

By Sidney Smith

A BACHELOR HUSBAND

By RUBY M. AYRES
Author of "Richard Chatterton," Etc.
Copyright, 1921, by W. J. Watt & Co.

THIS BEGINS THE STORY

Marie Chester and Christopher Lawless were raised together, and when her father died they married; she because she loved him and thought he loved her; he because he liked her and he needed the money. On their honeymoon she learns why he married her and tells her the does not know who she is. He agrees to be just friends. He flirts with Mrs. Heriot. She is a friend of her husband's. Feathers, a friend of her husband's, Chris and Dakers and he had always been close friends, but he supposes it will be different now he is married. He need not be, says Marie. "That's what I told him," said Chris.

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

I TOLD him you were not an exciting woman; I told him that we had known one another all our lives. There was a little silence. "Did you tell him why you married me?" Marie asked. "Chris flushed. "What do you mean? Is it likely?" "I thought you might, as—as it was only just a sort of business arrangement." Chris stood still and looked down at her. "Do you know that you have altered a great deal lately, Marie Celeste?" she said. She forced herself to look at him. "Do you mean my face?" He frowned. "Your face—no! I mean in yourself! I was only thinking this morning that you seem absolutely different to the girl you were that day outside Westminster Abbey." She turned sharply away. "Perhaps I am; a great deal has happened since then." Chris seemed to be considering the point. "Years ago," he said suddenly, "I used to flatter myself that you were rather fond of me, Marie Celeste." She caught her breath, but made no answer, and he persisted, "You were, weren't you?" "Yes—of course, I was!" she said desperately. "Even up to that last time you went back to Paris, I thought the same," he went on. "You had a funny little way of looking at me, Marie Celeste—a way I rather liked, I remember."

"And what made you think I was desperately in love with you?" she asked in a hard voice. "Well, not desperately in love, perhaps, but I used to think you had a sort of sneaking affection for me—I was a conceited donkey, I suppose." "I married you—anyway," she said breathlessly. "Yes, and what a marriage," he ejaculated. Marie put her hand to her throat as if she were choking. "I thought we were getting along well together." "Did you? That all depends what you mean by well! I suppose it's all right, if it suits you." She gave a queer little laugh. "Chris, you are not trying to pretend that you're in love with me?" The words seemed forced from her and her heart beat to suffocation as she waited for his reply. "It came without a second's hesitation. "I suppose I've never been in love with any woman, but if there ever has been any one, it's been you, Marie Celeste." A poor little grain of comfort, and yet it was comfort to know that nobody else came before her. She felt almost happy for the rest of the day; even Feathers noticed that her eyes were brighter and that there was more color in her cheeks. "This place is doing you good at last, Mrs. Lawless," he said to her during the evening. "It's the first time I've seen you with a color." He put up her hands to her cheeks, laughing. "And it's my own," she said, "and not out of the box." His gray eyes searched her face. "Inasmuch as I am, I could have told you that," he answered. Mrs. Heriot came rustling up to them; she wore a beautiful evening gown, cut rather unnecessarily low, and a diamond star glittered on her white neck. "What are you two laughing about?" she demanded. "Mr. Dakers, I must compliment you. You always seem to be able to make Mrs. Lawless laugh, and she's such a serious little person as a rule." She sat down between them; she always liked to be the center of a conversation. "There'll be no moon tonight," she said suddenly. "It's clouded over; I think we shall have some rain."

"It must be badly needed," Feathers said sentimentally. "She made a little grimace. "The crops and the farmers want it, I suppose you mean! Do you know that I've no interest in either of them?" "To surprise me," said Feathers gravely. She held out her white hand. "Give me a cigarette, Mr. Dakers!" She danced round the lounge. "Where is every one tonight?" she asked plaintively. "I think most of the men are in the billiard room," Marie said hesitatingly; she knew that Chris was, but she had asked the permission first, and the little attention had pleased her, though she was quite well that he would have gone, anyway, had he desired to go. "I think Mr. Dakers is simply splendid, you know," Mrs. Heriot said with enthusiasm, when presently he had walked away. "He makes such a wonderful friend, doesn't he?" "He is very kind," Marie agreed. "How will you miss him?" the elder woman went on sympathetically. "Oh, he is going back to town with you?" "No, he is not going back with us," Marie said. "He's going to London!" The eyes went across the lounge to where Feathers stood talking to some middle-aged man who had just entered. "Yes, she would miss him, she knew! He was afraid to think how much."

