

"My Path Leads TO THE Morgue → Then to Potter's Field"

The Career of Miss Florence Schenck, Who Realized the Fatal Folly of Her Misspent Life When It Was too Late---And the Lesson It Preaches to Women



THE MORGUE.

The Last Road House of the "Gay Life."

It is only a few days ago that Florence Schenck, the gay, willful Virginian beauty, whose escapades made her notorious in two worlds, died the day after she arrived at her old home.

Three days before her death, she dictated the article that appears on this page.

Florence Schenck thought that she had at least a year to live, and she had determined to devote every working hour to warning other girls of the path she had taken—the gay primrose path, whose end is the unnamed grave of Potter's Field. This article was to have been her first move in her fight.

The lesson she would have taught in it has been vided by Death, and it is more important now perhaps than it would have been with its writer still alive.

Miss Schenck, it will be remembered, was the daughter of Dr. Powhattan Schenck, a retired surgeon of the United States army and member of one of the "First Families of Virginia." She ran away with Charles Wilson, a whip in the Alfred Vanderbilt stables. She had tired of the humdrum, respectable life in a modest home in the seaport town of Norfolk, Va. She wanted to see the world. She saw it. And what she saw and experienced killed her.

She led the gayest of lives in New York, in London, in Berlin.

Here follows her story, her warning to other girls, who may be tempted to tread the path she trod:

"Beware the Path I Trod!"

By Florence Schenck.

(Dictated by Her Three Days Before Her Death.)

WHEN my father, in answer to my pleadings, came to see me in my little room at the hospital, I could not see him through my tears. I could not speak for the sob in my throat. I clung to his hand, thinking: "Poor father! He has seen many a shipwreck down home, but never one more terrible than this of his daughter's life." I stared up into his face that was very stern and sad. I whispered: "Kiss me, father."

He pressed his lips upon my forehead and I heard a little choke in his throat.

Then my lovely sister Ann came in and kissed me and cried. She went out of the room and two doctors came in and they and father looked at my bruised side and the purple gash where the surgeons had made an incision, and all of them looked very grave. Afterwards I looked up at father and he shook his head.

"You cannot live long, my daughter," he said. "At best it will be but a short time. If you seem to recover it will only mean that your short life will be that of an invalid. You have repented, have you not? Then spend whatever time is left to you in warning other girls against the path you have followed."

"The path that leads to the morgue and then to Potter's Field," I thought.

With my hand in his and our tears mingling I promised. And this is the way I shall do it.

I shall grow a little better. That they all expect for me. Knowing that it will only be a short time and that inevitably I shall grow worse and then the end will be very near, that time of being a little better will be my golden time. It is then that I will carry out my plan.

I shall not go back to my old home at Norfolk. That would be too severe a cross for my proud family, though they have not refused me shelter. But I shall leave New York, whose other name is temptation, for girls who have not great talents or the greatest talent of all, which is the ability to resist the lure of idleness and gaiety. Even now with the shadow of death upon me I fear it, for its fingers, though wreathed in flowers, are strong and cruel.

I should like to go to a small city, for instance Richmond, and there live quietly and either lecture from the platform or with my pen, until the end comes. Always my sermon will be: "The wages of sin is death," and always I will address myself to girls, weak, pleasure-loving girls, who know not what they say when they utter those ominous words, "I want to see the world."

Seven years ago I slipped out of my quiet home on the outskirts of Norfolk and came to New York in Alfred Vanderbilt's private car, the Wayfarer. The name of the car was an omen. But I did not know it then. It was the most luxurious sight I had ever seen, with velvet draperies and the scent of sandalwood and of the cigars and of old wines hanging about it. People who boarded the car and got off again were



Florence Schenck at the Height of Her Gay, Misspent Life.



