

The Storyteller

OUR MR. RIB

PART I.

Before the six days' journey from Montreal to Vancouver we had never seen the happy-faced young man who had the berth next to ours in the sleeping-car. He came aboard at Ottawa, I think, for soon after we left there Edith said to me:

'Our young neighbor in front is going West on a hunting trip, I fancy. See his gun-case and rods. That's a book on fishing in the strap of his mackintosh, and he has all the little illustrated railway books about Nepigon and Alaska.'

We noticed, too, that he appeared to scan with keen interest every stream and lake that we passed. In fact, Edith named him 'Young Nimrod,' although only to me, of course; and as the days of the journey passed we several times amused ourselves by speculating where he lived and why he was going West.

No doubt we were more given to curiosity of this kind than old tourists. For this was our first and only journey across the continent, in fact, it was our wedding trip. We were going to Alaska, and then home by way of Portland, Oregon, and the Yellowstone Park.

We did not actually speak with the young man till we were near Banff; and we never, even at the end of it all, fully learned his name. He mentioned it, indeed, but neither of us quite caught it—something like Rib or Ribb, a queer sort of name, but I did not like to ask him again, although Edith said I should have done so.

After we heard him speak he seemed a little different and older. He talked well and spoke of the bridges as if he were a civil engineer; but all along we had thought that he could not possibly be more than eighteen years old. That, I imagine, was because he had such a happy, laughing face. He looked very young, and was on the alert for everything.

The accident which led to our adventure was nothing very serious. It occurred in the Selkirk Mountains. A great fir tree had been blown down, and its top had fallen across the rails. As a curve hid it from view till too late for the driver to stop his train, the locomotive was derailed, and with it the express and baggage cars. On going out we found the engine on the upper side of the track. If it had gone off on the other side there might have been trouble, for so far as I could see there was nothing to keep the whole train from rolling down into the valley, a thousand feet below.

The conductor thought we should be delayed for two or three hours, but experienced passengers declared that it would probably be six. Nobody appeared to care very much about the delay. The mountain scenery was grand, and the car porter said that there was plenty of game thereabouts. He stood on the car platform and pointed across to the opposite mountain, where he told us he had seen eight mountain-goats a fortnight previously, when the train passed.

'Panthers, too!' said he. 'You ought to hear 'em yell nights, when our train goes through and whistles!' How much of this the porter was inventing, just to astonish us, I could not say. I am no hunter myself, and, anyway, a man is not likely to care much for hunting or fishing during his honeymoon.

Edith and I got out and walked back along the track to enjoy the scenery. After the wrecking-train came to put our locomotive back on the rails, twelve or fifteen of us walked on ahead and climbed on the roof of one of the great snow-sheds—a splendid place for a promenade. We went on for nearly or quite a mile, enjoying the superb views. We were really sorry when a brake-man came after us, to say that they were ready to go on—after a delay of only two hours.

Hastening back, we took our places in the car, and then we heard the porter say to the conductor, 'Dey's all here, all dey Marie Antoinettes'—the name of our car—but the young gent'man in sixteen.'

'Where did he go?' asked the conductor.

'Can't say for sure,' replied the porter. 'Took his gun an' started out. Tole him not to go too far. Tole him we wouldn't be stavin' here long. But he's one ob dem young gent'men dat's all for huntin'.'

'Why, it's our Mr. Rib!' exclaimed Edith, with an anxious glance at his seat. 'Come to think of it, he did not go with the rest of us.'

The conductor had the whistle blown again—three toots at a time—and shortly after again and yet again. But our Mr. Rib did not appear. Then two breakmen began shouting for him, thinking that possibly he might not understand the whistle. The porter thought he had heard a gun fired down in the valley.

The conductor at last lost patience. 'I cannot hold my train here all the afternoon for this young man to hunt goats!' he exclaimed, with indignation. 'He was warned. If he does not show up in five minutes more he will have to foot it to Glacier House and take to-morrow's train on.'

'Serve him right,' several said. 'Good lesson for him.'

Edith and I were not a little concerned about him, however. There lay all his things in the seat; even his checks were sticking in the back of the cushion.

'Why, I think it is dreadful to go off and leave him here in such a wild place! What if something has happened to him?' Edith said to me. 'What if he has shot himself?'

'That's not likely,' I replied. 'He has probably, seen game, and kept on after it.'

'Perhaps he has got lost, then!' cried Edith. 'Why, I call it cold-blooded to go off and leave him like this! Arthur, we musn't do it! Somebody must stay and find him.'

I had never seen Edith so much in earnest before. In fact, we had then been acquainted only about a year in all, and of course we did not know each other quite so well as we now do. Young married people always have some things to learn of each other's traits and ways.

'But, Edith,' I argued, 'we do not know much about this Mr. Rib. Like as not he meant to stay over and hunt, and take the train to-morrow.'

'Oh, Arthur!' exclaimed Edith, pointing to the young man's things in the seat. 'Is that likely? You know it isn't.'

I had to admit that it was not likely, and I felt concerned for him, too; but I did not see what we could do about it. The train was clearly on the point of starting.

'Oh, dear! what shall we do? What shall we do?' Edith cried, for just then we heard the air brake go off, s-s-s-s-sz! She flew toward the car door, and I jumped up and ran after her.

The porter tried to interpose. 'Train just goin', miss,' he said. 'Cayn't get off now.'

But Edith was past him and on the rear platform when I overtook her.

'You are not going to get off!' I exclaimed, amazed. 'Edith, I won't let you get off! The train is starting! It has started! Edith, I won't let you get off!'

Then I had to learn suddenly the limitation of my matrimonial authority. Edith had got off! Naturally I jumped after her.

'My dear girl,' I said, with assumed calmness, 'you are excited. This isn't called for. We must get on the car again.'

'Arthur,' said she, giving me such a look as I had never seen on her face before, 'I wouldn't leave any human being behind in this cowardly way. What if it were you? Why, he is only a boy—and inexperienced. He may have shot himself with his gun or be lost. Think of his family—and we were going to leave him here! Arthur, have you a heart?'

I had thought that I had one. Moreover, Edith had never spoken to me in this way before. But I had pride, too; and it was very embarrassing, for by this time the rear platform of the train, which had stopped a few feet away, was crowded with our fellow-passengers, and there were some very broad smiles on the faces of several of the men. The conductor, who had seen Edith and me alight and had stopped the train, ran back along the embankment.

'Cannot hold the train longer, madam!' he said, positively.

But Edith's resolution was taken. 'I should never feel right about it,' she said. 'Something has happened to him. Arthur, if he can walk to Glacier House we can. I'm a famous walker. I may be in the wrong, but oblige me, won't you?'

'Certainly, Edith,' I replied; and I called to the porter to put all our hand-baggage and wraps off at Glacier House, to be called for.

'Very well,' commented the conductor, grimly; but he was not a little staggered by the situation forced on him. 'Let me see your tickets.' He hastily stoppered them for the next train, and again signalled to go ahead, muttering audibly as he did so: 'If that was my wife, I'd pick her up and put her on the car.'

Of course that was none of his business, nor did it concern the smiling passengers on the rear platform. It was purely Edith's affair and mine; and it was my business to stand by her and defend whatever she did—so it appeared to me during the honeymoon.

But the situation was new to me and exceedingly sudden, and I felt nettled that Edith did not heed my judgment in the matter.