

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 uplifting."

'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 we 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 partin' 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 at quarter past seven, an' we'll have our 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. 'Well 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 do you do, bishop?" I asked.

"Well," answered the old man, "I prompt

two propositions and rejected the third.

"I said that I wouldn't take any of their money.

From the books of things they needed it a,

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 interpreted an appealing glance, a pitifully 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—respectable 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 evenin'," 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.

"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 'shoo 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 practise.

"You see, the first thing a man expects is forgive-

ness, 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 be.

"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.

Not that she looked bad, only troubled. Beneath her

indifferent hardness, or her forced pleasantness, there

was an undercurrent of agony, such as only comes

from great sorrow, and too often in a woman's ease,

the sorrow is based upon—well, at any rate, I thought

had over the sermon, and when the services came

on I think I never preached better in my life.

"The thoughts were very old, as the story itself

is old, but I pointed out in a way which was told me

afterward was very much the duty of forgiveness

and honor Jesus Himself, in touch with the gross-

er 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 young Mr. Montague. On the other side of the

stage 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 like-

wise, 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 in-

different 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

rough 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

reverie 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 told me in the most direct fashion that he

wildly loved Miss Sylvester; that 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—he had

followed her and had finally been engaged in the com-

pany.

"His intentions were of the most honorable char-

acter. 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 a 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. 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

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 an unusual one.

"She had lived in St. Louis, the only daughter of two worthy parents, who had stinted 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, 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?

"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 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. "Wer you there? Did you hear?"

"I did everything."