

I. — ROAST BEEF, MEDIUM

There is a journey compared to which the travels of Bunyan's hero were a summer-evening's stroll. The Pilgrims by whom this forced march is taken belong to a maligned fraternity, and are known as traveling men. Sample-case in hand, trunk key in pocket, cigar in mouth, brown derby atilt at an angle of ninety, each young and untried traveler starts on his journey down that road which leads through morasses of chicken *a la* Creole, over greasy mountains of queen fritters made doubly perilous by slippery glaciers of rum sauce, into formidable jungles of breaded veal chops threaded by sanguine and deadly streams of tomato gravy, past sluggish mires of dreadful things *en casserole*, over hills of corned-beef hash, across shaking quagmires of veal glace, plunging into sloughs of slaw, until, haggard, weary, digestion shattered, complexion gone, he reaches the safe haven of roast beef, medium. Once there, he never again strays, although the pompadoured, white-aproned siren sing-songs in his ear the praises of Irish stew, and pork with apple sauce.

Emma McChesney was eating her solitary supper at the Berger house at Three Rivers, Michigan. She had arrived at the Roast Beef haven many years before. She knew the digestive perils of a small town hotel dining-room as a guide on the snow-covered mountain knows each treacherous pitfall and chasm. Ten years on the road had taught her to recognize the deadly snare that lurks in the seemingly calm bosom of minced chicken with cream sauce. Not for her the impenetrable mysteries of a hamburger and onions. It had been a struggle, brief but terrible, from which Emma McChesney had emerged triumphant, her complexion and figure saved.

No more metaphor. On with the story, which left Emma at her safe and solitary supper.

She had the last number of the *Dry Goods Review* propped up against the vinegar cruet and the Worcestershire, and the salt shaker. Between conscientious, but disinterested mouthfuls of medium roast beef, she was reading the snappy ad set forth by her firm's bitterest competitors, the Strauss Sans-silk Skirt Company. It was a good reading ad. Emma McChesney, who had forgotten more about petticoats than the average skirt salesman ever knew, presently allowed her luke-warm beef to grow cold and flabby as she read. Somewhere in her subconscious mind she realized that the lanky head waitress had placed some one opposite her at the table. Also, subconsciously, she heard him order liver and bacon, with onions. She told herself that as soon as she reached the bottom of the column she'd look up to see who the fool was. She never arrived at the column's end.

“I just hate to tear you away from that love lyric; but if I might trouble you for the vinegar—”

Emma groped for it back of her paper and shoved it across the table without looking up, “—and the Worcester—”

One eye on the absorbing column, she passed the tall bottle. But at its removal her prop was gone. The *Dry Goods Review* was too weighty for the salt shaker alone.

“—and the salt. Thanks. Warm, isn't it?”

There was a double vertical frown between Emma McChesney's eyes as she glanced up over the top of her *Dry Goods Review*. The frown gave way to a half smile. The glance settled into a stare.

“But then, anybody would have stared. He expected it,” she said, afterwards, in telling about it. “I've seen matinee idols, and tailors' supplies salesmen, and Julian Eltinge, but this boy had any male professional beauty I ever saw, looking as handsome and dashing as a bowl of cold oatmeal. And he knew it.”

Now, in the ten years that she had been out representing T. A. Buck's Featherloom Petticoats Emma McChesney had found it necessary to make a rule or two for herself. In the strict observance of one of these she had become past mistress in the fine art of congealing the warm advances of fresh and friendly salesmen of the opposite sex. But this case was different, she told herself. The man across the table was little more than a boy—an amazingly handsome, astonishingly impudent, cockily confident boy, who was staring with insolent approval at Emma McChesney's trim, shirt-waisted figure, and her fresh, attractive coloring, and her well-cared-for hair beneath the smart summer hat.

“It isn't in human nature to be as good-looking as you are,” spake Emma McChesney, suddenly, being a person who never trifled with half-way measures. “I'll bet you have bad teeth, or an impediment in your speech.”

The gorgeous young man smiled. His teeth were perfect. “Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers,” he announced, glibly. “Nothing missing there, is there?”

“Must be your morals then,” retorted Emma McChesney. “My! My! And on the road! Why, the trail of bleeding hearts that you must leave all the way from Maine to California would probably make the Red Sea turn white with envy.”

The Fresh Young Kid speared a piece of liver and looked soulfully up into the adoring eyes of the waitress who was hovering over him. “Got any nice hot biscuits to-night, girlie?” he inquired.

“I'll get you some; sure,” wildly promised his handmaiden, and disappeared kitchenward.

“Brand new to the road, aren't you?” observed Emma McChesney, cruelly.

