

A Conscientious Uncle

There was not a large gathering at the last meeting of the Criterion club, but it was an earnest one. There was a noticeable absence of undue levity, and the exchange of that meaningless persiflage so common when gentlemen of social predilections congregate was as if by common consent tabooed. The meeting was on the Monday evening after the memorable dry Sunday of May 8, 1887. Whether the somewhat subdued tone of the club was due to that great metropolitan phenomenon the historian of the club does not presume to say. But he has his opinion, and it is one which no amount of evidence to the contrary can change. The exhibition lunch on the caterer's sideboard seemed more shrunk by age than usual, and showed so plainly the need of the renovating hand of the property man that there was no danger of any person, present for the first time, committing the error once made by a visitor, who, looking about the apartments, sought to sample the Saratoga chips, the English cheese, and the tempting ham, apparently just in its first slicing down to the bone. The visitor was not aware of the fact that the layout was a gift from Shed Shook and Jim Collier on their retirement from the management of the Union Square theatre some years ago, and a relic of the stage properties under that management. When Shakespeare wrote, "Age cannot wither nor custom stale its infinite variety," he had not this bric-a-brac lunch of the Criterion club on the line of his prophetic vision. And on Monday night it showed so palpably the need of retouching that Caterer Collins humanely covered it with a cloth and hid it from the unputying glare of the gas light above it.

"If the members present," by and by spoke up Brother Hal Young, late of Cincinnati, "would be pleased to hear a story in which there is no extravagant straining after either a ludicrous or an ultra dramatic effect, in which I will not attempt to woo the comic muse nor linger in doleful dalliance with sad eyed tragedy, and in the telling of which truth will be my prompter, they have only to signify their pleasure and I'll let her go."

No one said he would be pleased to hear the story, but every one said to Brother Young that he might as well let her go.

"It can't be any worse than yesterday's was," said the caterer.

And so the story began.

"If there ever was a conscientious man," said Brother Young, "that man was my Uncle Reuben Rashley. He was a preacher. Then you might say: 'A preacher! Why shouldn't he be conscientious?' But I've known preachers in my time, gentlemen, who were not so overwhelmingly burdened with conscientiousness, after all. But my Uncle Reuben was all conscience, so to speak. I could tell you chapters of incidents illustrating his exceeding conscientiousness. He would never eat fish or strawberries for breakfast on Monday, fearing that they might have been caught or picked on Sunday. Once he married a young couple, and the bridegroom gave him \$3 as his fee. At that time my uncle was very poor, and he was in great need of \$11 to buy actual necessaries; but an hour or so after receiving the fee he learned that the man who had paid it to him had sold a load of potatoes to a saloon keeper in the place, and my uncle was fearful that the \$3 was some of the money the saloon keeper had made by selling beer that he told me himself that he intended to return the fee to the young man at once; and, do you

know, the fellow was mean enough to deny ever having received the money back when I mentioned it to him afterward in boasting of my uncle's conscientiousness.

“Well, that was the way my uncle felt about things. He was preaching in a little town, at a small salary. While he was in that town an old classmate of his in college came to see him. The classmate was canvassing for subscribers to a religious magazine, at \$3 a subscriber, and my uncle took him all around and made personal appeals for him. More than 100 people subscribed, and at my uncle's suggestion paid the money in advance. The classmate went away. The magazines were to commence coming in a few days. They never commenced. That was a great blow to my uncle, and when one day he overheard one of the members of his church say to another that if the dominion got less than half of the amount the canvasser collected he was a fool, it was more than he could bear, and he resigned at once. He went away, and some of his congregation were heartless enough to say it was a pity he forgot to return the \$23 advance he had received on his salary, when I've often heard my uncle say he had hard work to get money from the church at all.

“The town he went to from the unappreciative place he so indignantly left was a large town. There was a church of his denomination there which had just been built. There was a debt on it, and it had no pastor. My uncle consented to take charge of it and see what he could do. Among the members of the church was an eccentric old gentleman of the name of Jason Horn. He was worth about \$23,000, and was a bachelor with two nephews, who expected to inherit his wealth. About six months after my uncle took charge of the church old Horn fell ill. During the first few days of his illness he declared that he would not leave his money to any one who was not a member of the church. His nephews were neither of them church members nor attendants, but after they had heard their uncle's declarations they suddenly became deeply interested in religious matters, and the first thing the town knew the two prospective heirs of old Jason Horn had joined the church and were its most devout members.

“Two months after Horn was taken ill he died, but before he died he sent for my uncle, his two nephews and his lawyer. They all met around his bed; the lawyer produced a document, and, at the order of the dying man, read it. It was Horn's last will and testament. It bequeathed \$2,000, in the form of a check, to pay the debt on the church. Then it declared that the testator had become disgusted with his nephews for joining the church simply to insure their legacy, and so the testator's will was that all the rest of his money, amounting to \$23,000 in bank bills—his entire property having been converted into cash by his lawyer—should be buried with him. Soon after the will was read the old man died, and it was the first instance on record that a man ever listened to the reading of the provisions of his own will, to enforce them by his dying word of mouth as well.

“Great excitement followed. The nephews contested the will while the old man lay dead, but the surrogate said its provisions must be carried out, but that the contestants could go on with the proceedings, and if the case was decided in their favor eventually they could have their uncle disinterred and gather in the wealth that he had chosen as lining for his coffin. Old Horn was buried and his \$23,000 with him. The nephews hired men to watch the grave night and day to guard against its being robbed, and the curious people flocked to this remote burying ground

daily to see the mound beneath which a fortune had been placed to feed the worms.

