

The Pusher-in-the-Face, F. Scott Fitzgerald

The last prisoner was a man—his masculinity was not much in evidence, it is true; he would perhaps better be described as a "person," but he undoubtedly came under that general heading and was so classified in the court record. He was a small, somewhat shriveled, somewhat wrinkled American who had been living along for probably thirty-five years.

His body looked as if it had been left by accident in his suit the last time it went to the tailor's and pressed out with hot, heavy irons to its present sharpness. His face was merely a face. It was the kind of face that makes up crowds, gray in color with ears that shrank back against the head as if fearing the clamor of the city, and with the tired, tired eyes of one whose forebears have been underdogs for five thousand years.

Brought into the dock between two towering Celts in executive blue he seemed like the representative of a long extinct race, a very fagged out and shriveled elf who had been caught poaching on a buttercup in Central Park.

"What's your name?"

"Stuart."

"Stuart what?"

"Charles David Stuart."

The clerk recorded it without comment in the book of little crimes and great mistakes.

"Age?"

"Thirty."

"Occupation?"

"Night cashier."

The clerk paused and looked at the judge. The judge yawned.

"Wha's charge?" he asked.

"The charge is"—the clerk looked down at the notation in his hand—"the charge is that he pushed a lady in the face."

"Pleads guilty?"

"Yes."

The preliminaries were now disposed of. Charles David Stuart, looking very harmless and uneasy, was on trial for assault and battery.

The evidence disclosed, rather to the judge's surprise, that the lady whose face had been pushed was not the defendant's wife.

On the contrary the victim was an absolute stranger—the prisoner had never seen her before in his life. His reasons for the assault had been two: first, that she talked during a theatrical performance; and, second, that she kept joggling the back of his chair with her knees. When this had gone on for some time he had turned around and without any warning pushed her severely in the face.

"Call the plaintiff," said the judge, sitting up a little in his chair. "Let's hear what she has to say."

The courtroom, sparsely crowded and unusually languid in the hot afternoon, had become suddenly alert. Several men in the back of the room moved into benches near the desk and a young reporter leaned over the clerk's shoulder and copied the defendant's name on the back of an envelope.

The plaintiff arose. She was a woman just this side of fifty with a determined, rather overbearing face under yellowish white hair. Her dress was a dignified black and she gave the impression of wearing glasses; indeed the young reporter, who believed in observation, had so described her in his mind before he realized that no such adornment sat upon her thin, beaked nose.

It developed that she was Mrs. George D. Robinson of 1219 Riverside Drive. She had always been fond of the theater and sometimes she went to the matinee. There had been two ladies with her yesterday, her cousin, who lived with her, and a Miss Ingles—both ladies were in court.

This is what had occurred:

As the curtain went up for the first act a woman sitting behind had asked her to remove her hat. Mrs. Robinson had been about to do so anyhow, and so she was a little annoyed at the request and had remarked as much to Miss Ingles and her cousin. At this point she had first noticed the defendant who was sitting directly in front, for he had turned around and looked at her quickly in a most insolent way. Then she had forgotten his existence until just before the end of the act when she made some remark to Miss Ingles—when suddenly he had stood up, turned around and pushed her in the face.

"Was it a hard blow?" asked the judge at this point.

"A hard blow!" said Mrs. Robinson indignantly, "I should say it was. I had hot and cold applications on my nose all night."

"—on her nose all night."

This echo came from the witness bench where two faded ladies were leaning forward eagerly and nodding their heads in corroboration.

"Were the lights on?" asked the judge.

No, but everyone around had seen the incident and some people had taken hold of the man right then and there.

This concluded the case for the plaintiff. Her two companions gave similar evidence and in the minds of everyone in the courtroom the incident defined itself as one of unprovoked and inexcusable brutality.

The one element which did not fit in with this interpretation was the physiognomy of the prisoner himself. Of any one of a number of minor offenses he might have appeared guilty—pickpockets were notoriously mild-mannered, for example—but of this particular assault in a crowded theater he seemed physically incapable. He did not have the kind of voice or the kind of clothes or the kind of mustache that went with such an attack.

"Charles David Stuart," said the judge, "you've heard the evidence against you?"

"Yes."

"And you plead guilty?"

"Yes."

