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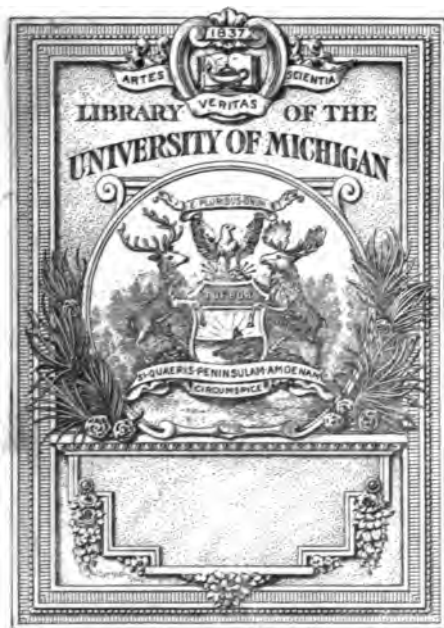
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THE ROGUE'S MARCH

A ROMANCE

BY

E. W. HORNING

AUTHOR OF "IRRALIE'S BUSHRANGER," "A BRIDE FROM
THE BUSH," ETC.

"As for the chain-gangs, you oft-times hear them jingling half-a-mile
away, and 'tis nigh all the music we get, a kind of ROGUE'S MARCH, to
remind us where we are, and why we came."

Extract from Convict's Letter.

NEW YORK
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS
1903

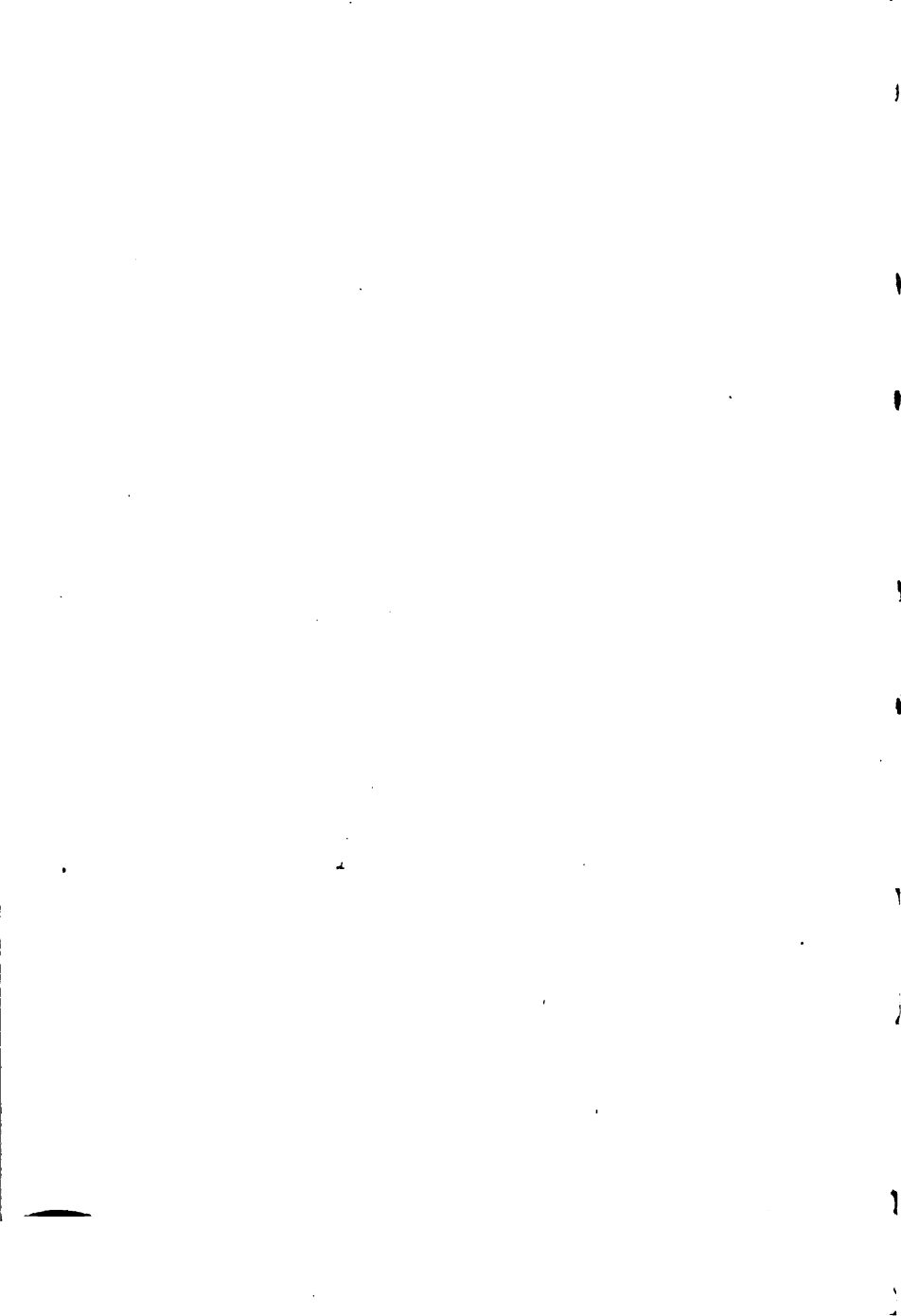
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To

RICHARD DOWLING

194310



PREFACE

A FEW friends, who were kind enough to follow "The Rogue's March" from week to week in its serial course, would have me add foot-notes on the ground that this story, though by no means founded upon facts, is nevertheless largely built up of them. I have, however, my own prejudice against foot-notes to fiction — and I understand that Notes at the end are never read. I may therefore state at the outset that the Newgate scenes are as near the truth as I have been able to make them, with the aid of sundry Parliamentary papers, supplemented by the very kindly assistance of (I believe) the first living authority on the subject. And a certain "broad-sheet" is still in existence as described and quoted, with its vile verses, and its illiterate but circumstantial account of the execution of a man who was not executed.

As to the Transportation details, they have been gleaned partly from the Blue-book published in 1837, partly from the New South Wales Calendar

and the Sydney newspapers of those days, and partly from an admirable work by Mr. Charles White, of Bathurst, N.S.W. To this gentleman's "Convict Life" (which should be published in the old country too) I owe the experiences of the First Fleeter, with other items which I think must bear the stamp of flagrant fact.

E. W. H.

AUGUST, 1896.

CONTENTS

PART I.—THE OLD COUNTRY

	PAGE
CHAPTER I	
"SUDDEN DEATH"	1
CHAPTER II	
THE OTHER LIVES	9
CHAPTER III	
THE NEW LOVER	18
CHAPTER IV	
THE OLD LOVE	24
CHAPTER V	
A BLOODLESS VICTORY	34
CHAPTER VI	
A KIND WORLD	42
CHAPTER VII	
A GUILTY INNOCENT	50

	PAGE
CHAPTER VIII	
HUE AND CRY	56
CHAPTER IX	
A GOOD SAMARITAN	68
CHAPTER X	
AT AVENUE LODGE	73
CHAPTER XI	
COALS OF FIRE	82
CHAPTER XII	
WHEEL WITHIN WHEEL	90
CHAPTER XIII	
A FORLORN HOPE	97
CHAPTER XIV	
OLD NEWGATE	104
CHAPTER XV	
INTERIM	117
CHAPTER XVI	
THE TRIAL OPENS	131

CONTENTS

xi

CHAPTER XVII

	PAGE
END OF THE TRIAL	143

CHAPTER XVIII

THE RECORDER'S REPORT	155
---------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XIX

THE ROYAL MERCY	160
---------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XX

SEALED LIPS	171
-----------------------	-----

PART II.—THE LAND OF BONDAGE

CHAPTER XXI

AN ASSIGNED SERVANT	184
-------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XXII

CASTLE SULLIVAN	201
---------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LAST STRAW	215
--------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XXIV

THE COURT-HOUSE	224
---------------------------	-----

	PAGE
CHAPTER XXV	
THE LOCK-UP	236
CHAPTER XXVI	
THE LITTLE GREY MAN	247
CHAPTER XXVII	
ADVENTURES OF A SUBSTITUTE	263
CHAPTER XXVIII	
THE OUTER DARKNESS	277
CHAPTER XXIX	
LIGHT AT LAST	292
 <i>PART III.—MASTER AND MAN</i> 	
CHAPTER XXX	
"THE NOBLE UNKNOWN"	307
CHAPTER XXXI	
THE COURSE OF THE "ROSAMUND"	317
CHAPTER XXXII	
A MARRIAGE MARKET	326

CONTENTS

xiii

CHAPTER XXXIII

	PAGE
THE SHIP COMES IN	335

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE BRIDE-ELECT	342
---------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XXXV

A MEDDLER	348
---------------------	-----

CHAPTER XXXVI

SIDE-LIGHTS	354
-----------------------	-----

CHAPTER XXXVII

FARM COVE	361
---------------------	-----

CHAPTER XXXVIII

TWO FAREWELLS	366
-------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XXXIX

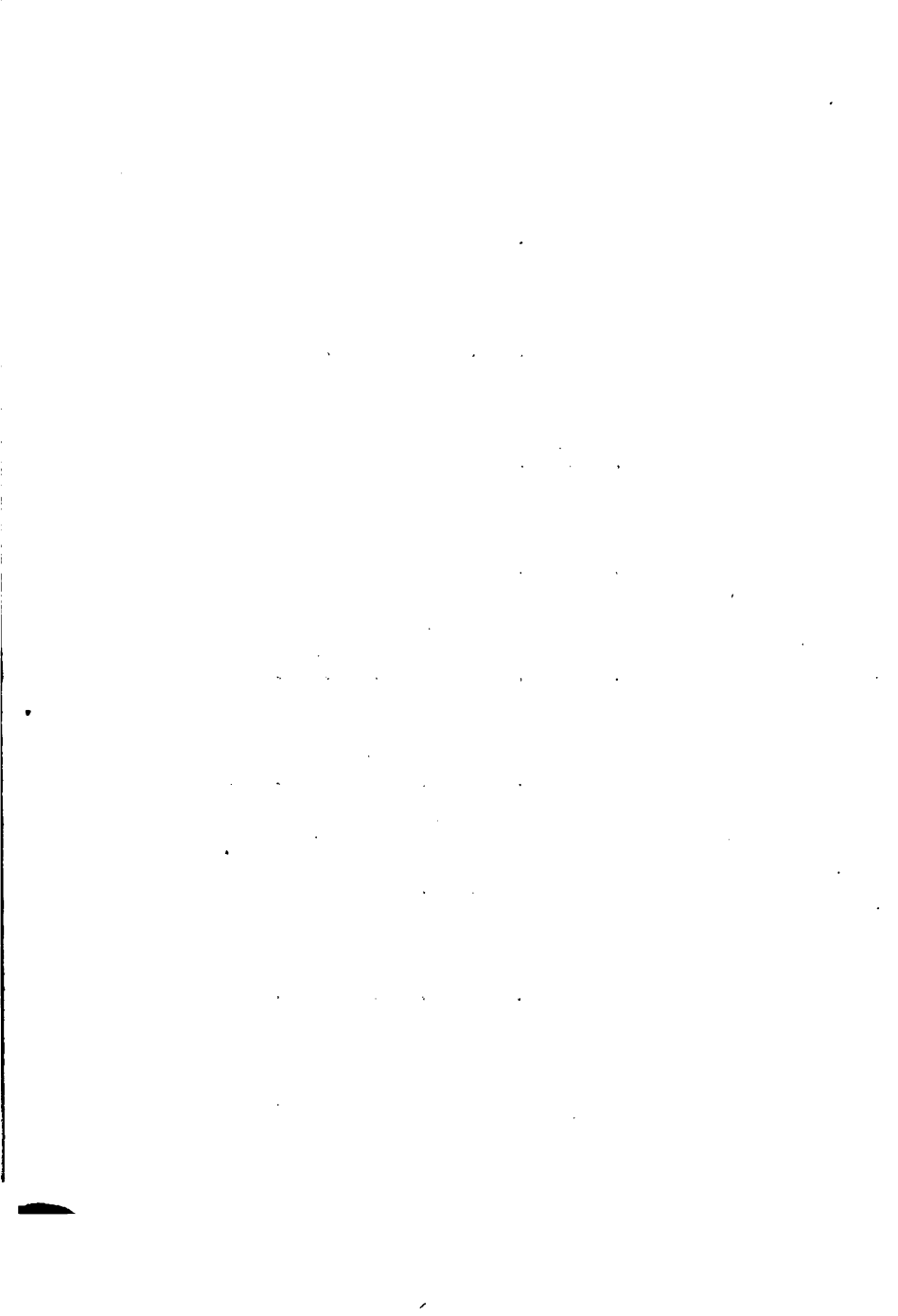
THE MAN IN THE MASK	373
-------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XL

MADNESS AND CRIME	385
-----------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XLI

"FOR LONDON DIRECT"	396
-------------------------------	-----



THE ROGUE'S MARCH

PART I

THE OLD COUNTRY

CHAPTER I

"SUDDEN DEATH"

IN the year 1837, and on a warm, moist April morning, there knocked at a modest lodging-house in Rolls Buildings, Fetter Lane, a recent lodger who could no longer afford even the attic's trifling rent. So now he made his bed in the parks of the metropolis, or in the damp green fields outside. And for all he professed to care, the damp was welcome to kill him, if only it would kill outright.

The man was very fair and spare, but of a medium height. His hands and feet were notably small, the wrists and arms a little deceptive. These looked lean, but were made of muscle, and quickened with hot, keen blood.

He was very young; but though, as a fact, not five-and-twenty, the thin, sardonic, reckless face looked half as old again. An abiding bitterness had curled the full nostrils, deepening the lines thence to the sensitive red lips, and drawing the latter too habitually apart upon

set teeth or a sneer. Nor was the bitterness of the kind sown in proud hearts by capricious circumstance and crushing but not dishonourable defeat. It was rather the Dead Sea fruit of wilful riot and a contemptible, in-penitent remorse. And yet in the full brown eye and lifted chin, as in the ill-clad, well-carried figure, there was a lingering something that was gallant and fine and debonair; as if the makings of angel or of devil still lurked beneath that crumpled kerseymere waistcoat and those faded blue swallow-tails.

