

THE PING-PONG - 016

NIGHT, and the two old fogies, Messrs. Dobbs and Cooper, shuffled and stumped along the road leading down to Titchwell's shop. Now and again they jostled each other, as a bandy-legged, three-footed pair of old reprobates are apt to do. Cooper was talking, and his voice was just what you would expect such an old rustic's voice to be—harsh and hoarse, a trifle high pitched, yet by no means unpleasant to hear for all that.

“....Jaaak,” he swore mildly, ‘dey ain’t nothing dat I won’t give to see muh Fannie before uh dies, Dobbie. Dat is all uh livin’ for now. Nothin’, nothin’ at all. Me own sweet, cuddly little Fannie. Only God knows if uh will ever set dese old eyes on me little Fan again.” Something like a sob choked the man’s speech, and Dobbie filled the pause by removing his pipe, hawking loudly and spitting far into the bush. Soon the other continued: “Tis now four year since her mother dead, an’ nigh on ten dat I in’ see nor hear from me only chile. Members the day in the boat wen uh went to see she off, sez I to she: ‘Fan, be a good girl, an’ hear what yuh auntie sez. An’ doan fuhget yuh old Ma an’ Pa out dis side; write we often, we won’t look for nothin’.’ An’ sez she to me, with she face swimmin’ with crying, sez she to me: ‘Allright Pa, de Lord go with yuh.’ As if it wus me that de Lord wus to go with, an’ she going out by herself alone on those dismal waters! But uh feel it deep in muh that one o’ these days wen uh least expect anything, uh gine hear uh car

drives up to the door, an' wen uh looks out who uh gine see but me Fannie . Uh feel so, uh feel so deep in muh. Wuh you think, Dobbie, wuh you think?"

"Mebbe, mebbe, mebbe," answered the other a trifle testily. He halted to relight his pipe; and as they resumed their walk, he in his turn started to voice his reminiscences. "Yes, Fannie wus a good-lookin' gal awright. An' she so quiet an' Christian-like. Dere wusn't none roun' here to pare with Fannie. Minds me wen uh used to see she passin' to church on Sunday mornings, uh used to say to meseif: 'Dere goes de girl dat I would like to see Boysie marrid.' An' she likin' Boysie an' everything. But since she lef' no good int come to Boysie. Jus' went an' throw hisself way on dat worthless Gwennie dat is anybody woman once she kin pick he pockets." Dobbie was annoyed, and he aimed a savage blow with his stick at a cat that was leisurely crossing their path. The animal avoided the blow by acceleration of speed, vanishing into the canes. Dobbie muttered something short and unintelligible. Whether it was meant for the cat or Gwennie only he knew.

Cooper had nothing to say about Gwennie. He had always felt, however, that Boysie, his crony's son, was not good enough for his daughter. He continued to talk as though he had never addressed the other, as though the other had never spoken.

"Yes, us feel so deep in muh bones. An' Dobbie, uh had uh wonnerful dream las' night—no—night-before—Wus night-before or when? Uh cahn jus' remember exactly, anyway, uh hear uh car drives up, an' wen

uh looks out, who should I see but me Fannie, looking real nice an' dressed up like a real lady, an' beside she a good-lookin', well-to-do-lookin', pow'rful-lookin' fellow. An' wen she comes in an' uh kisses she nough nough, sez I to she, sez I to she: 'An' who may this gent be?' An' sez she to me: 'Dis is my husband, Pa.' An' callin' him by name, uh cahn remember exactly what she call him now, but callin' him by name she sez: 'Mr. So-an'-So, meet Pa.' An' sez I to he: 'Very pleased to ... ' "

They had reached Titchwell's shop, and Cooper's voice was drowned in the roar of laughter that issued from the place. In the bar was a group of men, playful and boisterous, listening to the tales of a tall, lanky individual. His pants were cut high, his coat low and draping. A suit that could only have been tailored in America was enough to proclaim the wearer newly back from the U.S.A. without his affected slang and hail-fellow-well-met greetings in the approved Yankee style.

