

A NIGHT VIGIL IN PORTLAND SLUMS

BY JOHN FLEMING WILSON

JOHN END doctor is a good man to know. He lives 24 hours in the day and views many wonderful things. He is not given to speech, as a rule, and he is the special friend of the special policeman on the beat. Such an one I have the felicity to know, and at times he condescends to tell me that the weather is fine (for the time of year) or, very infrequently, to be sure, informs me casually that Nick was badly cut night before last, and that the Pocatello Kid split the nose of the El Paso Wonder over a glass of beer and a discussion of the beauties of Sarah, the Patter Dancer. These matters he relates in a perfectly professional way and never uses any unnecessary names. Consequently, when he met me on the street the other day and asked me as a favor to accompany him down to the Red Apple lodging-house "on a case" I was slightly flattered and accepted.

"It's a hard case," he explained laconically. "Probably were in for an all-night stand. I got lonely. You don't mind?" "Of course not," I assured him. "I'm glad to be of service."

So we climbed on a Third-street car and rode down to Coburn and got off and turned several corners, and in the middle of a block the doctor started up a dark stairway. "Look out for the middle landing," he warned me.

Now I know this stairway, and have known it since the time that Curley Fernald and Dick Farley pinched an old lady's watch and were nabbed later by a preacher who thought it a fine thing to follow two beggars up and land them in jail. Fernald escaped; and Farley—his right name would stir old bones in Portland—was let go the next day by a merciful but short-sighted Judge, and I became acquainted with this stairway. But spite of precaution I stepped on something soggy and grunting. It proved to be an exceedingly diminutive girl, clothed solely in an old sweater. She did not cry.

The hall to which we achieved was dimly lit by an oil lamp. This antiquated attitudinal was turned down and smoked abominably. Added to its fumes was the vile odor of stale cookery, of washed clothes, of littered floors, of unwholesome sinks and most pungent of all the smell of the bar below. The doctor sniffed and hurried on. We stumbled over a drunken stercorator stretched at full length at the foot of the next stairway, picked a baby out of the recess of the landing, and came to the third floor, more smelly, squalid and squalid than the second. From the doors that yawned the halls stretching out in three directions came the sounds of noisy slumber, of late meals, of wrangling card-players, and from one the shrill yell of a baby. The doctor, who is fat, puffed a moment in the midst of this, and then grasping his medicine case afresh led the way toward the back of the building. We did not knock when we reached the room but

picked up the lamp again and held it over the face. I stepped nearer in curiosity. "I guess, Mrs. Banks," said the doctor gravely, "that you'll not live very long."

The big lodging-house resounded like a mill while I waited for some response to issue from the black lips of the purple face. The gleaming eyes closed a moment, and the doctor set the lamp down. As he walked over to the chair on which his medicine case rested he motioned to the huge blond to leave. "I'll look out after her," he said quietly.

"Don't forget to sign the death certifi," she wheezed, in what was meant as a whisper. Then she shuffled out with intolerable massive vivacity.

When she had departed we fell to straightening up the room as much as we could. Then my companion emptied the contents of a vial into a saucer and presently the acrid scent of a drug relieved the deadly stink of the atmosphere. I thought that the purple face on the bed looked a little less horrible.

"How long?" I asked. My voice must have penetrated clear to the dying woman. "Couple of hours, maybe," was the reply. "Sit down and smoke up. Don't mind her. Tobacco'll be good for her as well as you."

"What's the matter?" I asked, as I accepted a cheap cigar.

"Heart trouble, acute and chronic and up and down and sideways and crossways," said the doctor, lighting a second cigar. "She looks old, doesn't she?" he continued thoughtfully. "Fact is, she is old, physically, but you'd be surprised to know how many years old she is really."

"Fast living soon brings 'em down," I remarked, brutally.

"Tent fast living," said the doctor, quick as a flash. "She's the wife of a rancher from up the Valley. She was deserted about three months ago. He ran off with her sister."

"Then her name isn't Banks, at all; it's —" I interposed.

