

RUTHVEN'S WARD

BY FLORENCE MARRYAT.



CHAPTER I

MR. RUTHVEN was what his lady friends termed "very eccentric." In their eyes the chief part of his eccentricity lay in the fact of his being a bachelor and perfectly contented with the position. But that was not all. He said such awful things. He was a dramatist and cynic. His plays were the most successful of the time, but he would never allow any one to mention them to him, far less compliment him upon their popularity. They were all full of the most sentimental love scenes, and also, graceful humor, yet Mr. Ruthven, if ever he mentioned the tender scenes personally, sneered at it as a chimera of the poet's and novelist's brain—a monstrous impossibility, not to be found in this world.

Quiet, steady-going husbands did not like Ruthven to associate with their wives. They were not in the least afraid of his upholding their morality; far from it; he had never been known to flirt in his life, but they were afraid of his destroying their faith in the existence of truth and virtue.

If his own word were to be believed, he did not credit mankind with any feelings beyond those of self-gratification and aggrandizement. He ignored love and laughed at matrimony, except as a convenient contract for such parties as desired to benefit by their mutual possessions—a transaction he always ended by saying he thanked the Lord he had been preserved against. But if Mr. Ruthven did not care for marriage, neither did he set much store by riches. He was very liberal with what he earned—an inconsiderable amount—and openly aided those who considered it incumbent upon them to save. He could not see the fun of planting fig-trees for the next generation to sit under. Yet he did not spend his money on his own home, which was a very modest one, situated in an old-fashioned portion of Kensington. There he lived, in a tiny house, waited on by an ancient portly housekeeper—one of those inconvenient creatures which a man sometimes finds himself compelled to accept against his will, and does not know how to get rid of afterward without being called a brute.

Mrs. Garrett had no such trouble, however, with her husband, who always spent his evenings at his club. There he might be found, night after night, the center of a circle of admiring friends, for Ruthven, though so unpopular with the women—in consequence of an unpleasant habit he had contracted by saying what he meant—was an immense favorite with the men, who heard no such caustic, witty, stinging remarks from any other member of the Cannibal Club. With the other sex Ruthven became hard, philosophical, sometimes almost uncomplimentary, but his own knew him as he really was—thoroughly good-hearted, honest, and true; hating vice, and with a very tender spot somewhere, waiting for the right hand to probe and reveal. Another great cause for offense with the ladies against Ruthven was, that he never went to their dinner parties, and, worse still, he never answered their letters.

Many and many a fair woman had angled for that tough old heart of his in vain, for a poular dramatist, and one of the cleverest men in town, was not a parti to be let slip without an effort. Yet the coveted, cunning fish swam by them, flashing his cold, glittering scales in the sun, uncaught and unlikely to be so. The married women said he was a bear, the unmarried ones that he was a fool; but Ruthven cared not what they said. In appearance he was decidedly good-looking. His earnest, deep-souled eyes were set in a face whose features betokened three grand qualities—dignity, perspicuity, and humor; but as his short sight compelled him always to wear a pair of double eyeglasses, few people knew how much tenderness beamed in his glance and was mixed with the rest of his disposition. His age was about five-and-thirty, but his hair was already plentifully sprinkled with gray. He gave strangers more the idea of being a disappointed and soured man than anything else, and the ladies

were not slow to attribute his misanthropic temperament to his having been jilted by one of themselves; but they were wrong. Ruthven had never been jilted. His cynicism was due to the fact that he did not believe in that which he had never experienced, and the love passages which issued from his pen were drawn, as we draw pictures of heaven, from his imagination only.

If a lady, by any chance, induced Ruthven to appear at an evening party, she was always more elated at her success than the event seemed to warrant; for he was generally either brusque or silent whilst there, and invariably withdrew himself to join his beloved Cannibals as soon as it ever was possible to do so.

And his hostess, could she have looked in upon him afterward, would have been surprised and disgusted to find how agreeable and talkative he could become directly he entered his proper element and felt himself to be at home. Just as those of his acquaintances, who thought him "so terribly sarcastic" that they hardly dare open their mouths in his presence, would have been amazed to hear Mrs. Garrett scold him for letting his breakfast grow cold whilst he lay in bed, or for remaining in damp boots with his feet upon one of the best chairs whilst he discoursed eloquently on all the cardinal virtues for the benefit of his nephew, young Hamilton Shore. That young Hamilton Shore was Mr. Ruthven's nephew every one had been told, and some believed; but no one knew how he came to be so—Ruthven's antecedents and family history being alike unknown in the world of London.

The majority of his acquaintances—according to the usual charity displayed by those who benefit by all we have to give them, and make the worst of everything we do in return—were bold enough to hint there was a closer connection between Ruthven and his protegee than he chose to confess; and he never took the trouble to contradict them. He had said that Hamilton Shore was his nephew, and what society chose to believe on the subject was a matter of supreme indifference to him.

The lad was now sixteen, and, having shown a disposition to enter the law, had been removed from the public school and was working under a tutor somewhere in the vicinity of his uncle's house. Except at breakfast-time he and Ruthven saw but little of each other; but he was under the special charge of Mrs. Garrett, who gave him his supper when he returned home of an evening, and generally looked after him.

