

RUTHVEN'S WARD



BY
FLORENCE MARRIAT.

CHAPTER I.—[CONTINUED.]

"Well, I've no alternative but to commit you for theft," said the magistrate, "with the option of a fine—three weeks, or a penalty of five shillings. Remove the prisoner, constable, and call the next case."

The hearts of the populace burned within them at the sentence, but beyond a low murmur, immediately checked by the cry of "Silence," they dared give their indignation no vent. Ruthven's heart burned in unison with theirs. That delicate, frightened-looking child, who had evidently neither understood the offense for which she had been brought there, nor the punishment that had been awarded it, to be sent to prison for three weeks, to herd with the lowest and vilest of her sex, and then to be released—for what end? Ruthven knew what he longed to do, but false shame and the fear of ridicule prevented him for a moment from carrying it out. But a long wail of terror, as the constables were removing the prisoner from the dock, decided him.

"Oh, sir! don't take me to prison," she screamed. "Don't take me to prison. I'll never do it again, indeed I won't. But I was so hungry. Let me off this time, and I'll never do it again—no! not if I die—indeed I won't." She was appealing frantically to the policemen, as if they had the power to mitigate her sentence, as they lifted her, not unkindly, but decidedly, off the scene of action.

"Remove the prisoner!" repeated the magistrate, angrily, as her shrieks reached his ears; and Ruthven's mind was made up. He went round and met the constable at the other entrance.

"I wish to pay this fine," he said, "and will look after your prisoner for a few days. I suppose it's allowable?"

"Of course it's allowable, sir. So long as the fine is paid, that's all we have to do with the matter. So now you'd better thank the gentleman for your liberty, and see you don't get into no more scrapes. D'ye hear?" and with a shake to Miss Peg O'Reilly, and a touch of his helmet to Ruthven in acknowledgment of a douceur over and above the stipulated fine, the constable went about his business, and left the liberated captive alone with her benefactor.

Ruthven felt himself to be in an awkward position. There were spectators to the interview, and he did not know what to do—what was best to be done. But the little girl was gazing up into his face with her wistful blue eyes, and the look of want and starvation upon her pinched features did more for her than any amount of elocution could have effected.

"Come here—Peg—what's your name? Are you very hungry still?"

"I'm allays hungry," the child replied, in a frightened whisper.

"You can speak out to me. I won't hurt you. Have you no friends nor home?"

"None, sir. I never did have."

"How do you live? Who feeds you?"

"I picks up things."

"And where do you sleep?"

"Under the market arches, and sometimes in a doorway."

"And aren't you cold at night?"

The girl only shivered for reply, and crossed her naked, dirty feet one over the other. As she did so, Ruthven marked they were covered with sores.

"Would you like to be respectable, Peg?"

"What's that, sir?"

"To be kept clean, and have warm clothes, and a good dinner every day."

"Shouldn't I! But no one won't give them to me."

"I will, if you'll be a good girl in return. Will you come with me, Peg?"

"Along with you! Of course I will, if you'll take me. Why, it's all because of you I ain't in prison. I'd go with you to the other end of the world, and be glad to."

"All right. I'll see what I can do for you. Here, cab!"

He hailed two cabs at the same moment, and, placing the child in one, took up his own position in the other. He felt very benevolently disposed—foolishly so, as he already began to tell himself; but he could not quite go the length of driving in the same cab as Miss O'Reilly. As the two vehicles took their way toward Kensington, Ruthven experienced some decided qualms of fear as to how Mrs. Garrett would receive the new addition to the house-

hold. She had told him only that morning that, sorely as it went against her grain to have a young girl racketing about the house, she felt she could not go on much longer without some help.

"For I ain't so young as I was, Mr. James, and the work Master Hamilton makes is past believing, what with his litter and his boots; and so, though I always says gals is not worth their salt, with their himpudence and their break-ages, still some one I must have, or I shall lay up altogether, and the work will be at a stand-still."

Ruthven had suggested the assistance of a boy instead.

"Lor! Mr. James, as if one boy in the house wasn't more than enough nuisance already. No, sir; no boys for me, if you please. If help I must have, let it be with as little trouble as may be; so, with your leave, I'll look out for a respectable young gal to do the scrubbing and such like for me."

Ruthven had remembered this speech as he stood in the police court. Mrs. Garrett wanted a young girl, and here was a young girl in want of a home. Why shouldn't she do for Mrs. Garrett?

It all seemed very feasible at the moment, but when he had completed the bargain, and was driving to Kensington to introduce his protegee to his housekeeper, he felt that he might perhaps have been a little hasty. However, before he had had full time for repentance, the brace of cabs rattled up to his front door, and Mrs. Garrett appeared upon the threshold, ready to welcome the apparent visitors.

CHAPTER II.

NOTHING could exceed the housekeeper's surprise at seeing her master return home at so unusual a time of the day, except, perhaps, the intelligence which followed it.

"Bless my soul, Mr. James! nothing's the matter, I hope? You haven't broke your leg, nor heard bad news, nor had any misfortune, surely?"

"No, Mrs. Garrett, my legs are all right, thank you," replied Ruthven, leaping to the ground; "but look here! I want to speak to you for a moment," and, linking his arm through that of the old woman, he led her back into the passage.

"You told me, this morning, that you wanted a girl to help with the housework, and so I've brought you one."

"You've brought me a gal? Lor! Mr. James, you're joking!"

"I am not, indeed. She's in the other cab; and I want you to be very kind to her, and look after her well, and all that sort of thing, for me."

