

Mr. Squem

by Rev. Arthur Russell Taylor, -1918

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'WHY do we go on perpetuating an uncomfortable breed?'

The man who was shaving at the mirror-paneled door of the Pullman smoking compartment looked at his questioner on the leather seat opposite.

'Give it up,' he answered. 'Why is a hen?'

The first man rapped his pipe empty on the edge of a cuspidor.

'You answer the question,' he said, 'in the only possible way—by asking another.'

'Right,' answered the shaver; and began to run the hot water.

A closely built man, in a suit so heavily striped as to seem stripes before it was a suit, lurched into the compartment and settled himself to his paper and cigar.

'That monkey-on-a-stick,' he presently broke out, 'is still taking good money away from the asses who go to hear him rant about God and Hell and all the rest, up in Boston. I am so *damn* tired of him, and of that rich rough-neck Freeze. It's the limit.'

'Pretty much,' said the man with the pipe. 'I was reading about the Belgians just before you came in, and when I jumped away from them I lit on some things about Poland. Then I wondered aloud to this gentleman why we go on multiplying—increasing such an uncomfortable breed. Modoc gods and degenerate millionaires make one wonder more.'

'What is your line, may I ask?' inquired the stripe-suited man.

'Religion.'

'The hell—I beg your pardon. If you mean that you're a preacher or something like that, all I've got to say is, you're a funny one. It's your job, isn't it, to be dead sure that everything's all right, or somehow going to be all right—no matter about all the mussed-upness? Yes, that's certainly your job. Yet here you are, asking why we go on stocking the world with kids. *I* might ask that—I'm in rubber tires—but not you. Yes, I might—only I don't.'

The man who had been shaving had resumed his tie, collar, and coat, and now lighted a cigarette.

'I lay my money,' he said, 'on one thing: that, if men let themselves go, they wind up shortly with God—or with what would be God if there were any. You've come to it early—through the *Ledger*. You'd have got to it sooner or later, though, if you'd been talking about hunting-dogs—provided you'd have let yourselves go.'

'Well, now,' asked the closely built man, 'what is *your* line?'

'Education.'

'High-brow company! Seems to me the pair of you ought to be silencers for a plain business man like me. Rubber is my line—not how the world is run. My opinion on that is small change, sure. Yet I think it ought to be run—the world, I mean—even if it's mussed-up to the limit, and I think it's up to us to keep it running. The parson here—if he is a parson—asks why we should; that is, if I get him. And then I think there's a manager of it all in the central office—a manager, understand, though he never seems to show up around the works, and certainly does seem to have some of the darnedest ways. The professor here—if he is a professor—doesn't sense any manager; that is, if I get him straight, with his "if there were any." That was what you said, wasn't it? I'm a picked chicken on religion and education, but, honest, both those ideas would mean soft tires for me—yes, sir, soft tires.'

'Broad Street, gentlemen,' said the porter at the door.

The Reverend Allan Dare walked away from the train and down the street. He was Episcopally faced and Episcopally trim, and he was having considerable difficulty in holding his universe together. This is not pleasant at forty-two, when you want your universe held together and things settled and calm. He had an uncomfortable sense that this difficulty had jolted into plain sight on the car.

'Ass!' he addressed himself briefly. 'To let your sag and unsettlement loose in that way! To say such a thing as you said, and in such a place! To parade your momentary distrust of life! Ass—oh, ass!'

He said—or thought—a Prayer-Book collect, one which seemed rather suited to asses, and continued—

'I suppose I'm three-tenths sag—no more; and *He knoweth whereof we are made*, and what a devil of a world it is to be in just now. But that rubber man on

the car—he isn't sag at all. Heavens, his crudeness! His beastly clothes, and the bare shaved welt around the back of his neck, and that awful seal ring! But he's fastened. Life is worth pushing at and cheering for—and there's a manager, if he has "the darnedest ways." I'd give something for an every-minute mood like that—a carrying night-and-day sureness like that. He's not illuminated—lucky dog!

Professor William Emory Browne had changed cars and was continuing his journey. In his lap lay a volume of essays just put forth by a member of his craft, a college professor. He opened it—it chanced at page 27—and his eye was caught by the name of his own specialty. He read:

'Philosophy is the science which proves that we can know nothing of the soul. Medicine is the science which tells that we know nothing of the body. Political Economy is that which teaches that we know nothing of the laws of wealth; and Theology the critical history of those errors from which we deduce our ignorance of God.'

'Confound it!' ejaculated Professor Browne, and closed the book.

'Room for one more?' inquired a voice, and the rubber-tire man slid into the seat.

'I just pulled off a little thing out here,' he said, 'that ought to put a small star in my crown. A down-and-out—a tough looker—says to me, *Please, mister, give me a dime. I'm hungry.* And I says to him, *Get out! What you want is a good drink—go get it,* and slips him a quarter. Talk about gratitude! To think there are men—you know it and I know it and he was afraid of it—who'd have steered him to a quick-lunch and put him against soft-boiled eggs!

