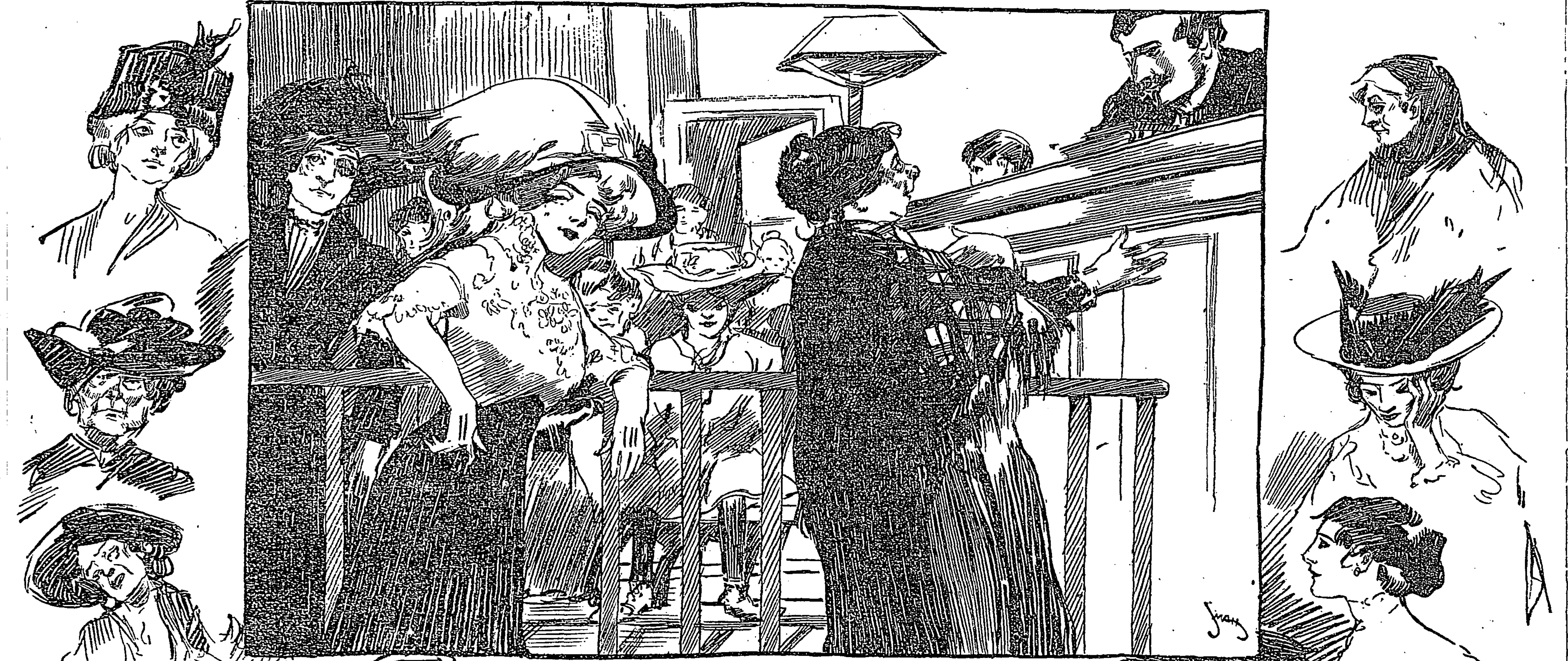


SAD HUMAN DRAMA PLAYED NIGHTLY IN WOMEN'S COURT

Worthless Bits of Wreckage and Good Stuff Battered and Spoiled Drift There--An Epitome of All That Ails Human Nature.



Scenes in the Women's Night Court.

person in the court, with an unscientific sniff, "people make me tired talking about home. A good part of the girls who come to this court come because of their home conditions. The streets are better. Oh, I don't sit in judgment on the mothers, either; they've had no fair training, but the fact remains. Back of it all stand the economic conditions, but the immediate cause that sends most of the girls who are not inherently vicious (and few of them are) to the streets is just uncomfortable, unsympathetic homes. When people have children like animals, with no more thought or understanding . . . But you want to see the court and not to hear me lecture."

A pretty little creature in a pink dress came next and was offered by the sociologist in proof of her assertion. A delicate girl, not in the least vicious, she had found her way to the Night Court because she had lost her job and couldn't find another, and had been scolded at home for being a "loafer."

She told her story simply. They bade her find work. She answered advertisement after advertisement and always found herself one of a score. No, she did not know how to do housework; she had always worked in a shop. Apparently it had not occurred to her to seek work that was not more or less along the old line. The poor are not trained for adaptability—that agreeable accomplishment belongs to the "classes." We boast that this is a specialized age, and so the girl in pink had taken it.

