

HOW THEY CARRIED THE BAD NEWS TO PARSON'S GREEN.

BY ALFRED SLADE.

Illustrated by A. H. BUCKLAND.



TIP-TOP Society, or what counts for it round the New King's Road, has completely "cut" the Massingers. And none too prematurely, either; it was a thing all the world in that microcosmic oasis already mentioned had long been expecting, for,

ever since they had arrived, the Massingers had continually been giving occasions for discussion and distrust.

They were Colonials, to begin with; and as such were distressingly ignorant of, or insolent of, the niceties of that little social code that makes for happiness in a suburb.

For instance, when they came they left no cards anywhere; they paid no visits in the district, and seemed to invite none. Then the way they furnished their house—at least, as much as could be seen from the outside—disgraceful! Scorning the chaste white leno curtains of the rest of the street, they flaunted flaring art muslins of green and golden! Instead of the demure and orthodox snowy hearthstone at the gate, they substituted a most dissipated mosaic! They swept away the highly respectable shrubs in the front garden, and actually tried to grow flowers; and, worse still, they did it.

Other depravities of course followed. They had the gas cut off, threw the incandescent burners into the dustbin, and used nothing but oil-lamps and fairy-lights; they had the walls stripped of their beautiful varnished paper, and distempered rose and pale blue; they used to go on the balcony in fine weather and sit there, perhaps for hours together, as if it were decorous to venture

on a balcony overlooking a public street; they used to go out a great deal to foreign parts quite outside the district, and—most ominous and disreputable sign—they paid the tradesmen ready money!

Again, when the next-door lady had managed to surprise Mrs. Massinger one day trimming the flowers in the front plot, she succeeding in telling her it was a fine day. What was the reply? Not, as would have been expected by folks of breeding and refinement, an immediate and confidential discourse on all Mrs. Massinger's private affairs and the history of her relations and acquaintances. No! Mrs. Massinger failed at the test. She simply corroborated the hypothesis that the day *was* fine, finished her pruning, and went indoors. She was concealing something, of course; so of course she had something to conceal.

Then the extravagant way she dressed! Always in the height of fashion; not the demure and sobered fashion that was tolerated down there, but the fashion that came over fresh from Paris; not the copy of a Bowlderised magazine pattern, but the result of an intelligent woman's intuition. And these startling gowns, which the foolish men (in their wives' absence) declared lovely, she was known to make herself, and to spend next to nothing on the making; so that she could manage to have a new one much more often than was decent, and—aggravation of the offence—with a hat always to match.

Mr. Massinger's eccentricities—the suburb tried to be charitable, and at first only called them that—were as deplorable. He had been seen from the back cleaning his boots, and was reported to have declared that boot-cleaning was no work for the maid, and so he did it himself. This aforesaid maid had openly boasted that she received more wages than she had asked, a statement that did not assist in "keeping down" the other "girls" in the street; she had also confessed that the "master" often carried up scuttles of coal for her from the cellar, and sometimes went to the extent of lighting his study fire; also that he periodically hired a man to clean



"Mrs. Massinger trimming the flowers."

the windows and do rough work like that; and even openly encouraged the visits of her young man as soon as he knew they were formally engaged to be married.

It has already been said that he paid the tradesmen ready money, as if it were not more solid and select to run a bill for a month, and then run it on for another; but in this matter he went even further.

He sometimes even insisted on carrying his purchases home, and submitted himself to the shameful indignity of being seen walking about with a brown paper parcel in his hand.

One day—Mr. Massinger had been buying some heavy ironwork at the local stores—the tradesman felt it his duty to protest. He had a boy especially for that duty, a hungry-looking boy, apparently aged about thirteen, and standing nearly as high as his hand-barrow: he would send the things home by the barrow and the boy. And this very reasonable proposition Massinger overruled: said he was just as strong as the boy, took the things on his shoulder, and went off like that.

