

Sad Fate of the Station Mission (1911)

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The Countess Julia was a very virtuous young lady, a fact that means a great deal in the depraved state of today's morals. At the age of eighteen, with a heart still untarnished, she could talk as proficiently about prostitution and the ways in which it could be rooted out as if she herself had experienced all the hardships endured by fallen women in the Houses of Ill Fame. Her mother, the Princess Boldierová, had gathered round her a group of ladies who represented the flower of moral purity from both the aristocratic and the middle classes and they indulged in frequent deliberations, in the presence of the innocent Julia, on ways of protecting young girls and preventing them from being lured into Houses of Shame. Their first concern was for inexperienced girls who hadn't an inkling of the snares that lie in wait for them in the big city, any more than they had of the traps being laid for them by the company gathered around Princess Boldierová.

For Mrs Waldsteinová, the Commercial Councillor's wife, had proposed that girls from the country should be warned at the railway station itself of the dangers that threatened them, as they set foot in the city. And with this proposal, she got old Baroness Richterová into trouble. The latter made her way to the railway station one day, to meet the train from Tábor, and accosted a strapping young country wench who had just arrived with the words: 'Where are you going? Do you have a position? Do you have any money? Do you have any relatives in Prague?' The girl eyed her for a while as if she were a lunatic and then told the Baroness very firmly to leave her alone. 'Leave me alone, you old witch, or I'll thump you!' The worthy Baroness heard no more, for she fell down in a faint and has talked with a stutter ever since.

Later, at Princess Boldierová's, when she had stammered out the tale of how she had got on, Mrs Zapp, who had made her mark with a book for young girls on the sinful nature and harmful effects of dancing, proposed that they should organise a Railway Station Protection Service and that ladies who were willing to undertake this duty should wear some kind of identification. And what finer badge

could they wear than the image of that most virtuous of all the women to whom this world ever gave birth, the Virgin Mary, with the child she had so miraculously conceived? They called in Father Zacharius of the Carmelites who approved the plan and designed a ribbon with a cross on it, at the centre of which was to be a picture of the Mother of God, as a symbol of virginity. The colours chosen were the papal colours of white and gold, to symbolise faith (besides which, no-one was going to call the virginity of the Pope in question). It was clear that the rescue of these girls should be carried out in a Roman Catholic spirit, with special emphasis on the benefits of piety. For surely even the most hardened pimp would give way before a virtuous maiden who was forever telling her beads, oblivious of all around her as she went about, continually whispering to herself and repeating one of those lovely litanies: 'From the spirit of fornication, Good Lord, deliver us!' And if on top of all that the maiden was old, hunchbacked and boss-eyed, she would not fall into the hands of the pimps, for she would be strengthened by her faith in eternal bliss and her pious beliefs would keep her safe from places of shame and moral depravity.

And so, when the Station Mission had been set up, Mrs Waldsteinová was singled out for the distinction of being the first who, armed with a ribbon from which it could be seen at first glance why this lady was spending so long walking about the station peering at everyone she met, set off to the rescue of innocent young girls who were arriving in Prague.

Two rooms had been made ready to receive them; furnished in modest style, it is true, but with a delicate understanding of the spiritual needs of innocent and inexperienced young girls from the country.

Everywhere she looked, such a girl would see the tortured face of the crucified Saviour staring back at her and even if she chanced to look up at the ceiling, there was a cross painted up there as well.

And between these crosses, which were to remind her that, if only for the sake of Him who had sacrificed Himself for her, she should maintain her innocence undefiled, there were inscriptions everywhere with the categorical imperative: 'Do not fornicate', though Countess Julia, ever the model of tact and good breeding, had in her innocence proposed that the legend should read: 'You are requested not to fornicate' or 'In the event of fornication, please contact the Director.'

Oh, the good, the innocent Countess Julia! The meaning of that word was as foreign to her as that of words like 'radioactivity' or

'Gautsch'* would be to a shepherd in the Appennines.

Mrs Waldsteinová walked about the station waiting for a train and when one at last arrived, she rushed full tilt at the first girl who came through the door carrying a suitcase. Her heart was boiling over with enthusiasm and she completely failed to notice that in the crush, her ribbon had fallen off her sleeve. Swiftly, she plucked the suitcase from the girl's hand but in that same instant, a policeman was on the scene and arrested her, and off they went to the police-station, followed by a large crowd.

In her confusion, she began to shout at first and then began to assert and explain that she was not a criminal, she was from the Station Mission. The further they went, the more confused she became and finally, only half-aware of what she was doing, she started to exhort the policeman to give up the life he was leading and stay away from the pimps.

It all got straightened out at the police-station but that did not prevent a certain journal, which took a very hostile attitude to the bourgeoisie, from coming out with an article headed: 'A Strange Case of Kleptomania'. A correction was published later, but the article left a stain. Mrs Waldsteinová withdrew from the Station Mission and the story goes that she invested the money she had inherited from her mother in a large brothel in Ustí nad Labem and is now making fifty per cent a year on the investment.

This setback in no way deterred the selfless ladies. On the contrary, it called forth among them such a readiness to sacrifice themselves for the good cause that Princess Boldierová herself descended on the station and came back in high triumph to the refuge with a girl in tow who took a lively interest in that philanthropic institution.

The ladies led her in procession into the refuge and instructed her till ten o'clock at night about the moral degradation that lay in wait in the city. And then the innocent Countess Julia took leave of the Station Mission's first victim with the words: 'I beg you from the bottom of my heart to refrain from fornicating!' The girl was given the keys to the place and told she could stay there until she had found herself a job.

She was there a week. For the first two days, she behaved respectably, but then she began to bring men back to this sanctified retreat of hers.

This was a terrible blow to Father Zacharius of the Carmelites when

* Karl, Freiherr von Gautsch, Prime Minister of the 'Austrian' part of the Empire, May-October 1911.

he called in early one morning to prepare her, during that idle hour of the day, for the approaching Easter Festival which means so much to the soul that burns with religious sensibility.

And it was frightful when to cap it all, the fellow threw the worthy Father out, which sad tidings of moral degeneracy he then relayed to the lady who was so earnestly fighting the good fight against immorality, the lofty-minded Princess Boldierová.

But who can know the depth of self-sacrificing ardour that fills the hearts of ladies such as this? Next to sally forth to the rescue of those girls at the station was Countess Solvarová and since that worthy lady was extremely short-sighted, she came back with some bent old crone to whom, as they rode along in the carriage, she kept saying: 'And you should thank God, young lady, that I have rescued you from the hands of the pimps!'

But why give up in despair over such an innocent mistake? The virtuous Countess Julia asked her mother's permission to go down to the station herself and meet the trains.

The noble, the innocent Countess! As she stood waiting for a train to come, she was approached by a smartly-dressed young man who showed a lively interest in the purpose of the ribbon she was wearing on her sleeve and in the aims of the Sacred Station Mission. The good Countess opened her virginal heart to him and he, young and elegant as he was, introduced himself to her as the Prince Godknowswhat. They had a most enjoyable conversation.

Poor innocent, young, virtuous Countess Julia! He bartered her, that hapless station missionary, that most innocent of innocent lilies, that chaste and virtuous flowerbud; he sold her for a hundred crowns, the blackguard, to a House of Ill Fame in Pilsen.

My pen is reluctant to proceed further, for the sad fate of the Station Mission is so deeply moving that one weeps in the act of writing, just as my friend Hájek is weeping now as he writes his employer's obituary.