

AN HALLUCINATION.

Chicago America. She played upon the burlesque stage. With smile somewhat mechanical. Her costume would, methinks, outrage The ultra-puritanical. Her stage apparel, I must say, Was quite inclined to brevity. And not constructed in a way Conductive to longevity. The fairy form that once I prized O'er all contemporaneous, That figure that I idolized Is made by means extraneous. I'm jeered at now by heartless ends. Alack-a-day! She pads, she pads!

Mr. Ashton's Second Sermon.

Charles R. Harker in the Argonaut. Her bold, black eyes stared at him as he went by the open bar-room door. She stood on the threshold, and Mr. Ashton flushed at her smile as if she passed. She had long since ceased to blush; others might do it for her, but she was in no wise ashamed of her appearance. Strangely out of place she looked in the garish light, laughing and joking with the rough men near her. Such a girlish embodiment of the vice he was seeking the young minister was not prepared to behold. The heavy-footed, coarse-faced men, smoking strong-smelling pipes and sickening cigars; the imitation dandies, with swaggering gait and flaring neckties, they seemed to belong to the vicious place. But the girl, with her handsome face, plump arms and shoulders, bare as if she were in a ball-room, and her scanty pink dress barely reaching to her knees, she was startlingly incongruous. So young, so pretty, so hardened, going down so swiftly to the gates of hell! Ah, it was pitiful.

Mr. Ashton sighed compassionately as he went into the hall adjoining the bar-room. A few kerosene lamps ranged along the walls shone dully through a blue haze of tobacco smoke. Long wooden settees covered the floor, which was dirty and uncarpeted. It was Saturday night, and a larger number than usual of men and youths lounged upon the seats or gathered in groups about the hall, across the rear end of which extended a stage, with footlights and curtain. A low, dingy-white gallery, connecting with the stage and running half way around the room, was divided into a dozen or more little stalls, called "wine-rooms." In them certain moneyed and reckless patrons of the place could sit at their ease while drinking and viewing the stage and scene below, or they could with curtains screen themselves completely from the public gaze, as they preferred.

Such was the thriving young Western city's most notorious den of vice, sink of iniquity, centre of sinful contagion, etc., against which the young minister had recently thundered. His first sermon, delivered the Sunday before, had made a profound impression. It had set all the better portion of the community to talking about this plague-spot, known as a "cave," though it was up one flight from the main street. The Daily Mirror printed the sermon in full, with warm editorial indorsement. It applauded his earnest, fiery declaration that he would not, could not, discuss dogmas and creeds, living or dead, till he had done his best to start a crusade against the pestiferous sin at their very doors. Until this foul snare, which was set before their eyes openly, but into which even the boy from his Sunday school were blindly walking—until this was destroyed, there was no higher or holier duties to perform, no more vital theme to dwell upon. It was a strong, stirring blast from a mail-clad warrior, who did not seek in distant lands for the foe in his own house.

With the crusading spirit strong within him, Mr. Ashton, in the midst of his preparation of his second sermon, determined to slip out of his study quietly and see the monster of vice with his own eyes. Then, returning with his hideous visage still fresh in mind, he could vividly describe it on the morrow.

So, taking a seat well up to the stage, for he was rather near-sighted, he looked about him. It could scarcely be pharisaical, he thought, with a shudder of disgust, to thank the Lord that he was not as some other men were—such as those around him. What enjoyment could they get out of such a repulsive place? The foul air was hot and nauseating. Already he felt slightly feverish, and his head was beginning to throb. There was none of the glitter and glare which he had expected to find. But, of course, it was early yet; he would wait as best he could for the curtain to rise.

Meanwhile he studied the faces of those nearest to him, trying to read their thoughts, listening to their talk, and endeavoring to put himself in their places. Two brawny fellows, with an Irish brogue, were warmly arguing about a strike of iron workers then in progress, and their reeking whisky-drinkers' breath swept over his thin, shrinking nostrils. Next to them, three boys, the oldest not over fifteen, were animatedly discussing, while puffing cigarettes, the peculiarities of their "boss." Such shocking profanity, so carelessly uttered, the minister had never before heard. They left their seats, and following them with his eye down the hall and through the open door, he saw them go into the bar-room, stopping on the way to chat a minute with the bare-shouldered siren at the entrance. He began to realize that he had got into another world, the inhabitants of which neither knew nor cared what he might have been saying about them from his fashionable pulpit to his silken and fur-clad congregation. Clenching his thin, white hands together passionately, he longed for the power of an autocret that he might arise and command that this soul-destroying siren be instantly cut out, these good-hearted but imbruted ones about him forced to walk in the light till they came to know, as they must in time, that it was vastly better than darkness.

