

Where But In America

BY OSCAR M. WOLFF

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OSCAR M. WOLFF

Oscar M. Wolff was born July 13, 1876. After graduation from Cornell University he completed his law course in the University of Chicago. In addition to his interest in law, which he has practised and taught, he has done considerable writing and editing. He has published a legal text-book, and his articles on legal subjects have appeared both in law journals and in magazines of general interest. During the war he was connected with the United States Food Administration at Washington. At present he lives in Chicago, Illinois.

In addition to some stories, he has written several one-act plays: *Where But in America*, *The Claim for Exemption*, and *The Money-Lenders*.

Where But in America is an excellent play of situation, as well as a delicate satire on a certain aspect of American social life.

CAST

MRS. ESPENHAYNE MR. ESPENHAYNE HILDA

WHERE BUT IN AMERICA[J]

SCENE: *The Espenhayne dining-room.*

The curtain rises on the Espenhayne dining-room. It is furnished with modest taste and refinement. There is a door, centre, leading to the living-room, and a swinging door, left, leading to the kitchen.

The table is set, and ROBERT and MOLLIE ESPENHAYNE are discovered at their evening meal. They are educated, well-bred young Americans. ROBERT is a pleasing, energetic business man of thirty; MOLLIE an attractive woman of twenty-five. The bouillon cups are before them as the curtain rises.

BOB. Mollie, I heard from the man who owns that house in Kenilworth. He wants to sell the house. He won't rent.

MOLLIE. I really don't care, Bob. That house was too far from the station, and it had only one sleeping-porch, and you know I want white-enamelled woodwork in the bedrooms. But, Bob, I've been terribly stupid!

BOB. How so, Mollie?

MOLLIE. You remember the Russells moved to Highland Park last spring?

BOB. Yes; Ed Russell rented a house that had just been built.

MOLLIE. A perfectly darling little house! And Fanny Russell once told me that the man who built it will put up a house for any one who will take a five-year lease. And she says that the man is very competent and they are simply delighted with their place.

BOB. Why don't we get in touch with the man?

MOLLIE. Wasn't it stupid of me not to think about it? It just flashed into my mind this morning, and I sat down at once and sent a special-delivery letter to Fanny Russell. I asked her to tell me his name at once, and where we can find him.

BOB. Good! You ought to have an answer by to-morrow or Thursday and we'll go up north and have a talk with him on Saturday.

MOLLIE. [*With enthusiasm.*] Wouldn't it be wonderful if he'd build just what we want! Fanny Russell says every detail of their house is perfect. Even the garage; they use it----

BOB. [*Interrupting.*] Mollie, that's the one thing I'm afraid of about the North Shore plan. I've said repeatedly that I don't want to buy a car for another year or two. But here you are, talking about a garage already.

MOLLIE. But you didn't let me finish what I was saying. The Russells have fitted up their garage as a playroom for the children. If we had a garage we could do the same thing.

BOB. Well, let's keep temptation behind us and not even talk to the man about a garage. If we move up north it must be on an economy basis for a few years; just a half-way step between the apartment and the house we used to plan. You mustn't get your heart set on a car.

MOLLIE. I haven't even thought of one, dear. [*BOB and MOLLIE have now both finished the bouillon course and lay down their spoons. Reaching out her hand to touch the table button, and at the same time leaning across the table and speaking very impressively.*] Bob, I'm about to ring for Hilda!

BOB. What of it?

MOLLIE. [*Decidedly and with a touch of impatience.*] You know very well, what of it. I don't want Hilda to hear us say one word about moving away from the South Side!

BOB. [*Protesting.*] But Mollie----

MOLLIE. [*Interrupting hurriedly and holding her finger to her lips in warning.*] Psst!

