

Partnership That Ended Abruptly

By Maximilin Foster

Illustration by J. C. CARR

When the Faithful Housewife Receives "A Good Home" and nothing more the Consideration is Insufficient

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SOME spell Romance with a capital R, but the second Mrs. Hoople made no choice. Some go even as far as Italy; but Mrs. Hoople did fancy work nine hours out of the twenty-four, and worshipped no false idols. Her day began at half past six; and between the fancy work and the fact that Mr. Hoople came home at half past five at night, there was enough, if not more, fully to engage her mind. Once she had read somewhere of a woman who had her breakfast in bed, and that really seemed to be romance. But no Mrs. Hoople had ever eaten her breakfast in bed. At 7 a.m., to the minute, Mr. Hoople and Al, his son by a former marriage, expected to sit down to theirs, as at 6 p.m. they sat down to their dinner. For Mr. Hoople was a methodical man, and Al had imbibed his habit of course—as if by an iron code. Mr. Hoople was a bookkeeper in a downtown shoe store; Al studied at a business college, and called on a girl Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, and such is the force of association that Mrs. Hoople found all her moments regulated to habit—their habit, of course—as if by an iron code. Four hours a day were set apart for housework—to making beds and cooking, to sweeping, dusting, washing, ironing, mending, and then the remainder was hers for fancy work. The only break in this routine was on Wednesdays, when she walked down to the Exchange with her handiwork, and brought home the money owed to her. Big or little, Roman type or italics, it was all the same to Mrs. Hoople. An x would have expressed it just as well.

Yet, after all, there was the romance of her marriage. Even Mr. Hoople, when he talked of it, assumed an air of almost large nobility, that impressed itself on his hearer's mind, and brought home hadn't he, and given a good home to her? There seemed no reason to deny the facts, since Mr. Hoople expressed them so clearly, and by habit, both in manner as well as by speech. By habit, too, she listened passively, just as, by habit, Mr. Hoople often spoke of it. But there were times when the second Mrs. Hoople wished the world were free from habit. Her father had been a man of habit, too—or habits, rather, if collectively expressed. They had resulted in her mother leaving him to them, when Mrs. Hoople was as yet unmarried, and not quite twenty-one. Now she was thirty-five, and had been married fourteen years. None the less, it had been a romance in so far as it was unusual.

It began in this manner: The day after her mother died, Mena moved from the second story, front, of the lodging house to the fourth floor, back. Left to her own decision, she would have moved out altogether. Indeed, she was preparing to leave, when Mrs. Dunwiddie, the lodging keeper, begged her to change her mind—nay, even insisted on it. So hedged 'twixt the devil and the deep sea Mena remained, the alternative being expressed suitably by Mrs. Dunwiddie, on one hand, refusing to give up her trunk till the lodging bill was paid; on the other, by moving to the fourth floor, back, and paying off the debt in installments. So Mena moved, regarding the position of trunkless freedom as untenable. In the meanwhile, her father seemed to have disappeared.

In the fourth floor, front, of Mrs. Dunwiddie's lived Elias Hoople, a self-contained, quiet gentleman, wearing pale, respectable side whiskers and a white string tie. At five thirty, to the minute, Mena always heard Mr. Hoople's key rattle in his door. At six, to the dot, Mr. Hoople emerged and sought a near-by restaurant. At eight-thirty Mr. Hoople returned, each act as regular as the functions of a clock. In time Mena struck up a nodding acquaintance on the stairs, and then, one Sunday night, came a tap at Mena's door.

She opened it, and—by habit—paled at the presence of the landlady, to whom she still owed two-thirds of the debt, plus lawful interest at eight per cent.

"You will tidy yourself immediately," directed Mrs. Dunwiddie, "and in ten minutes be ready. Ordinary. I eat at five or thereabouts, but to-night I'm late. Mind you don't keep me waiting."

They had veal loaf, prunes, hot biscuit, and tea, and Mr. Hoople was also at the board. Afterward Mena went back to her fancy work, a neat board handkerchief box covered with pink brocade, and destined for the Woman's Exchange. She sewed swiftly until half past eleven, and then, as she crept into bed, Mena recalled the veal loaf, the prunes, the hot biscuit, and the tea, each in exquisite succession. Later, by the same association of ideas, she recalled Mr. Hoople. He had asked permission to call on her Tuesday evening in the parlor, naming a quarter of eight as the hour. At twelve minutes to eight, on Tuesday, Mena went down to the parlor and found him looking at his watch. At eight, as if by programme, Mr. Hoople told her he was a bookkeeper in a downtown shoe store. At 8.15, as by special arrangements, he slipped in the fact he was a widower. Then, as if further resolved to prove himself frank, free, and aboveboard, Mr. Hoople, at 8.30 by the clock, said he had a small boy living with his deceased wife's sister. Outside, the chimes struck on the minute as Mr. Hoople climbed the stairs to his room.

