







Family Reading THE RUINED POTTER From Dickens's Household Words

James Fielding was the son of a potter, bred up to his father's trade. He married young—long before he could keep a wife—and with both his parents' consent, or rather with their forgiveness, as they could not help themselves. For, as they said, it was very natural, and he might as well be worse: 'twas to be sure, the first time, as 'twas like he wouldn't do it again. And so they cordially shook hands with him, and pledged the pretty bride in a flagon of old Burton, and were both present at the first child's christening. But the cholera came soon afterwards, and took off the old man and his wife. This was the opening scene of James Fielding's sufferings—want, penitence, and death. His wife and himself were soon afterwards both seized with the disorder, and though they recovered slowly, it was only to find their father and mother, and first-born child, removed from their once comfortable home to the churchyard, and they themselves with feeble bodies and accumulated debts, which had run on wildly during sickness. First, James was put into jail for the doctor's bill, and then the landlord distrained for rent, and turned them on the world; and so they were ruined.

To be in prison never serves a man; he gets a habit of shifting and shuffling, and leaning, and talking, and idling; he has the short hand-in-the-pocket walk, and the hang-down look of a jail companion; he is never a man again. James Fielding came out of Stafford jail a changed character; more clever and less capable of work, daintier, but not so refined, prouder, but not more honorable; the edge was taken from the mind and given to the appetites; nevertheless, he was a fond father, for he shortly became one again, and a loving husband to a wife who doted on him. But a thoroughly fallen man seldom rights himself, and bankruptcy is a break-up for life in the constitution of successful industry. James Fielding labored, but his toil was fruitless; he found friends, but by one way or other, he let in everybody who had anything to do with him. By degrees, he got, as was natural, a very bad character, and, as is generally the case under such circumstances, without altogether deserving it. He was an unfortunate, but not an evil man; and we all know how falling bodies quicken in their descent.

Still, he was a man born to suffer, and to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow. Men of all countries, stations, and fortunes, labour—from the serf to the lord—and Fielding's destiny was only that of his sex. But the gentle, pretty girl, whom he had taken from her father's home to comfort and cherish, to keep his fireside clean, and to nurse his little ones around him—her lot was not cast by God for labor, for toil and moil, and anguish; yet who can tell what arrows of grief pierced that woman's heart during her twelve years' apprenticeship to widowhood! Who shall describe the unwomanly miseries, alas, too common in England! of her daily shifts and struggles, her pigmy gaunt looks, her thread-bare clothes insufficient to protect her from the winter weather, her hard day-labour, her sharp endurance of her children's hunger, and forgetfulness of her own; her long sad catalogue of distresses, compared with that of the child at the breast, are nothings, being feminine sufferings.

This poor we-be-gone mother stood before God curate Godfrey, one of a noiseless wayfaring body of Christian men who make little stir beyond their own parish, but there are constantly felt and heard of; the true disciples of the Father of the poor, the world's first teacher of quiet charity. 'He is good, first indeed he be,' said Mary Fielding, speaking of the potter, who had been down some weeks in a low fever. 'This had to lose the father of one's children, I could ha' borne any stroke but this. Every where is a church-yard now—the life is dug out of me.' 'Do not murmur, but think of the past. I remember christening some of those children, when he and you were full of health and joy. In this journey of life, Mary, there is no hill without its hollow. Your neighbour Susan Jackson will not have to mourn the loss of a husband, for she has never known the love and protection of one; and when she goes, she will not leave orphans to grieve for her. But for all that, Susan is very lonely and destitute, and says nobody cares for her.' 'Mayhap, but Susan Jackson can't be sorry for what she never had and poor folk didn't ought to be fanciful. 'Tis me, sir, partin' wi' my husband that should feel.'

'Well, well, we must do something for the children, Mary.' 'Oh, sir, I did na come for that. What I want is work. You ha' come atween us an' death, many's a time. But indeed, what I am here for, is, afore James goes I wish he could see you, sir, an' talk wi' you a bit. His mind be strange an' uncomfortable like, about religion.'

'I thought him a believer, Mary.' 'Mayhap he be; but men tell their wives what, if they could, they would hide from God; an' I ha' heard him say awful things; he ar always so courageous like. Howsoever his hour be come, an' he ha' loosed his darin', and believes just like a child. I thought if he could only see you, sir.'

