

## Literature, &amp;c.

From Chronicles of "The Fleet."

## THE RUINED MERCHANT.

It was at the close of the year 1810 that I was standing near the entrance of the prison—the inside entrance unhappily, not the outer one—when the door opened, and a gentleman-like man, past the middle time of life, appeared at the top of the steps, and paused. Putting his hand on the top of the rail, he looked round with a vacant stare, as if not perfectly comprehending where he was. He cast his eyes over the face of the building on his right, but saddened by its repulsive gloominess he turned his face to the left, and scanning the lofty wall he slowly measured it upwards with his eye, till elevating his head he rested his view on the revolving spikes at the top. The view of the high wall and the spikes gave him no more satisfaction than the sight of the huge building within it, and he cast down his head with a sudden jerk, and surveyed the confined space between the building and the wall, searching the countenances of the few who were walking up and down, as if seeking for the sympathetic countenance of some one whom he might trust for information and guidance in his new situation.

At first I thought he was a stranger come to see a friend, for he had that quiet and respectable air, dressed as he was in a black coat and waistcoat with breeches and gaiters according to the fashion of the time—that his appearance impressed me with the idea of his being a man of substance; unostentatious, but wealthy; and the black crape round his hat indicated that he was still in mourning, accounted sufficiently for the air of sadness which pervaded his quiet features. But as he made no sign of moving from his position, after some time, and as I observed that not one of the turnkeys busied himself in attending to him, as is usual on the occasion of strangers appearing I began to suspect that he was not a voluntary visitor of the Fleet; and my eyes meeting his at that moment, with an air of commiseration I suppose in my look, he raised his hat and bowed to me. I understood that mute appeal at once; so I approached him, and to make a beginning, I asked him "if he was looking for any particular person?"

He shook his head, and turned round to the door behind, which was closed and locked; he looked at it for a moment, and then seeming to make up his mind to his fate he descended the steps, and we walked across the yard together. I did not like to urge him to talk, for I saw that his heart was full, and we made one or two turns up and down before I spoke again.

"I hope," said I, "that you are not another victim of the merciless law of imprisonment for debt?"

He stopped short at this, and making an effort to overcome his emotion, replied,—

"I have been arrested—very suddenly—in the midst of my affliction:—last night I was taken to the bailiff's private house, and this morning, as I had no money to spare for such expenses, my solicitor had me removed to this place, as being more convenient, he says, than the King's Bench; and now I must ask the friendly advice of some one what to do, for every thing is strange to me."

"Do you anticipate," I asked him as delicately as I could, "remaining here long?"

"My creditor," he said energetically, "is ruthless!"

We walked on again.

"You are alone, I presume?" said I.

"My daughter wanted to accompany me, but this is not a fit place for her—and yet—"

"It is not indeed," I replied. But as I had said this it occurred to me how frequently I had heard the same observation from new inmates, and with what dread they regarded the entrance into the prison of their wives and daughters, and how often I had seen these feelings overcome by the pain of separation. I thought too of the terrible consequences which had often ensued from the breaking down of the mind's best resolutions under the pressure of the misery and despair of a prison life; however, I said nothing of that at the time, but turned my attention to the present solace of the old gentleman in his affliction.

I could not find a place for him to sleep in except at a cost which was unsuited to his scanty means, so I persuaded him to make use of my bed for the early part of the night, alleging that I had writings to complete which obliged me to sit up; so that by making use of my narrow crib turn and turn about we got through the night tolerably well. The close acquaintance to which this trifling service—so acceptable at the moment—naturally led, brought on an intimacy during which I became acquainted with the circumstances which led to my friend's imprisonment; but first I must describe his interview with his daughter on the morning after his arrival.

St. Paul's clock had struck eight, at which hour the door of the prison were opened for strangers, and I had just finished putting the room in order, which I always did myself, the bed being turned up so as to look as much as possible like a wardrobe, and the breakfast table being tidily set out, with a clean towel for a table cloth, and with an additional cup and saucer, which I had borrowed from a neighbour on the other side of the gallery, when there was a gentle tap at the door:—

