

Miss SYLVESTER'S CONFESSION

By Cyrus Townsend Brady

ID I ever tell you of the most memorable visit to Arapahoe?" asked the bishop, looking up from the magazine with which he had beguiled the last hour of the journey.

"No," I replied, "that was before my time, I believe. I was a newcomer in the diocese, comparatively speaking."

"Yes," answered the bishop. "Something in this paper recalled it to me. This notice of the Irving-Terry performance of *Macbeth* in New York with the pictures, you know," he added, handing me the book.

"What connection is there, bishop, between your most memorable visit to Arapahoe and the Irving-Terry performance of *Macbeth*?"

"Not any," said the bishop, "except that it reminded me of another theatrical performance which I attended in Arapahoe. I am not one of those clergymen who join in the clerical hue and cry against theaters," he continued reflectively. "In fact, I think the theater may be a means of grace and that a good play is up-lift and elevating."

"religious party" of the town, which I am happy to say turned out to be in a considerable majority, the congregation, or the opposition, was forced to leave its guns with the ushers, and we got through all right. They used to say it was Sunday only when the bishop came around. But I have changed all that," continued the old pioneer, as a quiet smile of satisfaction overspread his face.

"But about the theater, bishop?"

"I'm coming to that. I became so popular, in fact, that there was not a 'show' that could rival the church, so the boys put it. On church nights, which were only once every three months—and perhaps that accounts for their popularity—everything else shut up shop and the services were crowded. I always preached to them the very best I knew how. I remember one of the expressions of appreciation of my efforts which came from the city marshal.

"'Wot we like about you, Right Reverend,' he said, using the quaint form of address, 'is that you don't never play your congregation for a fool, w'ich you may be but we don't like to be told of it. You allus seems to give the best you kin to us, the best you got in the deck,' he added."

barrier between them quite perceptible to a close observer, and both appeared to be supremely miserable. My loquacious friend, the manager, confided to me that Mr. Montague, "which his real name is Henry Pearce and he is a young man of very respectable family, is in love with Miss Sylvester, which her real name is Mary Bates, and it's her as is talked about for something or other, the rights of which I don't know, but I stake my life on her honor and honesty."

"She looked like an honest girl, and I would have backed up the manager's confidence myself. Well, the day dragged along somehow. A funny little thing happened at Sewaygo, where we ate. By this time I was one of the party, and dined at the same table with the rest of them at the railroad eating house. I finished my meal before the others, rose, walked over to the cashier's desk and handed him a ten-dollar bill. You know I wasn't very strong on clerical costumes in that day, and I was dressed in an ordinary business suit very dusty and much the worse for wear. As the cashier took the bill I was astonished to have him ask, 'Are you payin' for yourself alone, or for your whole party, sir?' In the eyes of the cashier I was the manager of the party. So much for my episcopal air and authority!

"A few miles from Arapahoe the manager of the local Opera House, who was also the Warden of the Mission and the City Marshal, boarded the train in great perturbation. He was in hard luck, for it was church night, and he told me the manager of the tra-

mean our show—a little late. Say you have your'n at quarter past seven, an' we'll have our'n at quarter to nine. And we'll do more than that," he added hastily, lest I should decide before I had heard all that he had to offer. "We'll all come to your show—services I mean—if you come to ours, and we'll give you a part of the proceeds to-night to help the church."

"What did you do, bishop?" I asked.

"Well," answered the old man, "I promptly made two propositions and rejected the third."

"I said that I wouldn't take any of their money. From the looks of things they needed it all, and my friends in Arapahoe were so generous that the church in that particular section lacked nothing. The church in Arapahoe has always been more or less unique, you see. I think that one reason I decided so promptly was because I intercepted an appealing glance, a pitiously appealing glance, I might say, from Miss Sylvester when she heard the proposition. She came to me after the two managers had retired to discuss their arrangements and clasped my hand impulsively.

"'Oh!' she said, 'I am so glad you are going to have church. I haven't been to church for years, it seems to me, and you have been so kind to us and have treated us so much like re-spectable people, that I wanted to go to your services so much to-night.'

"I am very glad," I replied, "that you are to have the opportunity."

"About this time the train pulled into the station, and the townspeople, informed of the change in the hour of services and delighted at the prospect of a double treat, or as they phrased it, two shows in one evening," immediately busied themselves in spreading the news throughout the settlement. The place was smaller in those days than it is now, and it was not difficult to advise everyone.

clerk say, 'There is the bishop's office, Miss Sylvester. I've no doubt he will be glad to see you.'

"There was no other exit from the room save the door leading into the bedroom. As Miss Sylvester approached the parlor door I motioned to Mr. Montague, who immediately went in to the bedroom and closed the door.

