

THE DAMNATION OF THIÉRON WARE

to the Presbyterian highwater mark, — and they now had almost abolished free pews altogether. The oyster suppers given by their Ladies' Aid Society in the basement of the church during the winter had established rank among the fashionable events in Tecumseh's social calendar.

A comprehensive and satisfied perception of these advantages was uppermost in the minds of this local audience, as they waited for the Bishop to begin his reading. They had entertained this Bishop and his Presiding Elders, and the rank and file of common preachers, in a style which could not have been remotely approached by any other congregation in the Conference. Where else, one would like to know, could the Bishop have been domiciled in a Methodist house where he might have a sitting-room all to himself, with his bedroom leading out of it? Every clergyman present had been provided for in a private residence, — even down to the Licensed Exhorters, who were not really ministers at all when you came to think of it, and who might well thank their stars that the Conference had assembled among such open-handed people. There existed a dim feeling that these Licensed Exhorters — an uncouth crew, with country store-keepers and lumbermen and even a horse-doctor among their number — had taken rather too much for granted, and were not exhibiting quite the proper degree of gratitude over their reception.

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The
Damnation of Theron Ware
or Illumination

BY
HAROLD FREDERIC



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PART I

CHAPTER I

No such throng had ever before been seen in the building during all its eight years of existence. People were wedged together most uncomfortably upon the seats; they stood packed in the aisles and overflowed the galleries; at the back, in the shadows underneath these galleries, they formed broad, dense masses about the doors, through which it would be hopeless to attempt a passage.

The light, given out from numerous tin-lined circles of flaring gas-jets arranged on the ceiling, fell full upon a thousand uplifted faces, — some framed in bonnets or juvenile curls, others bearded or crowned with shining baldness, — but all alike under the spell of a dominant emotion which held features in abstracted suspense and focussed every eye upon a common objective point.

The excitement of expectancy reigned upon each row of countenances, was visible in every attitude, — nay, seemed a part of the close, overheated atmosphere itself.

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An observer, looking over these compact lines of faces and noting the uniform concentration of eagerness they exhibited, might have guessed that they were watching for either the jury's verdict in some peculiarly absorbing criminal trial, or the announcement of the lucky numbers in a great lottery. These two expressions seemed to alternate, and even to mingle vaguely, upon the upturned lineaments of the waiting throng, — the hope of some unnamed stroke of fortune and the dread of some adverse decree.

But a glance forward at the object of this universal gaze would have sufficed to shatter both hypotheses. Here was neither a court of justice nor a tombola. It was instead the closing session of the annual Nedahma Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Bishop was about to read out the list of ministerial appointments for the coming year. This list was evidently written in a hand strange to him, and the slow, near-sighted old gentleman, having at last sufficiently rubbed the glasses of his spectacles, and then adjusted them over his nose with annoying deliberation, was now silently rehearsing his task to himself, — the while the clergymen round about ground their teeth and restlessly shuffled their feet in impatience.

Upon a closer inspection of the assemblage, there were a great many of these clergymen. A dozen or more dignified, and for the most part

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elderly, brethren sat grouped about the bishop in the pulpit. As many others, not quite so staid in mien, and indeed with here and there almost a suggestion of frivolity in their postures, were seated on the steps leading down from this platform. A score of their fellows sat facing the audience, on chairs tightly wedged into the space railed off round the pulpit; and then came five or six rows of pews, stretching across the whole breadth of the church, and almost solidly filled with preachers of the Word.

There were very old men among these, — bent and decrepit veterans who had known Lorenzo Dow, and had been ordained by elders who remembered Francis Asbury and even Whitefield. They sat now in front places, leaning forward with trembling and misshapen hands behind their hairy ears, waiting to hear their names read out on the superannuated list, it might be for the last time.

The sight of these venerable Fathers in Israel was good to the eyes, conjuring up, as it did, pictures of a time when a plain and homely people had been served by a fervent and devoted clergy, — by preachers who lacked in learning and polish, no doubt, but who gave their lives without dream of earthly reward to poverty and to the danger and wearing toil of itinerant missions through the rude frontier settlements. These pictures had for their primitive accessories log huts, rough household implements, coarse clothes, and patched old saddles

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which told of weary years of journeying, but to even the least sympathetic vision there shone upon them the glorified light of the Cross and Crown. Reverend survivors of the heroic times, their very presence there—sitting meekly at the altar-rail to hear again the published record of their uselessness and of their dependence upon church charity—was in the nature of a benediction.

The large majority of those surrounding these patriarchs were middle-aged men, generally of a robust type, with burly shoulders, and bushing beards framing shaven upper lips, and who looked for the most part like honest and prosperous farmers attired in their Sunday clothes. As exceptions to this rule, there were scattered stray specimens of a more urban class, worthies with neatly trimmed whiskers, white neckcloths, and even indications of hair-oil,—all eloquent of civilized charges; and now and again the eye singled out a striking and scholarly face, at once strong and simple, and instinctively referred it to the faculty of one of the several theological seminaries belonging to the Conference.

The effect of these faces as a whole was toward goodness, candor, and imperturbable self-complacency rather than learning or mental astuteness; and curiously enough it wore its pleasantest aspect on the countenances of the older men. The impress of zeal and moral worth seemed to dim-

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ish by regular gradations as one passed to younger faces ; and among the very beginners, who had been ordained only within the past day or two, this decline was peculiarly marked. It was almost a relief to note the relative smallness of their number, so plainly was it to be seen that they were not the men their forbears had been.

And if those aged, worn-out preachers facing the pulpit had gazed instead backward over the congregation, it may be that here too their old eyes would have detected a difference, — what at least they would have deemed a decline.

But nothing was further from the minds of the members of the First M. E. church of Tecumseh than the suggestion that they were not an improvement on those who had gone before them. They were undoubtedly the smartest and most important congregation within the limits of the Neolama Conference, and this new church edifice of theirs represented alike a scale of outlay and a standard of progressive taste in devotional architecture unique in the Methodism of that whole section of the State. They had a right to be proud of themselves, too. They belonged to the substantial order of the community, with perhaps not so many very rich men as the Presbyterians had, but on the other hand with far fewer extremely poor folk than the Baptists were encumbered with. The pews in the first four rows of their church rented for one hundred dollars apiece, — quite up