

[Written for the Flag of our Union]

The Garnet Ring

by M. Lindsay

During the first year of my practice as an attorney, clients and cases were so few with me, that I found it an agreeable change from the dullness of an almost unfurnished and unfrequented back office, to visit the court rooms, where I not only became familiar with the usages, arts and means of success employed by skillful lawyers, but where I could see human nature in its perplexities and struggles, its feebleness and power, exciting in me an interest and sympathy that the drama has never equaled.

One freezing morning during the first week of December, my office having been wholly innocent for the season of all artificial warmth or means of warmth, was too cold and cheerless to be endured any longer. It was enough to quench the light of hope and fire of courage in the most hot-headed and enthusiastic young man, so I determined to leave it for a while. I took down from its hook my old overcoat, the ever ready and unflinching friend of two or three winters, which, regardless of its dignity as an outsider, had never shrunk from the duties of frock-coat, dressing-gown, sick-gown and bedclothes. But alas! on this fireless cold morning, when it would have been so grateful to my poor heart and poorer purse to have found it transformed into one of the thickness beavers, fur-lined and fur-trimmed, invincible to the fiercest northwester, it looked to me, spite of my old attachment to it, and my gratitude for its services, it looked quite used up, brown and rusty, thin and threadbare; its collar sadly soiled, its button-holes rent, its buttons lonesome, no two standing together. And worse—the once friendly garment was to my gloomy and suspicious eyes—a traitor. Would it not tell to every one who should see it, the secrets I most wished to hide? those which might bring my final ruin? Would it not tell that I was poor and unsuccessful, that I had no business and no immediate prospects of say? that I had no acquirements and abilities which the world needed; not enough even to enable me to take care of myself? The once good friend seemed anything but a friend now, and it must not go with me this morning. But then if it stayed at home, its absence would tell my tale the same as its presence. I was in despair. What could I do? What was there for me but poverty, neglect and mortification? I hurried away to the police court-room, where turbulent and uncontrollable distress makes us forget the suffering that can be hidden; where the hopeless and frantic agony of crime makes us feel ourselves fortunate in innocence, however else unfortunate.

As I entered, a girl was put on trial for larceny; a common case, as that stated; yet I saw something in my first glance at her, that made me forget lack of clients, cheerless office and tell-tale overcoat. She was about eighteen; fair and fresh-looking; with soft light hair brushed neatly over her ears; large blue eyes, the lids very much swollen by crying; and small, unmarked features. She was clad in a dark blue marino dress and a plain white collar. I cannot clearly explain what it was in her that so interested me. The inner life has an expression outward that is more easily recognised than described, and it was probably this. I felt that there was undoubtedly something wrong in the case; that decent looking young person, so neat and proper in dress, without any tawdriness or ornament, did not belong in a prisoner's dock; ought not to be there.

I watched her and watched the trial. The clerk read the indictment. The girl stood up and heard

herself, Selina Whise, charged with stealing a shawl and dress, the property of one Mary Wilson. The tears rolling in streams down her cheeks, and her voice scarcely audible from emotion, she pleaded "not guilty."

The first witness was the police-man who arrested her. His testimony amounted to nothing more than that he had found the clothes alleged to have been stolen in a carpet-bag marked with the prisoner's name, and claimed by her. The prisoner ceased weeping when this witness was called, and kept her eyes steadily fixed upon him. She was told by the judge, whose sympathy she had evidently enlisted, that it was proper for her to ask any questions bearing on the case, and I now perceived that she had no one to defend her, or give her special advice and aid. She availed herself of the privilege with which the judge had made her acquainted, and endeavored to draw from the officer the admission that she had shown more surprise when the stolen articles were found in her carpet-bag than say one else present, but in this she failed. He was altogether incommunicative and evasive in his answers to her.

One Mary Wilson testified to the loss of some clothes which she described; some garments were shown her which she identified. In answer to questions she stated that they had been lying in a trunk; that she had not laid eyes on them for three months or more till she found them in the prisoner's carpet-bag, and that one Mary Murray had suggested her looking there for them.

Mary Murray was now called. She was a very bold girl, showy in dress and airy in manners. Her fingers were loaded with cheap rings, the most conspicuous of which was a large garnet. While the stolen garments were being shown, I had observed a young man crowd as far forward as he could get to look at them. My eyes happened to be on him when he first caught sight of the witness's rings, and the expression which then covered his face excited my interest scarcely less than that of the prisoner had done. I approached him and inquired, "Do you know anything of this case?"

"Not much," he answered, coloring deeply.

"Do you know *anything*?"

"Well—yes—some things," he answered.

"If it is anything that can be brought to bear in favor of the prisoner tell me forthwith," I said, "for she is an innocent looking girl, and I am afraid things will go hard with her."

"She never stole them things," he said.

"They were found in her possession; that is strong legal proof, and I am afraid it will decide the case against her."