'Man's inhumanity to man'—

'Sure! Nothing but that ever makes me any trouble about things. Tear ninety, George'—this to the conductor—'and burn this panetella some time. You said you were in education,' he went on. 'I've just blown myself to a Universal History—five big volumes, with lots of maps and pictures and flags of all nations and hanging gardens of Babylon and such things. Gave down thirty-five for it, and my name is printed—Peter B. Squem—on the first page of every book. Now'—Mr. Squem grew quite earnest—'you'd say, wouldn't you, that if a man could take those books down—chew them up, you understand, and take them down—he'd have an education? Not the same, of course, as normal school or college, and yet an education.'

'I think, if you know what's good for you, you will steer clear of what you call an education. I think I should stick to rubber tires, and a few comfortable certainties—and peace.'

Mr. Squem stared. 'How's that?' he inquired. 'Education is your line, you were saying, and yet you queer your stuff. I'd get quick word from the house, if I handled Mercury tires that way.'

'But you wouldn't,' rejoined Professor Browne, 'you wouldn't, because tires mean something. Tires are your life-preserver—they are shaped like life-preservers, aren't they?'

'You've got me going,' said Mr. Squem, 'and no mistake. I don't mind telling you I'd hoped to get some hunch from you—on education. You see, my clothes are

right, I always have a room with bath, and I get two hundred a month and fifty on the side. I read the papers—and the magazine section on Sunday—and I got through four books last year. And yet there's something not there—by Keefer, not there! I'd give something to *get* it there—to slide it under, somehow, and bring the rest of me up to regular manicuring and ice-cream forks and the way my clothes fit!

Mr. Squem was interrupted in the expression of this craving. There was a tremendous jar; the car tore and bumped with an immense pounding over the ties, then careened and sprawled down a short bank and settled on its side. People who have been through such an experience will require no description. To others none can be given. In the bedlam chaos and jumble, and chorus of shrieks and smashing glass, Professor Browne, struggling up through the bodies which had been hurled upon him, was conscious of a pain almost intolerably sharp in his leg, and then of a sort of striped whirlwind which seemed to be everywhere at once, extricating, calming, ordering, comforting—and swearing. It was like a machine-gun:

'Keep your clothes on, nothing's going to bite you—just a little shake-up—Yes, chick, we'll find your ma—No, you *don't* climb over those people; sit down or I'll help you—To hell with your valise, pick up that child!—There go the axes; everybody quiet now, just where he is—You with the side-whiskers get back, *back*, hear me!—Now, children first, hand 'em along—women next, so—men last—Why didn't you *say* you was a doctor? Get out there quick; some of those people have got broke and need you!'

Professor Browne was one of these last. Lifted by Peter Squem and a very scared brakeman, he lay on two Pullman mattresses at the side of the track, waiting for the rabbit-faced country doctor to reach him. He was suffering very much—it seemed to him that he had never really known pain before—but his attention went to a white-haired lady near by—a slight, slender woman, with breeding written all over her. She had made her way from the drawing-room of the Pullman, and leaned heavily upon her maid, in a state approaching collapse. Professor Browne was impressed by her air of distinction even in the midst of his pain. Then he saw a striped arm supportingly encircle her, and a hand dominated by an enormous seal ring press to her lips an open bottle of Scotch.

'Let it trickle down, auntie—right down. It's just what you need,' said Peter B. Squem.

'What did you think of when the car stopped rolling?'

Professor Browne, lying in his bed, asked this question of Mr. Squem, sitting at its side. The latter had got the professor home to his house and his housekeeper after the accident the day before, had found the best surgeon in town and stood by while he worked, had in a dozen ways helped a bad business to go as well as possible, and now, having remained over night, was awaiting the hour of his train.

'Think of? Nothing. No time. I was that cross-eyed boy you've heard about—the one at the three-ringed circus. *Did* you see that newly-wed rooster—I'll bet he was that—the one with the celluloid collar? *Good-bye, Maude!* he yells, and then tries to butt himself through the roof. He wouldn't have left one sound rib in the car if I hadn't pinned him. No, I hadn't any time to think.'

He produced and consulted a watch—one that struck the professor as being almost too loud an ornament for a Christmas tree. An infant's face showed within as the case opened.

'Your baby?' inquired Professor Browne.

'Never. Not good enough. This kid I found—where do you suppose? On a picture-postal at a news-stand. The picture was no good—except the kid; and I cut him out, you see. Say, do you know the picture was painted by a man out in Montana? Yes, sir, Montana. They had the cards made over in Europe somewhere—Dagoes, likely—and when they put his name on it, they didn't do a thing to that word Montana. Some spelling!'

'Why, what you have there,' said the professor, taking the watch with interest, 'is the Holy Child of Andrea Mantegna's Circumcision—it's in the Uffizi at Florence. Singularly good it is, too. I'm very much wrapped up in the question, raised in a late book, of Mantegna's influence upon Giovanni Bellini. There's a rather fine point made in connection with another child in this same picture—a larger one, pressing against his mother's knees.'