To this lost youth the door in Rolls Buildings was opened by a grey-haired woman who nodded knowingly in response to an inquiry for letters, and handed one over with an invitation to enter and read it within. But the kindly words fell on inattentive ears. Looking fondly and yet fearfully at the superscription—to Thomas Erichsen, Esquire, and the rest—the needy owner of that name suddenly pocketed his letter with unbroken seals. He was turning as abruptly away when the blank face of his former landlady led him to pause a moment.

“No; bless you, no! it’s not from him,” said Erichsen, grimly. “This is from a friend I met yesterday, who would insist on having my address. What was I to do? I thought you wouldn’t mind, so I gave my last.”

“Mind! It is your address, and might be your ’ome if you wasn’t that ’igh and ’aughty. Dear, dear, dear! so you’ve not heard from that villain yet?”

“Not a line.”

“Nor of him?”

“Not a word. Give me time. If I don’t root him out by this day month—well, then he’s fled the country—like a sensible man.”

“But what if you do?” demanded the landlady, who was herself directly interested in the event.

“What if I do, Mrs. Adcock? Well, I shall probably half murder him, to begin with; he has wholly ruined me. Yes, it will be my money — and your money — or his life! He knows it, too, if he’s got my letters. Feel the weight of that!”

And he put in her hands a heavy ash stick, green and sinewy, with the knob still creamy from the knife.

“Lord save us!” cried the woman. “Is this the rod in pickle for him?”

“That’s the rod in pickle. Nice and heavy, isn’t it?”

“Too ’eavy, Mr. Erichsen! Too ’eavy by ’alf. I’d show no mercy to thieves and swindlers, but I should be very careful what I did with that. I wouldn’t take the law into my own hands, if I were you!”

“You wouldn’t?” cried he. “Not if you’d been cleaned out as I have, by as blackguardly a dodge? By the Lord that made him, I’d break every bone in his infernal body; and will, too, if I find him and he won’t pay up. I’ll pay him! I grant you it was my own cursed fault in the beginning; but what about that last thirty pounds? Who got that? Why am I rotting and starving here? Who threw me on the mercy of kind good folks like you — yes, and made a sponge of me in my turn? Whose doing is it that I’ve got to pawn the clothes off my back, or beg my meals; to tramp the streets all day, to lie all night in the fields —”

“Your own!” exclaimed the woman, coming hastily down from the step upon which she had been standing all this time. “It’s your own fault, is that, however! You know well it isn’t mine. Our attic has been empty ever since you went; you’re welcome to it until it’s

wanted again, if only you'll come back. Nay, sir, I do assure you I'd rather have you for nothing than most of them that pays. Come back to-night, or I'm sure I sha'n't sleep a wink for thinking of you; come in now, and I'll get you some nice 'ot breakfast. You look as if you hadn't 'ad any yet, I'm sure you do. So in you come!"

Erichsen held out his hand.

"No, no," said he. "I owe you quite enough already, Mrs. Adcock; besides, I'm as strong as a horse, and doing much better than you think. But the world is full of kindness, after all! and God bless you for yours!"

And his dark eyes, that but now had flashed and burnt with bitter fires — that were the more striking always for a shock of almost flaxen hair — stood full of tears. He could say no more, but only wring the dry, chapped hand in his. Then he was gone; and might have been seen, a little later, hurrying with bent head towards Temple Bar; or, later yet, spread at full length in that green asylum of his homeless days, the southwest corner of St. James's Park.

And here he read the letter from his friend. It began on one side of the large white paper, and ended on the next. The girlish handwriting was pitifully tremulous, but yet instinct with a self-reliance then uncommon in young English ladies. The letter ran: —

"AVENUE LODGE,

"REGENT'S PARK.

"April 26th.

"DARLING, — What does it mean? I was picturing you in Calcutta when I saw you this afternoon in Piccadilly! I had been thinking about you just then — I always am — and there you were! Oh, my darling, what can it mean? Tell me quickly, or I shall go

mad with anxiety, as I nearly did on the spot this afternoon. *Come here, as you love me, and tell me all!*

“Darling, what can it be that has kept you here, and so silent all this time; or did you go out and come straight back? No, there has not been time. The *Jumna* sailed on the last day of September, and I have prayed for her safety all these months. I was so sure my love was on board!

“Oh, if only I dare have stopped to speak to you a few more seconds. The groom was so close behind. But, Tom, you seemed not to want to give me your address? I would not have left you without it; and now I shall come to you there unless you come to me. You looked so sad and ill, my sweetheart! I can see his poor face still!

“Come and tell me all, and let me help you, or my heart will break. You are in trouble. I know it, and must help you — it is my right. We are in the new Avenue Road; you will easily find it. The house is *far the largest* on the *right-hand* side as you come *from* town. There are fields behind, and our garden goes the farthest back; that is, we have a field of our own walled in with it, and there is a *green gate in the wall*. It is kept locked, but I will be there at *nine o'clock* to-morrow (*Thursday*) night; and so must you. Be there for my sake, and tell me all.

“I have written the moment I got in. I will post it myself. Dear Tom, do not be hard on this girl if you think her over-bold; for she loves you! she loves you! and would give her life to make yours happy.

“Your own true

“CLAIRE.

“Twenty-eight mortal hours to wait. I shall hear my heart beating — as I hear it now — as I have heard it ever since I saw that sad, sad face — until I see it again!”

When Thomas Erichsen came to the end of this passionate, pure love-letter, he buried his face in the sweet spring grass, and lay immovable with a grief too great for tears. The sounds of London (louder than now) boomed and rattled in his ears; the racket of unmuffled

wheels upon street beyond street of cobbles; a coachman's horn in Whitehall; a roll of drums from the barracks across Birdcage Walk; elsewhere a hurdy-gurdy; near at hand an altercation between two other hiveless drones; and in the middle-distance an errand-boy whistling "All Round My Hat." Such were the sounds heard that April morning by Tom Erichsen's outward ears; to those of his soul, a brave soft voice was whispering the last God-speed, while his own, the more broken of the two, was vowing not only eternal constancy, but eternal goodness and an honest life for her sake.

He could see the steady grey eyes filled with tears that never fell, and shining into his with the love that knew no shame; he must never look in them again, nor ever more defile with his the brave lips that had trembled, truly, but yet spoken comfortable words up to the end.

And here he lay, in culpable poverty and dishonourable rags; fallen already to an ultimate deep. So now, too late, as through the gates of hell, must come this message of angelic love!

He read it again, tore off the clean half-sheet, and, sitting cross-legged, wrote as follows in pencil upon his knee:—

"It means that I am a blackguard, and no longer worthy to be even your friend.

"The *Jumna* was ten days behind her advertised time of sailing, and I was miserable. You might have pitied me then; I neither ask nor deserve any pity now. I had vile thoughts. Even if I made my fortune your father would hate my father's son for ever—and I him—so it could never be. You would marry in due course. How could you help yourself? Those were my thoughts. And then I made a friend!

"He showed me the town. He helped me to forget. He won most of my money, and took the rest by fraud. I never even

booked my passage. And now I only live to spill the fellow's blood.

“But that's all he did. He didn't disgrace me. I disgraced myself, and broke all my promises to the noble girl of whom I never was worthy; and must therefore see her no more. It would be no good. Why should I insult you too? I have done so enough in coming to this. Simply forget me, for I am not worth your scorn. Forget me utterly. I am too ashamed to sign my name.”

This he folded up, addressed with his pencil, and sealed (in a fashion) with the wafers which had been used already: her lips had touched them before his! Then he sat where he was, and noted the other moral corpses stretched upon that daily battle-field, and wondered if any of them had wrecked their lives as wilfully as he his. And then he thought of his father's white hairs, and thanked God they had won to the grave without this to bring them there.

Then he lay down again, and wrestled with hunger and anguish alternately and both together. It was evening when he left the park, heavy-laden with a fact remembered on the way. He lacked the price of a two-penny stamp! Not a farthing had he left, nor a thing to pawn, save his long silk purse so ignobly emptied, and that had been his father's before him. It should not go, even for this; yet the letter must; then how?

He sat down again on a bench; for he was weak for want of food; and in his weakness came a temptation, that was indeed more like an inspiration, so luminous was its flash. He might take his letter and leave it himself in the key-hole of the garden-gate. Why not? Then she would get it at once — that evening.

Why not? He had already given the reasons in the letter itself. And see her he would — he must — if once

he got as far as that garden-gate. So the reasons in the letter held very good indeed; and how weak to be himself the first to fly in their face! But then weakness was his present portion, whereas the temptation grew stronger and stronger: only to see her face once more; only to hear her voice, although it lashed him with the reproaches he so richly deserved! Yet he did not give in without a kind of struggle. He had become a gambler, and a gambler's compromise occurred to him now.

This was when the yellow London sun was setting, a little after seven o'clock; about twenty minutes past, several of the better-favoured pedestrians in Pall Mall were accosted by a timid ragamuffin with a ghastly face, who begged the loan of a penny, and was rightly treated to deaf ears. But at length a dapper young man, in a long bottle-green coat, wheeled round with an oath and a twinkling eye.

"Lend you one!" cried he. "I like that! What d'ye mean by it, eh?"

"What I say. I ask the loan of the smallest coin you've got—and your pardon for the liberty."

"Pray when shall I see it again?"

"In half a minute."

"Half a what? Well, you're a rum 'un, you are; here's your brown."

"Thank you," said Erichsen, and balanced it on his right thumbnail. "Now you stand by and see fair play. Heads I go and tails I don't; sudden death; let it fall clear!"

His beggar's manners (such as these were) had been forgotten on the instant. The coin rang upon the paving-stone with his words.

"Heads it is!" cried the owner, on his haunches, with his fine long coat in the dust.

"Then I'm unspeakably obliged to you," replied the fervent beggar, returning the penny. "I wish you good-night, sir, with a thousand thanks!"

"No, no; hang it all! I'm a sportsman myself; you're a man of my kidney, and you hadn't even a brown to toss with! Oblige me by taking this yellow-boy; no, curse it, I beg your pardon — I might have seen! At least, sir, you will join me at the tavern, to show there's no ill-feeling? A cut off the joint, I think, and a tankard of stout; what say you? I feel peckish myself. Come, come, or you'll offend me!"

But the eyes which his miseries had left dry were dim again at the kindness of the world; and Tom Erichsen had not spoken because he could not. "May I live to repay this!" he muttered now. "It will be my first bite since yesterday."

And in another hour it was a new man who was pushing forward, with such brisk steps, upon the high road to Avenue Lodge and his appointed fate.

Moreover, the currents of other lives than his had been deflected, for good or evil, by the spin of that borrowed coin.

CHAPTER II

THE OTHER LIVES

THE household at Avenue Lodge consisted at this period of Nicholas Harding, M. P., J. P. (also of Fish Street Hill, E. C., and Winwood Hall, Suffolk); his five daughters; his men-servants and maid-servants, and a certain stranger within his gates.

Nicholas Harding was fifty years of age, and a widower for the second time. He was a big, blond, jovial, loud, overbearing man, without a grey hair in his massive, reddish head, or a sign of sorrow upon his healthy, pink, domineering face. Yet private bereavement was not the only misfortune that had fallen to a lot otherwise enviable enough: since the last General Election, a little charge of flagrant bribery had found its way even to an assize court, where it had indeed broken down, but not in a fashion wholly satisfactory to the accused.

An important witness had refused to open his mouth, as some said because he was well paid by Mr. Harding to keep it shut and endure the penalty; in any event, the charge was not permitted to be withdrawn, but the action merely dismissed, to allow of a new trial of which nothing had been heard up to the present time. But a naked sword thus dangled over Nicholas Harding's ruddy, hard head, whose true temper the situation served to prove. So far from resigning his seat, he returned to the House with a shrug and a half-smile; and in the whole matter continued to bear himself with such modest gallantry as to remove the prejudices of many who had at first sided with the enemy.

Among his own Suffolk constituents the popular sympathy had been his from the beginning; and in London itself the feeling gained ground that a judgment which neither convicted nor exonerated was a judgment to be repudiated by all fair-minded persons. Ex-Ministers said or wrote as much to Mr. Harding (who belonged to the fashionable Opposition) in as many words. Cockaded coachmen were once more directed to drive to his house. Invitations were received which were worth receiving; and thus encouraged, Mr. Harding sent out invitations in

return. He had deemed it inexpedient to entertain much of late; and even now it was a very judicious selection of his friends that was bidden to quite a small dinner-party on the last Wednesday in April; while his sister, Lady Starkie, was called up from Bath to play hostess for the occasion.

"On any other," wrote her brother, "Claire would do very well. But the enemy may blaspheme the less if you are here. I want you to see Claire. She is greatly improved since you were with us last."

"It is the enemy that hath done this thing," replied Lady Starkie; "those wicked Radicals, how I should like to transport the whole crew! Of course I will come. Why isn't Claire married? She must be getting on in years."

She was not yet twenty-one. The only child of his first wife, Claire had never occupied the place of the younger ones in her father's affections; had been consistently repressed in childhood; but had since contrived to please that critic by her clever management of an enlarged establishment. Indeed, the girl had come home from school very capable and shrewd and self-possessed, with an admirable drawing-room manner, and even better qualities of which Mr. Harding would have thought less; so they were carefully hidden from his view; for Claire had also her faults, and was both secretive and politic in the home circle, as a result of that early repression and injustice. Given that cause and this effect, and some clandestine folly may be counted upon in nine cases out of ten, and Claire's was not the tenth.

It came about at Winwood Hall, the Suffolk shooting-box where the family had spent the last three autumns. Nicholas Harding had begun there in characteristic

fashion by quarrelling with the gentle, white-haired parson (who would yet be neither domineered nor overborne by an interloping Londoner), and by forbidding his daughters the church, glebe, rectory, or any communication with its inmates from that day forth. A week or two later he came full upon Claire and the rector's idle son comparing notes in the lane; and a pretty scene ensued. Mr. Harding shook his stick at the lad, who snatched it from him and snapped it across his knee. Claire was imprisoned under lock and key for four-and-twenty hours, and young Erichsen shinned up the waterspout and sat on her window-sill while the rest were at dinner. But this and succeeding incidents never came to the ears of Nicholas Harding. And partly in revenge for the indignity to which she had been subjected, and partly by reason of those adventitious traits already touched upon, the motherless and then all but friendless Claire disobeyed and intrigued thenceforward without a qualm.

