



THE SINGULAR CASE OF WILLIAM PLUMPTY

By GEORGIA DAVIES

Illustrated by MARCEL OLIS

"Good-bye, Bill!" he called out in a high, cheerful, almost bantering tone, flinging up his hands as the crash came.

WHEN I consented to accompany my old friend, Lenny Brisco, on the trial trip of his new runabout, it was not because I was braver than my fellows. It was rather that I lacked courage to refuse. And although one and all of my fellow townsmen declared that nothing could have induced them to accept his invitation, I knew better.

Every one always did as Uncle Lenny wanted. He was far and away the most popular man in Harmony Centre, the peaceful Canadian town in which we lived. And yet I find that the word popular calls up a vision of a politician talking himself into favour, or of one who canvasses a town for its good opinion, so I should rather say Uncle Lenny Brisco was our best-beloved citizen.

He was as unobtrusive as a sunbeam, and almost as silent, much of his conversation consisting of nods and understanding looks. On only one or two epoch-marking occasions had I seen him excited and heard him indulge in his one profanity, "Great Crimson Christopher!"

When his small, shambling figure appeared on the street, he was greeted with affection by all ranks of our society. Had he expressed a desire for such an office, to a man and with one voice, we would have proclaimed him Mayor of Harmony Centre; nay, we would have done more; we would gladly have loaned him our lawn-mower—supreme test of devotion. But Uncle Lenny, who could have asked all, wanted nothing. Was this his secret?

My niece, Pinky Patterson, who is highly educated, and dabbles in what she calls "the occult," corners me sometimes and tells me curious tales of clairvoyance, mesmerism, hypnotism, and such new-fangled notions; but, as far as I can judge, Len Brisco leaves all those fellows out of sight. The pictures which Pinky shows me of famous hypnotists represent these uncanny chaps as being of what a novelist calls "a majestic mien," their hair abundant and curly, and their eye so magnetic and terrible that even a lion would quail before it.

Uncle Lenny is not like that. He has no more presence than a wisp of hay or a dried-up leaf. He buys his clothes, ready-made, at the Harmony Centre Emporium, and nature has not built him for ready-mades. The pockets of his coat always come down too low, the knees of his trousers are too near his ankles, and altogether too much of his trousers legs go to waste and have to be turned up at the bottom. As for hair! If, in some sentimental mood, he gave a lock to a friend, what was left would not be worth combing!

But his eye! With such an eye, why should he need to talk? An eye that an angel might have coveted—not piercing or dominating, but limpid, confiding, candid as a child's, and yet with the exceeding wise and sombre look an infant sometimes brings with him as he comes from far, far places. It was of the purest and most celestial blue I have ever seen in a human head. Such a charm was in his glance, that strangers were attracted to the silent little man, children followed him as though he were the Pied Piper; and Dan Pinson, town drunkard and brawler, of whom even our policeman was afraid, he had so tame that he would have eaten from his hand.

So who was I, that I could refuse when Uncle Lenny beamed beguilingly and coaxed, "Come on, Bill; come out for a little spin! Aw, come on!"

Exaggerated as it may seem, I would have followed the quaint figure in the ready-mades to Kamchatka; or even stepped aboard a Zeppelin steered by Len, and bound for the Kaiser.

Pinky Patterson says it was my Karma—I am not educated, like her; I am not up on metaphysics, if that's what you call 'em. I am only a Presbyterian, a Liberal,

and a Registrar of Deeds, so I can only say if Karma had taken the shape of my next-door neighbour, Simpson Cutter, he would have got the cold shoulder.

I was under no delusion as to Lenny's mechanical ability. In Harmony Centre we know all about each other. Our system made the Bertillon, or any other, seem careless. If any Eugene Aram had sought to hide a guilty secret in Harmony Centre, Pikesville, Cranberry Corners, or anywhere near our neighbourhood, I would have said, "In vain, in vain, Eugene; try somewhere else!"

Household tasks which the rest of us take for granted we must do—although loathing them—he shirked—screens, double-windows, stove-pipes, etc.—until some one else did it for him. Once, to my knowledge, he spent a whole morning putting a fastening on his gate, and then he had put the staple on the gate and the hook on the post! Of course I changed it for him and said nothing, and he never even noticed! Need I say more?

I am very fond of Lenny Brisco. Except for Pinky, who calls me a "cushiony old dear," (whatever she may mean by that) I have no one else I am so drawn to. My wife abhors sentiment and insists on all the world being "sensible." She is always reminding me, "A man of your years—"

Uncle Lenny is the only man in Harmony Centre who calls me "Bill." I insist on "Mr. Plumpty," or "William." When one has the outline and gait of a fat robin, it takes a lot of dignity to counterbalance Plumpty; but I let Len, unrebuked, call me "Bill" in public, and even submit to "Old Hundred" when he is in affectionate mood and we are alone.

So I stepped aboard the car of destiny. As we zig-zagged down the main street of Harmony Centre, we had the right-of-way. Grocery teams ducked hastily into alleys; people fled to shop steps; children scattered from the road like partridges; and the Baptist minister drove into the hotel yard. And yet from the Hon. W. P. V. Sprague, our Liberal member, came hearty greeting.

"Good for you, Brisco," and Dan Pinson waved an inebriated arm and shouted, "Doin' fine, Uncle Lenny!"

I am not brave; perhaps I am too fat. I do not plan to be heroic, but respectable. I am, as I said, a Registrar of Deeds, a position not demanding physical prowess, so I have no shame in confessing that before I had been in that predestined machine five minutes, I was in a cold funk; another five minutes and my scalp was crawling with horror; I could have shrieked aloud, but my tongue was paralyzed. I sat, incapable of motion.