It was six weeks after this, one Thursday night, that Mena closed her door behind her, and walked over to the looking-glass. Her small, pinched features stared back at her from the mirror, a face starved and transparently pale, desperately lacking the slightest claim to good looks. Even her hair was distressing, a flat, ginger-colored tangle dragged back into a scanty knot. In the gas jet's garish light, it looked like dried-out oakum, and Mena's study slowly turned itself to her eyes. They peered back at her wistfully, orbs of a pale lustrous blue, their lids reddened to the rims from too much straining in too little light; so Mena gave up the scrutiny, and, bracing back her shoulders, tried to pinch in her waist. There was no vanity in the act, either in that or in the slow, unappealing study of her face and eyes and hair. Her expression was that of a woman left enough for one more loaf of bread, but too little to go to a drug-gist's. Turning from the glass, she began wearily to disrobe.

"No," she muttered concisely, "I guess he'll be the only one."

She crept down between the sheets. On the table her fancy work lay unheeded, the Exchange would have to wait. Strange, too, for one of the things Mr. Hoople had spoken about was that neat sewing of hers. Idly wearily, she'd told him what it brought her in; then Mr. Hoople, after a moment's thought, had changed the conversation. Drawing his chair a little closer, he spoke of marriage, naming its concrete comforts in a tone he knew to be alluring—as he showed. One knee was crossed comfortably on the other; he smiled and leaned back and tugged at his side whiskers; and in an armhole of his waistcoat he inserted an easy thumb. "Yes, that's right," he repeated confidently, "I oughter know. I been there, you see. Little women at the door—glad evening's welcome—slippers warming by the fire—and then

a good, square meal, piping hot. Prompt six o'clock, too. Oh, yeah!" added Mr. Hoople knowingly.

There was a pause, and Mr. Hoople fell suddenly into thought. Mena, desperately calm, calmly despatched, sat with folded hands. "Every little helps, though," muttered Mr. Hoople suddenly as if he mused. It seemed to smack of some unspoken decision, an unrevealed thought.

"Beg pardon?" inquired Mena, thinking he had, perhaps, jumped back to the topic of her fancy work.

Lounging in his chair, two thumbs on his armholes now, Mr. Hoople addressed her. "Say, look at here, Mena! What you think if me 'nd you was to get married, hey?"

So there her romance unfolded. Now she'd had fourteen years of it, and the fancy work besides. In addition she had the cooking, the making of beds, the sweeping, dusting, and the mending. Until Al got to the business college stage, she'd had a good deal of Al too. But as Mr. Hoople said, every little helps. Her fancy work first helped to buy her clothes. Then, as fewer clothes were bought for her, it helped to pay the rent. Later on, it began to help to buy clothes for growing Al, and still later to help pay his tuition at the business college. There are many ways in which every little helps, but long ago hers had ceased to remain little. Still, virtuous activity brings its own reward. Hadn't Mr. Hoople said he'd given a good home to her?

"That's right now, ain't it?" he'd declare, perhaps a little put out when the dinner was late; "here I'm giving you a good home 'nd all that, 'nd you just can't get the meals on when they'd oughter be."

The second Mrs. Hoople looked up at the mantel clock. It lacked only fifteen minutes of her husband's and stepson's return, and dinner must not be late. To-night was Thursday, and again Al had warned her she mustn't keep him waiting. He and the girl were going to Coney Island—to "Coney's" as Al expressed it, and the second Mrs. Hoople would have liked to go to "Coney's," too. Her father, before he had acquired his own particular brand of habits, had often taken her there, and she would like to go again.

As Mrs. Hoople meandered listlessly kitchenward, the bell of the top floor rang loudly. It

"Any more?" she droned, picked up the pudding dish, and getting ready to clear. Mr. Hoople shook his head, and his son also divided between a toothpick and the fter, clucked off noisily toward the front door. Down the hall, Al slammed the front door to him, and the second Mrs. Hoople flopped on a chair.

"I wish I was dead," she earnestly, and with great simplicity. But, a minutes later, will reconquered; she dragged herself to her feet, and bore the dishes to the kitchen. "Coney Island!" she murmured. In the room the book-keeper of the shoe concern absorbed himself with the twin necessities of tick and paper.

In the kitchen the second Mrs. Hoople gulped once, and then wiped her face on a fish towel. Some time later Mr. Hoople slipped up from the "Reporter" to find his wife only staring at him, but otherwise idly idling. "Well, now?" he inquired, his eyes wandering restlessly toward the pile of unfinished parrot hearts. "I wonder," she proposed unemotionally, "I wonder how the lights'd look it Coney-night, and if there's the same old music they wonder now. Father and I used to dance, it only cost a nickel for a waltz."