“My uncle’s conscientiousness had already made a great impression on his people. The check for \$2,000 which had been left to pay the debt on the church was drawn on a bank in a neighboring town five miles away. It was made payable to the church trustees or order, and they indorsed it over to my uncle and told him to go over to the bank at his leisure, fetch the money and pay the church’s debt. About a week after old Horn was buried my uncle put the check in his pocket and went after the money. It was early in the fall, when the nights were cool, and my uncle being a great walker, concluded to stay in town, after drawing the money from the bank, and walk the five miles home. He started back about 7:30 o’clock in the evening, later than he had intended, but he had fallen in with a friend and the time passed quicker than he had noticed.

“The graveyard where old Jason Horn was buried lay along the road my uncle had to travel. It was two miles from the town the church was in, or a little more than half way between the two places. About 9 o’clock that night two men came into the former place in a great hurry. They were pale and excited. They were the men who had gone on duty that night to watch old Horn’s grave. To every one they met they said they had seen a ghost—a tall white figure that seemed to float on the air. It had risen out of the ground in the graveyard, and after touching at several graves had started slowly toward Horn’s grave in a manner that drove the watchmen from the place in terror. After going a half a mile or more the men had cautiously returned, thinking the ghost might have gone away; but there it was, circling in a weird manner near the spot where Horn’s grave was. This news caused a great sensation, and the dead man’s nephews were much alarmed, and construed the apparition as a warning to them for their action in the matter of the will. While the excitement was at its height my uncle arrived in town. It was then about 10 o’clock. He was very much agitated, and the story he told added to the feverish feeling in the place. After telling why he had remained in the other town so late my uncle said:

“ ‘I was coming along toward the graveyard at a moderate gait,’ said he, ‘carrying my light overcoat over my arm and singing a favorite hymn, when suddenly something white attracted my attention over in the burying ground. I came even with the road entrance to the graveyard, when I saw a tall, white figure standing erect a short distance inside the sacred enclosure. I was momentarily startled, of course, but quickly recovered myself, and at once determined to discover what the figure was, and why it was there at such a place and at such an hour. I entered the graveyard and approached the white figure. It moved slowly forward for a few steps, then stopped and seemed to kneel. The sky was clouding over, but the whiteness of the object before me made it conspicuous in the darkness. I drew near noiselessly, until I was within reach of the kneeling figure. I bent and placed my hand upon it. Instantly it sprang out, with a loud scream, and tried to run away. I seized it, and found that I held in my arms an apparently young woman, screaming with terror. I succeeded in quieting her, telling her who I was and that I meant her no harm, and she finally told me she was the daughter of a farmer living near. She was a somnambulist, she said. Her mother had recently died and she was buried in that graveyard, ‘and,’ said the girl, ‘I must have risen in my sleep in my night clothes and walked here to mother’s grave.’

“ ‘The girl,’ continued my uncle, ‘was shivering, and I threw my overcoat about her and led her out of the graveyard. She said her home was half a mile further on in the direction I was going,

so I said I would see her safely there. The darkness became deeper, and before we had gone far I could see but a few feet ahead of me. When we got to the spot where the trees and the bushes are so thick on either side of the road, it was barely possible to see at all. Suddenly I felt the girl take her hand from my arm. I stopped and spoke to her. She was gone. I groped about in the darkness, but she was nowhere to be found. She took my overcoat with her,' continued my uncle, while a look of agony came upon his face, 'and if she is not discovered—

“There my uncle broke down and sobbed.

“ ‘Suppose she isn't discovered,' said a bystander, petulantly. ‘You can get another one, can't you!’”

“ ‘Yes,' said my uncle. ‘Yes; but, oh! My brethren! The church's \$2,000 was in the pocket of that overcoat!’”

“Men, there was a time in that place. Everybody was interested in the church, and in a short time a hundred men with lanterns were scouring the country about the graveyard and the graveyard itself for traces of the mysterious somnambulist, who had walked away with the church's fortune. They discovered nothing, but during the search a wail that made the blood of the boldest in the party turn cold came from that part of the graveyard where old Horn was buried. Everybody hastened thither, including my poor uncle. By the light of the lamps that were held aloft a terrible sight was revealed. Old Horn's coffin lay open by the side of his grave. Old Horn was in it, but his \$23,000 were gone. The grave had been robbed. Stretched on the ground were Horn's two nephews, groveling in the dirt and wailing in the agony of their souls.

“Well, of course there was great lamentation in the town, but no one mourned with the true soreness of heart that my unfortunate uncle did. The mystery of the robbery of course could not be explained, but my uncle worried so much, and his oversensitive conscience pricked him so, that a month after the robbery in the graveyard he resigned his pulpit and bade farewell to the place to seek peace elsewhere. We heard from him a few months later. He was in Montana, and said he had fallen into great fortune by the unexpected finding of a silver mine.”

Brother Young paused. His story had certainly not improved the spirits of the club.

“Did they ever discover who got the church's \$2,000 and the wealth out of old Horn's grave?” asked Caterer Collins, impatiently.

“No, they never did,” replied Brother Young.

“But they might,” said the Caterer.

“How?” inquired Brother Young.

“By putting the detectives on your uncle,” said the Caterer.

Here the doleful meeting adjourned.—*New York Sun*

Wichita Eagle, September 3, 1887