The callow pair had enough in common: the girl had suffered from a step-mother, the lad was suffering from one then. In his old age Mr. Erichsen had married a managing woman thirty years his junior; and the blackness by her embedded in Tom Erichsen's heart had known no relief till Claire Harding lit up his life. Claire understood; she sympathised, she soothed, she softened. And though so stealthily employed, her influence was all for good. Tom put his soul in her keeping, and made a great effort to run straight at college for her sake; but was nevertheless rusticated in the spring; and was absent, penitently reading, all the autumn following, when they never met. A year later the rector was in his own churchyard, and Tom a broken-hearted lodger

in the village. Mrs. Erichsen had gone her way; and Tom was going his, to India, where through her unlooked-for interest a berth had been obtained for him in a Calcutta counting-house. A hundred guineas for outfit and passage-money was his only picking from the good old man's estate; and it was a loan.

Tom said his long good-bye to Winwood just three days after the Hardings arrived. But in those three days Claire and he made many noble vows, and parted in a storm of tears. And there ended the first chapter of their secret history.

The single page known to Nicholas Harding was a thing of the past in his mind. He never thought of it now, and for the best of reasons. He firmly believed that Claire intended to marry an entirely different person, of whom he himself most cordially approved; and it made him for the first time as cordially approve of Claire.

And Claire on a sudden divined it all, and saw (also for the first time) the false position in which she had placed herself; and yet never regretted it, but rather gloried in having the least little thing to suffer for Tom's sake.

Now, the other man in her mind, and in Nicholas Harding's too, was the Stranger within their Gates.

James Edward William, Sir Emilius Daintree's son, and heir to the baronetcy and entailed estates, was a melancholy, brooding bachelor little worse than thirty years of age. Unlike Mr. Harding, however, he looked much older, with his swarthy, saturnine countenance, and the white threads in the coal-black whiskers that curled beneath his deep-set chin. His lines had fallen

in very different places from those of Mr. Harding; he had spent most of his restless life abroad. His soul had been burdened with a very different temperament; he had that of a poet; and his manhood had been poisoned at the fount by one of those wretched family quarrels which redound to nobody's credit, and of which the outside world never get the rights. It was only known that Sir Emilius and his son had not been on speaking terms for years.

Such sympathy as is felt in these matters was entirely on the side of the son. The present baronet was not a popular man. His character was eccentric, and his morals so notorious that in many quarters the quarrel was from the first considered creditable to young Daintree. When, however, after an absence of eight years, the latter came home on leave from New South Wales, where he was a magistrate and a man of some importance and more promise in the young colony; and when the old savage, his father, not only still refused a reconciliation, but publicly cut his son on every possible occasion, then — well, the indignation might have been greater had James Daintree been himself a more popular man. But the truth was, he had come home a morbid, sensitive misanthropist; and this treatment made him ten times worse. He was seldom seen by his old friends anywhere; but he happened to make a stanch new one in the person of Nicholas Harding, whose house, indeed, became the wanderer's home.

Claire's attitude will be readily apprehended. Daintree opened his bruised heart to her, and she considered his father the most abominable old man alive. It was at Avenue Lodge that a parcel of faded flowers arrived for Daintree, and drove him almost crazy with rage and

grief. He had placed them a day or two before upon his mother's grave. He burst into a storm of oaths and tears before the girl, who thought the worse of him for neither. Lady Daintree had died the year before; in fact it was her death that had brought the outcast home, for the reconciliation for which he pleaded in vain.

He had the sympathy of all who knew him; that of Claire was spontaneous and heartfelt and frank; but it never blinded her to Daintree's faults, which were those of a warped, egotistical, but yet an ardent nature. She cured him of one or two. But he was a man with a weight upon his soul, and she could not cure him of that. She was not told enough. After all, too, her head and her heart were full of another. And thus she was slower to detect the new lover in the new friend than would or could have been the case in normal circumstances.

Indeed it might never have dawned upon her until he spoke, but for the calling in of Lady Starkie to lend her distinguished countenance to the first dinner-party given by Nicholas Harding after his late ordeal. Lady Starkie was a lieutenant-general's widow, and at all events a shrewd woman of the world.

"My dear," said she, after luncheon, "that young man never took his eyes off you once, and you never once looked him in the face. You are in love at last!—you both are!"

"Aunt Emily!" cried Claire, aghast but scarlet.

"Hoity-toity!" exclaimed the old lady; "nothing escapes *me*. My dear, you will do very well; a very interesting face and an admirable family, *malgré* that atrocious Sir Emilius, who won't live for ever. No, no, he can't keep that pace up much longer at his age; and then every mortal thing will be this young man's and yours!"

"But — aunt! indeed you are mistaken. I—I don't love him one atom! Such a thing has never entered my head."

"Then may I ask what kept you awake all night?" was the bland inquiry. "My dear, you have a tell-tale face! I remarked it instantly: you cannot have slept a wink till morning!"

It was true; she had not; but then she had seen Tom Erichsen near Hyde Park Corner when she pictured him in Calcutta. And that was not all. She had pressed him for his address, and then written him a letter which had made her feel hot or cold ever since. The glow was from conscious pride in her own full, free, selfless love; the shiver from a new-born doubt of his, begotten by haunting memories of his face. And the more Claire thought of it the less could she fathom his still being in London, and so shabby. And she had thought of it all night long.

"I had things on my mind," she now confessed; "but Mr. Daintree wasn't one of them."

"Then it's somebody else," reflected Lady Starkie, with half-shut eyes upon the girl's dry lips and burning cheeks. "Who is this Captain Blaydes I hear so much about?" she asked aloud.

"Another friend of papa's."

"Another new friend?"

"Newer than Mr. Daintree. He comes to see papa on business. But I have had him a good deal on my hands; too much, for my taste."

"You don't like him, then?"

"Hate him!" said the girl, with sudden vehemence, her mind for once detaching itself from Tom. "There, it's out: I never said it to anybody else, but it's what I

feel. Last week when Mr. Daintree wasn't with us, Captain Blaydes was, and had his room. Aunt Emily, I want you to know about him; he was a horrid guest — insolent to the servants — forward with me — and more presuming with papa than any man I have ever seen. Yet papa vowed he was the best of fellows — and looked miserable all the week! And I was told to be civil to him or to leave the house myself. I want to know what it all means: no good, I'll be bound. What should you say, Aunt Emily? We have had trouble enough lately; heaven knows, we want no more. And yet I had the strongest instinct about this man — that he was here for no good!"

"He is not coming to-night, I hope?"

"Yes, he is; but luckily not until after dinner. He could not get here in time. The Bury St. Edmunds coach —"

"He is coming from there!" cried Lady Starkie. "Then, my dear, you may be sure he has had some hand in that wretched election business! It is not over yet, Claire; you must endure such people until it is. But why have him to-night?"

"You may well ask! Papa expects him."

"Well, it is a pity. Indeed, in my opinion, this dinner-party is a little premature — considering everything. However, let us only make it a success!"

CHAPTER III

THE NEW LOVER

A success it proved to be — the dinner-party — but it was neither Claire nor yet Lady Starkie who made it one. It was Nicholas Harding himself. His laugh was louder and more infectious than ever, his face an even healthier pink, and his little jokes were both felicitous and incessant, even when he was busy carving the haunch. He cracked several at the expense of Ministers, and two or three at his own.

“I only hope one thing,” said he, pausing in those obsolete labours. “I only hope they send me to Botany Bay! My friend Daintree has promised to give me another chance there as chief butler in his establishment. And so I may hope — ha! ha! — to carve my way back to decent society — ha! ha! ha!”

The spirit of such jests made up for the letter. The party had been so carefully chosen that nothing offended or fell flat, and the general good-humour never flagged. Even Claire had light-hearted moments during dinner. Daintree had taken her in, and he talked to her so much about his lovely, lonely home on Port Jackson's shores (once the subject was started) that he quite forgot to carve the fowls which had been placed in front of him, and a reprimand from the head of the table set everybody laughing. Daintree joined in with what grace he might; he was too self-conscious to enter into the spirit of such chaff, and very soon he was once more edifying Claire by talking entirely about himself in his deep, confidential, serious voice. The girl struck him as less sym-

pathetic than he had ever known her. Of course, her wits were all at nine o'clock and the meadow gate. But Daintree put his own construction upon her altered manner, and tore his nails beneath the table-cloth, and made up his sombre mind to a bold, immediate course.

So when Claire had left a drawing-roomful of ladies under her aunt's providential wing, and had set a first trembling foot upon the lawn behind the house, a long swift stride overtook her, and there was Daintree at her side—with the night's wine-bibbing but just begun.

"Mr. Daintree!" she exclaimed aghast.

"Yes! I also have escaped," he said. "I made my excuses. The room was hot, but your father understood. I wanted to talk to you."

"To me? Why, you have been talking to me for the last two hours!"

And, emboldened by very nervousness, she looked up at him with a shake of her ringlets unwittingly coquettish; and he down on her with all the devouring desire of his gloomy, passionate soul. Upon the lawn there was no light save that from a dozen of brilliant windows; and Claire's face was to it, and Daintree's back. Yet it might have been the other way about, for her emotion he never saw, while his was but too apparent to her keener woman's eye.

"You came out for a breath of air," said he. "Let me come with you."

"I was going to the arbour," she replied. "I left a book there this afternoon."

It was true enough; but the arbour was on the way to the paddock gate; she had left her book there for a cunning excuse against some such need as this. And now

he was coming with her; she could not prevent it; and Tom already at the gate!

They walked in silence across the smooth damp grass. It was a summer night come a month too soon, and with the greater fragrance from the porous earth. The stars were white and bright, and the air so mild and sweet that the Southern Cross might have twinkled with the rest. Daintree stood aside at the arbour steps, then followed Claire and filled the doorway with his powerful frame.

"I wanted to speak to you," he repeated pointedly, as she found her book. "I say your father understood. I had spoken to him already. Claire — Claire — will you be my wife?"

The book dropped.

"Mr. Daintree!" she gasped, and took a terrified step towards the obstructed doorway.

"I beg your pardon," he said, entering immediately. "There, you are free to run away. Yet I think you will hear me out. Your attention, at all events, I may claim without presumption!"

"Oh, yes," said Claire. "I will listen — I will listen." She knew that touchy tone of his so well; but it was dropped now in a moment.

"God bless you for that," he broke out, hoarsely — "even for that! Only listen to me; that is all I ask. I know I am not a likely sort of man for a young girl like you. I am years older than you are. I look older still — I'm a hundred at heart — but you would make a new man of me. I should be born again. Oh, listen, for pity's sake, and let me speak my heart! It has been bursting with love of you so long! Whatever your answer, you must hear me out. Claire, I am not a bad man

—I really am not; but I have never been myself all these years. My life has been all bitterness, my very soul is steeped in it. Everything has been disappointment, disillusion, disgust, and distrust! You know the sort of life I have led — a wanderer, an exile like Byron, an outcast from my own home. It has spoiled me. I know that well enough. I have never had a chance; but you would give me one. You would make the man I might have been before this. I have talent — perhaps something more — I may say so freely to you. I spoke of Byron. I am nearer him than any man alive. There are those who do not put me second. But all my powers have been wasted, like my life; how that had been wasted I never knew until I met you. Claire — my darling! — you have made a new man of me as it is. I am no longer the bitter fellow I was when first God brought you into my life. You have changed me; you have changed all life and all the world. You are the one thing left in either that is all good, all pure, all noble; and I want you, I want you, I want you with all my heart and soul and being! Come to me, and by your help I may still leave the world the better and the richer for my presence; leave me lonely, and I am lost and ruined both here and in the world to come!”

He ceased; and Claire heard him shaking all over in a palsy of passionate desire. His passion frightened her, and yet won somewhat of her respect without for a moment blinding her to its glaring egotism. It was none the less genuine on that account; on the contrary, there was a convincing honesty in the utter absence of altruistic pretensions; and, for the rest, Claire did feel herself the possessor of a certain power for good over this man. But that power could only go out from her with her love.

And that love belonged already to a spirit as wild as Daintree's, but lighter, brighter, and if not incomparably braver and manlier, then changed indeed.

She rose and laid a hand upon the trembling arm, and very gently said: "You have paid me the greatest compliment, Mr. Daintree, which they say a man can pay a woman. You know that I like you. Indeed there is no one for whom I feel a heartier sympathy. But love you I do not—it is best to be perfectly frank."

"You do not!" he only said.

"And I never can."

"Why never?" he cried irritably. "What do you mean by saying that? Is my family not good enough for you? Am I not clever enough?" In the midst of his love-making he had lost his temper, but Claire was at once too proud and too kind to rebuke this ebullition; and presently he continued in a merely injured tone, "It isn't as if I was obliged to go back to New South Wales. Why should I? It would be a wretched place for you, and I am sick of it. I thought I could never bear this cruel old country again; but I could—I can—with you!" He would not see that he had got his answer. An overweening vanity was among his salient faults.

"It can never be," repeated Claire, decidedly.

"But why never? That's what I can't fathom. There is no one else, is there?"

"There—is."

In an instant he dropped the hand which he had just taken, and which she had not the heart to withdraw. His trembling ceased. She heard him breathing hard and through his teeth.

"I might have known it!" he said bitterly at length; and that was all.

"You could not—" she was beginning penitently, but he cut her short.

"I could!" he cried. "It has been so all my life; disappointment has been my daily bread. No doubt it was ordained and is all for the best! Anything else might turn my brain!"

"I am very sorry," murmured poor Claire. "I am more sorry than I can ever say."

"You may be," was the quick retort. "You had this and that to gain."

The girl's blood was up at last; her lips parted and her eyes flashed; but she could not condescend to his weapons. "I am going back to the house," was all she said, as she caught up her rustling skirts. "Excuse me, Mr. Daintree."

"No, I shall not excuse you!" he answered, barring her way. "It is you who must excuse me first. God forgive me, I never meant to say such things! I hardly know what I *am* saying. I am wild and mad for love of you, Claire. And I shall win you yet—I shall win you yet—even if I have to wait a lifetime! You were made for me. I refuse to do without you. *He* shall not have you, whoever he is! And you must forgive me for that, too," he added, with sudden humility, and he stood aside. "But it is none the less a fact!" he hissed as suddenly through his teeth.

