

## Too Much Johnson: Plot Summary

The tangled plot of William Gillette's *Too Much Johnson* (1894) takes its inspiration from the French marital farce *La Plantation Thomassin*, by Maurice Ordonneau. For the Mercury Theatre version of *Too Much Johnson*, Orson Welles told the back story for each of the three acts in movies and pared down the stage play to a lightning-paced screwball comedy, heavy on repartee.

The story follows the misadventures of Augustus Billings, who has been philandering in New York City under the name Johnson. To cover his tracks, Billings has told his wife that he makes visits to Cuba to supervise his plantation, assuming that a plantation-owner friend there would vouch for him in a pinch. But on the day when his dalliance with Mrs. Dathis is discovered by her wronged husband, his own wife decides to join him on one of his regular "Cuban trips" and bring along her mother. Billings is forced to hop the Cuba-bound ship, to which Dathis tracks him through photographic evidence—the top of a keepsake portrait ripped from his wife's hands. As Act I begins, we find another unhappy group on shipboard: Leonore Faddish, facing an arranged marriage with a Cuban plantation owner also named Johnson, along with her father Faddish and her stowaway sweetheart Mackintosh.

Arriving in Cuba at the start of Act II, Billings learns that his Cuban friend has died and that the plantation's new owner is the same Johnson who is awaiting his mail-order bride. Billings's lies escalate as he orchestrates ruses to hide his identity. As the confusion mounts, the plantation owner mistakes Mrs. Billings as his bride, Billings's mother-in-law as Billings's wife, and the Faddish trio as poor relations—and then Dathis arrives, ready to duel with the plantation owner, whom he assumes to be his wife's lover. (All this leads to a Billings-Dathis-Johnson fight offstage, which is the centerpiece of the Mercury movie before Act III.)

After a rushed ceremony—which some take as a wedding while others take as a real-estate sale—Billings makes his escape, along with the women and Mackintosh. Duped, the abandoned men—Johnson, Faddish, and Dathis—howl, "Find Billings!" Curtain.