

ROMANCE OF A JAIL BORN INVENTION

THE INGENUITY WHICH WON A WIFE AND MADE A FORTUNE FROM BEHIND PRISON BARS

CHARLES F. FLOR

MR. FLOR'S BLINDSTITCHING DEVICE

ONE NIGHT HE SAW IN IMAGINATION HIS MOTHER HEMMING A GARMENT WITH THE HEM TURNED OVER HER FINGER

IN the story of Charles Flor, five times sentenced to State prison for burglary, and now free, prosperous and happily married to a young woman, is a lesson with a significant moral. Mr. Flor is forty-two. When a fatherless lad he was sent to State prison charged with robbing a store. He was really innocent, he always maintained, but sentence was irrevocable and years of shame followed. Long association with a prison full of hardened convicts made him a criminal, and he left the grim institution well schooled in the monstrosities of crime. Burglars had taught him how to rob dwellings and stores with little chance of getting caught, they said.

Young and impressionable, he in time had every phase of accomplished rascality at his fingers' end. He was an orphan, deserted, helpless, alone in the world and already branded a criminal. Still, with a bit of heaven's own nature in his heart, the boy resolved to live honestly, and he went to work. Possessed of unusual talent for mechanical problems, he soon found a berth to his liking, and his employer considered him invaluable.

Indeed, the man boasted of his great good luck, called Flor a jewel and a prize, and things went well until one day a customer from out of town dropped in, and gave a startled glance at the young man, and whispered:—"I see you have a convict in your employ. Make inquiries and you will find he has done time for burglary."

So They Didn't Want Him.
The young man was promptly discharged. Then bitterness and revenge entered his soul. "If the world doesn't want me honest, and it insists that I am a burglar, then I'll be one. I can't starve."
Such was the logic, the lesson and the moral of one man's early experience with his fellow men.

One night an honored citizen thought he heard a noise somewhere in his house, proceeded to investigate. He was almost as frightened as the burglar when he ran against him in the darkness. After a desperate encounter, with pistol shots and screams from women, help came, lights were turned on and then half the town held its breath and gasped:—"Why, it's our neighbor, Charles Flor, as sure as I live! Can we believe our eyes? Why did he do it?" cried a dozen women in one voice.

This explains how the young man, without a home, became a "professional," this time a full fledged burglar. They wouldn't let him earn an honest living, so the State had to support him.

Between intervals of imprisonment he worked hard and became an expert machinist. While employed by one of the best known sewing machine companies in the country he turned toward inventions and saw many ways of improving the machines. He kept his ideas to himself, and was convinced that if a blind stitch machine could be invented and made practical there would be a fortune for the inventor. But it would take years of experimenting and much ready money to take out patents in the different countries of the world in case the machine proved a success. It was this burning desire to get money that caused him to again think of burglary.

Ten Years of Jersey Justice.
His last and final sentence of ten years was for robbing a store in Shiloh, Cumberland county, N. J., to get money to patent a new invention, he said. But his plea cut no figure with Jersey justice. The jury pronounced him guilty and the Judge gave him a ten years' sentence. The old prison was waiting for him. There was almost excitement among the professionals when the convict's secret telegraph code brought word that Flor was coming back again.

It was his fifth appearance in the great criminal fortress at Trenton. Everybody knew him and welcomed him—keepers, prisoners and all. The contractor who pays for using the convicts of the State in manufacturing clothing greeted him heartily, for his great skill was known, and almost immediately he was made superintendent of the sewing machines of the shops.

This gave him the run of the prison wards, and but for the fact that he could not leave the institution when he pleased he had almost as much liberty as any workman outside. He was familiar with the intricacies of the machines and could set one up and run it in his sleep, it was said.

In talking with the contractor one day the subject of a blind stitching device came up, and he was encouraged to devote himself exclusively to that problem. One night he saw in imagination a mother hemming a garment with the hem turned over her finger. In an instant, like a flash from the sky, came the solution to the problem that had baffled sewing machine inventors for half a century. Neither Howe, Singer nor any of the great experts could devise a plan for making blind stitch that would be secure and yet show no thread on the face side of the fabric.

The Blind Stitch.
It is the kind of a machine stitch wanted for sewing the bottoms of trouser legs. With such a machine working as rapidly as an ordinary sewing machine, two men would be able to do the work of twenty-five tailors finishing trouser leg bottoms in the old fashioned way by hand.

sewing, not only on trousers legs, but on all kinds of skirts, dresses and other material requiring that special kind of sewing.

Flor not only did this, and with the ordinary straight sewing machine needle, but he made a device that alters the stitch from an ordinary lock stitch to a criss-cross stitch for facing down a seam, as on the bottom of trousers legs. It presents a row of little triangles. This was achieved by a cam geared to the needle bar, throwing it to one side and then the other between stitches. By merely turning a thumbscrew the stitch is altered at the will of the operator.

