

The Serjeant's Daughter

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The Court's session came to an abrupt end; it had been a long day. The case was concluded.

'I was fortunate there,' said Mrs Crosby to the serjeant as he opened the gate of the dock. Her manner was that of someone speaking a confidence; her voice was low, her face close to his. The air of the courtroom was stale and vitiated; the smell reminded you, with all the coughing, of an assembly hall during an influenza epidemic. There was a faint odour of camphor and eucalyptus oil.

The serjeant smiled slightly, to himself. 'Hardly a matter of fortune, Mrs Crosby: your Court manner was very adroit. I congratulate you.' His voice was also soft and confidential.

'It's difficult to believe it's all over. I take it I'm free to leave?' continued Mrs Crosby, looking down from the dock's steps to the public well. She watched the stenographer (a slight woman) as she looked at the clock and extracted the paper record from her machine, by the keyboard of which lay a glass nail-file. The stenographer's face, though intelligently attractive, was — deliberately perhaps — without the slightest expression. Her unpainted nails were short but exactly filed and rather square.

'You have been acquitted,' said the serjeant.

'Sure?' asked Mrs Crosby. 'The outcome was not made ultimately clear to me.'

'It's not my place to speak,' said the serjeant, 'except on this one matter. But you are quite free, Mrs Crosby. In the Court's eyes it is as though your case had never been brought before it. It took you from the swirling crowd of humanity, examined you, tried you, and now it innocently places you back where you were, keeping only a record of the case as it is likely to impinge on future jurisprudence.' He paused. He held open the portal of the dock, a substantial gate of dark mahogany intricately jointed into the semblance of a portcullis with carved chains of ebony set at either side in high relief. The serjeant wore a black uniform with black leather cross-bands; he had a side-arm on his belt.

There was some confusion in the court, and members of the public murmured. In fact there was quite a pandemonium of confused muttering. There was a crush of people at the double-door which led out into the main foyer. Several people were looking angrily at Mrs Crosby. There was quite a lot of coughing.

'Don't mind them,' said the serjeant. 'Come with me. I'll escort you to a private door at the back. Don't mind them. I shall say nothing further.'

'I had thought the court would be in private session,' said Mrs Crosby. 'On this one day.'

'Please don't press me,' said the serjeant. 'I'm doing the best I can. There are no closed sessions in this Court. This Court admits to no secrets. Try to ignore the public: the adversarial system gets them aroused: they enjoy the spectacle.' He paused. 'Remember that until your acquittal you were not a member of the public. Even though you were the accused, you were a valued and important member of the Court. It will be simpler if you look at matters in this light. You, a key member of the Court, are now leaving it. After all, without the accused, what would be the necessity for the Court? What reason would it have for its existence? If all human acts were just, what would be the need for theories of law? But now you are leaving the Court, Mrs Crosby, your name at last justly cleared. When you step outside tonight you will be a member of the Court no longer: you will be a member of the public. I think the side-entrance would be for the best. The glare of publicity's not pleasant. Let's go. Excuse my looking at my watch: my daughter wishes me to buy some lamb's liver for dinner at Reiner's the late-closing butchers in Fishergate on my way home: my daughter lives with me and keeps house. So we'll take our exit at a brisk pace, Mrs Crosby. The public aren't allowed beyond the rail: we'll take the service-corridor. And if there are people waiting at that side-entrance, there is another entrance; and indeed another. But with my guidance you'll get out unobserved. And if I miss Reiner's, we'll make do — my daughter and I — with something cold this evening, even if it is just bread and margarine. My daughter will understand; she is sympathetic to women who appear before the Court. She is interested in Law and questions me each evening, especially in cases where the accused is female. There are entrances and entrances, just as much as there are exits and there are exits. And, in fact, there are portals which are neither entrances nor exits, if you follow my meaning, Mrs Crosby.' He swung one of the points of

his black-braided aiguillette with the fingers of his right hand, his manner thoughtful.

Mrs Crosby looked at the serjeant. 'Guide me, please. I'm apparently free, but I have to take a guide to get out. It seems to be a necessity. It's kind of you to oblige me,' she said, aware that her own reasoning was obscure even to herself: perhaps I have adopted the reasoning of the Court, she murmured to herself. 'And I'll keep up with you as best I can. I wouldn't like to be responsible for you and your daughter going without an evening meal.'

'It's nothing,' said the serjeant. 'Follow me. To please me.'

'To please you?'

'If you would. To please me. I know an exit — untried — which would I think grant you true anonymity,' said the serjeant. 'But I don't know for certain. And you wish for absolute anonymity, I take it?' He paused. 'Well, as much anonymity as can be offered,' he added.