"It was the woman's side of the situation. Mr. Montague loved her and she returned his affection, but she had refused to become his wife. She had even prevented him from declaring himself so far as was in her power because—ah, here was the reason! The story was a sad but not an unusual one.

"She had lived in St. Louis, the only daughter of two worthy parents, who had stunted themselves to give her an education. She had fallen in love with a man, whose character and reputation did not commend themselves to the judgment of those, older than she, who loved her, and in defiance of parental opposition, she had made a runaway marriage. It was not long before life became unendurable; she was yoked with one utterly unworthy, and the glamour passing from her eyes, she saw nothing but misery ahead. Of course, the parting came; the old people had died, broken-hearted by her conduct she believed, and she was absolutely alone.

"Chance, to make a long story short, threw her into the company of the good people with whom she was acting. She had a pretty little turn for elocution, and she had supported herself, wretchedly and meagerly enough, under her assumed name for the past two years, by acting. She had struggled against her affection for Mr. Montague. She considered herself no fit wife for him or any man, but my sermon had put a new idea in her mind. Might there not be forgiveness for such as she? God would forgive her. Would man? In the play he would not. Which was true and which was false? Love divine could make excuse, would love human?



"AND YOU WILL TAKE ME AS I AM," SHE CRIED. "YOU WILL FORGIVE ME AND LOVE ME IN SPITE OF—"

"I had, of course, a lot of sermons with me—in my head, that is; you know the first thing you learn in the West is to 'shoot without a rest,' so they say, which is their euphemism for preaching without notes—and I had previously selected a theme for the evening, but something, I did not know what, unless it were Providence, turned my thoughts in another direction and I chose that text of Scripture. 'Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.' And I determined to preach upon forgiveness, as exemplified in that exquisite incident cited by St. John, as the very first lesson in Christian practice.

"You see, the first thing a man expects is forgiveness, although it is usually the last thing he wishes to bestow. There has been much discussion about that chapter," said the bishop, "and it is believed, you know, to be an interpolation, but whether it is or not, I, for one, am convinced that it represents a true incident, and I bless the interpolator, whoever he may have been."

"There was something in the girl, Miss Sylvester, to call her by her stage name, which kept recurring to me when I thought over the points of the sermon. She looked bad, only troubled. Beneath her indifferent hardness, or her forced pleasantry, there was an undercurrent of agony, such as only comes from great sorrow, and too often in a woman's case, the sorrow is based upon—well, at any rate, I thought hard over the sermon, and when the services came off I think I never preached better in my life.

"My thoughts were very old, and the story itself is old, but I pointed out in a way which was told me afterward was very convincing, the duty of forgiveness and how Jesus Himself, in touch with the grossest sort of aberration, forgave it.

"The theatrical people were all there, although to keep his promise the manager had been compelled to go without his supper, he had been so busy arranging for the performance. The most interested listener in the congregation crowded into the saloon-church was the young woman. On the other side of the room from her Mr. Montague followed the sermon with scarcely less eagerness. You know, when you are preaching, sometimes without volition you direct your arguments to one or two in the congregation, and my appeals and exhortations seemed to be aimed straight at those two young persons.

"Well, after the services, I went to the play, as I had promised, and the whole congregation did likewise, for the manager had kept his promise faithfully. As I remember, it was rather a poor play, but very respectable."

"Miss Sylvester played the leading part, and though I suppose, ordinarily she would be considered an indifferent actress, yet when she confessed the past, in which she had been more sinned against than sinning, and the hero of the play, depicted by Mr. Montague, gave her up, her acting was a marvelous surprise. So real and natural did it seem that I almost felt that they were not playing parts but speaking the truth there on that stage. There was such agony, such heartrending appeal to her lover for mercy, in the woman's voice that it did not seem possible that he could reject her even on the stage. The Opera House rang with applause, and there were tears in many a tough cowboy's eyes when the girl died, still begging for forgiveness."

"I was thinking sadly over the whole situation, and the face and voice of the girl fairly haunted me. My severity was broken by a tap on the door. When I opened it Mr. Montague came in. He was very much perturbed and without any preliminaries burst out that he had come to see me on a very important matter. He had come in the most direct fashion that he could manage, and he had seen her. He had seen her play in the little town in which he lived a few months before; that he had been so infatuated with her that he had given up his business—he was a lawyer—had followed her and had finally been engaged in the company."

"His intentions were of the most honorable character. He wanted to marry her and take her away from the life she was leading. He had some little property of his own, was a college man, learned in the law, and had no fear but that he could support her comfortably. Latterly he had heard rumors. He had received an anonymous letter, and though he believed her as sweet and pure a woman as ever lived, yet stories of so circumstantial character had been brought to him with little corroborative evidence, that he did not know what to do. He was in a state of perfect despair."