[*The next instant HILDA enters, left. She is a tall, blonde Swedish girl, about twenty-five years old. She is very pretty and carries herself well and looks particularly charming in a maid's dress, with white collars and cuffs and a dainty waitress's apron. Every detail of her dress is immaculate.*

MOLLIE. [*Speaking the instant that HILDA appears and talking very rapidly all the time that HILDA remains in the room. While she*

speaks MOLLIE watches HILDA rather than ROBERT, whom she pretends to be addressing.] In the last game Gert Jones was my partner. It was frame apiece and I dealt and I bid one no trump. I had a very weak no trump. I'll admit that, but I didn't want them to win the rubber. Mrs. Stone bid two spades and Gert Jones doubled her. Mrs. Green passed and I simply couldn't go to three of anything. Mrs. Stone played two spades, doubled, and she made them. Of course, that put them out and gave them the rubber. I think that was a very foolish double of Gert Jones, and then she said it was my fault, because I bid one no trump.

[As MOLLIE begins her flow of words BOB first looks at her in open-mouthed astonishment. Then as he gradually comprehends that MOLLIE is merely talking against time he too turns his eyes to HILDA and watches her closely in her movements around the table. Meanwhile HILDA moves quietly and quickly and pays no attention to anything except the work she has in hand. She carries a small serving-tray, and, as MOLLIE speaks, HILDA first takes the bouillon cups from the table, then brings the carving-knife and fork from the sideboard and places them before ROBERT, and then, with the empty bouillon cups, exits left. BOB and MOLLIE are both watching HILDA as she goes out. The instant the door swings shut behind her, MOLLIE relaxes with a sigh, and ROBERT leans across the table to speak.

BOB. Mollie, why not be sensible about this thing! Have a talk with Hilda and find out if she will move north with us.

MOLLIE. That's just like a man! Then we might not find a house to please us and Hilda would be dissatisfied and suspicious. She might even leave. [*Thoughtfully.*] Of course, I must speak to her before we sign a lease, because I really don't know what I'd do if Hilda refused to leave the South side. [*More cheerfully.*] But there, we won't think about the disagreeable things until everything is settled.

BOB. That's good American doctrine.

MOLLIE. [*Warningly and again touching her finger to her lips.*] Psst!

[HILDA *enters, left, carrying the meat plates, with a heavy napkin under them.*

MOLLIE. [*Immediately resuming her monologue.*] I think my last year's hat will do very nicely. You know it rained all last summer and I really only wore the hat a half a dozen times. Perhaps not that often. I can make a few changes on it; put on some new ribbons, you know, and it will do very nicely for another year. You remember that hat, don't you dear?

[BOB *starts to answer, but MOLLIE rushes right on.*

Of course you do, you remember you said it was so becoming. That's another reason why I want to wear it this summer.

[HILDA, *meanwhile, puts the plates on the table in front of BOB, and goes out, left. MOLLIE at once stops speaking.*

BOB. [*Holding his hands over the plates as over a fire and rubbing them together in genial warmth.*] Ah, the good hot plates! She never forgets them. She *is* a gem, Mollie.

MOLLIE. [*In great self-satisfaction.*] If you are finally convinced of that, after three years, I wish you would be a little bit more careful what you say the next time Hilda comes in the room.

BOB. [*In open-mouthed astonishment.*] What!

MOLLIE. Well, I don't want Hilda to think we are making plans behind her back.

BOB. [*Reflectively.*] "A man's home is his castle." [*Pauses.*] It's very evident that the Englishman who first said that didn't keep any servants.

[*Telephone bell rings off stage.*

MOLLIE. Answer that, Bob.

BOB. Won't Hilda answer it?

MOLLIE. [*Standing up quickly and speaking impatiently.*] Very well, I shall answer it myself. I can't ask Hilda to run to the telephone while she is serving the meal.

BOB. [*Sullenly, as he gets up.*] All right! All right!

[*BOB exits, centre. As he does so HILDA appears at the door, left, hurrying to answer the telephone.*

MOLLIE. Mr. Espenhayne will answer it, Hilda.

[*HILDA makes the slightest possible bow of acquiescence, withdraws left, and in a moment reappears with vegetable dishes and small side dishes, which she puts before MRS. ESPENHAYNE. She is arranging these when BOB re-enters, centre.*

BOB. Somebody for you, Hilda.

HILDA. [*Surprised.*] For me? Oh! But I cannot answer eet now. Please ask the party to call later.

[*HILDA speaks excellent English, but with some Swedish accent. The noticeable feature of her speech is the precision and great care with which she enunciates every syllable.*

MOLLIE. Just take the number yourself, Hilda, and tell the party you will call back after dinner.