The Sad, Aged Face of Florence Schenck a Month Before Her Death—A Broken, Miserable Old Woman at 25.

people who belong to the smiling world, where there is no fear mingled with the thought of paying next month's bills. I had forsaken the work world where I had been a stenographer, working in the Fair Grounds at the Jamestown Exposition at seven dollars a week, and had entered the play world, where I had nothing to do but look pretty and be gay spirited.

This alone would not have seemed justification to me for leaving my home. But I had at my elbow and figuratively at my feet a man with whom I was infatuated, Charles Wilson, whom I had met at the Horse Show, while I was admiring the Vanderbilts' horses. I saw that he admired me and I was flattered. When he began to make love to me I believed him. When I got aboard the Wayfarer I believed that he would marry me when we reached New York.

Instead he took me to his home at Newport when a sweet faced, gray-haired woman greeted me kindly and called him Charlie. When I asked him who she was, he said: "Don't make a fuss about it. She's my wife!"

I left their home in Newport and came to New York. He followed me here. I threatened to go home and tell my father everything.

"You'll not stay long," he sneered. "They'll kick you out. Do you suppose an F. F. V. will have such a girl as you now as under its roof?"

Although he spoke in anger, I knew he told the truth. I had always admired and loved my father, but I knew him as he was, a proud, stern man with little sympathy for the weaknesses of human nature. I had been very weak and foolish. That I loved this man who had strewn my life path with wreckage when I was only seventeen years old would be little excuse to him. Southerners are hot-headed as well as high-spirited. If I told father the truth he might follow Charles Wilson and kill him. Before that thought I quailed. Often a woman's heart is traitor to her own best interests. I remained in New York. Wilson told me he would divorce his wife and marry me.

I tried to believe him and I waited. I hoped and prayed for the time when, rehabilitated, as his wife, I could pay a visit to my home. But waiting is a dangerous pastime in New York. Especially if you are young and beautiful.

If I went out for a walk my appearance attracted attention. I was always accosted, or was followed home, by some man, usually one with cruel eyes and a predatory mouth. Often I reached home just in time to slam the door in his face. If I dared to go to a play in the afternoon, it was the same.

I was very lonely. Charles Wilson's travels with the Vanderbilts' horses and his care for them at the stables in New York and in Newport kept him busy. I saw him seldom, and then for only a short time. If you are very clever you can amuse yourself. You can study and read. Your thoughts are excellent companions. But if you are only pretty and dependent the hours you are alone are hours of torture.

I have heard a girl like me say: "Peo-

ple have different ideas of hades. Mine is just being alone."

When you are alone, if you are such a girl, thoughts assail you. You see yourself deserted, starving, dying and alone. You think of a way out. You plan suicide but you are afraid. In those long hours alone while I was waiting for Charles Wilson to keep his promise I learned to drink.

A girl who was blue and lonely like myself advised it. "It will drive away the blue devils. You'll think you are a princess—for a little while," she said.

Two glasses of champagne made my head whirl, made me dance and sing, made me laugh, made me build air castles of the time when I should go home and introduce my husband and when my mother should take me in her arms and say, "Daughter, I forgive you."

The next time I was alone and blue I drank again, this time three glasses. I kept on comforting myself thus in secret. Once Wilson came to call and found me unconscious, with the empty bottle and glass beside me. He was very angry. We quarrelled. He stayed away. I entreated him to come back. It was the beginning of many scenes between us.

Whether he would have willingly kept his words had I not in those months of waiting formed the habit of drinking, I don't know. I have never been sure. But of this I am sure. It gave him an excuse for procrastinating. It gave him reason to tell me that his love was gone because the girl who had come from Norfolk with him was gone.

My mirror told me that this time he told the truth. I was not the same girl. My figure was losing its slim, youthful lines. My features were bloated. My eyes were smaller and the lids were heavy. My fresh color had disappeared and had given way to a gray, pasty look. I was sober the morning I looked into the mirror and saw the truth that all I had, my beauty, was vanishing. I threw myself on the bed and cried for hours. I promised myself to stop drinking.