"Have you spoken to her of these stories," I asked.

"No," he replied.

"Or shown her the letters?"

"No, I couldn't. They'd insult any honest woman. Now, bishop," he continued, "I've come to you for advice. I never heard a sermon like that you preached this evening. It was in my mind all through the play. Did you notice the earnestness with which Miss Sylvester played her part? We have acted in that piece a number of times, and never before has she impressed me as she did then. It was almost as if she were really pleading for forgiveness. I love her more than life itself, and yet there are some things—suppose it's true? Can I forgive her? What shall I do?"

"We were interrupted just here by the sound of footsteps in the hall. Outside the door I heard the

"You saw me act to-night, bishop. I never played like that before. I was myself on that stage, confessing and pleading for forgiveness—which he would not grant."

"My child," I said, "it seems to me that while you have done grievously wrong in running away from home and wilfully disregarding the appeals and commands of those who loved you, and whose judgment you were bound to respect, and have broken the Commandment that says, 'Honor thy father and mother,' yet you have been more sinned against than sinning. I see nothing, since you are so repentant, which would prevent you from being the wife of any honest man who loved you, if you loved him. The man you married, where is he?"

"Dead," she flashed out through her tears.

"Go to Mr. Montague," I replied promptly, "tell him the whole truth and let him decide."

"I can't!" she wailed. "He respects me now. He loves me. I'm afraid to put him to the touch. I'm afraid to confess and let him decide. 'Twould kill me to lose that affection. Indeed, I could not bear to have him fall below the standard I have set for him in my heart, and if he doesn't forgive, if he ceases to love me, I shall die. I've lost faith once in humanity and have only slowly recovered it. If I lose it again I shall lose faith in God."

"There was much that was true in her words, I thought, said the bishop, digressing for the moment, for our faith in God depends upon our faith in man to a greater extent than we dream of."

"You need not confess anything," at that moment exclaimed Mr. Montague, who had opened the door and entered the room.

"What?" cried the girl, springing to her feet in piteous dismay. "Were you there? Did you hear?"

"I did everything."

"And you, sir! turning fiercely on me, 'were you a party to this deception? Did you allow me to tell you the most secret thoughts of my heart in confession with that door open so that he, of all men, could hear?'

"The bishop is entirely innocent," returned Montague promptly stepping nearer to her. "He saw me close the door. I opened it again on my own account. You were neither of you looking that way, and neither of you noticed. It wasn't the right thing to do, I'll admit, but I love you, and I love you more than ever now. I intended to-night after what I had said to the bishop, and what he preached about forgiveness to us, and the play, you know, to have told you not to confess anything to me, for there was nothing I could not and would not forgive, if you loved me and were free to marry me. I am sorry I didn't say it before I heard you say that you had suffered so severely, and how you had been wronged. Now it is I who should plead forgiveness, for having doubted you for a single moment. Don't shrink away from me. I love you more now than ever, and if you give me a chance to lead you back to happiness, and restore your lost faith in humanity, I will undertake the task so gladly that I will bless you forever for the opportunity."

"And you will take me as I am," she cried. "You will forgive me and love me in spite of—"

"I'm very sure," he cried, "of never forgetting me," he cried.

"They had entirely forgotten me," laughed the bishop, "and it was almost like a scene from the play we had just witnessed. Perhaps because they were players there was a little touch of the theatrical about them, for he knelt at her feet, clutching a fold of her dress as he pleaded with her. When she yielded to his importunities, as what woman could have resisted, she put both hands upon his shoulders and best and kissed him."

"It is I," she said, "who should kneel at your feet, not you to mine."

"Then I coughed violently to remind them that I was there. Hand in hand they came to me."

"I did expect," cried the girl, "I'm so glad you came. You have been to us like an angel from Heaven."

"My services are not ended, I trust," I suggested.

"No," said the young man promptly. "When shall it be?" he continued, turning to the girl.

"Whenever you like," she answered frankly, "there is no one to consult and nothing to hinder, if you are sure."

"I'm very sure."

"Then let it be—"

"This evening?" he cried impulsively.

"No," she answered smiling, and her face was fairly transformed by the happiness of the new situation. "Let it be to-morrow in the church where the bishop taught us that forgiveness was the first lesson of the Christian life."

"Will you be ready to officiate, sir?" asked Mr. Montague turning to me.

"With the greatest pleasure," I replied, there being no obstacle to prevent, as I learned by questioning them.

"So, on the next morning Mr. Victor Montague and Miss Carlotta Sylvester disappeared forever from public view, while I united them in the holy bonds of matrimony under their proper names of Mary Bates and Henry Pearce."