To say that the news of this invention created a stir in the big prison but faintly expresses it. The contractor was wild with joy. Prison officials said they saw fortune and fame for the distinguished prisoner. He, of course, was pleased, but being a strong, self-contained man by nature he did not waste any time in vain flights of imagination, but wanted a patent at once. It is said that a certain official, with a contractor, formed a little syndicate for promoting the invention, and the inventor was assured that a patent would be procured as soon as possible.

Tried to Steal His Patent.
As the story is told down in Trenton, Mr. Flor, after waiting an unusually long time, made inquiries about the cause of the delay. He was told that it was all right; that his patent had been applied for and that his interests were being carefully looked after—all would be well in a few days.

At last, tired of waiting, he dropped a line to headquarters and learned that no such machine appeared on the records in his name, asking for a patent, but that there was such a machine in another man's name, said to be interested in contact enterprise.

This opened Flor's eyes and made him think that there were some people out of prison as criminal as the convicts within bars.

Then he opened correspondence with a Fifth avenue patent lawyer and made application for a patent covering the points in his machine. These curious facts have played a strong part in increasing Mr. Flor's bad opinion of mankind unshackled and running at large.

Of course there is a woman in the case—a young, handsome one, of course—and the romance that hangs over this portion

of the story like sunshine and dew, is thus narrated:—
The inventor's aunt, who lived just across the street from the big prison, had a lovely young woman visiting her family, who had met Flor before his sentence. Often when the aunt made the regulation visit to her nephew she was accompanied by this mademoiselle. Her soft eyes rested sympathetically upon the prisoner, who, by the way, is a fine looking man, bearing none of the marks of a prison bird. He has a Roman nose, like Julius Caesar, a flashing dark eye, blazing with resolution and good health, so the young lady could not be blamed for doing what thousands of

other women have done—falling in love. Probably no institution in the country is managed better than the Trenton Prison. The rules are strictly enforced, and the discipline is absolute. For a young woman to think of tip-toeing into that fortress half a dozen times a day, or even once a week, with Cupid's little arrows hidden under her wraps, was impossible, if not absurd.

But, "love finds a way," the poet says, and the quotation seems to work in New Jersey as well as elsewhere.

This is the way they did it. How simple it seems. Flor had a little workshop bench perched up against one of the grated windows overlooking the street, where his aunt lived.

His sewing machine work was punctuated with little billet-doux written on scraps of paper, full of love and glorious sentiment. These he tossed out the window. The young lady opened them, read them, thanked heaven that the Lord had made her such a man, then hoisted a big blackboard, and, with a piece of chalk, wrote music and heart songs on it. Then she held it up in the sunlight for her prison lover to read.

It took him about two seconds to read a whole blackboard of love declarations. It was easy to throw kisses back and forth and then toss out more written messages. Thus the golden hours melted and vanished. The long, long days seemed of about ten minutes' duration. Flor did the best work of his life. His machinery took on new form, and there were improvements every week.

The patents were not for those sweet finishing touches, but for the unique principles involved in the blind stitch. So they were put in as love's overweight. An early marriage was promised and repromised, and the young lady prayed long and earnestly for the early release of her young genius in the law's big tomb.

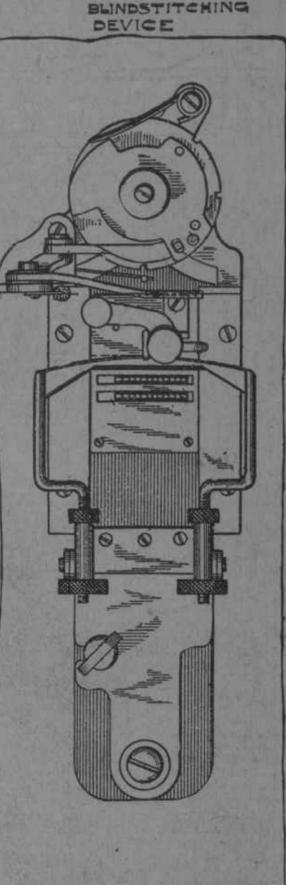
A Massachusetts poet says that all the forces of nature hasten to help the man who helps himself. When Flor's Fifth avenue patent lawyer turned up on the scene you could have knocked down a giant contractor with a pin, so to speak. Profuse apologies were in order, and the inventor was assured that there was no thought of robbing him of his patent. As he was in prison, his chances were not so good as a man's on the outside, free and loaded with money.

