

A Melodrama—the Union

By T. Baron Russell

I

Is it not almost unprintable? To give to it anything of actuality one would have—no, not to invent, but to suppress. As a bit of life it was too impossibly dramatic, too fictional, too much—what can one say?—too much like a story in a Christmas number, and a story constructed in the worst style, at that.

Yet, it happened! and the Organist is my witness. She had taken me to see the Workhouse Chapel: incidentally, to hear her play (for which purpose one would go much further than to this chapel), little purposing, as you may believe, to give me sheer Surrey melodrama thrown in. The beadle admitted us by a little door, cut in the black painted wooden gates. He admitted us with a smile. A Union Beadle *can* smile on occasion, and I was to find soon that the coming of the Organist was the signal for many smiles in this “Union.” One or two inmates were waiting in the paved courtyard. They all smiled, too, at sight of the Organist, and hovered forward to greet her. One man had a crutch, and walked with difficulty, but he shuffled quickly over the flagstones, and followed us with the others into the chapel, where a good number were already waiting—just so many vacant-looking, tired

tired old faces, that brightened up and became animated, covetous of an individual recognition, when the Organist passed through to her seat.

The most devout of the intending worshippers was a woman of, perhaps, no more than fifty, who alone took no heed, kneeling already with a rapt, ecstatic gaze that made her face almost "eerie." She was, I learned, hopelessly imbecile, and had to be led into and out of church, the only incident of her life. An appalling amount of tribulation seemed to be collected here and personified in these old women. One felt a more instinctive sympathy somehow for them than for the men, poor fellows. Even a couple of younger women, who carried a baby apiece, did not convey the same aching sense of desolation as these shrivelled, wrinkling old crones, in their hideous round bonnets and grey shawls.

The chapel was a gaunt structure, devoid of adornment; but some one had put a few yellow daisies in a tumbler on the close stove—cold now, and shining with blacklead. On the mean font, placed in emblematic neighbourhood to the doorway, stood a small crockery jug. "A christening afterwards," the Organist whispered to me, in explanation.

She took her seat. The organ, unscreened, stood in a corner, facing the congregation. An old, grey man, in spectacles, sat at the side, leaning on the bellows handle, ready to perform his duty when the Organist should give the sign.

She pulled out a few stops and uncovered the single manual. The paupers moved in their seats, leaning forward, anticipant. It was easy to gather that the air was a familiar one. At the first notes, nods and smiles of delighted recognition were exchanged. The unmusical mind only takes kindly to tunes that it knows. Not a pauper moved until the last note had sounded and died away.

Then

Then they leaned back, settling in their places with a wriggle of gratification, to wait, fidgeting, for Evensong to begin.

The stroke of half-past six brought the surpliced chaplain, brisk and businesslike. The Organist played him in with slow, droning chords, dying away in muffled pedal notes as he kneeled awhile in his place. It was his only deliberate act, almost, through the service. The congregation shuffled hurriedly to its feet when he rose to gabble the exhortation. One of the babies—the subjects of the anticipated sacrament—woke up and had to be hushed after the fashion of babes at an age when, even for the infant pauper, food is easy to come by.

Evensong was briskly performed. Then the clergyman made his way to the font, emptied into it what may have been half a pint of water from the little crockery jug, and began to read the Order for the Publick Baptism of Infants. “Have these children been already baptized, or no?”

The mothers stood up, nervous and inaudible, the only sponsors. In the more essential parts they had to be prompted individually by the chaplain in a stage-whisper: “Say ‘I renounce them all’” —“Say ‘All this I steadfastly believe.’” One of them was a sullen woman, well over thirty, with a brutish face and disappearing chin; the other, a light-haired, rosy-cheeked girl, who hung her head and cried quietly all through the ceremony. Neither wore a wedding-ring. In the brisk time set by the clergyman, the ordeal was soon over, and the congregation—the women, old and young, intensely interested in the babies—rose to sing the baptismal hymn:

“In token that thou shalt not fear
Christ crucified to own,
We print the Cross upon thee here,
And stamp thee His alone.”

There

There was an incongruity, an insincerity, in the ceremonial thus hurriedly bustled through, as though even the Sacrament must be brief for a workhouse brat. I do not say that it was done brutally or with indifference ; but there was something perfunctory and unreal about it. I think we were all glad when it was over, and the awakened babies were being hustled off to sleep again in the usual manner. There had been an impersonal unreality in the whole service. These tired old women, chanting the canticles—it was wonderful, at their average age, how well the Organist had got them to sing—seemed to find nothing of promise, no hint of comfort even in the Psalms or the sublime *Magnificat*. But at least they were not indifferent to the music. *That* was personal ; *that* “belonged” to them. There was no “playing-out” in the closing voluntary : the whole congregation sat it through, mothers and all, and beamed gratefully on the kind face of the Organist, their friend, when at last she closed the instrument and passed through the waiting people to the door.