The whining of a fiddle, followed by the clamor of a small orchestra, interrupted his thoughts, and presently up went the lights and the curtain. It was a variety performance, somewhat above the average, as a traveling company had gone to pieces in the city that week, and some of the members, unable for reasons of a distinctly financial nature to return to Chicago,

had in their stranded necessity turned to the live stage. They were skilled in the art of making both good and wicked people laugh. Mr. Ashton was forced to confess to himself that the stage performance was a deal more innocent than the surroundings. To be sure, some of the actresses appeared in tights and all of them wore abbreviated skirts, but so, as he knew, did actresses occasionally in theatres and opera-houses of the highest respectability. Stamp out the bar and wine-rooms and there would be nothing so very debasing about the resort, he decided. And after that he made no more mental memoranda. For upon the stage came one who instantly caught and held his serious, short-sighted eyes as none had done before. He leaned forward breathlessly, his heart beating like a trip-hammer, a scarlet line in either cheek. The voluptuous form, so freely displayed, did not affect him in the least, but the face—the face! he could see nothing else. It thrilled him with a nameless ecstasy, the arch glance from the sparkling eyes, the pouting red lips, the curves of chin and cheek, guiltless of paint, it was to him no gaudy dancer, but a living picture suddenly advancing from out of a hidden nook of a half-forgotten time. Who—what was she? Of whom did she so vividly remind him? He caught up his flimsy programme. "Belle la Reine, the famous queen of the variety stage." It was a lie. She was not a creature of that sort. Did she look at him then? Did she know him, though he could not recognize her? His hands grew moist as he twisted the programme around them nervously. She sang to him alone, of that he was positive, and if he could have seen himself as she saw him, his clear-cut, intellectual face standing out in sharp contrast to the heavy features around him, he might not have wondered that she looked at him as she did. Her dancing, though graceful, annoyed him; her songs he did not hear, except one that told of bygone love; that stirred him strangely. She seemed to talk to him with her eyes, and held him spellbound. But it could not last forever. She vanished the way she had come, and with a choking gasp he realized that she was gone. For him the lights were out, the performance ended. He sat dazed for a few minutes and then, grasping his hat, was about to leave his seat, having seen much more than he came to see, when a boy touched his elbow and handed him a slip of paper. Seemingly intuitively to know what it meant, he unfolded the note and read at a glance:

"An old friend would like to see you. Follow the boy."

He was comparatively a stranger in the city, probably nobody in the hall knew him. But he did not stop to reason. Certainly he could not be blamed for following the boy to see an old friend. He had no thought of turning back even when his small guide led him into the low gallery, by way of the side door near the stage. Before he fully realized where he was he stood in one of the calmly-lit wine-rooms, alone with the queen of the variety stage. She sat with her back to the audience-room below, between which and her snowy shoulders was a dingy red curtain. Still arrayed in her scanty dainty attire, her dainty, silvery shoes elevated to the edge of a round table upon which were bottles and glasses, she coolly surveyed him.

"You wished to see me?" he said, unhesitatingly, advancing a step.

"Certainly," she replied, taking her feet off the table and rising; "but I don't want to see you as white as a ghost. What's the matter? Do I scare you?"

"It is the foul air below. I am not used to it and I have had a few dizzy spells lately," he murmured, unsteadily, leaning on the table as, for an instant, even she seemed blurred and far-away looking.

She came to him at once, took his hat from his nerveless hand, and ran her cool fingers soothingly over his aching forehead.

"Here, down with this and you'll feel better," she said, pouring out some liquor from one of the bottles. He recoiled with a shudder, put the glass from his lips, and stepped back.

"You mistake," he said, gravely; "I am not a frequenter of this place—I am a clergyman."

"As if I didn't know you!" she laughed, gayly; "and to think you didn't know me! Don't you really recognize me? Come, look, not around, but at me, once, good and hard, and see if I am not an old friend."

She poised airily before him, and then, as he still seemed puzzled, she said, softly:

"Ned!"

"A flame of red shot across the Rev. Edward Ashton's pallid face.

"Olive! Olive! My God, is it you?" he whispered, and sank into a chair by the table, staring at her dumbly, she still smiling. The minister was a young man, but his heart had once been wrung by this same fair woman. No, not the same. That was years ago, and she was then not as she must be now. Equally thrilling she had been to him then, though; and most terribly had she disappointed both him and all her friends. She it was who had turned his life-course. In the bitterness of his sorrow over her mad conduct he had set his face heavenward. And he had not known her that night till then!

She saw that he was profoundly moved, but she did not know how fiercely he was trying to crush back the feeling which burned in his eyes as he looked at her.

