

Other Men's Luck

Beatrice Redpath

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Other Men's Luck

By BEATRICE REDPATH.

*In which Morrison sees his wife as others see her.
A very human story of married life.*

Morrison realized that he had been evolving it in his mind for some time, that he had been preparing and making his arrangements without definitely pronouncing even to himself what was his intention. It had been a plant of slow growth, fostered by his continual discontent, and now it was coming to flower.

He had put his affairs in order, he had straightened out everything, and now this morning it was as if something had snapped within him that bound him to the old life, the psychological moment had in fact arrived for which he had waited.

At breakfast there had been only the usual noise and disturbance of the children getting ready for school. It had been perhaps a trifle accentuated by a loud outcry from their youngest son about wearing his rubbers. Carrie's voice had risen shrilly above the hubbub in a manner which always intensified his irritation. Carrie never seemed to understand that she could enforce obedience just as well if she spoke quietly. Finally, with a sense of complete exasperation, he had retreated behind the damp sheets of his paper in protest against the babble of voices. He detested noise, and yet he never escaped from it, least of all in his own home. It was a subject that was worn thin between Carrie and himself, and he was conscious that she was aware of his extreme irritation this morning as he sat shrouded in the morning paper.

She showed her consciousness of it in her voice when she sat down finally to her tepid coffee after the children had slammed the door for the last time that morning. It was in her manner as she asked him with exaggerated politeness for some eggs and bacon from the covered dish before him. Her whole attitude was a reproach that he should show irritation about something that could not be avoided. He was not sure, but he thought that it was in the moment when she asked him if he had remembered to send a cheque to the butcher, that something snapped within him which set him

free. Then it was that he rose with a sense of finality and looked at her with an eye that did not miss the slightest detail of face, figure or attire. She was wearing a blouse with narrow blue stripes cut on masculine lines that displeased him. He liked soft, feminine clothes, and saw no reason why she could not please him in this instance. He noticed the few gray threads in her black hair, coiled with no unnecessary elaboration, and he noticed the lines about her eyes. He recognized that she was a good-looking woman, but there was a note of efficiency about her, a certain masterfulness that gave a hard tone to her voice and to her appearance. He supposed that she had been so used to giving orders to servants and children that it had caused her to become like this. She was undoubtedly admirable as a mother, she was an excellent housekeeper, a good wife in every sense, but he could have dispensed with it all if in place of it she could have offered him the sympathy he craved.

He looked at her curiously in that moment as he stood folding his paper, wondering if he would miss her out of his life. He was secretly amused at her complete unconsciousness of all that was going on within his mind. How little we know of those with whom we live, he thought to himself. It struck him as quite absurd that she should continue to eat her eggs and bacon while her whole existence tottered on the brink of something so decisive, so final.

She looked up from her plate as he passed from the room with a repetition of the same question which he had omitted to answer.

“Yes, yes; I have sent the cheque,” he responded, with a curious smile which, however, she did not appear to notice. She was occupied in buttering a piece of toast as he left the room.

He felt a momentary regret as he passed down the path and noticed that his rose bushes were almost ready to bud, and he wondered how many blossoms they would bear this year. Last year they had done well, but this year he expected the blooms to be much larger and more varied to repay him for all the care he had expended upon them. There was a tea rose which he particularly valued, and he felt sorry that he would not be there to see it flower. In all probability, the children would destroy it with a cricket ball, for Carrie encouraged them to play cricket on the lawn, in spite of his frequent protests that it destroyed his flowers. She had never taken his hobby very seriously, she was completely absorbed in the children. The children were all right in their way, but they were noisy and alien to him. Somehow he felt that he had never got into touch with them. It may have been his own fault entirely that he could not interest himself in their lessons or amusements. He knew that they regarded him as a silent ruling sovereign

whom it was well to propitiate in view of future requests for money. He had so often heard Carrie hold him over their heads in a manner which annoyed him excessively and seemed to form barriers between himself and the children.

“I will tell your father,” was frequently upon her lips, and it seemed somehow to have the effect desired, although it never went further than the threat. She had taken the entire reins of government into her hands, with only this reference to his authority. No, the children belonged to Carrie; he was only a figurehead, and would not be missed.