"Come in," said I, cheerfully; for the morning air, and the light of the fire, with the sight of the breakfast things, and the pleasure of having contributed to the comfort of one more unfortunate than myself, had raised my spirits; though my visitor remained in a condition of the most profound dejection. "Come in," I said; and opening the door, I was struck with surprise at the vision of one of the most

beautiful women my eyes ever beheld. How she came there, or what she wanted with a poor man like me, was a matter of wonder indeed. I had never seen her before in the prison, and I knew all the inmates. I was about to ask her business; when presently recollecting that my visitor had mentioned that he had a daughter, it struck me that it must be her whom I saw; but she, catching sight of her father as he turned his head towards the door, rushed into the room, and throwing herself into his arms, burst into tears. I shut the door upon them, and remained outside, to prevent the entrance of any casual intruder; and in the meantime the baker coming round as usual, crying "hot rolls!" for those who had money to buy them, I ventured on a piece of extravagance that morning, and bought two pennyworth; prompted, I must confess, by the desire to make a respectable appearance—so close does this habit cling to me—at the unusual occasion of having a lady for my guest.

When I thought sufficient time had elapsed to allow of the burst of grief to subside, which the novelty of the sight of her father in a prison had excited, I opened the door and went in with my hot rolls in my hand; and was astonished to observe the extraordinary change which had taken place in my apartment. My room is now, as it was then, on the ground floor, looking out into the front yard, the prospect forwards being bounded by the high wall of the prison before it, and to the left is the entrance into the yard, which forms an amusing sight from the constant ingress and egress of all sorts of persons connected with the inmates of the prison, or employed in bringing in supplies of all sorts, of necessity or luxury, according to the means of the consumers. Perhaps instead of a room I ought to call it a cell, for it is all of stone, and formed in an arch over head; about eight feet square, with a fire place in the centre on the right hand side, and a window opposite the door. The stone floor makes it look cleanly and lively when it is fresh whitened, but I have often found it very cold in the long nights of winter, at times when I could not afford to have a fire. Well—I was saying, I was quite astonished at the change which had taken place in my apartment in the brief quarter of an hour during which the lady had been its occupant. There certainly is nothing like a woman's hand to set a place in order! At seventy years of age women do not make any particular impression on us; we look at them according to their features and the expression of their countenances, as at pictures more or less beautiful or interesting; but unless connected with us by marriage, it is but a cold regard with which an old bachelor looks upon those of the other sex. But on this occasion I felt my heart quite warm within me. The table was removed to a more cheerful position close by the window, and the scanty materials for breakfast were re-arranged; and somehow the things about the room looked better, I don't know why; and the little ledge of wood above the hearth, which formed the chimney-piece, was set out with an unusual effect. The young lady had taken off her bonnet, and sat at the head of the table, with her father on one side, leaving the opposite end for me. With the deference which she thought due to my years, I suppose, she had left the other of the two chairs—the best one—for me; the one which her father occupied was a very good one, only having no bottom, that deficiency was obliged to be supplied by the lid of an old box; and the young lady herself was pleased to content herself with the box itself, which, turned upright on its end, formed a very convenient seat, and one calculated to display her figure to advantage.

When I came in with my hot rolls, as I was about to make a gallant speech on the occasion of being honored with such a visitor, the young lady, to whom I suppose her father had been explaining the nature of our acquaintance, stretched out her hand, and taking mine in hers pressed it warmly, giving me at the same time a look that said a thousand things. Old fool as I was, I could not get my words out; but my eyes filling with tears, I went to the cupboard to look for something that I wanted. While I was rummaging about just to recover myself, the sweetest voice I ever heard asked me, "if it was allowed to ask for a tea-spoon in such a place."

I was glad to have something definite to do, but unfortunately this happened to be the most awkward question that could have been put to me just at that time, for I had nothing by me but the bowl and one broken spoon, and the handle of another, which, although conjointly they formed the parts of an entire instrument, were in their separate portions useless for the occasion. However, I handed them to her, and she with the sweetest smile imaginable received them without observation; and immediately making use of the bowl to serve the sugar (I apologised for its being brown, but she assured me that she and her father preferred it) she stirred up her father's tea with infinite grace with the handle, which she then politely handed to me before making use of it for herself. As I had only one knife, we used it by turns, and in this way the ceremony of breakfast was conducted with as much dignity as if it had taken place in the palace of a king. But what continued to surprise me was the air of ease and cheerfulness which the young lady maintained in her visit to the chamber of a prison. I regarded her with admiration; for I had had too much experience in the expression of the human countenance not to see that all this apparent ease and cheerfulness was forced, and put on, as I did not doubt, in order to raise the spirits of her father. However I took care to encourage it, and in the meantime I took an earnest observation of the young lady's general appearance.