"Arapahoe!" shouted the conductor, thrusting his head in the doorway, as the train bumped together and slowed down by the station platform. "All out for Arapahoe!"

"Do you speak from experience?" I asked.

"Well, no, that is not exactly. Of course, when I was a young man I remember going to theaters more or less, but since I have been ordained I think I have only been twice. Once when I was taken by my host and hostess in New York to see this Irving-Terry performance a few years ago, and the other time at Arapahoe. But these two visits convinced me that the theater can sometimes teach a needed lesson."

"Arapahoe," continued the old man—and now that I had him fairly started I breathed softly so as not to interrupt him or check the current of his thoughts, hoping that I should get one of the stories he youngsters prized so much from this veteran—"Arapahoe used to be one of the toughest places on the border. When I first decided to start services there I wrote to the only man in the town whose name I knew, and announced my intention. He said I could come along and that they would fix things up for me in good shape. The railroad wasn't built there in those days, and the last thirty miles of the journey had to be made by wagon over the trail. I was astonished when I reached the station to find some twenty-five or thirty horsemen portentously armed and picturesquely costumed gathered about the wagon which had been provided for me, who declared that they constituted themselves my escort."

"I learned en route from my communicative friend who drove the wagon, that there was some little antagonism to holding religious services in the town; and, as the opposition had organized, a church party had been gathered together to see fair play and, as they phrased it, 'They wasn't goin' to see no shootin' done agin the minister 'lesn they c'd take a hand! You may imagine,' continued the bishop, smiling at the recollection, "that I did not feel very comfortable even when I looked at my stalwart defenders. However, in accordance with regulations prescribed by the

"Well, that being the case in Arapahoe, you can imagine that the managers of various wandering theatrical enterprises as were likely to visit such places, were careful to avoid church nights. One day, however, on this very railroad, after it was built into the town, I fell in with a traveling theatrical company headed for Arapahoe. I made friends with them, of course. They seemed to be respectable people enough. The manager, a veteran player, assured me, 'I don't allow any immoral plays in my show. We're poor and have to do bum towns—I'm trying to quote his elegant phrases—but I try to be respectable, myself, and to have everybody in my company decent-like.' He confided to me in secret that there was only one member of his present troupe about whom people talked, and he assured me that he didn't believe what was said about her."

"I made the acquaintance of all of them, and they talked freely to me about their experiences and adventures, and certainly they had a difficult life and a hard one."

"Almost as hard as being a peripatetic missionary?" I suggested.

"Oh, much harder than that," said the bishop cheerfully. "I enjoy that, so far as I am concerned; but the two who interested me most were a young man whose name was Victor Montague—at least that was his theatrical name—and a young woman who was introduced to me as Miss Carlotta Sylvester. She had been a charmingly pretty girl, although she looked tired, and faded, and somewhat haggard, as if there was something on her mind which preyed upon her and rendered her life miserable. It appeared to me that Mr. Montague was very much in love with Miss Sylvester, and by all the signs—and you know I am a past master in such affairs," laughed the old man, "for I have had so many young couples on my hands—that she reciprocated his feelings, but there was a

veling company, that he and his troupe would have no show against the bishop, that he had tried to head them off but had failed to do so, and he did not know what to do. The two consulted in the end of the car and finally came back to where I sat.

"Right Reverend," said the warden, "we're up agin it hard. You know, bein' a religious an' a law-abidin' town we allus gives the church a hearty support, an' there ain't nothin' an' nobody as is more welcome in these parts than you be. We shuts down the saloons, w'ich the barkeeps says they wants to go to church as much as anybody. It's allus Sunday when you comes around. But we've made a mistake in the dates somehow or n'other, an' we've got a show billed for to-night. Now this yere man, pointin' to the manager, 'sez you've been speakin' to him durin' the day an' he sez you've been treatin' him w'ite, w'ich you allus does everybody. I told him. He's down on his luck, he sez, w'ich he's been in breakdowns, an' wrecks, an' washouts an' has had poor houses, an' mobs, an' now he's run up agin the church. He wants to make a proposition to you, an' I've told him you'd deal fair with him if any man would."

"Mr. Bishop," said the manager, "what he says is all true. We've had a terrible time. This is the last of our season, the company is goin' to disband as soon as it gets back to Kansas City, an' if I don't get some receipts to-night and to-morrow—bein' as to-morrow's Saturday, we're goin' to have a matinee—I don't see how I can pay the salaries to those poor people thet's due them, or get them back to civilization. We're goin' to give a clean, moral show. No Uncle-Tom's-Cabin affair, doctor, but it's respectable an' anyone can see it with pleasure. We hear from Bill here that there ain't no show for us in Arapahoe unless you help us out. What I propose is this. If you'll have your show—I mean your services—a little earlier, we'll have our services—I

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