HILDA. Thank you, Messes Aispenhayne.

[*HILDA exits, centre. BOB stands watching HILDA, as she leaves the room, and then turns and looks at MOLLIE with a bewildered expression.*

BOB. [*Standing at his chair.*] But I thought Hilda couldn't be running to the telephone while she serves the dinner?

MOLLIE. But this call is for Hilda, herself. That's quite different, you see.

BOB. [*Slowly and thoughtfully.*] Oh, yes! Of course; I see! [*Sits down in his chair.*] That is--I don't quite see!

MOLLIE. [*Immediately leaning across the table and speaking in a cautious whisper.*] Do you know who it is?

[*BOB closes his lips very tightly and nods yes in a very important manner.*

MOLLIE. [*In the same whisper and very impatiently.*] Who?

BOB. [*Looking around the room as if to see if any one is in hiding, and then putting his hand to his mouth and exaggerating the whisper.*] The Terrible Swede.

MOLLIE. [*In her ordinary tone and very much exasperated.*] Robert, I've told you a hundred times that you shouldn't refer to--to--the man in that way.

BOB. And I've told you a hundred times to ask Hilda his name. If I knew his name I'd announce him with as much ceremony as if he were the Swedish Ambassador.

MOLLIE. [*Disgusted.*] Oh, don't try to be funny! Suppose some day Hilda hears you speak of him in that manner?

BOB. You know that's mild compared to what you think of him. Suppose some day Hilda learns what you think of him?

MOLLIE. I think very well of him and you know it. Of course, I dread the time when she marries him, but I wouldn't for the world have her think that we speak disrespectfully of her or her friends.

BOB. "A man's home is his castle."

[*MOLLIE'S only answer is a gesture of impatience. MOLLIE and BOB sit back in their chairs to await HILDA'S return. Both sit with fingers interlaced, hands resting on the edge of the table in the attitude of school children at attention. A long pause. MOLLIE*

unclasps her hands and shifts uneasily. ROBERT does the same. MOLLIE, seeing this, hastily resumes her former attitude of quiet waiting. ROBERT, however, grows increasingly restless. His restlessness makes MOLLIE nervous and she watches ROBERT, and when he is not observing her she darts quick, anxious glances at the door, centre. BOB drains and refills his glass.

MOLLIE. [*She has been watching ROBERT and every time he shifts or moves she unconsciously does the same, and finally she breaks out nervously.*] I don't understand this at all! Isn't to-day Tuesday?

BOB. What of it?

MOLLIE. He usually calls up on Wednesdays and comes to see her on Saturdays.

BOB. And takes her to the theatre on Thursdays and to dances on Sundays. He's merely extending his line of attack.

[Another long pause--then Bob begins to experiment to learn whether the plates are still hot. He gingerly touches the edges of the upper plate in two or three places. It seems safe to handle. He takes hold of upper and lower plates boldly, muttering, as he does so, "Cold as--" Drops the plates with a clatter and a smothered oath. Shakes his fingers and blows on them. Meanwhile MOLLIE is sitting very rigid, regarding BOB with a fixed stare and beating a vigorous tattoo on the tablecloth with her fingers. Bob catches her eye and cringes under her gaze. He drains and refills his glass. He studies the walls and the ceiling of the room, meanwhile still nursing his fingers. BOB steals a sidelong glance at MOLLIE. She is still staring at him. He turns to his water goblet. Picks it up and holds it to the light. He rolls the stem between his fingers, squinting at the light through the water. Reciting slowly as he continues to gaze at the light.

BOB. Starlight! Starbright! Will Hilda talk to him all night!

MOLLIE. [*In utter disgust.*] Oh, stop that singing.

[BOB puts down his glass, then drinks the water and refills the glass. He then turns his attention to the silverware and cutlery before him.

He examines it critically, then lays a teaspoon carefully on the cloth before him, and attempts the trick of picking it up with the first finger in the bowl and the thumb at the point of the handle. After one or two attempts the spoon shoots on the floor, far behind him. MOLLIE jumps at the noise. BOB turns slowly and looks at the spoon with an injured air, then turns back to MOLLIE with a silly, vacuous smile. He now lays all the remaining cutlery in a straight row before him.