She was, as I guessed, and as I afterwards learned, about twenty years of age, full and

beautifully formed. Her hair was of that rich chestnut brown which has so rich an appearance when it does not degenerate into red; her complexion was delicately fair; her height rather tall than otherwise; and her eyes, which were large and well-opened, were by turns of the most brilliant and of the softest hazel, according as their expression was influenced by her emotions. I think I never heard a more silver-toned voice; clear and articulate, but soft and low. Fifty years ago, I should have fallen in love with her directly; but at three score and ten, the scriptural term in the life of man, I regarded her only as a lovely flower of the earth, too bright and beautiful to last. But I must not anticipate.

All this time her father continued silent, and eat little; I saw that his daughter affected to eat, but that it was only an affectionate pretence to beguile her parent. It was plain that she was only playing a part, but with a holy intention to spare her father's feelings. I saw, however, that her heart was too full to allow her to maintain her character for indifference long; but just as I was wondering how it would end, there was a knock at my outer door, which I opened; and a gentleman inquired "if a Mr Courtney was there."

"I am Mr Courtney," said my guest; "it is my solicitor," he said, turning to me (his daughter looked pale)—and taking his hat in order to speak with him, as I suppose, untroubled by the presence of his daughter, he walked out with him into the gallery.

The moment he disappeared, the almost overwhelming emotions with which his daughter was agitated, were revealed with a violence which alarmed me, and made me almost stand aghast at the awful exhibition of anguish unspeakable! Her sobs and tears burst forth like a pent up sea: she fell on her knees, and without regard to my presence, she cried aloud to God for succour in this extremity of trouble, and for vengeance on their persecutor! The soft and delicate girl beaming with smiles, was transported in a moment into the very semblance of passionate despair. I was amazed; and for a brief space stood irresolute, shrinking from being a witness to her passionate exclamations, yet fearing to leave her in a state of such sorrowful excitement; but she put an end to my indecision by rising up, and with her hands clasped fervently, and with an appeal of filial affection which no human being could listen to unmoved, she implored me:—

"Oh!" she said; "dear sir, you who have been so kind to my father, do not desert him! You do not know him as I do; he is broken-hearted! he is indeed; but he tries to keep his grief from me; my poor mother!"

"What of your mother?" said I, taking her hand, soothingly; for she was in deep mourning like her father; and I feared to open anew a wound that was perhaps scarcely closed.

"I will tell you. When my poor father was ruined, the shock was too much for my mother: she died," she said, shudderingly, "only ten days since; the day before yesterday was the day appointed for the funeral, and as my father was coming down stairs to follow her to the grave, he was arrested."

"Good God!" I exclaimed; "arrested as he was about to follow her to the grave?"

"That was the very time they chose to do it; but it was done with a purpose,—it is too long to be explained now,—and I saw that the blow went to my poor father's heart. On her death bed my dear mother made me promise, it was unnecessary, but she wished me to promise—never to leave my father; that I would be his guardian, his nurse, his servant; that I would devote myself to him. My own heart would prompt me to do it, but that vow pronounced on her death bed invests my duty with a character more solemn and sacred, which I must fulfil as a direct compact made with my God; and with God's assistance I will perform it. But to see him in this place! In a prison! Oh! this is a trial indeed!"

I was amazed, I say, at this sudden outbreak of passionate feeling from one who had seemed all gentleness and softness in the presence of her father; and my own heart was lacerated with a sharper pang of sorrow than I had known for many years, even in this abode of sighs and sorrows, to see one so beautiful and loving plunged in such a depth of grief. That there was something more than met the ear, I easily divined; and that this was no common case of persecution and suffering, I felt persuaded; but as I did not like to risk the laceration of fresh wounds by random questions, I restrained my curiosity, and left it to time to reveal the secret that lay hidden in the saint like devotion of the daughter to the father. Not that my experience had not furnished me with many instances of filial and parental love, as I have related in other histories; but the present case seemed to me to be of a peculiar character, and partaking more of the deep feeling of religious devotion than of the instinctive and habitual affection which parents and children cherish for each other. I was revolving these thoughts in my mind,—for long confinement and habits of abstraction have rendered me philosophical and contemplative,—when the young lady interrupted my meditations by a question:—

"I suppose I can stay here with my father?"

Now this was a very simple question; but it embarrassed me exceedingly. As I remained musing for some time, the young lady thought that I had not heard her question. She repeated it therefore, with much earnestness.

"I suppose," she said, "I can't remain here with my father?"

