



# The Husbands of Edith

By GEORGE BARR M'GUTCHEON

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(Continued.)

"There's more than I can say for dear old Roxy. But I'll try to anticipate Raggles by compelling Edith to keep her distance," he said, scowling darkly. "Eh? It has not occurred to you that Tootles will be pretty—or much of a nuisance when it comes to mountain climbing?" He felt his way carefully in saying this.

"Oh, dear me, Roxbury! Would you have left the poor little darling at home—in all that dreadful heat?" "Eh? I couldn't be so mean as to blame her for leaving her at home," he protested. "She didn't exist until half an hour ago. Heavens, how they do jump up!"

The remainder of Brock's day was spent in getting acquainted with his family, or, rather, his menage. There were habits and follies, demands and restrictions that he had to adapt himself to with surprising gentleness. He made a friend of Raggles without half trying. Dogs always took to him, he admitted modestly. Tootles was less vulnerable. She howled consistently at each of his first half dozen advances. His courage began to wane with sticking rapidly. His next half-hearted advances were in reality inglorious retreats. Spurred on by the sustaining Constance, he stood by his guns and at last was gratified to see faint signs of surrender. By midday he had conquered. Tootles permitted him to carry her up and down the station platform (she was too young to realize the risk she ran). Edith and Constance, with the benign nurse and O'Brien, applauded warmly when he returned from his first promenade, bearing Tootles and proudly heeled by Raggles. Fond mothers in the crowd of hurrying travelers found time to look upon him with smiles, as if to say, "What a nice man!" which almost hearted him, though it, which no doubt accounted for the intense ruddiness of his cheeks.

"Do you ever spank her?" he demanded of Mrs. Medcroft after Tootles had brought tears to his eyes with a potent attack upon his nose. She caught the light of danger in his gray eyes and hastily snatched the offending Tootles from his arms. Miss Fowler kept him constantly at work with his eyeglasses and his English, neither of which he was managing well enough to please her critical estimate. In fact, he labored all day with the persistence, if not the usefulness, of a hard driven slave. He did not have time to become tired. There was always something new to be done or learned or unlearned; his day was full to overflowing. He was a man of family.

The wife of his bosom was tranquilly herself. She was enjoying herself. Where not amusing herself by watching Brock's misadventures she was napping or reading or sending out for cool drinks. With all the selfishness of a dutiful wife she was content to shift responsibilities upon that ever convenient and useful creature—a detached sister.

Brock sent telegrams for her from cities along the way—Lim, Munich, Salzburg and others—all meant for the real Roxbury in London, but sent to a fictitious being in Great Russell street, the same having been agreed upon by at least two of the conspirators. It mattered little that he repeated himself monotonously in regard to the state of health of herself and Tootles. Roxbury would doubtless enjoy the protracted happiness brought on by these dispatches, even though they got him out of bed or missed him altogether, and they reached him in a bundle the next day. He may also have been gratified to hear from Munich that Roxbury was perfectly lovely. She said in the course of her longest dispatch that she was so glad that the baby was getting to like her father more and more as the day wore on.

At one station Brock narrowly escaped missing the train. He swung himself aboard as the cars were rolling out of the sheds. As he sank, hot and exhausted, into the seat opposite his wife and her sister the former looked up from her book, yawning ever so faintly, and asked: "Are you enjoying your honeymoon, Roxbury?" "Immensely!" he exclaimed, but not until he had searched for and caught Connie's truant gaze. "Aren't we?" he asked of Miss Fowler, his eyes dancing. She smiled encouragingly at him. "Think you are such a nice man to have about," commented Mrs. Medcroft, this time yawning freely and stretching her fine young arms in the luxury of home contentment.

## CHAPTER V. The Distant Cousins.

The end of the week found Brock quite thoroughly domesticated—to use an expression supplied by his new sister-in-law. True, he had come through some trying ordeals and had lost not a little of his sense of locality, but he was rapidly recovering it as the pathway became clearer and less obscure. At

first he was irritatingly remiss in answering to the name of Medcroft; but, to justify the stupidity, it is only necessary to say that he had fallen into a condition which scarcely permitted him to know his own name, much less that of another. He was under the spell. Wherefore it did not matter at all what name he went by. He would have answered as readily to one as the other.

He blandly ignored telegrams and letters addressed to Roxbury Medcroft, and once he sat like a lump, with every one staring at him, when the chairman of the architects' convention asked if Mr. Medcroft had anything to say on the subject under discussion. He was forced, in some confusion, to attribute his heedlessness to a lifelong defect in hearing. Thereafter it was his punishment to have his name and fragments of conversation buried about in tones so stentorian that he blushed for very shame. In the Bristol, in the Karntner-Ring, in the Lichtenstein gallery, in the gardens—no matter where he went—if he were to be accosted by any of the genial architects it was always in a voice that attracted attention. He could have heard them if they had been a block away. It became a habit with him to instinctively lift his hand to his ear when one of them hove in sight, having seen him first.