Mr. Squem was perfectly uncomprehending. 'Come again,' he remarked. 'No, you needn't, either, for I don't know anything about the rest of the picture. I told you it was no good. There was an old party in a funny bathrobe and with heavy Belshazzars, I remember—but the picture was *this*.'

He rose and began to get into his overcoat.

'There's one thing about this kid,' he said, in a casual tone which somehow let earnestness through. 'I know a man—he travels out of Phillie, and he's some booze-artist and other things that go along—who's got one of those little *Josephs*. You know, those little dolls that Catholics tote around? Separate him from it? Not on your life. Why, he missed it one night on a sleeper, and he cussed and reared around, and made the coon rout everybody out till he found it. It's luck, you see. Now this kid'—Mr. Squem was pulling on his gloves—'isn't luck, but he works like luck. He talks to me, understand, and'—here a pause—'he puts all sorts of cussedness on the blink. You can't look at him and be an Indian. I was making the wrong sort of date in Trenton one day, and I saw him just in time—sent the girl word I'd been called out of town. I was figuring on the right time to pinch a man in the door—he'd done me dirty—and I saw him again. Good-night! I'm never so punk that he doesn't ginger me—doesn't look good to me. The management is mixed up with him—and I hook up to him. Here's the taxi. So long, professor.—Rats! I haven't done one little thing. Good luck to your game leg!'

It was Sunday morning, and service was under way in the Church of the Holy Faith. For the thousandth time the Reverend Allan Dare had dearly-beloved his people, assembled to the number of four hundred before him, exhorting them in such forthright English as cannot be written nowadays, not to dissemble nor cloak their sins before God, and to accompany him unto the throne of the heavenly grace. He had had a sick feeling, as he read this exhortation, so full of pound, rhythm, heart-search, and splendid good sense, to the courteous abstractedness in the pews.

'Heavens!' he had thought, 'once this burnt in!' He had wanted to shriek—or fire a pistol in the air—and then crush the meaning into his people; crush God into them, yes, and into himself.

He was four-tenths sag that morning—the Rev. Allan Dare. In the *Jubilate*, a small choir-boy—a phenomenon who was paid a thousand a year, and was responsible for the presence of not a few of the four hundred—had sung *Be sure ye that the Lord he is God*, to the ravishment of the congregation—not of the rector, who stood looking dead ahead. The First Lesson had been all about Jonadab, the son of Rechab, and drinking no wine—frightful ineptness! What could it mean to any one? how help any one? Here was Life, with all its cruel tangles, tighter and more choking every day. Here was Arnold's darkling plain, and the confused alarms and the ignorant armies clashing by night.

There came back to Dare the creed he had heard in the smoking compartment: 'I think it ought to be run—the world—even if it's mussed-up to the limit, and I think it's up to us to keep it running. I think there's a manager of it all in the central office—a manager, understand, though he never seems to show up around the works, and certainly does seem to have some of the darnedest ways.'

'O God!' breathed Allan Dare, 'there are so many things—so many things!'

It was the same Sunday. Professor William Emory Browne was for the first time on crutches, and stood supported by them at his window.

'Back again,' he ruminated. 'I can probably drive to my classes in another week. Then the same old grind, showing ingenuous youth—who fortunately will not see it—*how the search hath taught me that the search is vain*. Ho, hum! How very kind, that Mr. Squem—he did so much for me—and how very funny! I should like to produce him at the seminar—with his just-right clothes, his dream of culture via his Universal History, his approach to reality through a picture postal-card!'

He turned on himself almost savagely. Then—

'What the devil are you patronizing him for? Don't you see that he is hooked to something and you are not, that he is warm and you are freezing, that he is part of the wave—the wave, man—and that you are just a miserable, tossing clot?'

It was the same Sunday. Mr. Squem sat in his room—extremely dennish, smitingly red as to walls, oppressive with plush upholstery. A huge deerhead, jutting from over the mantel, divided honors with a highly-colored September Morn, affrontingly framed. On a shelf stood a small bottle. It contained a finger of Mr. Squem, amputated years before, in alcohol.

On the knees of the owner of the room was Volume One of the Universal History—Number 32, so red-ink figures affirmed, of a limited edition of five hundred sets. Mr. Squem's name was displayed, in very large Old English, on the fly-leaf, and above was an empty oval wherein his portrait might be placed.

'No use,' soliloquized the owner of this treasure, 'no use. If I *could* chew it up and get it down—or two of it—*that* wouldn't slide under the thing that isn't there. Nothing will ever put me in the class of Professor Browne or that preacher on the car, or bring the rest of me up to my clothes.'

He rose and stretched.

'Maybe,' he said, addressing a huge chocolate-colored bust of an Indian lady, 'maybe I can catch up to those fellows some time—but not here. Noon, I bet'—looking at his watch—'and it is to eat.'

He contemplated the Mantegna baby.

'So long,' he said, 'you're running things,' and snapped his watch.