"Have you anything to say before I sentence you?"

"No." The prisoner shook his head hopelessly. His small hands were trembling.

"Not one word in extenuation of this unwarranted assault?"

The prisoner appeared to hesitate.

"Go on," said the judge. "Speak up—it's your last chance."

"Well," said Stuart with an effort, "she began talking about the plumber's stomach."

There was a stir in the courtroom. The judge leaned forward.

"What do you mean?"

"Why, at first she was only talking about her own stomach to—to those two ladies there"—he indicated the cousin and Miss Ingles—"and that wasn't so bad. But when she began talking about the plumber's stomach it got different."

"How do you mean—different?"

Charles Stuart looked around helplessly.

"I can't explain," he said, his mustache wavering a little, "but when she began talking about the plumber's stomach you—you had to listen."

A snicker ran about the courtroom. Mrs. Robinson and her attendant ladies on the bench were visibly horrified. The guard took a step nearer as if at a nod from the judge he would whisk off this criminal to the dingiest dungeon in Manhattan.

But much to his surprise the judge settled himself comfortably in his chair.

"Tell us about it, Stuart," he said not unkindly. "Tell us the whole story from the beginning."

This request was a shock to the prisoner and for a moment he looked as though he would have preferred the order of condemnation. Then after one nervous look around the room he put his hands on the edge of the desk, like the paws of a fox-terrier just being trained to sit up, and began to speak in a quivering voice.

"Well, I'm a night cashier, your honor, in T. Cushmael's restaurant on Third Avenue. I'm not married"—he smiled a little, as if he knew they had all guessed that—"and so on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons I usually go to the matinee. It helps to pass the time till dinner. There's a drug store, maybe you know, where you can get tickets for a dollar sixty-five to some of the shows and I usually go there and pick out something. They got awful prices at the box office now." He gave out a long silent whistle and looked feelingly at the judge. "Four or five dollars for one seat—"

The judge nodded his head.

"Well," continued Charles Stuart, "when I pay even a dollar sixty-five I expect to see my money's worth. About two weeks ago I went to one of these here mystery plays where they have one fella that did the crime and nobody knows who it was. Well, the fun at a thing like that is to guess who did it. And there was a lady behind me that'd been there before and she gave it all away to the fella with her. Gee"—his face fell and he shook his head from side to side—"I like to died right there. When I got home to my room I was so mad that they had to come and ask me to stop walking up and down. Dollar sixty-five of my money gone for nothing.

"Well, Wednesday came around again, and this show was one show I wanted to see. I'd been wanting to see it for months, and every time I went into the drug store I asked them if they had any tickets. But they never did." He hesitated. "So Tuesday I took a chance and went over to the box office and got a seat. Two seventy-five it cost me." He nodded impressively. "Two seventy-five. Like throwing money away. But I wanted to see that show."

Mrs. Robinson in the front row rose suddenly to her feet.

"I don't see what all this story has to do with it," she broke out a little shrilly. "I'm sure I don't care—"

The judge brought his gavel sharply down on the desk.

"Sit down, please," he said. "This is a court of law, not a matinee."

Mrs. Robinson sat down, drawing herself up into a thin line and sniffing a little as if to say she'd see about this after a while. The judge pulled out his watch.

"Go on," he said to Stuart. "Take all the time you want."

"I got there first," continued Stuart in a flustered voice. "There wasn't anybody in there but me and the fella that was cleaning up. After awhile the audience came in, and it got dark and the play started, but just as I was all settled in my seat and ready to have a good time I heard an awful row directly behind me. Somebody had asked this lady"—he pointed directly to Mrs. Robinson—"to remove her hat like she should of done anyhow and she was sore about it. She kept telling the two ladies that was with her how she'd been at the theater before and knew enough to take off her hat. She kept that up for a long time, five minutes maybe, and then every once in a while she'd think of something new and say it in a loud voice. So finally I turned around and looked at her because I wanted to see what a lady looked like that could be so inconsiderate as that. Soon as I turned back she began on me. She said I was insolent and then she said 'Tchk! Tchk! Tchk!' a lot with her tongue and the two ladies that was with her said 'Tchk! Tchk! Tchk!' until you could hardly hear yourself think, much less listen to the play. You'd have thought I'd done something terrible.

