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A HARLEM TRAGEDY

By O. HENRY.

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HARLEM.

Mrs. Fink has dropped into Mrs. Cassidy's flat, one flight below.

"Ain't it a beaut?" said Mrs. Cassidy.

She turned her face proudly for her friend Mrs. Fink to see. One eye was nearly closed, with a great greenish purple bruise around it. Her lip was cut and bleeding a little, and there were red finger marks on each side of her neck.

"My husband wouldn't ever think of doing that to me," said Mrs. Fink, concealing her envy.

"I wouldn't have a man," declared Mrs. Cassidy, "that didn't beat me up at least once a week. Shows he thinks something of you. Say, but that last dose Jack gave me wasn't no homeopathic one! I can see stars yet. But he'll be the sweetest man in town for the rest of the week to make up for it. This eye is good for theater tickets and a silk shirt waist at the very least."

"I should hope," said Mrs. Fink, assuming complacency, "that Mr. Fink is too much of a gentleman ever to raise his hand against me."

"Oh, go on, Maggie!" said Mrs. Cassidy, laughing and applying witch hazel. "You're only jealous. Your old man is too frapped and slow to ever give you a punch. He just sits down and practices physical culture with a newspaper when he comes home. Now, ain't that the truth?"

"Mr. Fink certainly peruses of the papers when he comes home," acknowledged Mrs. Fink, with a toss of her head, "but he certainly don't ever make no Steve O'Donnell out of me just to amuse himself—that's a sure thing."

Mrs. Cassidy laughed the contented laugh of the guarded and happy matron. With the air of Cornelia exhibiting her jewels she drew down the collar of her kimono and revealed another treasured bruise, maroon colored, edged with olive and orange, a trifle now nearly well, but still to memory dear.

Mrs. Fink capitulated. The formal light in her eye softened to envious admiration. She and Mrs. Cassidy had been chums in the downtown paper box factory before they had married, one year before. Now she and her man occupied the flat above Mame and her man. Therefore she could not put on airs with Mame.

"Does it hurt when he soaks you?" asked Mrs. Fink curiously.

"Hurt?" Mrs. Cassidy gave a soprano scream of delight. "Well, say, did you ever have a brick house fall on you? Well, that's just the way it feels—just like when they're digging you out of the ruins. Jack's got a left that spells two matinees and a new pair of Oxfords—and his right! Well, it takes a trip to Coney and six pairs of openwork, silk lisle threads to make that good."

"But what does he beat you for?" inquired Mrs. Fink, with wide open eyes.

"Silly" said Mrs. Cassidy indulgently. "Why, because he's full. It's generally on Saturday nights."

"But what cause do you give him?" persisted the seeker after knowledge.

"Why, didn't I marry him? Jack comes in tanked up, and I'm here, ain't I? Who else has he got a right to beat? I'd just like to catch him once beating anybody else! Sometimes it's because supper ain't ready, and sometimes it's because it is. Jack ain't particular about causes. He just lushes till he remembers he's married, and then he makes for home and does me up. Saturday nights I just move the furniture with sharp corners out of the way, so I won't cut my head when he gets his work in. He's got a left swing that jars you. Sometimes I take the count in the first round, but when I feel like having a good time during the week or want some new rags I come up again for more punishment. That's what I done last night. Jack knows I've been wanting a black silk waist for a month, and I didn't think just one black eye would bring it. Tell you what, Mag, I'll bet you the ice cream he brings it home tonight."

Mrs. Fink was thinking deeply.

"My heart," she said, "never hit me a lick in his life. It's just like you said, Mame; he comes in drunk and didn't got a word to say. He never takes me out anywhere. He's a chair warmer at home for fair. He buys me things, but he looks so glum about it that I never appreciate 'em."

Mrs. Cassidy slipped an arm around her chum.

"You poor thing," she said. "But everybody can't have a husband like Jack. Marriage won't be a failure if they was all like him. These discontented wives you hear about—what they need is a man to come home and lick their slats in one week and then make it up in kisses and chocolate creams. That'd give 'em some interest in life. What I want is a masterful man that slugs you when he's jagged and hugs you when he ain't jagged. Preserve me from the man that ain't got the sand to do neither!"

Mrs. Fink sighed.

