

Literary Selections.

THE CONVICT'S TALE.

In the gloomy cell of the condemned were two persons. A muscular and powerfully-made man, heavily ironed, sat on a low bench placed in the corner. At a glance an observer would have pronounced him a native of Ireland. His head was well-formed, and covered with a thick mass of curling hair, of a light brown colour. The form of his mouth indicated courage and decision, and in the large blue eyes there was a thrilling expression of suffering and despair, which is never seen among the hardened in crime. It seemed as if the overburdened spirit looked forth from those mirrors of the soul, and in his extremity asked sympathy and consolation from those among whom his fearful lot was cast.

His companion was a Catholic priest, the tones of whose voice, as he spoke in soothing accents to the condemned, were soft and clear as those of a woman.

The prisoner spoke, and his voice sounded dull and hollow. Hope was extinguished in his soul, and all the lighter inflections which express the varied emotions stirring within us, had ceased to vary the monotonous sound which issued from his lips. A few more hours, and for him Time would have ceased to revolve.—What then had he to do with human aspirations—with human joys? Nothing; his fate on earth was known: an outlaw's life—a felon's death!

Can we credit the great truth that a Divine architect modelled the form from which earthly hands are about to thrust forth the subtle tenant by violence, and yet proceed in the unholy purpose? Yea, those who would be shocked at the imputation of religious infidelity, do this without scruple, though the Christian commandment is, "Judge not, lest ye be judged." One would have supposed that the execution of Christ by human hands would have struck so great a horror throughout the whole believing world, that henceforth such a form of punishment would have been forever abolished. Spite of the doctrine preached by Him, of "Peace and good-will to all men," we still cling to the bloody Mosaic law, as if society could not protect itself without the utter sacrifice of a guilt-stained and despairing creature, whose horror of his approaching doom paralyses the soul, and renders the sense dull to the promises of mercy in a future world, which is denied him in this. The prisoner folded his manacled hands over his breast, and said:

"Why should I seek to prolong my wretched existence by asking such a commutation of my sentence? Death is but one pang, whereas solitary confinement for life, to which I should probably be doomed, would be a living torture. To live forever alone! Think what that must be even to a man innocent of crime, and feel how far worse than the bed of Procrustes it must be to one like me. No, holy father, let me die before the time appointed by nature.—Thus let the tender mercies of my race toward me be consummated."

"You are reckless, my son," said the priest, mildly. "Think how far worse it will be to face an offended Judge in your present mood, than to live for repentance."

"Repentance!" repeated the prisoner, in the same passionless manner; "that is ever the jargon of your cloth, father; you condemn a man without adverting to the motives, which in his view, often sanctify the act."

The priest looked at him rebukingly. As if the slumbering energies of his impetuous nature were suddenly aroused by that look, the prisoner started from his seat; his pale features glowed; his eyes sparkled with fury as he exclaimed; "Yes, I would again trample the life out of the wretch who murdered my love with deception and ill-treatment, with as little awe, with less compunction than if he had planted his dagger in her heart."

He covered his face with his hands, and large tears fell over them. Passionless as he was, the priest was touched by this overwhelming emotion in one who had hitherto been so passive. He laid his hand on the sufferer's arm, and kindly said—"Tell me, my son, how it was."

Melting beneath the voice of friendly sympathy, the murderer wept like a child. When he became calmer, he said:

I will give you the history of my life, and you may judge me.

I was born on a wild and rock-bound portion of the coast of Ireland. My father was at the head of a small and wretchedly-built village, whose inhabitants were all, with one exception, wreckers. You have heard of those lawless and hardened men who exist on the spoils of unfortunate mariners, whose destruction is often brought about through means of false lights placed as beacons of safety. Fit parentage, you will say, for the murderer!

My mother died before I can remember her; and the school-master of the Parish was the only one who ever spoke to me of higher and nobler pursuits than those followed by my father's adherents. The Dominie was a poor creature, whose necessities compelled him to abide in our neighborhood, though his moral sense was greatly shocked at the crimes which were often perpetrated around him. He fancied that he discovered some superiority in me to the other urchins who were taught to read in his turf-built hovel, and many hours did he employ in endeavoring to impress upon my young mind the great evil of spending a life in such a pursuit as that to which I seemed destined. The good man died while I was yet a mere child, and I soon forgot his lectures. The school-room was abandoned for the ocean, and I grew up a promising pupil of my father's wild occupation. Young, buoyant, full of activity, I was ardently attached to the adventurous life I led. My moral perceptions were not active, and there was a keen delight in dashing through the surf, when the billows threatened each moment to engulf my boat, in pursuit of the wealth the greedy waves seemed eager to claim as their prey.