"By and by, after they calmed down and I began to catch up with what was doing on the stage, I felt my seat sort of creak forward and then creak back again and I knew the lady had her feet on it and I was in for a good rock. Gosh!" he wiped his pale, narrow brow on which the sweat had gathered thinly, "it was awful. I hope to tell you I wished I'd never come at all. Once I got excited at a show and rocked a man's chair without knowing it and I was glad when he asked me to stop. But I knew this lady wouldn't be glad if I asked her. She'd of just rocked harder than ever."

Some time before, the population of the courtroom had begun stealing glances at the middle-aged lady with yellowish-white hair. She was of a deep, life-like lobster color with rage.

"It got to be near the end of the act," went on the little pale man, "and I was enjoying it as well as I could, seeing that sometimes she'd push me toward the stage and sometimes she'd let go, and the seat and me would fall back into place. Then all of a sudden she began to talk. She said she had an operation or something—I remember she said she told the doctor that she guessed she knew more about her own stomach than he did. The play was getting good just then—the people next to me had their handkerchiefs out and was weeping—and I was feeling sort of that way myself. And all of a sudden this lady began to tell her friends what she told the plumber about his indigestion. Gosh!" Again he shook his head from side to side; his pale eyes fell involuntarily on Mrs. Robinson—then looked quickly away. "You couldn't help but hear some and I begun missing things and then missing more things and then everybody began laughing and I didn't know what they were laughing at and, as soon as they'd leave off, her voice would begin again. Then there was a great big laugh that

lasted for a long time and everybody bent over double and kept laughing and laughing, and I hadn't heard a word. First thing I knew the curtain came down and then I don't know what happened. I must of been a little crazy or something because I got up and closed my seat, and reached back and pushed the lady in the face."

As he concluded there was a long sigh in the courtroom as though everyone had been holding in his breath waiting for the climax. Even the judge gasped a little and the three ladies on the witness bench burst into a shrill chatter and grew louder and louder and shriller and shriller until the judge's gavel rang out again upon his desk.

"Charles Stuart," said the judge in a slightly raised voice, "is this the only extenuation you can make for raising your hand against a woman of the plaintiff's age?"

Charles Stuart's head sank a little between his shoulders, seeming to withdraw as far as it was able into the poor shelter of his body.

"Yes, sir," he said faintly.

Mrs. Robinson sprang to her feet.

"Yes, judge," she cried shrilly, "and there's more than that. He's a liar too, a dirty little liar. He's just proclaimed himself a dirty little—"

"Silence!" cried the judge in a terrible voice. "I'm running this court, and I'm capable of making my own decisions!" He paused. "I will now pronounce sentence upon Charles Stuart," he referred to the register, "upon Charles David Stuart of 212½ West 22nd St."

The courtroom was silent. The reporter drew nearer—he hoped the sentence would be light—just a few days on the Island in lieu of a fine.

The judge leaned back in his chair and hid his thumbs somewhere under his black robe.

"Assault justified," he said. "Case dismissed."

The little man Charles Stuart came blinking out into the sunshine, pausing for a moment at the door of the court and looking furtively behind him as if he half expected that it was a judicial error. Then, sniffing once or twice, not because he had a cold but for those dim psychological reasons that make people sniff, he moved slowly south with an eye out for a subway station.

He stopped at a news-stand to buy a morning paper; then entering the subway was borne south to 18th Street where he disembarked and walked east to Third Avenue. Here he was employed in an all-night restaurant built of glass and plaster white tile. Here he sat at a desk from curfew until dawn, taking in money and balancing the books of T. Cushmael, the proprietor. And here, through the interminable nights, his eyes, by turning a little to right or left, could rest upon the starched linen uniform of Miss Edna Schaeffer.

Miss Edna Schaeffer was twenty-three, with a sweet mild face and hair that was a living example of how henna should not be applied. She was unaware of this latter fact, because all the girls she knew used henna just this way, so perhaps the odd vermilion tint of her coiffure did not matter.

Charles Stuart had forgotten about the color of her hair long ago—if he had ever noticed its strangeness at all. He was much more interested in her eyes, and in her white hands which, as they moved deftly among piles of plates and cups, always looked as if they should be playing the piano. He had almost asked her to go to a matinee with him once, but when she had faced him her lips half-parted in a weary, cheerful smile, she had seemed so beautiful that he had lost courage and mumbled something else instead.

