

## Literature, &amp;c.

From Chronicles of "The Fleet."  
THE RUINED MERCHANT.

It was about three weeks after Mr. Courtney's arrival in the prison that I missed him for several days in his accustomed walk; for I ought to say that about a month after his entrance he had been so fortunate as to be able to hire a room for himself, at a rate which, high as it was, could not be called immoderate for the time; for he got it for a pound a week, for the prison was very full.

I missed him, as I say, for several days; and the answer through his door always was, that he was not very well, and would not leave his room that morning. So, on the fifth day, after I had walked up and down a little while, smoking my pipe, and a little uneasy that he did not appear—for the day was fine, and the sun was shining cheerfully over the iron spikes of the wall—I determined to ascertain the reason of his keeping in his room so closely. This time, the moment I knocked, Louisa came to the door, and, in a faint voice, said—

"Come in!"

I was grieved to find her father lying on a sort of wooden sofa, which served him for a bed at night, in a very weak condition. I had observed for some days before that he had walked languidly; but that did not particularly surprise me, as it is, by no means uncommon for persons to fall into a low despairing way in this place. His daughter resumed her seat by his side, with her face to the light, and I was struck with the very thin look that she had; however, it was natural, as I thought she should fret on account of her father's imprisonment. But there was something about her eyes which I fancied was a little wild and odd; she looked about as if she was seeking for something, and seemed to be in pain occasionally. Her father, too, was by turns excited and depressed, and lay uneasily, as it seemed to me, on his bed. I had noticed about a week before that he had no coat, and that he wore an old coloured dressing gown, and on looking round the room I observed that there were no stray articles of apparel lying about; and on regarding his daughter attentively, I perceived that she was as thinly and scantily clad as it was possible for any one to be, considering the coldness of the weather. I did not think it was so bad as it was; but I guessed from the symptoms—for I was used to the gradual disappearance of the wearing apparel among the inmates, and knew full well what that meant—that there was a lack of money in the house. Now I had received that very morning a sum which had been paid to me for an advertisement which I had written for a foreign singer, who with very kind consideration had forwarded me the seven and sixpence, which was the price agreed on, by a special messenger. I was casting over in my mind how I should introduce the subject in as delicate a way as possible, so that my offering an advance of money should not appear as if I thought them in a state of destitution, when Louisa suddenly cried out, as she caught sight of something from the window—

"There's a man with bread!"

The eager and famished look which she gave as she said this made her father fear that she had betrayed their secret, and he reddened up with shame and mortification; for the greatest humiliation which can befall one in the prison is to be thought poor—so ingrained is that feeling in the souls of all, even of the wretchedest and the poorest! Louisa coloured, and for a moment became crimson all over, but in an instant after her face resumed the ashy paleness which I had observed at first, save a spot of red on each cheek, which looked unnatural; her eyes too were very bright and restless. All these were signs and tokens which I could not mistake; so I said, in a careless way—

"I came to propose that we should dine together to-day; that is, if you allow me to bring my dinner to your room and join it to your's; for I have bought a great piece of meat I said, which will not keep, and if some one does not help me to get through with it; it will be a waste;" and without waiting for a reply, which I saw they were too much embarrassed to give, I went out, and at once bought half a quarter of butter, and a large slice of cheese, at a shop in the fair.

"See," said I, taking the things in, "how rich I am. I have brought these in first; and if Miss Courtney will lay the cloth, we shall be getting things ready."

The poor girl, at the sight of the bread, was nearly overcome. She seized the loaf with a trembling hand, and at first tried to break a piece off, but not being able from her weakness and nervousness to do it, she pointed to the bread, and then to her father—and with a sort of scream cried out wildly—

"He!" pointing to her father—"and I too! We have not eaten food for more than four days!" Then, bursting into an hysterical fit of tears, she fainted away from exhaustion, and from the sight of the food so unexpectedly brought to her for which she was craving.

I was in a great fright, for I never could bear to see a woman in that way; but I had the presence of mind enough to make haste after a doctor who lived in the fair, and he coming up between her father and him, they contrived to restore her, though not without difficulty, for the faint was a very bad one, on account of her extreme weakness. Now that that the doctor had appeared in the matter—and I must say that he was one of the most benevolent old gentlemen I ever knew—it became necessary that some explanation should be given to account for the young lady's illness. The women were very much in the habit of fainting and going off in hysterics from all sorts

of causes, the Doctor informed me—as indeed was natural enough, poor things living in the dreadful way they do; so that when the Doctor found that there was a reserve in communicating the reason of Miss Courtney's faint, he ascribed it to some love affair, and asked no more about it, only begging them if there should be any return of the complaint, to send for him immediately.