"Banks'll do," suggested my companion. I moved over nearer the bed on which (not in which) lay a shabby form and, apparently quite separate from it, that purple face. I looked at it carefully and recognized the features of a woman who had wept into a very gaudy handkerchief not three weeks before in the Chair of Police's office. I recollected that she had been assessed by the police some \$4 or \$5 for "expenses," and I wondered whether she had ever been able to raise the sum demanded for locating her husband. While I was thinking of these things, her black eyes were resting pitiously on my face. I heard her tortured breathing and noticed that one skinny hand was clutched over her breast. "Dad be get away," a voice presently said, huskily. It was from the black lips in the face on the bed.

"He did," I answered. "He was arrested at the seashore with your sister, but you know no jury'll convict a man for running away with a woman not his wife."

I may explain here that the woman on the bed had, at the age of 32, married a younger man and came West with him and cleared with her own hands a quarter section of land and borne him three children, while he worked at odd jobs in sawmills or on the river. When the claim was all proved up, he had stepped in, sold half of it for \$300, and given her \$75 for her pains. Of this she had sent \$60 to a young sister in the East for her fare West, and three weeks after the arrival of the sister her husband had quietly eloped with her, leaving the wife with the three children, some chickens and a bad case of heart disease. It was not a nice story, and it struck me that the husband had been a little harsh.

"Almost in answer to my thought the woman on the bed stirred a little. 'I wish they'd convicted him,' she whispered sulkily. 'He had no call to run away with Lu. He'd ought to stick to his true wife.'"

The doctor walked over and administered some medicine. "Where is he now?" she went on, as he stepped back to watch its effect.

"I don't know," I said in horror, as she strove to rise.



"TELL 'EM I LIVED STRAIGHT."

"Look here," put in the physician, soberly. "You lie still, Mrs. Banks, and don't fuss over that worthless cur and your bad sister. You're going to be rid of the whole outfit pretty soon. Do you want us to do anything for you? If you've any messages, we'll see that they get there."

She seemed to ponder this awhile. "If you see Tom," she said, with a choke,

"tell him I was a good wife to him. I ain't very well, and I've lost my looks; but he had no call to run off with Lu."

"We walked away and sat down. The silence in the room grew oppressive in comparison with the dull racket from the rest of the big house. A half-hour passed, and then the last sound from the bed said, "Poor Lu!"

The doctor made a gesture and stepped over to the bed again. When he came back, he did not try to lower his voice.

Out in the passageway the bulky blond shuffled to meet us. "Say, Doc," she mumbled. "Tony was just here, and he says Mame is awful bad."

"All right," came the response. "You better look out for the special and tell him to speak to the undertaker."

I expressed surprise that he should occupy so important a position and still be learning to read, write and cipher.

"Well, you see," he said, "I know my own business, but that's all. But I'm not too old to learn, and that's why I'm here."

With that he resumed his work, and I forbore to interrupt him further. The dilatory tactics of a mischievous-looking youth caught my eye, and I went over to talk to him. His fingers were covered with ink, and there were nearly as many blots on his paper as there were letters and ovals.

"Cause I have to," he said and winked. Ma, she makes me come. I'm elevator boy in the building in the daytime, and she says it ain't hurt me none to get something besides devotion in my head. I'd cut it out, but she sends Kate with me."

"Who's Kate?"

"She's my sister. That's her over there, that red-headed girl," and he landed a paper arrow in his sister's flaming tresses. "She'd peach on me if I didn't come, and then Ma would land on me for fair. See? A kid can't have no fun, 'cause some girls' always squeal on him."

Kate had different ideas.

"Yes, sir, I'm only too glad to get the chance to come. We're a pretty big family and since papa died we've all had to work. We don't mind that so much, but you see we can't none of us go to school. Mamma ain't very well and it's awful hard for her. I'm cash girl at —" and Dick, over there, is elevator boy. He's a good boy, too," she said with conviction, though I took a silent exception. "He brings all his money home and gives it to mamma. Of course we don't earn much, but I'm going to keep on here and then I'm going into Mr. Milner's room and learn bookkeeping, and then, maybe, I can learn typewriting some day and get a good job. Do you think, if I do, that I can earn \$20 or \$30 a month?"

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"How much do I owe you, Doc?"

"Nothing," said my companion. "You put up for her board and room, and I shan't charge you for services."

"Well, nobody ever said I didn't do the square thing by my lodgers. When they ain't no money, why, I ain't goin' to put an old woman in the street."