The hallways were suddenly filled with sound. The door flew open at the kick of Mr. Cassidy. His arms were encumbered with bundles. Mame flew at him, hung about his neck. Her sound eye sparkled with the love light that shines in the eye of the Maori maid when she recovers consciousness in the hut of the visitor who has stunned and dragged her there.

"Hello, old girl!" shouted Mr. Cassidy. He shed his bundles and lifted her off her feet in a mighty hug. "I got tickets for Barnum & Bailey's, and if you'll bust the string of one of them bundles I guess you'll find that silk waist. Why, good evening, Mrs. Fink! I didn't see you at first. How's old Mart coming along?"

"He's very well, Mr. Cassidy, thanks," said Mrs. Fink. "I must be going along up now. Mart 'll be home for supper soon. I'll bring you down that pattern you wanted tomorrow, Mame."

Mrs. Fink went up to her flat and had a little cry. It was a meaningless cry, the kind of cry that only a woman knows about, a cry from no particular cause, altogether an absurd cry—the most transient and the most hopeless cry in the repertory of grief. Why had Martin never threatened her? He was as big and strong as Jack Cassidy. Did he not care for her at all? He never quarreled. He came home and dodged about, silent, glum, idle. He was a fairly good provider, but he ignored the spice of life.

Mrs. Fink's ship of dreams was becalmed. Her captain ranged between plum duff and his hammock. If she would shiver his timbers or stamp his foot on the quarter deck now and then! And she had thought to sail so merrily, touching at ports in the Delectable Isles! But now, to vary the figure, she was ready to throw up the sponge, tired out, without a scratch to show for all those tame rounds with her sparring partner. For one moment she almost hated Mame—Mame, with her cuts and bruises, her salve of presents and kisses, her stormy joy—love with her fighting brutal, loving mate.

Mr. Fink came home at 7. He was permeated with the curse of domesticity. Beyond the portals of his cozy home he cared not to roam, to roam. He was the man who had caught the street car, the anaconda that had swallowed its prey, the tree that lay as it had fallen.

"Like the supper, Mart?" asked Mrs. Fink, who had striven over it.

"M-m-m-yep," grunted Mr. Fink.

After supper he gathered his newspapers to read. He sat in his stockinged feet.

Arise, some new Dante, and sing me the belittling corner of perdition for the man who sitteth in the house in his stockinged feet! Sisters of patience who by reason of ties or duty have endured it in silk, yarn, cotton, lisle thread or woolen—does not the new canto belong?

The next day was Labor day. The occupations of Mr. Cassidy and Mr. Fink ceased for one passage of the sun. Labor, triumphant, would parade and otherwise disport itself.

Mrs. Fink took Mrs. Cassidy's pattern down early. Mame had on her new silk waist. Even her damaged eye managed to emit a holiday gleam. Jack was fruitfully penitent, and there was a luxurious scheme for the day afoot, with parks and picnics and Pilsener in it.

A rising, indignant jealousy seized Mrs. Fink as she returned to her flat above. Oh, happy Mame, with her bruises and the quick following balm! But was Mame to have a monopoly of happiness? Surely Martin Fink was as good a man as Jack Cassidy. Was his wife to go always unbelabored and uncaressed? A sudden, brilliant, breathless idea came to Mrs. Fink. She would show Mame that there were husbands as able to use their fists and perhaps to be as tender afterward as any Jack.

The holiday promised to be a nominal one with the Finks. Mrs. Fink had the stationary washtubs in the kitchen filled with a two weeks' wash that had been soaking overnight. Mr. Fink sat in his stockinged feet reading a newspaper. Thus Labor day presaged to speed.

Jealousy surged high in Mrs. Fink's heart, and higher still surged an audacious resolve. If her man would not strike her—if he would not so far prove his manhood, his prerogative and his interest in conjugal affairs, he must be prompted to his duty.

Mr. Fink lit his pipe and peacefully rubbed an ankle with a stockinged toe. He reposed in the state of matrimony like a lump of unblended suet in a pudding. This was his level. Elsewhere to sit at ease vicariously girdling the world in print amid the wifely splashing of suds and the disagreeable smells of breakfast dishes departed and dinner ones to come. Many ideas were far from his mind, but the furthest one was the thought of beating his wife.