I was glad to see, on my return to their room after the lapse of some time, that a considerable part of the loaf had been consumed, and that my friends seemed the better for it. As the exclamation of his daughter had revealed to me the secret which both had so long concealed, I made no scruple of reproaching them both for not having made me acquainted with the fact of their condition. It was Miss Courtney who spoke, and she told me, that for some time past they had been obliged to part with every little valuable they possessed, till they had nothing left; and then, with great hesitation and reluctance, she confessed that they had sold or pledged their clothes for food, till at last they had none left that they could part with. She told me that both she and her father felt a sort of delirium from hunger, but that she felt it most on the morning when I discovered their destitute state. I felt hurt at first with Louisa and with her father for having concealed from me, their friend, the actual state of their affairs; but I had so often seen people in the prison who had fallen from affluence to poverty bear the very extremity of want and hunger without complaint rather than confess their absolute poverty, though in a prison, that I could not find it in my heart to be angry with them long; but the experience of her father's sufferings during the terrible time had the most disastrous effect on the fate of the affectionate Louisa; for, although she could not bear her own agony in silence, she could not bear to witness her father's pain; and this is the way that it fell out.

The poor girl, wearied out with exhaustion, fell asleep on her father's couch. I rose to leave the room, but he motioned me to stay, thinking it did not matter, I suppose, whether an old man of threescore and ten was present or not; and by little and little we got into conversation; but his heart being full of his daughter and her sufferings, which she bore with such patient fortitude, he could talk of nothing but her; and by degrees he began to talk of the creditor who had arrested him, and who, in order to revenge himself of the affront put upon him by Mr Courtney's daughter, as he chose to consider it, had endeavoured to wound her in her tenderest point by wreaking his vengeance on her father. Mr Courtney was so earnest, and I was interested, that I believe, for the moment, we both forgot the sleeping girl; but, chancing to turn my head round at a little rustling which I heard behind me, for we were sitting with our backs to the sofa, I beheld her eyes fixed on her father with an expression which I can never forget, and in which surprise, reproach, and filial love were strangely blended, and which quickly changed to an air of desperate determination. She put her finger to her lips, to intimate to me that I was not to notice that she was awake—an intimation which I had the thoughtlessness or the weakness to comply with; for somehow, old as I was, I felt a pleasure in being made a confidant by a young and beautiful woman. And there I did wrong—very wrong; and God knows the anguish of the bitter repentance which I have suffered from that act, unimportant as it seemed at the time, and venial as some may think it was in its commission! And it is enough, perhaps, that human beings should be responsible for the direct results of their actions without being made accountable for their indirect consequences: for who can tell what may be the effect even of his slightest acts? The smallest pebble cast into the sea, philosophers say, must affect the vibration of the whole mass of the ocean; and so it is with man's actions!

It has been with this reflection that I have endeavored to console myself for becoming an accomplice with Louisa in concealing from her father the fact of her having overheard his conversation about her suitor and his prosecutor. Alas! that apparently insignificant departure from truth cost three lives!

I made Mr Courtney take four shillings of the five that were left; and that lasted them pretty well for four days. It was leaving myself rather short; and, as ill-luck would have it, no work came in, so I was obliged to live on the remaining shilling as well as I could; but I could not bear to see that beautiful girl wanting food. It is ridiculous to talk of love at my age, but I certainly had a great affection for that girl; I felt it from the first. And she seemed to be attached to me: that was, of course, because I had done a little service to her father when he first came in here. I remember one day—but this was previous to the scene which I have described about the bread—I went into their room rather better dressed than usual, for I had on my pea-green coat with basket buttons, which had been in and out of pawn for years past, with a nice frilled shirt that I seldom wore, because of the expense of the plaiting; and I had taken a little pains with my hair, not that I ever cared to disguise my age, but I always had a young look; and, I may say it now that all such vanities are over with me, I was considered to be not a bad looking man in my time; and I had still a pretty good head of hair at the sides and back—white, as may be supposed; but that accorded with my complexion. Well—I don't know why I run on in this way; but old men have always had a privilege to talk, from Homer's time downwards; by and by, they will call me the Nestor of the Fleet—I went into the room, I say, when Louisa was there, as she always was in the day time, and

she exclaimed, "How well you look to-day!" I thought I never saw her look so handsome; but she was a beautiful creature! And she had such little winning ways; and she used to fill my pipe with her delicate fingers (I always used short-cut) so daintily, and pretended to like the smell of tobacco, that I do believe if I had been a little younger,—but this is all very foolish. But I linger on the remembrance of her. Poor Louisa! she was the last ray of light that shone on me in this dreary prison.—Well, I must finish my story.