As we stumbled down the stairs and into the fresh air the doctor informed me that Mame lived down two blocks in the Hotel.

"That's a respectable place," I ventured. "Mame's all right," he growled.

"What's the matter with her?"

"Consumption."

The Hotel has always borne the reputation among the "wise" of being a "respectable" house. It is over a saloon of unsavory character, and from the comparatively clean stairway we heard sounds of revelry. It was now after midnight, and the last car had rattled and flashed into the darkness of the lower street. On the second landing we caught a glimpse through an open door of a party. A young woman with what is poetically known as a "wealth of golden curls" was singing a song from the airy heights of a piano. In spite of the recklessness of the song and the abandon of the company it was easy to see that these were perfectly nice people whose code of morality excuses many things, but lays great importance on the cardinal commandments. Among the flushed faces about the table I recognized the careless vivacity of a "reminiscent" man, in whose prosperous seasons there are even dinners at the Portland and theater parties.

We passed on and at the door of what was evidently a series of apartments were met by an old woman with precocious eyes. "Come to see Mame?" she inquired, curiously.

"Yes," said the doctor. "This is my friend."

"All right! Go right in. She's pretty bad. I guess the team of Wiley and Sis is up against it."

"What does she mean?" I asked of my companion as we opened the door.

"Mame and that girl do variety stunts," he responded gruffly. "Used to be popular, too."

I never laid eyes on a more oddly furnished room than that displayed by the opening of the next door. It was a good-sized apartment, with an alcove. A tattered Wilton carpet covered the floor, and yellow paper of most blithering hue clung despairingly to the walls. A huge bearded chandelier hung crookedly from the plaster molding in the middle of the ceiling. A solitary gas jet burned and whistled among the glittering gauds. A willow chair, a huge rough wooden table and a small dancing platform of polished wood in one corner completed the furnishings. Bottles, cigarette boxes, flimsy skirts and lopsided slippers littered up the intervening spaces.

"Hello, boys!" said a gentle voice from the alcove.

We walked over, the doctor firmly, I hesitatingly.

"Who's your friend, Doc?" she asked. To my utter surprise, my companion introduced me formally and gave my right name. "Glad to meet you," she said, simply. "I guess you won't mind the looks of the room. Take a chair and talk to me while Doc fixes me up. How am I, Doc? Pretty bad?"

There was a deep silence, and I edged away after one look at the slight face on the pillow. The doctor cleared his throat and pulled over a stool. His hand rested an instant on her forehead, an instant on her wrist, and then he looked at his watch. "Had anything to eat?" he asked.

"Wiley brought me some egg nog a while back," she replied, coughing.

"Want some more? Throat dry?"

She looked from the doctor's face over to mine. A sudden hush seemed to come over us all. With a quick movement she put her hand over her mouth and turned her face away.

We took off our overcoats and opened a window. The sharp street sounds floated up and the words of song from a saloon across the way. The dingy curtain waved in the draft, and the gas flickered and spit.

The doctor turned it down softly and settled himself in the willow chair. "Set it against the door and sit there."

Gradually the life of the North End dimmed down and went out. Twice a form stumbled up to the door against which I sat and went on without much noise. At 2 o'clock Wiley came back in a wrapper, with chattering teeth. "I'm sleeping down with Mrs. Flint," she explained to the doctor. "I ain't in any condition to watch her"—she pointed timorously at the form on the bed. "Lemme know if she wants me." Then she vanished, and the doctor lit a cigar and dreamed, while I dozed uncomfortably.

I was roused by the rustling of the bedclothes. I looked at the doctor. He slept heavily in his chair, with his extinguished cigar stub in one hand. I glanced over at the bed, and the girl there beckoned to me. "I stepped over and she whispered that she wanted a drink. I got her one, and she tasted it, between gasses. 'Can I do anything for you?' I asked."

"No; you try and get some sleep. I'll call her. If I want anything I'll call you."

A moment later she called and I went over. "Feel my hands," she said. "Are they cold?"

I took them in mine. They were very thin and childlike. The chill of them startled me. She did not wait for my answer, but nodded. "I know," she said hoarsely. "I guess it's all off with Mame."