BOB. [*Slowly counting the cutlery and silver, back and forth.*] Eeny, meeny, miney, mo. Catch a--[*Stops suddenly as an idea comes to him. Gazes thoughtfully at MOLLIE for a moment, then begins to count over again.*] Eeny, meeny, miney, mo; Hilda's talking to her beau. If we holler, she may go. Eeny, mee----

MOLLIE. [*Interrupting and exasperated to the verge of tears.*] Bob, if you don't stop all that nonsense, I shall scream! [*In a very tense tone.*] I believe I'm going to have one of my sick headaches! [*Puts her hand to her forehead.*] I know it; I can feel it coming on!

BOB. [*In a soothing tone.*] Hunger, my dear, hunger! When you have a good warm meal you'll feel better.

MOLLIE. [*In despair.*] What do you suppose I ought to do?

BOB. Go out in the kitchen and fry a couple of eggs.

MOLLIE. Oh! be serious! I'm at my wits' end! Hilda never did anything like this before.

BOB. [*Suddenly quite serious.*] What does that fellow do for a living, anyhow?

MOLLIE. How should I know?

BOB. Didn't you ever ask Hilda?

MOLLIE. Certainly not. Hilda doesn't ask me about your business; why should I pry into her affairs?

BOB. [*Taking out his cigarette case and lighting a cigarette.*] Mollie, I see you're strong for the Constitution of the United States.

MOLLIE. [*Suspiciously.*] What do you mean by that?

BOB. The Constitution says: "Whereas it is a self-evident truth that all men are born equal"--[*With a wave of the hand.*] Hilda and you, and the Terrible Swede and I and----

MOLLIE. [*Interrupting.*] Bob, you're such a *heathen!* *That's not in the Constitution.* That's in the Bible!

BOB. Well, wherever it is, until this evening I never realized what a personage Hilda is.

MOLLIE. You can make fun of me all you please, but I know what's right! Your remarks don't influence me in the least--not in the least!

BOB. [*Murmurs thoughtfully and feelingly.*] How true! [*Abruptly.*] Why don't they get married? Do you know that?

MOLLIE. All I know is that they are waiting until his business is entirely successful, so that Hilda won't have to work.

BOB. Well, the Swedes are pretty careful of their money. The chances are Hilda has a neat little nest-egg laid by.

MOLLIE. [*Hesitating and doubtfully.*] That's one thing that worries me a little. I think Hilda puts money--into--into--into the young man's business.

BOB. [*Indignantly.*] Do you mean to tell me that this girl gives her money to that fellow and you don't try to find out a thing about him? Who he is or what he does? I suppose she supports the loafer.

MOLLIE. [*With dignity.*] He's not a loafer. I've seen him and I've talked with him, and I know he's a gentleman.

BOB. Mollie, I'm getting tired of all that kind of drivel. I believe nowadays women give a good deal more thought to pleasing their maids than they do to pleasing their husbands.

MOLLIE. [*Demurely.*] Well, you know, Bob, your maid can leave you much easier than your husband can--[*pauses thoughtfully*] and I'm sure she's much harder to replace.

BOB. [*Very angry, looking at his watch, throwing his napkin on the table and standing up.*] Mollie, our dinner has been interrupted for fifteen minutes while Hilda entertains her [*with sarcasm*] gentleman friend. If you won't stop it, I will.

[*Steps toward the door, centre.*

MOLLIE. [*Sternly, pointing to BOB'S chair.*] Robert, sit down!

[*BOB pauses, momentarily, and at the instant HILDA enters, centre, meeting BOB, face to face. Both are startled. BOB, in a surly manner, walks back to his place at the table. HILDA follows, excited and eager. BOB sits down and HILDA stands for a moment at the table, smiling from one to the other and evidently anxious to say something. BOB and MOLLIE are severe and unfriendly. They gaze at HILDA coldly. Slowly HILDA'S enthusiasm cools, and she becomes again the impassive servant.*

HILDA. Aixcuse me, Meeses Aispenhayne, I am very sorry. I bring the dinner right in. [*Hilda exits left.*

BOB. It's all nonsense. [*Touches the plates again, but this time even more cautiously than before. This time he finds they are entirely safe to handle.*] These plates are stone cold now.

