

POTATO SOUFFLÉ

By PERCY A. HILL

The purser aiding him, the little man in the checked suit was poring over the passenger list of the *ss President Madison*, commenting half audibly on each name as he spelled it out. "Mr. and Mrs. Jones . . . no, *she's* traveling alone. Mrs. James Bernhart . . . no, I don't think *she's* married. Miss Ethel Cummings . . . well, possibly. Miss Lena Apfelbaum . . . no, *she's* not a foreigner. Miss Lulu Baker . . . there, I'll bet *that's* her! The name just suits her, sounds substantial."

His deductions seemed to have ended. He gave the purser a *Manila*, his private brand.

"Say," he angled, "do you know the name of the blonde who sits third from the end on the left of the first officer's table?"

"The fat girl?" The purser lit his smoke.

"No, I wouldn't call her fat, *she's* just plump."

"I guess we mean the same girl. I mean the whale of a blonde who wore the striped dress last night. You couldn't forget her."

"That's the one." The little man edged closer to the purser. "I'm like you, I just couldn't forget her."

The purser rubbed his chin. "She's a good-looker, all right," he ventured. "Wait a minute, I'll look her up," running down the passenger list. "Here she is, 'Miss Lulu Baker, Manila,' that must be the one."

"That's just the name I'd pick out for her from the list." The little man beamed, pleased with his wisdom about women.

"Why are you so sure?" asked the purser.

"Well, it sounds the way she looks. She ought to have an L in her name, something like Lois, Louise, or Lulu." He paused, then confided: "My first wife's name was Gwendolyn."

"I've got your number," the purser said to himself as the little man beat a triumphant retreat. "You're a six-month widower and you're on the make again." He grinned to himself.

The little man, already out of earshot, stalked his quarry from the saloon to the promenade deck, and from the promenade deck to the saloon again, without once seeing her. He was on the prowl, and he was a man of purpose. At length, passing a row of deck chairs with their muffled occupants, he turned to watch a school of flying fish. A false step tangled his feet in a trailing rug, and he fell prone on the sleepers—aided by the slight roll of the ship. In frantic struggle to right himself he rolled between two of the chairs, head down and feet upmost.

"Goodness! what's this?" came shrilly from a voice on the left. And a throaty contralto chuckled from his jailer on the right. "A man stumbled, I guess. Here are his feet, his head must be under your chair."

"Gracious!" said the shrill one, jumping up hastily.

A soft and plump white hand clutched the prisoner and helped him to his feet. Red and speechless, the little man stood before the object of his search; embarrassed no end, at any rate he had found her. His position for the moment was that of no hero. The longer she looked at him, the harder the plump contralto laughed: deep, mellow-chested chuckles that shook her fat rippling. He had ample opportunity to notice her blue eyes, golden hair and fair complexion, and chin— or rather her chin— before she could control herself.

"I'm sorry to be so rude," she managed to say, at last, "but I'm not used to being roused up in just this way."

"It's me who must apologize," said the little man. "My foot must have caught in your steamer rug."

"Did you hurt yourself?"

"No; just got shook up a bit."

The other lady, having received his apologies in acid silence, retired to her stateroom. The little man looked significantly at her chair. "Do sit down," said the blonde one. "And, if you don't mind my telling you, your tie seems to have got turned round."

He put his tie to rights. "There, is that better, Miss Baker?"

Her round eyes became still rounder. "How did you know my name?"

"A little bird told me."

"Must have been a sea-gull; a gossiping bird, too. If you meet it again, tell it to come around and tell me your name."

"I'll save it the trouble," said the little man, intoxicated by her repartee. "My name is Parker, Charles Parker, of Manila."

"So? A friend of mine married a man by name of Parker who lived in Manila, but I heard he didn't amount to much. Poor Gwendolyn! I heard she died some time ago."

Parker flushed crimson. "Well, I don't know," he said. "She married me."

It was the blonde's turn for blushing. "Oh!" she gasped. "Maybe I mixed her up with someone else."

"No, I guess not," said Parker, humbly. "I never did amount to much after I got out of the army. Business was rotten, you know. Gwendolyn had slim pickings until a relative of mine kindly died and left me some money. Then business picked up, too."

