

Literary Selections.

THE CONVICT'S TALE.

(Concluded.)

Among the things cast on shore from the ship was a box of Mr. Crawford's treasured books, and to them I added such modern works as were most congenial to the taste of Alice. I have mentioned that my education had not proceeded much beyond its first elements, and now for the first time did I begin to appreciate the intense enjoyment found in literary pursuits. I studied deeply, and was soon competent to converse with my mistress on the beauties of her favorite authors. We then read together, and I sought, while reading aloud the impassioned strains of the poet, to express by various intonations of my voice, the tender and soul-thrilling emotions with which my listener inspired me; for I felt when near her an ineffable satisfaction, as if the soul had found its better part, and the being that was needed to complete my existence was beside me. A holy calm prevailed my whole being—springing not from the dull listlessness which falls over the stupid or inert, but from the fullness of content. The assurance that I was making myself daily more worthy to claim this beloved girl as my own, spread through my soul a delicious, all-prevailing sense of uninterrupted happiness. No man, however rough, could thus associate with a delicate and refined woman without acquire some of the elegance which distinguished her. I imperceptibly lost the clownish air which had so often bitterly mortified me; and as my preceptions became more acute, I saw in my own manners all that could render me repulsive, and hastened to correct it.

Ah! if Alice would then have married me, all the horror, all the wretchedness which has ensued might have been avoided! But I must not anticipate.

Eighteen months passed thus, and again I urged Alice to listen to my prayers for an immediate union. She replied:

"The time has now arrived when I can express to you the scruples which still fill my mind. Your preceptions are now so correct that I believe you will feel with me that it is wrong for you to retain the wealth your father's pursuit enabled him to accumulate."

"I have thought of this," said I, "but how could it possibly be returned to its rightful owners? Besides, much of it is legally the right of those who rescued it from the ocean at the risk of life. All was not purchased at so fearful a price as when you—"

She interrupted me gently:—"It matters not how obtained, Erlon, its possession will bring with it a curse. I cannot consent to enjoy property, the loss of which, perhaps, consummated the ruin of the rightful owners. You might think, perhaps, that for nearly two years past I have very quietly submitted to this, but the object I had in view in rescuing a human being, capable of better things, from such a life, was my motive; and to my mind it seemed good. But now we must leave this place. Your duty leads you to a higher sphere, where you must seek the means of a more honorable support. While you do this, I will obtain a home among the Sisters of Charity in Dublin, and in acts of mercy and kindness pass the time until you are in circumstances to claim me as your wife."

"No, no, dear Alice, you must not expose yourself to such privations as are endured by those excellent women. I will go forth and seek independence, but you must remain with my good Elspeth; she loves me as a mother, and will watch over you for my sake."

"I cannot remain when you leave," said Alice, quietly, but decisively.

I pressed her so earnestly for her reason, and opposed her wish to go so strongly, that she at length said with great reluctance;

"If you will not be satisfied without a reason, I must give you the true one, Erlon—But promise me that you will not give way to anger."

I gave the desired promise, and she then said in a low tone:

"I should not feel quite safe here in your absence. The nephew of Elspeth, in spite of

his knowledge of our engagement, often intrudes into my presence, and speaks of his passion for me in words that sometimes terrify me."

I started up with irrepressible wrath:

"Cowardly rascal! I will instantly punish him!"

"Nay, remember your promise, dearest Erlon," said Alice in her softest tone. I was instantly calmed, so magical was her influence over me, and I seated myself by her side. Our plans were then definitely arranged. I proposed to go at once to Dublin, and with a sum of money which had been hoarded by my father, get into some mercantile employment, for which I considered myself well fitted. I promised Alice that as soon as I could possibly spare such a sum the whole amount I had taken from my father's stores should be placed in the hands of a competent person to be dispensed in charities, thus clearing myself of all participation in the fruits of his crimes. She was to obtain an asylum with the Sisters of Charity, as she had proposed; for she steadily refused to be any longer dependent on me until the period arrived when she should become my wife.

Our intentions were silently but quickly put into execution; and on the third morning after our consultation everything was in readiness for our departure. Until the carriage I had sent for by a trusty person was at the door, even Elspeth remained in ignorance of our intended flitting. I then sought the village, and announced to the people my final departure. They heard me in silence: the majority of them had already looked upon me as one expatriated from their band.

