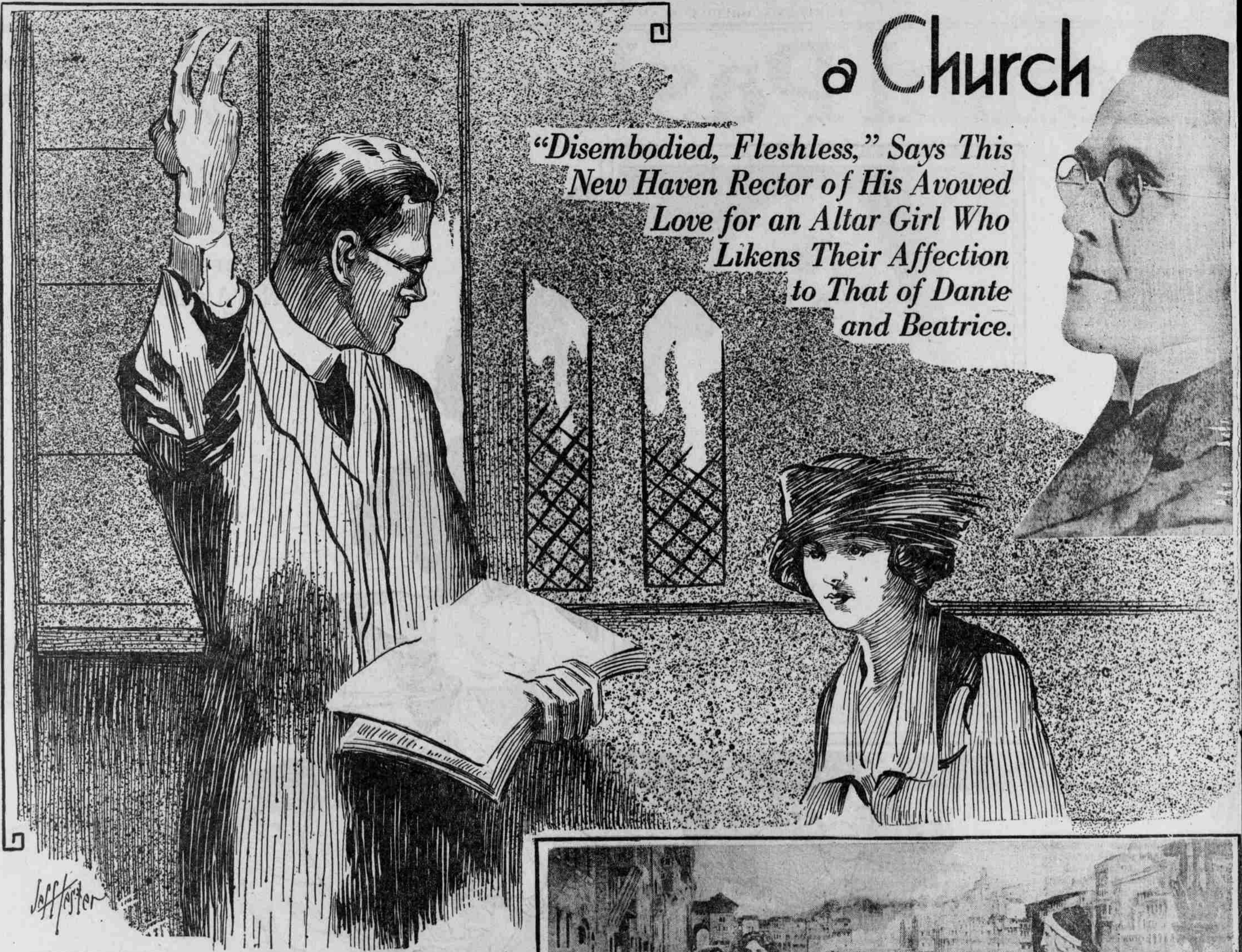


The "Sexless Passion" that Has Stirred a Church

"Disembodied, Fleshless," Says This New Haven Rector of His Avowed Love for an Altar Girl Who Likens Their Affection to That of Dante and Beatrice.



BY WINIFRED VAN DUZER.
IN STRANGE tales you always are reading of them; the rose without perfume; the night without stars; the flame without warmth! But the passion without sex!

Still it has burned its pure, cold way across the pages of tradition. Abelard and Heloise, monk and religieuse, met and marveled at a life holding such perfection as each other. Though a sea rolled between them all the days of their after life, save only one, their passion, which indeed was sexless since it held no alloy of carnal desire, was like a star that never sets. And when they did meet, after years of separation, in the sanctity of an obscure monastery, without so much as a handclasp they knelt side by side and in the terrific sacrament of renunciation offered their love to God.

Dante adored his Beatrice with a lofty love beyond the standard of affection Plato advocated. But he needed no defense against the lure of physical appeal, since life never brought them together. And could there be love freer from carnal taint than that of the Blessed Damozel who leaned from the very wall of heaven itself to lavish sorrowing devotion upon her beloved still on earth?

