

Shoes

Richard Connell

“Your name?”

“William Felton.”

“Speak louder, can’t you?”

“William Felton.”

“Your age?”

“Twenty-two.”

“Say ‘Your Honour,’ when you answer a judge. Don’t pretend you haven’t been arrested before.”

“I haven’t been, your honor.”

“How old did you say you are?”

“Twenty-two, your honor.”

“You look older. What is your occupation?”

“Clerk in a shoe store, your honor.”

“Officer Greavy, Officer Greavy.”

“Here y’ronor.”

“What is this man Felton charged with?”

“Well, y’ronor, I was on m’post on Simpson street las’ night an’ at twenty-three minutes past eight, I hear a commotion in front of the Idle Hour Movie Theater, at 1833 Simpson Street, Saul Bloch, proprietor. I seen the prisoner here bein’ thrown outa the theater by some men. They was kickin’ and punchin’ him. A woman was screamin’ ‘He kissed me! He kissed me!’ I ast her did she want to make a complaint against him and she said yes, she did. So I arrested him.”

“Is that woman over there the one that got kissed?”

“Yes, y’ronor. That’s her.”

“Thank you, officer. You may go. Will you take the stand, Madam? What is your name?”

“Elsa Keck.”

“Mrs?”

“Miss, your honor, Miss.”

“Your age, Miss Keck.”

“Must I?”

“Yes.”

“Well—forty-one.”

“Are you employed?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“I’m a waitress in the White Tile Restaurant, corner of Third Avenue and 149th Street.”

“Been there long?”

“Twenty-two years, your honor.”

“Where do you live?”

“At No. 1989 Second Avenue.”

“With your family?”

“I ain’t got any family.”

“With friends, then?”

“No; furnished room.”

“Tell me exactly what happened last night.”

“Well, your honor, I was on the early shift, bein’ I been workin’ there at the White Tile longer than any of the other girls, so I got off about seven and I says to myself I can’t go home to that hot room of mine this early so I guess I’ll go take in a movie show, so I goes into the Idle Hour. It’s cool in there and I can rest my feet, I says; if you ever done any waitin,’ your honor, you know how hard it is on the feet. Well, I goes in and they’re showin’ a lovely picture all about an Arab prince that fell in love with a white girl and carried her off to his tent and——”

“Please be as brief as possible, Miss Keck.”

“Well, your honor, this man was sittin’ next to me, and I paid no attention to him except to notice that his face was sort of sickly and his eyes sort of wild. I didn’t give him no encouragement, your honor; I’m a decent girl. I just watched the film. Well, I slipped my pumps off my feet and leaned back to take it easy when all of a sudden he reaches out and kisses me right on the face. I screamed. I got all sort of hysterical. Then some men began punchin’ him and the ushers dragged him up the aisle and I was that upset—nothin’ of the kind ever having happened to me before—that I screamed some more; and when the cop come and asked did I want to have him run in, I said I did. I was afraid the men would kill him; they was beatin’ him something fierce and he wasn’t very strong lookin’——”

“Don’t you want to press the case?”

“I—I dunno, your honor.”

“Well, I do. I’m not going to let you withdraw your complaint, Miss Keck. I happen to be the father of nine children, six of them growing girls. For their sake and the sake of the rest of the womanhood of the city, I’m going to see if something can’t be done about men like this. Is that man over there the one who kissed you?”

“Yes, your honor.”

“Are you sure?”

“Oh, yes, your honor; I couldn’t forget.”

“You say you haven’t been kissed before——?”

“No, your honor.”

“I mean by a stranger in a moving-picture theater.”

“Oh, no, your honor.”

“Ever been followed on the street by men, or annoyed by mashers?”

“Never, your honor.”

“Very well. You may stand aside, Miss Keck.”

“Your honor——”

“What is it?”

“I don’t want to be hard on this—this boy. I guess he didn’t mean no harm; mebbe he’d been drinkin’ or wasn’t right in the head or sumpin.’ I guess I was sort of hysterical when I said I wanted him run in. I don’t want to get him in trouble and make him lose his job. Jobs is hard to get and——”

“That will do, Miss Keck. It’s too late now to drop the case. You tender-hearted women, with your misplaced sympathy, are to blame for mashers. I represent the public, and the public can’t have young ruffians going around kissing women old enough to be their mothers. I’ve got daughters to think of, and the daughters of other men, too.”

“But, your honor——”

“That will do, Miss Keck. Prisoner, stand up. Well, Felton, you’ve heard the officer and you’ve heard Miss Keck. What have you to say?”

“Nothing, your honor.”

“Speak up, can’t you? Don’t mumble. Are you guilty or not guilty?”

“Guilty, your honor.”

“Have you anything you’d like to say? I’d really like to know why a quiet-looking young fellow like you goes around acting like a beast; I really would.”

“I—I—would like to say something, if you don’t mind.”

“Well? Don’t mumble.”

“I—I’m not a beast, your honor.”

“Well, why do you act like one then?”