Perching on the table, she caught hold of his hand and began to talk to him of old times. But he did not listen to her. He was conscious of the squealing of the orchestra-violins, the stamping of heavy feet, and the tomfoolery upon the stage. In the adjoining stall he heard a drunken man trying to sing a ribald song with a woman, who was laughing at the man's attempt. Presently, though soft fingers held his own and a fascinating face was close to his, though satiny shoulders were so near him—presently he would arise and put Satan from him. But he could not do it instantly. She was so frankly joyous, so merrily bewitching, not a repellent line from her laughing eyes to the tiny shoes whose heels she was kicking together as she sat before him. With an inward wince he shut his eyes, and was about to stand erect and forbidding, when he was shocked by a chuckling laugh behind him. Withdrawing his hand from hers, as if from the touch of fire, he turned his head with a guilty flush. A man, in a flaxen wig and comedian's stage-garb, stood in the curtained doorway.

"I know that they're guilty, but, oh, they're so sly!" laughed the intruder, repeating a line of a topical song he had just been singing on the stage, and, bowing low, he disappeared.

Mr. Ashton reached for his hat, the flush dying out of his face and leaving it very pale. But she put out her hand restrainingly, a quick glitter of anger melting to tenderness in her marvellously expressive eyes.

"It's only Jack," she said, hastily; "don't mind him nor his impertinence."

"Jack?" questioned Mr. Ashton, hoarsely, wavering again under her glance.

"Yes," she said, carelessly; "but he never troubles me. I do as I please in all things. You needn't think of retreating now, though. He has caught you, fairly or unfairly. If you went now he would be sure to have it in the morning papers, and make a few dollars out of the scandal, don't you see? But if you will bide a wee, and be sociable and sensible, I'll answer for it that not a whisper from him gets to the sensitive ears of your goody-goody friends."

Each word sank like burning acid deep into the young minister's heart. His face grew ghastly, the little red-curtained stall swam round and round, the bright creature leaning toward him seemed to be receding in a luminous mist.

"Olive, Olive!" he gasped, reaching out wildly toward her.

"My poor old Puritan Ned," she said, softly, sinking on her knees before him; "let this and me cheer you. For once forget everything but that you and I are here; neither of us will ever be here again, and never again, perhaps, will

we be together. Drown care and enjoy yourself, Ned, dear old boy."

She lifted the glass, she had once rejected to his lips. He this time clutched it, and, though it was not wine but a far stronger liquor, he drank it to the last drop as if it were cooling water.

In the gray of the Sunday morning, while the city was still slumbering, a tall, black-coated priestly figure stole homeward like a belated night-thief. Snow had fallen during the darkness, and the wide street of the new town was smooth and trackless, white and soft as wool beneath his hurrying feet. His footprints, showing a black trail behind him on the sidewalk stones, seemed to his feverish eyes to mark the passage of a foul thing over the dazzling purity, each step defiling the spotless snow. He felt the cold, he felt himself in with his latch-key, and in another minute, noiseless as a burglar, he was hidden in his study.

Brazen bells clanged out in the crisp wintry air, calling to church the just and the unjust, earthly saints, and human sinners. The first sleighs of the season jingled along with merry dissonance of the quiet, frosty atmosphere. The broad streets, house tops and fences gleamed in the sun, each evenly incrusting with frozen jewels by the gentle snowfall. The ringing laughter of boys, snow-balling one another by the curbstones, mingled with the music of the bells. Sleigh load after sleigh load of church-goers arrived at the stately entrance of the church, which was the architectural pride of the young city. Within its lofty walls the organ rolled its rumbling voice high up to the vaulted roof.

Ladies in furs and silks, gentlemen in overcoats and broadcloth followed the soft-footed ushers up the richly carpeted aisles to the luxurious pews. Flowers rare and costly were before the pulpit, and added to their fragrance were the delicate perfumes from numerous fair roses in the shape of the city's most beautiful daughters. The pews were filled to the last one. It was a great congregation—the greatest the church had ever held. So the reporter decided as he sharpened his pencils and noted the prominent men present, from the mayor down. The fame of the young minister's eloquence had gathered together all of the city's leaders to listen to his second sermon. But he was late in appearing. Minute after minute went by, the organ ceased to sound and then began again. The official chief of the church's laymen grew uneasy. It would be a great pity to disappoint such a splendid assembly by an untimely sick-headache. He did not know that the young minister might even then be working at his sermon, with flaming eyes and trembling fingers, trying to make up lost time. But he did know that Mr. Ashton had not looked overstrung. Finally he slipped into his overcoat and went out in search of the tardy preacher. It was but a few steps to the pastor's residence.

"Mr. Ashton, I think, is still in his study," said the housekeeper; "I have not seen him this morning."

"But it is late," protested the churchman, in soft indignation at such thoughtlessness. Eloquence was not punctuality, and there were the honorable mayor and the highest people in the city kept waiting. He tapped sharply at the study door, then he called and shook the knob. Then, finding the door locked, and being assured by the now alarmed housekeeper that the minister must be there, he burst a strong man and with this time excited, burst the lock and flung open the door.