One morning she sought him out in the saloon, beckoned him mysteriously and dramatically placed a photograph in his hands. It was, he commented, the picture of a mighty pretty girl—reminded him of someone he knew.

"Is it your sister?"

She slumped into a chair. "It's funny—and yet it's dreadful. That's me as I looked three years ago. I've grown so fat nobody knows me anymore. When that picture was taken I weighed only a hundred and forty pounds, and now two hundred and fourteen. It's simply awful—it's a tragedy!"

Parker swallowed hard, thought even harder. He had never reached even a hundred and thirty pounds; that, no doubt, was because he had only lied when he said he relished potato soufflé.

"What—what started you upping?" he hazarded.

"I had been sick, and the doctors advised building up. And then . . . oh, I like candy and sweet things," she moaned.

"And potato soufflé."

"The worst part is, I'm going to Manila to be married, and George hates fat girls—hates 'em!"

Parker winced, not because George, whoever he was hated fat girls, but because he feared he might not hate this one enough. "Does he know you've gained?" he asked.

"No, this is the last picture I dared send him. When he went out to Manila, four years ago, he used to call me kiddie and little girl!" Her smile was large, but wan. But even in the midst of her trouble, she giggled at last. To Parker she was more desirable than ever.

"Well," he pronounced stiffly. "If George likes skinny girls, he can have 'em. For me, I like 'em plump."

She continued her confession. "He sent me heaps of embroidered things from Manila, all meant for a thirty-six model. Why, this I have on," in bewitching confidence, "is made up from two dress patterns besides what I had to fill in with stuff to match them."

"Never mind, never mind. The sweetest things grow large, sometimes I think: sugar-cane and . . . lots of things."

By the time the *ss President Madison* was midway across the Pacific, Parker was Miss Baker's avowed suitor—with the joyous approval of everyone from the captain down to the deck steward. They enjoyed the law of contrast on a steamer. Still no word had been said denoting anything beyond a cosy and understanding friendship between the pair. But they were dancing, one evening, and he asked the orchestra leader if he couldn't play *O You Beautiful Doll*.

"Sure! But how about *My Great Big Blue-Eyed Baby*? It's nearly the same." And the orchestra favored with that.

"My gracious!" she said, as they sat panting in their steamer chairs after their waltz. "Are you good at arithmetic? If a fat girl gains two pounds a week on a sea-voyage, how much will she gain in a month ashore? But don't work it out, it would scare me!"

"It wouldn't make you any different than you are, to me."

"To you, perhaps, no. But I'm not worrying about you, but about George. He hates fat girls."

"Let him go, then. I love fat girls, myself, a certain one, at any rate."

"How can I let him go? how can I? He and my aunt Mable will meet me at the pier. We are to be married at once. They will possess me as I walk down the gangplank. I can't get away without jumping overboard."

"Well," said Parker, with desperate gallantry. "You refuse me. There's nothing left then but for you to reduce to suit George." She rewarded him with a brilliant smile. "How shall I begin?"

"I'll prescribe for you. Diet—two meals a day, only of toast, weak tea, vegetables, and no sweets nor potato soufflé. And no siestas or naps, sleep only six hours a night. Exercise, twelve turns around the deck between meals."

She heroically tried it, her suffering comparing with that of the early

Christian martyrs. With tears she eschewed the luscious menus, and kept strictly to the abstemious regimen Parker had indicated. But while the spirit might be strong, Parker suspected the flesh was weak.

"Why don't you quit torturing yourself and marry me?" he urged her.

"I don't care how fat you are. I love every pound of you, every kilo even—every ounce. I tell you, I love fat girls!" Smiling but persistent, she put him off and kept to her diet, losing an ounce or two more. It was a magnificent but an utterly hopeless struggle. One evening, as they sat together on deck and listened to the pulsing engines, he thought he heard a repressed sob from her. It had been days since they had begun calling each other Lulu and Charlie. He looked, her shoulders betrayed her; she was crying.

"Poor kid," putting an arm around her and patting a heaving shoulder.

"Tell Charlie all about it. What's the matter? Are you crying for fear George won't want you? Out with it, now!"

She nodded negation: "For fear he will want me, for fear he will!"

