

A Lost Fish and a Philosopher

Being the Romance of Miss June Dayton and Charles Augustus Webby, Ph.D.

By A. E. McFARLANE

DR. CHARLES AUGUSTUS WEBBY nervously blinked his little whitey-winkered eyes, and removed and polished his glasses. Then he hesitatingly clutched the stern of the canoe. Miss June Dayton, that most beautiful but breezy child of nature, stepped in and gaily dropped to her knees on the cushion in the bow.

He followed her in silence. And, for a man, especially a Cornard lecturer in philosophy, who intended to make a proposal within the hour—albeit the damsel had no first suspicion of that—it may seem a trifle astonishing that at that moment he was distinctly “put out.” But *why*—when it filled him with the qualmiest aversion to troll from *any* canoe, and from her trickys Peterboro, the *Diana*, in particular—*why* could she not have let him take one of the hotel row-boats for that last evening? It was such conduct as this which had too frequently made him doubt the wisdom of ever having let his affections settle upon her at all, and which, indeed, had made him keep his love wholly under a cloak as yet.

And when they reached the weed beds at Cedar Island Channel, she deliberately laid down her paddle and turned around. It congealed his marrow. But she took his protest as a joke. “Oh, they weren’t going to have the fun of a tip-out yet. And if they *did*, she was good enough swimmer to take care of both of them!”

Then, still smiling serenely, she took up her trolling-line, and caressingly twirled the small, corrugated, silver-gilt spoon. “This is the kind of ‘wash-board’ for the new woman,” she said; which remark was even more offensive than the last. For not only was it a jeer, symbolically speaking, at all Webby felt to be most sacredly domestic, but it savoured insultingly, besides, of covert warning and defiance.

And already she was blighting her prospects with a third speech. “I know you must think I’m an awful kid not to be using a rod. Father says that as a sport I’m a Chicago shandygaff—half hard drink and half soft, you know—and I guess I just am.”

Yes, that refined observation was indubitably her father’s. Webby had learned that summer just what amount of culture may be requisite for a railroad presidency. And out of the reach of such parental influence—once she had been made a just settlement—he would make it his future business to take and keep her. She would find the atmosphere he moved in somewhat different, he could promise that—if it were not folly on his part to hope, *now*, that she could ever grow into a dignity fitted for professional circles.

Yet with her fair countenance quite oblivious of all offense, she now beamed up at him, and now gave the paid-out line little encouraging jerks as if she were playing horse with it. “I’ll hold it for just at present,” she explained; “but if we get a strike, you’ve got to take it and have all the fun. Think of your being up here for two weeks, and never even *seeing* a real ‘lunge’ caught! And there’s nothing I’d love more than to see you get a big one!” Her whole large young loveliness, bathed in the glow of the setting sun, seemed to radiate the tender witchery of her feeling.

IN spite of himself the little man of philosophy kindled anew. He could not be blind, he felt, to the meaning of that look. Nay, had there not been times when, after he had spoken to them of the principles of Neo-Platonism or the *Kultur-kampf*, he had felt her looking up to him from a depth of awe and respect that was almost reverence? For all her father’s coarse-grained fleers and flippancies, must he not confess that *she* at least had begun to understand what his rank and position represented? And with their marriage built on such a foundation, would he not find it easy to seem to overlook all her small detractions of speech and manner? Would she not hourly mold and form herself—

“Ee-ee!” Her creamy brown wrists suddenly jerked and stiffened, the line ran sawing along the gunwale of the canoe, and almost knocked Webby’s paddle from his hands. Twenty-five yards behind him there was a “whooff,” and then a crack as sharp as a pistol shot; and it made him jump as if it had been one.

“Got him!” she cried, “and, oh, aunty, *isn’t* he a whopper, too!” For another ten seconds she watched the line with gleaming eyes and rigidly

parted lips. Then she ducked forward and thrust it into Webby’s grasp.

“Now,” she bubbled ecstatically, “you’re going to have the time of your life!”

“Yes—yes, indeed.” He grinned like a cat, and was pale already. “Yes, indee—” He got a jerk which all but heaved him overboard.

“Oh, say!” she shrieked, “how did *that* feel? It’s mighty lucky for you I’d put my paddle in!”

Webby gasped as if the waters had actually closed over him. Miss June swept the *Diana* around with a swashing roll, and the fish made furiously up the Channel.

And after that first rush it seemed to the little Doctor that the very piscine Satan must be at the end of that leaping line. The diabolical strength of the beast completely staggered him. No sooner had he, with burned and tingling fingers, got it steered away from the Sunken Meadow shore than it bored bewilderingly for bottom. Then it broke Lakewards; and before he could get his new bearings, it had turned a third time, and had dragged him around toward the Upper Channel again. He did not dare to free a hand to mop off the perspiration he could feel trickling from his nose and sopping hotly into his collar. He gasped and panted. The fish had caught *him*. And it jerked, pulley-hauled, tortured—did what it chose with him, and did it always like the most malignant of demons.

If any psychologist has as yet made a scientific study of “buck-fever,” he can, with much added profit, make another on the kind of paralyzing fright which a big game fish is sometimes able horribly to impart to its would-be taker. Nor need he go among tuna and tarpon to get his phenomena. After a quarter of an hour’s battle with a twenty-pound ‘lunge, an old “small-fish” sportsman has been known to cut his line and pull for shore. And the effect upon many women of such an experience has always been one of the big jokes among their masculine kin.