The intention was to secure the patent and give him the full benefit of it in the settlement. This explanation caused several eyes to wink, but Flor saw that he was helpless, and by advice proceeded to make terms and close the incident. There were handshakings all round, though inwardly the curses were loud and deep.



EVERY PHASE OF ACCOMPLISHED RASCALITY AT HIS FINGER ENDS

LITTLE BILLETDOUX WRITTEN ON SCRAPS OF PAPER, FULL OF LOVE AND GLORIOUS SENTIMENT



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Romance of Caliph and Miss Murphy at the Zoo.

PETER is Miss Murphy's eighth. The advent was marked by the usual anxiety in the manager's office at Central Park. Miss Murphy's known sensitiveness is too acute to allow of any great ceremony. Keepers Donahue, Snyder and Hurlick, whose knowledge of animal lore extends to the innermost confidences of their numerous jungle friends, displayed the usual concern for Miss Murphy; but when, at eight o'clock to the minute on the night of July 12, Peter appeared on the surface of the water at the side of his proud mother there was great rejoicing.

Indeed, by the light of the incandescents it was readily seen that the little hippopotamus was a robust and healthy youngster. His first faint whimper jarred the stone foundations and upset the nerves of Miss Murphy most completely. That she was concerned no one doubted. Miss Murphy expressed this concern by a "w-o-o-o-o-f-f-f" that rolled in awful volume from the lion house, where it was taken on the breeze and allowed to reverbate with growing force till lost beyond the Palisades of the Hudson.

Now when Miss Murphy "woofs" there is only one thing to equal it. That is the story of the violence caused by the dynamite guns of the Vesuvius, which coughed those earthquakes into the harbor of Santiago during the Spanish-American war.

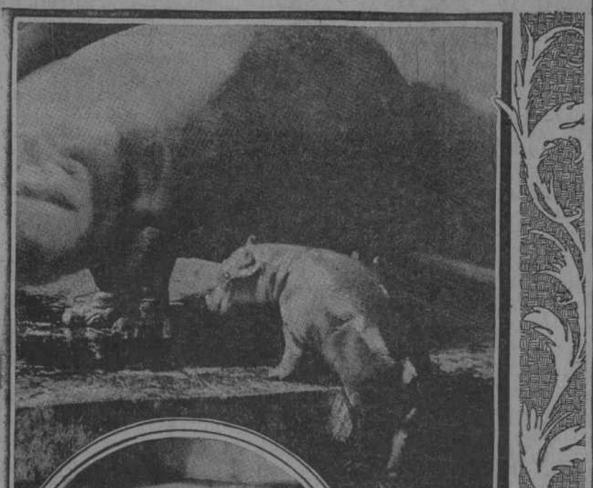
Peter was born very timid. Had he seen Hurlick, the keeper, watching him closely from a corner he might have shown some fright. With the help of Miss Murphy he got upon one of the stone steps and looked upon Caliph, who opened his mouth with a huge smile at the dainty pink thing he could call his own. When Caliph opens his mouth the draught is likened to one of the winds which go down the ages. Peter saw it coming and fled with evident alarm to the side of his mother. That excellent lady smiled sardonically upon the now crestfallen Caliph, and with evident joy commented:—

"He evidently doesn't think much of you."

That settled Caliph for the day. He had got more than he bargained for in the early morning, but this last display of sarcasm was too much for him.

"Really, I don't know why they make all this fuss over me," said Miss Murphy, when she had recovered her composure and good nature, "unless it is the fact, which is undisputed, that my babies are the only ones ever born in captivity in this country, and perhaps the world. I guess it's about twelve years ago since I came here. I met that august gentleman named Caliph (this with a sneer) and he courted me instantly. If I could really tell you the nonsense he poured into my dainty ear it would make you sick. He said that he had never seen such a beautiful girl."

"He said my lips were like cherries and that I had the neck of a swan. I was young and fickle in those days and he loved him. After my first baby was born I began to understand Caliph better. He never was really companionable. The greed he displayed at our meals was quite



MISS MURPHY WAITING TO BE SNAPPED.

PETER FEELS SAFE AT HIS MOTHER'S SIDE.



CALIPH HAS BEEN PHOTOGRAPHED FREQUENTLY.

in contrast with his meek and humble nature at the table when he was telling me that I was the only girl he had ever loved. During that period there never was a moment when he failed to sort out for me the choicest carrots."

She continued:—"That was so long ago that I can hardly remember, and it's best to forget disagreeable things, don't you think? Well, anyway, we have lived in a sort of peace these

stand a few of them have been earning an excellent livelihood as acrobats in the big circuses. Each time I make an awful fuss when my child is taken away, but it seems to be the rule here, and the reason is quite obvious, for our quarters are limited and Caliph does require so much room."