"Did you?" answered Mr. Hoople, idly turning a page of his paper. There was something almost indulgent in his tone, kindly, condescending, whimsical. "Well, I guess your father you all kinds of dances before he come to shyness."

Mrs. Hoople blinked suddenly, as if the light hurt her red-rimmed, overworn eyes. "Any-way, he took me to Coney," she stammered incoherently, after a pause; "it only cost a quarter, too. A dime there and a dime back, a nickel if you dance."

Mr. Hoople, after turning another page, looked at his wife benignly, if pityingly. He had grown portly in these fourteen years. "Necome, Mena; you'd look fine, wouldn't you, egg up and a dancing there in public?"

Still indulgently, his eye traveling over her face and figure, and then back to his paper. Otherwise, he might have seen the look that faded, a flush of responsive shame, a little spasmic twitching of the lips, and after that look, some pendent tremulously on an eyelash and going as it fell. Shame, perhaps, all yet there in their pity may have caught that something it dropped,

moment she tried to stifle it by hand, and, that failing, she thrust it beneath her pillow. There it still continued to vociferate; and then, arising with her accustomed groan, Mrs. Hoople took up the alarm clock and dropped it down the airshaft. It struck with a crash and became silent. Mrs. Hoople was fully aware of the consequences, but she climbed back into bed, and turned her face to the wall.

It was Mr. Hoople's voice that broke in on her dream. "Now look a here! Is this any way to treat a man after he's given you a good—"

Mrs. Hoople sat up with a jerk, instantly awake. She brushed back the thin wisps of ginger hair astray on her face, and wrinkled up her nose. Her nightdress, opened at the throat, disclosed her neck and shoulders, the last of all in a woman's person to lose youth, freshness, comeliness. Her's were scrawny and dark, the skin harshly dry and yellowed, of a texture of parchment. "Never mind telling me again," she droned carelessly; "I got it by heart long ago. All the same, I ain't going to get up."

Mr. Hoople's side whiskers stood out almost straight from his puffed-up cheeks. Words deserted him, those ready little phrases so often on his tongue. Mrs. Hoople sat there impassively, her round, protuberant eyes blinking at his face like marbles. "No, I ain't!" she affirmed decisively.

One more abortive attempt, and then Mr. Hoople spoke—or, more properly, he exploded. "You look a here now!"—belligerently—"I'd like to know what's got into you?"

His wife drew her nightdress about her, and idly looked at the ceiling. "You go away and let me be. I've had a shock."

Once more—whiskers excepted—Mr. Hoople's face assumed the look of Boresas printed on a twelfth-century map.

"I've had a shock, I tell you. Go away and let me be. Father died two weeks ago, and I just got a letter telling."

Mr. Hoople threw down his hands with a jerk. The gesture was explicit; it expressed reproach, bewilderment, almost irritability.

"Good Lord! You mean to tell me—you got nerve to say—Buh!" Mr. Hoople gasped loudly. "Say, is that why you are letting everything go to smash? For that?—him?—WELL!"

Mrs. Hoople turned in her bed and rearranged

out his arms to his wife, and with one awkward foot kicked behind him at Al's shins to make Al clear out and leave them. "Oh, my poor Mena!" cried Mr. Hoople thickly.

A mumble answered him; Mrs. Hoople had turned over with her face to the wall, and again drawn the covers around her. The mumble continued. "You . . . away . . . don't bother me."

"Yes, yes, dear," answered Mr. Hoople softly; "yes, sleep will be good for you after such a shock. You sleep just as long as you like now. Me 'nd Al'll get up a little something to eat, 'nd you needn't bother. Come on, Al!"

But Mrs. Hoople didn't sleep. She turned her face to the ceiling, and seemed deep in heavy thought. A while later, the sound of Al's drawl, elated and confident, awoke her from her reverie. But the dream was of little moment. It was of Coney Island, that same remembrance of dancing with her father.

"Say, man; you going to buy that shoe store now, ain't you?" asked Al, in his drawl.

Mr. Hoople's answer, low and more discreet, was inaudible, but she guessed it from Al's next words. Said Al:

"I shouldn't wonder but I'd take a job with you, then. They ain't no use in my keeping on at college, now—and me 'nd her don't need to wait so long, neither, before we get married."

The second Mrs. Hoople, her eyes on the ceiling, recalled the Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday girl; doubtless Al referred to her. Satisfied that this was so, the second Mrs. Hoople rolled over, and again buried her head in her clothes. But there is little rest for the weary; Mr. Hoople came next to arouse her. "Now Mena, wouldn't you like a cup of coffee and an egg?"

His wife mumbled back at him that she cared for neither coffee or an egg. "I want to be left alone."

"Just as you like, dear," murmured Mr. Hoople softly and withdrew. Later, on his way out with Al, Mr. Hoople stopped at the door again.

