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His Secret Sin

I

THEODORE BUGG had made England what she is. The last forty-two years had elevated him from errand-boy to biggest retail grocer in the Midlands. Twenty-eight years of wedded happiness had left him with a clear conscience, a five-year old grave to keep in order "To the memory of my beloved relict," as he had written until the clerk suggested a trifling alteration, and a strapping daughter, just turned twenty.

I wish I could stop here. But there is

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a rough side to every canvas, and Theodore Bugg had forgotten all about England, and what she is, and how he had made her. Or, if the good work was going on, it was sub-conscious. He was standing by the gilded statue of Jeanne d'Arc, his mouth wide open, his Baedeker limp in his perspiring hand. "She's riding astride!" The molten madness throbbed in his brain. "She's got man's clothes on!"

The shocking truth must out; Theodore Bugg had come to Paris for Pleasure!

He had only been able to spare two days, the Sunday and Monday of Whitsuntide. He had travelled by the night boat on Saturday, arriving in Paris on Sunday morning—the first step downward! The air of Paris intoxicated him; the Grands Boulevards ate into his moral fibre like a dragon chewing butter; and though he

had not actually "been in" anywhere, he felt the atmosphere of the music-halls as Ulysses heard the Sirens. He was fortunately tied to the mast of his ignorance of French and his fear of asking anybody such a peculiar question, or he would certainly have discovered and visited the Moulin Rouge.

As it was, Joan of Arc was very much more than was good for him. He stared, fascinated as by a basilisk, his eyes starting further and further from his head as his moral sense dragged his body backwards along the Rue de Rivoli. By this means he cannoned into a worthy Frenchman (who refused to take him seriously) and so was shocked into himself.

He pulled out his watch. Only an hour and a half to catch his train. Just as he was beginning to enjoy himself, too.

The shopman, not yet old enough to master his disgust at the familiar incident, brought forward several books of photographs.

"Perhaps Monsieur will find there what he requires," he said coldly.

Furtively and hurriedly, his glance divided between the forbidden book and the shop-door, his only safeguard from intrusion the thought that nobody who entered would be in a position to throw stones at a fellow-culprit, Theodore Bugg turned over the pages.

The book began mildly enough with the winged Victory and only entered the rapids with La Gioconda. Thence, Niagara-like, one plunge to the abyss—the Venus de Milo.

The blood flamed to his face ; his breath came hot and quick.

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With fumbling fingers that trembled with excitement he withdrew the photograph from its leaf and half showed it to the proprietor with a whispered "Combyang?"

"Trente sous," said the shopman in his most rapid French. And in English, "We take English money here, sir ; ten shillings if you please. May I wrap it up for you?"

But Bugg had thrust it into his inner pocket, and, pressing a sovereign into the man's hand, dashed without looking behind him from the shop, eager to put time and space between himself and his compromising position.

He hurried to his hotel, not without many a suspicious glance over his shoulder, and packed his bag. He had ten minutes to spare. He locked the door carefully, sat down with his back to the light, and

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pulling the photograph from his pocket, indulged in a long voluptuous gloat.

Then the boots knocked with the news of his cab, and Bugg, nobler than Lord Howard of Effingham, thrust his treasure into his pocket, unlocked the door and cried "Venny!"

II

Theodore Bugg, a year later, was paying the price of his fall: He had allowed Gertrude to attend Art Classes, although he knew it to be sinful. But he had grown to fear his daughter, and—on such a point especially—he was incapable of fighting her.

For there were times when he tried to persuade himself that there was "nothing wrong in it." A brother churchwarden

had looked a little askance when the news of Gertrude's "advanced ideas" had come, but Theodore had stoutly and even a little sternly rebuked him with the original remark: "To the pure all things are pure." It was knowing when to be bold that had made Theodore the fine business man he was.

And very bold it was, for conscience makes cowards of us all. The secret shame of his orgies! Every week-night—once even on a Sunday!—after everyone had gone to bed, he opened the little safe in the wall at the head of his bed, and drew forth the obscene picture from its envelope marked "In case of my death or disability THIS PACKET is to be DESTROYED UNOPENED. T. Bugg." Then he would sit, and hold it in his hot hands, and gloat upon the evil thing, lifting it now and

again to his mouth to cover it with greedy slobbering kisses. And afterwards, when it was safely locked up again, he would undress with a certain unction. Once even he attempted—with the aid of a bath towel—to take the pose before the mirror. And he saw nothing ridiculous in that, just as he saw nothing beautiful in the photograph. Nakedness is lust ; so ran his simple gospel of aesthetics.

Shame quickened him, too, to measures of expiation or precaution. He read family prayers twice a day instead of once, and he took the chair at the Annual Meeting of a Society for Sending Out Trousers to Converted Hindoos.

As everybody in the Midlands knows, "Hindoos" are Naked Savages.

And he discharged a groom for whistling on Sunday.

But if these expedients salved his conscience, they did nothing to quell Gertrude's incipient tendency to independence, of thought and action. There had been a very unpleasant scene when he threw into the fire a book from Mudie's (I thought one could have trusted Mudie's!) called "The Stolen Bacillus," which he understood to be of a grossly immoral tendency. (Nasty filth about free love or something, isn't it?)