They were his last words; she did not heed them, but gave him her warm soft hand in the kindest manner imaginable.

"We will forgive each other," she said gently, "as we pray to be forgiven ourselves!"

And so she left him on the arbour steps—a pillar of vain and gloomy passion—indistinct in the starlight, but quivering again—all six feet and fifteen stone of him—with the grievous burden of his stubborn love.

CHAPTER IV

THE OLD LOVE

THE garden was the ordinary narrow one, but with top-heavy additions beyond and behind its neighbour on either side. And the arbour was (so to speak) in the bottle's neck: there was no getting to the meadow without passing within a yard or two of its rustic portal.

There was, however, a shallow shrubbery down either wall of the original garden; and when Daintree had been alone about a minute, the laurels on his left began a risky rustle in the still evening air. Luckily, he was already in too deep a contemplation of his last and angriest wound to hear aught but the girl's voice and his own still ringing through the arbour. But as for Claire, one moment she held her breath in horrid certainty that he had heard; in another she was satisfied that he had not; and had forgotten his existence the next. Indeed, by the time she looked upon the meadow, asleep beneath its soft grey coverlet of dew, the wide world contained but one live man, and he was at the gate upon the farther side.

Yet was he? Round the meadow ran a gravel path, upon which she thought her feet pattered loud enough for all the world to hear. Then she dropped the key in reaching it from its accustomed crevice and it rang upon

the gravel, and in her nervousness she was an age fumbling at the lock. Yet no sound of hers brought a word of greeting from the other side. He had not come! As she pulled the gate open she felt certain of it; and then beheld and heard him, advancing shyly through the sibilant grass, with some white thing in his hand, and a young moon just risen over Primrose Hill.

"Tom!" she cried softly. "You are come! Oh, thank God! I have kept you—"

The words failed upon her parted lips. He stood askance before her, shamefaced and never noticing her tremulous, outstretched hands. His own held out to her a folded note.

"Read that," he said hoarsely. "I am only here because I had not money for the stamp!"

A great chill struck to the girl's loyal heart. It was the doubt that had kept her awake; now a doubt no more. Her trembling ceased; she turned her back on Erichsen, and read by the moonlight the candid words that he had written in St. James's Park.

He watched her with scarce a breath. His eyes lived upon her while they might. Her face had been turned away before he had the courage to raise his; but there was the white neck tapering to the nut-brown hair, the little ears half-hidden by ringlets, the thoughtful poise of the lithe, light body, all just as he had them by heart. The white arms struck him as a little thin, but then he had never before seen her in full evening dress. She was wearing pink *crépe* over white satin, high Venetian sleeves, and feathery fringes of pink and white satin *rouleau*; it was one more picture of her, and he thought the sweetest of all, to hang with the many already in his mind.

Meanwhile she had never turned her head; but now it

drooped a little; and those snowy shoulders were heaving with suppressed sobs.

In an instant he was at her side; the next, she had turned to him with shining eyes and yearning arms.

"My own poor boy!" she whispered through her tears. "Oh, thank heaven you had no money for those stamps!"

"Claire!" he gasped, falling back; "do not speak to me like that. I am not worthy—you don't understand. You should go your way and never think of me again."

"There is somebody else," said the girl, calmly.

"That I love? No, indeed!"

"You are not married?"

"God forbid."

"Then you have changed your mind. Well, if it makes you happier, dear, I can bear that too. I love you well enough—"

"Hush!" he said hoarsely, "it is not that. I love you, too, my darling—ah! God knows how truly now! Yet I have come to contemptible grief; I have been everything that's bad. What value can there be in such a love?"

"I don't know—still less care! It is all the love I want—it's good enough for me!" she whispered; and with a deep, sweet sigh she hid her face against his shabby shoulder. He touched the dainty head with his hand, but not his lips. His eyes were fixed upon the moon, that was like a golden curl astray in night's tresses; and his handsome, haggard face was discoloured and deformed with this the quintessence of his discreditable woes.

"Good enough for you—of all women!" he bitterly repeated. "MY love for YOU! Didn't I tell you I was no longer worthy of even your friendship? That was the

truth; every word in my letter is the literal truth. I have never looked at anybody else — to love them — but oh! oh! my love for you has been a poor thing. It didn't prevent me from going to the bad. You loved me; and yet I came to this!"

He groaned again. She said nothing, but caught his hand and pressed it. The pressure he returned.

"Oh, Claire," he cried, "it was madness, I think! I was mad at leaving you and Old England, perhaps for ever. And the ship wouldn't sail, Claire, the ship wouldn't sail! When I went to the office, thinking I had about three days, they told me she would be three weeks. I walked out of that office swearing I'd find some other; but all I found was the road to the bad. Drink and dice and cards! You asked me to tell you all. I tell you all I can. I tell it you to set you against me and make you hate me for ever. That is the kindest thing. . . . Claire, Claire, why don't you strike me? Why don't you scorn me and leave me to my fate? Oh, oh, I could bear it better than this!"

Her warm arms were about him. They clasped him tight. He could hear her heart and his own beating close together.

Suddenly she stood apart from him, with small clenched fists glittering with rings. He held his breath.

"The man who is at the bottom of all this," said she: "who is he? How was it? You speak of him in your letter: tell me more."

Tom shrugged his shoulders.

"What is the use? The thing is done; it's past mending; and it was my own miserable fault. Most of my money went in fair play and — riot! He only relieved me of the residue. Yet I tell you, Claire" (with sudden

fury), "I'd go contentedly to my account if I could only kick him along in front of me the whole way! Yes, I'd hang for the hound, and think the satisfaction cheap at the price!"

"What is his name?" demanded Claire.

"Blaydes!" said Tom; "B-l-a-y-d-e-s. Captain Blaydes, forsooth, on half-pay! Blaydes of the Guards, who disgraced themselves for all time by not—"

He broke off and stood looking at the girl.

"By not what?" whispered Claire, who had glanced involuntarily through the gate towards the distant lighted windows, and who was now trembling again, with a new and dreadful agitation.

"By not cashiering *your friend* Captain Blaydes!"

"He is no friend of mine."

"But I see you know him."

"Yes—I just know him."

"He is at your house to-night!" cried Erichsen, with uncontrolled excitement.

"No—he is not. We have had a dinner-party, but he was not there. I slipped out afterwards—I dare not stay long." This to explain that incriminating backward glance.

"Then give me his address!"

"Tom—I cannot."

"You cannot? You who said you would do anything in your power to help me? And this is all I ask—this villain's address! Oh, Claire, he is not fit for you to speak to! Tell me where you met him—what you think of him—and then I will tell you what I know. Oh, if I had him here!"

Claire answered with deliberate reservations. Her duty was clear as the stars. Tom and Blaydes must be kept

apart—that night at all events. Then many things must be done, but quietly, and with due forethought. Above all, no fresh fuel must be added to the vindictive fires now smouldering in her lover's speaking eyes. So Claire decided to keep to herself her own opinion of Captain Blaydes.

She had noticed without comment the heavy stick lying in the grass; she turned faint at the thought of her fiery Tom encountering the Captain so armed and so aggrieved. But she insisted on his telling her of his wrong; at first he refused.

"Very well," he said at last, "I'll tell you, so that you may see how I have been cheated; then I think you won't refuse to help me lay hands upon the cheat. It's a long story, but I'll cut it as short as I can. He had rooked me down to the last five-pound note. With that I had a little luck. I had won back five-and-thirty before we stopped playing, and Blaydes had lost more to the others than to me. He paid them in ready money. He said they were only acquaintances—his confederates!—while I was his friend. So we went back to our lodgings, and he wrote me a cheque for thirty-five pounds, with which I could have gone out to India after all, quite as comfortably as I deserved. But in the morning he had bad news, and had to go into the country, and he begged me not to cash the cheque till the end of the month; he was hard up himself. And I was loyal to the blackguard; and I needn't tell you what happened when time was up. His cheque was a dummy; he had never had a penny in the bank it was drawn on! So I wrote to his club again and again, and used to go there and watch for him, till the porters had me moved on by the police. The month was last October. I have heard

and seen nothing of him from that day to this. And to think he is in London, and you know both him and his address! You'll give it to me now, Claire, I know!"

She steadfastly refused, and gave her reasons; then he promised not to seek an interview with Blaydes for two clear days, and not to harm him then; and on this understanding she at last confessed that the Captain had taken rooms for the summer in the village of West End—a bare mile from where they stood.

But first she wanted him to give her the flash cheque, and let her fight his battle with Blaydes; and this she still intended to do—that very night.

They had finished with Blaydes, however, and were beginning to say good-bye, when Claire started, and vowed she heard a rustle at the gate. At that instant there came a breath of wind; the gate shut with a clean metallic click; she was locked out, for on this side there was only the key-hole, and the key was within.

"What shall I do?" she cried. "Oh, what shall I do?"

"Have courage," he answered, "and a little patience."

He was over the wall and back at her side within the minute. She was trembling terribly. All her nerve seemed gone. She must fly—she must fly—but he would come again the next evening? And again she was looking up divinely in his eyes, his right hand clasped in both of hers; and again the burden of past weakness bowed him down; but this time there was a counterpoise of hope and high resolve, a vision of atonement and self-respect regained, that gave to his voice a clearer, manlier note, and to Claire, in the thin moonlight, a first and last glimpse of the Tom Erichsen of Winwood uplands and red autumn afternoons. But it was now her turn to be refused.

"No, Claire," he said, "I am coming back no more. You have put it in my power not only to have my little own again, but to redeem the past, and I must set to work at once. If I don't get that thirty-five pounds now, you may hear of me next in Horsemonger Lane! If I do, there's an Indiaman—the *Jean*—sailing on Monday; and I sail in her if there's a steerage berth still going. At all events my debts here will be paid and done with; there may even be a few pounds over to make me decent when I land; and if that firm won't have me now, some other may. You shall hear of me from there. There are not going to be two false starts. And one day, Claire, I am coming back a better man than I go away; and it will all be thanks to you! Oh, thank you for your noble letter! It has saved me on the brink, little as I deserved it. I shall never stoop or sink—like this—again. That I promise you. But you should think no more of me! I was never worthy of you—I never can be that! It is best to forget me, dear; you must not spoil your life by waiting for a man—"

Her palm sealed his lips.

"For the only man I want," she whispered through her tears. "Darling, I could wait for ever!"

"I will write and tell you about the thirty-five pounds," he continued, regaining control of his voice. "It will be all your doing, my own brave Claire. No! no! not my own! never that any more!"

"For ever, darling! For ever, and ever, and ever!"

"No! no! Only be happy yourself, and forgive me for all I made you suffer. I shall never forgive myself. Good-bye, beloved. Oh, good-bye, good-bye!"

He strained her to his breast, but left no kiss upon

those pleading, praying, upturned lips. He was not worthy to touch them with his. He remembered this up to the end.

She leaned against the cold wall as he darted from her. The last thing she saw him do was to pick up the thick stick she had noticed lying in the grass; and that sinister final act struck a chill to her heart that was felt at the time, not afterwards imagined. That he could think of such a thing in such an hour! And she locked the gate and hurried down the gravel walks with eyes suddenly dried and a heart already at war with its own warmth. But when she came in sight of the arbour, and had to skulk once more behind the leaves, all in a moment she sounded the depth of her love and found it fathomless; for since the last like manœuvre the thought of Daintree had never once crossed her mind. Indeed he was recalled now chiefly by the smell of a particular cheroot which he smoked incessantly. He was smoking one at this moment in the arbour, where he had remained ever since she left him.

The other gentlemen were still at their wine—in those days they would sit over it till midnight—and Claire went first to her own room, which she gained unobserved. Here she changed her slippers for a precisely similar pair; also her stockings, which were wet to the ankles. Then she rang for her maid.

A pallid young woman, with black eyes set close together beneath a stunted brow, knocked promptly at the door, and entered with a downcast glance which swept straight to her mistress's feet.

"Has Captain Blaydes arrived?"

The black eyes gleamed. "I haven't heard, miss; shall I see?"

"Be so good, Hannah."

In a minute Hannah returned.

"No, miss, he has not."

"Thank you, Hannah, that will do."

And Claire returned to the drawing-room after a truant hour, which, however, Daintree's simultaneous absence from the dining-table explained satisfactorily enough to Lady Starkie and Mr. Harding. On her way Claire met the latter face to face in the hall. He was stark sober; indeed, his fresh face had lost colour, which was never the case in his cups.

"Seen anything of Blaydes?" he cried out to Claire, who started at the question, and then at her father's face.

"Nothing, papa: indeed, I hear he has not come."

"So do I. That's just it; that's just it!" repeated Mr. Harding, looking at his watch; and his hand was as unsteady as his voice was clear.

"I think he cannot be coming at all," remarked Claire, innocently; and she never knew why her father turned so abruptly upon his heel; but his face was still ghastly when he rejoined his gentlemen, and the bumper of port which he tossed off left it ghastlier yet.

It was twenty minutes past ten by the ormolu clock upon the chimney-piece when Claire Harding re-entered the drawing-room.

It was twenty minutes past ten by Captain Blaydes's gold repeater when through the window of a hackney-coach, creeping all too slowly along the Finchley Road, the Captain recognised a wayfarer who also recognised him, and thrust his iron-grey head through the opposite window to curse the coachman and bid him drive faster.

As he pulled it in again Tom Erichsen scrambled into the coach upon the other side, an unpleasant smile upon his set face and his thick stick in his hand. He had not promised to avoid Blaydes if chance threw them together, and chance had done so, for Tom was on his way to make his bed once more in the fields.

"You infernal ruffian," roared the Captain. "Hi! coachman, the police!"

"You miserable swindler," retorted Tom, "if you don't stop the coach at once and step outside with me you're a ruined man. I'll go on to the Hardings with you and expose you —"

"The Hardings!"

"Yes; you see, I know all your little plans."

"Little plans!!"

The Captain gasped and stopped the coach.

CHAPTER V

A BLOODLESS VICTORY

THE half-pay officer was a thick-set, youngish man, with a smooth, sly, yellow face, and hair like spun steel. He walked with a chronic limp and a stout, gold-headed cane, and was seldom without the genial, flattering smile that had tempted Tom Erichsen, and other young flies before him, into a parlour from which no pocket returned intact.