"Hi, strangers, you drinking?" he greeted the two cronies, and without waiting for their answer he bawled to the shopkeeper, "Drinks for the newcomers, Titchy, no . . . for the whole crowd, an' make it snappy."

Cooper forced himself beside the tall lanky one. Presently he nudged him slightly to draw his attention. He liked talking to men who had seen something of the world.

"You been to the States?" he asked, in that kind of breaking-the-ice tone.

‘Yep,’ replied the traveller breezily, “just back, an’ had a wallop in’ time.”

“Fine country, I hear,” prompted old Cooper.

“*Telling me!*” laughed the tall lanky one. “Tell it to the marines. Ha ha ha ha! Fine country? I should say it is. The States, why, top me rocker, there ain’t no place near like it. Man, it is a heaven on earth. There ain’t no place in the worl’ dat pays wages like the States. Dere ain’t no place in the worl’ as fair an’ square as de States. Dere ain’t no place in de worl’ with women like the States. An’ talkin’ ‘bout women, these halfscald Bajun lamp-posts think hard to talk to decent gentlemen. Out there purty women, purty for God sake, wus glad to keep an’ fin’ me If I would only stan’ in de States. Look, uh’ll show yuh a few that I used to get aroun’ with.” So saying, the tall lanky traveller delved into an inner pocket of his long coat and produced a leather wallet, which he zipped open with one brisk showy movement. Selecting a dry spot on the counter, he emptied the contents of one of the pockets—a number of photographs. Singling out one, he exhibited it to the crowd, saying. “See her, guys? See her? She wus my girl from the day I step in the States till de day I lef’ an’ cry tears bucket a drop wen I board the boat. An’ dese ole scrawny, speckly, frizzly-haired . . .”

“An’ who is hot-lookin’ little piece, Blackrod?” inquired one of the men, fingering the ping-pong portrait of a girl’s face.

Blackrod leaned over, glancing carelessly at the picture. "Oh she!" he answered, "she is one hot biby. Atta boy! Yuh got it comin' atcha wen you hitch up with that biby. Swell girl, though, no matter Tom, Dick an' Harry . . ."

He broke off, and straightening to his full height, looked down on his attentive listeners, executing a series of nods and prodigious winks.

His companions had reached that state when humour is easily excited, and now they laughed and roared more than ever, jostling Dobbs and Cooper farther away from the lanky man in their efforts to get closer views of the 'one hot biby.' Even Dobbs and Cooper, the two old heathens, guffawed, while they waited impatiently for the ping-pong to reach them, passing slowly from hand to hand as it was.

At last it reached Cooper, and he raised the portrait close to his dim eyes, peering into the brazen face. Suddenly he reeled as if he had been struck, clutching at the counter for support. Dobbie who was near him trying to get a view of the girl steadied him with one hand, surprised that the other, who could stack pints of liquor without appearing any the worse for it, seemed groggy after so little refreshment. But he wanted a closer view of 'the one hot biby' before he carried home the other, he took the portrait from Cooper's shaking hand.

For one second he looked almost carelessly into the sensual face, then he too stiffened, peering at the features. And as certainty struck him, he slowly lifted his eyes full of pity and of understanding to meet his friend's. He felt for his old friend from the depth of his ungodly heart.

“Oh Christ!” he said. “‘tis Fannie.”

Poor Cooper stood, holding the counter tightly and mouthing foolishly. Only one word, weak and faint, he managed to get past his trembling lips.

‘Fannie,’ he breathed, and it sounded like the low, painful whine of a stricken dog.

Together they left the shop unnoticed, unmissed by the crowd. The traveller was telling another tale of ‘way down south.’

The two old cronies shuffled and stumped along, saying nothing, feeling much. Within one the urge to live had been almost extinguished, his dim eyes dimmer and cloudy with tears.