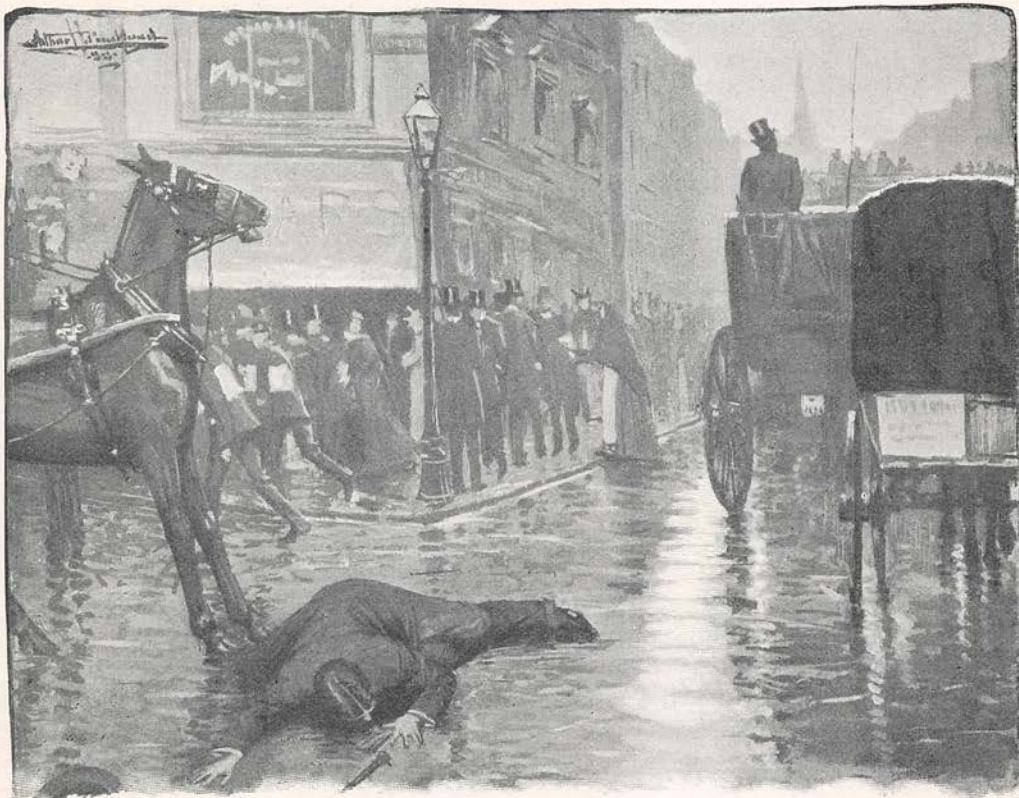
Australians and what-not! Australia! Where the convicts come from, you know!

Can it be wondered, then, that the nostrils of Society of Parson's Green were

quivering with indignation at the goings-on of such a couple; that this indignation only increased at the indifference of the offenders, until it distended itself into what might have seemed to an unsympathetic stranger to be an upturned snuffle; and that the whole neighbourhood in consequence went about with all the symptoms of a chronic and highly uncomfortable influenza? And yet the whole neighbourhood, with strange inconsistency, beamed into an ascetic smile when the Massingers approached; and said

front of an omnibus which had just got on the move. Then the wheels of the hansom and the omnibus became interlocked. Right down the line the traffic was brusquely stopped, and the air became thick with varied objurgations, which, commencing, as was just, with the omnibus driver, who was a pirate, lost none of its volume or intensity in proceeding.

The policeman remained stolid under this shower-bath of language, and took notes of the proceedings from everyone participating



"A hansom horse's head butted against him and made him slip."

good-day in ardent salutation. But that, you must understand, was *before* the cut occurred.