In spite of the change in me, some of the old leaven still remained; and I could not help giving a parting blow to Reardon for having dared to raise his eyes to the object of my adoring love. There had been a feud existing from boyhood between him and a young man named Casey, both born and raised to their present mode of life; and when I withdrew from the command which devolved upon me at my father's death, there had been a struggle between the two as to which should assume the authority I resigned. Reardon applied to me, and, as the nephew of my nurse, I preferred him as my successor. As my last act among the villagers I now reversed that decision, and appointed Ira Casey as the representative of my hereditary right. I turned away amid the acclamations of Casey's partisans, and Reardon approached me. His face was pale with concentrated passion, and in his eyes was an expression that for one moment made even my strong nerves quiver. His voice was scarcely above a whisper, but it was peculiarly distinct:

"Though the same arm had enfolded us in infancy, though the same mother had nursed us, I would still have sworn towards you an inextinguishable hatred for this cowardly act. If you had left me in peace, I should have forgotten the blue-eyed daughter of the Briton, and have suffered you to live in happiness. But now, in your hour of brightest hope, remember Reardon, and let his name send a thrill of fear to your soul; for I solemnly swear to you to destroy that happiness, if it should cost me my life!"

I laughed aloud, and turned off saying:

"I defy thee braggart! The whole village knows how much Erlon Reardon is given to boasting of his future exploits."

"Call it a boast if you will; but to you it shall yet become a terrible reality."

"Do your worst!" I replied with a sneer, and hastily waving an adieu to the assembled throng, I hurried towards "Vine Cottage," and in a few moments was borne away from—forever.

Knowing the catastrophe that has since occurred, you will be surprised to hear that I really had no fear of the machinations of Reardon. I knew him to be a great braggart; as I had said; and his threats against those who offended him were a standing jest in the village, for they had never in any instance been fulfilled. My taunt, perhaps, stung him into the accomplishment of his words to me; or his passion for Alice was so great as to urge him onward in wrecking her happiness, sooner than see her mine.

Reardon possessed a talent which had frequently afforded me much amusement, and I had never thought of the evil influence it might enable him to wield over those who were not on their guard against him. He was an admirable ventriloquist and an excellent mimic. Often have I been startled by his voice sounding so exactly like an echo of mine that the nicest ear must have been deceived. We were nearly the same size and unlike in features, and he could mimic my walk and air so accurately that, by a dim light, my best friend would have declared the counterfeit the true man. Alice was not aware of this, and to spare her some uneasiness I never mentioned the threat of Reardon. From these simple causes sprang all the evil that afterwards ensued. Are we not indeed the blind puppets of a fate that is inevitable?

"My son," said the mild voice of the priest, "we make our own fate, and the shadows which darken our path are thrown from the evil passions of our nature. Had you left Reardon to his wild command you had not now been here, his condemned executioner."

"True, true; but I must hasten. The remaining part of my unhappy story must be told in as few words as possible, or I shall madden over its recital."

We went to Dublin and put our mutual plans in execution. I was successful beyond my hopes, and anticipated our union at the end of my first year in the capital. I entered into partnership with a substantial trader, and after several months I was compelled to go over to England on business. An advantageous opening for a branch of our trade presented itself in one of the seaport towns in that country, and I was reluctantly compelled to take charge of it. It was impossible for Alice to leave Ireland until the year had expired for which she had assumed the garb of a Sister of Charity; and though we both repined at our separation, we were compelled to submit to the fate which separated us. We wrote frequently and it was mutually arranged that at the end of her probation we should be united.

As the time of our union drew near, I was so pressed with affairs of the last importance to my future prosperity, that I found it impossible to leave home long enough to visit Ireland and claim my bride. I wrote to Alice, informing her of the circumstances which detained me; and requesting her to take the first packet for Liverpool, where I would meet her and have everything in readiness for our immediate marriage. A vessel would be in waiting to convey us to my residence, so soon as the ceremony was performed. I sent this letter by my confidential clerk, who I afterwards found was in the pay of my dire enemy. The answer duly came, promising to be punctual; and words can convey to you no idea of my happiness. "Another week and she will be mine!" I repeated a thousand times.