Theodore Bugg was not a sensitive man ; excess of intuitive sympathy had not made his life a hell ; but he felt that his domestic relations were strained. Especially since "that Mrs. Grahame" had evinced a liking for Gertrude. Her husband's colonelcy was the gilding of the pill ; but the pill was a bitter one, for Mrs. Grahame went motoring and even

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golfing on Sunday instead of going to church, and once or twice had taken Gertrude with her, to the scandal of the neighbourhood. Colonel Grahame, too, rather got on Bugg's nerves, in spite of the "honour of his acquaintance."

Such thoughts went dully through his mind as he waited in the garden for his daughter to come in to tea from the "Art Class." But when she arrived, portfolio in hand, her beauty and the splendour of her long easy swing determined him to be gracious.

Under such circumstances conversation is apt to be artificial; but Gertrude was gay and garrulous, and the tea went very pleasantly until her father's eye unluckily fell on the portfolio. "And what has my little fairy been doing lately?" he asked with elephantine lightness.

"Oh, sketches mostly, father. This week we're copying from the old Greek masterpieces, though. Let me show you, father, dear." She opened the portfolio and turned over the leaves. "I'm getting on splendidly, Mr. Davis thinks I ought to go to Paris and study properly. Do let me."

"How can you think of such a thing, Gertrude? A daughter of mine! Study properly!!! No indeed! A little sketching is a nice accomplishment for a young lady, but——"

His jaw dropped. A thin, graceful pencil sketch it was that he clutched in frenzied fingers; but he could not mistake the subject.

"Wretched girl," he shouted, "where did you get the—the—the—Damn it all, what d'ye call it?—the—ay! that's it!

—the model for this vile, filthy, lewd, obscene, lustful thing? Damn it! you're as bad as Cousin Jenny! (Cousin Jenny was a blot on the 'scutcheon of the Buggs). You're a harlot, miss!" And then, with an awful change as the truth came home to him: "O my God! Damn it!" he screamed, "how did you get the keys of my little safe!"

The girl had frozen colder than the stone, but there was a new light in her eye, and if the curl of a lip could tread a worm into the dust, that lip was hers and that worm the author of her being. She had withdrawn as one who comes suddenly upon a toad, and the first flaming of her face had died instantly to deadlier ice.

Bugg saw his mistake, his masses of mistakes. There being but one more to make, he made it; and, finding himself

in the frying pan of discovery, leapt into the fire of things irrevocable and not to be forgotten. His fat, heavy-jowled, coarse face all twitching, he fell on his knees and clasped his hands together. "So you found me out? Don't, don't give away your poor old father, Gertie! My little Gertie!"

There was a silence. "Excuse me, father," said the girl at last, "but I've just had a glimpse of you for the first time in my life, and it's a bit of a shock. I must think."

And she stood motionless until her hapless father attracted her attention by backing into his wicker chair.

"Don't touch holy things," she snapped suddenly, taking the sketch from his nerveless hand, and replacing it reverently in the portfolio.

The action seemed to decide her.

"I'll give you an address to send my things to," she said, and walked out of the garden.

Theodore Bugg sat stunned. "Holy things," she had said. She called that lustful French photograph holy! Was this Original Sin; or was it that strange new thing people were talking about—what was it? Ah! heredity. Heredity? His secret sin become her open infamy? Truly the sins of the fathers were visited on the children!

By this time he was upstairs and in his bedroom. He must destroy the accursed thing; he must destroy—Ah! yes. He had contaminated Gertrude by having such a thing in his house. He must be the Roman father, and—what would a Roman father do?

He had the match alight, but he could not put it to the edge of the packet. Then the silence of the house hit him; he knew that his daughter would never return, and in a fit of rage, he trampled on the envelope like a wild beast mauling a corpse.

He thrust it into the empty grate, lit the paper frills, watched all blaze up. Then, gulping down a sob, he went to the drawer of a cabinet and pulled out the revolver which he had bought (and loaded, under the shopman's guidance) against burglars.

Yes, he must kill himself. He drew back the hammer. Cold sweat beaded his flabby face. He could not; and anyhow, how did one? He thought of many stories of people who had shot themselves ineffectively. He felt for his

heart and failed to find it, wondered if it had stopped and he were dying, had a fit of fear paralysing all his will. He thought of himself lying dead.

"No, by God! I can't do it!" he cried, and flung the pistol back into the drawer. As luck would have it, the weapon exploded. The bullet broke his jaw, tore away four molars, smashed the cheek-bone, pulped the right eye, and, glancing from the frontal bone, found its billet in the ceiling. He lost consciousness and fell. His head struck the grate where yet smouldered the ashes of the photograph.

It was three months before he recovered, and then with only half a face to face the world with. He still thinks that Gertrude gave him away, for the street-boys have taken to calling him "old Venus." But

he is wrong; the boys have their aesthetic reasons for the name.

Gertrude in any case is much too busy to bother her head about him; for, after a year in the Latin Quarter, if she has failed to surpass Degas and Manet and Van Gogh, she has at least conquered the great pianist Wlodywewsky, and it takes her all her time to manage him and keep the baby out of mischief.

Theodore Bugg needs no help of hers in his moral sculpture of the destinies of England.