“What makes you think—”

“Liver and bacon, hot biscuits, Worcestershire,” elucidated she. “No old-timer would commit suicide that way. After you've been out for two or three years you'll stick to the Rock of Gibraltar—roast beef, medium. Oh, I get wild now and then, and order eggs if the girl says she knows the hen that layed 'em, but plain roast beef, unchloroformed, is the one best bet. You can't go wrong if you stick to it.”

The god-like young man leaned forward, forgetting to eat.

“You don't mean to tell me you're on the road!”

“Why not?” demanded Emma McChesney, briskly.

“Oh, fie, fie!” said the handsome youth, throwing her a languishing look. “Any woman as pretty as you are, and with those eyes, and that hair, and figure—Say, Little One, what are you going to do to-night?”

Emma McChesney sugared her tea, and stirred it, slowly. Then she looked up. “To-night, you fresh young kid, you!” she said calmly, “I'm going to dictate two letters, explaining why business was rotten last week, and why it's going to pick up next week, and then I'm going to keep an engagement with a nine-hour beauty sleep.”

“Don't get sore at a fellow. You'd take pity on me if you knew how I have to work to kill an evening in one of these little townpump burgs. Kill 'em! It can't be done. They die harder than the heroine in a ten, twenty, thirty. From supper to bedtime is twice as long as from breakfast to supper. Honest!”

But Emma McChesney looked inexorable, as women do just before they relent. Said she: “Oh, I don't know. By the time I get through trying to convince a bunch of customers that T. A. Buck's Featherloom Petticoat has every other skirt in the market looking like a piece of Fourth of July bunting that's been left out in the rain, I'm about ready to turn down the spread and leave a call for six-thirty.”

“Be a good fellow,” pleaded the unquenchable one. “Let's take in all the nickel shows, and then see if we can't drown our sorrows in—er—”

Emma McChesney slipped a coin under her plate, crumpled her napkin, folded her arms on the table, and regarded the boy across the way with what our best talent calls a long, level look. It was so long and so level that even the airiness of the buoyant youngster at whom it was directed began to lessen perceptibly, long before Emma began to talk.

“Tell me, young 'un, did any one ever refuse you anything? I thought not. I should think that when you realize what you've got to learn it would scare you to look ahead. I don't expect you to believe me when I tell you I never talk to fresh guys like you, but it's true. I don't know why I'm breaking my rule for you, unless it's because you're so unbelievably good-looking that I'm anxious to know where the blemish is. The Lord don't make 'em perfect, you know. I'm going to get out those letters, and then, if it's just the same to you, we'll take a walk. These nickel shows are getting on my nerves. It seems to me that if I have to look at one more Western picture about a fool girl with her hair in a braid riding a show horse in the wilds of Clapham Junction and being rescued from a band of almost-Indians by the handsome, but despised Eastern tenderfoot, or if I see one more of those historical pictures, with the women wearing costumes that are a pass between early Egyptian and late State Street, I know I'll get hysterics and have to be carried shrieking, up the aisle. Let's walk down Main Street and look in the store windows, and up as far as the park and back.”

“Great!” assented he. “Is there a park?”

“I don't know,” replied Emma McChesney, “but there is. And for your own good I'm going to tell you a few things. There's more to this traveling game than just knocking down on expenses, talking to every pretty woman you meet, and learning to ask for fresh white-bread heels at the Palmer House in Chicago. I'll meet you in the lobby at eight.”

Emma McChesney talked steadily, and evenly, and generously, from eight until eight-thirty. She talked from the great storehouse of practical knowledge which she had accumulated in her ten years on the road. She told the handsome young cub many things for which he should have been undyingly thankful. But when they reached the park—the cool, dim, moon-silvered park, its benches dotted with glimpses of white showing close beside a blur of black, Emma McChesney stopped talking. Not only did she stop talking, but she ceased to think of the boy seated beside her on the bench.

In the band-stand, under the arc-light, in the center of the pretty little square, some neighborhood children were playing a noisy game, with many shrill cries, and much shouting and laughter. Suddenly, from one of the houses across the way, a woman's voice was heard, even above the clamor of the children.

“Fred-dee!” called the voice. “Maybelle! Come, now.”

And a boy's voice answered, as boys' voices have since Cain was a child playing in the Garden of Eden, and as boys' voices will as long as boys are:

“Aw, ma, I ain't a bit sleepy. We just begun a new game, an' I'm leader. Can't we just stay out a couple of minutes more?”

“Well, five minutes,” agreed the voice. “But don't let me call you again.”

Emma McChesney leaned back on the rustic bench and clasped her strong, white hands behind her head, and stared straight ahead into the soft darkness. And if it had been light you could have seen that the bitter lines showing faintly about her mouth were outweighed by the sweet and gracious light which was glowing in her eyes.