It was not to see Edna Schaeffer, however, that he had come to the restaurant so early in the afternoon. It was to consult with T. Cushmael, his employer, and discover if he had lost his job during his night in jail. T. Cushmael was standing in the front of the restaurant looking gloomily out the plate-glass window, and Charles Stuart approached him with ominous forebodings.

"Where've you been?" demanded T. Cushmael.

"Nowhere," answered Charles Stuart discreetly.

"Well, you're fired."

Stuart winced.

"Right now?"

Cushmael waved his hands apathetically.

"Stay two or three days if you want to, till I find somebody. Then"—he made a gesture of expulsion—"outside for you."

Charles Stuart assented with a weary little nod. He assented to everything. At nine o'clock, after a depressed interval during which he brooded upon the penalty of spending a night among the police, he reported for work.

"Hello, Mr. Stuart," said Edna Schaeffer, sauntering curiously toward him as he took his place behind the desk. "What became of you last night? Get pinched?"

She laughed, cheerfully, huskily, charmingly he thought, at her joke.

"Yes," he answered on a sudden impulse, "I was in the 35th Street jail."

"Yes, you were," she scoffed.

"That's the truth," he insisted, "I was arrested."

Her face grew serious at once.

"Go on. What did you do?"

He hesitated.

"I pushed somebody in the face."

Suddenly she began to laugh, at first with amusement and then immoderately.

"It's a fact," mumbled Stuart, "I almost got sent to prison account of it."

Setting her hand firmly over her mouth Edna turned away from him and retired to the refuge of the kitchen. A little later, when he was pretending to be busy at the accounts, he saw her retailing the story to the two other girls.

The night wore on. The little man in the grayish suit with the grayish face attracted no more attention from the customers than the whirring electric fan over his head. They gave him their money and his hand slid their change into a little hollow in the marble counter. But to Charles Stuart the hours of this night, this last night, began to assume a quality of romance. The slow routine of a hundred other nights unrolled with a new enchantment before his eyes. Midnight was always a sort of a dividing point—after that the intimate part of the evening began. Fewer people came in, and the ones that did seemed depressed and tired: a casual ragged man for coffee, the beggar from the street corner who ate a heavy meal of cakes and a beefsteak, a few nightbound street-women and a watchman with a red face who exchanged warning phrases with him about his health.

Midnight seemed to come early tonight and business was brisk until after one. When Edna began to fold napkins at a nearby table he was tempted to ask her if she too had not found the night unusually short. Vainly he wished that he might impress himself on her in some way, make some remark to her, some sign of his devotion that she would remember forever.

She finished folding the vast pile of napkins, loaded it onto the stand and bore it away, humming to herself. A few minutes later the door opened and two customers came in. He recognized them immediately, and as he did so a flush of jealousy went over him. One of them, a young man in a handsome brown suit, cut away rakishly from his abdomen, had been a frequent visitor for the last ten days. He came in always at about this hour, sat down at one of Edna's tables, and drank two cups of coffee with lingering ease. On his last two visits he had been accompanied by his present companion, a swarthy Greek with sour eyes who ordered in a loud voice and gave vent to noisy sarcasm when anything was not to his taste.

It was chiefly the young man, though, who annoyed Charles Stuart. The young man's eyes followed Edna wherever she went, and on his last two



visits he had made unnecessary requests in order to bring her more often to his table.

"Good evening, girlie," Stuart heard him say to-night. "How's tricks?"

"O.K.," answered Edna formally. "What'll it be?"

"What have you?" smiled the young man. "Everything, eh? Well, what'd you recommend?"

Edna did not answer. Her eyes were staring straight over his head into some invisible distance.

He ordered finally at the urging of his companion. Edna withdrew and Stuart saw the young man turn and whisper to his friend, indicating Edna with his head.

Stuart shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He hated that young man and wished passionately that he would go away. It seemed as if his last night here, his last chance to watch Edna, and perhaps even in some blessed moment to talk to her a little, was marred by every moment this man stayed.

