The Face on the Barroom Floor

Tourists and opera goers regularly stop in the Face Bar at the Teller House to see the chestnut-haired enchantress painted on the floor. Though unsigned, the famous face on the floor of the Teller House bar is credited to Denver artist Herndon Davis, who was inspired by Hugh Antoine D'Arcy's poem *The Face Upon the Floor*. The actual subject of the painting is not known for certain, but is believed to be Davis' wife Edna Juanita (Nita).

In 1978, Central City Opera commissioned *The Face on the Barroom Floor*, a tale of the Old West that combines modern-day Central City and a 19th Century gold camp. Based on both the poem and the painting, the one-act cabaret opera was written by Henry Mollicone with libretto by John Bowman. The opera tells two tales, separated in time, but parallel in character and theme. Present-day Isabel is a singer in the Central City Opera chorus who dreams of singing Violetta in *La Traviata*. The beautiful Madeline is a saloon girl in a 19th-century gold camp. Both are loved by two men, and as the opera moves between centuries, the parallel plots come to the same tragic end - a timeless tale of love and jealousy. Just thirty minutes long, *The Face on the Barroom Floor* is regarded as a showcase for rising talent, playing in regional opera companies with "a cult-like success," according to *The New Yorker* magazine.

Billy Hamilton

Teller House caretaker Billy Hamilton polished the famous face in the Teller House Bar, now called the Face Bar. Usually seen wearing a hat, carrying a shillelagh, and smoking a cigar, Hamilton was one of the more colorful characters in town. For several decades, he was resident caretaker of the Opera House and the Teller House, a job he held until his death - and perhaps even after that. Supposedly, when the new caretaker came to work in the morning, he would sometimes find piles of papers straightened, the desk organized, and everything in its place - just as Billy liked it - and the smell of cigar smoke lingering in the air.

The Face Upon The Floor

*H. Antoine D'Arcy*

Twas a balmy summer evening, and a goodly crowd was there,
Which well-nigh filled Joe's barroom, on the corner of the square;  
And as songs and witty stories came through the open door,  
A vagabond crept slowly in and posed upon the floor.  
"Where did it come from?" someone said. "The wind has blown it in."
"What does it want?" another cried. "Some whiskey, rum or gin?"
"Here, Toby, sic 'em, if your stomach's equal to the work --
I wouldn't touch him with a fork, he's filthy as a Turk."
This badinage the poor wretch took with stoical good grace;
In face, he smiled as tho' he thought he'd struck the proper place.
"Come, boys, I know there's kindly hearts among so good a crowd --
To be in such good company would make a deacon proud.
"Give me a drink -- that's what I want -- I'm out of funds, you know,
When I had cash to treat the gang this hand was never slow.
What? You laugh as if you thought this pocket never held a sou;
I once was fixed as well, my boys, as any one of you.
"There, thanks, that's braced me nicely; God bless you one and all;
Next time I pass this good saloon I'll make another call.
Give you a song? No, I can't do that; my singing days are past;
My voice is cracked, my throat's worn out, and my lungs are going fast.
"I'll tell you a funny story, and a fact, I promise, too.
Say! Give me another whiskey, and I'll tell what I'll do --
That I was ever a decent man not one of you would think;
But I was, some four or five years back. Say, give me another drink.
"Fill her up, Joe, I want to put some life into my frame --
Such little drinks to a bum like me are miserably tame;
Five fingers -- there, that's the scheme -- and corking whiskey, too.
Well, here's luck, boys, and landlord, my best regards to you.
"You've treated me pretty kindly and I'd like to tell you how
I came to be the dirty sot you see before you now.
As I told you, once I was a man, with muscle, frame, and health,
And but for a blunder ought to have made considerable wealth.
"I was a painter -- not one that daubed on bricks and wood,
But an artist, and for my age, was rated pretty good.
I worked hard at my canvas, and was bidding fair to rise,
For gradually I saw the star of fame before my eyes.
"I made a picture perhaps you've seen, 'tis called the 'Chase of Fame.'
It brought me fifteen hundred pounds and added to my name,
And then I met a woman -- now comes the funny part --
With eyes that petrified my brain, and sunk into my heart.
"Why don't you laugh? 'Tis funny that the vagabond you see
Could ever love a woman, and expect her love for me;
But 'twas so, and for a month or two, her smiles were freely given,
And when her loving lips touched mine, it carried me to Heaven.
"Boys, did you ever see a girl for whom your soul you'd give,
With a form like the Milo Venus, too beautiful to live;
With eyes that would beat the Koh-i-noor, and a wealth of chestnut hair?
If so, 'twas she, for there never was another half so fair.
"I was working on a portrait, one afternoon in May,
Of a fair-haired boy, a friend of mine, who lived across the way.
And Madeline admired it, and much to my surprise,
Said she'd like to know the man that had such dreamy eyes.
"It didn't take long to know him, and before the month had flown
My friend had stole my darling, and I was left alone;
And ere a year of misery had passed above my head,
The jewel I had treasured so had tarnished and was dead.
"That's why I took to drink, boys. Why, I never see you smile,
I thought you'd be amused, and laughing all the while.
Why, what's the matter, friend? There's a tear-drop in your eye,
Come, laugh like me. 'Tis only babes and women that should cry.
"Say, boys, if you give me just another whiskey I'll be glad,
And I'll draw right here a picture of the face that drove me mad.
Give me that piece of chalk with which you mark the baseball score --
You shall see the lovely Madeline upon the barroom floor."
Another drink, and with chalk in hand, the vagabond began
To sketch a face that well might buy the soul of any man.
Then, as he placed another lock upon the shapely head,
With a fearful shriek, he leaped and fell across the picture -- dead.