

Excess Baggage

by Rex Stout, 1886-1975

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NAPOLEON MAY HAVE BEEN IMPRISONED on an island; Milton may have written *Paradise Lost*; Carrie Nation may have smashed a joint; and Hannibal may have crossed the Alps. But I don't believe it. I believe nothing. When a man's own wife, the woman whom he loves above all the world, is convinced—but listen to my tale and you'll know what I mean.

Since I intend to tell the truth, the whole truth and the rest of it, I may as well admit that before I was married I made no claims to the white badge of purity. At the time I started to grow my first mustache I was a traveling salesman, and I've been one ever since. I remember an old refrain that ended something like this:

*Sailors have sweethearts in every port,
And drummers in every town.*

Perhaps it's a little too flattering; a knight of the road may be attractive and insinuating, but he isn't irresistible. And besides, there are some towns where a man wouldn't keep a dog—much less a sweetheart. But the author had the right idea, generally speaking.

For about twelve years I did all in my power to make the words of that song ring true; and even yet it puffs me up a little to remember that for eight of them I was the champion S.S. of the river route on up as far as St. Albans, Vt. S.S. means Secret Sorrow. No woman is ever happy without one. Only if you ever decide to enter the profession, take it from me that it's harder than it looks. It's easy enough to show a girl a good time; too often it's still easier to persuade her to do things she shouldn't do. But you have to have a real knack and lots of practice to be a genuine Secret Sorrow. Besides, you are continually in danger of becoming an active member of another organization not quite so popular. In fact, they're so near alike that it takes an expert to tell them apart—even the names are similar. Many a gawk that writes „S.S.“ after his name with a flourish is in blissful ignorance of the fact that instead of Secret Sorrow it may mean Sorry Sucker.

As I say, I held the Hudson River title undisputed for eight years, and it's the hardest ground in the country to cover properly. And with it all, I was—and am—a good salesman. If you don't believe me, ask The Dillbecker Company, Office Furniture, 543 Broadway.

The rice and old shoe thing never appealed to me. I never even took the trouble to joke about it. My idea was that marriage is a coeducational institution whose problems have no answer in the back of the book, whose lectures are given just when you want to sleep, and whose course of painful instruction is finished only when the minister stretches his hands over you palms downward, and your friends and family throw on a few tears and nice little bunches of flowers inscribed „REST IN PEACE.“

For twelve long and happy years I harbored this amiable opinion of the tie that binds. I was a half-and-half mixture of Benedick and Lothario, and I was never able to decide which I admired the more. My convictions were impregnable. Women, I agreed, are the most delightful creatures in the world; I would rather be an S.S. than a Ph.D. any day. But no woman should ever tie me down to the „where have you been“ thing; no woman should ever rope me in to teach me the hateful mysteries of a four-room flat; no woman should ever—

Then it hit me.

It happened in a little village not more than fifty miles north of Albany. I'd made a bum sale to the only furniture firm in town, and had gone out to Blank's house for dinner and to spend the evening. The first thing I saw when I entered the parlor was a little blue angel sitting at the piano.

„Who's that?“ I asked my friend.

„My cousin,“ said she, „from Burlington.“

We went into dinner almost immediately, and for the first time in my life I felt indifferent in the presence of food. The cousin sat across the table from me. I'm no describer, but I'll try to give you an idea of how she looked. She wore something blue with little bunches of lace at the wrists and neck. Her hands were so white they made her pink fingertips look almost red. Her eyes and lips seemed to belong to a sort of mutual benefit society. I never saw such perfect teamwork. They teased

and trembled and tempted, and yet all the time they kept saying: „Never—absolutely never. We’re having a lot of fun, but we will never—“

„You will!“ I said aloud.

„You will what?“ my friend asked coldly. She had been watching me. I was too busy to answer.

After dinner I walked out on the front porch alone. My eyes felt funny and I couldn’t swallow. All over my chest it felt like someone was sticking needles in me and pulling them out again. I started down the steps, sat down on the top one, and began to review my past life. Then I jumped up and started to walk up and down the porch.

„Frank Keeler,“ said I, „you’re sick. Your stomach’s out of order. It’s even possible that you’re drunk. But don’t you dare to tell me—“ I clenched my teeth hard—„don’t you dare tell me—“

Then I went back into the house and sat and listened to her eyes for three wonderful hours.

We were married in September—the 28th, to be exact. At that, I kept my word. She didn’t tie me down or rope me in. It was all I could do to get her to hold on to the rope after I tied it around my own neck. Before she’d even look at me, I had to admit that without her my life would be devoted to the joyless gloom of unrelieved masculinity.

We took a thirty-day wedding trip to Florida, then came to New York and rented a Harlem flat—she calls it an apartment. By that time my firm was sending me daily hints to the effect that although marriages may last forever, honeymoons don’t; and on the Monday following I left on a trip upstate. My wife’s mother had come down a day or two before for a long visit, so it wasn’t as though I was leaving her all alone among strangers.