Well, she had grown utterly discouraged. Never any work, always scoldings as if it were her fault. Then she told a young man, and he was kind, and then she left home—and now there she was in the Night Court, with griev-

creatures to shrink from, whose very existence should be forgotten as speedily as possible. They did not turn out to be injured innocents, any one of them, but as they were examined by the Magistrate each fell into her separate place, each individually stood out, distinct and actually, in all but a few cases, interesting. It was extraordinary how human they seemed, taken one by one, and how utterly brutish collectively.

In the pen, before this change had come upon them, there was no attraction to study them. It was matter for a hasty glance and a certain feeling of thanksgiving that they were shut up where their filth and degradation could not touch one's own respectable garments. So after a glance, back to the courtroom and to quiet expectation of the next drama.

"They're coming," said one of the attendants. One sat up with a start, for there was the sound of shuffling feet, and through the doorway tumbled the whole wretched straggling crowd.

One of them was still in a stage of hilarious intoxication. She beamed on court and bench.

"Here we are, your Honor, all your old friends," she called, and she giggled appreciatively, turning to the audience to remark, "Hear me kiddin'." There were eight or nine of them, some perhaps in the thirties, though it was hard to guess, and several fifty or sixty, possibly older.

The first to be called did not look repulsive when she stepped out of the group. She was respectful and apparently sober, said she was a laundress, and had fallen in with a "lady" who bespoke her fair in the park and suggested that they go and eat. The "lady" at least had drunk more than she had eaten, and the speaker, it turned out, had been in the Night Court before. She was better than her friends; but belonged, apparently, in the same miserable, drunken "gang" that infested the park in which they were taken.

One by one they mumbled their stories. Few were married, and none ad-

mitted that she had children, though one woman, when another denied this, murmured audibly "That's a lie for you." Maybe they were alone in the world, as they made out; maybe some sort of pride kept them from telling names that might be disgraced. One or two were so well known to the Magistrate, and so little able to talk, that he needed hardly more than to glance at them.

The humorous Irishwoman took the stand.

"When did you come back from the island?" asked the Judge.

"Never been."

"Do you work?"

"Laundress."

"Where?"

"Waldorf-Astoria."

At this witticism she was overcome with mirth, and holding her hand ever her grin she turned and winked at the by-standers.

She was promptly disposed of, and then, last of the group, came the woman who had been most restless of all in the pen. The others had stood in a long, dreary row, waiting their turn. She had taken a corner and had stood restlessly, rolling her sharp eyes from one person to another. She had not been bad looking and her clothes had been put on with some care. She had a bad black eye. If there was for her any unexplored corner of life her face belied her.

"Name?"

"Kate Jackson."

"Where were you born?"

"In Boston. Always lived there till I came to New York, And, Judge," she went on, speaking quickly in a voice of considerable education, repressing her emotion, "if you let me go I'll stop this foolishness. I will. This officer here gave me good advice no longer than

two nights ago. He told me to go home and keep away from this gang, and I'll do it now if you let me. Shame on me for being here." She brushed a few tears from her eyes. "I don't often cry, your Honor," she added.

The speech had been unexpected and dramatic. She seemed to feel a deep emotion and to be trying to repress it. Her hard face, with its bruised eye, had lines that made her look as if she might have been long ago even something like a lady, and there was not an inflection of the voice that was uneducated. She leaned over the desk a little and the Magistrate looked keenly at her. It was not a new tale to him, but how is one to know when it is true.

"What work do you do?"

"I don't work, your Honor. I don't have to. My brother sends me a check every week from home. And I promise if you'll let me go, I'll go back home. I will, your Honor, I promise I will."

She looked as if she were trying to hypnotize the man into letting her free. She would have hypnotized the by-standers had it not been for the lie about the money—and yet even that she told in a convincing way.

"Step down."

She stepped down, but from her corner she kept her eyes on the Magistrate's face, setting, apparently, her will against him. It was no good. When the Judge announced "Five days on the island" for her there was a quick glance of interest to see how she would take it. The others, those who were sober enough to understand, looked stolid or frightened. She set her teeth and stamped her foot, furious with the Judge or with her own folly.

The remark was made to the probation officer that of course her statement about the check was a lie.

"Oh, very likely it was true," she re-

turned. "Don't think that the women we get here are always from the poorest classes. You would be amazed if you knew what some of them come from, and the families to which they are related. They have just sunk and sunk till they reach this place."

It seems that a few nights ago a college-bred woman appeared in the court charged with vagrancy. There was no question of crime—she just would wander and insisted on sleeping in places the law has decided not to be fit for such a purpose. She spoke like the woman of education she was and explained that she liked to wander, that she couldn't stand the walls of a house, or knowing in the morning where her head would lie that night. She was discharged with a warning, and close on her heels followed newspaper men and a half dozen other interested persons, but she disappeared. She did not wish to tell her story or to have friends, and was clever enough to outwit the seekers in short order.

The women sentenced to the Island were to spend the night in the jail and thither went the probation officer and her visitors. On the way there was the doctors' room to see, and the place where they take fingers' prints of women convicted on various charges. The women doctors are an innovation in the Night Court, and so, too, is the taking of finger prints.