But since then Tom fancied Blaydes had found a richer dupe; he looked a much more prosperous scamp. The coach-lamps struck sparks from a very brilliant pin

in his high satin stock. The coachman must have been handsomely paid off, to depart as he did, with benedictions. And the Captain himself had evidently recovered a temper notoriously serene; for a soft hand fell like a feather upon Tom's square shoulder; and he heard once more the soothing accents of the gentlest rascal of his time.

"Come now, my good fellow," said his normal voice, "what the deuce is all this? You have treated me very cavalierly, and I you very obligingly, I think, for the elder man. What is it you want, Mr. — Mr. — upon my soul I've forgotten your name!"

"You're a liar, Blaydes," replied Tom, as quietly. "You always were one; but it won't do you much good to-night!"

"You trade upon our different stations," murmured the other. "I have shot a man for less than that; but you are only a boy. Have the goodness to say what you want."

"My thirty-five pounds!"

"Your thirty-five pounds? Yours? Look here, I begin to remember you. Your name is Eric — Eric something or other. And I was fool enough to play with you, Eric. I remember that too. You were going off to the Cape, or somewhere; you begin to take shape in my mind; but thirty-five pounds! I recall nothing of the kind. My impression was that we settled up and parted friends."

"We did," said Tom. He had allowed the other to lead him along the turnpike road, back towards the city. The moon sailed high on their left, and the sky was full of stars. On either hand the hedgerows were dusted with pale, bursting buds, like spray; and no figure but

these two broke the long, still parallels, or blotted the white road between.

"You admit it?" cried Blaydes, stopping in his walk. "Then why on earth come to me?"

"You know why! You settled with a cheque not worth the paper it was written on. Your name was unknown at the bank! It was a cheque for thirty-five pounds, and I want the money."

"Have you got that cheque?"

"It is in my pocket."

"I should like to see it."

"No doubt you would!"

"You distrust me," observed Blaydes, calmly. "I see now that you have some reason to do so. At least you won't mind telling me whether it was drawn on Stuckey's Bank?"

"It was."

"Exactly!" cried the Captain. "It's as plain as a pikestaff now. My dear young fellow, I apologise from the very bottom of my heart, for it has been my mistake after all. What do you think I did? Wrote out my cheque in Dick Vale's cheque-book—you recollect Dick Vale? He banks at Stuckey's. That's it, of course; and no wonder you thought me a thundering rogue! Now I'll be frank with you, Erichsen. Of course I knew you well enough; but I wasn't over-anxious to renew acquaintance with the man who had written threatening letters to my club. Especially as I couldn't understand 'em! But I do now, and 'pon my soul I'm sorry; here's my hand!"

"I prefer your money."

"What! you dare to doubt my word?"

"Until I see your money—most certainly."

"Well, you shall see it to-morrow. I don't carry thirty-five pounds about in my evening clothes."

"Then suppose we turn back to your rooms, and you pay me there and now!"

"And where are my rooms, pray?"

"In the village of West End."

Blaydes swore a puzzled oath, and thumped his cane upon the ground. "You know a lot!" he snarled. "What you don't know is when to leave well alone. I have told you I am sorry about that mistake. I have told you I can let you have the money to-morrow; yet you have the insolence to doubt my word! Very well—have your way; I shall waste no more time upon you. I am going. You know where to find me when you come to your senses!"

"Better still, I know where you're going, and I'm coming too. I don't lose sight of you to-night!"

"We shall see about that."

"We shall!"

And they stepped out with no more words, though Blaydes ground his teeth and gripped his cane and tried his best to drop a foot or two behind. But Tom's eye was on him. So he stopped at a stile; whereupon Tom stopped too; and, as they stood, there passed a labourer who stared and wished them good-night.

"See here, Erichsen!" exclaimed the Captain. "I object to discussing private matters on a turnpike road. Here's a path that's a short cut back into town; suppose I come a part of the way with you, and talk this thing over without fear of being heard? What do you say?"

"As you like; your way is mine."

Blaydes shrugged his broad shoulders, tucked his cane under one arm, and laboriously crossed the stile. Tom

then followed him into a sloping field, with a beaten right-of-way running uphill through the dewy grass. They climbed this path with the young moon in their eyes, but not a word upon their lips, and Tom's thick stick grasped tight by the knob. The ascent brought them to a second hedge, backed by a row of horse-chestnuts all hazy with tiny leaves, and to a hollow beech beside the second stile. Here the Captain dropped his cane in the grass, and limping pitiably, begged the other to pick it up. But Tom merely shifted it with his foot, keeping a strange eye on Blaydes as he did so. The cane in the grass had no gold knob, and the Captain's right hand was tucked inside his cloak.

"Very prettily planned," said Tom, with a sneer; "but I should like to see the rest of that sword-stick!"

The other laughed.

"I only drew it in case of need — you are such a violent young blood! Ah! you will have it, will you? There, then — and there — and there!"

The yard of thin, tempered steel had been casually produced, and Tom had instantly struck at it with his stick. Next moment the point was within an inch of his body, but Tom retreated nimbly, hitting high up the blade with all his might. It snapped at the third blow, whizzed in the air, and came down sticking in the grass. Only the gold head and three inches of blade were left in the Captain's tingling hand.

"Chuck it away," said Tom, "and I drop my stick. That's better; now about that money. You didn't bring me up here to run me through the body, of course! What was your object?"

"To settle with you — fairly," said Blaydes, with a lurch in his low voice. "I am overdue elsewhere, as you

have found out—the Lord knows how! If I had the money on me, it should be yours this minute. As I haven't it, I propose this compromise: wait till to-morrow and I'll make it fifty—and give you an I O U on the spot!"

"No, no, Blaydes. Once bit—once bit! Very sorry, but it can't be done."

Blaydes muttered an oath as he took out his watch, pressed the spring, and it struck ten, and then the three-quarters, like fairy bells. He did not put the watch away again, but stood with it in his hands and presently detached the chain from his waistcoat. He had already turned his face to the moon, and he now glanced over his shoulder and beckoned to Tom.

"Just have a look at this," said he. "No, take it in your hands and examine it properly."

The watch was a repeater of a type even then old-fashioned. It was very handsome and heavy and fat, with a yellow dial and a back like a golden saucer. Tom turned it over, and the moon shone on the Captain's monogram.

"Well, but what have I got to do with this?"

"Pawn it!"

"Pawn your watch?"

"And send me the ticket, and never pester me again! It won't be the first time it's been in. I've had forty pounds for it before to-day, and never less than thirty. You may get what you can; all I want is the pawn-ticket, and your undertaking to leave me alone from this day on!"

"Leave you alone! I shall get a berth of some sort aboard an Indiaman that sails on Monday. Do you mean it, Blaydes? Do you mean what you say?"

"Mean it? Of course I mean it; put the watch in your pocket, and give me a pencil."

"And the chain?"

"And the chain."

It was made of long gold links and short silver ones, with a huge bunch of seals at one end. Tom pocketed the lot without compunction, and then produced his stump of lead-pencil.

"Here you are."

"Got any paper?"

"Not a scrap."

"Well, well, then we must make this do;" and Blaydes produced a small sheaf of blue paper tied with pink tape, leant upon the stile, and, without untying the tape, wrote for a little on the outside sheet, moistening the pencil with his tongue.

"Sign that," said he, and handed the packet to Tom, who held it to the light and read as follows:—

"Received from J. Montgomery Blaydes (late Captain Coldstream Guards), his watch and chain, etc., in settlement of all claims, and in consideration of which I undertake to return pawn-ticket for same to said J. M. Blaydes, Ivy Cottage, West End, within three days from this date. — (Signed), ———, April 27th, 1837."

Tom read this terse deed twice through; looked again at the watch and chain; weighed them in his hand; took a third look at the paper, and signed his name in the blank space without a word.

"Good!" said Blaydes, pocketing the roll. "Now I think you'll have no objection to giving me back that worthless cheque? Come, perhaps it wasn't such a pure accident after all. But I was cursedly hard up at the time. And I honestly regret it — I do indeed."

Still without a word, Tom handed him the cheque, whereupon Blaydes twisted it up, struck a lucifer, and ignited the paper at one end. And as it burnt he picked off and powdered the charred bits between finger and thumb, while the yellow flame made his smooth face yellower than ever. When the last particle was demolished, he snapped his burnt fingers and turned to Tom.

“You will now, I think, allow me to proceed on my way alone? If you stick to this right-of-way, it will take you to Haverstock Hill, which is the straightest way back to the City from this. Good-bye, Erichsen. I have been a bad friend to you—I know it. Yet I have always liked you, and never better than for your grit and nerve to-night. Get all you can for the old warming-pan. I needn’t remind you to send on the ticket, for you were always as straight as a die. So was I once, Erichsen! Even now I’m not as bad as you think me; and upon my soul, it was only your infernal bludgeon that made me draw cold steel. Give me your hand, boy; we may never meet again; but if we do—I’m thinking of marrying—and you shall find me another man, so help me God!”

Refusal was impossible. Their hands met across the stile. And as Tom saw it last, by clean moonlight, there was a certain wistfulness in the yellow, sapless face, drained and stained though it was by a hateful life; a sort of pathos in the glistening white head, from which the low-crowned hat was lifted, as if the creature’s prayer had been indeed sincere.

CHAPTER VI

A KIND WORLD

THE other pushed on with a light step and a swimming brain. The sudden change in his poor little fortunes seemed too good to be true. Thirty-five pounds is not a mint of money, but to Erichsen it was something like one; at least it was his all, for he had no right to another penny in the world. The sum represented his full capital, as well as his last chance in life. And he had it safe in his pocket in the shape of Blaydes's watch and chain.

And then — and then — Claire loved him still! The tears started to his eyes; tears of hot shame and bitter self-reproach. Yet at least he had been punished. He was thankful for that. Nor could his punishment be over yet. But what remained he would bear like a man, ay, and glory in every pang. And he would write and tell her so, and of his immediate but accidental meeting with Blaydes; and of the interview which flesh and blood could not then resist.

He would tell her, too, that Blaydes was not after all as bad as he had seemed. Yet was he not? Tom thought of the sword-stick, and was torn between duty and magnanimity. It was right that the Hardings should have intimate warning as to the manner of man who went to their house. On the other hand, even Blaydes was entitled to fair play. And for some reason, Tom now chiefly pictured him in his last and best moment, with the dawn of remorse in his eyes, and the light of the moon upon that grey, uncovered head.

The moon was hidden now. Tom had difficulty in seeing and following the beaten path; and was unduly startled by a fellow-waif, who suddenly stood before him in the darkness.

"Got the time about yer, guv'nor?" said a high, hoarse voice.

"No, I—I don't possess a watch," stammered Tom, taken as much aback by the question as by the questioner. And he grasped the repeater in one pocket, and doubled the other fist.

"Ha! I see you don't," rejoined the other, as the moon shone forth at that moment. "No 'arm done, I 'ope. We can't all be real swells, can we?"

And Tom was left shuddering from a single moonlight glimpse of a horrible face horribly disfigured: disease had razed the nose to the level of the stubbly, shrunken cheeks; the very eyes were more prominent, but wolfish, unsteady, and little better to see. His own required the lotion of long star-gazing when the man had gone his way. But the sight would have remained longer in an emptier mind; that of the youth was full of the final kindness of the world, of the instinct for better things in even a Blaydes, and the divine possibilities of human nature as exemplified by the deep, full, true and tender love of a girl like Claire for a scapegrace like himself. And so he came back to his own unworthiness, and made as many honest resolutions as there were stars in the sky, and felt strength and virtue leaping in his warm and humble heart. Yet all this time was but twenty minutes at most; and he was still in the fields between the Finchley Road and Haverstock Hill, though descending now and in sight of the latter thoroughfare.

His plans for the night were as yet unmade. He thought of his old lodgings off Fetter Lane; but only for a moment. He could not be there before one o'clock in the morning; they were early people, and he had traded enough upon their good-nature. One more night in the open would not hurt him; and could there be a better place than in these very fields? Tom looked about him and espied a promising thicket not thirty paces from the path. And here, being tired out, he did actually lie down, after first kneeling, as he had not knelt for months, and thanking the Maker of All Good Things for having made the world so kind, and his love so true and so forgiving.

But he never quite fell asleep; he was near it when a sound of slipshod feet, running downhill through the grass, passed close by the thicket, and left him wide awake and wondering. It was hopeless after that. And two o'clock struck upon his ears with the sound of his own footsteps trudging down Haverstock Hill to no immediate goal.

Yet still the world was kind. A waggon came creaking at his heels, slowly overhauling him, and unexpectedly stopping when it did so. It was green mountains high with country vegetables, smelling notably in the clean night air; and with this sweet whiff of home and the past there came a hearty, elderly voice evidently hailing Tom.

"Now then, young man! If you want a lift, joomp oop!"

Tom was not sure what he wanted; but his feet were sore, the voice liked him, and up he jumped. And between darkness and dawn—the quiet foot of the sleeping hill and the half-awakened but already noisy

purlicues of Tottenham Court Road — the lucky, attractive fellow made another friend.

The waggoner was a red-faced, red-whiskered, freckle-handed fellow, with a genial, broad, communicative tongue. Jonathan Butterfield was his name, and he was a Yorkshireman only recently come south, as he said with a sigh which left him silent. Whereupon Tom became communicative in his turn, and remarked that he too meditated a move — to India.

“There’s the good ship *Jean* advertised to sail on Monday and I’m on my way to the office to see if they’ve a bunk left. If there isn’t, I shall go on to the docks and try my luck on the ship herself. I might work my passage out; if not, I’ll stow away.”

“You’re that anxious to leave old England!”

“I am anxious to make my way.”

“Ah, well!” sighed the waggoner. “I’ve got a lad o’ my own as far away as you are going; he writes us canny letters, but dear knows what we’d give to see him back!”

Tom said no more; he was wondering who but Claire would give a thank-you to see *him* back. But to Claire he must only return as a successful man of substance; and had he it in him so to succeed? The practical issue presented itself with dawn; and Tom’s little night of romance and exaltation was at an end long ere they got to Bow Street, raucous with wheels and oaths, and blocked with costermongers’ shallows, among which the waggon stood wedged till broad daylight.

