

SPRING 2016 – PERSPECTIVES

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The Disappearance

Grace's Alley, they called it – who really knows why? I have a theory though, and it goes back to the time when the Mission was a music hall and I was its manager. Before the fire, that was.

The bar was a marvel, the finest in London—ten yards of double-curved mahogany. The etched glass in the windows, the optics, the goblets in our clients' hands, all sparkled—like the conversation. Beyond the bar was the music hall, carved into the space between the tight-packed terraced houses that took the street frontage. From Grace's Alley, at the side, you got to the greenroom, and then the stage, and then the auditorium. What an auditorium—seats of red velvet, carved nymphs and ormolu. The cast iron pillars that held up the balcony were twisted like sticks of barley sugar; and the chandelier, with its hundreds of gas jets and thousands of crystals, blazed at night like a second sun.

Best of all, that auditorium held rank upon rank of paying customers. They laughed, they cried, they sang along with Champagne Charlie. A bit boisterous sometimes, but that's the East End for you. We had science too—of a sort. Exceptional specimens of humanity. Freaks, some called them, but to me it's all educational; and lucrative of course.

The woman I recall was an act of that kind. Maybe her name wasn't Grace at all, but that's how I remember her. A beautiful woman, no circus sideshow. And a beautiful voice—a trained opera singer, to my ear, and I'm a pretty good judge. To all appearances, though, she'd fallen on hard times. The agent who travelled with her seemed a shifty sort, and she was terrified of him.

She came highly recommended, and we made a big play of her reputation on the bill that night: headlined, of course, the very last act. Our audience were accustomed to the burlesque ditties of Champagne Charlie and his ilk. The singer that night gave them double their money's worth, with a soaring soprano voice and a programme of arias that far outshone the usual music hall fare.

Then the audience began to mutter, impatient for the promised finale of the act. At my signal, the accompanist struck a dramatic chord, and I pushed the agent onstage to introduce our

so-called experiment. Dressed in an evening cloak and top hat, he cut a fine figure. His words, though, carried no conviction.

“That’s not art! It’s pseudoscientific twaddle!” The voice rang out from the back of the auditorium. The soprano stepped to the front of the stage, where the footlights drenched her face in an eerie glow. Her features seemed contorted, the greasepaint smudged by her tears. She gesticulated, but no words came from her lips.

“My protégée lives for her art,” the agent declared. The diva shrank back, but he seized her by a wrist and dragged her back to the limelight. Then as planned, he thrust a crystal goblet into the soprano’s hand. She screamed, and the glass in her hand trembled. I had expected it to shatter, but the glass just disappeared, slowly, as if the undulations set up by her cry had somehow claimed it. A collection of vibrating particles that lost their organizing principle and fell apart into nothingness.

And then the singer herself started to dissolve—first the hand that had held the glass, and then the arm, her neck, her hair, her ears. In a matter of moments, there was nothing left but the black dress, and a screaming mouth like some tortured Cheshire cat. And then the mouth had gone. The scream reverberated around the music hall for a second, and died away. The black dress slipped to the floor, empty.

There would have been a riot, no doubt about it. But the collective gasp from the audience caused the flames from the sunburner chandelier to lick downwards, and in seconds the stage curtains were ablaze. I never saw the weaselly agent again, and my livelihood went along with my theatre. All I have left is a handful of crystals from the chandelier—and the memories of that last fateful, glorious night.

Now the Methodists have the place, and good luck to them. They can save a few souls here and there, but the true spirit of the East End is gone.

The events and characters described above are fictitious. However, Wilton’s Music Hall in Cable Street, London, is a real venue—the oldest extant example of the genre—that suffered a serious fire at the height of its popularity in the 1870s. It was rebuilt, but never regained its prestige as a music hall and became a Methodist mission for many years. After years of neglect, it has now been refurbished and is functioning once more as a performance space. Cambridge Architectural Research acted as structural engineers for the restoration.