

The Worst of Crimes

Lizzie M. Holmes

1906

There are crimes for which we imprison and hang, and consider our duty well done. We brand men as felons for stealing a few dollars or injuring a fellow being, perhaps in a fit of anger, and set them aside, a class by themselves too low for human kindness. But there are acts committed by good men which we do not punish by law that work more evil in the world than any petty thief or common murderer could bring about. And men who grow rich by these acts are honored and respected and pointed at as examples of successful and enterprising men.

But what shall we name the conduct of those “captains of industry” who hire little children to do the work from which they reap thousands of dollars and for which the babies do not receive enough to keep them properly alive? Or of the business men who employ young girls in stores, shops and offices and do not pay them enough to feed, shelter and clothe them decently, thus forcing them to go hungry and cold or resort to an awful alternative?

Once there was a man like this whose name was Nathan Powers. For forty years he had been making money, until he had come to believe that making money was God’s purpose in creating the world, and that nothing else could be of any importance. He was a thoroughly self-made man and was entitled to all the glory there is in the name. At twenty he was a poor tailor working for very ordinary wages. He scraped together a few dollars, rented a room, hired a helper and took in work for himself. He rented more room in a little while, procured “slop work” from the larger firms and hired poor women to make it up for him at starvation wages and so began to make money very fast. In a few years he owned a big clothing house with branch places—“sweat shops”—in several different localities and no longer plied the needle himself. He now owned several establishments in different cities and owned the most of a big department store in his own city. Besides this, he possessed railroad stock, a bank account, several tenement houses, and all these possessions were constantly bringing him more money.

And he had not a chick nor a child as an excuse for this greedy heaping up of money. Once he had had a mother and a sweet little sister dependent upon him for support. He had been more nearly human while they lived and his heart could be touched upon occasions. But the sister whom he had loved as he had never loved other mortal, died young, worshipping and believing in her “noble brother” to the last. Soon afterward the mother passed away and he was left alone. He then devoted himself to business—that is to “money getting”—by various devices, legal and otherwise. He had never taken time to court and marry any woman, so now at sixty he was a hard, lonely, money making machine with a rock for a heart and a dwindled shred for I soul.

Yet Mr. Powers belong to a church and signed checks for its various charities when asked to do so. It paid and he stood high in the community. He attended services occasionally and at these times the minister was careful not to say anything that could possibly hurt his feelings.

One Sunday he was asked to contribute to a project for building a home for fallen women. The promoter of this scheme was an eloquent and magnetic speaker, and, without fully realizing what it was all about, Mr. Powers wrote out a check for five hundred dollars. Thinking it over afterward, he concluded he had done a very foolish thing, for he had no sympathy to waste on “fallen women”—let them take the natural consequences of their evil lives. He felt as though he had actually lost that much money and began to wonder how he could make it up in his business. He might reduce the salaries of some of the clerks—he would see about it the next day.

He was at the store quite early for him the next morning and he made his way directly to the manager’s office. The manager was an elderly man, shrewd and farseeing, but a kindly gleam shone in his grey eyes that proved his soul was not all absorbed in business. The two discussed several matters of business, then the manager said:

“Oh, I thought I would consult you about this—it is rather an unusual thing. It seems some of the girls on the third floor are discontented and want higher wages. They have sent in a petition—very nicely worded it is—stating their reasons for making the request and thanking us beforehand for granting it. A Miss Baryl Harrison is, no doubt, the prime mover and writer of the petition, and she appears to be a fine, spirited sort of a girl.”

Mr. Powers, haughtily surprised as the king might have been when the cat looked at him, took the paper and glanced over it.

“H-m-m! Why, Mr. Garren, this seems to be entirely in your province. Why do you trouble me with it?”

“Yes, I presume it is. But I had a mind to grant their request. You see they declare they give us all their time during the daylight and that what they receive for it is not enough to feed, shelter and clothe themselves on. So if it were left to me I would give them a slight raise.”

To Mr. Powers, who had come with an intention of lowering some of the salaries, this proposition was quite startling.

“Why, Mr. Garren, you made an estimate at the beginning of the year on the cost of labor as well as other expenses, did you not?”

“Yes, but—”

“And you arranged the business for the year, prices, etc., on the basis of that estimate, did you not?”

“Well, you know we often are compelled to make changes in these estimates from various inevitable occurrences—”

“Has any such occurrence come about? You have no difficulty in obtaining sufficient capable help, have you? You can procure tolerably good female clerks for from four and a half to six dollars a week and beginners two and a half dollars to three and a half, can’t you?”

“Yes. there is no difficulty about that.”

“Well, we’ll hire them then.”

“Well, to tell the truth, it does not look well for a rich store like this to pay their employes so little that they are eventually driven into prostitution.”