In the short space of four months I had backed up, turned around and started off in the opposite direction. You’ve read how „in that one brief moment was condensed the experience of years, and from being a happy carefree girl she became suddenly a mature and resolute woman.“ Well, as a quick-change artist „she“ didn’t have anything on me. I had become the most faithful and devoted husband south of the North Pole.

In this, you understand, I was serious—darned serious. If I thought you’d know what I mean, I’d say I was an extremist. Of course I don’t claim any originality; many a man has called the Venus de Milo ugly because she didn’t look like his wife. But usually it’s merely a disease. With me it amounted to a religion. And there wasn’t any forcing about it, either; the thing actually seemed to agree with me. The worst of it was, I liked it.

As I say, soon after edging into a Harlem flat I left for upstate. The parting was tender and tearful. It was the first time I’d ever left for the front looking backward, and as I ran into an ash cart while turning to throw a final kiss up at the window where my wife sat, I felt for an instant that life had been robbed of one of its sweetest pleasures. But by the time I’d reached the 125th Street Station and bought a mileage book, I was thinking how dignified and noble it was to go out into the world and work for the support of a wife and the preservation of a home.

I shall never forget that trip up and down the river. I had never before realized the full extent of my success and popularity. If I told you all the incidents of that

eventful month it would sound like the plot of a musical comedy or the autobiography of a jackass. At each stop it seemed as though everybody I didn't want to see was waiting for me at the station.

I'd got no farther than Peekskill when I discovered that no man should ever become a Secret Sorrow unless he intends to stick on the job. If you tell a woman she's all the world to you, she's usually willing enough to let you fall off the earth; but if you can get her to put her hand in yours just once, and then tell her how sad it makes you to feel that you can never love her, she'll never let go. If you say you love her, she yawns indifferently and asks what time it is; if you say you can't love her she looks at you dreamy and sad and makes you promise to stay over an extra day on your spring trip. Multiply that by 249 and you'll have some idea of what I was up against.

It wouldn't have mattered so much if I'd been willing to sit tight in the front parlor and explain things. But nothing like that for me. You'll get an inkling of my state of mind when I tell you that I cut out Harris & Puler at Troy because they've got a lady buyer who always expects a box of candy and a pleasant smile. Each morning I said over to myself a Lord Tennyson vow about faithfulness in word, thought and deed, and I was getting better every day. I figured that if I came through that first trip with a whole skin the rest would be plain sailing; and what with going down side streets and taking the first train out of towns and spending my Sundays in places where I'd never left my mark, I was exceeding my own fondest hopes.

Every night I wrote a long letter to my wife, full of lonesomeness. Hers were a little more cheerful. She and her mother were picking all the department stores to pieces and filling the flat with everything from pillows to pills; and at the end of my third week out she wrote me that her brother was in New York for a few days and had already invited them to two concerts and four plays. It was in the same letter that she told me about tying a pink ribbon on the sponge in my humidior. It didn't make me feel any better to know that she could be gay and happy while I was lonesome and homesick—to say nothing of the awful temptations I was dodging—but still I knew that was better than if she was there all alone. And of course I didn't complain any. Instead, I wrote her to be sure and have her brother stay till I got back, so I could show him a corner or two which he'd probably miss without a guide.

By this time I was going along pretty easy. The worst territory had all been covered, and I'd proved my mettle by steering straight between Scylla and Charybdis without blinking an eye. I had only a week more to go, and I began to breathe easy and natural, feeling that all danger was past. I even got so cheerful and gay that I wrote my wife I wouldn't arrive till Saturday, thinking to get in on Thursday and give her a little surprise.

Thursday morning I called on Marshall Bros, of Poughkeepsie—my last stop. I'd been selling them for ten years, and I knew that all I had to do was to run over the stock and fill in the empty places. So I went back to the office and got Billy and we had the job finished up in an hour. Then I went to the office again to get the order signed.

Just as I got ready to leave old man Marshall came in, looking worried. As he caught sight of me his face brightened up.

„Keeler,“ he said, „you’re just the man I want. When do you leave?“

„Twelve fifteen for New York,“ said I, „and as fast as I can go.“

„Couldn’t be better,“ said he. „Come in here a minute.“

Now I’m always willing and anxious to oblige a customer, of course. So when I followed him into his private office I walked eager and pleasant. Then he explained to me that his wife’s niece was going down to New York to visit a cousin, and she was very innocent and timid and had never been there before, and would I act as escort?

I don’t know exactly how to describe my sensations when he finished. What good had it done me to spend most of my time in dark alleys and bum hotels? What good had it done me to throw away the advantages and perquisites of twelve years’ hard work and experience? What good had it done me to fill up with Henry Van Dyke and the Ladies’ Home Companion? What good had it done me if at the very end I was to have a young, timid innocent niece set right down in the same seat with me for a two hour-trip down the Hudson?