[*HILDA enters, left, with meat platter. Places it before BOB. He serves the meat and MOLLIE starts to serve the vegetables. HILDA hands MOLLIE her meat plate.*

MOLLIE. Vegetables? [*BOB is chewing on his meat and does not answer. MOLLIE looks at him inquiringly. But his eyes are on his*

plate. Repeating.] Vegetables? [Still no answer from BOB. Very softly, under her breath.] H'mm.

[MOLLIE helps herself to vegetables and then dishes out a portion which she hands to HILDA, who in turn places the dish beside BOB. When both are served HILDA stands for a moment back of the table. She clasps and unclasps her hands in a nervous manner, seems about to speak, but as BOB and MOLLIE pay no attention to her she slowly and reluctantly turns, and exits left. MOLLIE takes one or two bites of the meat and then gives a quick glance at BOB. He is busy chewing at his meat, and MOLLIE quietly lays down her knife and fork and turns to the vegetables.

BOB. *[Chewing desperately on his meat.]* Tenderloin, I believe?

MOLLIE. *[Sweetly.]* Yes, dear.

BOB. *[Imitating MOLLIE a moment back.]* H'mm! *[He takes one or two more hard bites.]* Mollie, I have an idea.

MOLLIE. I'm relieved.

BOB. *[Savagely.]* Yes, you will be when you hear it. When we get that builder's name from Fanny Russell, we'll tell him that instead of a garage, which we don't need, he can build a special telephone booth off the kitchen. Then while Hilda serves the dinner----

[BOB stops short, as HILDA bursts in abruptly, left, and comes to the table.

HILDA. Aixcuse me, Meeses Aispennyne, I am so excited.

MOLLIE. *[Anxiously.]* Is anything wrong, Hilda?

HILDA. *[Explosively.]* Meeses Aispennyne, Meester Leendquist he say you want to move to Highland Park.

[BOB and MOLLIE simultaneously drop their knives and forks and look at HILDA in astonishment and wonder.

MOLLIE. What?

BOB. Who?

HILDA. [*Repeats very rapidly.*] Meester Leendquist, he say you look for house on North Shore!

MOLLIE. [*Utterly overcome at HILDA'S knowledge and at a loss for words of denial.*] We move to the North Shore? How ridiculous! Hilda, where did you get such an idea? [*Turns to ROBERT.*] Robert, did you ever hear anything so laughable? [*She forces a strained laugh.*] Ha! Ha! Ha! [*ROBERT has been looking at HILDA in dumb wonder. At MOLLIE'S question he turns to her in startled surprise. He starts to answer, gulps, swallows hard, and then coughs violently. Very sharply, after waiting a moment for BOB to answer.*] Robert Espenhayne, will you stop that coughing and answer me!

BOB. [*Between coughs, and drinking a glass of water.*] Egh! Egh! Excuse me! Something, eh! egh! stuck in my throat.

MOLLIE. [*Turning to HILDA.*] Some day we might want to move north, Hilda, but not now! Oh, no, not now!

BOB. Who told you that, Hilda?

HILDA. Meester Leendquist.

MOLLIE. [*Puzzled.*] Who is Mr. Lindquist?

HILDA. [*Surprised.*] Meester Leendquist--[*Pauses, a trifle embarrassed.*] Meester Leendquist ees young man who just speak to me on telephone. He come to see me every Saturday.

BOB. Oh, Mr. Lindquist, the--the--Ter----

MOLLIE. [*Interrupting frantically, and waving her hands at BOB.*] Yes, yes, of course. You know--Mr. Lindquist! [*BOB catches himself just in time and MOLLIE settles back with a sigh of relief, then turns to HILDA with a puzzled air.*] But where did Mr. Lindquist get such an idea?

HILDA. Mrs. Russell tell heem so.

MOLLIE. [*Now entirely bewildered.*] What Mrs. Russell?

HILDA. Meeses Russell--your friend.

MOLLIE. [*More and more at sea.*] Mrs. Edwin Russell, who comes to see me--every now and then?

HILDA. Yes.