"Look here," I said. "Isn't there any message you want to leave with me?"

She held up her hands and looked at them. I followed her eyes and noticed that her head on the pillow and whispered for a moment. "And if they ever get wise, you'll tell 'em I lived straight?"

"Sure."

"It ain't nice to die this way," she went on rapidly. "It looks bad. But you'll tell 'em?"

"Sure."

"You ask Wiley. She knows I've lived straight. I ain't set up to be much, but I've tried to do as best I could. So if you'll just tell 'em."

I promised her I would on my word of honor.

An hour later the doctor woke with a start and hurried to her side. He seemed a little puzzled. But she was apparently asleep, and he came back to his chair with a grunted exclamation. When he subsided I saw the bedclothes rise and then Mame climbed out on the floor. She tottered for an instant and then acted went to the table. She fumbled a minute with the drawer and then opened it. She was seized with an access of coughing and it seemed to hurry her. She pulled out a small box and looked in it. Another, and then a little one tied up in paper. She unwrapped it feverishly, opened it and drew something out of it. Then she slipped back to bed, sobbing.

I straightened up cautiously and glanced at the doctor. His eyes were wide open and he stared back at me.

A little later we got up and went over to the bed. Mame turned her wasted face to us. Her eyes were very bright. She shivered slightly and I saw gathering on her features the final terror. The doctor went to his case and came back with a draught. She took it silently, and then dropping the glass on the carpet, my companion reached out and took her hand and settled himself by the bedside.

The terror swiftly shadowed her face and she shuddered. There was a laugh as of a belated reveler in the hall, and a knock on the door, followed by a call from a boyish voice, "Hope you feel better, Mame!"

Suddenly she gathered herself and commenced to sing:

If you love a me
And I love a you
We both of us love the same.

The voice ceased, and I bent over her. "Tell 'em I lived straight," she said.

The doctor put one hand over the frightened eyes and opened the other's clasp on her hand. We both looked. A plain gold ring circled the fourth finger.

JOHN FLEMING WILSON.

ONE EVENING AT THE PUBLIC NIGHT SCHOOL

By Hugh Herdman

"ES, I understand, Mr. Editor. You want this from the pupil's viewpoint?"

"Exactly. Hark back to your own school days. Forget the present. Put yourself in his place and see how it feels."

These words repeated themselves in my ears as, with a feeling akin to trepidation, I mounted the steps of the High School at 1 o'clock evening recently. I was bent on attending a session of the night school, but had no doubt about the result, for some of the recollections of my school days are painfully vivid. I wondered what sort of teachers I should find and whether they would be anything like some awful ones I had heard about. I pushed open the door and found myself in the midst of a crowd of people of both sexes and of all ages from 14 to 40. Moving along with them, I saw them separate and enter different rooms. By far the greatest number seemed to be going toward a room on the right, and I made up my mind to go with the crowd. Eyes and ears told me that these were the foreigners.

"Can you tell me where I'll find Mr. Alderson?" I inquired of a smiling, bright-faced young man.

"Huh?" he asked, startled and abashed.

"Can you tell me where Mr. Alderson's room is?" I repeated, in substance, slowly and loudly, under the impression that maybe his hearing was affected.

"Ay don't ban here long time," he replied.

I turned to a young girl standing near and repeated my question, but received only a stare in reply. I myself was becoming embarrassed by this time.

"You want see Miss Alderson?" an almond-eyed, son of Japan asked. Mistrusting words, I nodded yes and followed him.

After making known my mission and being kindly received, I heaved a sigh of relief. Now, I thought, I can begin going to school again. I was then ushered into the room from which the kindly Jap had rescued me and told to make myself at home. "This is the foreigners' room," Mr. Alderson said. I told him that I had discovered that already. He then introduced me to Mrs. Alderson, who has charge of this department of the work, and gave me a chair up in front, facing the pupils. I was on the point of explaining that I had been instructed to forget certain things, and that they were starting me wrongly. There was one unoccupied seat in the rear of the room which I

wanted very much to slip into, but before I could make my want known, a late comer entered and my opportunity slipped by.

