

Literature, &c.

THE SPIRIT OF THE MAGAZINES.

From Chambers's Journal for November.

LIFE'S UNDERCURRENT.

IN FOUR CHAPTERS.—CHAP. III.

Thus matters went on for some time; I learning, and singing as often as required by their visitors; but my dress was not improved. I never went out, but when sent a short message by Leonora. One afternoon, Bellino came home rather earlier than usual, in great spirits.

'Leonora my love,' said he, 'I have got it arranged; my party is made up, and we must prepare for our campaign. But how are we to raise the needful, my pretty one?' There was a pause. 'Come put me on the plan my girl; for my last shilling is chilled in my purse for want of a companion, and my heart feels heavy in my breast. Another pause. What! not one word of consolation to your poor Bellino?' Leonora looked very grave. Then, pointing to me—'There is my hope,' continued he, 'the leader to my ambition. Signor Carlino—as like a painted post as a gentleman—He cannot appear as he is; he would not even make a scarecrow, his clothes fit so tight.'—'This he said partly to Leonora in an under voice; and then in a louder tone: Come, my hopes of success are placed on you; do assist me, my sweet one.'

I sat mute, and gazed timidly; Leonora sat silent, in deep thought. At length raising her head—

'Where can we go,' said she, 'but to our Uncle? Your watch he has already in his keeping; I have two gowns, and a few other articles—I will give them into his charge until better times.' Bellino started, and embraced her, shouting: 'Glorious Apollo! Bellino is himself again! Look brisk my beauty; next to you, our Uncle is my only friend; let us despatch, for golden prospects rise before me. You shall a lady be, my pretty one.'

A bundle was soon made up, and Leonora went out with it, and returned with money.—I was sent for liquor and victuals; the evening spent in feasting and singing, of anticipations of success. They, for that night, was the happiest of the happy, and I shared their felicity; for I was to get a new dress to enable me to perform my part in the adventure, and appear before an audience. For the first time in my life, I retired to my shake down in the corner in joyous anticipation of the morrow.

I was awakened through the night by their wrangling and abusing one another; I feared they were going to fight: they had sat and continued their potations until the liquor, which at first made them jovial and loving, had at length sown discord. Gradually, their voices died away in sleep. When daylight enabled me to look round, Bellino sat on his chair, his head and arms resting on the table, sound asleep; and Leonora, dressed as I saw her when I went to bed, lay asleep across the bed—the wrecks of their debauch covering the table and floor.

It was late before they awoke sick and feverish: I had got the room in order, all traces of the debauch removed, breakfast ready, and the kettle boiling. They were as loving as if no squabbling had happened the night before, but their heads ached, and their stomachs were sick; they loathed food. I was sent for more liquor, and they mixed it with their tea, and in a short time rallied; but during the whole forenoon, they were very heavy and dull.

In the afternoon, I was taken to a second-hand clothes-shop by Leonora, and fitted from shoe to cap; and when we came home, Bellino was much pleased with my appearance, but not more than I was with myself. My clothes were showy; a broad frilled shirt covered my shoulders, my neck and breast were bare, and my hair hung in ringlets down my back. I had a genteel boyish appearance; Signor Carlino glanced his new title, and was no more called by his patrons Charlie.

In the evening, visitors arrived; they were three in number, and much better dressed than my master. They were all younger men, none of them above thirty years of age; I was introduced, and highly praised by Leonora and Bellino. After a display of my powers, I was so fortunate as to meet their approval. The evening was spent in consultations and matters of business: at length all was arranged. They appeared to be better supplied with money than Bellino, who bargained hard with them for my share of the profits, which were to be his own. The whole went out together, and I was left alone: when they came home I know not.

Next day the printer was set to work to print the bills; it had been resolved to begin the adventure in my native town. I was surprised at the number of the bills; but much more so when I saw, posted upon the walls and corners, a different one from any that had come home. How my young heart fluttered! There, in large letters, after the notice of the concerts, were the names of Signor Bellino, Madame Leonora, and Signor Carlino Bellino: here was a rise in the world for poor Charlie!

