

New Fables by Skookum Chuck

(R. D. Cumming)

X. William and Mary

William sat down at a small table:

"I'll have plain ice cream," he said to the girl who came forward.

"Plain ice cream," she mimicked. "Yes."

The maid vanished, and in a few moments returned with the service.

As she approached, William placed a hand over his mouth and made some frantic efforts to suppress a cough that began to irritate his throat. Failing to control the eruption he gave way to a violent convulsion that shook his whole frame and seemed to come from the very roots of his vitals. He expectorated in a handkerchief which he drew from his coat pocket.

"You have a bad cold," sympathized the girl setting down the ice cream before her customer.

"Gassed," he informed her.

"Gassed!"

"Yes."

It was a word that covered the situation in a breath—in one syllable. It gave the girl immediate vision of the great war as she had pictured it in imagination; or, as she had read or hear about the horrors of it. There was that phase of the victims of gas, some of whom had perished in their tracks, while others had endured living deaths for longer or shorter periods.

William looked up at the girl as he spoke, and their eyes met for the fraction of a second.

The young lady smiled. William might have smiled in response, but he had trained his features to shun emotion of this kind, until his soul seemed barren of any of that mirth-balm which seemed to effervesce profusely from the inner springs of the young woman.

Bill nibbled at the cold ice cream and the girl retired to serve other customers. The brief conversation might have created thrills in a normal man, but it did not fizzle in William. He observed, however, in a sort of mechanical way, that the young person who had served him could boast of a beautiful wealth of dark brown hair, crowning features that were improved by the tasteful manner in which it had been dressed, and that the skin of the face lacked that rich tone usually found in healthy young girls, but that the expression was most pleasant, especially when illuminated with a smile such as she had given him.

In due course Bill found himself wandering aimlessly along a beach from which the tide had recently receded, his feet keeping pace with the stagnation of his mind. He moved slowly out towards the ebbing tide and stood at the very edge as though defying the water to touch his sadly neglected shoes.

Out in the water were mermaids, mermen, and merchildren disporting themselves in the full bloom of their natural health and vigor. Bill sneered; it was all so annoying to him. He lived here only in search of that health which he knew would not come. They had laughter, animal emotions, health, all things that made life what it should be. He had none of them. He should worry!

He ran away from it all—turned his back to it, and withdrew over the smooth,

damp sand a hundred yards or more and threw himself down high and dry with a large drift log for a head support. Here he could still see them, it was true, but he could not hear the annoying shouts of laughter.

From his position on the sand he could see the hazy, horizon hills with the masses of white cloud voluming high above their summits, and the restless swell of the ocean stretching like a rolling prairie between. All nature seemed to rejoice or rest in repose, and not one item rebelled against the general order of things save he alone.

He saw the amphibians splashing in the water and he could hear their human calls of gladness. It would have purified stagnant water, but it failed to create a single thrill in the juiceless protoplasm of which Bill was composed.

He would not permit himself to absorb even the second-hand joy as it came floating free of charge towards him.

Briefly he recalled the girl in the ice cream parlor. Did his heart rebel against the fixed purpose of his mind? Something about the girl touched a strange chord in his soul. What could it be? She had sympathized with him. Unasked she had sounded a note of pity for him in his misfortune. She may have meant more, but she had gone as far as possible under the circumstances of their present intimacy. Had he responded? No. Well, he should worry!

A group of full-blooded bathers walked past him laughing and jostling each other. At that very illogical moment he was seized with a violent fit of coughing. The bathers ceased their play, surveyed him for a second and then went on their way in silence.

The usual interpretation of their attitude pinned his heart again to the cross of his sorrow. He was to be shunned as one might shun a plague. The girl in the ice cream parlor was not one of these, however, and his soul seemed to cling to her as one might cling to a rescuer.

He rose hurriedly and began to walk rapidly towards the water's edge again as though moving about gave certain relief both to his mind and lungs. He chose a portion of the beach this time that was more or less private and stood gazing seaward like one in a trance.

Suddenly there was a patter of hurrying bare feet on the wet sand and a wild little human cry of joy behind him, and a girl dressed in a navy blue bathing suit with a rubber cap to match, flew past him and ran into the sea splashing the salt water up about her enchanting young person.

The nymph ran into the water a hundred yards or more and then plunged headlong into the ocean, where, for a few moments she was completely submerged. Anon she appeared on the surface swimming shoreward, and a few seconds later stood on the floor of the sea up to the waist coughing violently.

"She has swallowed some of the salt chuck," commented William.

The fit of coughing over, she plunged into the water again, and for half an hour or more she was half fish, half human in the antics which she performed. Bill stood like one transfixed and watched

her swimming, floating, and diving, and commented on the sportsman-like manner of her performances.

In due course the bather ran from the water in the same manner as she had entered it. She took the same course towards the shore; and, as she passed Bill, to his great surprise, he recognized the pleasant features of his friend in the ice cream parlor. The hitherto pale countenance was now rosy-red with the exercise.

The swimmer recognized him as well, for she glanced at his face for a second in passing while her lips curled in a rich smile that could not be mistaken.

Bill observed again in the same mechanical way a peculiarity about the young woman. The limbs, he thought, did not possess that plump, round fullness one would expect to find in a girl so young, and that they were streaked with dints and depressions that shouldn't have been there.

Our hero, recovering somewhat from his trance, turned on his axis immediately and watched the lithe form racing across the beach towards the dry sand. When he saw her drop on the hot ground, he followed with a fervor that he made no effort to explain.

Arriving at the spot he found the mermaid half buried in the sand and enjoying a sun bath after the dip in the ocean.

William stood before the girl, and was about to speak when she began to cough, covering her mouth with a handkerchief. In the midst of the convulsion she sprang to her feet and the sand that had covered her to the knees, flew in all directions.

"What! Have you been gassed too?" inquired William, when the fit had subsided.

"Oh no, a mere cold, that's all," she explained. "Then, I think I swallowed some water the wrong way."

"Oh." And William smiled.

After a brief and awkward silence, William moved on.

The following day and the day after, and in fact every day after that, William found himself in the same ice cream parlor, at the same small table and asking the same waiter for the same service. In due course of time they became more or less fully acquainted.

He discovered that the girl's name was Mary. What her surname was he did not trouble to inquire. Someone in the shop had addressed her as Mary, and she became Mary to him and nothing more. Why worry further?

One day Mary said:

"You don't cough so much as you used to, Mr."

"My name is William," he supplied.

"The lovely weather will help some, Mr. William," she continued.

He did not correct her.

"The sea breeze, the salt water and the daily bath will work wonders. I believe you are getting better," she added when Bill did not reply.

"I don't swim," he replied.

"You should," she advised him. "It will cure you. It does me."

"No, I'm incurable. How is your own cold?"

"Oh, mine is all right. But you shouldn't talk like that," she cautioned him. "If you THINK you are well, you will BE well. That's my medicine."