“It wasn’t me, your honor. It was somethin’ in me. I don’t know how to tell you. It ain’t decent to talk about such things. The minister said so. I never done anything like this before. Honest. It just come over me—all of a sudden. I wouldn’t have done it if she hadn’t taken off her shoe; it was the first time I ever seen a foot—like that, you know—outside of a store; I guess I got a devil in me or sumpin.’ Anyhow, before I knew it I’d done it and she was screamin’ and the men was punchin’ me and kickin’ me and I didn’t know just where I was. I didn’t mean to do it, your honor; honest, I didn’t; it just happened—just happened —”

“Nonsense. Things like that don’t just happen, Felton. Tell the truth. You went in there to annoy a woman, didn’t you?”

“No, your honor, no. I swear on the Good Book I didn’t. I went in there so I wouldn’t annoy no woman.”

“I don’t understand you.”

“I—I—don’t like to talk about it, your honor. It ain’t decent. But I can’t help it—— I got sumpin’ wrong with me, I guess. Always did have, ever since I was a kid. I ain’t a bad one, your honor. I go to church regular and I know my Bible and I ain’t never been in no kind of trouble before. You can ask Mr. Wirtz if I ain’t honest and sober and hard workin’——”

“Who’s he?”

“I work for him—down at the Elite Shoe Store on Third Avenue—Jacob Wirtz—‘Fancy Feminine Footwear.’ He’ll tell you—Oh, I wish to God I never did go to work there. That was what done it, your honor. If I’d a been able to get a job as a chauffeur or a salesman in the gents’ haberdashery or anything, it wouldn’t have happened to me. But I didn’t know nothin’ but shoes—nothin’ but shoes, your honor. And they got me; I knew they’d get me; I did try to fight ’em, your honor; night and day I tried. I prayed every night, ‘Dear Jesus, don’t let the shoes get me——’ □ ”

“Come, come, Felton. I haven’t time to listen to you all day. If you have anything to say that bears on your case, out with it.”

“I’m tryin’ to tell you, your honor. It—makes me all ashamed. I don’t know how to tell things; I ain’t talked much to people, except about shoes.”

“Shoes? What have they to do with your conduct?”

“They got everything to do with it, I guess, your honor. It was them that made me do it—the shoes— You see, when I was a kid I wasn’t like the other kids—I dunno why. Things made me excited—little things that the other kids didn’t seem to mind. Things made me tremble and shiver like I was freezin’. I lived up-state in a little town with my uncle and aunt. The other kids played with girls but I never did; it made me all sort of nervous just to see ’em. Once I went on a straw-ride when I was in the seventh grade, and I sat next to a girl and I got so nervous I threw up. Other boys wasn’t like that; but I was—

“My uncle took me outa high school to go to work in his store. He kept a shoe store. I didn’t want to; I wanted to be a sailor. But he made me. I didn’t want to work in a shoe store, your honor. I was afraid.”

“Afraid?”

“Yes—well, you see—your honor—he made me wait on women. They had little feet, your honor, such little feet. And some of them wore silk stockings—

“Go on, Felton.”

“Uncle Ralph made me wait on them. He made me. He used to crack me across the face because I got sizes wrong; somehow I couldn’t think straight; with men it was different; I didn’t get their sizes wrong. But those little feet in the silk stockin’s—

“Look at me, Felton. Anything more?”

“I was nervous and sick and I felt queer all over and I used to think wicked things, your honor. I couldn’t stop it; no matter how hard I prayed; I’d just think and think—and I had to sit there and touch those little feet in the silk stockin’s. It got worse and worse— Guess I got some kind of a disease, your honor; I was always funny that way; and I didn’t want to be, honest I didn’t.

“Well, your honor, I clerked along in Uncle Ralph’s store for five years; I thought mebbe it would get easier; worse, that’s what it got. Uncle give me five dollars a week and my keep; but I couldn’t save much. He made me give money to the missionaries and when I made mistakes about women’s shoes, he fined me. I wanted to save enough to take a course to be an engineer on a steamship. I wanted to get away—get away from the shoes. I was afraid I’d go crazy or sumpin’, your honor. I was afraid I’d do, I don’t know what. Uncle Ralph didn’t know; I didn’t tell him; I knew he wouldn’t understand; he was a good man and men’s shoes and women’s shoes was all the same to him. But me, I was different.

“Well, your honor, one night in spring there was a bargain sale and there was lots of women and girls in the store, tryin’ on shoes. I began to feel very queer and awful; it was wicked; I drunk ice water and I prayed, but it done no good. I knew if I stayed there I’d go clean crazy and perhaps do, I don’t know what; a girl come in and she had red hair and silk stockin’s and I had to try on her a pair of 2AA pumps—she had the littlest feet you ever see, your honor—and I took to tremblin’ and I kept sayin’ under my breath, ‘Dear God, don’t make me want to kiss her; please don’t make me want to kiss her.’ An’ I guess He didn’t hear or sumpin’, or perhaps He was punishin’ me, because, anyhow, I did want to; I wanted to sumpin’ fierce. But I knew it would be wrong and I didn’t want to disgrace Uncle Ralph who was a good man and a deacon in the church. So I ran right outa the store just as I was, without a hat or nothin’ and I left her sittin’ there. I was so nervous I could hardly see where I was goin’. I ran all the way to the railroad station. I got on a train, the first that come. It took me to New York.”

