

“A HAMELY CRACK”

IF you were asked where, in all your experience of human nature, you had met the strangest people and heard the most amusing conversations, you would, I am sure, instantly reply—“The railway train.” So far as I am concerned, at all events, it has been in the railway carriage that I have come across more funny folks than ever I met on the stage, and from these I have taken some of my best character-studies, both as regards appearance and mannerisms of gesture and speech.

Some years ago I was travelling from Glasgow to Hamilton. The only other occupant of the compartment on leaving Glasgow was a stout, middle-aged woman, evidently of the working class. She was dressed in a rather shabby black gown, over which she wore a dolman that had likewise seen some years of service, while on her head was a wee bonnet trimmed with imitation cherries. At Newton Station another woman opened the carriage door. She was even stouter than the lady already

seated, and she "peched" dreadfully until she managed to sink down on the cushions.

"Thae trains are awfu' things," she exclaimed, turning to me with a sideward shake of her head; "they fair excite me!"

"Ma goodness!" broke in the other female, who had been looking out of the far window, and had not seen the newcomer's face. "Is that you, Mrs. Tamson? I thocht I kent the vice!"

"Ay, it's me, Mrs. Lindsay. I'm rale gled tae see ye. An' ye're lookin' that weel, mind; I wad hardly a kent ye!" went on the new arrival, moving away from opposite me and seating herself near Mrs. Tamson. All the way to Hamilton the two kept up "a hamely crack" on something like the following lines:

"It's richt cauld the day, dae ye no think?" asked Mrs. Lindsay, drawing her cloak closer in to her ample figure. "Ma feet are like lumps o' lead!"

"Ay, it's gey snell," was the reply. Then, with no apparent connection between the subjects: "Is yer man workin'?"

"Ay, but he's no oot the day. Ye see, we were up gey late last night. 'Dumplins'—ye ken 'Dump-lins'!—weel, 'Dumplins' an' his wife cam' roon' to see us last nicht, an' we had a bit o' a shindy, an'

Jamie's heid's feelin' a bit thick the day. That's the wey that he's no at his work."

"That's an awfu' queer name that auld MacWheep's gotten—'Dumplings.'" mused Mrs. Tamson. "Hoo on earth did they come tae ca' him siccan a name?"

"Oh, did ye never hear? Weel, for years he went about tellin' a'body that his wife Mag could mak' better dumplin's than ony woman in Hamilton, so the name just stuck to him, an' he seldom gets onything else. As I was sayin', they cam' to oor place last nicht. Mag—Mrs. MacWheep, that is—wasna feelin' very weel; she was complainin' o' an awfu' cauld in the heid——"

"A nesty thing, ma dear, a rale nesty thing; I've jist got rid o' yin masel'."

"Weel, to let ye understand," continued Mrs. Lindsay, paying no attention to the interruption, "Mag's nose was runnin' like a burn, an' she was lookin' that peely-wally I was sorry for her. Rale sorry! So I asks her in a whisper if she thocht a drap o' the hard stuff would dae her ony hairm. 'No,' says she—gey quick-like I thocht, but it's no for me to say onything. So I sends Jamie oot for a half-mutchkin, an' gi'es him a ten-shillin' bit, tellin' him to come back as quick's he could, an' we would

a' hae a wee taste thegither. But when dae ye think he cam' hame, the lad? Ye widna believe it! Hauf-past ten, an' as fu's a wulk!"

"Sic a disgrace!" exclaimed Mrs. Tamson. "Ye maun hae been black affronted—afore 'Dumplings' an' his wife, too!"

"Black affronted!—I was bilin', an' ca'ed him a' the frosty, frizzle-faced pee-weeps that ever lived. But he jist stood an' laughed i' ma face! An' yet it wasna the shame o' the thing that annoy't me! There was that poor woman Mag MacWheepie standin' wi' her hanky at her nose, the very pictur o' disappointment. Ye see, if she hadna been expectin' a drap the suspense wouldna hae been sae bad. At the same time, mind ye, Mrs. Tamson, at the same time," went on Mrs. Lindsay, gradually speaking louder and louder—"at the same time I div not think that Mag MacWheepie should have said what she did. You wadna believe what she said!"

"Ma goodness, lassie, what did the woman say? She didna daur——"

— "Ay, that's jist what she did. Fancy her turnin' on ma yin an' ca'in him oot'n his name! It was mair than flesh an' blood could stand, so I lost ma rag, an' let her tak' what I gien her! I div not

often lift ma haun, ma dear, but when I div there's some wecht in it, I gie ye my word!"

"Whaur was her man?" asked Mrs. Tamson, intensely interested in her friend's recital of these stirring events.

"Oh, he went oot to look for ma yin, an' he never cam' back," explained Mrs. Lindsay, calmly licking the points of her fingers and "damping down" her front hair on either side. "I don't think Mag'll ever come back either," she added with an unctuous chuckle. "But I'm rale glad Tammy MacWheeples wasna there when I open't oot on Mag, or I wad hae been in the Police Coort this mornin'. I gien her her character, I'm tellin' ye, an' if it wasna for the wee man in the corner there [meaning me, I presume], I would jist tell ye exackly what I said."