Half a dozen more people had drifted into the restaurant—two or three workmen, the newsdealer from over the way—and Edna was too busy for a few minutes to be bothered with attentions. Suddenly Charles Stuart became aware that the sour-eyed Greek had raised his hand and was beckoning him. Somewhat puzzled he left his desk and approached the table.

"Say, fella," said the Greek, "what time does the boss come in?"

"Why—two o'clock. Just a few minutes now."

"All right. That's all. I just wanted to speak to him about something."

Stuart realized that Edna was standing beside the table; both men turned toward her.

"Say, girlie," said the young man, "I want to talk to you. Sit down."

"I can't."

"Sure you can. The boss don't mind." He turned menacingly to Stuart. "She can sit down, can't she?"

Stuart did not answer.

"I say she can sit down, can't she?" said the young man more intently, and added, "Speak up, you little dummy."

Still Stuart did not answer. Strange blood currents were flowing all over his body. He was frightened; anything said determinedly had a way of frightening him. But he could not move.

"Sh!" said the Greek to his companion.

But the younger man was angered.

"Say," he broke out, "some time somebody's going to take a paste at you when you don't answer what they say. Go on back to your desk!"

Still Stuart did not move.

"Go on away!" repeated the young man in a dangerous voice. "Hurry up! Run!"

Then Stuart ran. He ran as hard as he was able. But instead of running away from the young man he ran toward him, stretching out his hands as he came near in a sort of straight arm that brought his two palms, with all the force of his hundred and thirty pounds, against his victim's face. With a crash of china the young man went over backward in his chair and, his head striking the edge of the next table, lay motionless on the floor.

The restaurant was in a small uproar. There was a terrified scream from Edna, an indignant protest from the Greek, and the customers arose with exclamations from their tables. Just at this moment the door opened and Mr. Cushmael came in.

"Why you little fool!" cried Edna wrathfully. "What are you trying to do? Lose me my job?"

"What's this?" demanded Mr. Cushmael, hurrying over. "What's the idea?"

"Mr. Stuart pushed a customer in the face!" cried a waitress, taking Edna's cue. "For no reason at all!"

The population of the restaurant had now gathered around the prostrate victim. He was doused thoroughly with water and a folded tablecloth was placed under his head.

"Oh, he did, did he?" shouted Mr. Cushmael in a terrible voice, seizing Stuart by the lapels of his coat.

"He's raving crazy!" sobbed Edna. "He was in jail last night for pushing a lady in the face. He told me so himself!"

A large laborer reached over and grasped Stuart's small trembling arm. Stuart gazed around dumbly. His mouth was quivering.

"Look what you done!" shouted Mr. Cushmael. "You like to kill a man."

Stuart shivered violently. His mouth opened and he fought the air for a moment. Then he uttered a half-articulate sentence:

"Only meant to push him in the face."

"Push him in the face?" ejaculated Cushmael in a frenzy. "So you got to be a pusher-in-the-face, eh? Well, we'll push your face right into jail!"

"I-I couldn't help it," gasped Stuart. "Sometimes I can't help it." His voice rose unevenly. "I guess I'm a dangerous man and you better take me and lock me up!" He turned wildly to Cushmael, "I'd push you in the face if he'd let go my arm. Yes, I would! I'd push you-right-in-the-face!"

For a moment an astonished silence fell, broken by the voice of one of the waitresses who had been groping under the table.

"Some stuff dropped out of this fella's back pocket when he tipped over," she explained, getting to her feet. "It's-why, it's a revolver and--"

She had been about to say handkerchief, but as she looked at what she was holding her mouth fell open and she dropped the thing quickly on the table. It was a small black mask about the size of her hand.

Simultaneously the Greek, who had been shifting uneasily upon his feet ever since the accident, seemed to remember an important engagement that had slipped his mind. He dashed suddenly around the table and made for the front door, but it opened just at that moment to admit several customers who, at the cry of "Stop him!" obligingly spread out their arms. Barred in that direction, he jumped an overturned chair, vaulted over the delicatessen counter, and set out for the kitchen, collapsing precipitately in the firm grasp of the chef in the doorway.

"Hold him! Hold him!" screamed Mr. Cushmael, realizing the turn of the situation. "They're after my cash drawer!"

