

FANNY FERN

Fanny Fern (real name Sara Payson Willis, 1811–72) was the first woman newspaper columnist in the United States. Her popularity encouraged her to take on controversial social issues such as women’s rights, prostitution, and prison reform. She had a clear, biting style; as Nathaniel Hawthorne admiringly put it, “The woman writes as if the devil was in her.” The sister of author-editor Nathaniel Parker Willis, she portrayed him satirically in her novel Ruth Hall (1855) in retaliation for his lack of support for her earlier writing efforts, when she was scraping by as a seamstress. Here she shows sympathy for working women, while illuminating an overlooked corner of New York’s mercantile Ladies’ Mile culture.

TYRANTS OF THE SHOP

THERE ARE PERSONS who can regard oppression and injustice without any acceleration of the pulse. There are others who never witness it, how frequent soever, without a desperate struggle against non-interference, though prudence and policy may both whisper “it’s none of your business.” I believe, as a general thing, that the shopkeepers of New York who employ girls and women to tend in their stores, treat them courteously; but now and then I have been witness to such brutal language to them, in the presence of customers, for that which seemed to me no offence, or at least a very trifling one, that I have longed for a man’s strong right arm, summarily to settle matters with the oppressor. And when one has been the innocent cause of it, merely by entering the store to make a purchase, the obligation to see the victim safe through, seems almost imperative. The bad policy of such an exhibition of unmanliness on the part of a shopkeeper would be, one would think, sufficient to stifle the “damn you” to the blushing, tearful girl, who is powerless to escape, or to clear herself from the charge of misbehavior. When ladies “go shopping,” in New York, they generally expect to enjoy themselves; though Heaven knows, they must be hard

Are you receiving Story of the Week each week?

Sign up now at storyoftheweek.loa.org to receive our weekly alert
so you won’t miss a single story!

up for resources to fancy this mode of spending their time, when it can be avoided. But, be that as it may, the most vapid can scarcely fancy this sort of scene.

The most disgusting part of such an exhibition is, when the gentlemanly employer, having got through “damning” his embarrassed victim, turns, with a sweet smile and dulcet voice, to yourself, and inquires, “what else he can have the pleasure of showing you?” You are tempted to reply, “Sir, I would like you to show me that you can respect womanhood, although it may not be hedged about with fine raiment, or be able to buy civil words with a full purse.” But you bite your tongue to keep it quiet, and you linger till this Nero has strolled off, and then you say to the girl, “I am sorry to have been the innocent cause of this!” and you ask, “Does he often speak this way to you?” and she says, quietly, as she rolls up the ribbons or replaces the boxes on the shelves, “Never in any other!” It is useless to ask her why she stays, because you know something about women’s wages and women’s work in the crowded city; and you know that, till she is sure of another place, it is folly for her to think of leaving this. And you think many other things as you say Good-morning to her as kindly as you know how; and you turn over this whole “woman-question” as you run the risk of being knocked down and run over in the crowded thoroughfare through which you pass; and the jostle, and hurry, and rush about you, seem to make it more hopeless as each eager face passes you, intent on its own plans, busy with its own hopes and fears—staggering perhaps under a load either of the soul or body, or both, as heavy as the poor shop-girl’s, and you gasp as if the air about had suddenly become too thick to breathe. And then you reach your own door-step, and like a guilty creature, face your dressmaker, having forgotten to “match that trimming;” and you wonder if you were to sit down and write about this evil, if it would deter even one employer from such brutality to the shop-girls in his employ; not because of the brutality, perhaps, but because by such a short-sighted policy, he might often drive away from his store, ladies who would otherwise be profitable and steady customers.