"I wad like fine tae ken, Mrs. Lindsay," wheedled the other. "Could ye no' look roon' the morn's afternoon an' hae a cup o' tea an' a crack? Ye'll be richt welcome, mind!"

"Well, I will," responded Mrs. Lindsay. "I'm gaun west the morn onyway to see my guid-dochter Nance, an' I'll look in i' the by-gaun."

"Yer guid-dochter! I didna ken ye had a son mairried! No' Peter, surely?"

"Ay, Peter, richt enough," dryly remarked Mrs.

Lindsay, "but the less said aboot that the better. Laddies will be daft, ye ken, Mrs. Tamson, but there's nae use o' sayin' ony mair. They're livin' in a single end—it'll be as muckle as Serab can keep clean, I'll warrant."

Then Mrs. Lindsay, feeling probably that she had had quite a fair share of the conversation up to that point, proceeded to ask Mrs. Tamson when she had last seen her friend Mrs. Fleming.

"Jean Fleemin's nae frien' o' mine, Mrs. Lindsay, an' I'll thank ye tae mind it!" tartly responded Mrs. Tamson, giving a very decided snort through her nose.

"Hoots, toots, lassie," soothingly interjected the other, "I didna ken there was onything wrang wi' you an' her. I certainly did hear something aboot it, noo that I come to mind, but it clean slippit me for the meenit." Whether or not Mrs. Tamson saw through the little ruse, she readily accepted her friend's apology, and forthwith started a long and slanderous tirade against the whole Fleming family.

"As for Jean hersel'," she continued, "I wadna put the worst past her! They tell me—but ye ken yersel' what they say. Mind you, had onybody said wan word to me against Jean Fleemin' three

months ago I would not have believed it, but a wumman that can turn roon' an' misca' her best freen', Mrs. Tamson—an' that's what she did to me, as ye ken fine—weel, as I say, I wadna put the worst past her!" And Mrs. Lindsay subsided with another snort which spoke volumes.

"I was speakin' to wee Mary Macintyre yesterday," quietly remarked Mrs. Tamson after a becoming pause. "A queer craitur yon, eh?"

"A sneevelin' body, if ever there was yin," promptly commented Mrs. Lindsay; "but her mith-er was the same afore her!"

"She was tellin' me," proceeded Mrs. Tamson, "that her man had been idle for six weeks. She was awfu' doon in the mooth. I was rale sorry for her. But they tell me that her man's in twa Societies—12s 6d in the week aff ane an' seeven bob aff the ither. She hasna muckle to complain about, I'm thinkin'."

"Deed no!" was Mrs. Lindsay's reply. "But some folk never ken when they're weel aff! I often wonder whaur she gets a' the braws. The last time I seen her she had on a new dolman, that wisna there for a penny less than twenty-five shillin's."

"Oh," quickly put in Mrs. Tamson, "a'body kens whaur the dolman cam' frae. She deals wi' a wee

packman frae Larkha'—a shillin' in the week, an' sometimes no' that! We could a' get fine brows, my dear, if we dealt wi' packmen."

"That's so, Mrs. Tamson," agreed the other. "The only time I manage to get onything new is when the 'Cop.' dividend's due. I'm sure it's a rale help, the 'Cop.,' an' hoo I wad manage without it I div not know. Ye're in the 'Cop.' yoursel', are ye no?"

"Ay, oh, ay," responded Mrs. Lindsay, an expression of pain crossing her face. "But unfortunately oor book's in Jamie's name, an' he aye lifts the 'divvy.' I canna say that I see muckle o't, for he gets drunk every time he draws't. I've asked them at the Store a dizzen times to change it to ma name, but they say they canna dae that without his written permission. An' Jamie never was guid at writin'! By the bye," continued Mrs. Lindsay, evidently anxious to turn the conversation from a painful topic, "hoo's yer ain man gettin' on? He wasna very weel the last time I saw ye."

"He's no much better, I'm sorry to say"—and Mrs. Tamson heaved a sigh—"it's thae terrible pains in his legs—skiatic, I think they ca' the trouble. He was aff for a full week a month ago, no' able to pit his left leg to the grun'. Somebody advised me to try roashtit ingins for't, so I got a pun'

o' thae big Spanish anes, roasted them as weel as I could, an' pat them on his leg. I maun admit they did him some good, but at the end o' twa days the hoose was smellin' like a pigstye. In fact, some o' the neebours sent for the Sanitary Inspector, thinkin' that the drains had got choked. I'm no nice-nosed masel', but yon ingins kickit up the awf'lest stink ever ye seen! The smell's no awa' frae the hoose yet, an' Jamie's leg's as bad as ever."

By this time we had arrived at Hamilton West Station, and as Mrs. Lindsay laboriously stepped down from the compartment, leaving her friend to go on with me to the main station, she whispered in a stage aside to the latter: "If ye happen to meet Mag MacWheepie, never let dab!"