

*A Work-Woman's Misfortune*  
by A Retired Lawyer

I was called to the jail in C—, one evening, to confer with a client whose trial came on in a day or two; and as I passed the half-dozen cells between the inner door of the prison and the apartment where my patron was now confined, I caught sight of the troubled but handsome face of a young woman, who sat leaning against the iron bars of one of the little rooms, and I halted for an instant to look at her.

She shrank away timidly to the rear of the cell, however, and I had the opportunity simply to observe that she bore, in her general contour, the traces of a poor “unfortunate,” in the usual acceptation of that unfortunate term.

I concluded the interview with my client in a few moments, and just before leaving him, I inquired:

“Who is your neighbor, yonder?”

“The young woman?” he asked, in a whisper.

“Yes—next door.”

“I do not know,” he replied.

“How long has she been here?” I asked.

“Since yesterday only,” he added.

“What is she here *for*?”

“I do not know that, either. I only observe that she weeps and sobs almost incessantly, and has in vain applied to the Deputy, who passes up and down this corridor, to learn why she is confined here.”

“The old story,” I suggested. “A repentant—too late.”

“Perhaps so,” rejoined my client. “Or it may be a case of oppression, hardship, injustice—”

“She certainly is very pretty,” I added, “and really looks too *poorly tidy* to be a criminal.”

“I have not seen her,” he added. “Why don’t you speak with her, as you go out?” he inquired, suggestively.

“She shuns observation,” I said, “and does not seem desirous to communicate with a stranger, I judge.”

“Naturally enough,” responded my client. “And this indicates that she may not be so bad as her present position might lead one to suspect, perhaps.”

“Good-night,” I replied. “I will stop as I pass out.”

And turning away from the young man’s cell, I halted again before the door of the girl’s apartment, and accosted her.

“Good-evening, Miss,” I ventured, in a friendly tone.

She was sitting upon the side of her little low bed, away from the barred grating, and for an instant she did not answer. Then, rising and coming timorously towards me, she asked, in a gentle way, “Who *is* it?”

“I am a stranger to you, Miss,” I answered. “I had occasion to call upon your next door neighbor professionally tonight. I am his legal attorney. I saw you as I passed, and—though it is not my habit to do so—I could not resist the impulse to ask you if I could be of service to you. Have you any counsel engaged?”

“No, sir—no,” she replied, with a sigh.

“Will you permit me, then, to inquire what brings you here?”

“Poverty, and misfortune, sir.”

“Not crime?”

“Oh no sir! On my honor, no,” she exclaimed, with singular earnestness and candor. And then her tears flowed copiously, as she briefly recounted the circumstances of her hard case, and present peril.

“I do not know,” she continued, “precisely, why I am in this place. It is not a *prison*, sir,” she inquired, artlessly.

“Yes, Miss.”

“But I have not been accused. I have had no trial. I have never been in a court even, at all.”

“When did you come here?”

“Yesterday.”

“What are the allegations made against you?”

“That I cannot explain. I do not know, sir. I am very poor, and entirely friendless. I am a seamstress. I have been compelled for several years to toil very hard, sir, to support myself and an invalid younger brother, with my needle; and the scanty pay we women can command for such labor, as you may know, is but a miserable pittance at best.”

“Yes,” I said, “I am aware of this.”

“We occupied an attic room,” she continued, “in a remote part of the city, and I had struggled along, and kept soul and body together, as well as providing for the needs of my poor brother, until up to a week ago; when, yesterday morning, I overheard confused talk in the story below us, which was occupied by some rude people—for persons in our humble position cannot choose the location where we may ‘stay,’ you know, sir—and I soon learned that some goods had been purloined by certain parties suspected there, and the premises were being searched by officers.

“A portion of the missing goods was found there, and four or five persons were arrested, as being concerned in the affair. I was simply a passing looker-on at the moment of the trouble, and was astounded, when the officers were called upon to accompany the officials, to find that they insisted upon taking *me* with them!

“I remonstrated in vain. My poor little invalid brother must starve, if they do not care for *him*, sir. And all I have been able to learn, in my extremity, is, that I must ‘give bail.’ What is it to give bail, sir, if you please?”

“Security for your appearance at court, Miss,” I replied.

“But *how*? In what way?”

“Some friend must recognize to the authorities in a required sum, to forfeit, should you disappear, or attempt to evade a trial or examination,” I informed her.

“For what? What have I done, sir?”

“That is precisely what I would like now to learn, Miss,” I said. “But if you are accused even, you must give the bail, or be detained.”