I observed, during the four days following that on which I had discovered the Courtneys' condition, that Louisa never smiled and seldom spoke, but seemed absorbed, by some thought which engrossed all her faculties. I felt uneasy—I did not well know why; but I was possessed with a vague presentiment of some coming evil.

Mr Courtney once or twice talked of the possibility of the return of his son; and I observed that Louisa caught at the idea eagerly; but when he came to consider the little probability there was of his son coming back for many years, of the uncertainty of his prospects, and of the climate, she returned again to melancholy abstraction, and seemed plunged in the same black despair which had recently overwhelmed her. I could not help being struck, however, by her manner when her father spoke of a Captain Morton, to whom, it seemed, her brother was to go on his arrival in India. When her father dwelt on the good heart and the amiable qualities of Captain Morton, and on the kind and brotherly reception which his son was sure to receive from his old friend, I remarked that Louisa blushed and breathed thick, and that the tears rushed into her eyes. It struck me that there had been an intimate acquaintance between Miss Courtney and that Captain Morton. I left the room, and smoked my pipe up and down the gallery, a good deal discomposed by the thoughts that assailed me of the pain and disappointment to which all are exposed in this world of care and sorrow!

When I went with her father to the gate that evening, to see his daughter out of the prison, the gas-light, shining full in her face, made her paleness assume so ghastly a hue, that I was alarmed. She kissed her father most affectionately just before she went through the gate, which was unusual, as she generally wished him good night in his own room. But on this occasion she clung to him with a sort of desperate fondness; and I saw, though her features were rigid as marble, that her eyes shone with a supernatural brightness! Just as she went out she gave her hand to me; and when I pressed it in mine I thought it felt icy cold. I did not like all these appearances, although I did not know what definite cause to ascribe them to; and I went to bed in a very melancholy state; and next morning I felt very weak and low, which was owing, perhaps, to my not having had any supper, and to my not knowing how to get my breakfast. Luckily I had a little tobacco left, so I sat down and smoked, with my eyes directed towards the entrance of the yard—not expecting to see Miss Courtney, however, for it was before the gate was open; and I always made it a rule to be ready at the entrance to accompany her to her father's room.

When the clock struck the hour for opening the gate I went to the lobby to meet her, but I did not take my pipe. I felt very dull that morning—and the turnkey, who was a civil and remarkably polite person, remarked it; for all the officers were very respectful to me, in deference to my long residence in the prison and my respectability. I made some civil reply to the turnkey's remark—I forgot what, and kept my eyes fixed on the door through which strangers passed to the lobby.

"You are waiting for Miss Courtney?" said the turnkey.

"Yes," said I, "I am: Miss Courtney is late this morning."

I had no idea that my attention to Miss Courtney had been remarked, which shows how careful gentlemen should be in their attentions to ladies, lest they should unthinkingly compromise their reputations, and give occasion for disparaging reports; and I was astonished when the turnkey said, with a knowing look, and lifting up the key which he held in his hand in an admonishing way—

"Ah! Mr Seedy, you have been a rare one in your days, I'll be bound; but you are a little too old to play the gallant now."

I declare I never felt more hurt in my life. But the vulgarity and impertinent familiarity of these people is disgusting. I said nothing, but left the lobby, and waited by the iron rails so that I could see Louisa when the door opened; but I waited and waited and waited, and no Louisa came. Her father came down, and I expressed to him my surprise that his daughter had not come in, with her usual punctuality.—"to make breakfast," I was going to say; but I remembered that, most likely, he had nothing for breakfast that morning, like myself; so I checked myself, that I might not hurt his feelings. Well, there we stood waiting and wondering; and at last I asked one of the char-women of the place to go to Miss Courtney's lodging, and inquire for her,—for she still lodged at the rooms of their old servant, who, by the way, had only just sufficient to live on. She informed us, on her return, that the young lady had gone out early that morning with another lady and a gentleman, who fetched her in a coach; that she was dressed in white, as if she was going to a wedding; but that she was in such a fainting state that they were obliged to lift her into the coach, and that then the coach drove away.