The genealogy of the scandal is this. One morning, recently, Massinger went into a shop in the Strand to buy some cigarettes; hurrying out, he had started to cross the road before he saw that the policeman had stepped back to allow the transverse traffic to proceed; consequently, when about in the middle, a hansom horse's head butted against him and made him slip and fall in the greasy mud. The cabby pulled up sharp, right in

in them; the crowd formed and enjoyed itself for a few minutes in inquiry and running commentation; Massinger limped into the hansom and drove to his club; the Waterloo pirate continued his interrupted way to King's Cross; and, with some difficulty and a good deal of help from the police, everyone at last managed to "pass along, please."

There the affair would, and should, have ended. But such a happy settlement was too much to expect in *this* world. For down Chancery Lane the Waterloo pirate got

crawling behind a green Favorite; the Favorite conductor had punched all his fares, and for the moment was quite disposed to a little perfunctory conversation.

"'Ello, Bill," he shouted, "what's the matter with your paint?"

Bill, whose name accurately was Lionel, a name found unfitted for street salutation, disdained to reply. But that was evidently what the conductor expected, for he began his catechism again.

"Been racing a Road Car? And he did you best, eh?"

The mere name of a Road Car aroused Lionel Bill (you must remember that the Road Cars changed the entire map of London as far as fares were concerned), and he repulsed the suggestion with much heartiness.

"No. What are you giving us? A bloke down the Strand fell down in front of a hansom, hansom backed into my near wheel. It'll cost me about a bob."

Then the Favorite got a clear start down the Gray's Inn Road, and left the pirate loafing.

When the Favorite got back again to Victoria, he found an old friend of his in the station-yard—a conductor on a Liverpool Street Road Car.

"'Ello, Bill," he said—this Bill's name was Albert Edward—"seen anything of the smash-up down the Strand this morning?"

"No," replied Bill Albert Edward; "what was it?"

"Bloke fell out of a hansom, drunk; hansom backed in a 'bus and smashed the near wheel. Old Bill's Waterloo 'bus it was, you know."

"No, I don't," denied Bill Albert Edward. The inspector blew his whistle, and they parted.

On the return journey the Victoria Road Car was changing horses at Westminster, when a Walham Green Car came up.

"'Orful accident down the Strand this morning," said Walham Green.

"Yes," acquiesced Victoria, who knew nothing about it, but wasn't likely to confess it, especially to a conductor of the same company; "'orrible, ain't it?"

"Did you see the bloke?" asked Walham Green.

"I was right there," lied Victoria. "'E came up to me, and he arsted were I a-goin' to Olympia. I could see he were intoxicated, of course; and when I pushed him off the step, he cannoned up against a horse and fell down right in the mud."

"They ought to have arrested him," advised Walham Green.

"That's what they done," said Victoria. "When I came away there were three bobbies taking him off in a hambulance."

At Sloane Square the Walham Green Car got to "nursing" a Putney pirate that had changed routes.

"Garn," said the Car conductor, "you're worse than the bloke in the Strand."

"Ho," asked the pirate driver, "and what did 'e do, if I might be so bold?"

The Car, in the face of such a respectful request for information, became friendly at once.

"Didn't you see it?" he said. "My word! you missed a treat. There was a bloke as a cabby had been driving about all night; and when he gets out, the cabby wants his dibs, as were right and natural; and then this bloke he punches the horse in the head, and the horse rears up and the bloke falls down under his hoofs, and they took him off to the hospital insensible."

"Screwed, weren't he?" asked the pirate. "Screwed!" cried the Car in admiration, "it ain't the word for it. Squiffy, that's what 'e were."

Here the pirate's horses gave out and he fell behind. But presently a Putney Bridge General came past him, and at the World's End they were together.

"Changed your route again, 'ave yer?" asked the General conductor; "you bloomin' old highwayman, you!"

"You'd liked to 'ave changed it, too, this morning, my lad," retorted the other, "I lay."

"What was up?" naturally demanded the General.

"A bit of all right"—the pirate had got his story ready, being of an imaginative and adventurous disposition, as befitted his calling—"a gent with D.T.'s, he was fighting a policeman in the Strand, and a lady came up and fell down in front of a furniture van, and then she sings out, 'Save me, kind sir!' and the bloke he pushes the horses back into the kerb, and catches hold of her, and she fainted off, and then three other policemen came up with an ambulance and strapped 'em into it, and they ain't expected to recover."