Upstairs the night matron prepared for her guests, while down in a little room a man made out tickets or records of some sort as to their stay on the Island. The cells were empty, save for the half-witted immigrant girl and one other. The occupant of the second cell stood by her open door and looked out at the visitors, a pale young woman, simply dressed with every air of decency, strangely out of keeping with the place.

"What is she doing here?"

"She came in," said the probation officer, "two nights ago, out of her mind, from cocaine. She couldn't talk coherently and kept saying, 'I haven't got any coke about me. Search me, if you choose.' All she could understand was that she had no cocaine, and that she wanted some. She seems straight in all other ways. She says she is quite alone in the world and does not even know where her family is now, but that may not be true. Perhaps she just doesn't want them to know. What will become of her? I don't know. I hope an institution will take her."

She crossed over to the girl. "Hadn't you better go to bed?" she said. "You'll feel better if you do," and she closed the grated door to keep out some of the sight of the string of women coming upstairs.

They went to their cells two by two, put together according to their appearance, the least depraved in one cell, the most degraded in another. The Boston woman, still angry and cursing beneath her breath, walked with the old laundress, the first who stood before the Judge. Whether for comfort or offering the protection of her strength, she held the old woman's hand in hers, and the door closed on them standing so together.

The matron shut them in, not at all unkindly—the system is brutal in many ways, but the people who administer it are not—and turned to her other visitors:

"Nice company," she said, somewhat wearily.

"One of them is an intelligent woman, too."

"Ah, they're many come here that know better," she said. "Good night."

There are many who know better. The Boston woman knew, and half of the others seemed to have come from decent stock originally. That is the strange part of it. The depraved women of the Night Court are not the foreign-born. Not one foreigner passed through the court that night, except the half-witted girl. People who follow the court say that the lowest depths belong to women of American birth, or even of straight American descent. It is not the "scum of the earth"—that lolls drunken in the parks—it is daughters of the "good old stock."

Are they reclaimable? Many. Naturally when a woman's life is nearly over and has been mostly spent amid evil, it is not an easy task. It is so hard that in general probation officers cannot undertake it; to do so would be to neglect much more important duties toward the young and plant. Of these a good many are rescued, who, like the girl in pink, have been dragged down step by step, their poor little wills feebly protesting. Some, again, are strong and go far in evil, but they can be turned round to work in the other direction with equal energy. In a house where such girls are taken and started straight a visitor met the other night a sweet young girl, fresh and simple as the flowers in her hat. She seemed a young lady come down to offer a friendly hand to the fallen, and it was with amazement that her farewell remark to the lady in charge came to the visitor's ears.

"Good-bye. I do like to come in and see you again once in a while."

"Why," gasped the visitor, "was she one of your girls? What did she do?"

Everything, it appeared, that a girl could do. From one thing to another she went, until she was arrested for grand larceny. She was put in the lady's charge on probation, and now she is as earnest in her work, as anxious to please, as eager to lead a good life, as any other girl. Her employer knows her story, but she has shown herself absolutely honest ever since she went to work a year ago. The same intelligence and energy she put into her badness goes now to her reformation.

Bad home conditions, lack of employment, trust in some man, these start the women who find the Night Court in ninety-nine cases out of every hundred. So people say who know as well as one can know the secrets of other's lives. It is pitiful, but, after all, it is good to feel that it isn't, even with the worst of them, just plain evil. They were all, or nearly all, victims to begin with.

Somebody had hit somebody else with a bottle, because somebody had struck the child, or somebody said so. It was a mixed affair. Mrs. Jacobs testified first, at much length, and having gained the floor refused to give it up. She was ready and willing to testify for all the others, too. "What Mrs. Jones means to say, your Honor, is—" "Keep quiet," she subsided.

After a minute: "What Mrs. Sullivan says that she says what—" "Keep quiet, will you?"

Two minutes later: "It's a lie, your Honor."

"Take that woman away."

But whenever a witness was called Mrs. Jacobs broke from her captors with a hopeful "Want me, your Honor?"

A certain Mrs. Thomas formed the sole oasis in a desert of loquaciousness. She sat patiently for hours waiting to give her testimony: "I don't know nothing about it." Mrs. Thomas had not lived in the house with the other ladies for nothing.

The nervous child wriggled and blinked and struggled not to cry. With the probation officer and the Judge she got along very well, but let her mother, the ubiquitous Mrs. Jacobs, appear, or the janitress, and she squirmed like a poor little butterfly stuck on a pin.

"Good Heavens," said one bystander to another, "how can that child grow up in such an environment? She's a nervous wreck now," and turning to Mrs. Thomas she repeated her remark. "Sure," said that taciturn lady, adding a minute afterward in a burst of confidence, "But she comes sometimes by my house."

Blessings on the head of Mrs. Thomas. The wriggling little girl left the court sticking close to her. When she grows up—if they let her—and hears about home and mother and other poetical things she is likely to sit dumb.

"Home, indeed," said a sociological