I felt very proud; I appeared all at once to have become somebody. In the notice I was described as the 'Infant Prodigy,' and I was called by Bellino, when he talked of me, 'an Artist,' as they called themselves.

Next evening, the concert was to come off; the forenoon was spent in rehearsal, and in the afternoon, Leonora was busy washing, starching and ironing our scanty wardrobe, and arranging her dress during the time my shirt was drying—my only one. She did my hair in ringlets; my thin pale cheeks were rouged: Leonora's and Bellino's, which inclined to red rather much, were whitened with flour. In due time, all of us were ready, and made up for stage effect; and when the other three came, we set off, with no little anxiety as regarded our failure or success.

A large and elegant room had been engaged, and all things arranged in the most approved order; the doors were opened, and our spirits rose as the room began to fill with an audience large and respectable. The entertainment commenced; and I had the pleasure to be encored, although it was an Italian song: I got through the evening with the greatest applause. Leonora sang several songs without an encore; she must have been much hurt at my success, for she became cool, and spoke snappishly to me during the whole evening; but I was to her as humble and obedient as I had ever been.

Bellino and his companions were in great spirits at our success. I got supper, and was sent to bed; Leonora still in the sulks at me. They continued their carousal until far in the night. For several evenings, the performances were given with various success; at length the audiences became so thin, that they did not pay the expenses. Nevertheless, Bellino had made for his share a good sum of money; his watch, and all the other articles that were in pledge, had been redeemed, and they both got new dresses: their way seemed to be to square their wants to their incomes, their wants being oftenest in advance.

A consultation was held with the others, when it was resolved to court fortune in the other towns: we were too poor to pay for our conveyance by coach, so we set off on foot, each carrying his own instrument, and Leonora her bundle of dresses. I had a good share of the burthen myself—all the bills that were to be posted up when we made a halt at any place where we hoped to collect an audience, and the little linen my master and mistress had; these were made into a bundle, which I carried on my back like a knapsack, and towards the evening I was often ready to sink under it.—We were ever in difficulties, for our expenses were certain, and our audiences very uncertain—often yielding but little more than a profit than otherwise.

During the summer months, we visited several towns with various success. As we journeyed along from town to town, when we came to a gentleman's estate, if the family were there, we stopped at the nearest village until Bellino went to the gentleman and offered his services; and at times were accepted: these were the bright days in our weary pilgrimage for we were well paid and well fed. At times we would remain for a day or two; I often got a few shillings to myself from the company, but this did me no good, for Bellino always took it from me: he was in this respect as bad as Blind Willie, my last master.

Towards the end of summer, discord began to disturb the harmony that had cheered us in all our fatigues and privations. One of the young men on such occasions took the part of Leonora, and this led to taunts and bickerings among all three: these became bitter every day; and at length they broke out into an open quarrel, and death and blood were threatened on both sides. The other two men looked on with indifference, as if they enjoyed the brawl; while I stood trembling, and Leonora weeping, or pretending to do so. These noisy threats ended one day in apparent reconciliation, and all retired to bed as if nothing had occurred; Bellino and the two others a good deal the worse of liquor, while Leonora and the young man remained perfectly sober, for I saw they drank sparingly.

On the following morning, I was seated by the kitchen fire of the inn where we were stopping, when Bellino entered in a fearful rage. I was much alarmed; he stamped and swore so fearfully, I crept into a corner, and trembled for my safety. I soon learned the cause: Leonora had decamped through the night, carrying off all his cash and linen, scant as his wardrobe was, leaving him without a farthing to pay for our lodgings. Fortunately for him, she had left his watch: I was sent with it to the pawnbroker's to get all I could on it; on my return the partnership was dissolved, for Bellino set off after the runaway. I was left once more alone in the world, without a home or friend, and left as forlorn as ever.

Until evening came, I had hopes of my master's return; it was not till then I felt fully the bitterness of my present situation, for self-reliance had not yet come to me. As it grew dark, I began to weep; I had not eaten anything throughout the day. I had not one penny in my pocket, and fearful of being turned out I looked imploringly at the landlady, for she had scarcely spoken to me during the day, and the few words she did speak were not in an inviting tone; they were uttered as if she looked

upon me as an intruder upon her hearth, inquiring when I expected my father to return. Observing the silent tears, however, that stole down my face, her heart was touched, her voice and manner softened, and she inquired if Bellino was my father. I told her the sad story of my life, and the good woman wept.

