

Fantaisie Printaniere

Frank Norris

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The McTeagues and the Ryers lived at the disreputable end of Polk street, away down in the squalid neighborhood by the huge red drum of the gas works. The drum leaked, of course, and the nasty brassy foulness of the leak mingled with the odors of cooking from the ill-kept kitchens, and the reek of garbage in the vacant lots did not improve the locality.

McTeague had once been a dentist, and had had "parlors" up at the respectable end of the street. But after a while the license office discovered that he had no diploma; in fact, had never attended a college of any sort, and had forbidden him to practice. So McTeague had taken to drink. Ryer, some years back, had been a son of small stock-dealers on the outskirts of Butchertown, and had done fairly well until the Health Board reported him to the Supervisors because he had fattened his hogs on poultices obtained from the City and County Hospital. The result was a lamentable scandal, which finally drove him out of business. So Ryer had taken to drink.

The Ryer's home (or let us say, the house in which the Ryers ate and slept), adjoined the house in which the McTeagues ate and slept. You would have thought that this propinquity, joined with the coincidence of their common misfortunes both victims of governmental persecution would have insured a certain degree of friendship between the two men. But this was not so at all, a state of feud existed between Montague Ryer and Capulet McTeague. The feud had originated some year or so previous to the time of this tale, in the back room of Gerstle's "Wein Stube" on the corner opposite the drum. A discussion had arisen between the two men, both far gone in whiskey, as to the lines of longitude on the surface of the globe. Capulet claimed they were parallel throughout their whole extent Montague maintained they converged at the poles. They discussed this question at length first with heady words and vociferation, next with hurled pony glasses and uplifted chairs, and finally after their ejection from the "Stube," with fists clenched till the knuckles whitened, crooked elbows, and the soles of heavy-shod boots. They arrived at no definite conclusion. Twice since then had they fought. Their original difference of opinion had been speedily forgotten. They fought now, they knew not why merely for the sake of fighting. The quarrel between them came to be recognized by the "block" as part of the existing order of things, like the reek from the drum and the monthly visit of the rent-collector.

Ryer had something the worst of it in these fights. He was a small, lean, pinkish creature, like a split carrot, his mouth a mere long slit beneath his nose. When he was angry his narrow eyes glistened like streaks of bitumen.

McTeague was a huge blonde giant, carrying his enormous fell of yellow hair, six feet and more above his ponderous, slow-moving feet. His hands, hard as wooden mallets dangled from arms that suggested twisted cables. His jaw was that of the carnivora.

Both men thrashed their wives, McTeague on the days when he was drunk, which were many, Ryer on the days when he was sober, which were few. They went about it each in his own peculiar fashion. Ryer found amusement in whipping Missis Ryer with a piece of rubber hose filled with gravel, or (his nature demanded variety of sensation), with a long, thin rawhide, which he kept hidden between the mattresses. He never used fists or boots; such methods revolted him. "What! am I a drayman, am I a hod-carrier!" exclaimed Mister Ryer. When McTeague did not use his fist or the foot, he used the club. Refinement, such as characterized Ryer, was foreign to the ex-dentist. He struck out blindly, savagely, and with a colossal, clumsy force that often spent itself upon

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the air. The difference between the men could be seen in the different modes of punishment they affected. Ryer preferred the lash of the whip, McTeague the butt. Ryer was cruel, McTeague only brutal.

While common grievance had not made friends of the two men, mutual maltreatment had drawn their wives together, until no two women on the "block" were more intimate than Trina McTeague and Ryer's wife. They made long visits to each other in the morning in their wrappers and curl papers, talking for hours over a cuppa tea, served upon the ledge of the sink or a corner of the laundry table. During these visits they avoided speaking of their husbands, because, although the whole "block" knew of the occasional strained relations of their families, the two women feigned to keep the secret from each other. And this in the face of the fact that Missis Ryer would sometimes come over to see Trina with a thin welt across her neck, or Trina return the visit with a blackened eye or a split lip.

Once, however, only once, they broke in upon their reticence. Many things came of the infringement. Among others this fantaisie .

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During that particular night three dandelions had bloomed in the vacant lot behind the gas works, the unwonted warmth of the last few days had brought back the familiar odor of the garbage heaps, an open car had appeared on the cross town cable line and Bock beer was on draught at the "Wein Stubes", and Polk street knew that Spring was at hand.

About nine o'clock Trina McTeague appeared on the back steps of her house rolling her washtub before her, preparing to do her monthly washing in the open air on that fine morning. She and Ryer's wife usually observed this hated rite at the same time, calling shrilly to one another as their backs bent and straightened over the scrubbing-boards. But that morning Trina looked long for Missis Ryer and at last fell a-wondering.

The fact of the matter was that the night before Ryer had come home sober and had found occasion to coerce Missis Ryer with a trunk-strap. By a curious coincidence McTeague had come home drunk the same evening, and for two hours Trina had been hard put to it to dodge his enormous fists and his hurled boots. (Nor had she been invariably successful.)

At that moment the ex-dentist was sleeping himself sober under the stairs in the front hall, and the whilom stock-dealer was drinking himself drunk in the "Wein Stube" across the street.

When eleven o'clock had struck and Missis Ryer had not appeared, Trina dried her smoking arms on her skirt and, going through the hole in the backyard fence, entered the kitchen of the Ryer's house and called. Missis Ryer came into the kitchen in a blue cotton wrapper and carpet slippers. Her hair was hanging down her back (it was not golden).

