

NEW FABLES BY SKOOKUM CHUCK

II. THE SHADOW OF A DOUBT.

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"But, our love!" exclaimed Charlie.

The girl's lips curled with impatience.

"What is love compared to a signed contract full of promises and possibilities?" she replied.

"Hang the contract!"

They had been to the show for the last time. For the last time they were lingering at the gate before parting for the night.

"And money?" the girl added.

"Flora!"

Flora laughed heartily, but with some effort.

"You silly!" she scolded him. "You think of nothing but love. Be a man. Forget it. What about my career?"

"Hang the career!"

There was a few moments silence during which Charlie regarded the girl plaintively, and almost with suspicion. Had he been a victim of sentimental imagination? Had Flora ceased to love him? Had she ever loved him? Had he pinned his faith to a superstition? Had he sown where he could not reap? Or, had Flora gone crazy? Had the illusory glare of the white lights unhinged her mind? Had the winning of the beauty contest and the "scholarship" to the movie stage belittled the meek but faithful Charley in her estimation? Was her success but the beginning of a dangerous adventure in which she was to be lost? Had a pride and self-conceit been bred in her mind which dared attempt a dissolution of a human tie which he had regarded as sacred?

Perhaps Charlie's male instinct had whispered the truth to him, for Flora was thinking along identical lines. She hung her head slightly as though conscious that a confession of guilt had been made. The new condition of things had opened her eyes to realize cold facts—she had enjoyed Charlie's society, but she had not loved him. She would leave him without a pang of regret. She pitied him; but, in the crowded chambers of her brain, there was no room for the accommodation of sentiment. With the realization of escape, the monotony which had attended her life became more and more apparent, more and more horrifying. The little out-of-date school room, the stupid scholars whom she had sought to lead into the light of knowledge for the consideration of a small salary, frightened her when she looked back upon them now. She fancied herself already well up the ladder of stardom. And why not? She had the face, the figure, the will; and now she had found the way. The path seemed clear. Even love would not detain her.

But she was not open enough to take Charlie into her confidence and seek honorable release. The female instinct flattered itself in the perplexities of a victim. She would leave him floundering in a maze of doubt and uncertainty.

While they stood there silent Charlie tried to penetrate the depths of her beautiful eyes where truth might be found. He questioned her with his, and sought to read replies from the speechless quivers of her lips and the silent motions of her brow.

But Flora would not, and did not commit herself as Charlie had done dozens of times. It would appear that it is the man's failing to speak and the women's diplomacy to remain silent.

"Remember you are doing this against my will," said the young man at last.

"But who are you?" she replied, teasingly.

"More than you may think."

And, as though to prove a claim, he encircled her waist

with his arm, drew her face to his and kissed lips that seemed for from resenting the familiarity.

The next moment Flora had escaped and was hurrying up the walk leading to the home in which she roomed and boarded.

"Flora!" cried Charlie, reaching out his arms.

She turned for a second with a hand on the handle of the door lock, smiled sweetly, and then disappeared closing the door gently behind her.

The kiss reassured Charlie, even although the girl did not respond, and the smile lit up for a moment the shaded chambers of his soul.

The following afternoon at the little station just before the departure of the train, notwithstanding the publicity, Charlie crushed Flora to his breast in the agony of parting.

"Oh!" she cried.

He released her and she hurried up the steps of the coach to escape the embarrassment of many searching eyes.

Flora wrote immediately upon her arrival at the training grounds. And even this first message was barren of those near-the-heart things which Charlie hoped for above all others. It was one hundred per cent. personal. Flora was becoming more and more wrapped up in Flora, first, last and always. The letter was practical to the core, and had not one sentimental breath that might serve to save Charlie from drowning. But it was a letter, and that was encouraging.

Charlie replied with that line of sentiment which does harm rather than good in such cases where the woman is wavering, as no doubt Flora was.

Flora's second epistle ignored Charlie's appeals to the heart, but gave more details of her own hopes, prospects and possibilities in the new field. "It has teaching backed off the map," she wrote. "Never again! I am through. This is the life."

The new pastures unquestionably had fascinations, for Florence did not return in a week, nor in two weeks, nor in a month or two. She corresponded faithfully, however, but the intervals between letters became longer and longer. And during all those weeks she continued to feed the boy with a starvation diet. At times Charlie would protest at the far-awayness, the low temperature, and the apparent indifference of her; and, at such times, he would receive a reply full of rich food that was at least momentarily nourishing. Flora did not want Charlie, but she was reluctant to let go.

As an alternative she had the magnetic glare of extravagantly illuminated stages, the popularity of famous men, and the thrill of the new dream life. Apart from her personal ambition and the binding contract, those things hypnotized Flora. After a few weeks of such enchantment, escape was impossible had she wished it.

At home Charlie steeled himself to the belief that Flora was drowning herself in a sea of illusion as a moth will scorch itself to death in the flame of a candle. And this may have been true, for many have perished in the same waters.

It was only his chronic uncertainty and doubt about Flora's sincerity that prevented him from hastening to the rescue. He was totally at sea as to how he would be received—as to whether Flora would accept the life-line. It was a situation that has maddened many before Charlie's day.

In the mean time Flora was stepping rapidly up the ladder of movie fame. She was approaching the target of