

The Night Court

Mitchell, Ruth Comfort, 1882-1954

“CALL Rose Costara!”

Insolent she comes.

The watchers, practiced, keen, turn down their thumbs.

The walk, the talk, the face,—that sea-shell tint,—

It is old stuff; they read her like coarse print.

Here is no hapless innocence waylaid.

This is a stolid worker at her trade.

Listening, she yawns; half smiling, undismayed,

Shrugging a little at the law's delay,

Bored and impatient to be on her way.

It is her eighth conviction. Out beyond the rail

A lady novelist in search of types turns pale.

She meant to write of them just as she found them,

And with no tears of maudlin glamour round them,

In forceful, virile words, harsh, true words, without shame,

Calling an ugly thing, boldly, an ugly name;

Sympathy, velvet glove, on purpose, iron hand.

But *eighth conviction!* All the phrases she had planned

Fail; “sullen,” “vengeful,” no, she isn't that.

No, the pink face beneath the hectic hat

Gives back her own aghast and sickened stare

With a detached and rather cheerful air,

And then the little novelist sees red.

From her chaste heart all clemency is fled.

“Oh, loathsome! venomous! Off with her head!

Call Rose Costara!” But before you stop,

And shelve your decent rage,

Let's call the cop.

Let's call the plain-clothes cop who brought her in.

The weary-eyed night watchman of the law,

A shuffling person with a hanging jaw,

Loose-lipped and sallow, rather vague of chin,

Comes rubber-heeling at his Honor's rap.

He set and baited and then sprung the trap—

The *trap*—by his unsavory report.

Let's ask him why—but first

Let's call the court.

Not only the grim figure in the chair,
Sphinx-like above the waste and wreckage there,
Skeptical, weary of a retold tale,
But the whole humming hive, the false, the frail,—
An old young woman with a weasel face,
A lying witness waiting in his place,
Two ferret lawyers nosing out a case,
Reporters questioning a Mexican,
Sobbing her silly heart out for her man,
Planning to feature her, “lone, desperate, pretty,”
Yes, call the court. But wait!

Let's call the city.

Call the community! Call up, call down,
Call all the speeding, mad, unheeding town!
Call rags and tags and then call velvet gown!
Go, summon them from tenements and clubs,
On office floors and over steaming tubs!
Shout to the boxes and behind the scenes,
Then to the push-carts and the limousines!
Arouse the lecture-room, the cabaret!
Confound them with a trumpet-blast and say,
“Are you so dull, so deaf and blind indeed,
That you mistake the harvest for the seed?”
Condemn them for—but stay!

Let's call the code—

That facile thing they've fashioned to their mode:
Smug sophistries that smother and befool,
That numb and stultify; that clumsy thing
That measures mountains with a three-foot rule,
And plumbs the ocean with a puddling-string—
The little, brittle code. Here is the root,
Far out of sight, and buried safe and deep,
And Rose Costara is the bitter fruit.
On every limb and leaf, death, ruin, creep.

So, lady novelist, go home again.
Rub biting acid on your little pen.
Look back and out and up and in, and then
Write that it is no job for pruning-shears.
Tell them to dig for years and years and years
The twined and twisted roots. Blot out the page;
Invert the blundering order of the age;

Reverse the scheme: the last shall be the first.
Summon the system, starting with the worst—
The lying, dying code! On, down the line,
The city, and the court, the cop. Assign
The guilt, the blame, the shame! Sting, lash, and spur!
Call each and all! Call us! And *then* call her!