But there was no end to the good-will of the Yorkshireman, who not only insisted on paying for hot coffee at an early stall, but flatly refused to go about his business until Tom promised to accompany him to breakfast

at its conclusion. The promise was made with some reluctance, but not a little relief at the prospect of an hour or two beneath a roof; while the interim in the market was in itself an entertainment for one to whom the scene was new. Tom never forgot the sweet smell of the early, costly peas, the picturesque groups of market-women busy shelling them in the shade, the red-stained pottles of premature strawberries, or the thousand flower-pots gay and odorous with the flowers of spring, which occupied his attention in the waggoner's absence. Nor was his interest greater than his personal satisfaction in the scene; it made a wonderfully happy ending to an unworthy phase of his existence, a wonderfully stimulating prelude to the new life begun with this day. Indeed, his heart rose steadily with the sun, and was singing with brave resolve when at length the waggoner returned.

"I doubt I've been a long time," said Butterfield. "It'll be very near six o'clock."

"Ten past," said Tom, whipping out the golden nucleus of his future fortunes, which he had even then been hugging in his pocket.

"Mercy on us!" cried the other.

"You thought it earlier?"

"Ay, I did; by gum, though, that's a fine watch you've gotten!"

And Tom felt a new light beating on his shabby clothes, and himself flushing painfully under a scrutiny which began with round-eyed wonder and ended in a series of approving nods.

"I see—I see," added simple Butterfield, in quite a reverent voice; "you'd rather starve than part with yon. I'm jealous it belonged some one else before you;

but there's not many would ha' gone hungry with a watch like that about them. However, t' waggon's ready, an' we'll take good care you don't go hungry to-day."

Tom's only answer was a sudden attempt to back out of the breakfast, and it failed. He tried again as they drove past Fetter Lane — he could pay his way in Rolls Buildings now — but this time the waggoner whipped up his horse and refused to listen.

"No, no," said he; "a promise is a promise, and I warrant they'll be proud to see you."

"You mean your wife and family?" said Tom.

"Nay," said Butterfield, "I doubt you'll not see *them* there."

"Not at your house?" cried Tom.

"It isn't mine," confessed the other; "it's my wife's brother's. He drives a hackney-coach, and I use his stable every other morning. Me an' my missus live out at Hendon, and I come in three nights a week."

"But you mustn't saddle these people with me. Let me get down at once!"

"Mustn't I?" chuckled the waggoner. "I'll take the blame then. We're very near there; and dashed if that isn't Jim on his way home to breakfast. Jim! Jim!"

And a hackney-coach, crawling leisurely along in front, was pulled up as the coachman turned round and recognised Butterfield.

"Well, Jonathan, how are you?"

"How's yourself, Jim? Early and late, as usual, eh? This is a young gent who has ridden in with me. He's waiting till t' offices open, and I thought you'd give us both a bit of breakfast."

"Always glad to oblige a gen'leman," said the coach-

man, looking hard but nodding genially at Tom; nor would he either listen to a single protest or apology from the youth, who found himself at breakfast, scarce ten minutes later, in a cosy kitchen close to Blackfriars Bridge.

The hackney-coachman was a burly old soldier, a jolly ruffian with a good brown eye; his wife was small and spruce, watchful and quiet, and perhaps Tom liked her less. She was kind enough, however; indeed, the sympathetic interest shown by all in an unknown vagabond was a circumstance that touched Tom deeply, though of a piece with all his most recent experiences, and but another proof of the world's kindness.

The old soldier had served in India himself. He was full of practical advice for Tom, who listened gratefully, but yawned twice, when it came out he had not slept for some thirty hours. Instantly the household was on its feet. It appeared that Jonathan Butterfield had a snooze there each morning after his night journey with the vegetables, and Tom must and should lie down beside him.

Tom consented — for an hour — and fell asleep wondering where he had seen the good Jim before. When he awoke, the waggoner was gone and the light different. He went downstairs in his socks and asked Jim's wife the time.

"Time?" said she. "Haven't you a watch?"

"Not I."

"Jonathan told me you'd a gold repeater!"

Tom remembered the repeater, for the first time since awaking; but the woman was looking at him queerly, and he had no intention of entering into explanations with her. So he simply asked whether Jonathan had gone.

"Many an hour ago; it's five o'clock."

"Five!"

"And after."

Tom burst into apologies, in the midst of which the woman put on a shawl and went out. He was still standing irresolute in his socks, dazed by his long sleep, when there came a rattle of wheels outside, and in rushed Jim with his whip and an evening newspaper.

"Glad to find you still here, sir!" cried he. "I want somebody as *can* read to read me a slice out of this 'ere *Globe*. It's awful, sir—awful! The wery gen'leman I drove last night! I've come straight from Scotland Yard!"

Tom suddenly remembered when and where he had seen the other before; it was overnight on the box of Blaydes's hackney-coach.

"Who is the gentleman?"

"Blaydes it seems his name is; or rather was!"

"Was?"

"He's dead—"

"Dead!"

"Stone dead—murdered—by a man I saw as close as I see you now, but never looked twice at! It's all in the *Globe*, they tell me; read it out, sir, read it out."

■

CHAPTER VII

A GUILTY INNOCENT

TOM ERICHSEN held out a steady hand for the *Globe*. His blood ran too cold for present tremors. The hackney-coachman had drawn a chair to the table, planted his elbows in the middle of the printed cotton cloth, and his hot, flushed face between his coarse, strong hands. Tom sat down at the other end. He found the paragraph, ran his eye from head-line to finish, and then read it slowly aloud :—

SHOCKING MURDER AT HAMPSTEAD

An atrocious murder was committed late last night, or early this morning, in the neighbourhood of Hampstead Heath. A mechanic, on his way to work at an early hour this morning, and having occasion to traverse the right-of-way connecting the Finchley Road with the upper portion of Haverstock Hill, noticed a stout staff upon the grass, near the second stile from the former thoroughfare. On picking it up, the staff, or rather cudgel, was found to be crusted with blood, and near it was discovered a drawn sword-stick, broken near the hilt. Continuing his alarming investigations, the mechanic made his crowning and most horrible discovery in a hollow tree close beside the stile, in which lay the body of a gentleman in full evening dress. He was quite dead ; indeed, life had probably been extinct some hours. The corpse was covered with blood, and the head terribly disfigured, as if by repeated blows from some blunt instrument. There can be no doubt that the crime was committed with the cudgel above mentioned (at present the only clue to the assassin), nor that the sword-stick was vainly used in self-defence by the unfortunate gentleman. The police were summoned with commendable despatch, and the body removed to the Marylebone mortuary to await inquest.

Meanwhile, in the course of the morning, much information has

been forthcoming, and we are sorry to state that the victim has been identified as Captain J. Montgomery Blaydes, late of his Majesty's Coldstream Guards, but for some years past on the half-pay list. No letters or papers of any sort were discovered upon his person —

Here Tom stopped reading.

"Go on, sir."

"I will. But that's extraordinary!"

"Not it. He's been robbed as well. That's what I want to get at. That there stick's no clue; we want the things he took."

Tom moistened his lips and harked back :—

No letters or papers of any sort were discovered upon his person, and it is only through the marking of his linen that the identity of the deceased has been so promptly established. It now transpires that the hapless Captain had been lately residing in the village of West End (not a mile from the scene of the murder), and that he left his lodgings shortly after ten o'clock last night, in order to attend an evening party, in a hackney-coach. The police hope that the coachman will come forward —

"He has!" said Jim. "You may leave out that bit."

"And you couldn't describe the man?"

"Not too well. I could only swear he was neither short nor tall, and looked to be wearing a pair of nan-keen trousers." (Tom's legs were underneath the table.)

"No," continued Jim, "I'm afraid they won't lay hands on him through me. But they may through the things he took. Go on to that!"

"There was a diamond pin."

"I seen it! What else?"

"All his money."

"Ah! he paid like a gen'leman. Anything else?"

"A — gold — watch."

The words would hardly come. Jim thumped the table with heavy fist.

"That'll do!" he cried. "That'll hang him, you mark my words! What sort of a watch?"

But this time the words would not come at all, for Jim's wife stood in the doorway behind Jim's chair, and her eyes and Tom's—the terrified and the guilty—were locked together in a long, dread stare.

"What's that about a watch?" she said in a sort of whisper, advancing unsteadily, and leaning a hand upon her husband's shoulder. "Whose watch?"

"One belonging a murdered man," replied Jim. "I'm asking what kind of a one. I say it ought to hang the chap what did it."

"It will," said she hoarsely in his ear. "It's a repeater, and him that has it sits in front of you in that chair!"

There followed a silence so profound that Tom could hear the watch itself ticking in his pocket. The coachman then rose, and slowly leaned across the table, resting one hand upon it; the other was half-way to Tom's throat when he started to his feet, and in so doing pressed his thigh against the table's edge. Instantly there rang from his pocket a sweet and tiny ting! ting! ting! ting! ting!

It was the saving of him from Jim the coachman and his wife.

Both shrank back as Tom darted to an inner door, and so up the stairs which he had descended half-asleep.

Ere he reached the top there was a crash below; for an instant he thought the man had fallen in a fit; but a volley of oaths proved it only a slip, as Tom slammed

and locked the door of the room in which he had slept away the day if not his life. His shoes were still where he had kicked them off. He slipped into them, and, exerting all his strength, pulled the large iron bedstead from its place and wedged it between wall and door. Then he crouched and listened. The man was for taking him single-handed; the woman evidently restraining him by main force.

"Let me go! Let me go, damn ye!" Tom heard him cry.

"Never till I drop! Police! police! He sha'n't murder my Jim too."

"So help me, but I'll strike ye if ye don't let go!"

"Strike away. Police! police! police! If you go, I go too."

Her cries were not loud; they were smothered in the struggle, which was still continued—now at the foot of the stairs, now on the stairs themselves, and at last on the landing outside the barricaded door. Meanwhile the bird had flown.

No sooner had Tom realised what was taking place below than he threw up the bedroom window. It overlooked a small and filthy backyard, into which Tom quietly dropped while the pair were still struggling on the stairs. To find his way through the house, through the kitchen itself, and out into the narrow street, was the work of very few moments. The last Tom heard was the belabouring of the locked, blocked door by honest Jim. Nor did his presence of mind desert him yet. He walked out of the narrow side-street, only running when he came to the main thoroughfare, and after a perilous hesitation as to whether he should strike into the City or over Blackfriars Bridge.

He chose the City, and having chosen, lost his head and ran for his life.

He darted across the street and plunged into the busy alleys filling the delta between the bridge and St. Paul's. Here he slackened a little, for the stony, many-windowed ravines were so narrow and so crowded that it was impossible to continue running. But he threw up his heels the instant he emerged on Ludgate Hill, tearing helter-skelter in the middle of the road. He was nearly run over by a van coming out of Paternoster Row, and cursed to the skies by the driver. Faces stopped and turned upon the pavements. He knew the folly of it, and yet ran on with a fiend in either heel.

"Ba—nk—ba—nk—'ere you are, sir, 'ere you are!"

Tom was almost up to the omnibus before he realised that this was meant for him; instinctively he waved and nodded, and his mad pace was explained. The omnibus stopped; he jumped in gasping.

"Thought you was after me," said the cad, with a grin.

Tom had no breath to reply. A rubicund old gentleman made a well-meant remark upon the eagerness of youth, and was favoured with a glassy stare. The newcomer sat panting in a corner, the perspiration trickling from his nose.

But his head was cooler; he saw the needlessness as well as the indiscretion of conspicuous flight. He had slipped through the only hands that were as yet against him; he had eluded the only eyes he need avoid that night. For the hackney-coachman might take his new tale straight to Scotland Yard, but it could hardly be given to the world before morning.

Tom's heart leapt as he discovered the temporary

strength of his position; next moment it sank, for the cad was collecting the fares, and his single asset was the watch. His bankrupt state had occurred to Tom as he ran for the omnibus, but not again; it was so small a thing compared with the charge now lying at his door. Yet he had just thought of it—his little fraud was so far deliberate—but he had neither the face nor the foolhardiness to sit there and confess his fault. And—situated like the wanted felon he now felt himself to be—it was wonderful and horrible how a felon's resources came unbidden to his fingers' ends. He began feeling in pocket after pocket, with a face that lengthened under the frown of the cad, the raised eyebrows of the rubicund gentleman, and the fixed attention of all.

"I'm afraid I—I don't seem to have a coin in my pocket!"

"Oh, you 'aven't, 'aven't you?"

"No—I have not! I'm very sorry—I—"

"You may be! Never mind no tales; you can keep them for the beak, as'll 'ave a word to say to you to-morrow mornin'!" And the cad winked at the other passengers, stopped the omnibus, and called a policeman from the curb.

Tom could have burst into tears. To be wrongly wanted for a crime so terrible, and justly taken for a thing so small! He looked forlornly at his fellow-passengers, with a wild idea that one might come to his rescue; the sole response was a withering frown from the ruddy old gentleman, who also commended the cad, and loudly trusted an example would be made of the case. The desperate Tom began ransacking his pockets in earnest for some overlooked coin, but he had done this so often of late that he felt the futility now. The per-

spiration froze upon his face; yet even with the policeman's tall hat poked inside the omnibus, his twitching fingers continued their spasmodic, hopeless search.

"The flash young spark!" whispered the cad. "Just you frighten 'im, Sir Robert."

"Now then, come along!" said the officer.

"Good God!" cried Tom.

"You'll get all the more for swearing; now, out you come afore you're made."

"Not just yet," returned the culprit, and handed the conductor one of two halfcrowns found that very moment in a scrap of crumpled paper. "I'm sorry I couldn't find it before. Kindly give me change."

"Where to?" growled the cad, as the constable stepped down.

Tom did not hear.

"Can't you answer? Where to?"

"Oh, as far as you go!"

Tom's eyes were on the crumpled scrap, and filled to overflowing by half-a-dozen ill-written words.

CHAPTER VIII

HUE AND CRY

"Wishin good luk, yours respectfull, J. Butterfield."

Those were the words that made full the warm heart and speaking eyes of Thomas Erichsen. He pictured the furtive waggoner slipping the halfcrowns into the waistcoat pocket where he had found them, while he himself lay serenely prone, with the long arm of the law already

feeling for him, and nimble pressmen even then indicting paragraphs that should hound him to the gibbet. His new extremity made him the more appreciate this touching tribute. He could not understand why so many persons were so strangely kind to him. He was not aware that there was a something generous in himself which excited the generosity of others possessing that quality. He only knew that of all his like experiences he ranked this first. And then he began wondering what the waggoner would give to recall his crown and his kindness when he came to know the apparent truth.