"Are you a lawyer?" he asked.

I answered that I was.

“Are you *her* lawyer?”

“I am now going to offer to defend her; if you can tell me anything, I warn you that there is not a moment to lose.”

“Well, then, some of the same fuss and trimmings that’s on them stolen clothes is on this girl here on the stand.”

“Is that so? Are you sure?”

“Sure as can be.”

“Well, that’s something, or may be.”

“Then I know that big ring on her fore-finger as well as I know my hand.”

“Do you?”

“I’d swear to it.”

“Well, we’ll give you a chance to. What is your name?”

“Miles Allen.”

“Keep on hand where you are, and we’ll take care of this poor girl, if we can.”

I sent up a line to the judge, in which I offered to defend the prisoner. He announced this fact, I took a seat beside her, and the trial went on. The interview with Allen and the note to the judge had prevented me from hearing much of Mary Murray’s testimony; but the prisoner seemed to have lost nothing of it. She questioned her closely as to their personal relations, and from the answers she drew out, it was evident that Selina’s pretty face had excited considerable admiration in a young man who boarded at Mrs. Wilson’s, and whom Mary Murray chose to consider her beau; that Mary had shown ill-will towards Selina on making this discovery, and made some slanderous remarks concerning her, and had even uttered a few threats for her warning. I permitted the prisoner to elicit these facts without interruption, and I must acknowledge she did it with a tact which surprised me, and which I could ascribe only to strong woman-wit quickened and urged on by the extremity of her circumstances. Mary Murray was leaving, when I detained her for further examination.

“Have you any employment?” I inquired.

She answered in the affirmative.

“What is it?”

“Cap-making.”

“Who is your employer?”

This she told.

“Do you work at the shop, or at your own lodgings?”
“Sometimes at the shop, and sometimes at my own lodgings.”

“Where have you worked during the last week?”

“At my lodgings.”

“What is the work upon which you have been employed?”

“Caps.”

“Yes; but what kind of caps?”

“Plush.”

“Of what color?”

“Mostly brown.”

“Was that bit of brown plush now hanging to your shawl-fridge, trimmed from the caps?”

The witness did not answer, but impatiently catching up the end of her shawl, shook off the shred.

I turned to the judge. “Will your honor direct that that shred be secured? I shall have something to do with it.”

It was picked up and handed to the clerk.

Mary Murray was still on the stand. I resumed my questions to her. “You board in the same house with Selina White?”

“Yes.”

“Is your room near hers?”

“No, hers is in the attic, and mine is a chamber over a back tea-room.”

“Was Selina ever in your room?” I had learned one or two facts from Selina before I put the last question.

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“No; she never was; I never had anything to do with her.”

“Were you ever in Selina’s room?”

“Not while she had it; except the day the police-man searched it.”

“Did you then handle the clothes found in the carpet-bag?”

“No; the police-man allowed no one to touch them.”

“When did you last see Mrs. Wilson wear the delaine dress that has been shown here?”

“I can’t tell exactly; not for some months.”

“Has it been in your room among the plush caps to your knowledge?”

“No sir.”

Mary Murray was dismissed.

I now called Miles Allen. At mention of this name, the little girl at my side started forward as if she had received an electric shock, then sank back and held her hands tightly together as if she was struggling with some powerful feeling. She looked steadily at this witness as she had done at those who preceded him, but her color kept coming and going, and she was excited and anxious. Miles Allen answered to his name and employment; he was a carpenter; came here from New Jersey; had been here about six months.

“Do you know the prisoner?” I asked.

The girl’s eyes were full of tears, but there was a look of hope, almost of triumph, on her face as he bluntly answered, “Yes, sir, I do.”

“Where did you know her?”

“Where we both came from, in New Jersey.”

“How long have you known her?”

“Ever since she was born. And I know her too well to believe myself, or let anybody else believe she’s a thief.”

“Never mind your opinion of her character now,” said the judge. “Do you know anything about the present case?”

“I know as much as this; that there’s the same fuzz on the clothes they say Selina stole, as was hanging to that gay girl’s shawl.”

“Do you know the witness, Mary Murray?” I asked.

“No. I hope not.”

“Do you know the ring she wore on her finger this morning?”

“Yes sir,” with an emphasis, was the answer.

“What do you know about it?”

“I owned that ring once myself, and Selina White owns it now, for I give it to her, and she ain't the girl to give it away.”

“How did you recognise it?”

“Because I did. I'd know it anywhere as soon as I'd set my eyes on't; but if you're a mind to, I'll tell you how *anybody* may know that that ring don't belong to the girl that's got it. Inside on't you'll find my name. “Miles Allen” pretty plain and a little something else besides, per'aps.”

“Have you anything further to tell us with regard to this case?”

“Only that the gay girl proved plain that she never know'd or loved Selina enough to make her give her the ring, and so I'd like to ask how'd she get it? and then who's the thief after all?”