I cannot deny that in this absorbing object the shrieks of drowning wretches were too often unheeded, while we appropriated their property; but I can truly say that I was never deaf to the voice of entreaty, and frequently drew on myself the anger of my father by saving those whose claims on his spoils sometimes seriously interfered with the profits of the expedition. He never, however, refused to relinquish property thus claimed; for he was exceedingly desirous of allowing no serious cause of complaint to reach the ears of those who might make him feel the strong arm of authority, even in the out-of-the-way place in which he had fixed his residence. At an early age I considered myself as having no superior in my wild occupation. The strong energies of my nature had no other outlet. For days I would remain alone on the ocean, with the storm careering around my frail boat, and at such times my restless soul would look into the Future, and ask of Fate if such was ever to be my lot. My thoughts often soared beyond the limited horizon of my home, and I made several excursions among the cities of my native island; but I was glad to return to my wild retreat. Uncouth in manner and appearance, ignorant of the conventional forms of society, I keenly felt my inferiority to the only class among whom I would have deigned to dwell. After such humiliation I enjoyed a fiercer pleasure in my solitary excursions on the deep.

I cannot say that my life was passed without excess. In such a home as mine, that would have been impossible. The frequent brawl, the wassail-bowl and drunken revel, were almost of nightly occurrence; and I was fast sinking into the mere robber and inebriate, when an event occurred which rescued me for a time from the abyss on the brink of which I was standing.

He paused, as if nerving himself for what was to follow, and the priest gazed with strong interest on his features, over which swept many wild emotions, occasionally softened by a gleam of tenderer feeling. He at length proceeded:

One evening, in the stormy month of March, a ship was seen from our lookout, drifting at the mercy of the winds and waves. The sky was a mass of leaden clouds, and the sun, as it sank from view, threw a lurid glare over the angry waters, such as one might fancy to arise from the deepest abyss of Hades. My father

ordered the false light to be shown, which had already brought swift destruction on many a gallant bark. I knew not why, but my heart was interested in the fate of this gallant vessel, and I opposed his commands.

"Are you mad?" said he, sternly; do you not see that this is a ship of the largest class, and the spoils must be great?"

"But her decks are crowded with human beings," said I, lowering the glass through which I had been surveying her; "and there are many women among them. Put not up the false light, I conjure you. If she founders, the spoils are legitimately yours, but—"

Even as I spoke the baleful light streamed far up into the rapidly darkening air; a private signal had been given to one of his men, and it was now too late to remonstrate. I rushed to my boat, calling on a boy who sometimes accompanied me on such occasions, to follow. One glance at the ship assured me that in five minutes she would be on the sunken rock over which the light gleamed, and no human power could prevent her from instantly going to pieces. My boat had weathered many a storm as severe as this threatened to be, and I was fearless as to the result. I resolved to die, or save some of the helpless creatures I had seen on the deck of the doomed ship. A whistle brought a large Newfoundland dog to my side, and in a very short time I was launched on the waves of the heaving ocean. My father nodded approvingly to me, thinking that I had made up my mind to assist as usual in rescuing our game from the waves.

"Right, my boy!" said he, through his speaking trumpet; "all you save to-night shall belong to yourself alone."

I was borne beyond the reach of his voice, and as I turned my face toward the ship, there came a violent burst of thunder which seemed to fill the echoing vault of heaven, attended by a continual flashing of lightning. Mingled with its awful roar was a cry more terrible still, that of human agony uttering its wild appeal to heaven for mercy in the last dire extremity. The ship had struck, and hundreds were cast into the ocean. The struggling wretches vainly raised their arms from the foaming waters, and implored help from those who could have saved them had they so willed it. The boats passed on and left them to their fate.