It was so apparent that from the first he despaired of ever disproving it, and felt his only chance to lie in flight. To fly and hide was not only his first instinct, but his comparatively mature judgment in the matter. His stick had been used. He had told people that he intended so to use it himself. He would never be believed about the watch; the paper that alone could prove his word had been stolen with everything else from the dead man's pocket. Even supposing he had started with a case, he must have spoiled it by his incriminating conduct at the hackney-coachman's. Yet flight had been and was still his only chance. Innocent as the dead in the grave, as the child in the womb, he was still compelled to choose between a guilty hiding and a surrender tantamount to certain death.

These thoughts did not all come together, nor in this order. They were interspersed with white-hot memories of poor Blaydes as last seen in the moonlight; of that touch of dignity and of regret that read now as a premonition of his immediate end; and these in their turn were interrupted by visions of a repulsive face, and by the unseen flight of headlong, shambling feet. Perhaps

there was no connection between any of these things; it was more than likely there was not. But the fugitive's heated brain, susceptible enough to sharp and deep impressions, was as yet quite incapable of consecutive thought; besides, he was always wondering whether the footstep behind him conveyed a hand that would close next instant upon his collar; and every minute there were many such in the crowded City streets.

Towards dusk his eye was taken by a common barber's pole. Hitherto the desired sign had been that of the three gilt globes, and he had paused at one or two, peering through the windows without daring to enter. The barber was a new idea. Tom felt his chin, looked at it in the window, and found it thinly yellowed over to the depth of half an inch; his fair hair was also very long. He entered, and asked to have it cut and his face shaved. It was quite a small shop, near Finsbury Circus, whither Tom had drifted from the Bank.

"Another nice murder!" remarked the barber, reluctantly throwing aside the *Courier* for his scissors.

"Whereabouts?" said Tom, who had guessed from his face what the man was reading.

"London again!—'Am'sted 'Eath way this time."

"Ah, that! Yes, I've heard of it. I'll have my hair quite short, please."

But the man would talk.

"Worse than Greenacre, I say."

"How so?"

"Done for robbery; that there watch and diamond pin!"

"Ah!"

"On the other 'and, Greenacre, 'e cut 'er up. You don't 'appen to be goin' to the 'anging on Tuesday?"

That ought to be prime. I mean to be there if I stand all night for my place! Not fond of an execution, sir?"

"I never saw one."

"Never saw one! Well, that's funny; and I 'aven't missed one these fifteen years!"

Tom looked from his own ghastly visage in the mirror to the low, gloating face puckered with sly smiles at ghoulish memories. He went elsewhere for his shave. And slowly but at last the grateful night closed in; the busy City streets became empty, echoing chasms; and Tom, feeling more than ever the guilty cynosure, drifted westward with the ebbing tide of innocent, free men.

His great dread was of the hackney-coachman. His friend Jim was perhaps the one man in the streets of London who could at present identify him at sight. He squandered fivepence on the latest *Globe*. It contained no fresh particulars. His name had not yet transpired, so Jim was still his chiefest terror. He tarried in narrow alleys where four wheels could not follow him. In one of these a second-hand bookseller, smoking a churchwarden on his doorstep, stared at Tom critically. Thereupon he slunk into the nearest street. It was Newgate Street. He stood before the sombre walls of the prison itself, and continued so to stand, impersonally fascinated, with a sudden end to all sense of danger, as though a nerve were killed.

There was no moon, but the wide clear space above the prison walls was pricked with the brightest stars Tom had ever seen. He wondered whether it was in mercy or in mockery that the stars shone their best over that monument of gloom and horror; then his speculations took a more practical direction. How thick were those grimy walls? Where was Greenacre? What was

he doing? Where would he be hanged? But this he thought he knew, and turning into the Old Bailey, he stood opposite the place.

The Old Bailey was all but deserted. Tom stood unseen, and peopled it with the vile crowd he had often read of in those newspaper descriptions which it was easy to condemn but more difficult to skip. He found himself mentally in the midst of that ruthless ritual, just as he was bodily upon its scene. He heard the lewd cheering of throats athirst for blood, the screaming of bruised and trampled women, the clink of wine-glasses in the twenty-guinea windows behind and above him. On every face he found the bestial relish that the mirror had shown him at the barber's shop. And as then he saw his own sickly mask as well, but a long way off now—above the felon's gate—with the rope round his neck and dangling from the beam. And with that final vision returned the sense of deadly danger, in ten-fold force and with sickening poignancy, as the vividness leapt from the inner to the outward eye, and he saw and realised what was then and there taking place.

A police-officer had emerged from a narrow door in the great grimy walls; his white trousers shone across the street; so did the fluttering paper in his hand. He carried a paste-pot and a brush, and stopping at a point where a black board clung to the black stones, he pasted his paper upon it. Before he began there was a little crowd about him; when he finished it stretched half across the street. And there was Tom still cowering under the windows opposite.

The first word he heard was his own name bandied from mouth to mouth.

"Herichsen," said one. "It's as good a name as

Greenacre. They allus do have good names. Look at Fauntleroy and —”

“A hundred pounds reward!”

“Long, fair hair — slight growth on chin —”

“Medium height — dark brown eyes —”

Tom heard no more; sidling warily to the left, he squeezed round the corner into Fleet Lane, while every eye was turned the other way. Out of Fleet Lane there ran another to the right; as Tom dived into it, his shaking hand went to his smooth-shaven chin and short-cut hair; and his quivering lips muttered a new blessing on Jonathan Butterfield and his seed for ever.

He had spent sixteen pence, which left exactly three-and-eight. Further disguise he must have, and though he tried more than once to pawn the watch, his nerve always failed him on the threshold of the shop. The aimlessness of his proceedings now came home to him, and yet what was he to do? He had heard that London was the best hiding-place in the world, and indeed it had never struck him to break for the country. Nor did it now. But he would try some other end of the town; not the docks, however; he had told everybody he was going there, and could not, therefore, go too far in the opposite direction.

The Paddington omnibus was passing as he emerged from Skinner Street. Tom got in, and paid his sixpence, leaving three-and-two.

So his name had come out already. He had time to think of things in the omnibus, which was half empty, and he soon saw that Jim the coachman could not have supplied the police with the name; he did not know it himself. Other witnesses must have stepped forward already. Who were they? But it mattered very little

after all. Not Claire, at any rate; and yet the thought of her brought with it the keenest torture he had suffered yet.

She would think him guilty; after what had passed between them she could not do otherwise; then guilty let him be, in every earthly eye, and the sooner it was all over the better for him and for her. He had no wish to live if the one sweet judge whose judgment he respected held him worthy of death. And she would — she could not help herself; then what must she think of his love for her? And the thought of her thoughts was worse than that of shameful death before a howling mob.

He tore up her letter that he had meant to treasure till his death, so that when he was taken no slur should rest upon his beloved; and he distributed the minute fragments at long intervals that night before looking for a place to lay his head. In the end he hit upon an empty house overlooking the then green enclosure of Westbourne Park; an unfastened window caught his eye; he waited till the road was clear, and then entered like an expert, fastening the window behind him.

Here he destroyed and hid away his hat, a battered beaver bought in the days of poor Blaydes. In its stead he had obtained from a pawn-shop, and for eighteen pence, an old-fashioned peak-and-tassel cap. But he had not dared to offer the watch in pledge, although he had entered that shop for the purpose.

It ticked so loud in the empty house that in the dead of night he leapt up in a frenzy and smashed in the works with his heel.

Before he could lie down again there came a deafening double-knock at the street-door.

CHAPTER IX

A GOOD SAMARITAN

To run no risk of observation through the dirty, bare windows, as well as to secure equi-distance from all possible points of approach or escape, the hunted youth had lain him down in the hall, with the bottom stair for his pillow. He was rewarded with the full shock of this ear-splitting tattoo. Yet it shook him less than the insolent, maddening solo of the dead man's watch; and the hollow house was still resounding like a drum as Tom groped his way on tip-toe to the garden door, and stealthily withdrew the bolts. The door was one-half coloured glass, showing a pink moon in a purple sky, and a neglected garden which by daylight would have been sky-blue with a ruby margin; but now it merely gave another coat to night; and Tom was outside and half-way down the flight of stone steps before he saw that which made the iron balustrade grow colder in his hand. The chimney-pot hat, white trousers and drawn staff of one of the new police awaited him at the bottom.

"Come along," said this officer; "it's no use turning back — hear that!"

As he spoke the noise of breaking glass came through the open door; and Tom's mind was made up. Suddenly crouching, with knees and elbows at acute angles, he sprang clean on top of the police-officer, who collapsed beneath him like a house of cards. The fall was bad enough for Tom; his nose was bleeding when he picked himself up; but the other lay motionless on his back, and Tom bent over him in horror. His eyes opened that

instant, and he made a grab at Tom, who turned and darted down the garden just as there was a clatter of fresh feet upon the stone stairs behind.

The garden wall was mercifully low. Tom vaulted it, and all but landed in a cucumber-frame upon the other side. He found himself in a nursery-garden, with avenues of crystal roofs shining to the moon in long low parallels. Down one such causeway sped Tom at top speed, getting into another by turning left and right at the first gap. Just then he heard a welcome crash at the cucumber-frame fifty yards back. But now the frontage wall loomed ahead, cutting the stars at an uncomfortable height; and on dashing up to it Tom saw the mistake he had made by changing avenues. He had to turn back to the right to make the gate; and the officers, who had run straight ahead, and thus gained a score of yards, were upon him in full cry.

The gate was a high wooden one, luckily without spikes; the runaway straddled the top just as the pursuers reached the bottom, and left a shoe in their hands, ere he threw himself down upon the other side, and kicked its fellow to the winds.

A stretch of fair road ran right and left between temporary fences and open ground laid out for building. Tom headed to the left, scampering like a mouse in his stocking-soles, with the constables again clattering at his heels. One of the latter seemed to be running lame; and both breathed the music of short wind to Tom's ears. He was himself lean and hard from little food and much fresh air. With a clear course, he had perfect confidence in his pace and staying powers; and this was then comparatively open country; and the time was between three and four in the morning.

Lightly and rhythmically fell his feet upon the road-side; those of his pursuers rang fainter by degrees; but when at length he glanced over his shoulder, it cost him yards from sheer admiration. Of the four white legs flying after him in the moonlight, one was as if dipped in red from thigh to ankle; yet the limping man led; and Tom, remembering the crash at the cucumber-frame, felt a parenthetic pang at being pitted by fate against this hero.

But now a broad road crossed and ended this one, and Tom tore round to the right. Hardly had he done so when he became aware that the pursuit had suffered a sudden interruption. He heard the blowing of a whistle farther and farther behind him, and guessed that the wounded man had dropped from loss of blood, and was in too bad a case to be left. His heart smote him; he seemed cast for blood-guiltiness after all; still, here was his chance, and he must make the most of it or surely die.

He ran swiftly on, and presently overhauled a cart lumbering westward along the middle of the road. He was passing it at a less suspicious pace when he made a discovery. The driver was bent double and fast asleep.

Tom dropped behind again and peeped in over the back. It was a hay-cart, and the load had been left in town; all that remained was the tarpaulin lying in a crumpled heap. He looked back along the road, but saw nobody. Then he boarded the cart—silently enough in his ragged socks—and curled himself up beneath the tarpaulin.

He had not been there many minutes when the double patter of two pairs of boots came to his ears above the creaking of the cart-wheels and the horse's

sober stride. Louder it grew and louder yet, until once more Tom heard the laboured breath of untrained runners: he heard them pass the cart, one each side; and then, just as he himself had stopped on overhauling it, so did they.

"I see nothing of your man," said one. "Let's ask this chap if *he* has."

"We might do worse. Hey, driver! Wake up there, will you?"

"What's the row?"

"You're asleep!"

"What's that to you?"

"Everything — when you're in charge of a horse and cart."

The man promptly denied having been asleep at all; was asked if he had seen the fugitive; and wanted to know what he was like.

Tom heard himself most inaccurately described. "And I ought to know, because I've chased him for a mile already; and only lost him because my comrade was wounded and couldn't run," added the ingenious officer.

"Well, what if I did see him?"

"We're just at the fork; you must have seen which way he went, and you've got to tell us."

"And what if I refuse?"

"Refuse! Why, he's a desperate burglar, who's about done for two of us already! Refuse away — but you come along with us."

"Oh, all right, I *did* see him," declared the carter, to Tom's momentary horror; "but I call it wery 'ard, makin' one pore chap split on another."

"And which way did he go when he came to the fork just ahead here?"

"Which way? Why, he kep' on straight along the Uxbridge Road, and that's the truth."

The carter was cautioned, threatened, but finally allowed to proceed upon his way. In a minute or two Tom heard him burst into a laugh, and whip up the draught-horse to an elephantine trot. Meanwhile the police-officers had run out of ear-shot along the Uxbridge Road; and the hay-cart was well upon its way to Turnham Green and Kew.

At the latter place the carter stopped for his breakfast, and Thomas Erichsen made good his escape, not a little encouraged by the fact that his late pursuers had manifestly not known who it was they were pursuing.

Tom had *his* breakfast in the beautiful early sunshine beside the river's brim.

Overnight he had avoided the tavern, but not the pastry-cook's shop; so he had made his supper in the empty house, and was provisioned still; moreover, his pocket was still weighted by poor Blaydes's broken watch, nor could he make up his mind to pitch into the river his only asset, and one to which he was so justly entitled. He was clear of London now; the early sun gave him confidence and pluck. He would pawn the watch in one of these Thames Valley towns, and then get back to London and the docks by river and in new habiliments. It was Saturday morning; he would wait until that best of times, Saturday night; but first he must find a place to hide his head in during the day.

He found one in the boat-house of a small, new, white-brick villa, with a narrow garden leading down to the river's edge. The boat-house had an open window. Hardened by his extremity into incredible alacrity in

such enterprises, Tom was through it in a twinkling, and well pleased with his discovery. The boat was still hibernating keel upwards on trestles. It would be a very strange thing if that day, of all others, were chosen for launching her for the summer. Determined, at any rate, to risk it, the runaway climbed into a little loft which might have been made for him, and settled down for the day; he rolled himself up in several folds of strawberry-netting, and made another quaint pillow of the box of a mowing-machine, whereon he slept soundly for several hours.