All of which isn’t as foolish as it sounds. I know my weakness. Like Lord Darlington, I can resist everything except temptation.

I felt that I had just one chance. There are nieces and nieces. As I packed my sample case I kept hoping that she would prove to be a second, or even a run of the mill.

She wasn’t. She was the kind that comes in a case by itself, packed in cotton and invoiced separately. As I shook hands with her on the station platform I took a wild and despairing grip on my Lord Tennyson vow. Then I realized that I was gripping her hand even harder, and I dropped it and went over to the baggage room to read over the last letter from my wife. I got back just in time to help her on the train and shake hands with old man Marshall.

We hadn’t gone a mile before she asked me to lay her coat up on the rack, and thanked me in that way that says: „I’m so glad you were here to do that for me.“ Then I reversed the seat in front, and she put one foot up on it—the one next the window. It was only about half covered by a low, small, dainty pump, and the ankle and its surroundings were composed entirely of curves. She turned clear around in the seat and sat facing me. Her hair was a kind of reddish brown—different from any I’d ever seen—and it kept trying to crawl out from under her hat. Her eyes, big and brown, had a tender, friendly look that seemed willing to admit anything, and her mouth—

Then I went to the other end of the car for a drink of water.

The incidents of that two-hour ride are still sort of hazy in my memory. Of course for any ordinary man it would have been simple and easy, but all the time I had a remembrance of my previous record, my promises to my wife, and a perfume that blew over from the niece’s hair whirling around before me in a sort of Donnybrook Fair. I was afraid even to be polite, and I guess she had begun to think I was the original and only genuine clam. Then—this was about at Tarrytown—after trying hard for thirty minutes, I managed to say something about my wife.

„Are you married?“ said she, like that.

I nodded. She looked at me interested for a minute, and then said:

„Poor man!“

„I don't agree with your sentiment," said I with some heat. „I'm the luckiest man in the world. The true state of happiness is—"

„Freedom." She shook her head again and laughed. „That's why I intend to hold on to it as long as I can."

Then I thanked God I'd told her I was married. If I hadn't, I never would have been able to pass by such a challenge as that. Even as it was I felt an awful longing to make her take it back. No man who thinks anything of his sex or has any self-respect can allow a woman to go around talking about freedom, especially when she's pretty.

„I hate to be personal," she went on presently, „but can you see anything in this car, for instance, that is apt to make a girl long for a plain gold band and a six foot veil?"

I turned and looked straight at her, and found her laughing at me. „Miss Robinson," I said, „your uncle told me you were innocent and timid. If he could only—"

„I am," she interrupted. „I didn't say a word till I discovered you were harmless."

Good God! I—Frank Keeler—harmless! And it was true. That was the worst of it. It was true. I turned away from her with a bitter smile, and began to wonder if she had any idea of my pace under an empty saddle. Then I went to the smoking car and sat there talking to myself clear to Grand Central Station.

Her cousin lived up on Washington Heights, so it would have been quicker to get off at 125th Street, but I was too busy with my reflections to think about it. I managed to steer her through about four miles of scaffoldings and boardwalks, and I noticed it was just half-past two as we boarded a subway express for uptown. I counted on getting home by four.

By the time we got off at 168th Street I was pretty well calmed down. Although it made me unhappy to realize that I'd just been forced to swallow a gross insult to my long training and unquestioned ability, and that all the rest of my life I'd be helpless in the face of the strongest provocation, I could yet remember with pride the day when „Frank" was a household word in a hundred towns. And I felt a kind of pity come over me as I looked at the niece and reflected that she'd never know what she'd missed.

Consequently, I was feeling almost sad as we turned in a marble entrance on 168th Street, and told the elevator boy to take us to Robinson's apartment.

„They ain't in," said he, as if he was glad of it. „Gone out of town for a week."

They'd left four days before. He didn't know where they'd gone. The niece and I sat down in the hall to talk it over.

„Didn't they know you were coming?" I asked.

„No," she said. „I was going to surprise them."

I remembered that I had planned a surprise too, so I couldn't very well blame her. She said she didn't want to go back to Poughkeepsie unless she had to, but she didn't want to cause me any more bother. Of course I said she was anything but that. Then she said she had another cousin in New York, and she might go there.

„Just the thing!" I cried. „Where does she live?"

„Bath Beach," replied the niece calmly, just as though she was stating a pleasant fact instead of a horrible dream.

Well, there was only one thing to do. I didn't stop to explain what I was about to suffer for her sake, nor what she was up against herself. I thought she'd find out soon enough.

