

New Fables by Skookum Chuck

III.—An Irishman's Dream

On the Great Lakes steamer my stateroom was number 88. I was directed there by a steward and found that it was already occupied.

A bulky man dressed in a brownish-grey suit, who seemed to fill all available space, was stooping over a large suitcase juggling things from it in the same manner as a magician will juggle things from a hat.

He was throwing haberdashery here and there, hanging some where the accommodation offered itself, and appropriating all space in the room as though the eventuality of another tenant had not occurred to him. He was either hopelessly greedy or extremely rude.

The effects would seem to have been baled in under great pressure, for the articles produced might have filled a good-sized trunk.

My arrival did not appear to disturb the magician for the first few seconds, ultimately he stood erect and looked around at me.

"Ho, ye are to be me room mate, are ye?" said a very Irish voice.

"Looks like it," I replied, throwing my valise on a part of the sattee which was not already occupied by Irish haberdashery.

The Irishman resumed his occupation at the dissection of the suitcase, emphasizing each movement with a jerky but endless gusher of words mostly about himself. At last he said:

"Me name is Grubbe—Mr. Grubbe. Might as well get acquainted first as last?" The latter in the form of a question.

"Sure," I agreed. "My name is Bruce—Mr. Bruce."

He rose and extended his right hand to me, which I accepted. In his left he held a bottle which contained a white pulverized substance of some kind. It was no doubt fruit salts.

"Me best friend," he said, holding the bottle at arm's length and admiring it. "Bates the doctor all hollow."

"Indeed."

He poured a little into a glass, added some water, and drank it greedily while effervescing.

"Baestly bad water that," he complained, throwing what remained in the bottle into the lake through the open port hole.

After this he polished his shoes, oiled and brushed his hair, groomed his coat and trousers, and adjusted his tie, but never for a moment giving his tongue a moment's rest.

He went about his labor of toilet as though it were the one supreme effort of his life.

In the cramped space at my disposal I had succeeded in asserting certain rights, for I now found myself sitting on the edge of the lower berth. I was a mere spectator for my new friend kept up a continual stage act and speaking away in such a manner as to prevent me from breaking in even when it seemed necessary to reply.

During a momentary pause, however, I succeeded in putting my case before him:

"Let's toss for berths," I suggested.

"Devil a bit; mine is the lower wan, Look!"

He produced the stub of a ticket from somewhere. It certainly was an official claim to the lower berth.

I consulted mine, and found that I had been assigned to the upper one. I had not yet gone into the phraseology of the ticket to that extent.

Without further argument I climbed up into my own quarters and crouched like a huge orang in his tree nest.

I had not been long in the nest when a young girl passed our door and looked in casually; and then hurried past.

Monkey-like my eyes had fastened themselves on the features of the girl during the brief second when they were turn-

ed in our direction. She had seen me, but only to that degree which a stranger will see another for the first time—uninterestedly.

Grubbe gave a slight start as the girl looked in and then disappeared. He stepped out into the hall, looked along, but whether the girl turned to greet him or not I was not in a position to say. At least he did not speak nor call to her, which seemed strange in view of the interest he seemed to have in her.

Personally the hurried glance I got of the face left an impression in my mind which will not be readily erased. Although there appeared to be contentment in the general impression, there was something akin to appeal in the glance of the eyes. Words seemed to flow from them that should have come through the natural channel of the lips. I could almost read the voice of the eyes in actual spoken language. The lips parted spasmodically in unison with the eye communication as though some natural, perhaps ancient instinct, would prompt her to give outlet to her thoughts. The lips seemed to refuse assistance to words which crowded for escape.

I was buried in deep thought studying the picture of the strange face as it had framed itself in the doorway for a second in passing, when Grubbe re-entered the cabin:

"Deaf an' dumb," he volunteered. "Miss Fram—Mary Fram, to be precise."

"Deaf and dumb!"

"Yes. And running away from Ireland at that. We are both running away from Ireland," he added.

"Running away from Ireland!"

"Yes. She to Edmonton, I to Vancouver."

"Related?"

"Not a bit. Met her for the first time on the boat leaving Ireland. Her sister was killed be Republicans. The family harbored a 'rebel.' Spies ferretted him out, asked the girl his whereabouts. She would not speak—could not speak—They shot her dead."

"Heavens!" I cried out.

"Indade it is worse than that," continued Mr. Grubbe. "The things they do! I can't spake about it. Wan old man had his beard cut off, and a beautiful beard it was, the growth of a life-time."

I could not conceal my merriment.

"Ye may laugh, but, faith, it's true."

At the dining table I met the deaf and dumb girl. That is, we came in contact with each other without the formal ceremony of an introduction, for the Irishman did not introduce me. He was now carrying his rudeness or crudeness to a point where it was extremely embarrassing for me.

Without the usual formality we became acquainted, but our friendship at the present time did not go beyond the familiarity of a mutual smile as occasion permitted.

In the silent language of the fingers and hands, Grubbe kept up a continual conversation with the deaf mute. At times I would ask a question, and it would be transmitted through Mr. Grubbe to the girl, the reply coming via the same channel. Most of the time I sat meek and mild, for the Irishman was a perfect perpetual motion speaker. If he was not addressing me in the ordinary way, he was sign-writing with his fingers to the girl across the table. Whether he had acquired this knowledge since meeting with her or not I did not inquire.

But a blind person could have seen that the Irishman had fallen a hopeless victim to whatever charm the girl possessed as an excuse for love. My neutral eyes made vain efforts to reach a source of attraction; but they failed in this, for the medium which gives birth to human love between the sexes cannot be detected only at first hand and actual experience.