

**OUR MR. WRENN: THE
ROMANTIC ADVENTURES
OF A GENTLE MAN**

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Our Mr. Wrenn: The Romantic Adventures of a Gentle Man by Sinclair Lewis

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BY
SINCLAIR LEWIS

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MAIN STREET,
BABBITT, ETC.



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"called down" by the office manager, Mr. Mortimer R. Guilfogle. He needed the friendly nod of the Nickelorian ticket-taker. He found Fourteenth Street, after office hours, swept by a dusty wind that whisked the skirts of countless plump Jewish girls, whose V-necked blouses showed soft throats of a warm brown. Under the Elevated station he secretly made believe that he was in Paris, for here beautiful Italian boys swayed with trays of violets; a tramp displayed crimson mechanical rabbits, which squeaked, on silvery leading-strings; and a newsstand was heaped with the orange and green and gold of magazine covers.

"Geel!" inarticulated Mr. Wrenn. "Lots of colors. Hope I see foreign stuff like that in the moving pictures."

He came primly up to the Nickelorian, feeling in his vest pockets for a nickel and peering around the booth at the friendly ticket-taker. But the latter was thinking about buying Johnny's pants. Should he get them at the Fourteenth Street Store, or Siegel-Cooper's, or over at Aronson's, near home? So ruminating, he twiddled his wheel mechanically, and Mr. Wrenn's pasteboard slip was indifferently received in the plate-glass gullet of the grinder without the taker's even seeing the clerk's bow and smile.

Mr. Wrenn trembled into the door of the Nickelorian. He wanted to turn back and rebuke this fellow, but was restrained by shyness. He *had* liked the man's "Fine evenin', sir"—rain or shine—but he wouldn't stand for being cut. Wasn't he making nineteen dollars a week, as against the ticket-taker's ten or twelve? He shook his head with the defiance of a cornered mouse, fussed with his mustache, and regarded the moving pictures gloomily.

They helped him. After a Selig domestic drama came a stirring Vitagraph Western scene, "The Goat of the Rancho," which depicted with much humor and tumult the revolt of a ranch cook, a Chinaman. Mr. Wrenn was really seeing, not cow-punchers and sage-brush, but him-

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self, defying the office manager's surliness and revolting against the ticket-man's rudeness. Now he was ready for the nearly overpowering delight of travel-pictures. He bounced slightly as a Gaumont film presented Java.

He was a connoisseur of travel-pictures, for all his life he had been planning a great journey. Though he had done Staten Island and patronized an excursion to Bound Brook, neither of these was his grand tour. It was yet to be taken. In Mr. Wrenn, apparently fastened to New York like a domestic-minded barnacle, lay the possibilities of heroic roaming. He knew it. He, too, like the man who had taken the Gaumont pictures, would saunter among dusky Javan natives in "markets with tiles on the roofs and temples and—and—uh, well—places!" The scent of Oriental spices was in his broadened nostrils as he scampered out of the Nickeloron, without a look at the ticket-taker, and headed for "home"—for his third-floor-front on West Sixteenth Street.

He wanted to prowl through his collection of steamship brochures for a description of Java. But, of course, when one's landlady has both the sciatica and a case of Patient Suffering one stops in the basement dining-room to inquire how she is.

Mrs. Zapp was a fat landlady. When she sat down there was a straight line from her chin to her knees. She was usually sitting down. When she moved she groaned, and her apparel creaked. She groaned and creaked from bed to breakfast, and ate five griddle-cakes, two helpin's of scrapple, an egg, some rump steak, and three cups of coffee, slowly and resentfully. She creaked and groaned from breakfast to her rocking-chair, and sat about wondering why Providence had inflicted upon her a weak digestion. Mr. Wrenn also wondered why, sympathetically, but Mrs. Zapp was too conscientiously dolorous to be much cheered by the sympathy of a nigger-lovin' Yankee, who couldn't appreciate the subtle sorrows of a Zapp of Zapp's Bog, allied to all the First Families of Virginia.

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Mr. Wrenn did nothing more presumptuous than sit still, in the stuffy furniture-crowded basement room, which smelled of dead food and deader pride in a race that had never existed. He sat still because the chair was broken. It had been broken now for four years.

For the hundred and twenty-ninth time in those years Mrs. Zapp said, in her rich corruption of Southern negro dialect, which can only be indicated here, "Ah been meanin' to get that chair mended, Mist' Wrenn."

He looked gratified and gazed upon the crayon enlargements of Lee Theresa, the older Zapp daughter (who was forewoman in a factory), and of Godiva. Godiva Zapp was usually called "Goaty," and many times a day was she called by Mrs. Zapp. A tamed child drudge was Goaty, with adenoids, which Mrs. Zapp had been meanin' to have removed, and which she would continue to have benevolent meanin's about till it should be too late, and she should discover that Providence never would let Goaty go to school.

"Yes, Mist' Wrenn, Ah told Goaty she was to see the man about getting that chair fixed, but she nev' does nothing Ah tell her."

In the kitchen was the noise of Goaty, ungovernable Goaty, aged eight, still snivelingly washing, though not cleaning, the incredible pile of dinner dishes. With a trail of hesitating remarks on the sadness of sciatica and windy evenings Mr. Wrenn sneaked forth from the august presence of Mrs. Zapp and mounted to paradise—his third-floor-front.

It was an abjectly respectable room—the bedspread patched; no two pieces of furniture from the same family; half-tones from the magazines pinned on the wall. But on the old marble mantelpiece lived his friends, books from wanderland. Other friends the room had rarely known. It was hard enough for Mr. Wrenn to get acquainted with people, anyway, and Mrs. Zapp did not expect her gennulman lodgers to entertain. So Mr.

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Wrenn had given up asking even Charley Carpenter, the assistant bookkeeper at the Souvenir Company, to call. That left him the books, which he now caressed with small eager finger-tips. He picked out a P. & O. circular, and hastily left for fairyland.

The April skies glowed with benevolence this Saturday morning. The Metropolitan Tower was singing, bright ivory tipped with gold, uplifted and intensely glad of the morning. The buildings walling in Madison Square were jubilant; the honest red-brick fronts, radiant; the new marble, witty. The sparrows in the middle of Fifth Avenue were all talking at once, scandalously but cleverly. The polished brass of limousines threw off teathy smiles. At least so Mr. Wrenn fancied as he whisked up Fifth Avenue, the skirts of his small blue double-breasted coat wagging. He was going blocks out of his way to the office; ready to defy time and eternity, yes, and even the office manager. He had awakened with Defiance as his bedfellow, and throughout breakfast at the Hustler Dairy Lunch sunshine had flickered over the dirty tessellated floor.

He pranced up to the Souvenir Company's brick building, on Twenty-eighth Street near Sixth Avenue. In the office he chuckled at his ink-well and the untorn blotters on his orderly desk. Though he sat under the weary unnatural brilliance of a mercury-vapor light, he dashed into his work, and was too keen about this business of living merrily to be much flustered by the bustle of the lady buyer's superior "Good morning." Even up to ten-thirty he was still slamming down papers on his desk. Just let any one try to stop his course, his readiness for snapping fingers at The Job; just let them try it, that was all he wanted!

Then he was shot out of his chair and four feet along the corridor, in reflex response to the surly "Bur-r-r-r" of the buzzer. Mr. Mortimer R. Guilfogle, the manager,