

THE JUDGE CONVICTED—FOUNDED ON A FACT.

By William Comstock.

The morning was dark, and the snow lay in piles about the street. A severe coldness was in the atmosphere, and as the bleak wind whistled around the gables of the Court-house, it seemed to sing of other days, in melancholy cadence. It seemed to tell of broken hearts and of every description of human suffering. The wanderers abroad wrapped their cloaks more closely about them, and shivered as much with nervous agitation as with the cold. I was abroad myself on that day; and, although I was at the time a mere youth, yet I have never forgotten the impression which the events of a few hours made upon me. I had been brought up in the strictest manner. I had scarcely been permitted to look upon vice; and to gross immorality I was an utter stranger. But on this bleak and melancholy morning I chanced to pass by the Police Court. I saw several persons hastening into the building in which the court was held, and in order to escape the severe cold I also entered. I had never been in a court of justice before, and I looked around with no small curiosity upon the various arrangements within. I stood outside of the railing with several others, mostly persons of low character, who appeared to have come in for no other purpose but to warm themselves. The judge was on the bench. He was a grave, dignified man, about forty-five years of age. The other officers of the court were in the places assigned for them, and a universal silence reigned on every side. At length the judge seemed to start from a reverie and cried, 'Bring in the prisoner.' An officer immediately seized his pole and went out the door. The few spectators now started up from the lethargy into which they had fallen, and began to look with some interest toward the door at which it was expected the prisoner would enter. They did not wait long before the door opened, and the officer returned, followed by a woman of most wretched appearance. I shuddered and trembled until the railing by which I held vibrated beneath my hand. I had not supposed that human nature could become so utterly cast away and degraded. Could it be possible that the 'human form divine' could ever present such an image of squalid misery? She staggered into the room, and I caught a glimpse of her face. Her face and bosom were covered with filth. Large blotches disfigured her every feature, and around one of her eyes was a circle of black the consequence of a brawl, in which it appears she had been engaged at the time of her arrest. On her head was a straw bonnet, through which the winds found free access, and from under its ragged crown a few tangled gray locks straggled forth. Her dress was insufficient to keep the piercing air from her person, and her red swollen feet were half exposed by the apology for shoes which she could hardly be said to wear. She did not appear to be in the least abashed, but advanced directly to the stand, drew up her rags around her, and, throwing back her straw bonnet, looked steadfastly at her accuser. He was one of the town watch; and, having been sworn, he stated that he had found the prisoner fighting and making loud outcries in the street—that she appeared to be very much intoxicated, and was very impudent.

At this stage of the proceedings the judge asked the watch-man if he had ever seen her in that situation before.

'No sir,' returned the witness. 'It is easy to see by her appearance that she is a woman of abandoned character; but I never saw her before in my life, and desire never to see her again.'

The judge then asked if any body knew where she belonged. An officer arose and stated that he did not know where she belonged, but he knew that she came to town only a few days ago. He also said that the quarrel in which she had been engaged arose from the circumstance, that her landlady, who was very little better than herself, had turned her into the street at midnight, for stealing.

'Stealing!' cried the wretched woman, looking at the last speaker. 'Perhaps you call it stealing; but if to take a rug to cover over the blue and shivering limbs of my poor child is stealing, then—'

'Your child!' cried the judge, 'have you a child?'

Every eye was fixed in surprise when the vagrant opened an old plaid cloak and disclosed beneath its shreds the pale starved countenance of a girl, who appeared not more than six years of age, but who in reality had seen ten miserable Summers and Winters. If the appearance of the mother had been supremely disgusting, that of the girl was so pitiful and wo-begone, that I felt the tears gush into my eyes and my bosom heaved with an emotion which I could not restrain. Even the judge appeared melted, when he saw this little skeleton frame clinging to the waist of its miserable mother, its eyes wildly and timidly cast around her as if she feared that she should be separated from the disgusting wretch who gave her birth.

The judge quickly recovered his firmness however, as if afraid to exhibit a weakness unbecoming his station. He said in a stern voice! 'Has not this woman been here before, Woman, have not I seen you before?'

She turned at the sound of his voice and fixed her eyes upon him in one long and steady gaze. 'Those who had fair view of her countenance say that she had not looked long in the face of the judge before a sudden paleness overspread her features, and her eyes seemed ready to burst from her head. Having surveyed the judge in silence for some time, she replied to his question in a low sepulchral voice that made me tremble, 'Yes, yes we have met before.' The peculiar tone and manner in which the prisoner uttered these simple words produced a death-like silence throughout the court-room. The spectators crowded as near to the railing as they could, and every eye was bent upon the singular wretch who stood at the bar of justice. The judge appeared at first a little struck by her strange conduct; but a man who had seen such a variety of prisoners was not likely to be thrown off his balance by any peculiarity in their conduct. He therefore proceeded with the trial, and asked her if she wished to ask the witness any questions. As he spoke in a sterner tone than he had done before, the little girl, beginning to be apprehensive that evil threatened her mother, wept and sobbed audibly. The prisoner proceeded to ask the witness a few questions and now much surprise was evinced by the officers of the court, at the choice language which proceeded from the swollen and chapped lips of so unprepossessing a figure. The questions were answered by the watchman; but there was a bungling hesitancy in his replies, which seemed to intimate that he had found in the squalid wretch before him a more ingenious questioner than he had anticipated. In short, so unsatisfactory were his replies, that the judge asked if there was not another witness in that case. No other witness was at hand, and therefore the judge turned to hold a short colloquy with the prisoner. 'Are you not ashamed,' said he, 'to let that little girl starve while you are able to work and maintain her decently?'

