

A Convict's Gratitude by Andrew Forrester, Jr.

ABOUT four years ago I had occasion to call upon a solicitor in Westminster, and, in the usual manner, sent my name in from the clerks' office to the principal's sitting-room. This it is perhaps needless to inform the reader is a practice adopted by solicitors to avoid unpleasant *rencontres*. The debtor and creditor, or plaintiff and defendant, who sometimes entertain a lively animosity towards one another, thus avoid collisions. If Mr. Jones, the tailor, happens to be in conference with Mr. Ferret, his attorney, when Mr. Smith, a debtor of Jones', who has been served with a writ, to recover an unsettled account, calls upon the smart lawyer, the client is always allowed to get clear off before the supplicating customer is admitted to Ferret's presence. Sometimes, however, it happens that this salutary rule of letting off one gentleman before another is asked to—"walk in" is broken. The attorney and his clerks do not imagine that the departing and the awaiting persons can be acquainted with one another, or are at least unconscious of the respective business they have with Mr. Ferret, and in the tacit belief that a casual glance will be not at all embarrassing to either party, they are suffered to meet on the passage, staircase, or lobby. An act of thoughtlessness, or want of precaution, on the occasion I speak of, led to a very disagreeable incident, although it also brought to my knowledge one of the finest illustrations of persistent gratitude that I, or perhaps the reader, ever heard of. My story, I think, fully equals that of Mr. Charles Dickens's Mr. Pip and the convict, in that able novelist's "Great Expectations." My story has also the merit of being true. The great novelist's narrative is, I suppose, a pure fiction. I am about to tell what did happen, and he has related what at best might have occurred.

After waiting about ten minutes, I was told that Mr. Goodman, the solicitor, who wished to see me, was then disengaged, and that I might walk in. As I entered the private room of this gentleman, through a door communicating with his clerk's office, another person was quitting the sanctum by a door which opened on the staircase lobby. Our eyes met, and Mr. Goodman's eyes rested upon us both. Long habit enabled me to suppress the astonishment I felt. It was not so with the retiring gentleman. My eye transfixed him. He stood for a couple of seconds with the door in his hand. During this brief space, the hues, form, and expression of his countenance changed at least half-a-dozen times. A vacant stare passed through the phase of twitching into a deep crimson blush, that itself gave way to a forced smile, and then a half-sardonic grin, which settled down into an ashy paleness, betokening that intense pain which conventional respectability endures when suddenly covered by shame. As soon as he could muster self-possession enough—that was, I calculate, about two seconds afterwards—he closed the door, and I suppose went on his way doing anything but rejoice.

Mr. Goodman and I looked at one another significantly and inquiringly. Neither of us could, however, get an answer, or a hint towards the solution of a mystery, from the other.

"Do you know that gentleman?" I was asked.

"Yes," I laconically answered.

"What do you know about him?"

“Well,” I evasively replied, “that is hardly a proper question, Mr. Goodman, because it might lead to something else, and I might almost, without knowing it, drop a clue to some of *my* clients’ confidences.”

“Nonsense,” said the solicitor, “you can’t mislead me. That man has been in trouble, and you had something to do with his tribulation. Well,” he continued, musing, “it’s no affair of mine. I don’t want to probe your secrets. I know that he is now living a respectable life, that he moves in very good society, and a kinder-hearted man I never met with.”

I began to feel curious, but said nothing. Mr. Goodman, who was an exceedingly respectable and good-natured man himself, was evidently desirous of creating a favourable opinion in my mind towards his client, proceeded.

“That man, sir, over whose career some blight has, I see, passed, who has been the victim of some profound misfortune, or it may be once perpetrated some offence, would now, I verily believe, travel from London to John O’Groat’s on foot, or stint himself to the barest necessities of life, if by so doing he could keep a deserving fellow-creature.”

I expressed myself as “very delighted to meet such a man.”

“Yes, sir,” continued Mr. Goodman, “that unfortunate man has been for more than three years the prop and sustentation of a whole family who, but for the continuance of his benevolent exertions, and his own contributions, must tomorrow go to the work-house.”

My curiosity was getting intense. I had formed a different notion of the man, but I yielded up my prejudices. I confessed that I should like to know more about his present character and habits.