"Who ain't?" impatiently demanded the General, who had started again and was rapidly getting out of hearing.

"The policemen," answered the pirate, who hadn't understood the question.

"Was—she—his—wife?" asked the General, waving his arms.

"Only one of them," shouted back the pirate, who was practically deaf at this distance and hadn't heard a word.

"Well, I'm blest," commented the General, as he turned to collect fares.

blood run cold, to rise to her head at boiling heat next minute in shame and indignation; and then came the determination, and a certain sense of self-indulgence, to relate the affair in the social circle that very evening.



"Mrs. Smugleigh, one of the Pillars of Society."

He had to ask twice of the first passenger, a middle-aged matron of stuffy appearance, whose face was entirely preoccupied with allied emotions of grief and determination. The story she had just heard had made her

For the lady was Mrs. Smugleigh, one of the Pillars of Society as edified at Parson's Green.

Massinger went to his club, and got as much of the mud as possible brushed off him; but London mud is too much like glue to be disposed of in so summary a manner; and when Massinger went home to tea his clothes were perhaps even more noticeable than ever.

At any rate, they were sufficiently noticeable to Griggs, the greengrocer, who thought the matter of so much interest that he spoke about it to all his subsequent customers, of whom one was Mrs. Gauntby. Mrs. Gauntby and Mrs. Smugleigh met at the

same social circle that evening; and the electric connection was completed.

From which resulted the record:—That Mr. Massinger had been having *delirium tremens* all night in a hansom; that, reeling out of a public-house, he had fallen against a hansom in which was sitting his first wife; that she had sprung out and seized the horse's head and felled Massinger to the ground with it; that she had flung herself into his arms and claimed him as her long-lost husband; that a policeman coming up had at once handcuffed him, whereupon Massinger had fought the policeman for twenty minutes and three rounds; that in the meantime the woman had fainted underneath the horse's hoofs, whence she was rescued conjointly by Massinger and the policeman (the same policeman, and the fight still continuing); that when they had strapped her into the ambulance, she violently assaulted the cabman, and seizing the horse's reins forced the hansom into a 'bus and broke the wheels; that Massinger was all the while too drunk to keep on his feet, and was now engaged in a stand-up fight with everyone who approached him; that he was also speechlessly intoxicated—too far gone to say a single word—and using most dreadful language; that he was eventually locked up for bigamy and manslaughter and being drunk; that, being recognised as a well-known forger and assassin, bail was of course refused and he was immediately taken to Holloway to await his trial; and that he came home in the evening—same evening—in such a state as to

leave no doubt as to the correctness of all the foregoing.

Next day it was, of course, only these matrons' decent duty to inform Mrs. Massinger of the whole affair, with particular stress on the bigamy; but her husband had evidently found her weak enough to believe some falsehood of his own invention; for, oh! shame to have to say it! she burst out laughing in their faces. Nothing can be done to help a woman like that—they left her to her fate and her husband, and henceforth cut them both.

There was a certain moral and platonic comfort in this action, it is true, but it was greatly discounted by the silence of the newspapers on the subject, and by the unaccountable negligence of the criminal authorities in leaving Massinger still at large; and then, as if more were needed, it was altogether disconcerted and upset by the shameless bearing of the Massingers themselves. For, incredible as it may appear to a right-minded onlooker, they didn't seem to mind. They went on living just as before, they kept up the same hypocritical pretence of perfect happiness, they presented always a well-nourished appearance, they continued paying their tradesmen in cash, and, most impudent effrontery of all, when they are met by the Pillars and severely and orthodoxically "cut," they look at one another and laugh.

The Pillars, however, have one sure hope and consolation: in careers like this more and more dreadful revelations may be hourly expected. The time *will* come—and the Pillars are now waiting for it.