“Bah! If they are likely to drift into prostitution they’ll drift anyway. Most of them live with their parents who board them and they only want their wages for pin money.”

“But many do not, and many others are obliged to assist their parents.”

"I say no! We can't afford a raise at this season of the year." And Mr. Powers arose to go. Mr. Garren looked troubled but he knew it was of no use to urge the matter further. He sorrowfully went and told the young ladies the result of the interview and that their case was probably hopeless. Beryl Harrison listened to his statements with flashing eyes and curling lips.

"I shall see him myself. I shall tell him to his face that he is driving innocent young girls to ruin!"

"I fear he will not see you," said Mr. Green.

"I'll make him see me," she said firmly, and went back to her work.

The next morning Mr. Powers again entered the store. He had ridden in in his automobile and he felt fresh and comfortable. He was obliged to walk the length of the floor to reach the offices, and Beryl put herself fairly across his way. He stopped in amazement at her audacity.

"Mr. Powers," she said bravely, "we, the young lady clerks in your employ, wish to ask you for a raise in wages. We give you ten of the best hours in the day, six days in the week, and have no time or strength to work more than that to earn anything extra. Yet we cannot live, and get enough to eat and suitable places to live in and dress as we must to be presentable in your store. What do you expect us to do? It cannot be that you, a respectable citizen, a good church member, a law abiding man actually wish to drive us to degradation and crime! You are rich and could easily make these girls' lives comfortable, virtuous and happy. I wish you could see how some of us live, how pinched, how lonely and desolate, you could not have the heart to refuse our request."

Mr. Powers had been held by a kind of a spell while the girl talked to him. Her bright, courageous face, so delicate and refined yet so strong, reminded him of his loved and lost sister, and he could not speak for the moment. But he collected his senses presently and said.

"That will do. Miss. Mr. Garren attends to those matters."

"But may he attend to them as he wishes?"

"You will allow me to pass, if you please. If you do not like your position and your wares you are at liberty to try elsewhere."

"Have you no heart at all?"

Mr. Powers was compelled to go around the girl, and he stalked away quite majestically. Something, however, made him look back as he reached the office door. The girl still stood in the aisle, but now her cheeks were pale and her blue eyes were full of tears. She looked so much like Lucille as she was after she became ill; he felt an impulse to go back and take her in his arms and kiss away her grief. If only he had not declared he would not change his plans, he might be induced to—but pshaw! business was business and it would not do to allow sentiment to interfere with it.

But the man could not forget the girl nor drive away the vision of her face. That night after a good dinner when he had made himself comfortable before the fire in dressing gown and slippers, he seemed to see her standing beside him. And presently when he raised up to look closer, lo, the girl was real and she was his sister! And she was young and pretty and innocent as she was so many years ago. He reached out to put an arm around her with the exclamation, "Why, Lucille! Is it really you?" when she hurried away seemingly anxious about something. He apparently followed her though she did not seem conscious of his presence and he could not sense the motions of his own body. He followed her out into the streets, where she walked on in a weary manner. He wondered why she did not take a street car, then seemed to read her thoughts, the wish that she could do so and the necessity of saving carfare. She had twenty-five cents, she said to herself,

and would not get her pay until the next evening, so she must make it answer for three meals at least.

A car stopped on the corner, and a man alighted and came across the street to speak to the girl. He was coarse looking and loudly dressed, but he spoke to her in a smooth, gentle voice. She seemed to shrink from him instinctively, and the brother would have pushed the man away, but he could not make himself felt in the least. The girl seemed to make an effort to overcome her repugnance and the two walked on together unconscious of the other presence. They reached a big dilapidated looking rooming house at last, and the man urged her to come down presently and go out somewhere to supper and to the theater afterward. The girl hesitated with a frightened look in her eyes. Then she remembered she was hungry, and that her room upstairs was ugly and dull, and she smiled and consented. And the helpless looker-on, who would have knocked the man down if he could, only followed her up two weary flights of stairs and into a little room at the end of a hall. It contained a cot, a trunk, one chair, a wash stand with a broken-nosed pitcher and cracked washbowl, a little table and a curtain of calico which hung across one corner of the room indicated the wardrobe. If the truth were known, it also hid a tiny oil stove, and the lingering odor of cooking, which the landlady was not to know anything about. There was room enough in the middle of the floor to stand in and even to turn around in when necessary. A few prints and photographs were pinned on the wall, and a pretty pasteboard box with a well-bound little Old Testament lay on the table.

The girl hastily washed, combed her hair, and put on a worn but well-cared for gray dress which fitted her nicely, and when she had placed a plain but neat little hat above her wavy brown hair she looked quite pretty.