Having only myself and the boy to propel my boat, we did not reach the scene of action so soon as the rest. As I came within speaking distance, my father shouted to me to save a large box which was within reach of my boat-hooks, but I was deaf to his voice. Also near me were two of the unfortunate persons who had been shipwrecked. A man, with a female form clasped to his breast, was feebly struggling with the waves. I saw that his strength was nearly exhausted, and that before I could reach him, both must sink. Then came my noble dog to my assistance. I pointed to the sinking forms; Hector sprang into the water, and swam to the side of the unfortunates; he seized the dress of the lady, made an effort to sustain both against the force of the raging waters, and turned a piteous glance on me as he felt their united weight too much for his strength. "Courage, old fellow!" I shouted, and made a desperate plunge with my boat to reach them. The impetus of the rising billow sent me past them. The father, for such I knew him to be, with sublime self-sacrifice relaxed his hold, and turning his death pale face toward me, uttered some words which were lost amid the howling of the blast, and sank forever from my sight. Relieved of the double weight, Hector now gallantly struck out for my boat, and in a short space of time I had drawn the senseless girl from the waves. I wrapped her in my sailor's jacket, and used every means in my power to restore her. A few drops of brandy, from a small flask I carried in my pocket, brought a faint shade of color to her cheeks and lips, and presently she unclosed her eyes and gazed wildly around. With a shudder she again closed them, and seemed to relapse into insensibility.

"She must have immediate attention or she will perish!" I exclaimed, and I bent vigorously to the oar. Barney steered, and I never for an instant raised my eyes from the sweet pale face before me, until my boat grated on the strand.

Never have I seen so purely beautiful a countenance as was hers. It seemed to me to be the mortal vesture chosen by one of the angels of heaven to express to earthly souls all the attributes of the children of light. She was fair as the lily which has just unfolded its stainless leaves to the kisses of the sun, with hair of a bright golden hue clinging in damp curls around her slender form. Her eyes were of the color of the cloudless summer heaven, and the pale lips were so exquisitely cut that a sculptor might have been proud to copy them for his *beau ideal* of human loveliness. I gazed, and worshipped this creature rescued by myself from the jaws of destruction. Hitherto I had thought little of love. The specimens of the female sex in our rough settlement were, as may be supposed, not of a very attractive description. Coarse, uneducated, toil-worn women, and girls who promised in a few years to emulate their mothers in homeliness, possessed no charms for me. It is true, that in my occasional visits to the more civilized portions of my country, I saw many of the beautiful and gently nurtured, but they were placed so far above me that it would have seemed as rational to become enamored of the fairest star in heaven, and think to make it mine. But this lovely girl had been rescued by me; her life had been my gift, and she seemed of right to belong to me. All, save herself, had perished in the wreck; she was probably alone in the world, and I hugged to my soul the hope that in me, her preserver, she would find father, brother, lover, all united.

My thoughts were interrupted by the voice of my father, who had just landed with a boat-load of bales and boxes.

"How is this, Erlon?" he thundered. "Have you again dared to save life, and neglect the object of our expedition? Fool! you will be driven forth as a drone from the hive. The girl's dead; throw her into the sea; she will be a dainty morsel for the sharks."

The girl raised her head as he spoke, and cast a wild look around her.

"Father! oh, where is my father?" said she, in a piercing tone. "Oh, God, let me die!" and she clasped her hands over her eyes as if to shut out the vision of the swarthy, reckless looking men who pressed forward to gaze upon her.

"Hear her prayer," said the old man, brutally; "in with her at once! we want no witnesses against us of this night's work."

He stepped forward as if to put his threat into execution. She shivered, and shrank beneath the covering I had placed around her.—I arose, and stepping between them, said—

"You must first throw me in; for, by the heaven above us, we both go together! I have your own promise for all I succeeded in saving, and I claim this wail as my own."

"Be it so," said he, sneeringly; "I always knew you to be an idiot. A profitable adventure, truly, this is likely to prove to you."

"I am satisfied with it at all events," I replied, and he strode away. I then turned to the young girl, and said in as soft a tone as I could command:

"Fear nothing, beautiful being. I am rough in appearance, but my heart is in the right place. I will protect you. I will be to you a friend."

"Am I then alone?" she asked, in an accent of indescribable anguish. "Oh, why did you not suffer me to perish with the rest? Wretched wretched Alice! to survive all that loved her!"

"Not all, lady, for I am here," I said, naively.

"You! I know you not; all—all have perished. Forgive me," she continued, seeing the blank expression of my countenance. "I know not what I say. The wretched are excusable."

"Ah!" I replied with fervor, "I am too happy in being made the instrument of serving such a being as you are to take any offence at words wrung from the overburdened heart. Come with me, fair Alice, and I will place you in a place of safety." I conducted her to the cottage of an old woman, who had been my nurse. Though rough and frightful, she was kindly in her nature, and I knew would do anything to oblige me.

The narrator paused, arose, and rapidly paced the floor, his hands nervously working, and the