Evidently she had just arisen.

"Ain't you goin' to wash this mornin', Missis Ryer?" asked Trina McTeague.

"Good Mornin', Trina," said the other, adding doggedly, as she sat down hard in a broken chair "I'm sick and tired a-washin' an' workin' for Ryer."

She drew up instinctively to the cold stove, and propped her chin upon her knuckles. The loose sleeve of the wrapper fell away from her forearm, and Trina saw the fresh marks of the trunk-strap. Evidently Ryer had not held that strap by the buckle-end.

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This was the first time Missis Ryer had ever mentioned her husband to Trina "Hoh!" ejaculated Trina, speaking before she thought, "it ain't alwus such fun workin' for Mac, either."

There was a brief silence. Both the women remained for a moment looking vaguely out of the kitchen door, absorbed in thought, very curious, each wondering what next the other would say. The conversation, almost without their wishing it, had suddenly begun upon untried and interesting ground. Missis Ryer said:

"I'll make a cuppa tea."

She made the tea, slovening languidly about the dirty kitchen, her slippers clap-clapping under her bare heels. Then the two drew up to the washboard of the sink drinking the tea from the saucers, wiping their lips slowly from time to time with the side of their hands. Each was waiting for the other to speak. Suddenly Missis Ryer broke out:

"It's best not to fight him, or try to git away hump your back and it's soonest over."

"You couldn't do that with Mac," answered Trina, shaking her head with decision; "if I didunt dodge, if I let um have his own way he'd sure kill me. Mac's that strong, he could break me in two."

Oh, Ryer's strong all-right-all-right," returned Missis Ryer "an' then he's sober when he fights an' knows what he's about, an' that makes it worse. Look there what he did last night." She rolled up her sleeve and Trina glanced at the arm with the critical glance of a connoisseur.

"Hoh," she said scornfully, "that ain't a circumstance. I had a row with Mac last night meself, and this is what he did with his fist. Just his fist, mind you, and it only grazed me as it was." She slipped a discolored shoulder out of her calico gown. The two critically compared bruises. Missis Ryer was forced to admit that Trina's bruise was the worse. She was vexed and disappointed but rallied with:

"Yes, that's pirty bad, but I'll show you somethin' that'll open your eyes," and she thrust the blue wrapper down from the nape of the neck. "See that scar there," she said, "that's the kind of work Ryer can do when he puts his mind to it; got that nearly four months ago and it's sore yet."

"Ah, yes," said Trina loftily, "little scars, little flesh wounds like that! You never had any bones brokun. Just look at that thumb," she went on proudly "Mac did that with just a singul grip of his fist. I can't nevr bend it again."

Then the interminable discussion began.

"Look at that, just look at that, will you?"

"Ah, that ain't nothun. How about that? there's a lick for you."

"Why, Mac's the strongest man you ever saw."

"Ah-h, you make me tired, it ain't a strong man, always, that can hurt the most. It's the fellah that knows how and where to hit. It's a whip that hurts the most."

"But it's a club that does the most damage."

"Huh! wait till you git hit with a rubber hose filled with gravel."

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"Why, Mac can knock me the length of the house with his left fist. He's done it plenty a' times." Then they came to reminiscences.

"Why, one time when Mac came home from a picnic at Schuetzen Park, he picked me right up offun the ground with one hand and held me right up in the air like that, and let me have it with a kitchun chain. Huh! talk to me about Ryer's little whips, Ryer ain't a patch on my man. You don't know what a good thrashun is."

"I don't, hey? you can just listen to what I tell you, Trina McTeague, when I say that Ryer can lay all over your man. You jest ought a been here one night when I sassed Ryer back, I tell you I'll never do that again. Why the worst lickin' Mister McTeague ever gave you was just little love taps to what I got. Besides I don' believe your man ever held you up with one hand and banged you like that with a chair, you wouldn't a' lived if he had."

"Oh, I ain't lyun to you," cried Trina, with shrill defiance getting to her feet. Missis Ryer rose likewise and clapped her arms akimbo.

"Why," she cried, "you just said as much yourself, that if you didn't dodge and get away he'd kill you."

"An' I'll say it again. I ain't gowun to eat my words for the best woman that ever wore shoes, an' you can chew on that, Missus Ryer. I tell you Mac's the hardust hittun husband a woman ever had."

"Well, I just guess I will," vociferated the ex-dentist.

Bewildered and raging at the unexpected reconciliation of their husbands, the two women had disappeared, Trina slamming the door of the kitchen with a parting cry of "pig feeder," which Missis Ryer immediately answered by thrusting her head out of a second story window and screaming at the top of her voice to the neighborhood in general, "dirty little drab."

Meanwhile the two men strode out of the house and across the street, their arms affectionately locked; the swing doors of the "Stube" flapped after them like a pair of wings.

* * * * *

That day settled the matter. Heretofore it had been the men who were enemies and their wives who were friends. Now the two men are fast friends, while the two women maintain perpetual feud. The "block" has come to recognize their quarrel as part of the existing order of things, like the leak from the gas-works and the collector's visits. Occasionally the women fight, and Missis Ryer, who is the larger and heavier, has something the best of it.

However, one particular custom common to both households remains unchanged both men continue to thrash their wives in the old ratio McTeague on the days when he is drunk (which are many), Ryer on the days when he was sober (Which are few).