The entire day was spent in saying a mental farewell to all that had been his life for so long. The office, where he had always fretted at the stale routine, that yet managed to bring him in a fair salary each month, without much increase. He could very well estimate just how much more he would be getting in five years, in ten years, and thus it lost all the charm of the unexpected. But, then, he had sufficient, more money would not have helped him; no, it was not money which was at the root of it all. It was just the terrible monotony, the repetition year in and year out of the same thing, at home and in the office, and never what he desired. It was stale, flat, and utterly alien to all that he would have wished his life to be.

After a solitary lunch at his usual restaurant, he went to a steamship office and bought a ticket for a steamer sailing that night for the East. Even the posters of the Orient nailed up in the office, vivid things of palms, a stretch of golden sand and a girl in white being wheeled in a jinrikisha gave him a thrill which he had not known was possible any longer for him to feel. How he had always longed for the East—all the colour, the mystery and romance! He could imagine himself dressed in white, smoking a long cigar, visiting the bazaars and tea houses, where wonderful dark-skinned girls would come to wait on one. Pictures he had seen of Japan, China, India and the South Sea Islands raced through his mind in pleasant confusion, giving him a delicious sense of colour and romance, and all for the price of the small ticket which he had put away in his pocket with care.

He went next to a large departmental store and bought himself a bag and outfit that he would require on the steamer. He was glad that he had not brought his old bag that had gone with him every year on his trips to the seaside with Carrie and the children. The new things pleased him: he fingered some hair brushes that the clerk was fitting into the bag with pleasure. He had put away the old life, everything must be new and different; a new existence was before him, and he would fill it full of all that he desired.

He gave the order for the bag to be sent to the steamer, and felt that now indeed he had burned his bridges behind him. He bought a new soft hat, and regarded himself with some satisfaction in a mirror. It was different to anything he had worn, and he fancied that it made him look younger. After all, he was only in the very prime of life; his hair was just touched with grey, and if his figure was not so slight as he would have wished, still he was not fat; no, decidedly, no one could have called him fat, he said to himself with some satisfaction. A man of forty-eight has still a long way to go before old age is upon him, a long way, and he would make the most of it.

He returned to the office, and spent the remainder of the afternoon in writing letters, for it was necessary to inform Carrie of the decision he had made. He wrote to her very briefly to tell her that he had left everything in good order for her and the children. They would not be stinted for money, for he had managed to save enough, fortunately, always with this in his mind. There was no use in her writing to him, for he was going to be a ship without a port—he would no longer be anchored to any shore.

At six o'clock he left the office, shutting the door behind him with a keen pleasure at the thought that he would never again see that square desk, the swing chair, and the green blind pulled half-way down the window. He had finished with offices; he had finished with all that was flat, stale and monotonous. The glamour of the East was before him, and it gave a sprightliness to his walk, a thrill to his senses.

He dropped in at an hotel for dinner. He fancied that he would enjoy lingering over his dinner while he listened to the orchestra and made plans for the future. The waiter led him to a table in a corner of the immense room, and he sat down with a pleasurable feeling that his adventure had commenced. It was a long time since he had dined at an hotel, and he never remembered being alone without Carrie—and Carrie always ordered the dinner. To-night he would order what he liked.

He was glancing over the menu when he heard a voice behind him, and started up in surprise as a man about his own age held out his hand with a hearty exclamation of greeting.

“Jim Alloway!” Morrison exclaimed, rising to his feet. “Why, it’s years and years since I’ve seen you.”

Jim Alloway! They had gone to school and college together and been friends for years, and then somehow he had lost track of him completely.

“Yes, it’s a long time,” Alloway responded. “Dining alone? Can I join you? I’m just back from a trip abroad. It’s good to see a familiar face.”

Morrison gave the order to the waiter, and they spoke for a few moments of the sundry items of world news in the papers that evening till the waiter had brought the soup. Alloway looked across the little table at his friend in silence, and Morrison felt that he was summing up the changes which time had wrought in him, and he returned his glance with a challenging smile.

“Well, it’s a long time, isn’t it, and I’m a good bit older than when we last met. Is that what you are thinking? Let me see, it must be nearly fifteen years. I think I remember it was at a dinner given for Carrie just before we were married. Do you remember? After that your uncle died and you went abroad. Fifteen years! It’s a long time!”

“Fifteen years, is it? Yes, I remember the dinner. Carrie wore a yellow dress with some glittering arrangement in her hair. How is Carrie?”