MOLLIE. But how does Mrs. Russell know Mr. Lindquist and why should she tell Mr. Lindquist that we expected to move to the North Shore?

HILDA. Meester Leendquist, he build Meeses Russell's house. That ees hees business. He build houses on North Shore and he sell them and rent them.

[*BOB and MOLLIE look at each other and at HILDA, in wonder and astonishment as the situation slowly filters into their brains. A long pause.*]

BOB. [*In awe and astonishment.*] You mean that Mr. Lindquist, the young man who comes to see you every--every--every now and then--is the same man who put up the Russell house?

HILDA. Yes, Meester Aispenhayne.

BOB. [*Slowly.*] And when Mrs. Espenhayne [*points to MOLLIE*] wrote to Mrs. Russell [*jerks his thumb to indicate the north*], Mrs. Russell told Mr. Lindquist [*jerks his thumb in opposite direction*] and Mr. Lindquist telephoned to you?

[*Points to HILDA.*]

HILDA. Yes, Meester Aispenhayne. [*Nodding.*]

BOB. [*Very thoughtfully and slowly.*] H'mm! [*Then slowly resuming his meal and speaking in mock seriousness, in subtle jest at MOLLIE, and imitating her tone of a moment or two back.*] But of course, you understand, Hilda, we don't want to move to the North Shore now! Oh, no, not now!

HILDA. [*Somewhat crestfallen.*] Yes, Meester Aispenhayne.

BOB. [*Reflectively.*] But, of course, if Mr. Lindquist builds houses, we might look. Yes, we might look.

HILDA. [*In growing confidence and enthusiasm.*] Yes, Meester Aispenhayne, and he build such beautiful houses and so cheap. He do so much heemself. Hees father was carpenter and he work hees way through Uneeversity of Mennesota and study architecture and then he go to Uneeversity of Eelenois and study landscape gardening and now he been in business for heemself sex years. And oh, Meeses Aispenhayne, you must see hees own home! You will love eet, eet ees so beautiful. A little house, far back from the road. You can hardly see eet for the trees and the shrubs, and een the summer the roses grow all around eet. Eet is just like the picture book!

MOLLIE. [*In the most perfunctory tone, utterly without interest or enthusiasm.*] How charming! [*Pauses thoughtfully, then turns to HILDA, anxiously.*] Then I suppose, Hilda, if we should decide to move up to the North Shore you would go with us?

HILDA. [*Hesitatingly.*] Yes, Meeses Aispenhayne. [*Pauses.*] But I theenk I must tell you thees spring Meester Leendquist and I aixpect to get married. Meester Leendquist's business ees very good. [*With a quick smile and a glance from one to the other.*] You know, I am partner with heem. I put all my money een Meester Leendquist's business too.

[*MOLLIE and BOB gaze at each other in complete resignation and surrender.*]

BOB. [*Quite seriously after a long pause.*] Hilda, I don't know whether we will move north or not, but the next time Mr. Lindquist

comes here I want you to introduce me to him. I'd like to know him. You ought to be very proud of a man like that.

HILDA. [*Radiant with pleasure.*] Thank you, Meester Aispenhayne.

MOLLIE. Yes, indeed, Hilda, Mr. Espenhayne has often said what a fine young man Mr. Lindquist seems to be. We want to meet him, and Mr. Espenhayne and I will talk about the house, and then we will speak to Mr. Lindquist. [*Then weakly.*] Of course, we didn't expect to move north for a long time, but, of course, if you expect to get married, and Mr. Lindquist builds houses---- [*Her voice dies out.*]
Long pause.

HILDA. Thank you, Meeses Aispenhayne, I tell Mr. Leendquist.

[*HILDA stands at the table a moment longer, then slowly turns and moves toward door, left. BOB and MOLLIE watch her and as she moves away from the table BOB turns to MOLLIE. At this moment HILDA stops, turns suddenly and returns to the table.*]

HILDA. Oh, Meeses Aispenhayne, I forget one theeng!

MOLLIE. What now, Hilda?

HILDA. Meester Leendquist say eef you and Meester Aispenhayne want to look at property on North Shore, I shall let heem know and he meet you at station weeth hees automobile.

CURTAIN