“You shall know all I know,” continued the solicitor. “About three years ago a doctor who had a year previously taken a new house, near to my residence at E—, was discovered to be inextricably embarrassed. The poor man was one of that class of persons who never seem to be capable of doing any good for themselves, but whose gentleness and kindness, or amiability, make them friends in all directions. The gentleman you have just seen leave my office was one of the doctor’s friends. He had, I believe—indeed, I know he had—borrowed money everywhere it was procurable, and lent the doctor all he possibly could of his own money; but as fast as he settled one thing, another became an imperative demand. It would have been only wise on the doctor’s part to have taken the benefit of the Insolvent Act, but although poor and woefully embarrassed, he was proud and anxious to avoid doing what he thought would inflict a stain upon his character or that of his children.

“One day while the duns were pressing—and I believe there was an execution in the house for rent—the sheriff was also in possession under a *fi. fa.* for an amount there seemed no chance of being able to pay, and a *ca. sa.* might at any moment be lodged with the officer for his arrest, the unlucky surgeon received a letter from an old acquaintance in New Zealand, advising him to sail at once for that colony, where he must realise a good income out of little work. The letter contained no remittance—nothing, in fact, but advice and encouragement. The surgeon consulted

with his substantial and true friend, and they both arrived at the conclusion, that it was desirable the former should try his fortune in the new colony.

The question then arose, how was he to get away?—how pay the mere passage-money and outfit for himself, his wife, and their three children? He had but few debts to collect, and these could only be got in far more slowly than legal processes would overtake him. The furniture in his house, when sold, would go towards satisfying the landlord and the execution-creditor. The friends had to solve a hard problem. The only practicable course seemed almost cruel, and yet it was, they thought, on the whole proper and wise to adopt it. The surgeon was to raise enough money, by every fair expedient, to pay his own passage, leaving to his never-failing friend the thankless task of arranging or procuring somehow, from wearied relations, and other persons, the means of sustaining the family until the father could earn in New Zealand, and remit to this country, sufficient for their passages to the land of their adoption. This plan, when laid before the wife, I need scarcely say was a source of grief to her; but painful as the thought of separation was, she did not oppose it, and would have assented to anything which held out a ray of promise to the blighted hopes of the family. The man who has just quitted this room, sir, had to find the whole of the money to take the surgeon out. He put his own name down on the subscription list for an amount that he could very ill indeed spare, and I and others were pertinaciously besought for ‘just another mite, to set up the poor fellow and his family.’ In this way the surgeon got out of the reach of sheriffs’ officers, and was conveyed to the land of promise. The next thing was to raise a provision for his wife and the children. Again the hat was carried round, again the man who has just left this room, sir, threw in the price of a new coat he rather needed. Furniture enough to furnish two rooms in Islington was saved from the wreck of the household. He pointed out to the helpless wife how she might, by the exercise of her talents, make a little money. He induced some good people to take the temporary charge of two of her children—the third she would not part with. In fact, sir, in a way that no ordinary father or brother would do, he undertook the duty of maintaining that surgeon’s family, and he has to this day nobly executed the trust.”

“Three years ago?” I observed, “and has the doctor left his wife and children so long? Why has he not sent for them, or remitted something towards their maintenance?”

“He has not,” continued the solicitor. “I am not satisfied with the doctor. He writes home pretty often, and draws a dismal picture of his own ill success and endurances, but I am now convinced that as long he lives he will never do any good for himself. I don’t think he is exactly lazy, unprincipled, or positively unfeeling, but there is something deficient or defective in the man’s character, which bars his success in life. I am beginning to be afraid, moreover, that long absence from wife and children may weaken or even destroy the affection I believe he entertained for them.”

“The doctor’s name?” I involuntarily asked.

“Nay, nay,” replied Mr. Goodman, “I have no wish to enlarge your knowledge of my client’s acquaintance, whether that be much or little. I was only desirous of removing, as far as I could, any prejudice against that poor man—who suffered so keenly through your meeting with him

just now—by relating truthfully some incidents of his recent career, which have passed under my own eye.”

I have often been sorely touched by the exercise of my vocation, but rarely have I been so moved as I was by this narrative, and I would then have given much to recall half an hour, so that the repentant criminal might have been spared the agony of a recognition at such a time and place.

I assured Mr. Goodman that any prejudice I could have felt against any man would have yielded to such a story as he had told me. He said that he did not ask me to tell him anything, but he did entreat me not to say a word to anybody that could afflict or injure the poor man, whose charity was the best atonement he could offer to society and to Heaven for any wrong he had ever committed. I gave that undertaking, and have hitherto kept it. I still preserve it. The penitent is dead, so that his eyes will never rest on these pages. The solicitor will never supply a clue to inquiries that will establish an identity, which I am also careful to conceal by an alteration of names and localities in this otherwise true story.