“Oh, she’s well. What a memory you have! I couldn’t remember what Carrie wore fifteen years ago.”

“Couldn’t you?” Alloway smiled. He was a large, massively built man with very white teeth that flashed when he smiled. “But then you’ve been spoiled. A hungry man remembers the taste of a dinner eaten years ago, while you and I couldn’t even remember what we have had for lunch to-day. It’s all a matter of what one has had. You’ve had Carrie all these years, while I’ve been a lonely beggar knocking about the world looking for distraction from the mere fact of living.”

“Travelling, have you?” Morrison regarded his companion with greater interest. He thought he looked as though he had had all the good out of life, and no wonder, with nothing to do but go where he wished.

“You’re not married, then?” he added.

“No, no; I’m not married.”

“Tell me where you have been; tell me something about the places you have seen? You must have seen a great deal.”

He regarded Alloway rather enviously. He thought he appeared years younger than himself. Well, slaving one’s life out in an office is not conducive to keeping young. He did not wonder that Alloway had that advantage over him.

Alloway put down his spoon and shrugged his shoulders.

“Oh, there isn’t much to tell. When it comes down to it, one place is much the same as another. I always say when you’ve seen one country thoroughly you’ve seen them all. India—Russia—Siberia—China—Japan. I’ve been to them all a score of times. No, there isn’t much to tell you that you couldn’t read in a guide book. But tell me of yourself and Carrie.”

“Of Carrie!” Morrison smiled and took a mouthful of soup before he continued. “Well, I don’t know that there’s anything to tell. We have four boys and live in the suburbs; a brick house with a patch of lawn in front and rose bushes—yes, some rose bushes, capital ones. There’s a tea rose—but perhaps you’re not interested in roses. I’m still with Phelps & Smithers, and—well, I really don’t think there’s much more to tell you.”

Alloway laughed.

“It’s all so complete; is that it? Your four sons—and Carrie, and your roses! Yes, it sounds pretty complete to me. I suppose Carrie is just the same Carrie she was fifteen years ago, she wouldn’t change; no, I can’t imagine that she would change very much.”

Morrison pondered his friend’s words. A picture rose before him of Carrie in the blouse with the white stripes sitting eating her eggs and bacon that morning. He wondered if Alloway would find her much changed. Perhaps not.

“I don’t know,” he said slowly, “but I suppose we all change, at least in our ideas. I think mine have changed a good bit. It’s curious to look back on ourselves as we were so long ago.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” Alloway returned, absently. “Fifteen years! Fifteen years since Carrie told me that she was going to marry you. I remember how I felt then as though it were only yesterday. It was like a blow straight between the eyes. And now she has four sons. Lucky devil you are! It makes one feel too envious to think about it.”

Morrison looked the amazement that he felt.

“I never knew that you and Carrie——”

“That I wanted to marry her? She never knew it herself. I hadn’t a cent then to marry on. You remember, my uncle died just after you were married. It seems strange to talk about it now, but it’s all so long ago. Why, it’s another lifetime!”

“But you’ve had a splendid life. After all, marriage ties one down horribly. You’ve been able to travel——”

“Oh, I’m not grudging you your luck, old man. Don’t think that. Only a man feels a bit lonely at times, knocking about from one hotel to another, and never a soul to care what becomes of him. It’s a lonely life, and there’s nothing when you come to the end. Nothing but a little heap of memories. Four sons, you say!”

“Yes, but——”

“Carrie’s boys! I’d expect Carrie to have sons. I suppose they all have those same blue eyes, like cornflowers. They always seemed to see clear through any falsehood or deceit. Carrie’s sons would have eyes like that. Fine, straight lads, I bet. Doesn’t it keep your world right just to think of them? Four sons. To carry on your name and do the things you haven’t had time to do; climb the heights you’ve only aspired to climb. That’s what sons mean. You can’t fail when you have sons. They’ll turn your failures into successes if you’ve had failures, and they’ll make your successes seem worth the while. You’ve had the run of luck, David, and I’m glad of it. The man who married Carrie Webster deserved all the luck.”

Morrison felt a curious sense of unreality as he listened to the earnestly spoken words. It was difficult to grasp that Alloway meant just what he was saying; it was difficult to grasp that he was envying him. But he appeared serious. Morrison broke in sharply during the pause.