The unseen man looked on feeling that he could show no sign of his love and sympathy, and he groaned in spirit. He tried to impress her not to go out with that man, but he could not make himself felt. Yet something affected her, for she stopped and looked at her face in the glass very seriously. Then she turned to the little table and opened the Testament

lying there. It had her mother's name in it, and it fell open at the Lord's prayer. "Lead us not into temptation," she read, and pronounced the words over and over again. Then she sat down and took her hat off very slowly, and placed the shabby gloves she had been about to draw on, in the crown. Someone from far below called out, "A gentleman to see you, Miss!" She answered that she was not well and that she could not go out. After a moment's pause the voice called again.

"He says come down jest a minute—he wants to speak to you."

"Tell him I cannot—I will not," and she slammed the door shut and turned the key in the lock. Now, how rejoiced was the unseen spectator! How he longed to comfort her, to take her out himself and load her with good and beautiful things! But he could do nothing but watch her.

He knew she was hungry, but she dared not go down in the street for fear the man might still be waiting about. She removed her gray dress and put on an old print wrapper and a run-down pair of slippers. She looked in her trunk and found a tin box which contained a few crumbs of crackers and a bit of cheese, which she ate greedily. Then she sat at the table and played "solitaire" with an old, worn deck of cards. After tiring of this amusement, she studied her face in the glass awhile and massaged the wrinkle that showed across her forehead. She yawned and finally went stupidly to bed. His dear, sweet sister! And so lonely, so weary, so hungry and so dull! He would have given years of his life to have been able to give her a little joy. Yet he was powerless.

There seemed to be a break in his consciousness, for when he next looked on the girl it seemed to be the next day. He saw that she had spent some of her twenty-five cents for a bottle of shoe dressing to hide the shabbiness of her shoes and that she was living on a couple of stale loaves of bread that she had got cheap at the bakery. He was proud of her and longed, oh, how earnestly, to help her! For how long would she withstand temptation in her lonely, ugly room with her body and soul-hunger and her youthful craving for some of the joys of life?

He lost himself for a time, and when again conscious he found himself in a brilliantly lighted room filled with tables around which merry parties were gathered. The room was dazzling with mirrors and from behind some palms, gay, beautiful music floated out. A gay group of young men and women were seated around a table in the far end of the apartment, eating and drinking, and their merry voices in song and laughter betokened "a good time." The girl, the girl he was so interested in, who seemed to be his sister, though it was so impossible, was there and her eyes sparkled, her cheeks glowed and her laugh rang out lightly. One of the men had an arm across the back of her chair, as he regarded her with passionate ardor. Presently the party arose and the girl could scarcely stand on her feet; the man at her side threw an arm around her and drew her half reluctant, half yielding form toward the door with him. The unseen tried with all his might to pull her back, to speak to her, to warn her for God's sake not to go away with that man. But he could not make himself heard or felt, and with wild grief he saw her pass out into the night and the darkness.

It seemed to him that there was another long break in his consciousness of what was happening. When he came to himself again he seemed to be in a wretched part of the city where besotted men and women and miserable children huddled together in filthy basements, cellars and dilapidated shacks; and the flickering lights showed a ghastly face or a shrinking ragged form or a slinking figure on evil bent, in every nook and corner. Coarse voices shouted out vile epithets or shrieked in fear or anger, or rang out in ribald laughter. He heard blows and groans behind a broken door, and as he would have tried to enter, it opened and a brute of a man kicked a woman into the street with a terrible oath. She fell on the sidewalk and sat there for some moments, a bruised, miserable wreck of a woman, but through the matted hair straggling over her face, he could see it was the changed, haggard, hardened countenance of the young girl—his sister! Horrified, he hurried to her side to help her to her feet, forgetting he could not make his presence felt.

She struggled up by herself presently and staggered toward a man who was approaching and said something to him. The man turned and beckoned to a policeman who was coming about half a block away. He approached, grabbed the woman by the arm and bade her roughly to "come along." The man who was seeing all this himself unseen tried to stop him, tried to scream out that he would care for the woman if he would not drag her to a cell, tried to force back the officer—all in vain! And in his frantic struggle and agony of mind he suddenly awoke and found himself battling with a pillow that had fallen over his face. The fire was low and the room shadowy and chilly. But he remembered that it was all a dream and that the morrow yet lay before him. The young girl was yet safe and he had it in his power to save her and many like her. He could have shouted in his joy. He would go tomorrow and tell Mr. Garren to pay the girls all the business would possibly allow, and he would devote himself to finding pleasant, comfortable and safe homes for them with kind and wise women to look after them. He would begin to save girls at the beginning of their career and not wait to build "homes" for them after they had "fallen." And in this resolution he was happier than he had ever been in his life.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Lizzie M. Holmes
The Worst of Crimes
1906

Retrieved on 29th May 2023 from www.libertarian-labyrinth.org
Published in *The International Wood-Worker* 16 no. 1 (January 1906): 1-4.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net