I made every arrangement that could promote her comfort; and having chartered a vessel for the purpose, set out with a light heart. The captain of my craft proved, as I then thought very stupid in the navigation of his vessel; but I afterwards knew that he had been bribed to delay my arrival. I did not reach Liverpool until many hours after I should have been married. I hurried with breathless haste to the hotel and enquired for Miss Crawford. The answer which I there received almost paralysed me:

"A lady of that name was married here last evening at eight o'clock, and immediately embarked with her husband in a ship bound for America."

"Married! Who then was her husband?" I knew at once; but I need not repeat to you all my frenzied enquiries, nor the dark certainty which fell on my soul that Reardon was the cause of this terrible catastrophe!

He again paced the floor in deep agitation. Yes, yes, he continued, he came indeed in my hour of brightest hopes! I will now tell you what I subsequently heard from the lips of the dying Alice; for once again we met face to face, and I beheld upon her brow the impress of approaching death, and I thanked God that it was so. I could, without tears lay her in the silent earth, knowing that her pure spirit was with angels; but it rived my soul

with unutterable pangs to know that she was the wife of such a wretch as Reardon.

On the night of my expected arrival in Liverpool, Reardon, who was kept informed of all my plans by my perfidious Clerk, personated me with such success that even Alice was deceived. He met her in a room very dimly lighted, and under pretence that he was very much hurried by the captain, who wished to avail himself of wind and tide in his favor, he wore his cloak ready for instant departure. His hair was of the same color, and disposed as I always wore mine; he spoke to her in her lover's voice, and Alice, hurried, agitated, and half-blinded by her tears, doubted not that I was beside her. The license was handed to the clergyman, who hurried over the ceremony and within half an hour after Reardon's appearance at the hotel they were on board a ship which was ready to sail immediately. They remained on deck until the vessel was many miles from land; and when Reardon felt himself secure in the avowal of his villany, he resolved to exult in the anguish of his victim. He entered her state-room, and seating himself before her, said—

"Alice Crawford, you acknowledge yourself my lawful wife in the sight of heaven, and you have willingly come on board this ship, to accompany me to my home."

"Assuredly, dear Erlon; why such questions?" said Alice.

"Erlon! yes, Erlon is the name I bear in common with him who is dear to you; and from him have I stolen you. Behold!"

He dropped the cloak, threw off his hat, and stood before her. Alice uttered an exclamation and fell fainting from her seat. Oh, had she then died! But no, she revived, to know and feel the full bitterness of her lot. Vain were her pathetic entreaties; vain her protestations that she would never consider herself as his wife. In reply to the first, he said—

"I love you quite as well as Purcel, and you must make up your mind to fulfil the vows you have this night uttered." And to her threat to appeal to the captain and passengers, and state the diabolical deception he had practised, he replied—

"I have provided for every contingency, madam. The captain believes you to be my insane wife, whom I am taking to New York on a visit to your parents, in the hope that the sight of your native home may benefit your mind. I have already anticipated your story, and represented it as the vagary of a disordered intellect. My arrangements are all made, and you leave this state-room no more until we reach New York. Withdraw your affections as speedily as possible from Purcel, and centre them on your lawful husband, or it may be worse for you."

Fancy the torture of such a situation to a high-principled and sensitive girl! Reardon was true to his word, and her story was listened to incredulously by the maid, the only person beside himself who was allowed access to her during the voyage. By the time they reached New York her spirit was completely broken, and her health in an alarming state of decay. This enraged Reardon, and he brutally reproached her with grieving over my loss. Indeed, I believe he sometimes proceeded beyond reproaches toward his helpless and now uncomplaining victim. She bore it all in silence, for she felt that death would soon release her from the sufferings she endured.

On their arrival in this city, Reardon procured a house, and set his servant as a spy on her during his absence from home. Alice made an attempt to escape from his power, determined to throw herself on the protection of the first person she met who looked as if he might give credence to her story. The servant followed and brought her back to her prison, and when Reardon returned his anger knew no bounds. Then I know he struck her, for she fell with violence against the sharp corner of a table; and that blow upon her breast hastened the doom that was already impending over her.

To die with him was horrible, and she next found means, through the agency of an intelligent child who sometimes played under her window, to send to one of the city papers a letter containing an advertisement addressed to her unknown uncle. She knew that Reardon