He was a fine, handsome lad, tall and upright, with wide-open blue eyes, and fair, curly hair—bearing no resemblance whatever to his uncle. On rare occasions he appeared by Ruthven's side in the stalls of the theater, and he always attracted much attention from the friends of the latter when he did so; but his uncle did not encourage the practice. Like most men who have passed through the crucible of the world, he did not see the necessity of being scorched by its flames, and wished to save Hamilton from too early an acquaintance with its evil. He had been burned himself too often not to dread the fire for his nephew.

So young Shore was still considered and treated as a mere child, at which he was sometimes more than disposed to grumble.

Ruthven, who usually sat up writing half the night, seldom left his bed till eleven or twelve o'clock in the day, when, after a desultory breakfast, he would saunter down to the Strand and spend his afternoon among the theatrical world of London, being as well known in every lobby and greenroom as the manager himself.

It was on one particular day in spring when, having passed some hours in the way described, he was walking quietly down a street in the city in which one of our principal police courts is situated. There was an amused smile upon his face, the smile of a man who has heard something which excites his ridicule either by its absurdity or its untruth.

The fact is, Lord Lupton had just met and congratulated him on his supposed engagement to Cissy Vanilla, the prettiest and most popular burlesquer on the boards. His lordship had appeared to imagine that it was the most natural thing in the world that the well-known dramatist should be about to contract an alliance with the well-known actress and that he was a very lucky fellow to get her. Ruthven had acknowledged the possible luck, while he denied the fact, but his lip curled inwardly the while. He and Cissy Vanilla! Where would the world's folly stop? Last month he had been accused of losing his heart to Mrs. Futtlerley.

Next week, in all probability, he should hear his name linked with that of Signora Scandalati, or some other prominent female. Why could they not leave him alone—he who troubled his head so little about paying attention to any of them? If his detractors could only have looked into Ruthven's heart at that moment they certainly would not have put themselves out of the way to invent a destiny for him any longer.

As Ruthven arrived at the police court he perceived there was a large crowd at its entrance—so unusually large a one, in fact, that it induced him to ask the policeman in attendance the reason of it.

"It's one of them spiritual cases coming on, sir; a doctor to be tried for him-position, and the hevidence against him given by a member of parliament."

Ruthven immediately decided upon going in to hear the trial. It was a common habit of his to attend the police and law courts when anything of interest took place. His profession was the study of mankind, and he knew of no better arena for the pursuit of it. So he turned short round and entered the court. It was very crowded in anticipation of the coming case, and for some minutes he could hardly get standing room, and of what was going on in front of him he had no idea, except from the remarks of the people, who were not complimentary to the cause of justice.

"Shame!" exclaimed one man, sturdily.

"If she did do it, what harm?" said another.

"She's a mere child to look at," remarked a third.

"Silence in the court!" was shrieked out by the clerk in office.

"What is it all about?" demanded Ruthven, pushing his way to the front rank.

There in the dock was a pitiable sight. Held up between two policemen, because she trembled so she could not stand, was a young girl, whose age was put down in the charge-sheet as thirteen, but who, by reason of her attenuated appearance, did not look more than ten or eleven. Her small, white, pinched face, from which two immense blue eyes stared tearfully at the magistrate, was filled with terror; her rough and tangled hair, which should have been flaxen, but was so begrimed with dirt as to appear what artists would term a neutral tint, hung down upon her half-naked, bony shoulders; and her ragged cotton gown was scarcely sufficient for decency. She looked like a half-starved, hunted fawn, with those wild, pitiful, entreating eyes, and her whole appearance filled Ruthven's breast with so much compassion that he listened with interest to hear what charge was brought against her. He concluded it would be theft, and so it was—of what other crime could such a child be guilty? But the evidence given against her by one of the policemen was certainly of an aggravated character.

"Please your worship," he commenced, after having been sworn, "I was on my beat last evening along Little Peccadillo Street—"

"Speak out," said the magistrate, testily. The policeman grew red, cleared his throat, and recommenced.

"I was on my beat in Little Peccadillo Street—"

"You've said that before," interrupted the magistrate.

"When I see this young gal, your worship, stooping by some pailings outside a house; and when I came up with her she had got 'er 'ands full of onions, which she had stole inside the pailings, and—"

"Only three," articulated the pale lips of the child in the dock.

"What does she say?" interrupted the magistrate.

"She said it was only three onions as she'd got, your worship."

"Only three! Three is as bad as thirty. What more, constable?"

"Nothing in particular, your worship. She was thieving the onions—not the first time by many, I know—and I took 'er in the fact."

"What's the prisoner got to say for herself?"

"What 'ave you got to say for yourself? You can speak to his worship, if you will," repeated one of the constables to the criminal.

"Please, sir, I was so hungry!"

"Hungry! nonsense. Hunger is no excuse for crime. Where does this girl live, constable? What's her name? Has she got no parents?"

"Her name is Peg O'Reilly, your worship, and she's got no parents as she knows of; and she ain't got any friends, nor any home in particular, neither; she gets her living about the streets."

The magistrate frowned visibly. Ruthven was watching every phase of the farce through his double eyeglasses.

"Ha! very bad! very bad indeed! Does she attend the School-Board?"

"No, your worship."

"Been vaccinated?"

"'Ave you been vaccinated?" demanded the policeman in charge.

"Whacked," said the prisoner, mistaking the word; "oh, yes, sir, often."

The mournful tones went through Ruthven's toughened heart.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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