WEBBY was in philosophy, not psychology. Nor could he have analyzed to identify his emotions, even had he had any desire to lock that nightmare in the scrap-book of his memory. But it seemed to him as if he were in a kind of twilight Gehenna, and he had got a noose about the leg of some frenzied wildcat or panther which sooner or later must inevitably turn and rend him. His spirit cried out again and again that if only *it* would let go, he would also, gladly, gladly! His heart alternately stopped and pounded on again at double speed, like an engine with the “governor” off. His unkeyed nerves had thrown a St. Vitus dance into the muscles of his hands and wrists. And though he tried desperately to keep his teeth set, his dragged moustache drew away from them spasmodically at every jerk.

The ‘lunge jumped a second time.

“Oh, isn’t he a size!” she shrieked again. But once more the canoe had all but turned turtle. Webby’s heart now sickeningly coked his throat. His panic became ever more and more absolute. One outside thought alone remained to him, the fervent hope that he did not look the unmanned, shuddering pallor he felt upon himself.

But Miss Dayton had eyes only for the line. And every signal it sent up to her she was intent on answering instantly with the paddle. She veered off to port or starboard, now backed a length, now shot the *Diana* a dozen yards forward. And she did it with the same thrill and exhilaration as if she were invertedly flying some huge and gloriously rebellious kite!

For a moment between rushes the tension eased off. Webby saw before him a minute’s respite. He lowered his quivering hands and took a long breath.

“Oh, you’re giving him slack, Doctor! You’ll lose him! You’ll lose him!” And once more he had to take up the horror of it. But now against *her* his tortures found their inward voice. It was *she* who had brought him into this position. It was *she* who had compelled him to grasp this live wire which there was no letting go of. She had encompassed his humiliation. But for *her* this damnable fish would not be tearing at the very chords of his being! Nay, now again it showed signs of being ready and willing to free him. He began to lower his hands once more.

But again and more mercilessly than ever, she

drove him back into that soul-searing Tartarus. His meager Vandyke worked frantically up and down with the wobbling of his nether lip. All the pride of his manhood was being taken from him. All his nobility of intellect was being made a mock of! But nothing whatever, no, not one iota, did *she* care for his torn and lacerated feelings, so long as she forced him to catch that—that—

And now a third time for one moment he thought the hateful brute was off; and yet once again hope began to stir trembling in him.

“Oh, Doctor, you *will* lose him!” She all but wept—but not for *him*! “Let me, let me take the line! You can catch the next one! I’d never forgive myself if I lost—” For the twentieth time the ‘lunge broke for the Upper Channel. She caught the line from his fingers, her shoulders and back stiffened for the tug-of-war, and her eyes shone and sparkled again with the joy of that hideous conflict.

Bah! Bah! Had she had even the faintest perception of the finer feelings, she could not have acted so! The first glimmerings of true womanliness would have told her how little delicacy she showed in carrying on the struggle, and doing it thus ostentatiously, when *he* had thought it judicious to abandon it. An Amazon? No, for she had not even the antique dignity of those detestable females! *She* would not only throw every shred of feminine propriety to the winds to land that fish, but beyond a doubt she would make it a matter for triumphing and exulting over him forever afterwards!

She was doing it already! “Whee!” she crowed, “this is just about the fiercest ever! This pretty near suits *me*! No wonder he had *you* scared cold!” She got a tremendous tug, broadside on. “Oo-oo! Look out! He almost had us that time!”

And they *did* ship a good pailful! In a semi-delirium of terror renewed and rage redoubled, he drove in his paddle, thrusting wildly and with all his strength. And he thrust the wrong way! Next moment they were over, and he was swallowing, gulp on gulp, of the lukewarm waters of Lake Scumong.

As he came up he gave a strangled gurgle, and caught at the bows of the wallowing Peterboro. He did not look for Miss Dayton. For she—she had boasted of it—she was fully capable of taking care of herself! He tried to climb up on the canoe, to throw his legs about it. But, most horrible of sensations, every moment he could feel it gradually, steadily sinking with him.

And then behind him went up a burst of somewhat choked, but still hilarious, full-throated laughter! For all the convulsive shuddering of his soul, he twisted his head around toward her. She was standing upright, and the water was hardly above her armpits! They were not in mid-channel, but on a weed-matted sandbar. And at their own time and pleasure they could wade in shore!

“Oh, *we’re* all right!” she cried, spluttering; “but old Daddy ‘Lunge’ has taken the chance to cut his sticks!” She was righting the canoe, and throwing the cushions and paddles back into it. And now, with the painter in one hand, and the trolling line dragging limply from the other, she started for the beach.

Her sailor blouse and skirt clung wrinkling about her like Burne-Jonesian draperies of a later date, and her hair streamed lankly into her eyes. When knee-deep she stopped and began to try and straighten herself. But she ended by going off into another peal of laughter. “Say, won’t they burble over us at the hotel! And this is the third time this summer that *I’ve* come home like this!”

HE drew himself up to his full height of misery. “I fear, my dear Miss Dayton, that I don’t quite grasp the joke in the situation.” He did not spare his emphasis. “My mind fails to see anything to laugh at in it whatever!”

“Great Caesar!” It was only an awed and husky murmur, but she started as if he had smitten her with one of the paddles. Yet, even so, it seemed to him that she had no real conception of the actual import of his words—of what he had left unsaid. And after the first moment, she was plainly not overwhelmed. She was merely a trifle amazed—“flabbergasted,” as she doubtless would have expressed it. And he could even imagine her secretly taking it for granted that he would be laughing at it *himself* a half hour later!

Twice on the way home she tried to get him to
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