CHAPTER IX
Marie woke on the Friday morning with the vague feeling that something unpleasant was going to happen. She lay for a moment looking round the room with sleepy eyes; then she remembered—they were going back to London! She sat up in bed, her dark hair falling about her shoulders, and stared at the packed luggage. "It's the end of her honeymoon!" she thought. A month since she had been married, with only one bright memory attaching to it—her friendship with Feathers. Now she was leaving even that behind! She was conscious of a little shiver when she thought of it. Who would help her through the long days when she was not at hand? She looked helplessly on her old suitcase. "I shall be used to it soon! I must get used to living like this soon, sure-

There would be Aunt Madge, too; it was comforting to think of her, but Marie did not realize that when she married her she had burnt her boats behind her, and would never again find happiness or contentment in the simple things that had pleased her before. Her heart was heavy as she went downstairs; it was a particularly beautiful morning, and her eyes were misty with tears as she looked at the blue sky and the sunlight and realized that tomorrow she would open her eyes on bricks and mortar and smoky London. Yet it had been her own wish to return. She could have stayed on had she chosen. "Good morning," said Feathers beside her. She turned quickly, her eyes brightening. "Am I down before you? It's generally the other way about!" "Yes, I overleapt myself. Where's Chris?" "I don't think he's up yet."

There was a little silence. "Are you going by the morning train?" Feathers asked presently. "No, after lunch, I think; we shall be home about 5."

He looked up at him wistfully. "Have you got headaches?" she asked in concern. "You look as if you have." He laughed. "Not for me," she said, indulging in such luxuries, but I don't sleep particularly well last night." "A guilty conscience?" Marie said, teasingly. "Probably." He stepped out into the sunny garden. "Shall we go for a stroll, as it's your last morning?" She followed at once. "That sounded so horrid," she said, with a half sigh. "My last morning! It sounds as if I were going to be executed or something."

"Thank you." Suddenly she laughed. "Why, it's Friday!" He always seems to choose unlucky days to go to places or do the important things. I was married on Friday, and I came home from Paris after father died on Friday." "Well, it's a good day as any other."

She shook her head. "Not for me," she said, unthinkingly, then laughed to cover the admission of her words. "I'm superstitious, you see." "Aburd!" "I know it is, and I never used to be." "I don't believe you are now," he declared. "What are you looking at?" Marie had stood suddenly still, and was looking down on the sands. The tide was out, and a man and woman were walking along together close to the water's edge. "It's Chris and Mrs. Heriot," Feathers said quietly. "Shall we go and meet them?" He turned toward the steps leading down to the shore, but Marie did not move. She was very pale, and the look in her eyes cut him to the heart when he looked at her. "I don't think I will—I'd rather go back—they haven't seen us," she answered. She would have turned back the way they had come, but Feathers resolutely barred the way. "Mrs. Lawless, don't you think it would be much wiser to come along and meet them?" She raised her troubled eyes to his. "I don't want to go, why need I? Oh, do you think I must?" He tried to laugh as if it were a subject of no importance. "Why not? They have probably seen us."

He could see refusal in her face; then all at once she gave in. "Very well. But her steps dragged as she followed him down to the sands, and her face had not regained its color. Feathers was racking his brains for means whereby to dispense the suspicion which he knew was in her mind. He was cursing Chris with all his hearts, even while he was level-headed enough to guess that in all probability his friend's meeting with Mrs. Heriot was entirely of no chance. When they were near enough he called out to them cheerily: "Now, then, you two, it's breakfast time, so hurry! Mrs. Lawless and I have been right along to the headland."

THE GUMPS—Backyard Scandal



SOMEBODY'S STENOG—Connie's a Happy Nut



The Young Lady Across the Way



TOMBOY TAYLOR



SCHOOL DAYS



PETEY—Here's a Sticker



GASOLINE ALLEY—Walt Needed No Introduction



CONTINUED TOMORROW