'Poor boy,' said she, 'your sorrows began too soon; but do not weep, you may remain with me for a day or two, until I try to find a master for you, and save you from this vagabond life. Would you wish to be a tradesman?'—

'O yes; thank you,' I replied; 'could I only find a master.'

'There is no fear, trade is brisk and hands scarce; if you are a good boy and industrious, you may yet be a rich man. I expect Thomas Ross and a few master-weavers here in an hour or two; I will speak to him to take you as a learner: he is a good master, it is a good trade and they make good wages at the calico-weaving, which is easily learned.'

Her kind words shed a ray of hope on my despair, and with a grateful heart I thanked my hostess. At length the expected guests began to drop into the kitchen, where I sat solitary and anxious, listening to every word that was said; their talk was of trade at first, but gradually politics absorbed all their interest. I sat fearful lest the landlady in the hurry of business might forget her promise, for her guests were many; but at last she beckoned to one of them, a plain elderly-looking man, who rose and went to her; and they talked together for a few minutes. My eye was upon them; I saw her point to me, and my heart beat fast as I observed her look pleased as the conversation proceeded. Presently the old man rejoined his companions, and after a short time, all eyes were turned upon poor Charlie; he had evidently spoken to them of me.

I was called to the table, and offered drink, which I civilly refused; but taking a glass, I took a little of it, and drank all their healths. Some of them boisterously insisted that I should empty the glass, when the individual who had spoken with the landlady checked them, and I was excused. I was then requested to sing, which I did; and every one in the company gave me a few coppers—it was such a sum as I had never before possessed. It was all my own, delightful feeling!—I could scarcely keep my hand out of my pocket; for there was no blind Willie or Bellino to take it from me, and I almost felt that I was no longer poor Charlie.

I retired to my seat by the fire, after I had sung a few songs, anxiously awaiting the result of the landlady's application; but they were so much engrossed in their own debates, that my heart began to sink as they began to drop away. I feared I was forgotten; and they were nearly all gone, when Thomas Ross, the individual to whom the landlady had spoken, came to me: 'Poor boy,' said he, 'come to me at my shop to-morrow forenoon, and I will see what I can do for you, if you behave yourself.' I thanked him for his kindness, and he left the room.

I went to bed that night with a feeling that I had never enjoyed before; I could scarcely refrain from leaping and bounding about the room, I was so happy at the prospect of being enabled to earn my bread by my own industry. I was weary of the vagabond-life I had been forced to lead. Again, the money I had just received was a temptation to continue it on my own account, without a master to take the whole from me; small as the sum was, it appeared a great one, and been won without toil; with these thoughts revolving in my mind, I fell asleep.

The instructions and example I had got from Annie were by this time nearly forgotten. I first became careless while with Willie; and in Bellino's service, where the worst of examples was before me, all pious feelings had forsaken me. But now—I think it was partly suggested by a dream—old thoughts came back upon me, and I rose up unconsciously, and found myself upon my knees repeating the prayers Annie had taught me. At length I crept into bed, and again fell asleep.

Early in the forenoon I waited on Mr Ross, and was kindly received. From the questions he put, I saw he was suspicious of me from the wandering life I had led, and the people I had been forced to live among; he was a member of the Secession Church, and a very religious man; but thanks to Annie's training and my good memory, I answered to his satisfaction. He inquired not of the songs and ballads I knew but put questions from the Catechism and Scriptures; and I raised his wonder at the number of texts and passages I could repeat.