'That's certain. My whole life has been laid before the public, and I am a very private person.'

'Private, yes, Mrs Crosby, but also frank. Your frankness did you credit. Some people attempt to hide themselves by covering their faces with newspapers or coats, literally and metaphorically, but in my experience it never works. People are not recognized by their faces alone, Mrs Crosby, and, besides, the Court Artist is very skilful, and her pencil drawings are more accurate and descriptive than the best studio photographs: they reveal truths far greater than surface appearances. Photographs display the surface. I don't ask you to trust me in everything; but please trust me in this.'

Their footfalls were sharp on the flagstones of the floor; his heavy and measured; hers lighter and more curtailed, faster and more conscious, partly because she was wearing a dress with a high-waisted hobble-skirt of watered black satin, and partly because she was still conscious of the emergence of her own freedom. 'Yes, I was fortunate,' she repeated, half to herself. 'It could so easily have gone the other way.'

'Ah, the Court officials were on your side,' said the serjeant. 'Yes; all of them. Without their covert help matters might have been very different. Franco, the other serjeant, was immediately attracted to you; he's attracted by women who dress well and who know how to deport themselves in the dock; in fact he once told me that he could hardly believe he was in the same room as you, Mrs Crosby, you had so great an effect on him. Every evening after the Court was adjourned we would go to our little mess at the rear of the building, in the basement, after the other officers have gone home, sit either side of the table and have a glass of stout while we discussed the day's events. He thinks you wear clothes of such tactile fabrics, Mrs Crosby. To be frank he's jealous of your husband, on account of the ease with which you acquitted yourself while wearing clothes which surely must constrict you.'

'Do you think so?' Mrs Crosby smiled to herself. 'He doesn't know what I'm like with my husband.'

'Your husband is a lucky man. You are so assured, Mrs Crosby,' said the serjeant. 'In fact you had the Court eating out of your hand, even Justice Mitlock, who is notoriously immune to the blandishments of female defendants.' He paused. 'In fact if he suspects that a defendant is using her femininity and her beauty to influence his judgement, he refers to it in his summing-up.'

'To be honest with you I think he went out of his way to help me,' said Mrs Crosby. 'His instructions to the Jury were explicit. Particularly after the transcript which was read out to the Jury on the second day of its withdrawal.'

'His instructions always are,' said the serjeant. 'Unfavourably in many cases; favourably in yours, Mrs Crosby.' He gave a small, amused sound, half-way between a laugh and a snort. "'Why, his instructions to the Jury are lapidary to the point of the peremptory.'" He lowered his voice. 'A phrase used by one of the prosecution lawyers; not addressed to me; I happened to overhear it.' He smiled. 'I overhear many things: the Court Stenographer also. Our — the officers' — mess is next door to the prosecutors' parlour, and these lawyers often stand talking in the doorway of their parlour and we overhear them. The Stenographer appears absorbed in filing her nails, but all the time she is listening to what the blue-bags are saying.'

And so they were walking along a quiet corridor, past the doors of Justices' rooms, kitchens, small interview chambers, store-rooms.

The serjeant began to speak again. 'Miss Killin took to you quite swiftly, and that must have altered the mood of the public.'

'Miss Killin?'

'You will have seen her. A small, slight woman with bobbed ginger hair, usually wearing mid-green with a white lace collar at her neck. She is the Court Artist, Mrs Crosby. A Scotswoman of some ability: she comes from Dunfermline. She is an eminent watercolourist in her own right. She does the Court artwork because of her interest in the human psyche; the definitive adult character is imprinted on the face at the age

of about thirteen, she says. In her view adolescence shapes the lasting properties of the face. I'm sure that you will have seen her sketches of you in the papers, day after day.'

'Yes,' said Mrs Crosby. 'How extraordinary, seeing one's own image in the paper, day after day! And in the dock! All that carved legal imagery! And in *The Telegraph*! She flattered me, I think.'

'No; I believe she caught your likeness perfectly. Her pencil sketches are often said to have a damask-like quality.' The serjeant pressed his lips together before speaking. 'It's not for me to say, but you are a very beautiful woman, Mrs Crosby. And if Miss Killin did embellish her portraits of you in any way it was to provide your head with a nimbus. Or even an aureole. Or even a suggestion of the innocence which an aureole might imply.'

Mrs Crosby paused in her walking. The echoes died away. 'The one good thing is that sooner or later I'll be anonymous again. And — I don't know how to say this — the Court Artist gave me a certain expression. Well: the expression of a woman of a certain class; a woman of a certain education: a woman inclined to be a little free with her thought.' She resumed her walking. 'I might make an allusion to original moral principles,' she said.