'Mr. Godfrey rang the bell. An aged but notable servant woman came. Martha, bring Mrs. Fielding a little warm bread and milk.' 'Oh, no, no, sir! 'Tis only my way, what you see in my face; I war always palish like—leastways this many a day.' Martha, who had promptly obeyed her master, returned in a few minutes with a basin.

'There, take that gently, Mary; it will warm you.' 'Will you forgive me, sir? Indeed I cannot. It 'ud choke me. The children—the poor hungry children, sir!' 'They shall be thought of.' Mr. Godfrey left the room, returning shortly after with a long surtout buttoned closely up, and a small parcel in his hand. 'This contains a loaf, Mary—and something else—you know what to do with it. Let me have the ticket when I can, which will be in the course of the evening. Leave me now.'

The comforted mother looked on Heaven's minister, and then up to heaven, and passed noiselessly through the small door, with faith, hope, and maternal love—the three strongest impulses of the heart—to support her. She had had the only full and perfect lesson of religion—charity. But she did not know, until she got to the parsonage, that the poor curate had taken his only waistcoat from his back to feed her children. Then, indeed, the tide of religion came strong upon her. So true it is, that one act of kindness is worth a volume of sermons in converting people. The curate's vest was a baptismal robe to the unregenerated spirit of Mary Fielding the freethinking potter's wife.

It was on an evening in the middle of June, that Mr. Godfrey passed along to the potter's cottage. There had been some smart refreshing showers during the day, and the grass was healthily green, and the flowers were vigorous and balmy, and here and there was the restless uneasy chirp, in the tree or hedge, of the young bird in its nest. The sheep were settling down for the night in the meadows; and the cows, after milking, were scattered over the distant pastures. At intervals there was an unyoked horse exulting in abundance and freedom. The poor saluted Mr. Godfrey as he passed, and the rich cordially greeted him, for he was universally beloved. 'All God's works are beautiful and happy,' said he to himself, as he wound among the green lanes, and gazed upon the broad benignant sky. 'Man alone makes the world miserable. I cannot think the design of Providence was to make the chief of a joyous creation wretched; there must be some key to human felicity. The departing sun shines on these dingy cottages, and the cast struggling flowers bloom cheerfully, and cast their sweetness abroad on the air. Outside is God's work; within is man's.'

ther cannot be a very bad man. I never believed you ill-disposed, Fielding.' 'No, bless thee for it, and He will bless thee. Ye ha' made me a Christian; the ways of 'e world made me an infidel long ago. A man kindly treated feels like a Christian, sir.'

'But we must give up resentments, now. I see by your countenance, you will soon meet your God. Prepare, Fielding, for that great judgment.'

'Yes, I know it will come soon, an' that ha' changed me. But, indeed, sir, I am weary of the world. If it were not for her and the children, I had gone years back.'

'The Christian religion always supposes poverty and suffering, James. Were all the world sinless and happy, the Atonement had been useless.'

'I can well believe this 'o' thea, sir. If yer wer dumb an' blind, yer han' would preach; 'tis the on'y saramin as goes home to a hungry man. Fine words be 'o' small account. But when a rich parson, or a bishop, or such as never gives an' never suffers, tells starvin' poor fellows like me to bear their crosses as the only road to heaven, it looks like humbug, sir. If heaven is to be won by poverty—artificially—noting is so easy for 'em as to give all they ha' more than enow, to feed the hungry, an' comfort the afflicted.'

Mr. Godfrey said, 'Ah, James, this is bad grace in a dying man. It is enough for every one to look to himself; to bear his own burden, and to know that in the midst of trial, and sorrow, and suffering, he can have recourse to One who knew them all on earth. This, surely, is fair comfort.' 'It is, sir. 'Tis at the point I am now, a man feels he must believe in some religion, an' there is none so nat'ral like as our own. A dyin' man is not a doubter. I wish I ha' been of this way 'o' thinkin' long ago—'twould ha' made me contented—an' a contented man is a regular man, an' a regular man is a toilsome man, an' a toilsome man is a thriving man; but when one begins in grubblin' one ends wi' sorrow. Mary dear, gi' me a drink. I feel faintish.'

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