"This is not a place," said I, "fit for a young lady to reside in; but there is no prohibition against it, if you desire to remain with your father. You can come in every morning and return to your home at night. But it is to be hoded that your father will not be obliged to remain in this miserable place

long. Besides, it is to be presumed that he will be able to go out on bail, as he has not been taken in execution. What is the amount," I asked, "for which he was arrested?"

This question was answered by Mr Courtney himself, who now entered the room, having taken leave of his solicitor at the door. "The debt," he said, "or rather the alleged debt, is a heavy one; not less than thirty thousand pounds; but that is not the matter that presses at the present moment; I have worse information than that. Do you think, my dear Louisa," he said to his daughter, "that you can bear more ill news? And yet it must be told, and better for you to hear it from me than to learn it suddenly and more painfully."

"Tell it to me, dear papa," replied his daughter, who had resumed her forced composure: "any thing is better than suspense."

"Well," said he, "better to let you know the truth at once. My love, bear it with fortitude—you have no longer any home!" Here the poor man put his hands before his face, and the tears streamed through his fingers; but he presently recovered himself. "I was thinking," said he, "of your poor, poor mother: it is well that she has been spared this last indignity."

His daughter took his hand and kissed it; but she repressed her agitation, as I observed, by a strong effort.

"A creditor," continued her father, "stimulated I have reason to believe by the enemy who has placed me here, has issued an execution against my goods, although contrary to his express promise, and the law has seized every thing."

"What! every thing?" said Louisa.

"Yes, my love; the law takes every thing if there is not enough to satisfy the judgment."

"My good friend," said Mr Courtney, "here I am imprisoned; and here is my daughter, deprived of her home, for she cannot well go back to a house in the possession of bailiffs; what is best to be done under such circumstances?"

I confess I had been so long unused to consider of the best means of disposing of young ladies, that I was considerably puzzled how to advise my new friends in their difficulty. On examining into their case, I found that Mr Courtney had gradually sunk from bad to worse in his affairs, until he was reduced to the most humble means. He had resided lately with his wife and daughter in a small cottage on the outskirts of the town, with one servant girl, who was totally inadequate to afford protection to his daughter even if she could return home; and, as I have often known in such cases, there was no friend to whom they could immediately apply for temporary shelter. The relations both on the father's and mother's side were dead, except some distant ones with whom for some years past they had kept up no correspondence. The solicitor also who was acting for them was only a recent acquaintance, his former legal adviser and friend having died some months before; so that there was no claim or hope of other than professional assistance from that quarter. The next inquiry was, if any room could be procured for the father and daughter; but the prison was very full at that time, and the cost of decent accommodation would have been enormous. In this dilemma the young lady, decided on seeking a bed for the night at the lodging of an old servant who had known them in better days, and who preserved an attachment for the family of her old master; in the day time it was agreed that she should come to her father and remain with him till the time for closing the gates at night.

"Fortunately for us, papa," she said, "Mr Seedy is not a young man, or we could not make so free with him; and I am sure he is very good to allow us to take possession of his room in this unceremonious way. But God will reward him for his good actions."

It is a remarkable circumstance, and I mention it as an instance of the weakness of the human mind, and of that inexplicable feeling—I will not call it vanity, which clings to us even in our most advanced years, but it gave me a sharp sort of pang to be alluded to by a beautiful girl as an old man no longer of any account in the relations between those of the opposite sexes. It is true that I could not be ignorant that an old man of seventy could be regarded only as an abstraction by a young girl of twenty; but I did not like the fact to be made so evident to me; and it pained me very much at the time. But the effect of the little mortification soon passed away, and I expressed my cordial concurrence with any arrangement which would be most pleasant to herself and her father. She rewarded me with a sweet smile, which seemed to illumine my cell with sunshine, and held out her hand to me, which I was about to kiss in the enthusiasm of my admiration, but my beard being somewhat rough, not having been able to borrow a razor for some days past, and the stumps encountering the back of her delicate hand, she gave a little shriek, which amused her father, and gave me the opportunity to say that if I had been fifty years younger, I would not have let her off so easily.

Domestic matters being thus satisfactorily arranged, we passed the day very sociably together, I going out after dinner to smoke my pipe, which I did up and down the gallery, in deference to the lady; but it was not until after this friendly intercourse had continued for several days that I learned Mr Courtney's story, which I did partly from himself, and partly from his daughter. I take a melancholy pleasure in writing it, as it keeps me a little longer from coming to the catastrophe, which I protract it as I may, I know must be faced at last, if I am faithfully to record the histories of this prison. But I approach it with fear and trembling. Well, as I said, after we had