'Who would give work to me?' returned the other, fixing the same earnest gaze once more on the face of the judge.

'It is your own fault, if you have arrived at such a degraded condition that nobody will receive you into their house,' cried the judge. 'But you seem to have seen better days. You have an alias to your name, I understand. What is your other name?'

'It is not to be pronounced in such a place at this,' said she still fixing her unquailing eyes on the magistrate. 'You might recollect it if you heard it.'

'Enough,' said the judge. 'You acknowledge that you have been in this court before. I thought I had a faint recollection of your features.'

'Ah!' cried she, elevating her hand, and her head, 'we have met before.'

'You confess that you have been brought before me the second time,' said the judge. 'What have you to say for yourself why you should not be sentenced to six months in prison?'

The prisoner looked down and remained silent a moment, when she again looked upon the judge and said, 'I will tell you where I came from, and all about it. You shall also know my true name.'

'Proceed, then,' said the magistrate, placing himself in an attitude for listening, and see that you tell me the truth.'

'O, yes, I will tell you the truth,' cried she, with a low laugh. 'Ye may not be always so fond of hearing the truth.'

'You waste time,' said the judge. The prisoner stilled her child, and proceeded.

'The present condition to which you see me reduced is the consequence of treachery in one whom I supposed to be my lover.'

'A very common plea,' interrupted the judge. 'Your lover must have been greatly enamored of such a beautiful object as you are. I admire his taste.'

'He was considered respectable,' said the prisoner, 'and I thought him respectable. Nay, he is to this day regarded as a very respectable gentleman.'

'Where does he live?' said the judge.

'You shall know all in good time,' returned she. 'My father was a wealthy husbandman in one of the Middle States. I was his only child, and his heart was bound up in me. When a cloud crossed my brow, he was miserable until I appeared cheerful again.'

'Is the old man alive now?' said the judge. 'Truly, he must be proud of such a daughter.'

'He is not alive,' cried she. 'No no. His gray hairs have gone down in sorrow to the grave. The seducer came. I believed the tales he told me. He swore eternal constancy. He promised to take me to the city, and introduce me to his friends, who were some of the first in the land. I thought there was no guile in his mouth. My innocence.—'

'This a tale which you have picked up from some novel,' said the judge. 'I'll be bound that you have told it before in half the courts in the country. It is very improbable that you were ever seduced. You have wilfully taken up this course of life. For shame! Take her away, carriage stable.'

'No no—not yet,' cried the prisoner. 'I can prove what I say. I can bring such evidence that the seducer of my innocence and the murderer of my father shall himself own his crimes, and stand before you in all the horror of guilt.'

Observing that every one in court was impressed by her earnest manner and being himself strangely interested in the fate of this wretched being, the judge motioned to her to continue her story.

'The crafty man who wrought my ruin,' said she, 'belonged to——. He was a lawyer who was said to be rising in his profession, and whose personal and mental qualities were calculated to captivate the heart of a young simple maiden, such as I was then.'

'How long ago was that?' said the judge.

'When I first saw this bad man,' said she, 'it was eleven years ago.'

'But you are now fifty I should say.'

'No, sir: Sorrow and sin have made dreadful inroads upon my constitution since my father died. I am but thirty-one years of age. It was eleven years ago, last October, since I first—'

'Stop! stop!' said the judge. 'This cannot be true. You cannot have sunk so low in so short a time. You are older, much older than that.'

It was observed that the judge pronounced these words with a great deal of emphasis, and that his countenance was suffused with blood. He was supposed to be in passion with the prisoner, on account of her attempting to deceive him with respect to her age. She quietly answered him, but fixed her eyes on his face as she did so, 'do not deceive you. There are those who understand deception better than I. I say that this lawyer led me step by step, until he effected my ruin. Since then I have been a cheerless and homeless wanderer, with the poor child, over the world. I have sometimes subsisted on the wages of sin. At first I was obliged to have recourse to such business, in order to support myself and my perishing little one. At length poverty deprived me of what little pride I had. I became wholly abandoned. God! to what misery has one false step reduced me! The eyes of the judge now glanced frequently at the man, and at every glance his countenance became