“Fred-dee!” came the voice of command again. “May-belle! This minute, now!”

One by one the flying little figures under the arc-light melted away in the direction of the commanding voice and home and bed. And Emma McChesney forgot all about fresh young kids and featherloom petticoats and discounts and bills of lading and sample-cases and grouchy buyers. After all, it had been her protecting maternal instinct which had been aroused by the boy at supper, although she had not known it then. She did not know it now, for that matter. She was busy remembering just such evenings in her own life—summer evenings, filled with the high, shrill laughter of children at play. She too, had stood in the doorway, making a funnel of her hands, so that her clear call through the twilight might be heard above the cries of the boys and girls. She had known how loath the little feet had been to leave their play, and how they had

lagged up the porch stairs, and into the house. Years, whose memory she had tried to keep behind her, now suddenly loomed before her in the dim quiet of the little flower-scented park.

A voice broke the silence, and sent her dream-thoughts scattering to the winds.

“Honestly, kid,” said the voice, “I could be crazy about you, if you'd let me.”

The forgotten figure beside her woke into sudden life. A strong arm encircled her shoulders. A strong hand seized her own, which were clasped behind her head. Two warm, eager lips were pressed upon her lips, checking the little cry of surprise and wrath that rose in her throat.

Emma McChesney wrenched herself free with a violent jerk, and pushed him from her. She did not storm. She did not even rise. She sat very quietly, breathing fast. When she turned at last to look at the boy beside her it seemed that her white profile cut the darkness. The man shrank a little, and would have stammered something, but Emma McChesney checked him.

{Illustration: “That was a married kiss—a two-year-old married kiss at least.”}

“You nasty, good-for-nothing, handsome young devil, you!” she said. “So you're married.”

He sat up with a jerk. “How did you—what makes you think so?”

“That was a married kiss—a two-year-old married kiss, at least. No boy would get as excited as that about kissing an old stager like me. The chances are you're out of practise. I knew that if it wasn't teeth or impediment it must be morals. And it is.”

She moved over on the bench until she was close beside him. “Now, listen to me, boy.” She leaned forward, impressively. “Are you listening?”

“Yes,” answered the handsome young devil, sullenly.

“What I've got to say to you isn't so much for your sake, as for your wife's. I was married when I was eighteen, and stayed married eight years. I've had my divorce ten years, and my boy is seventeen years old. Figure it out. How old is Ann?”

“I don't believe it,” he flashed back. “You're not a day over twenty-six—anyway, you don't look it. I—”

“Thanks,” drawled Emma. “That's because you've never seen me in negligee. A woman's as old as she looks with her hair on the dresser and bed only a few minutes away. Do you know why I was decent to you in the first place? Because I was foolish enough to think that you reminded me of my own kid. Every fond mama is gump enough to think that every Greek god she sees looks like her own boy, even if her own happens to squint and have two teeth missing—which mine hasn't, thank the Lord! He's the greatest young—Well, now, look here, young 'un. I'm going to return good for evil. Traveling men and geniuses should never marry. But as long as you've done

it, you might as well start right. If you move from this spot till I get through with you, I'll yell police and murder. Are you ready?"

"I'm dead sorry, on the square, I am—"

"Ten minutes late," interrupted Emma McChesney. "I'm dishing up a sermon, hot, for one, and you've got to choke it down. Whenever I hear a traveling man howling about his lonesome evenings, and what a dog's life it is, and no way for a man to live, I always wonder what kind of a summer picnic he thinks it is for his wife. She's really a widow seven months in the year, without any of a widow's privileges. Did you ever stop to think what she's doing evenings? No, you didn't. Well, I'll tell you. She's sitting home, night after night, probably embroidering monograms on your shirt sleeves by way of diversion. And on Saturday night, which is the night when every married woman has the inalienable right to be taken out by her husband, she can listen to the woman in the flat upstairs getting ready to go to the theater. The fact that there's a ceiling between 'em doesn't prevent her from knowing just where they're going, and why he has worked himself into a rage over his white lawn tie, and whether they're taking a taxi or the car and who they're going to meet afterward at supper. Just by listening to them coming downstairs she can tell how much Mrs. Third Flat's silk stockings cost, and if she's wearing her new La Valliere or not. Women have that instinct, you know. Or maybe you don't. There's so much you've missed."

"Say, look here—" broke from the man beside her. But Emma McChesney laid her cool fingers on his lips.