"But you'll excuse me, sir, for asking. Who is she?—for you can't bring any sort of gal into a respectable house like this, to knock about the things and damage every article she touches."

Ruthven considered a moment. He felt it would not do, all at once, to initiate Mrs. Garrett into the antecedents of Miss Peg O'Reilly, and decided that a little innocent deception was necessary to win the housekeeper over to his cause.

"Now, listen to me, Garrett. I ask you to take charge of this girl for me as a favor. I know she is not all that she should be, in outward appearance at least, to form your companion; but, with your ready wit, you can remedy that in a few hours, and I have a peculiar reason for wishing to befriend the child."

"You know her people, then, Mr. James?" said the housekeeper, suspiciously.

"Of course—of course," he answered, hastily; "and all about her. She's been terribly misused and half starved; so feed her up well, and don't let her out of your sight; and here's a five-pound note. Get some clothes, and make her look decent as soon as you can; and—that's all. You'll find her in the other cab."

Saying which, Ruthven leaped back with all speed into his own vehicle, only desirous to get out of ear-shot before Mrs. Garrett should introduce herself to Peg O'Reilly. He could "do good by stealth," but he certainly "blushed to find it fame."

As soon as her master's cab had driven away, the housekeeper beckoned to the second one to advance, and descended the steps to welcome Mr. Ruthven's protegee.

What was her astonishment to find, sitting in a scared attitude at the bottom of the cab, what appeared at first sight to be a bundle of rags, and proved on nearer inspection to be a half-starved, weird-looking child, with filthy hair and skin, and a look of intense

fright upon her features. The dirt disgusted the precise old woman beyond measure; but the evident fear of the poor girl was in excited her compassion.

"Lor! bless me! This can't be the gal as Mr. James meant?"

"Where's the gentleman? Him as is so kind to me?" demanded Peg, anxiously.

"The gentleman's gone away and left you to my charge, so you had better get down and come indoors with me."

"You won't send me to prison?" demanded Miss Peg O'Reilly.

"Bless the child! what are you talking about? Here, come, get into the house quick, do!—before we have all the neighbors' heads out of the windows staring at us."

And having bundled Peg out of the cab, Mrs. Garrett paid the driver's fare, with magnificent disregard of his laughter at her discomfiture, and followed her new companion into the house.

"And now I just wonder where Mr. James picked you up, and what call he's got to befriend you," she soliloquized, as she regarded her.

"He got me out of the perlice court the gentleman did," replied Peg, starting at the unusual luxury by which she was surrounded.

"Why! you've never a thief, I hope," cried Mrs. Garrett.

"Yes, ma'am, I am," said the girl, unhesitatingly. "I took three onions, 'cause I was so 'lear,' and the perlice-man saw me and took me off to the lock-up, and they would have sent me to prison, too, only the kind gentleman brought me here instead."

"Just like Mr. James," murmured the housekeeper; but she was a good old countrywoman, and Peg's story shocked her, less on her own account than on that of the girl's.

"Poor child!" she exclaimed, "it would have been just like 'em to have sent you there, a set of blundering old fools! And all for the sake of three onions! Hadn't you nothing better to eat, then?"

"Please, ma'am, I haven't had nothing to eat for three days at least."

"And what's your mother about to serve you so?"

"I haven't got a mother, nor a father, nor any one."

"Where do you live?"

"Anywhere's. I walk about the streets all day, and at night I sleep on the door-steps—only the policeman will make me keep moving about from one to the other all night."

"It gives me the shudders to think on," said Mrs. Garrett. "And Mr. James has actually picked up a gal out of the very streets to be his under-house maid. Why, we may all be robbed and murdered in our beds. Oh, these men—these men! They are so scatter-brained, there's no making head nor tail of them."

Her attention was diverted by Peg pulling at the skirt of her gown.

"I won't rob and murder, please, ma'am, I'd be glad to do something for the gentleman that brought me here. He looks so real kind, he does."

"And so he is, child—the best gentleman that ever stepped on the earth. What's your name?"

"They call me Peg O'Reilly in the market, so I suppose that's it. Some one told me once that my mother's name was Nan O'Reilly, and she sold matches, and she died in the work-house."

"And why didn't you stay in the work-house, then? Wouldn't they keep you?"

"I stayed there till I was ten, and then a lady, who kept a grocer's shop, wanted me to be her servant; but she beat and starved me terrible, and so I run away from her and tried to get my own living."

"And a nice business you seem to have made of it. However, if you behave, you're provided for now; so you may think yourself lucky. But come along into the kitchen and I'll get you something to eat. I must give you a warm bath and get you some other clothes before Master Hamilton comes home, or you'll frighten him out of the house again."

"Who's Master Hamilton? Another gentleman?"

"Well, he'll be a gentleman some day, I suppose, if he lives long enough, and conducts himself as such; but he's only a lad at present. He's Mr. Ruthven's nephew; but no more like him in face nor sperrit, than you are."

When Peg O'Reilly had bread and cheese and cold meat set before her, she fell to work with a ravenous hunger that made the tears rise to good Mrs. Garrett's eyes, and rendered the task that followed the meal less unpalatable than it otherwise would have been.

The girl could understand the uses of food and drink; but those of the bath were less familiar to her, and had it not been for the housekeeper's decision, might not have proved so efficacious as they did.

"Now, I can't have no nonsense!" she exclaimed, as she saw Peg stepping into the warm water as daintily as though it had been the broken flints her bare feet were accustomed to traverse. "Into it you go, head over ears, and don't come out again until I've had my will of you. I've never had a speck of dirt in this house, and you don't begin it, I can tell you."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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