasing her slightly. “This is what I’ve always wanted.”

“Could I take Sophelia’s place—?” she whispered faintly.

The name falling from her lips struck hard at John’s conscience. He jerked his head back, muscles relaxing. What was he about to do? Married but a few hours and already in the embrace of another woman! He was a cad, he castigated

himself remorsefully. At least Sophie wasn’t a cheater.

“What’s the matter?” The question came softly.

Almost brutally, John disengaged the clinging arms around his neck. With little effort he picked up the light figure and deposited her on the bed.

“I’m going back to my room,” he said shortly. Without another word he fled through the door before his conscience weakened.

He undressed hurriedly in his room without turning on the light. Safely away from his enchantress, he swelled with a vast relief and just a little pride that he had had enough courage to leave her before things went too far.

Perhaps, after all, Sophelia would change her attitude in time and become the wife he wanted. At least he would do his utmost to bring that desirable condition about. He would try to be a good husband.

Donning his pajamas, he threw back the bed covers and crawled in between the comforting sheets. His hand, thrusting out to arrange the pillows, encountered something soft and strangely alive. For a second he couldn’t quite understand what had happened. A fear that he had gotten into the wrong compartment stabbed at him. But that was impossible—he had found his own pajamas.

“Sophie!” he cried hoarsely, unbelieving.

Before she could reply, he uttered a queer, squeal of delight and smothered her lips with a devastating kiss.

“I’m sorry I was so nasty,” she whispered a little later, when he permitted speech. “After you went out I—I changed my mind. Are you sorry?”

For answer, John found her lips again, his arms sweeping her close, while the little traveling clock on the dresser ticked busily away.