"Nothing from the side-lines, please," she said. "After they've gone she can go to bed, or she can sit up, pretending to read, but really wondering if that squeaky sound coming from the direction of the kitchen is a loose screw in the storm door, or if it's some one trying to break into the flat. And she'd rather sit there, scared green, than go back through that long hall to find out. And when Tillie comes home with her young man at eleven o'clock, though she promised not to stay out later than ten, she rushes back to the kitchen and falls on her neck, she's so happy to see her. Oh, it's a gay life. You talk about the heroism of the early Pilgrim mothers! I'd like to know what they had on the average traveling man's wife."

"Bess goes to the matinee every Saturday," he began, in feeble defense.

"Matinee!" scoffed Emma McChesney. "Do you think any woman goes to matinee by preference? Nobody goes but girls of sixteen, and confirmed old maids without brothers, and traveling men's wives. Matinee! Say, would you ever hesitate to choose between an all-day train and a sleeper? It's the same idea. What a woman calls going to the theater is something very different. It means taking a nap in the afternoon, so her eyes will be bright at night, and then starting at about five o'clock to dress, and lay her husband's clean things out on the bed. She loves it. She even enjoys getting his bath towels ready, and putting his shaving things where he can lay his hands on 'em, and telling the girl to have dinner ready promptly at six-thirty. It means getting out her good dress that hangs in the closet with a cretonne bag covering it, and her black satin coat, and her hat with the paradise aigrettes that she bought with what she saved out of the housekeeping money. It means her best silk stockings, and her diamond sunburst that he's going

to have made over into a La Valliere just as soon as business is better. She loves it all, and her cheeks get pinker and pinker, so that she really doesn't need the little dash of rouge that she puts on 'because everybody does it, don't you know?' She gets ready, all but her dress, and then she puts on a kimono and slips out to the kitchen to make the gravy for the chicken because the girl never can get it as smooth as he likes it. That's part of what she calls going to the theater, and having a husband. And if there are children—”

There came a little, inarticulate sound from the boy. But Emma's quick ear caught it.

“No? Well, then, we'll call that one black mark less for you. But if there are children—and for her sake I hope there will be—she's father and mother to them. She brings them up, single-handed, while he's on the road. And the worst she can do is to say to them, 'Just wait until your father gets home. He'll hear of this.' But shucks! When he comes home he can't whip the kids for what they did seven weeks before, and that they've forgotten all about, and for what he never saw, and can't imagine. Besides, he wants his comfort when he gets home. He says he wants a little rest and peace, and he's darned if he's going to run around evenings. Not much, he isn't! But he doesn't object to her making a special effort to cook all those little things that he's been longing for on the road. Oh, there'll be a seat in Heaven for every traveling man's wife—though at that, I'll bet most of 'em will find themselves stuck behind a post.”

“You're all right!” exclaimed Emma McChesney's listener, suddenly. “How a woman like you can waste her time on the road is more than I can see. And—I want to thank you. I'm not such a fool—”

“I haven't let you finish a sentence so far and I'm not going to yet. Wait a minute. There's one more paragraph to this sermon. You remember what I told you about old stagers, and the roast beef diet? Well, that applies right through life. It's all very well to trifle with the little side-dishes at first, but there comes a time when you've got to quit fooling with the minced chicken, and the imitation lamb chops of this world, and settle down to plain, everyday, roast beef, medium. That other stuff may tickle your palate for a while, but sooner or later it will turn on you, and ruin your moral digestion. You stick to roast beef, medium. It may sound prosaic, and unimaginative and dry, but you'll find that it wears in the long run. You can take me over to the hotel now. I've lost an hour's sleep, but I don't consider it wasted. And you'll oblige me by putting the stopper on any conversation that may occur to you between here and the hotel. I've talked until I'm so low on words that I'll probably have to sell featherlooms in sign language to-morrow.”

They walked to the very doors of the Berger House in silence. But at the foot of the stairs that led to the parlor floor he stopped, and looked into Emma McChesney's face. His own was rather white and tense.

“Look here,” he said. “I've got to thank you. That sounds idiotic, but I guess you know what I mean. And I won't ask you to forgive a hound like me. I haven't been so ashamed of myself since I was a kid. Why, if you knew Bess—if you knew—”

“I guess I know Bess, all right. I used to be a Bess, myself. Just because I'm a traveling man it doesn't follow that I've forgotten the Bess feeling. As far as that goes, I don't mind telling you

that I've got neuralgia from sitting in that park with my feet in the damp grass. I can feel it in my back teeth, and by eleven o'clock it will be camping over my left eye, with its little brothers doing a war dance up the side of my face. And, boy, I'd give last week's commissions if there was some one to whom I had the right to say: 'Henry, will you get up and get me a hot-water bag for my neuralgia? It's something awful. And just open the left-hand lower drawer of the chiffonier and get out one of those gauze vests and then get me a safety pin from the tray on my dresser. I'm going to pin it around my head.'"