He then said: 'Charlie, I will be your friend, if you behave yourself; I have not at present an empty loom, but you can fill pins until I get one. In the meantime, you shall have bed and board for your work, and as soon as I can, I will place you on the same terms as my other learners; you will for the first year get the half of your earnings, and after that you shall be free, and get all you can work for.' I thanked him for his kindness, and that forenoon commenced my new mode of life. For the first few days I felt my situation very irksome, the change being great; but still, I plied my task with energy, and pleased my master. Gradually I became reconciled, and filled my pins

with a lighter heart than ever I had sung; and the hours passed like minutes. I knew my work, and for the first time in my life felt happy and independent of the caprice of others; I was in a new world, where all around me were busy and happy. At times they sung, or discussed politics or the passing events; every one was a statesman in his own estimation, and saw no difficulty in setting to rights both church and state, if they were allowed to do so so. At times, we would practice psalmody, for all Mr Ross's men were members of the church: and I soon picked up the psalm-tunes, and was often leader when they were in the mood, for the recently revived religious impression was still strong upon me.

In a few weeks I was seated at my loom, and received instructions from my master with whom I was a favourite. I joined in family-worship, regularly attended church, and felt a peace of mind and calm happiness I cannot describe: my time passed as in a pleasant dream. In a short period, I could maintain myself, and at the end of my engagement I was comparatively rich; I had a chest of my own, containing changes linen and of clothes; I was independent, and could more than support myself.

I had no wish to leave my benefactor, and I agreed still to work for him. I had formed friendships with some of my fellow workmen of sober habits; for I am sorry to say, several of them were very improvident and dissipated, and were only a shade above the inhabitants of the garret, my first associates. My companion and fellow-lodger was James White; he had been the child of misfortune, like myself, in his earlier years, but unlike me, had been born to brighter prospects. His father, who was in business for himself, and was thought to be prosperous, died after a long sickness; and at his death, from losses and misfortunes, he left his widow and two children in poverty. The widow sunk under her privations and her grief; and James, only five years of age, and his sister younger, were sent to the charity work-house. From what he told me, I must have been far happier under good Annie than they were under the tyranny of the keeper and matron; for although I suffered toil, cold, and privation, I was not flogged and crushed like him at the caprice of unrestrained cruelty. His sister, along with many others of tender age, sank under their cruel treatment, and this without inquiry. The matron was the harshest of any one in the house—a perfect tigress.

My heart sickened at the narrative he gave me of the sufferings of the workhouse children under their unchecked officials, whose feeling seemed to be—they are beggars, it is good enough for them; they are not starved, they are clothed, and have a house above their head—what more do they require? The statements I have heard from James often made my blood boil in my veins, child as I was of destitution and poverty.

I will not dwell longer on his workhouse sufferings. At twelve, he was sent from the house as an apprentice to a weaver, where he was overwrought and almost starved; and on the Sabbath confined all day, lest he should run away. But where could he run to? If he returned to the house, his complaint was unheeded and undressed; he was punished for running away, and then sent back to his oppressor, now backed in his cruelty. After several unsuccessful attempts, he made his escape and reached Glasgow, where he soon obtained employment. He was now twenty years of age, seven of which he had spent in the workhouse, yet he read worse than I, who was taught only by Annie. He was not dissipated, but improvident; not inclined to read, yet eager after moral information, and very acute in the arguments that often occurred in the shop. Although he earned more money than I did, he was often in my debt before his web was out of the loom; and when he began his rambles, he was neither better nor worse than many of the others. Like most of them, he could earn money, but could not take care of it.

I was now an expert tradesman, and earned as much as any one in the shop, till I was gradually led into all their habits. Being a good singer, my company was much courted; my evenings were oftener spent in the tavern than in my lodgings. I was called by the landlady a good, steady lad; for I settled regularly every Saturday evening my weekly bill, and owed no one anything; content if I had a few shillings over in my pocket for my extra expenses until the web was in, never thinking I was one behind. If I fell sick, or was out of employment I had not a single pound in store to provide for the casualty; such was the improvident manner in which we almost all lived, both married and single.

There were sixteen of us in Mr Ross's shop, all living as I did, except Allan Roy. He was careful and penurious, never allowing himself the smallest comfort or relaxation, and scarcely taking what was necessary to sustain him at his toil; he seemed to have no other enjoyment in life, than to hoard money for its own sake. He seldom joined in any of our discussions; his mind was too intent upon his web. I never could draw from him what was his ultimate aim; for he was void of ambition, and had no intention of becoming a master himself; although he could have done so at any time, for he had a good sum of money in his possession, which he hoarded up, fearful of trusting it in