“Those points will be settled at a proper time,” said the judge, and at my request he ordered Mary Murray to be re-called. She appeared, quite red with anger. I examined her as to where she obtained the garnet ring, and as I anticipated received only unsatisfactory and contradictory answers. The judge requested her to remove it from her finger. She refused. An officer in attendance soon relieved her of the ornament which he handed up to the bench. The judge looked at it carefully, and then read from the inside, “Miles Allen. To the girl I love best.”

There was a general titter through the courtroom. I glanced at Miles. He was smiling and blushing, but showed no shame or embarrassment. It was plain that he thought it no unmanly thing to give a ring to the girl he loved best, and he was not unwilling to have it known that the pretty, modest-looking Selina White was that girl, though she was now in the prisoner's dock on trial as a boarding-house thief.

“Now,” said the judge, turning to the clerk, “I think we will look at those stolen clothes again.” They were produced, and on being examined, there was found fastened to some bead trimming which ornamented the dress, a bit of brown plush, the same in shade and fabric with that the clerk had secured. In the meantime an officer had returned from Mary Murray's lodgings (where he had gone at my suggestion) with a brown plush cap, which she had lately finished, and on comparison it was found that its material was the same with the shreds before in court.

The testimony was now all in, and I rose to make the defense. I went over the evidence and

showed that there was nothing against the prisoner but the one fact of possession, always a strong one, I admitted, but in this case outweighed by the too apparent malice and guilt of the girl Murray, who had not only hated and plotted to ruin her, but had stolen from her herself. In proof of this, I alluded to her jealousy, her threats, and her too great readiness in throwing suspicion upon Selina; I dwelt upon the circumstance that a bit of plush which appeared to be a cutting from Mary Murray's work was found upon the stolen dress although it had been packed away for a long time previous to being found in the prisoner's possession. It had not been shown that Selina White ever had any plush or had ever been in Mary Murray's room to obtain it. "Then how," I asked, "did this detective shred find an opportunity to fasten itself upon the dress in a sudden transit from its owner's trunk to a stranger's travelling bag? Perhaps," I suggested, "Mary Murray might tell us. She had a similar shred attached to her shawl, and is it not possible, nay probable, that she could tell how and where its fellow became attached to the trimming of the stolen dress? Might it not have been caught in a temporary lodgment in her room, or by contact with her own clothes? How else?" In view of all the circumstances proved, it was easier to believe that Mary Murray had stolen the clothes and then put them in Selina White's carpet-bag in order to ruin her and get her out of her way, than that Selina had stolen them.

I then touched upon the garnet ring, showing that it undoubtedly belonged to the prisoner, and had been taken from her carpet-bag when the stolen articles had been deposited there, and ended with a few words of appeal to the conscience and sympathy of the judge, intended to produce its effect on the spectators rather than the person addressed. The judge whispered a moment with one of the officers near him; then rose and pronounced Selina White innocent of the charge preferred against her. There was a loud burst of applauses. I took Selina's little cold hand in mine and told her she had better leave with me at once. We had but just reached the door when Miles Allen joined us, shaking hands and laughing and talking so fast that one could hardly understand him. I learned this, however, that he and Selina loved each other too well to be far separated; that Selina had come to get work near Miles at his suggestion; that, owing to a series of blunders not so easily explained as frequently met with, she had failed to find him on her arrival, but that certain of meeting him soon she had spent her time in looking for employment till she was arrested for theft and lodged in jail. Miles declared himself to have been surprised beyond expression, so much even as to have been suspicious of his mental state, when on going to the court-room to make complaint of some wrong done to himself, he saw the very "girl he loved best" in the dock on trial.

But the lovers were happy now. And so was I, notwithstanding my old overcoat. I don't know whether or not Miles Allen noticed that I was thinly clad and that spite of a strong effort of will, I showed great sensitiveness to the cold on reaching the outer air, but this I know, that the warm-hearted fellow *gave* into my hand (I don't say *paid* for of course I never charged him or Selina anything) he *gave* me the price of one of the very best overcoats I ever wore, within a week of the time when I first met him in the police court-room.

There may be some who are desirous to know whatever more I can tell them about the garnet ring. I will therefore add, that soon after the trial I have described, the morning papers reported Mary Murray to have been convicted of stealing a ring and fined twenty dollars, failing to pay which, she was sent to jail.

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And this, further. No longer ago than last summer, I met Miles Allen on a pleasant Sunday afternoon, leading a fine little boy who looked the very image of Selina White as when I first saw her. Leaning on Miles's right arm was Selina herself, and what was curious, on her little left hand which clung to the strong, muscular arm, was the identical garnet ring that had proved her innocence. Perhaps she was proud of it, and desirous of having it seen and admired; perhaps it was so large it might have torn or misshaped her glove. At any rate, whatever her reason for so doing may have been, she wore it in plain sight, and I knew it as well as Miles Allen swore he did, long years before.

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