But that evening some gay friends telephoned me of a party that was being made up at a rathskeller to watch the old year out and the new in. I knew I should be alone. I went. I slept all of the next day. When I awoke I knew what that heavy torpor meant. I had drunk too much, far too much.

I had become a slave. Let me tell you what it is to become a slave to drink. It is to become utterly hopeless. It is to become incapable of effort of any kind, even effort of the will. Friends tried to "pull me up." They suggested Paris. But I felt only the call of the cafes in Mont-

martre. I went to London. I handled the Vanderbilts' horses now and then, and the papers talked of the Virginia beauty who was so clever a whip. But all the while a voice whispered to me when I was alone, "You are not beautiful. You are not happy. You are not gay. You only seem to be. You and your kind are apples of Sodom, beautiful outside, but ashes within—the ashes of despair."

Charles Wilson's mood toward me varied. Sometimes he was kind. At others cruel. He secured his divorce. There was a ceremony. I have brought a suit to prove that I became his legal wife. That suit is pending.

But he afterward married another. A young, lovely girl, with such a face of innocence as I had when I first met him. The news drove me frantic. I watched for them one day, and when they drove up to the station I threw myself in her path and told her my story. "He is not your husband. He's mine," I said, pointing at him. A crowd collected. He had me arrested. I served a term in Holloway Jail, with my golden hair, that he had often said was my chief beauty, cut off.

When I had served my term I searched London for friends and help. I went to Paris and was arrested at the station for disorderly conduct. Thirty days. When I spoke people looked at me with contempt and drew away. My story was written in my bloated features, in my eyes, that betrayed my secret. I was a drunkard.

One night I sat all night while the cold gray fog came up from the river and wrapped me round, on one of the benches on the Embankment, with other human wrecks.

Once I tried to kill myself, but in that, as in everything else in my life, I failed. I drifted back to America, half of my passage paid by charitable Americans. I told my story to those I had known in my first days in New York. They doled out money to me, a little at a time, saying,



Florence Schenck As She Was When She Ran Away From Home with Charles Wilson, Vanderbilt's Horse Trainer.



POTTER'S FIELD. The End of the "Primrose" Path.

"Spend it for food, not rum, Florence." I didn't follow their advice. A charitable woman wrote my parents. My own mother answered, saying her heart was broken, but that they had given me up, that my case was hopeless.

A kindhearted woman placed me with the good sisters in a convent near Harrison, New York. They were kind to me but they would give me nothing to drink. I craved drink. I went mad for it. I climbed the high convent wall, ran to the station, found a dollar on the station floor where some one had dropped it and paid my fare to New York. When I arrived I went straight to a cafe. I asked the proprietor, who had known me in prosperous times, to trust me for the drinks. I telephoned a woman friend who came and paid for them, though she did grudgingly. "I suppose I'll have to get you out of hock, you fool," she said.

"That's it," I said. "I'm a fool. I am filled with the folly that you pour out of a bottle." Since then I've lived about, on the bounty of former friends who pitied me. My health and strength were gone. I lay in bed all day, awaking only to drink myself into a stupor. To be sober was to realize the depths to which I had fallen and that was torment for then the fine sensibilities I had inherited from gentle folk awoke in me and lashed me as with whips.

Then came this last terrible illness that sooner or later will prove fatal. There is no hope for me. Drink caused the abdominal walls to become encysted. It hardened my liver. I am dying, though tediously, slowly. There is no hope for me. But there is hope that I may say what will warn other girls from a fate like mine.

I have seen other girls slip slowly down to perdition as I have done and even more rapidly. That dreaded disease, "swift consumption," is not quicker than drink when it devours some bodies and blights some souls.

"Do you drink?" I heard a physician ask a beautiful young actress.

"No," she replied, her clear eyes looking into his, corroborating her story. "Why do you ask?"