We took a subway express downtown again, got off at Brooklyn Bridge and with the help of three policemen and a cripple found an L train for Bath Beach. As we started out from the terminal I wondered if I would ever get back. Even a Harlem flat looks like a real home, sweet home to a man when he gets lost in the wilderness.

We'd been under way about twenty minutes when the niece turned to me looking puzzled.

„What place is this?“ she asked. „It's so—funny. It seems that I've seen it in a dream.“

„It must have been a nightmare,“ said I. „Don't talk so loud. This is Brooklyn.“

For miles and miles, and it seemed hours and hours, we sat there in silence, waiting for the end. Finally the guard called out „Bath Beach!“ and we jumped off onto a pile of ashes and tin cans. Then, after waiting a quarter of an hour for a trolley car that didn't come, we started off down the street.

I gave a sigh of relief as I went up the steps of a brown and green two-story house and rang the bell. Almost immediately the door opened, and the niece started forward, then fell back again as she caught sight of the old dried up woman that looked through at her.

„Is this Robinson's?“ I asked.

„Naw,“ she said. The door slammed in my face.

I looked at the number over the door, then at the sign on the street corner, then at the niece. „This is 6123 Bath Avenue,“ I said sternly.

For answer she sat down on the porch step and began to cry. „I thought it was 6123,“ she said between sobs.

She got all right in a minute or two, and we started for the nearest drug store to look at a directory. Then she remembered that the Robinsons had moved down there only a few months ago, so the directory would be useless. She stopped and began to think.

„It might have been 6132,“ she said.

I left her at the drug store, and tried 6132, 6312, 6321, 6231 and 6213. Then I got desperate and went about three miles down to 3261. Just to save time and paper, figure out for yourself how many combinations there are in that damnable figure. I got back to the drug store about six o'clock.

„Nothing doing,“ I said, as friendly as I could. „There's no Robinsons in Bath Beach. There's only one thing to do. Come home with me. My wife'll be glad to have you.“

The niece got ready to cry again. „But I can't,“ she said. „She doesn't know me.“

„I can introduce you, can't I?“ I demanded. „Unless you want to stay at a hotel.“ But I could see she wouldn't do that.

She was silent for a minute; then, „I'm going back to Poughkeepsie,“ she said. „When can I get a train?“

I could see she meant it, and besides, I realized it was the best thing to do. So I didn't waste any time in argument.

On the trip back my spirits jumped a notch every time the wheels went round. It was a combination of relief and expectation that I can't exactly define. I suppose I should have had a premonition, but I know I didn't.

At Grand Central we found out that the next train to Poughkeepsie was at 8:20. I looked at the niece. She was leaning against the window rail and seemed kind of limp.

„That's an hour,“ she said, glancing at the clock.

„Yes,“ said I. „What's the matter? Don't you feel well?“ She was gazing across the room in a kind of trance. Looking in the same direction I saw a big double door, and over the top the word „Restaurant.“

Of course I should have thought of it sooner, but I'd been so darned busy looking for Robinsons I hadn't had time for anything else.

„Good Lord!“ I exclaimed. „We haven't had anything to eat since morning!“

„Yesterday,“ she said. „I never eat breakfast.“

Instinctively we started together for the big double doors. About halfway across I suddenly stopped. „Listen,“ I said. „We have a full hour. Why not go to a good place? It's close.“

„Anywhere,“ said the niece. „But I don't want to miss the train.“

Why I chose Rector's I don't know. But I did. It was pretty well crowded but we found a table over on the Broadway side, and I ordered everything I could recognize.

The companionship of the knife and fork has always appealed to me. I suppose that's what made me feel so friendly; but there were other considerations. When two people go to Brooklyn together they are forever bound by a sort of mutual sympathy. Also, I felt grateful to her for going back to Poughkeepsie instead of coming home with me. So by the time we'd finished with the roast we were almost chummy. It had even got to the place where I was trying to show her the advantages of being married. When I got through she stretched a hand across the table to me.

„Mr. Keeler,“ she said, „I believe you. I really don't know anything about it, but I'll take your word for it. And after all your kindness to me, I'd like to congratulate the girl that was lucky enough to get you. I'd like to meet your wife.“

Suddenly she stopped and looked up. So did I. Two women and a man had stopped on their way out and were looking down at us. It was my wife, her mother and her brother.

If you expected to hear a good story, of course you're disappointed. There isn't even any use explaining to you that I've spent five months trying to explain it to my wife, and she won't listen.

I've been a Secret Sorrow, I've been a Faithful Husband, and I've been a Fool. As I hinted before, if you want to make me believe that Carrie Nation smashed a joint, you've got to show me the hole in the window.

I'm going to give my wife just one more chance. I'm going to write it all out, have it typewritten, and maybe have it printed in a magazine. Then if she don't believe it—well, the niece is still at Poughkeepsie, and as I said before, no man who has any self-respect can allow a pretty woman to go around talking about freedom.



