

The Mutes

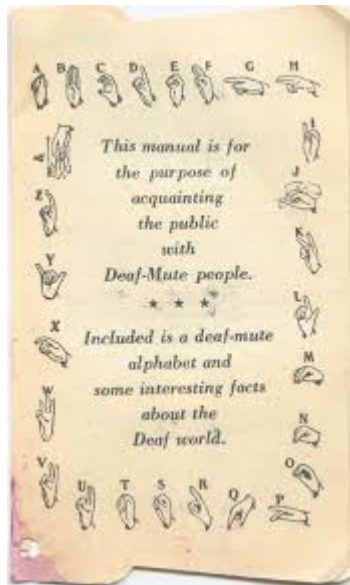
by Con Chapman

They were a couple who looked much like any other. He was shaped liked most middle-aged men, an egg stood up on end; she was thinner, maybe she ate less than him, trying to keep her figure. To look at them, you'd have thought there were normal, which in most ways they were, the exception being, they were mutes.



She was deaf, but he was not; they both could sign. They worked at the county shelter for the disabled and retarded; filling packages, making small objects that were easy to put together. Other people at the shelter had parents, or relatives, but they didn't. They'd come from someplace else, nobody knew.

They were trying to live a normal life, or as normal as they could without the power of speech. They didn't want any handouts; they wanted to earn their keep if they could. He had learned how to play the accordion at some point in his life, and so he had a business card printed up that said



"Liven up your next party or dinner with the sweet sounds of an accordion!" He wouldn't perform on the street like a common beggar, unless there was something special going on, like Midnight Madness on Main Street, or a traveling carnival was in town. When that happened, he'd play as if part of the event,

discreetly taking a place on the edge of the scene, smiling at the crowds who passed by. She'd take a shoebox around with a home-made paper cover that said "If you enjoy the music, please help us out and make a contribution. We take no charity, but ask that you give so that we can live. Thank you."

One night he had been hired to play at a fish fry out at the Community Center, the one on a pond south of town. The man in charge of getting him to the event picked up the couple at their home, and brought them to his house first, so his children could meet them. He thought it would be a good lesson for them.

"Kids," he said when he got home, "come on down for a second." His son and daughter had taken their baths and were already in their pajamas. "This here is the couple I was telling you about at dinner last night."

They're deaf and dumb, but they still work and earn a living, and he practices his accordion every day."

The children looked at the couple, who smiled down at them. "It just goes to show," their father continued, "That you shouldn't let anything hold you back, not a speech impediment or a handicap or nothing. And if you practice your instruments every day, you'll get good enough so that people will pay to hear you play."



The man and his wife nodded at the children and smiled. "Now say goodnight," their mother said, and gave instructions to the baby sitter who had come to watch the kids.

The children said "Goodnight," and the mute woman bent down to give them a hug. The children hung back at their mother's legs, but she gave them a nudge, and they hugged the woman.

When the couple had gone, the baby sitter took the children upstairs for a story and then to tuck them in. "What did daddy mean when he said those people were deaf and dumb?" the boy asked. "That means they can't talk and they can't hear," the baby sitter said. "So it doesn't mean they're stupid?" the girl asked. "No, 'dumb' also means you can't make a sound."



"How did they get that way?" the boy asked. "Some people are born that way, and some people do things to themselves that keep them from talking" the baby sitter said.

"Like what?" the girl asked. "Oh, I don't know," the sitter said. "Like opening up a soda bottle with your mouth, or if you were in a car accident and got hit in the mouth."

The boy and the girl went to bed and talked about what it would be like to have parents who didn't talk, keeping their voices down. "We'd never get yelled at," the girl said.

"They'd have to come get us instead of calling us to come home from the park," the boy said. "And they couldn't tell us to do our homework," he added. "It would be fun."

Out at the community center, the woman carried the shoebox around under the Japanese lanterns while her husband played. She thought about the house she'd been in, which was big enough to be a boarding house—and those sweet children. She smiled at the people, who were smoking cigarettes and having drinks on a patio overlooking a pond; laughing, happy.

She thought back to the tiny apartment on the second floor of the house they'd go back to later that night; one bedroom, one bathroom, a kitchenette and a little living room with a coffee table, a portable TV, a book case and a curio shelf. An urge welled up inside her, twisting her air pipe like a dish towel being wrung out, and she gave out a little moan, a cry.

From "Town Folk & Country People."