“Go on, Felton.”

“When I got to New York I had one dollar left. I looked for a job in a department store. The man said, ‘Any sellin’ experience?’ And I said ‘Yes.’ He said, ‘What line?’ and before I knew it, like a fool, I said ‘Shoes.’ So they put me in the Misses’ shoes. It paid sixteen a week. I thought mebbe I could save enough to get married. I guess I oughta have got married. But the fellas who was married said, ‘Fat time a young fella has that marries on a clerk’s salary! It ain’t so much the wife that costs; it’s the kids.’ And I says ‘But have you gotta have kids?’ And they said, ‘Of course y’ have. How you goin’ to stop havin’ ’em?’ And I says ‘But s’pose y’ can’t afford kids?’ They said, ‘Then it’s tough luck for you,’ they said, ‘and for them.’ There was a girl in the cotton goods, your honor, that liked me, I guess. She was makin’ twelve. We could of got married, mebbe, if it wasn’t for havin’ to have kids. If I only coulda got married, your honor, I wouldn’t be here.”

“Well, you are here, Felton. What else?”

“In the big store it was worse than Uncle Ralph’s. All kinds of girls come to get shoes. I began to get nervous again; I was scared I’d do sumpin’ wicked. I tried to get work at the docks; they said I was too light. I had to stay in the Misses’ shoes. I stayed a year. Then I couldn’t stand it another minute. One day when I was tryin’ a brogue oxford on a girl I felt so bad I ran right out the store. I didn’t stop for my pay or a reference or anything. I just run right out and went into a movie because it’s cool and quiet in movies.

“Well, your honor, I tramped all over town lookin’ for another job; everything was full up; I did get a job carryin’ boxes in a lead pipe factory, but they fired me after the first day; the boss said I didn’t have the muscle. I didn’t have no money left—I’d used up the money I’d saved to be married with—and they put me outa the house I roomed in and I didn’t have no

overcoat and winter was here and for three days I didn't have nothin' to eat but coffee. I couldn't stand it. I asked a man to give me a quarter and he said, 'You lazy bum, find a paper and get a job.' I did find a paper and it said 'shoe salesmen wanted.' It was beginnin' to snow and my head felt light and queer and I guess I'm weak, anyhow, so I went up to the Elite Store and they give me a job at fifteen per. I been workin' there nearly a year: next week Mr. Wirtz was goin' to raise me to sixteen—and then I got into this trouble——”

“Is that all, Felton?”

“No, no, your honor. There's a little more. It's about what happened last night. I was workin' away in the Elite and it was gettin' worse and worse. The older I got, the worse it got. I prayed, your honor. But I guess I was made wrong or sumpin'. The other fellas in the store didn't mind; they was all married. But I couldn't get married on fifteen a week. I used to walk miles every day; but that didn't help none. It got worse. Those little feet—your honor, there oughta be a law against girls wearin' silk stockin's and little patent leather pumps with red heels. Things began to get worse; I was all sorta jumpy; all last week I couldn't sleep. Last night I felt sumpin' comin' on me like I felt in Uncle Ralph's store that night I run away; I was afraid—. It's not decent to talk about things like that, your honor——”

“Go on, Felton.”

“A girl come into the store; she was a red-headed girl, your honor, and she had the littlest feet—and she wanted patent leather pumps with red heels——”

“Come, Felton. Take hold of yourself. If you've anything more to say, say it.”

“I went to get the pumps—but I was tremblin'—and the box dropped from my hand; I knew I couldn't stand it; I ran outa the store; I guess they thought I was crazy or sumpin'; I went into the first movie show I come to; I knew it would be cool and quiet and dark—in there ——”

“Well, what then, Felton?”

“They was showin' a film there, your honor, that there oughta be a law against; the girl wore silk stockin's and the man kissed her. There was a woman—that woman there—sittin' next to me and when the fella in the picture kissed the girl, this woman makes a little sighin' noise, and I looked at her sidewise. She seemed sorta old and tired lookin', your honor, and skinny and plain and her eyes were sorta sad and I said to myself, 'I'll bet she wishes she was bein' kissed, just like I wished I was bein' kissed.' 'And,' I says to myself, 'fat chance for either of us.' 'And' I says to myself, 'I guess, mebbe, she wouldn't mind if——' But I knew it was wicked so I turned away and tried to watch the picture. And then——”

“Well, Felton?”

“And then, your honor, I heard her movin’ and I looked and she’d slipped off her pumps—and she had little feet—and I’d never seen feet before outside of the store—and then—I dunno why—but—I—kissed her—and the next thing I knew they was punchin’ and kickin’ me and the policeman had me, twistin’ my arm and hurtin’ me sumpin’ fierce. I didn’t mean to do it, your honor; it just happened—just happened—”

“I’ve listened to enough, Felton. More than enough. I’m heartily ashamed that there are such men as you in this country; you are unworthy of the name of American, Felton. It is men like you who can’t control themselves that worry the soul out of the fathers of growing daughters. I can’t understand why you don’t exercise a little self-control. Six months in the city prison on Blackwell’s Island!”

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