Her handsome countenance fell at this remark, and she said, after a moment’s hesitation, “I have no friend on earth to do this, sir. No friend to call upon; none whatever!”

“It is late,” I replied, “and a night of rest will do you no harm now, Miss. Be of good cheer. I will examine into your case before I sleep; and at an early hour in the morning you shall see me again. Good-night, Miss; and rest quietly with the assurance that I will do what is in my power to serve you, and promptly.”

She stared upon me with her great flashing eyes, evidently not clearly comprehending my good intentions; and I departed with the impression, if she *were* a guilty person, that she

was the most innocent *looking* one I had for along time seen. On my way out I inquired at the jail-office who she was.

“What number?” inquired the grouty Deputy, roughly.

“Number thirteen, south wing,” I said.

“A woman?” he added, briefly.

“Yes; she came in yesterday.”

“Oh—ah—yes. One of a gang o’ shop-lifters. Five on ’em in all. Number thirteen’s Mary Howell. The rest give bail.”

“And are all the others released?” I asked.

“In coorse they air. *She*’d ’a gone too, on’y she couldn’t give no s’curity, you see.”

I left the prison with an unusually heavy heart. On further inquiry outside, I ascertained that the invalid boy had been taken care of temporarily; and subsequently I learned the following particulars of this curious, but not very uncommon case of hardship and wrong.

Oliver Howell had lived, twenty years before, in a fine house in a fashionable quarter of the city, in affluent circumstances. The fire of ’35 beggared hundreds of men of fortune, and Howell among the unlucky number.

He had two children—a daughter and a crippled son. The mother died, and then the father. The children were left to the cold charity of relatives, who threw them off their hands at the earliest convenient opportunity; and the girl found herself, at sixteen, alone in the world, with the encumbrance of her sick brother on her hands, whom she never forsook or neglected.

After trying various experiments, she obtained needle-work, and contrived to keep herself and brother alive, in the attic room of a poor house in an obscure part of the town; and the wolf had been kept from the door until she was suddenly torn from her garret by the officers, who arrested all they could find at hand, and was charged with being accessory to the robbery mentioned.

She had never associated with these persons in any manner whatever, nor did she know anything of their character. She supposed them to be poor, like herself, and she had no occasion to inquire as to anybody’s reputation. She had little leisure—heaven help her!—to look into the affairs of others. But the police seized her, and she was a prisoner.

I rose at an earlier hour than usual the next morning, and made my appearance at the chambers of Judge S—. I stated the case briefly to him, and expressed my surprise that a woman should have been thus detained in a prison cell, for eight-and-forty hours, upon

suspicion, without a hearing. He said it was not uncommon. There was a vast deal of crime transpiring constantly; and the innocent sometimes suffered with, or even *for*, the guilty. He would give this case his early attention; which, fortunately for Mary, was soon righted, as it eventuated.

Upon reaching the jail, I found Mary awaiting me anxiously, but evidently greatly relieved in mind, as I gave her “good-morning.”

“I am happy to see you, sir,” she said, pleasantly. “But I have most unexpectedly found a friend, since you were here last night.”

“I am glad to know it, Mary,” I responded.

“I should rather say, sir, properly, that he has found *me*, however. And it is one whom I supposed had forgotten me, long ago.”

“Who has called, Mary?”

“The last person I expected to see, sir,” she added, modestly. “I had not seen him for many months, and had no sort of claim upon him, sir. It was William Edson, a discarded lover, sir.”

“Indeed!” I exclaimed. “Then you have *one* friend, at least. And he appears to be one in your need.”

“He is just gone, sir. He is able, and will furnish the necessary bail for me at once.”

“This is well, Mary, but I think you will have no occasion for it. I have represented your case in the proper quarter, and I think an order for your release will shortly be here.”

And so it turned out, an hour afterwards.

I had the pleasure of seeing Mary discharged, a very happy being, without further trouble. A carriage waited at the door, into which young Edson placed her, and they rode away in excellent spirits.

Mary sought out her sick brother at once, and under Edson’s advice, she forthwith exchanged her old quarters for more acceptable lodgings. It seemed that although Mary had discarded Edson a year before, when he had made pretensions to her, he persisted in looking after her and had that day made inquiries for her, and learned of her unfortunate misadventure.

He hastened to the prison, where the young woman quickly explained everything, and he lost no time in getting her relieved—though his proffered aid in this instance was not needed, as it proved.

He, however, again offered her his hand, and I was gratified at learning, a few months subsequently, that Mary Howell became Mrs. William Edson; and that she proved a faithful wife to one of the best husbands, though he did find her, at last, in the cell of a jail!

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