In the chilly study, darkened by the drawn curtains at the windows, nothing but cold ashes in the grate, the minister lay sleeping his last sleep. Drawn up to his writing-table, upon a lounge was extended his black-overcoated form. The upturned toes, though rigid in death, yet showed lingering about the white lips a tender smile, as if in the solemn repose he had been visited by a pleasant dream. A bottle labeled "chloral" stood upon the table. The churchman groaned in horror:

"He must have felt nervous and taken an overdose. He has been dead for hours."

Beneath the bottle lay two scraps of paper. Upon one was pencilled:

"An old friend would like to see you. Follow the boy."

Upon the other, a trembling scrawl, the pencil still beside it:

"Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall."

MRS. CAIRD AND HER VIEWS.

She Has a Lovely Home, a Lovely Husband, and Makes Famous Tea. From the Evening World.

Mrs. Mona Caird, whose views of marriage are known to fame, is a woman of culture, a lover of jewels and laces and dainty draperies, open to all æsthetic influences. Her drawing-room in London reflects her quaint and original taste in its arrangements, its inviting nooks, and the odd windows over the mantel. The "den" in which she writes cries out against its name. It is a marvel of white enamel and delicate tintings, even the bookcases and the pretty writing-desk showing the fleckless finish. Mr. Caird proclaims himself ready to maintain against all the world that his wife makes the best cup of tea in London. She is a pretty figure while serving it, clothed in a long, falling house-robe in tints of blue and gold, and her heavy braided hair waving low on her forehead, the dainty cups and saucers, fragile as eggshells, seeming fitter burdens than sociological treatises for her fingers.

Mr. Caird is a son of James Caird, and, judging from his quizzical expression when the subject arises, is more interested in his wife's fate than in her theories. He listens respectfully, however, while she tells me that her views of the marriage relation have been misunderstood quite generally.

"Instead of holding," she said, "that men and women should be allowed to meet for a visit in a country house, I believe most steadfastly in life-long marriages; but the bond should be a free contract, and the parties should be free to dissolve it, and wife found that, after all, the union was a mistake and harmonious life together impossible, they should not be forced to live on for the sake of their dear, terrible existence, outraging both body and soul. Strange as it may seem, I believe that to make marriage dissoluble is the way to greater permanence in the relation. The fact that a thing cannot be undone is enough to make many wish to try."

"Do you advocate any immediate changes?"

"Only education to a higher view of marriage responsibilities. All these things are matters of course."

Mrs. Caird is a restless soul, and, like many Americans but few Englishwomen, an occasional victim of nervous prostration.

Kicking Is Contagious.

Did you ever hear an old crank get started to kicking in a crowded street-car? He starts in by complaining that every car on the line invariably tried to miss him, the conductor and gripman turning their heads in another direction as he stood waving his cane on the crossing. Then he spouts about the general lack of respect, and denounces all cable lines in the country, declaring that he never encountered a courteous employé of one of them in his life. By this time two old women sitting opposite him have become interested, and they follow suit with a tale of cable-car war. In turn every old woman and man in the car remembers and relates some grievance against cable lines and servants, and only the young lady in one corner and the reporter in the other are left to form the overwhelming minority, the satisfied public.

For the Most Popular Boy or Girl.

THE SUNDAY HERALD is going to give a magnificent present to the Washington boy or girl who obtains the largest number of votes in a contest which begins to-day. Read the full particulars of it on the twentieth page of to-day's HERALD.

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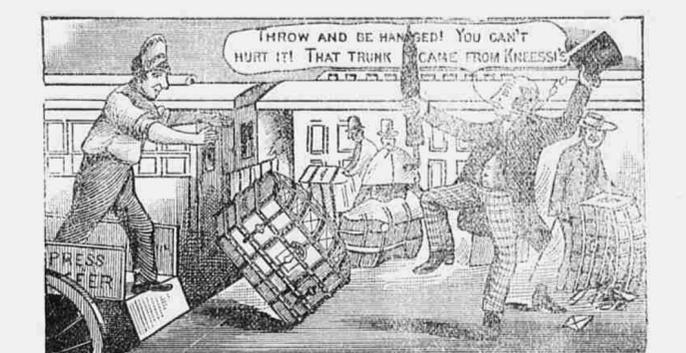
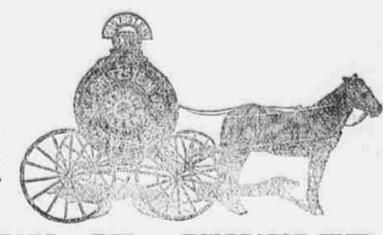
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