Now is it possible that such a sexless passion actually drew together the Rev. Frederick W. Leeds, scholar and religious man, even as Abelard and his altar girl, Ellen Reid, and gave them strength to defy question and criticism and finally accusation while remaining serene in the awareness of each other?

"Yes!" sobs the girl who likens herself to the gentle heroine of long ago, heartbroken that any should dispute the quality of her emotion. "My love for Mr. Leeds is a sacred feeling. It is spiritual as a prayer. He is my spiritual friend and guide; the embodiment of my salvation in this world and the next!"

"Yes!" declares the former pastor of the aristocratic Grace Episcopal church of New Haven. "My love for Ellen Reid is a spiritual love, passing the understanding of the world. It is a religious feeling, an expression of the loftiest form of Christianity. It is the will of God!"

"No!" contradicts Mrs. Leeds, the third point of the triangle, "that spiritual love is not possible. It is a delusion; a cloak to hide real motives. I am his wife and my husband's love should be mine. I shall fight for it."

Now that their passion has run its course, or now that it has run at least as far as the barrier of the law which seeks to curb human nature by orders, you may look backward from the ignominy of their day in court to the beginning of



Ellen Reid, altar girl, who was holding hands with her pastor when she was arrested with him in a Boston hotel after their "spiritual" love affair had startled his pastoral flock.

their "sexless passion" as each one treasures it in memory.

Leeds, the scholar, had received most of his education in Europe. Wandering through galleries that hold the great treasures of all time, making his leisurely way over paths of beauty stretching from the North sea to the cataracts of the Nile, he developed an estheticism which ever after was to dominate his character. It was in the old world cathedrals, where worship is expressed in ceremonials rivaled in elaborate picturesqueness only by Wagnerian opera that he linked his love for abstract beauty with religion.

Perhaps he suppressed his longing for

a time after returning to America, where life is more conducive to fast movement than dreams. Anyway, you find him in the pulpit of the New Haven church, delivering the divine message, as he understood it, to the fashionable congregation in a manner to win respect if not actual love for himself. He lived quietly and with apparent happiness in a home made pleasant by his wife. They were companionable and friendly; she did welfare work in the parish and assisted him with advice.

The even tenor of this sort of life ran to monotony, possibly. Anyway, you can fancy Leeds growing a little restless;

finally developing poignant memories of the days in the old world; longing for the picturesqueness of the cathedrals and the beauty of ceremonials.

Then you can see him introducing just a bit of those formalities in his church. A bit of change about the altar, perhaps; a few words added; a little more attention given to symbols and something withdrawn from the faith that takes on trust. There were changes and more changes, all slight, but sufficient to arouse the protest of the parish. The church members did not share his estheticism and they wanted their religion unchanged.

Out of his disappointment and dejection, Mr. Leeds found comfort. It was offered by a church worker, Ellen Reid, a slight, delicate appearing girl with pale gold hair and dreamy eyes. She, too, thrilled to beauty in the abstract; she loved the suppressed drama of religious ceremonial; in the rector she saw the embodiment of all that was splendid. She helped him trim the altar; it was she who began to plan for him instead of the

rather heavy, plain woman in the ivy-covered red brick parish house. And so sympathy was established.

You need touch upon only two points in their ways which became a single way. One was when the girl assumed the duties of secretary to the pastor; the second was the night they went away from New Haven—two nights, they insist, for each went separately and with no intention of meeting again, they say.

That was after Leeds had resigned his place in the pulpit and had taken up the astonishing work of insurance selling; after the parish had questioned and gossiped; and the neglected wife had wondered and sorrowed and finally accused him, point-blank, of giving her up for a younger woman. This, probably, was the first time he declared his friendship with Miss Reid to be purely spiritual.

"His resignation meant the downfall of his career," said the wife. "It meant the ruin of all our hopes. He has a wonderful mind and a keen intellect and he had a great future in the church. He

had a chance to become a spiritual leader; everything was in his favor."

So unlike Abelard, whom he keeps before him as an example, the Rev. Mr. Leeds gave up his church and turned his attention to material things.

So you will believe the climax of his association with the un-Heloise-like Heloise inevitable; detectives after a search of three months, breaking the door of a Boston hotel room to find the "sexless lovers" sitting hand in hand.

"There was nothing premeditated about our being there," Miss Reid explained. "We did not go away together. I had been in Boston visiting friends. He didn't know where I was and I didn't know he was in the city. We met on the street. Then we went to a hotel together because there was no other place we could talk and renew our spiritual friendship."

"We are looked on as guilty of a grave and terrible offense. I am not ashamed; just saddened to think the world misunderstands. I am glad that he holds a

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Holliday's famous painting, "Dante and Beatrice." Ellen Reid says she wanted to be a "Beatrice of inspiration to Rev. Mr. Leeds." Above—Frederick W. Leeds, Connecticut pastor, who says that his love for his altar girl is like that which Abelard held for Heloise.