"Say, Mena, how'd it do was I just to step in and see them lawyer people, he suggested 'I c'n do it easy, long about noon.'"

Mrs. Hoople turned over fretfully. "Can't you stop bothering me? You keep away from those lawyers. They wrote particular they wanted to see me personally."

"Yes, yes; just as you say, dear," placated Mr. Hoople, and a few minutes later the door closed behind father and son.

As their footfalls beat a tattoo retreat down the stairway, the second Mrs. Hoople sat upright, a sound like a creak escaping her. She arose slowly, each foot, after her habit, touching the floor with a groan; and donning a cotton-flannel wrapper too short in front and too long behind, she solemnly proceeded kitchenward. Twenty minutes later she returned a tray in her hand, and on the tray was an egg, a pot of coffee, two slices of toast, and sugar and milk. Mrs. Hoople set it on the bed, and carefully climbed in afterwards. Then, the tray on her lap, the second Mrs. Hoople, for the first time in the history of either Mrs. Hoople, calmly ate her breakfast in bed!

The hours passed. One by one they fled away. As Mr. Hoople and Al set foot to the landings of the top-floor flat, the clock struck—not half-past five but six. Together, father and son had gone to look at a downtown shoe store on which Mr. Hoople long had had his eye—hence the break in their daily routine. In Mr. Hoople's hand was a large, slightly faded bunch of roses, which Mr. Hoople had acquired at a discount, the florist skeptical of their ability to last another day. But in their frailty they wore distinction, the first floral tribute known in Mr. Hoople's home since the demise of the first Mrs. Hoople. She had died of chronic anaemia, and the shoe store had sent a wreath. Mr. Hoople, inserting his doorkey, composed his features to a smile, and called, "Mena, my dear!" he called, and stepped inside the flat.

There was no answer. Mr. Hoople's smile slightly altered itself to a frown. Very disappointing! Perhaps she was in the kitchen, though. Al closed the door, and struck a match. "Mena!" called Mr. Hoople loudly, and no Mena answered. No little woman at the door. No glad evening's welcome. No slippers warming before the fire. Six o'clock and past, and no dinner piping hot. Mr. Hoople stalked back to the kitchen and found it empty, its fire gray and cold.

"Queer, ain't it?" muttered Mr. Hoople to Al; "s'pose she's gone gadding around spending money, and clean forgot the dinner?"

Al suggested a solution. "Mebbe them lawyers kept her late. Don't let's make no kick for this once."

Mr. Hoople breathed harshly, a deep transpiration. "Why, of course not!" he exclaimed in relief. "Say, Al, let's me 'nd you start in on supper. I'll make a fire 'nd you c'n peel the potatoes. Then we won't be kept so long when she comes in."

In that brief moment, his air was almost jovial. He still clung to the slightly withered roses, which he held awkwardly and tentatively, as if they were about to explode. Crowding them into a water pitcher, he started for the front room, striking a match on his trousers to guide him through the tunnel of the hall. A moment later Al heard a loud and agitated cry.

In the second Mrs. Hoople's bedroom sat Mr. Hoople, collapsed on a chair. His pale, respectable whiskers drooped limply; he still clung to the pitcher and its roses, and the pitcher, tilted at an unsafe angle, was quietly pouring its water down Mr. Hoople's legs. In his face appeared terror, consternation, anything. Mr. Hoople's bed, still unmade, lay in frouzy disorder; the drawers of the bureau were pulled out and disarranged; and Mr. Hoople, with a wild, miserable gesture, pointed tragically to the pin cushion.

"Look!" he moaned hoarsely.

A large sheet of paper was pinned to the cushion, and on top lay a two-dollar bill. Something in the combination cried a loud attention, and Mr. Hoople's whiskers quivered pitifully when he spoke.

"'Nd to think—'nd to think of all the good home I've give her, now."

Al lurched to the bureau, and snatched up the sheet of paper. Al read the written words, and his face vied, in that moment, with the pasty whiteness of his closely shaven neck.

"I pin this to the pin cushion like I read once in a romance book. I've seen those lawyers, and they say it's so. There's eleven thousand, all right, and I got a little in advance. They're going to pay the rest when I'm ready. You'll find two dollars with this, and though I ain't good at sums, I figure out you won't be losing anything if I leave you that. I've tried to subtract fourteen years of hard labor from the fourteen years board and lodging you've bragged about giving me, and I don't seem to get any results. Maybe you still owe me something, but let it go. I'm willing. I've gone away from here and taken my things. Maybe I'll go to Coney, but you needn't look for me. I'm never, never coming back. The Exchange owes me a dollar seventy-nine. It's yours, and I don't regret the money. Good-by."

Al tossed the letter on the floor and pocketed the two-dollar bill.

"Didn't I always tell you she was no good," he drawled through his nose.



"ND TO THINK OF ALL THE GOOD HOME I'VE GIVE HER, NOW."