

New Fables by Skookum Chuck

(R. D. CUMMING)

IX. Pedigreed Stock

Another Sequel to the Fifty-Fifties

I could hear Miss Agnew's footsteps coming up the richly carpeted stairway and along the wide hall, while the Professor pierced my face with eyes that seemed to reach and penetrate to the innermost recesses of my soul. My heart reached out for that relief which the girl's presence might lend to moments that were becoming embarrassingly tense. But I was to be disappointed, for she did not favor the office with her rare presence, but opened a door across the hall, entered a room and closed the door behind her. From that source of attraction there was not the slightest suspicion of a sound during the next half hour.

Just why I wilted away so much in the presence of this man I could not tell; but notwithstanding his hospitality and apparent kindness, a fear of him had crept into my heart which no amount of personal bravery that I could resurrect in opposition served to appease.

There was something about the artificial laugh and commercial manner that rendered me suspicious. There was something hid that was not intended to reach the surface, at least for the present. There was camouflage, suggestive of one who might use me in the same manner as a warrior would use a shield to defend him against sword-thrusts. Infinitesimal though I may have been in comparison to him, I could not account for such groundless cowardice.

Naturally, I am not too brave, but in the presence of Professor Agnew at this second interview, I sank to the cringing proportions of a creeping coward. Some friendly medium no doubt took this method of warning me against impending danger.

"But we can let that go," said Agnew, suddenly, lifting the daggers of his eyes from my face. "In the meantime you want to know about my people?"

"That is my only mission," I replied.

This was to notify the man that I had no intention of engaging with him, even while conscious of personal strained circumstances and the alarming conditions of my immediate financial resources. I would seek employment elsewhere.

The Professor began his story immediately, as though it gave him great pride and pleasure to narrate and follow the pedigree of the new human stock which had been born to the world, and which he had no doubt related hundreds of times before.

"The year 1901," he began, "was the year one with my people, and Professor Newman, the great authority on monkeys and monkey life, was their original creator."

"I know him," I replied, becoming interested.

"You mean you *knew* him," corrected the Professor.

"Why? Is he dead?"

"Yes. Did you not know? How green you must be! He died thousands and thousands of years ago."

"Thousands and thousands of years ago?" I laughed. "Surely you are joking?"

"Joking nothing. I am relating authentic history," he informed me.

"Well, it can't be the same one."

"Possibly not."

"Or else I am dreaming," I persisted, absentmindedly, for I had a strong suspicion that I was actually asleep, and that all I saw was an illusion of my unbridled brain.

"Dreaming nothing!" exclaimed the Professor, angrily, as though out of patience with my nonsense. "This is the real thing.

But, as I was saying, this remote ancestor of mine who thoroughly believed that monkeys had a language and could speak among themselves and understand each other, built him a cage in the heart of an African forest which was infested with monkeys, and where he might study their manners and language."

The Professor paused as though to ascertain if I were listening with the prescribed attention, and then he went on:

"He remained there for weeks with no other companions than the wild beasts of the forest, and no voice to speak to him but the wild and meaningless cries of the crude inhabitants of the woods. Although monkeys chattered near at hand and seemed to understand each other, the Professor could not distinguish one word that was intelligible to him. Beyond a cry of pain or a squeak of delight, the vocabulary of the monkey went no further. One day, however, a strange creature came up to the cage and looked at him with an almost human curiosity, although with the usual animal vacant bewilderment. The creature was hairless except on top of the head as in man, and it was entirely naked. At once the Professor believed that he had discovered the missing link between man and monkey which was suspected to inhabit those forests, and which had been sought for years and years without success, so shy the creature proved himself to be. The Professor had no hesitation in speaking to the Fifty-Fifty. 'Where are you going?' he called out. 'Come here, I wish to speak with you.' Immediately the animal became frightened, and with one wild look at the astonished Professor, it vanished into the woods."

"It was simply an insane man," I ventured to suggest.