Mrs. Fink turned on the hot water and set the washboards in the suds. Up from the flat below came the gay laugh of Mrs. Cassidy. It sounded like a taunt, a flaunting of her own happiness in the face of the unmarried bride above. Now was Mrs. Fink's time.

Suddenly she turned like a fury upon the man reading.

"You lazy loafer!" she cried. "Must I work my arms off washing and toiling for the ugly likes of you? Are you a man or are you a kitchen hound?"

Mr. Fink dropped his paper, motionless from surprise. She feared that he would not strike—that the provocation had been insufficient. She leaped at him and struck him fiercely in the face with her clinched hand. In that instant she felt a thrill of love for him such as she had not felt for many a day. Rise up, Martin Fink, and come into your kingdom! Oh, she must feel the weight of his hand now just to show that he cared—just to show that he cared!

Mr. Fink sprang to his feet. Maggie caught him again on the jaw with a wide swing of her other hand. She closed her eyes in that fearful, blissful moment before his blow should come. She whispered his name to herself. She leaned to the expected shock, hungry for it.

In the flat below Mr. Cassidy, with a shamed and contrite face, was powring Mame's eye in preparation for their junket. From the flat above came the sound of a woman's voice high raised, a bumping, a stumbling and a shuffling, a chair overturned—unmistakable sounds of domestic conflict.

"Mart and Mag scrapping?" postulated Mr. Cassidy. "Didn't knew they ever indulged. Shall I trot up and see if they need a sponge holder?"

One of Mrs. Cassidy's eyes sparkled like a diamond. The other twinkled at least like paste.

"Oh, no," she said softly and without apparent meaning, in the feminine ejaculatory manner. "I wonder if—I wonder if—wait, Jack, till I go up and see."

Up the stairs she sped. As her foot struck the hallway above out from the kitchen door of her flat wildly flounced Mrs. Fink.

"Oh, Maggie," cried Mrs. Cassidy in a delighted whisper, "did he? Oh, did he?"

Mrs. Fink ran and laid her face upon her chum's shoulder and sobbed hopelessly.

Mrs. Cassidy took Maggie's face between her hands and lifted it gently. The stained it was, flushing and paling, but its velvety, pink and white, becomingly freckled surface was unscratched, unbruised, unmarred by the recreant fist of Mr. Fink.

"Tell me, Maggie," pleaded Mame, "or I'll go in there and find out. What was it? Did he hurt you? What did he do?"

Mrs. Fink's face went down again despairingly on the bosom of her friend.

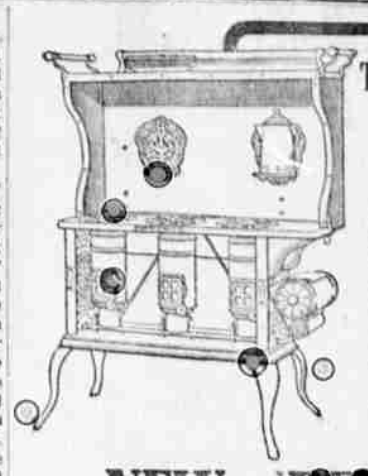
"For Gawd's sake, don't open that door, Mame!" she sobbed. "And don't ever tell nobody—keep it under your hat. He—he never touched me, and—he's—oh, Gawd—he's washin' the clothes—he's washin' the clothes."

Tobacco Smoke.

The body is a factory of poisons, says a big pathologist. These poisons are constantly being poured out at the rate of eight pounds a day. One-third of all these poisonous excreta passes through the lungs in the form of steam or vapor. The lungs within the comparatively small compass contain a folded surface of about 1,000 square feet, in area equal to the floor of a room forty feet square. It is through this surface that the oxygen is drawn into the body and the poisonous carbon dioxide thrown off. Smoke in reality is nothing more or less than a cloud of fine carbon dust. And when this dust comes into contact with the surface of the lungs it forms a tar coating which obstructs the entrance of oxygen laden air as well as the exit of the poisonous exhalations. The smoker or he who inhales smoke either directly or by sitting in a smoke laden atmosphere is both starved and poisoned—starved for oxygen, the most important of all the foods, and poisoned by his own excreted waste.—Chicago Tribune.

The Source.

Gum—That little boy of yours seems to be nervous. Does he inherit it from you? Henpeck—I guess so. He certainly did not get it from his mother, for she's got more nerve than ever.



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