"Because," he replied, "if you did you would be dead or insane in three weeks." Here, he explained, was a delicately organized constitution upon which liquor would work havoc, rapidly destroying her nerves and putting out the lamp of her life.

I know a girl who is beautiful as the dawn, her beauty of the fresh, delicious sort of dew-kissed violets. Yet that girl sits all day in cafes, drinking brandy and finishing the day with doses of cocaine. The doctors say that at most she can live two months.

Drink is the greatest danger that threatens a woman's footsteps, for it is the beginning of all other pitfalls. Avoid the first glass and regard the friend who offers you a first glass from that time as an enemy.

Old men give the advice: "Keep your head." You cannot keep your head with demons of brandy or green devils of absinthe dancing in your brain.

Old women tell you to guard well your heart, for that way danger lies. You cannot guard your heart while fumes of strong drink are muddling your ideas. At such time every one seems a friend and everyone is enwrapped in romance.

The greatest safeguard a girl can have is a fear—a hatred—of strong drink and of the drugs that follow.

Drink and drugs are sign posts on the path which leads by way of the Morgue to Potter's Field. My way, your way, the way that begins in forced gaiety and ends in despair, the way not of mirth, but of misery, abject and hopeless.

The Dowager Queen Who Is Always in Debt

London, Jan. 24.

FOR some time past Queen Alexandra's financial affairs have been the subject of a good deal of talk among those in her immediate entourage.

Her Dowager Majesty is perhaps one of the worst wretched business who ever had the unfeeling control of a considerable fortune. Her income from the state is \$350,000 per annum and her private fortune in the way of charges on the estate of the late king and interest from invested monies amounts to about \$600,000.

This income, properly managed, would far more than have sufficed to meet the needs of Her Majesty after King Edward's death, and would have been sufficient to have kept her in the dignity and state which the widow of the sovereign might have naturally desired to have maintained.

But her expenditures have been steadily increasing until during the past year, she has exceeded her income by several tens of thousands.

while Her Majesty's living expenses and the wages at Sandringham amounting to \$400,000, thus leaving living expenses alone Queen Alexandra last year spent \$260,000 more than the sum which she receives from the nation, which was supposed to cover the cost of her maintenance and the upkeep of her two establishments.

Before Queen Alexandra went with her sister to Balmoral she ordered a special through train from London to Balmoral, and then almost at the last moment, altered the hour she had arranged to leave London at from 2.30 p. m. to 3.45 p. m. The alteration in the special service naturally caused great inconvenience to the railway company and put an additional \$15,000 to the cost of the special, and the only reason why Her Majesty made the alteration in the hour of her departure from London was in order to allow her time to see some new designs for the papering of one of the rooms at Marlborough House, which could have easily been seen on to her at Balmoral.

Queen Alexandra's expenditure on gifts to relations and friends is lavishly extravagant. Her Majesty paid \$14,000 for a gold vase which she presented to the Duchess of Fife for a wedding present.

Her Majesty, when at Balmoral, ordered a pearl and diamond necklace as a present for the Princess Mary to wear at the royal wedding. Four necklaces were sent from London to Balmoral by special messenger for Her Majesty's approval. One of these was valued at \$15,000, and this she would have given to the Princess, but Queen Mary would not allow Her Majesty to do so.

A couple of months ago Queen Alexandra was forced to face the fact that her expenditure was exceeding her income by a notification from her bankers that her private account was overdrawn by nearly \$75,000. To meet her bankers' overdraft, Queen Alexandra has had to realize some of her securities, and at the urgent solicitations of King George. Her Majesty has allowed Mr. Leopold de Rothschild to go into her financial affairs.

Only last week, on the suggestion of the chief groom at the stables at Marlborough House, she allowed an order to be sent out for three motor luggage wagons at a cost of \$2,000 per wagon, which will put a commission of at least \$750 in the pocket of the groom, and the wagons, which are not required, will probably never be used.