Miss Murphy snickered so audibly that Caliph stirred uneasily.

"Yes," she said; "Caliph is getting robust. I have often told him to diet, but he insists that it is fashionable on the Congo to become robust in the summer of life. Well, I suppose they will allow me to keep Peter until he is old enough to look out for himself. But, really, did you ever see such a bright boy? He is the very image of his mother, the beautiful child."

Caliph had been listening with no little amusement. He could not contain himself any longer. He just had to roar, and the earth trembled once more.

"See the brute!" screamed Miss Murphy. "He thinks he is amusing. Oh, but I would like to have him here for an instant. I'd make him laugh on the other few yards of his face."

Miss Murphy retired, but not before she heard Caliph grunt:—"She takes all of the credit."

Peter is now five weeks old, and a bright little fellow he has become. He has been visited by many thousands of people in New York and his fame has extended to many nearby cities. No more does Miss Murphy thresh about her quarters and attempt to douse the visitors with water. She has grown accustomed to the many

Some of the Re-ords.
As he was just leaving for Europe, he would only make a brief statement, as follows:—

"In April, 1901, Mr. Charles F. Flor engaged me as a patent solicitor, to apply for United States patents upon his ingenious and valuable blind stitch sewing machine. He first requested me in Trenton, where I would transact his patent business for him the same as I would for any other, regardless of his position.

"Since that time I have obtained patent rights in about thirty different countries and have gained his claims in the United States, and sold, as agent, his patent rights in Great Britain as soon as the patent was issued, for \$25,000 cash and the same amount in the stock of the purchasing foreign company.

"I had no objection to acting as a solicitor for one in his position, for I thoroughly believe in assisting such a one to make a new start in life and to be benefited to his fellow man through a valuable invention. If all had refused to act for him before the Patent Office, what chance could he have had to reform through his invention?"

According to the Patent Office records, Emilie W. Oppenheim, on February 6, 1897, filed an application in Washington for a blind stitch sewing machine. The specifications covered several pages of printed matter, and are dated Boston, Mass., January 30, 1897. Four years later the patent was granted, January 22, 1901, to Mr. Oppenheim as inventor. Number of patent, 666,381.

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Then a company of three Trenton business men was formed to buy the inventor's rights and promote the machine, also to take out patents in other countries—Charles Scudder, Richard Barlow and Samuel Gaston. These gentlemen capitalists paid Flor \$10,000 spot cash for a two-thirds interest in the machine and patents, leaving him one-third as a future income.

But better than all was their promise to secure a pardon for the inventor. True to their word, the gentlemen went to work, showed the Board of Pardons how valuable the man was to the State, by making a machine enabling two men to do the work of twenty-five, thus increasing the revenue of prison labor.

A Question of Trousers.
In other words, make twelve pairs of trousers blossom where but one blossomed before. The strongest kind of influence was brought to bear in his behalf. Men of reputation and probity became interested, and presently Mr. Flor walked out of the Trenton State Prison a free man, though he had nearly two years yet to serve.

He showed the sincerity of his faith by making a bee line for his sweetheart and renewing his sentiments of loyalty and love for the finest woman in New Jersey or any other State.

Although she had been an ardent worker, her interest did not cool when she found her sweetheart really free. She even loved him more intensely than ever, and in that healthiest of months, January, 1903, they were married. All the town rejoiced, and Mr. Flor showed wisdom in making a solemn promise to himself to remain here in Trenton, establish himself and become a good citizen. For this determination his friends congratulated him.

Why He Loves Trenton.
Mr. Flor was wise because the people of that city knew his record, knew that he had won distinction as an inventor and had taken a lovely young woman for his wife, so he was reconciled to the town and the town was reconciled to him. On the other hand, had he gone to the thriving city of Newark, for instance, people would have said, "There goes the former convict; look at him," and he would have felt that he was not overwhelmingly wanted, and would have met repulse on every hand.

"In Trenton people are proud of him, and honest men and women welcome his reform and resolution, so this man of forty-two, with an eventful life behind him, is deep in New Jersey clover. Having sold out his sewing machine patents, which cover fourteen countries in South America and Europe, he is able to live like a gentleman.

He has become interested in a new invention for burning gas with a new kind of mantle, said to leave every other mantle in the shade. His offices are in Trenton's new crack skyscraper, the tallest building in the State, overlooking the great canal, the churches and the suburbs of ancient Bordertown.

In view of the above story I called on Mr. Flor's lawyer, Mr. Edward P. Thompson, No. 156 Fifth avenue, for explanations. He did not remember hearing that any other person had patented the machine six or seven years ago. He had received thousands of specifications since that time, and it would be difficult, he said, to give the facts without referring to his files.

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