"Nothing of the kind," corrected the Professor, heatedly. "The Fifty-Fifty did not stand erect like a man, but walked bent forward, and only maintained that approach to the erect with the aid of a huge branch which he carried in his right paw."

"Strange!" was all the comment I could make.

The Professor abandoned his vigil and hastened to civilization to report to science the wonderful discovery he had made. None would believe him; so, at his own expense, he outfitted an expedition to go into the forest, search for the missing link, and bring members of the new discovery to civilization as a proof of the statements he had made.

"And did he get them?" I inquired, deeply interested.

"Several, male and female," replied the Professor, with pride.

"Then seeing would be believing," I quoted.

"Seeing was believing," corroborated the Professor. "At first they were exhibited in a metropolitan zoo, but later a happy idea occurred to the ambitious Professor. He would domesticate them, and teach them to talk, think, act intelligently. It was a daring undertaking and one that would revolutionize society were it successful; but, like Darwin, he had a theory, and he was determined to exploit that theory notwithstanding the risk to the existing human race. His plan was to create a new human being. Darwin had declared that man had descended from a monkey; Newman would prove it."

"Could they not speak when discovered?" I inquired, following him closely.

"Speak nothing! They were as dense, and stupid as a covote, and possessed no more intelligence than the ordinary monkey. They had no language. They lived partially in trees and partially on the ground. They

were hairless, but the young ones up to about ten or fifteen years of age were covered with hair like their monkey cousins. At that age they shed the hair and their bodies were henceforth clear like that of a human being. This peculiarity was said to connect them backward with the anthropoid and forward with man. The children walked on all fours, the adults had adopted the biped method of navigation with the aid of any rude stick which they might pick up. The young ones lived almost entirely in the trees, while the grown-ups gradually abandoned those arboreal habits."

"Marvellous!" I cried out in amazement.

"Although the Professor succeeded in domesticating the Fifty-Fifties," continued Agnew, "he failed in the real object of his ambitious undertaking. He never did teach the missing link to talk, nor did he advance it one iota intellectually. It was not a proof of failure, however, or that the thing was impossible. It simply meant that the time at his disposal was inadequate to accomplish the metamorphosis. He was compelled to admit, although with agony, that it would require many more generations than his own to evolve a crude animal into a cultivated human being. This blow was the direct cause of his death, for he died comparatively young in years. When the truth came home to him he deliberately planned a wild scheme to pass on to posterity a work which it was impossible for him to complete. He willed the tribe and the work in connection with its emancipation over to his son and his son's son, even down to hundreds of generations. The ordinary span of a human life could accomplish little or nothing."

Again the Professor paused as though to diagnose my attitude in the matter.

In the room across the hall there was a movement of some kind. The door opened, Miss Agnew came out, walked along the hall, and went down the stairway. I listened to the footsteps until they died away entirely in one of the spacious rooms on the ground floor.

"It is the most remarkable story I ever heard in my life," I told the Professor in the enthusiasm of the moment.

"But you have not yet heard the most remarkable chapter," said Agnew, piercing me with his strange eyes again while I strained my ears in an effort to trace the movements of his daughter.

"The wish of the worthy ancestor has been carried out with such religious determination and persistence that the undertaking succeeded far beyond our most hopeful expectations. Generation after generation the light of intelligence became more and more apparent, until to-day we have a race of men which I dare say far surpasses our own species in moral conceptions as well as in industrial ability."

"Is it possible?"

"Even physically there is an improvement, although there is still room for a great deal more which time will no doubt grant," continued the historian. "But I must tell you of that virtue which raises them head and shoulders above the moral elevation of the original human race. In their native haunts the Fifty-Fifty was a vegetarian purely and simply. He was not flesh eating, and did not kill other animals for the purpose of food. His constitution had adapted itself for millions of years to a fruit and nut diet, and could accustom itself to no other. They killed in self-defence only, and it is said that their ferocity and cruelty while thus engaged was something which all other animals in the forest knew to their cost. In defending his mate against others of the tribe, the male