Willing hands assisted the Greek over the counter, where he stood panting and gasping under two dozen excited eyes.

"After my money, hey?" shouted the proprietor, shaking his fist under the captive's nose.

The stout man nodded, panting.

"We'd of got it too!" he gasped, "if it hadn't been for that little pusher-in-the-face."

Two dozen eyes looked around eagerly. The little pusher-in-the-face had disappeared.

The beggar on the corner had just decided to tip the policeman and shut up shop for the night when he suddenly felt a small, somewhat excited hand fall on his shoulder.

"Help a poor man get a place to sleep--" he was beginning automatically when he recognized the little cashier from the restaurant. "Hello, brother," he added, leering up at him and changing his tone.

"You know what?" cried the little cashier in a strangely ominous tone. "I'm going to push you in the face!"

"What do you mean?" snarled the beggar. "Why, you Ga—"

He got no farther. The little man seemed to run at him suddenly, holding out his hands, and there was a sharp, smacking sound as the beggar came in contact with the sidewalk.

"You're a fakir!" shouted Charles Stuart wildly. "I gave you a dollar when I first came here, before I found out you had ten times as much as I had. And you never gave it back!"

A stout, faintly intoxicated gentleman who was strutting expansively along the other sidewalk had seen the incident and came running benevolently across the street.

"What does this mean!" he exclaimed in a hearty, shocked voice. "Why, poor fellow—" He turned indignant eyes on Charles Stuart and knelt unsteadily to raise the beggar.

The beggar stopped cursing and assumed a piteous whine.

"I'm a poor man, Cap'n—"

"This is—this is horrible!" cried the Samaritan, with tears in his eyes. "It's a disgrace! Police! Pol—!"

He got no farther. His hands, which he was raising for a megaphone, never reached his face—other hands reached his face, however, hands held stiffly out from a one-hundred-and-thirty-pound body! He sank down suddenly upon the beggar's abdomen, forcing out a sharp curse which faded into a groan.

"This beggar'll take you home in his car!" shouted the little man who stood over him. "He's got it parked around the corner."

Turning his face toward the hot strip of sky which lowered over the city the little man began to laugh, with amusement at first, then loudly and triumphantly until his high laughter ran out in the quiet street with a weird, elfish sound, echoing up the sides of the tall buildings, growing shriller and shriller until people blocks away heard its eerie cadence on the air and stopped to listen.

Still laughing the little man divested himself of his coat and then of his vest and hurriedly freed his neck of tie and collar. Then he spat upon his hands and with a wild, shrill, exultant cry began to run down the dark street.

He was going to clean up New York, and his first objective was the disagreeable policeman on the corner!

They caught him at two o'clock, and the crowd which had joined in the chase were flabbergasted when they found that the ruffian was only a weeping little man in his shirt sleeves. Someone at the station house was

wise enough to give him an opiate instead of a padded cell, and in the morning he felt much better.

Mr. Cushmael, accompanied by an anxious young lady with crimson hair, called at the jail before noon.

"I'll get you out," cried Mr. Cushmael, shaking hands excitedly through the bars. "One policeman, he'll explain it all to the other."

"And there's a surprise for you too," added Edna softly, taking his other hand. "Mr. Cushmael's got a big heart and he's going to make you his day man now."

"All right," agreed Charles Stuart calmly. "But I can't start till tomorrow."

"Why not?"

"Because this afternoon I got to go to a matinee—with a friend."

He relinquished his employer's hand but kept Edna's white fingers twined firmly in his.

"One more thing," he went on in a strong, confident voice that was new to him, "if you want to get me off don't have the case come up in the 35th Street court."

"Why not?"

"Because," he answered with a touch of swagger in his voice, "that's the judge I had when I was arrested last time."

"Charles," whispered Edna suddenly, "what would you do if I refused to go with you this afternoon?"

He bristled. Color came into his cheeks and he rose defiantly from his bench.

"Why, I'd—I'd—"

"Never mind," she said, flushing slightly. "You'd do nothing of the kind."

#### Notes

Written in Great Neck in March 1924. Also, the story was syndicated by the Metro Newspaper Service; it was included in *The Cream of the Jug*, a 1927 humor anthology; and it was made into a movie in 1929. This story reads like a movie scenario, and maybe it was intended as one.