It took a moment for Charlie to get this. Then, when he did:

"Don't you care for him anymore?"

"No! I like you a million times more!"

For a period they were too engrossed for conversation. At last he whispered: "Then you'll marry me in Manila, instead of George."

"Oh, my gracious, no! Why, he'd kill you, Charlie! You have no idea how jealous he is!"

Parker straightened his spare shoulders. He remembered they had once carried a gun and knapsack.

"I'll inform him right away, by wireless—explain all and ask him to be my best man. It's about time for one of us to get what they want, ain't it?"

"No, no!" she wailed. "He might kill you, I say! I'm a giant, over six feet—a policeman, too."

"Ha, ha," roared Parker. "It was once a policeman, myself—in the days when they needed brains instead of brawn." Then another mood came over him; shaking his head dolefully, he faced her with her indecision. "First you were afraid he wouldn't want you, and now you're afraid he will."

They were both simple folk, with no leanings toward the psychopathic.

The ship sailed up the wide bay of Manila one sunny morning, took quarantine and tied up at the pier. Lulu, no leaver but as plumply fascinating as ever, came to Parker as he stood at the rail.

"I'll inform you on the forward deck," Charlie. "Stay aboard till I come. Don't fail me," she begged hurriedly. Then she went below. He assumed she wanted him to lead her to George, and he waited with impatience after taking leave of his other acquaintances of the voyage. However, he kept an alert eye for his Princess Plump. He was still in the game, he told himself, and his idea was fixed. The other passengers scrambled down the gangplank, but he waited faithfully and scanned the crowd below in an effort to pick out Big George and Aunt Mable.

He finally located who must be them, a big glum man with a florid middle-aged woman at his elbow. And at this moment a large lady in widow's weeds stood beside him, Lulu's voice issuing from beneath the veil.

"Charlie, guess who?"

"My goodness, Lulu! where did you get that rig, and what's the answer?"

"From the stewardess. Would you know me?"

"I should say not!"

"Then, I guess, George won't, either," she giggled as they made their way to the gangplank. "There they are, Charlie—let's pass right by them," for the waiters on the pier had come aboard on a searching trip. They brushed past, hearing George below: "She's somewhere aboard yet—she must be. Let's ask the purser."

"There's one thing," said Charlie, when they were safe in a taxi at last, "there's one thing we must do right away—get married, and explain afterwards!"

"Gee, Charlie," she said. "If George knew, I guess he'd make me a real widow in five minutes. Well, I'd be Mrs. Parker, anyway," she sparkled.

Two hours after the ceremony had been performed, with hastily drafted ship's officers as witnesses, when Lulu was still beaming at her husband, they crashed into a bulky preoccupied man on the Escolta, where they were on a happy shopping tour for their new home. The usual recoil and apologies followed. Lulu giggled inordinately and the big man's face turned sickly.

"Why, Lulu! where have you been? We went to the boat and missed you!" "How do you do, George," said the beaming Lulu; and George, dumbfounded, looked her blankly up and down.

"Say, you've certainly changed a lot since I left you in the States," he managed to stammer.

Parker sensed that George was even less prepared to meet Lulu than she was to meet him. What was wrong George soon blurted out.

"The fact is, Lulu," he said shamefacedly, "I might as well get it off my chest now—I'm a cad and all that—but my feelings changed in the last year and a half. I married your aunt Mable and—"

"Aunt Mable!" Lulu echoed, incredulously.

George held his ground and blundered on: "Yes, Lulu. She's a remarkable woman, and only six years older than me. She has great business ability and . . . I'm sorry I disappointed you and never wrote you anything about it, but Mable said we'd better let you come for a visit. I . . . well, I think we can show you a good time, too—if you can just forget—"

Lulu appeared to remember for the first time. "Just a minute, George," she said. "So rude of me, really. You must both forgive. Let me present my husband, Mr. Parker. I haven't had him very long, but I'm proud of him. And he loves fat girls." The two males shook hands in a daze, while the blonde beamed over them impartially. "You phone Aunt Mable, George," she chortled on, "and we'll all lunch together. And Charlie, dear, take us somewhere where they have potato soufflé. Really, I'm famished!"

"Betcher life!" said Charlie.

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