'Not at all,' said the serjeant, somewhat taken aback. 'Not at all. Miss Killin portrays defendants skilfully: you see them in a different light every time you look at her drawings. One moment you see the accused as they see themselves; the next, how you see them for yourself. It's subtle art, and one peculiar to Miss Killin. Why, if you look at her while she is sketching, you would swear that she had entered a deep meditation. Her images truly seem to come from another realm. And, as for her portraiture of you, Mrs Crosby: well, it does have a somewhat teasing look, as of a woman who knows that she is going to get her way, and, as soon as she has what she wants, is likely to let it drop unwanted: the strategy and act of acquisition were the driving-forces. The look of a woman who will defy convention. Yes; there is that look of classical challenge, heightened by the nimbus. That woman is skilled.

'And Miss Flanders, also: she was moved by your testimony. She is the Court Stenographer. If she pities and feels for the defendant she subtly alters the evidence in the defendant's favour. Her changes are almost unnoticeable, but they are there. For a long time I thought that the changes in which she is instrumental were unconscious, but they are not; there's a subtle purpose to them. This morning, while we were taking coffee, not long after dawn, waiting for the Justice to arrive, Miss Flanders said in a confidential voice, while filing her nails: "I shall put my shoulder firmly to the *not guilty* wheel in the Crosby case." And then she looked round at each face. "The evidence against her is all but hearsay and likely concocted. I don't like that. I hope you'll all support me." Each one of us nodded in turn as she looked at us, still filing her nails. Miss Flanders has a kind of natural authority: even in the sound of the filing of her nails.' He paused in his speaking. 'In fact you might paraphrase that old expression from the American South — if the Stenographer ain't happy, ain't nobody happy.'

'It's very good of you to go to all that trouble on my behalf,' said Mrs Crosby.

'It's the least we could do. But we are nearly there.'

'It's a long walk,' said Mrs Crosby. She noticed that the corridor, though still very tall, had become narrower and less ornate; the walls were of white-glazed brick, the floor a diagonal chequer-work of red and black quarry tiles. She and the serjeant were forced to walk close together to keep abreast of each other. 'I'm delaying you,' said Mrs Crosby. 'Look. I'll take off my hobble-garter and lift up the skirt of my dress so that I can walk faster and keep up with you.'

'That's kind of you,' said the serjeant, resisting the desire to look at his watch again. 'I'll turn away.'

'Not kind of me at all. It's the least I can do for you: but turn away for a moment while I undo the buckles,' said Mrs Crosby, lifting up her skirts and unbuckling the hobble-garter from her graceful thighs, one strap after another. She held the garter in her left hand and her lifted skirts in her right. 'I'm ready,' she said, her voice preoccupied. 'You *may* turn round now.'

They began to walk again; Mrs Crosby's paces were now easily as long as the serjeant's; indeed, her spacious stride was rather uninhibited and even eager; that of a woman late for an important meeting, perhaps with a lover.

The serjeant seemed taken aback by his companion's whole change of demeanour. He began speaking, rather rapidly and confidentially, perhaps as a way of avoiding his own embarrassment, for he could hardly take his gaze from Mrs Crosby's hitched skirt and her long, stockinged legs. He had never before seen a woman's hobble-garter and he wished to take this one in his hands, admiring the horn buckles, the white silk bows and the soft silk webbing which tethered the two thigh-garters. So the serjeant spoke rapidly, but his mind was not on the meaning of his own words. 'Miss Flanders, the Court Stenographer, can

take down speech very swiftly, as you may have noticed. The prosecutor is given to rapid speaking when he gets into his stride, and Miss Flanders takes that rapidity in *her* stride. She knows the legal jargon minutely, and phrases such as: "I put it to you that you have acted with deceit of the most flagrant nature," which the prosecutor uses quite a lot, though limiting it to once a session, Miss Flanders will with the press of three simultaneous fingers on three keys commit it to transcript. She told me this herself. So her fingers actually do very little and she can closely observe the proceedings, her face without the slightest expression. "How wilfully you have painstakingly constructed a tissue of lies!" is another of the prosecutor's favourite phrases, again requiring little effort on Miss Flanders' part. I could go on. "Mendacity might be a term composed with you especially in mind."

'It was hurtful, being harangued in the dock,' said Mrs Crosby, reefing in a little more of her skirt. Her hands were surprisingly large for a woman, and the black satin was securely held between the capable fingers of her gloved right hand. Her stride was long and loose. You could see the alternate tautening and loosening of the smooth musculature of her thighs and calves. Now that she had removed her hobble-garter her hips swung from side to side with a fluid freedom as she covered the ground.

[This is a preview. The full story is about 5,000 words.]

For Jenny Woolf, author of *The Mystery of Lewis Carroll*
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