II

As we crossed the courtyard, the Organist delaying to speak to one here and one there—she appeared to know every one by name and history—we became aware of a disturbance in the gateway. A young fellow, dressed like a sailor, had his foot inside the little door in the gate and was endeavouring to push past the beadle.

“I tell you it ain’t visiting time,” said that functionary, sourly. “You can see ’er at the proper time : you can’t see ’er when it isn’t the proper time. I told you that before, and it’s no good your making a disturbance, because you can’t go in.”

“What is it ?” I was asking the Organist—she seemed to under-stand

stand so instinctively everything here, in this somewhat unknown territory, that I did not doubt her perfect familiarity with this kind of dispute—when there was a cry behind me, and the fair-haired mother, her child still in her arms, rushed past us like a whirlwind, pushed aside the outraged beadle, and fell, in a heap, baby and all, into the arms of the sailor.

What followed, happened in an instant. There was no pause, no further altercation with the door-keeper, who would probably have demurred to the whole highly irregular proceeding. The sailor gathered up the woman in his arms, lifted her impetuously over the step into the street and banged the little door behind them. A little assemblage of paupers had crowded into the covered passage to witness this drama; and then, in a flash, it was over, the door closed, and the beadle—he was a small lean man, in a jacket, nothing like the conventional Bumble—was left gasping behind.

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We overtook the couple—the trio, to be more exact—at the corner of the street. The sailor was carrying the baby now, and the woman was fastening her bodice. The red sunset rays glinted on her hair and made it brightly golden; a shower was drying up, and the air was clear and fresh-smelling. The lime-blossom on a tree that overhung a garden fence—for we are rural, here in the Southern Suburb—was giving off the beginning of its evening fragrance. The street was deserted and quite silent. A scrap of talk floated to us down the hill from the man and woman in front.

“Only landed this morning,” the man was saying. “Couldn’t get no news of you off the old people; they wouldn’t tell me nothing, and I bin lookin’ everywheres for you, all day. Then I met yer sister, and she ——— told me; and I come round in a rush

to

to fetch yer out. They didn't want to let me in—ah! I'd 'ave showed what for, in about another minute—and then I see yer comin'!" The baby began to cry feebly. The man hushed it awkwardly, stopping in his walk to do so. He would not give it up to the girl though; and she hung on his arm looking up into his face, transfigured, unrecognisable; then they passed out of our sight.

The Organist laid her hand upon my arm, her eyes glistening. "We may as well go home, I think, mayn't we?" she said.

III

It was nearly a month later, when I found a letter from the Organist on my breakfast table.

"If you could take me to the parish church on Saturday morning—yes, I mean Saturday, not Sunday—" she wrote, "I could show you the finish of an affair that I think you are interested in."

I wondered, vaguely, what the "affair" was, and, having been a little late in presenting myself, did not succeed, in a hurried walk to the church, in eliciting an explanation of the summons. "Make haste, and you will see," said the Organist; and she would tell me no more.

We found the church almost empty, save for a little group, facing an ascetic-looking young priest in the chancel.

"Well, what is it, then?" I whispered. The Organist answered me by a motion of the head altarwards, and I recognised my friend the sailor, looking very uncomfortable in a stiff suit of tweeds. Then the words which the priest was reciting gave me a last clue to the situation.

"Into

“Into which holy estate these two persons present come now to be joined. Therefore if any man can show any just cause, why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him NOW speak, or else hereafter for ever hold his peace !” We were witnessing that service of the Church which, as a cynic remarked, “begins with ‘Dearly Beloved,’ and ends with ‘amazement.’”

A pew, half way down the aisle, gave us decent shelter, within earshot, and we paid attention to this reticent, informal, solemnisation of matrimony. There were no bridesmaids, as you may suppose—no groomsmen—only a perfunctory pew-opener as witness, and an awkward youth in a large jacket, who officiated, blushing profusely, as “father,” giving “this woman to this man.” He may have been half a year her senior. The girl’s parents, apparently, had not yet forgiven her. At length, duly united, the couple followed the clergyman bashfully into the vestry, with their witnesses. The baby, apparently, had been placed in some safe keeping, as an unsuitable attendant at this ceremonial. We viewed the departure of the group, the ring proudly displayed on the girl’s ungloved hand ; and my companion (whom I began to suspect of having abetted in this *dénouement*) had a word to say to the clergyman. Then, as we passed out of the gates, I asked her,

“Well ! How in the world did you follow them up ?”

“Oh, nothing easier,” she replied. “I had a notion of what would happen, and of course I knew the girl’s name through the Union people, so that there was no difficulty in finding out from Mr. Noster (that is the curate, who has just married them) when the bans were put up.

“I thought,” she added, with her delightful smile, “that you would be glad to see the end of it !”

And I was glad : but really it is hardly printable ; it is too improbable, too melodramatic.