“But you—why, you’ve been all around the world! You’ve been on ships for weeks at a time. Oh, you don’t know the fever it starts in my veins just to think of the sea. The Mediterranean—as blue as the sky on a fair day. Athens and the Acropolis—I suppose you’ve been in Athens. I always dreamed that some day I would go there. India and the Taj Mahal, like a great white pearl, they say, when the moon shines upon it. The East—all the colour and mystery and romance! That is what I have missed out of life. Romance, variety, change! Seems to me as I look at it that you’ve had most of the luck yourself. Yes, that is how it appears to me.”

He sat looking into the lights while an orchestra concealed behind a bank of palms played softly, carrying him away on a flood of glad anticipation. For wasn’t the ticket safe in his pocket which was to give it all to him? He was roused from this pleasant contemplation of what was before him by a short laugh from the man opposite to him. The waiter had changed their plates and left them again. Abstractedly, he looked at Alloway over the top of a covered dish.

“And you talk of having missed the romance out of life!” Alloway was saying with a slow, incredulous smile. “You who married Carrie Webster. It

doesn't seem possible. The times when I've been knocking about, putting up at some greasy hotel with a pack of mangy foreigners; the times I've thought of Carrie Webster—she'll always be Carrie Webster to me—Carrie, with the cornflower eyes and that clear, direct look that seemed to see straight through whatever you were saying. I remember one night when I had gone to see her. It was a hot night, and we went out into the garden for coolness. You remember the garden, of course, with the stone wall and the hollyhocks and all the dear old flowers. She had some lacy thing over her shoulders, and she looked for all the world like a white moth with her scarf floating behind her like little white wings. I remember the smell of the heliotrope—I can never smell heliotrope that I don't think of Carrie Webster."

Alloway paused, gazing across the crowded room as though he were still seeing the old garden with the stone wall. Morrison sat looking at him, vainly trying to imagine Carrie in any way appearing like a white moth. He smiled a trifle cynically to himself at the picture Alloway had drawn. How far from reality it was! Carrie in the blue striped blouse, Carrie with the lines about her eyes, Carrie seeing that Robert wore his rubbers to school, Carrie inquiring if the household bills had been paid! It amazed him to think that Alloway had thought of Carrie all these years. He began to wonder if the fault was all within himself. Was he just naturally dissatisfied with what life had to offer? Oh, but he would not be dissatisfied once he was on board the steamer. The blood tingled in his veins when he thought of what was opening before him. The freedom to go where he willed. Japan . . . Japan with the cherry trees in blossom. He realized that it would appear strange to anyone if they knew his mad longing for beauty. A fat . . . for yes, he was fat . . . gray-haired business man of forty-eight! There was nothing very romantic looking about him. But how he longed for beauty and romance. He had been so starved for it all these years. Alloway might say what he chose, but he had never found marriage very romantic. Bills and children, noise and drudgery . . . But Japan . . . the very name was magical. He could almost smell the queer scent of sandal wood that things brought from the East had clinging to them. He would drink tea out of tiny cups in the quaint houses made of paper . . . he had read that the houses were built of paper. He would walk through the streets thronged with strange peoples, each face holding some new interest for him. He remembered the throngs of uninteresting dreary looking figures that he met every day, figures like himself going and coming from their offices! Tired, anxious faces drawn into the same lines by the same trend of their lives. Rushing for trains, stooping over desks in dingy offices, square desks with a swing chair and a green blind pulled half-way down the window . . . home in the evenings to a

square plot of lawn and a brick house in a row. Thousands leading just the same life day in and day out, year in and year out. What a past to look back upon when one came to old age.

Well, the ticket in his pocket spelled release from all that. Never again would he join the sombre throng. Sunlight . . . warmth . . . colour, the intoxication of new sights, of beauty that surpassed even his most extravagant dreams . . . and Alloway had had all this! He wondered at him, he wondered that he could speak of anything else. He wondered that he was not just bubbling over with the pure joyousness of it all.

Alloway started to speak and Morrison recalled his wandering attention.