It was just thirty minutes and twenty-three seconds, as computed by our local mathematician, when the climax came. At first we had been on the level, marking the dusty road on the bias as we went, but now, behold us approaching Sky Hill, a short, steep, twisty hill, at its foot a bridge spanning Trout Brook, a wide, brawling stream. On either side the road fell away sharply into deep gullies leading down to the brook.

Afterward, when I asked Lenny why he had not turned to the West, where the road was level, he said simply, "I thought I did steer to the right," and I had no heart to reproach him.

Our speed seemed to increase every second. Trees, horses, cattle, farmyards flew past us in a streak; we jumped, we skidded, we biased, we thumped over bridges and the boards flew up, we struck the top of Sky Hill with a bang, and, for the first time conscious of my companion, I heard him say in a voice of curdling terror, and the words seemed not spoken but seared on my brain:

"Great Crimson Christopher! She has run amuck!"

HALF way down the hill he moaned, "Oh, my poor wife!" Then at the far end of the bridge, where the crash came, a second later, he flung up his hands and called out in a high cheerful tone, almost bantering:

"Good-bye, Bill!"

A long, long silence.

When I awoke, I looked into the leather face of old Dr. Ketchum. I was in my own bed. I had sense enough to recognize the familiar, gay log-cabin quilt.

"How are you now, Mr. Plumpty?" the old man asked in his professional tone, which was not at all the same he used when trading horses. He was born to be a horse-dealer, but circumstances had made him a doctor.

I meant to say, that I had not had time to find out, but to my astonishment replied in an accent of concentrated horror:

"Great Crimson Christopher! She has run amuck!"

My wife drew near, anxiety in her eye.

"Oh, William! Do you know me?"

With an exceeding "patness" I groaned, "Oh, my poor wife!"

Then I realized that dear little Pinky was hovering over my pillow, her eyes full of tears, her rosy cheeks pale.

"Dear Uncle," she whispered, and kissed my cheek.

I tried to say, "Cheer up, Pink!" but heard a voice, the identical high, courageous, cheerful note of Uncle Lenny, but yet issuing from my own throat, call banteringly, "Good-bye, Bill!"

Then I fainted dead away.

Although not noticed by me at the time, Len Brisco had been an anxious watcher over my unconsciousness. Of course he was comparatively unharmed. What could hurt an autumn leaf? I believe Uncle Len simply floated into safety, although he explains it this way: The bank of the road, just where we crashed into the end of the bridge, fell down into a deep roadway leading to the creek, where teamsters drove their horses down to drink. A canny countryman, coming toward us with a load of hay, had seen our eccentric approach. Deciding that not even all the road was too much for us, he hastily started to drive down to the creek. Uncle Lenny was tossed lightly into the air and fell like a bird into the cosy

nest Providence had prepared for him. I was flung into the creek, and if you think that a soft couch, just try it!

I was cut about the face and head, bruised from head to foot, and when I came to myself, I was one big ache and unable to move. But this was not serious. The real injury was in the shock, which left me absolutely unable to speak, except to utter the three sentences which had been bitten into my consciousness as if with a hot iron:

"Great Crimson Christopher! She has run amuck!"

"Oh, my poor wife!"

"Good-bye, Bill!"

GRADUALLY this awful state of affairs became known to our own circle, first to myself—too tired and collapsed to care much for awhile—and then to my wife, Pinky, and poor Len, who looked like a broken-hearted ghost, and to Dr. Ketchum.

The old doctor was, as he said, "Kerfoozled." He had no past experience to guide him.

Pinky says he understands horses intuitively, but humans only instinctively, and mostly merely professionally. My, that girl is educated!

Nerves he held in contempt. He recognized only two diseases, consumption and rheumatism, both incurable, and I could not be classified with either. So he could only say that perhaps time would restore my speech when I had gone long enough past the event for the shock to fade from my mind. So, by-and-by, when his famous Ketchum's Spavin Cure had limbered up my stiff body, he departed.

I sat in my large, pleasant room, cheered by the companionship of Pinky Patterson and Len, and tried to wait patiently and woo back my lost speech.

Love—wonderful love—teaches wisdom; and I have thought since that I was saved much agony of mind by the courageous, outspoken, matter-of-fact way in which Pink and Lenny spoke of my case. They refused to see Tragedy, even when her black wings were flapping over us.

I was provided with a slate and pencil. I found I could think as clearly and express myself in writing as readily as ever. It was as though the cords of speech were frozen to all other ideas, and responded only to a three-fold suggestion. No matter what I meant to say, it could not assume enough importance in my mind to dominate my speech, and so the three sentences came forth, or rather, one at a time, and always in their original order. They had marked the three stages of a drama. Pinky took a keen interest in my case—what I might call a professional interest—as she read volumes on nervous diseases, but confessed she could not find a case just like mine. I could have said, like Emerson, (Continued on page 42.)

Big Confederation Issue

On the first of July, Canada will celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Confederation. To fittingly commemorate this important event, EVERYWOMAN'S WORLD will issue a special Confederation Number, containing important articles on the growth and development of Canada as a Nation.

The cover of this issue will be an elaborate design in colour, symbolical of Canada's achievements in peace and war; and the whole issue, made entirely in Canada, by Canadians, and for Canadians, will demonstrate the strength and purpose of the people of this great Dominion in materially establishing the meaning of their ideals.