"That's what I get for being a liar," he lamented dolefully. Constance had just whispered her condolences. "Do you think they'll consider it odd that you don't shout at me too?" "You might explain that you can tell what I am saying by looking at my lips," she said. He was immensely relieved.

Considerable difficulty had to be overcome at the Bristol in the matter of rooms. Without going into details Brock resignedly took the only room left in the crowded hotel, a 6 by 10 cubby hole on the top floor overlooking the airshaft. He had to go down one flight for his morning tub, and he never got it because he refused to stand in line and await his turn. Mrs. Medcroft had the choicest room in the hotel, looking down upon the beautiful Karntner-Ring. Constance proposed, in the goodness of her heart, to give up to Brock her own room, adjoining that of her sister, provided Edith would take her in to sleep with her. Edith was perfectly willing to interpose the sage conclusion that gossiping menials might not appreciate a preference so unique.

Roxbury Medcroft's sky parlor adjoined the elevator shaft. The head



wife, Mrs. Medcroft," he declared, "but an unusually agreeable chaperon. I don't know how Constance and I could get on without you."

But the day of severest trial was now at hand. The Rodneys were arriving on the fifth day from Berlin. Despite the fact that the Seattle "connections" had never seen the illustrious Medcroft, husband to their distant cousin, there still remained the disturbing fear that they would recognize—or, rather, fail to recognize him—from chance pictures that might have come to their notice. Besides, there was always the possibility that they had seen or even met Brock in New York. He ingenuously admitted that he had met unfortunate thousands whom he had promptly forgotten, but who seldom failed to remember him. It is not surprising, then, that the Medcrofts, experts, were in a state of perturbation—a condition which did not relax in the least as the time drew near for the arrival of the 5 o'clock train from the north. Constance strove faithfully, even valiantly, to inject confidence into the souls of the prime conspirators.

"I have done so beautifully up to this time," she protested to the doctor, Brock, "why should you be afraid?" One read of an Indian chief whose name was Young-Man-A-Fraid-of-His-Wife. He was a very brave fellow in spite of all that. You are afraid of Edith, but can't you be like the Indian? He?

"That's all very nice," mourned Brock, "but he could cover his confusion with war paint. Don't forget that, my dear. Think of the difference in our disguises—war paint in daubs versus spats and an eyeglass! Besides, he didn't have to talk west end English. And, moreover, he lived in a wigwam and didn't have to explain a sky bedroom to strangers who happened along."

"That is a bit awkward," she confessed thoughtfully. "But can't you say that you have insomnia and can't sleep unless you are above the noise of the street?"

He looked at her with an expression that made a verbal reply to this suggestion altogether unnecessary.

"Nurse says that Tootles has forgotten the real Roxbury," she went on after a moment. "See how cleverly you have played the part?"

Still he stared moodily, unconvinced, at the roadway ahead. They were driving in the Hauptallee.

"I hope I haven't got Roxbury into trouble by that interview I gave out concerning the new method of fireproofing woodwork in office buildings and hotels. It occurred to me afterward that he is violently opposed to the system. I advocated it. He'll have a right to say a devil of a time explaining his change of front."

As a matter of fact, when Medcroft, hiding in London, saw the reproduced interview in the Times, together with editorial comments upon the extraordinary attitude of a supposedly conservative Englishman of recognized ability, he was tried almost beyond endurance. For the next two or three days the newspapers printed caustic contributions from fellow architects and builders, in each of which the luckless Medcroft was taken to task for advocating an impractical and famous New York hobby in the way of construction, something that the staid old London would not even tolerate or discuss. The social chroniclers of the Medcrofts in Vienna as dispatched by the correspondents offset this unhappy "bull" to some extent in so far as Medcroft's peace of mind was concerned, but nothing could have drawn attention to the fact that he was not in London at that particular time so decisively as the Vienna interview and its undefended front. Even his shrewdest enemy could not have suspected Medcroft of a patience which would permit him to sit quiet in London while the attacks were going on. He found some small solace in the reflection that he could make the end justify the means.

On their return to the Bristol, Brock and Miss Fowler found the fair Edith in a pitiful state of collapse. She declared over and over again that she could not face the Rodneys. It was more than should be expected of her. She was sure that something would go wrong. Why—oh, why was it necessary to deceive the Rodneys? Why should they be kept in the dark? Why wasn't Roxbury there to counsel wisely, and more, ad infinitum, until the distracted pair were on the point of desisting the cause. She finally dissolved into tears, and would not listen to reason, expostulation or persuasion. It was then that Brock cruelly but effectively declared his intention to abdicate, as he also had a reputation to preserve. Whereupon, with a fine sense of distinction she fired up and accused him of treachery to his best friend, Roxbury Medcroft, who was responding the utmost confidence in his friendship and loyalty. How could she be expected to go on with the play if he, the man upon whom everything depended, was to turn tail in a critical hour like this?

To be Continued.

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