Before me I saw 70 or more men and women—for most of them had reached their majority or were near it—either of foreign birth or of foreign-born parents. Most of them were Swedes and Norwegians, but there were a few Japanese and one or two Germans. Some of them could read and write a little in English, because they had been at school before; some of them could neither read nor write, and some could hardly understand or speak a word of English.

I very soon quit trying to put myself in their places and gave myself up to watching the methods of starting them on the road of assimilation into our National life.

They are divided into three grades. The work of the first grade in learning the a, b, c's was a responsive memory. Here were men 40 years old learning a-b, ab, b-a, c-a-t, and the tussles they had with the vowel sounds reminded me of my first lesson in German. Some of them came almost as near the sound of short a as I did that of unitar, and they snickered over their failure just as I did over mine. Only they as a class were more serious and earnest than we were. They were there to learn because they realized the necessity of it, but we studied "Dutch" because it was required for entrance to college. I learned a good deal from that c-a-t class.

I heard the recitations of the other divisions, and they took me back to my first reader days in the little village school. Then I heard them, all sing. A stanza of "Tenting tonight on the old camp ground" had been written on the board, and after humming it through twice, they rose and sang it with good effect. No childish trebles there. There were sopranos, altos, tenors and deep basses, and I rubbed my eyes and asked myself, Can these people really be learning the alphabet and reading the first and second readers?

The School Board has been requested, I understand, to supply another teacher and provide another room to facilitate the work with foreigners seeking to learn. Surely, it is a reasonable request. Seventy-seven pupils in one room under one teacher! Think of it! And those pupils grown up and for the most part illiterate. Why, it would turn my hair—but that's

one of the things I was told to forget. We have these people here, and what are we going to do with them? They are uneducated, they have to work for their living, they want to learn at least the rudiments; they will in time become American citizens, good or bad, as circumstances determine. Are they asking more than our duty commands us to supply?

In another room, where reading, writing, grammar, arithmetic and simple composition are taught to those who already have some knowledge of our tongue, I joined the writing class. Mr. Alderson, the instructor, was engaged in substituting the forearm movement for the cramped finger movement.

"You were here last winter, weren't you?" he asked of a man of 30.

"Yes, sir."

"But you didn't stay long. You became sick or went away, didn't you?"

"No, sir," he replied, blushing like a boy of 10. "But I got married, and he ducked his head, bashfully.

I made an ironical remark, which I intended as a compliment, but overheard my mark, for he took it literally, and replied: "Yes, sir, it was too bad. But I'm going to stay longer this time."

In reply to further questions, he said: "You see, I have to work in the daytime, and don't get no chance to learn except at night. I've got a job down on Front street, and I don't get much pay, and I know I never will unless I learn something. I never had no chance to go to school when I was a boy, 'cause I had to work all the time, and I guess I wouldn't have went if I could. Boys ain't got much sense, have they?"

I encouraged him with "Some boys."

"You people can't understand how bad we want to learn," he continued. "I know there are lots of fellows that don't know nothing and don't want to. I guess I was pretty much that way myself until a little over a year ago. I didn't know nothing, but I thought I did. I drew my wages Saturday night and blew 'em in before Monday morning, trying to be one of the boys and have a good time. But I met Maggie last Summer, a year ago, and she put me wise to a lot of things. She got me to come up here to night school. Then we got married, and I had to hustle to make a living. I got a job at night, and had to drop school. But I'm better off now, and you bet I'm going to stay by this till I know something. Don't suppose I ever will know as much as she does, but I won't be such a plumb fool as I was. Say, girls have got lots of sense, ain't they?"

Desiring not to pose as an authority, I replied, "Some girls," and started away.

"Well, Maggie has, anyway," he said, convincingly, and went on making ovals.

"This man," said the teacher, as we stopped beside the desk of a well-dressed young man, "is head of one of the departments in one of our large stores. He comes here regularly at night and is making good progress."

I expressed surprise that he should occupy so important a position and still be learning to read, write and cipher.

"Well, you see," he said, "I know my own business, but that's all. But I'm not too old to learn, and that's why I'm here."

With that he resumed his work, and I forbore to interrupt him further. The dilatory tactics of a mischievous-looking youth caught my eye, and I went over to talk to him. His fingers were covered with ink, and there were nearly as many blots on his paper as there were letters and ovals.

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