We looked at one another at this—her father and I,—for the same thought flashed on both of us on the instant. Her father took

hold of my arm, and went with me into the corner of the yard; and, if he had not set down on the long seat that went all along the side of the yard under the wall, I am sure he would have fallen.

"I have a suspicion," he said, "of the reason of Louisa not coming in this morning." And then he looked at me, as if to divine my thoughts.

"I was very grave," said I, "but by some means found out the secret of the cause of my imprisonment, and she has sacrificed herself to that man for my sake!"

I could not speak. If the whole building of the prison had been placed on my heart, I could not have felt a heavier load.

"How she has discovered the secret," he continued, "I cannot imagine; but this dressing in white, and the story of the gentleman and lady taking her away in a coach, seems to show that she has taken a desperate resolution."

I did not know what to say; I did not like her to marry at all. I was not such a old fool as to suppose that she could marry me; but the news of her being about to marry some one else gave me a shock which I cannot well describe,—it was cutting me off from her forever; and the idea of her marrying, under such circumstances, a man whom she disliked—forcing herself to the most dreadful sacrifice which woman can offer—made me shudder. I remained silent, in a sort of whirl and confusion of thought, for the news had come so suddenly upon me that I did not know in what light to view it, or what to do. But her father looking at me with an anxious air, as if expecting me to say something, and indeed looking up to me I believe, for consolation under such an afflicting calamity, I tried to put the best face upon the matter I could; so I said, trying to throw a little cheerfulness into my tone—

"This may not turn out so bad at last as we both think: One thing seems to be in favor of the man; if our surmises are indeed true, he marries your daughter without fortune, and at a time when your own affairs are at the lowest possible ebb. Matters are so bad," said I, "that they cannot well be worse."

He shook his head, and replied mournfully: "You do not know Louisa! You have no idea of the depth of feeling and the strength of resolution which lie under that gentle exterior and modest softness. Besides,"—here he hesitated, but presently he went on—"besides, I have reason to fear that her affections;—but all that had better be buried in oblivion now! Let us send out again, and try if we can get any further information."

There was a quiet and discreet man, about my own age, who acted as a messenger for the inmates of the prison, and whom I knew to be trustworthy. Seeing him standing by the entrance, I beckoned to him, and explaining as much as was necessary, begged him to endeavour to trace where Miss Courtney was gone, and what was the meaning of the circumstance reported by the char-woman. He agreed to do this willingly, and we walked about the yard waiting for him to come back. He was a long time gone, and I got more and more uneasy. Her father, I could see, was internally agitated by a terrible conflict; but he mastered his emotion, though the muscles of the upper lip were contracted with a quivering convulsion that was painful to see. Suddenly, I saw our messenger return. He came in at a brisk but tottering pace to the spot where we were standing. I could see in a moment that he was the bearer of some strange news, for his face was flushed and heated with the haste that he had made to get back, and he came up to us in great agitation. He looked at me as if asking for my sanction to tell his story; but I fearing the worst, without saying a word, led Mr Courtney, who was stricken with dread, and submissive as a child, to his own room; and when I had shut the door, nodded to the messenger to go on with his story. He was still reluctant, so I proceeded to question him as calmly as I could.

"You went to Miss Courtney's lodging?"

"She was not there."

"Could you trace the coach?"

"I did; but—"

"Where did it take her to?"

"It took her," he replied, with a good deal of hesitation and looking at her father, "to a church."

Her father turned his eyes on mine with a despairing look.

I did not know how to frame the next question; but while I was studying it the messenger continued—

"They told me there, that a lady had been brought to the church; but she was so ill that the clergyman at first refused to perform the ceremony. But the lady recovering a little, insisted; and so—she was married!"

Her father here groaned, and put his hands before his face.

"And was that all?" I asked.

"No!" replied the man, with still greater hesitation, and looking alternately at me and at her father. "I ascertained where the coach which took them away from the church had been ordered to drive, and I followed them there."

"And then—"

"I knocked at the door, and said, 'I had come from the young lady's father.' It was a woman-servant that opened the door;—and there was a great bustle of running up and down stairs. While I stood at the door a lady brushed past us; and the woman wanted to question him, but he said, 'Don't stop me; I'm going for a doctor.'

"Who for?" said I, for my heart misgave me; and Mr Courtney gazed at the man with intense emotion, watching for his next words.

"It was for the young lady. She had faint-