“I remember dining one time in Cairo. My hostess had an English garden in which she took great pride, and that night there was a great bowl of heliotrope. I had felt rather drawn towards the girl I had taken in to dinner. I had seen quite a lot of her and it seemed as though I might choose to see a great deal more. But the smell of the heliotrope . . . and somehow I started thinking of Carrie Webster. Her eyes seemed to come in between me and that girl’s face. I thought of Carrie sitting in a room with the curtains drawn . . . of heliotrope . . . the scent of heliotrope coming in at the window . . . of the cry of a child overhead . . . Carrie’s child! Someway, oh, it seems absurd doesn’t it, and just as absurd to speak about it after all these years . . . yet somehow I didn’t seem to take any more interest in the girl. I know she found me distraught and was disappointed in me. She left for England soon after that and I never saw her again. Oh, I don’t say it was because of Carrie that I never married. But it just happened, I suppose, that I never met anyone who appealed to me in quite the way she had. It seems strange that I should tell you all this . . . but it’s ancient history now. Fifteen years ago . . . and Carrie has four sons!”

“What seems curious to me,” Morrison said slowly, “is that you should feel like this. I should have thought you would have been so full of all the places you have seen. You’ve had what I have always longed for and you treat it all as though it were not worth speaking about. That is what seems strange.”

“I’m sick of knocking about,” Alloway said fingering his glass. “I came back with every intention of settling down this time and making a sort of home for myself. But I don’t know . . . one needs children to make a home and at fifty it seems too late for all that.” He gave a short laugh as he raised his glass. “You know, I almost wish that I hadn’t met you to-night, old man. You seem to have raised the very devil of discontent in me.”

Discontent! Morrison was sorely tempted in that moment to tell Alloway just what was in his mind, just what was his intention. He hesitated through a sense of loyalty to Carrie. It would scarcely be fair. Alloway would go off with a wrong impression and it was through no fault of Carrie's that he felt as he did. No, Alloway would not be able to understand.

They shook hands at the door of the hotel in which Alloway was staying for a few days till he made further plans.

"Let me hear from you," he said to Morrison in his full, deep tones, "it's been splendid seeing you. Remember me to Carrie . . . and by the way, don't repeat all I've told you to-night. She'd laugh at me for a sentimental old fool."

They agreed to see each other in a day or so. Idle words Morrison felt, for in a day or so he would be on the deck of a steamer sailing for the East. He wished that he had not met Alloway to-night. Somehow it had dampened his spirits, it had left him with a dissatisfied feeling about the step that he intended taking. Was it actually possible that Alloway felt as he said he did? It seemed incomprehensible to him. How Alloway had looked when he had spoken of his sons . . . and of Carrie! How strange it was. He had actually envied him, yes, envied *him*—to envy him he could not be very well satisfied with his own lot in life . . . was it after all just other men's luck . . . the distant horizons . . . the lure of the unattainable! Was one man's luck much the same as another man's luck, providing of course that he had the essentials for comfort and no actual worries? But Japan . . . India . . . Greece . . . oh it was hard to believe that perhaps these would not satisfy him. Yet Alloway was not satisfied, no, plainly he was not satisfied, and yet he had had all this! Perhaps after all it was just that . . . other men's luck!

He walked slowly along the dimly lighted street brooding over these things. Soon he would be on the steamer with his face to the East. He would be going over the same ground, travelling the same route which Alloway had taken, visiting the same hotels, seeing the same sights. Would they satisfy him after all any more than they had satisfied Alloway? In a sudden flash he saw Alloway in one of these hotels of which he had spoken so scornfully, sitting at a table alone, thinking of Carrie . . . Carrie in the striped blouse . . . it made him smile a trifle cynically . . . and then he saw himself sitting opposite his own fire while he thought of the whole wonderful world beyond his threshold with the same expression on his face that Alloway had worn.

Greasy hotels and mangy foreigners! That was all the description he had been able to get from Alloway of his travels. Apparently it was the same whichever way you took . . . other men's luck was what you craved . . . apparently you always had your eyes fixed ahead on impossible horizons. Far away hills are green! That was perhaps all it amounted to in the long run.

He felt for the ticket and drew it from his pocket. He stood looking at it in the ill lighted street while his dreams fell away from him. To-morrow he would take it to the ticket office and receive his money back in exchange!

He turned and walked slowly back up the long street.

"Far away hills are green," he murmured to himself. Yes, that was all it amounted to after all. Far away hills are green!

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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[The end of *Other Men's Luck* by Beatrice Redpath]