After having given this promise to Mr. Goodman, I took his instructions for an investigation, on behalf of another of his clients, and I left him.

It may here be desirable to inform the reader that eleven years before our meeting at Mr. Goodman’s office, I arrested on a charge of forgery the man I now so disconcerted. He was then a solicitor in large practice, at H—, and was accounted a most respectable man. He was in fact a prosperous and an able practitioner, but on one occasion, being sorely pressed to make up a rather large sum, he had recourse to the expedient of realising a trust fund, and converting it to his own use. He saw his way to make up and restore the money within five or six weeks, and as he had advised a new form of investment, he thought he would have nothing to do when he had got the amount, but ask for a genuine power of attorney, destroy it, and apply the fund as arranged. Something, however, disclosed the forgery within a few days of its perpetration. The criminal was arrested by me, tried, found guilty, and sentenced to transportation beyond the seas for the term of his natural life.

This was all I knew up to the moment of our *rencontre*, when it became obvious that he had obtained a pardon, and, as I learned, was pursuing a meritorious life.

In less than a week after the interview with Mr. Goodman that I have described, the ex-convict gave me a call. In full reliance, he said, upon my generosity and good feeling, he had come to ask me to preserve the terrible secret of his crime and punishment. I assured him at once, that under no circumstances should I be a party to wantonly hunt down any member of society who, having broken its laws, had also either paid the penalty by enduring the sentence inflicted by a proper tribunal, or who by good conduct had obtained a pardon.

“If,” I continued to observe, “you could have maintained your self-possession the other day at Mr. Goodman’s offices, nobody but ourselves, not even that gentleman, need have been let into the secret.”

“Good God!” passionately exclaimed the unfortunate man, as he dropped his bald head between his hands, supported by both elbows upon my table, and his frame shook with an emotion unrelieved by tears. “Then he *did* see that you knew me before, and he observed my embarrassment!”

It was useless to deny that fact; but I told him I had not at all strengthened any suspicion in Mr. Goodman’s mind by information about the old disaster, and as I thought it might comfort him to do so, I told him all that had passed between us on the subject. I added that if my visitor had no objection to afford me that knowledge, I should like to know the special cause of his strong attachment to the doctor and his family.

He told me.

After his conviction great efforts were put forth by friends to prevent his being sent out of the country, and as the interests of many clients would have otherwise suffered, a solicitor was allowed to confer with him as to several matters then left uncompleted. He was afterwards sent to Bermuda.

His wife was unceasing in her exertions to procure a mitigation of his sentence, but notwithstanding the influence brought to bear during a series of years, those exertions would, in all human probability, have failed, but for the aid he received from a quarter in which he could not have reasonably hoped to find it. While at Bermuda, doing the rough work assigned to convicts, he was taken dangerously ill, and transferred to the infirmary, where he was placed under the care of a surgeon to whom his wife, who always got to know when and where he was removed, and who had taken up her abode in the island, had addressed herself. Under ‘the careful and skilful treatment of a sympathising hand, he recovered. He was then employed as an assistant in the convict hospital of the settlement, and the same kind-hearted fellow, who knew the rules of the service well, was able, without any breach of duty, to suggest the moment and the mode when and how renewed memorials in his favour could be got up for a remission of his sentence. He was ultimately liberated. Good conduct and a broken constitution, were united reasons for the exercise of the Royal prerogative of mercy in his case. The convict doctor was the man who afterwards emigrated to New Zealand. The penitent criminal felt that he owed life and liberty to that surgeon. When he obtained his pardon he vowed that one of the first objects of the remainder of his existence should be the promotion, if he had it in his power, of his benefactor’s welfare. His wife’s little fortune enabled him to offer the convict surgeon the means of starting in practice.

The surgeon resigned his appointment, and started on his own account in London, but had not been prosperous. Every misfortune, however, instead of weakening the devotion of the grateful convict, only deepened the hold of the unsuccessful man upon his friend, who concluded his story by informing me that his own dear wife having gone to her eternal rest, and having no children himself, he felt bound to share all he had with the wife and children of the emigrant.

The Revelations of a Private Detective by Andrew Forrester, Jr. London: Ward and Lock, 1863. 173-183.