So the morning went; but the livelong afternoon he lay awake beneath the strawberry-nets; and these were his worst hours yet. They gave him pause for thought, and what thoughts were his! The almost inevitable end of this wild-goose flight — that was one. The quite inevitable fate of one standing his ground in circumstances so damning — that was another. The two together led him in circles, so that his brain reeled. The upshot was that he had taken the wrong, and yet the only course. Nor was that the worst, for brooding over all there was the thought of Claire, believing him guilty till her dying day, and never forgiving her own warm heart that had gone out in fearless loving-kindness to the bloody and deceitful man. To have loved one who ended on the gallows! What a memory to take through life! And the poor fellow's love so quickened his insight that he shed tears for her, but regarded his own ease with a growing stoicism.

Yet all the time the changed face of Blaydes at the moonlit stile, and that other foul one seen so shortly after, looked down on him side by side from the boat-house roof; and now he knew them for the faces of

murdered man and murderer; but anon he gave it up, and shrugged his cramped shoulders, and left all that on the knees of the gods.

So these black hours wore slowly on, and they were the blacker in that they contained no new alarm to lift his mind from the ultimate. On the contrary, he felt safe enough for the day, for a steady rain had started while he slept, and never a footstep had mingled with its music on the garden paths; a relief, perhaps, but one that brought its own depression.

However, the rain ceased with the day, and when Tom deemed it dark enough for a judicious exit, the wet earth was as fragrant as a flower. He sniffed it joyously through the open window by which he had entered. The garden path was washed very yellow, and bordered by twin canals. There was more light than he had thought when in the loft; still, not a soul was in view, and it had been lighter yet when he arrived. It was necessary, however, to get out of the window legs first, and backwards, and when Tom had done so and turned round, he beheld, standing on the yellow path between the two canals, and quizzically regarding him, the quaintest and the tiniest old gentleman he had ever encountered.

He was certainly not more than five feet high, but he carried himself superbly, and fixed the intruder with a steady, jocular, light-blue eye which inspired respect before fear. He seemed, indeed, the essence of contemplative geniality; but it was his powdered hair, black knee-breeches, and white silk stockings that gave him the picture-book appearance at which even Tom found time to marvel. But he marvelled more when the old gentleman made him a courtly bow, and said in high, chirping tones:—

"I am delighted to see you, sir! I fear my boat-house will have afforded you but indifferent shelter on so vile a day; such as it has been, however, you are welcome to it indeed."

"Welcome!" exclaimed Tom.

"And why not?" chirruped the other. "Surely we who have must give to you who have not, be it roof or boot? I am sorry, however, to see you bare-footed, for you will permit me to observe that such stockings as you have on are worse than none. If you will have the goodness to come with me, you shall be shod afresh, and join me in a glass of negus before you go."

"But, sir —"

"Tut! I know what you would say: you have trespassed already, and have no wish to trespass further. Very well, sir, so be it; you shall have your way, and pay the penalty. I condemn you to a glass of negus and a new pair of shoes."

And with the utmost bonhomie the tiny gentleman drove Tom before him to the house, and through open French windows to a basement room where a lamp and a fire were burning, and a kettle singing on the hob.

"Hungry?" he chirped, giving Tom a playful push in the ribs.

"I had provisions in my pocket," stammered the youth, in deep embarrassment; "I shall do very well. Indeed, your kindness —"

"Tut, sir, tut! You will please me best by saying no more about that. You *are* hungry, and I shall order you something upstairs. But here's the sherry and there's the boiling water; you can brew your own negus while I am gone; and this is to-day's *Advertiser*. Make your-

self at home, I beg!" And with twinkling eyes and brisk gestures the little old gentleman departed, of all Tom's good Samaritans, assuredly the prince and king.

No sooner was he alone than Tom caught up the *Advertiser* and found half a column about the murder; and, yes! there was his name. The Adcocks had volunteered it, together with a full description, whose accuracy tempted Tom not to wait for his supper, but to rush through the open window and swim the river in his clothes. Yet there was more that must be read. The case against him was stronger than ever. The threatening letters had been found among the dead man's effects. The hackney-coachman had told his story, and here it was. But one name was gratefully absent; that of Harding did not occur in the closely printed half-column, which so strangely fascinated Tom that his quaint Samaritan was back before he had put the paper down.

"What! Feeding the mind before the body? Well, well, to be sure!"

"I hadn't seen to-day's paper," said Tom, feebly.

"Aha! I know what you were reading, too." The old gentleman chuckled as he poured sherry into two tumblers. "I know—I know!"

"What?" asked Tom, hoarsely.

"My eyes are good—my eyes are excellent. You were reading the Hampstead murder." Tom held his breath. "I never read such things myself," pursued the other; "but I did when I was young. Oh, Lord, yes! *Blood* was my negus then."

And with his childlike laugh he handed Tom one steaming tumbler, mixed another for himself, and insisted on clinking glasses before they drank. Tom spilt

some of his portion upon the floor, but his kind host never noticed it. He was next invited to take a pinch from a silver-mounted horn snuff-box. This he refused as politely as his state of mind would permit. He trembled to know whether the old gentleman had really eschewed all accounts of the murder. To make certain he hazarded a leading question.

"It seems to be a queer affair, sir. Do you think they'll ever catch him?"

"My good fellow, *I* haven't read the case."

Tom drew a deep breath and tossed off his negus at a gulp. At that moment there came a knock at the door, and a small maid entered.

"Ready, Mary?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then come this way, my dear young gentleman," the old one said, with his most benevolent smile. "Upstairs — follow the maid — I will follow you."

Tom hesitated, but gave in without a word. He was, indeed, as hungry as he was grateful, and he followed the servant upstairs, with the jolly old fellow chatting pleasantly at his heels.

"The shoes you shall have immediately. What, would you shake my hand? Ah, my good fellow, I fear it's but meagre entertainment that I can offer you. Well, well, if you insist! But that's the door; pray walk in. He! he! he! he!"

And ere the chirruping laugh had ended, Tom's flight was over, and he was in the hands of two policemen, who had securely pinned him by either arm. Resistance was useless. But from the officers' faces a last hope flickered in his breast.

"What do you want me for?" he cried.

"What is the charge, sir?" asked one of the constables, *sotto voce*, of the master of the house.

"Can't you see?" piped that triumphant humourist. "It's the Hampstead murderer! I knew the fellow with half an eye!"

CHAPTER X

AT AVENUE LODGE

ON the night of the dinner-party, and when the last guest was gone, Lady Starkie took her brother by both hands, and openly congratulated him in front of Daintree and Claire.

"A perfect triumph!" she warmly declared. "I only wish the enemy had been here to see; but there, Nicholas, you need bother your head no more about *them*! You know now the feeling of your friends; rest assured that it is the feeling also of all sensible persons throughout the community. Everybody knows that the charge against you was neither more nor less than an odious Radical conspiracy; they know it themselves, and have let it drop like a hot coal, you mark my words! Think no more of it, my dear Nicholas. It has done you more good than harm. They know that too, and will never be such fools as to rake it up again."

Mr. Harding received these well-meant assurances with forced laughter and a twitching face; they were supplemented by a duly florid little speech from Daintree, who had rejoined the gentlemen after all, and was now a brighter man. But his eyes still followed Claire, and his soul was in his eyes, as always when she was by.

She was now shutting her piano, and putting away music with a white face which she feared to show.

"I ought to return thanks to you both, upon my word I ought," cried Mr. Harding, with the falsest note yet in his noisy laugh. "But the fact is"—with a sudden pallid candour—"I've been waiting all the evening for that fellow Blaydes. I can't conceive what has happened to him!"

Claire let the open top of the grand piano slip through her fingers with a resounding bang. Daintree watched her with a new expression, lost, however, upon the other two, who had glanced towards her themselves. Claire apologised for her clumsiness without turning round.

"Was it on—business—that you wished to see Captain Blaydes?" inquired Lady Starkie, with eyebrows a little raised.

"Partly; a rather important matter."

"A very awkward time!"

"That couldn't be helped; the point is, what has happened to him? The coach was due in hours ago; we have had excellent weather; the roads must be excellent too. Then what has kept him away? I cannot think! I cannot think!" cried Mr. Harding, as at last his alarm broke bounds, and rattled in his voice as plainly as it twitched upon his face. "Not for the life of me," he added; "but, upon my word, I've a good mind to walk straight over to his rooms—"

"Oh, do! do! for pity's sake—now, at once!" And there was Claire, trembling before them, with lifted hands and broken voice; her pale face luminous with the white light of a breathless anxiety, an excruciating fear. So for an instant stood father and daughter, dumbly regarding each other, and half in surprise; for

the emotion of each was expressed in the look of the other.

Then Claire broke down and fled, sobbing, from the room.

Lady Starkie followed her.

"Now I know," said Daintree. "Now I know!"

Mr. Harding shut the door. "I'm glad to hear it," said he, sardonically. "I confess myself puzzled. What is your interpretation?"

"She is in love with Blaydes!"

"Blaydes? Nonsense; you mean yourself; it's you if anybody."

Daintree told the story of his declaration in the harbour. He told it in gasps, with sudden beads upon his face. "But I'll have her yet!" he finished through his teeth.

Mr. Harding's indignation scarcely met the case. The match would have been of his making. He had given much more than his consent to Daintree's suit, and for some time past had regarded him as a certain son-in-law. Indignant he was, but more puzzled, and most *distrain*. After a little wild speaking in his daughter's name, he suddenly said—

"But, look here, if your notion is correct, that's all the more reason why I should see this fellow Blaydes at once. I couldn't think why the beggar migrated to West End; now I can; and I shall forbid him my house this very night. There's a little transaction between us that shall be settled, and then I wash my hands of him. Will you come? It's only about a mile along the road. And I must know whether the fellow got back to town to-night, and if so, why on earth I haven't seen him. *I must know that before I sleep!*"

Daintree got his hat with alacrity, and together the gentlemen let themselves quietly out by the front door; nevertheless Claire heard them in her room, though her aunt, who was still with her, did not.

They walked between the same budding hedgerows and moonlit fields which Tom Erichsen and the wretched Blaydes had looked on earlier in the night. They passed within two hundred paces of the spot where the Captain's body was even then lying dead and undiscovered. They woke a sleeping hamlet, and were sharply informed through an angrily opened window that Captain Blaydes *had* come home, but had dressed and left again in a hackney-coach, shortly after ten.

"Did he say where he was going?"

"No; but I heard him tell the coachman it was only a mile."

The window was shut down. The pair returned. They had spoken little on their way to West End; not one word did they exchange on the way back; but Nicholas Harding shook a little at the knees, and his companion watched him shrewdly.

As they pushed open the gate, a light vanished from an upper window, to reappear in the hall. Daintree took the other by the arm, and whispered, "That's Miss Harding! Now you will see if I was wrong."

And, indeed, the door was open before they reached it, and Claire on the step, candle in hand, the tallow streaming in the draught, and dashing unheeded against the pink crape and the white satin which she had never taken off. Her face looked grey and old, with young eyes burning out of place.

"Well?"

Even the monosyllable was scarcely articulate.

"He is not there," said Mr. Harding.

"He never came back to London!"

"Yes — he did. That's just the point. He started to come to us about ten o'clock, and has never been heard of since."

Claire stood mute before them, her face pale as ashes in the light of the candle, which she carried quite steadily now. She had trembled in her fear; she stood like a statue in its realisation; then, with a single moan, she turned away, and her candle passed steadily through the hall, and slowly and steadily up the stairs.

Mr. Harding seemed lost in his own reflections, when Daintree clutched him by the arm.

"What did I tell you as we came up to the house?"

Harding thought a little. "You said it was Blaydes. Well, if so, she shall never have him. But I only wish I knew where he was!"

"So do I," said Daintree, viciously; and he held out his hand as they entered the hall; but Mr. Harding would not hear of his going to bed.

"For pity's sake don't desert me yet! There is no sleep for me this night. What can have happened to the fellow — between West End and this? What *can* have happened?"

"I neither know nor care."

"Nor I — nor I — but a man can't help his forebodings!"

And Harding shuddered as he shut the library door, and lit the fire with his own hands, though the night was so warm; and cowered over it till daylight, a ghostly satire on the loud, flamboyant, cocksure head of last night's dinner-table.

The eye of the guest was on him till it dropped with weariness; and at sunrise they both retired.

Claire in her room had never closed an eye. She did not come down to breakfast, and her aunt presided in her stead.

Lady Starkie thought her brother and his guest a pair of wrecks, and did not wonder at it when they told her to what hour they had sat up. But that was all they did tell her; and the lieutenant-general's widow departed for Bath in the forenoon, little dreaming what a storm was to burst within the hour.

When she was gone Mr. Harding ordered his coach for another expedition to West End. Daintree again accompanied him, and looking back as they drove away, saw a white face vanish from the window whence the light had disappeared on their return from the earlier pilgrimage overnight. He gnashed his teeth, but said nothing; and they drove on in a common preoccupation.

The fields were dazzling green in the sweet, hot sunshine; the hedgerows sparkled with a million emeralds; and up the hill to the right, beneath a row of horse-chestnuts clouded over with young leaves, the white trousers and shiny hats of a body of police caught without riveting Mr. Harding's roving eye. The sun shone brilliantly upon the cool green spot where they stood; but yet another constable, with a tall companion in plain clothes, was descending the right-of-way, and reached the road-side stile as the coach passed.

"There seems to be something astir there," observed Daintree, pointing to the group up above.

Mr. Harding glanced in the direction indicated, and then sat looking straight in front of him until the red roofs of West End rose above the hedge to the left.

At the cottage where Blaydes had lodged nothing had been heard as yet. The good wife was strenuously civil, as if to make up for any asperity in the night; but the gentlemen learned no more now than then. As they turned away, however, the wicket clicked, and they stood face to face with a police-officer and a dingy, tall civilian.

"The men we saw just now!" cried Daintree, as Nicholas Harding clutched his arm. "Do you know anything of Captain Blaydes, my man?"

"Was you looking for him?"

"Yes, we were; or, rather, this gentleman was."

"Then you'll never find him, sir, in *this* world."

"What?" shrieked Harding; and he was more shaken by the truth than even the dead man's landlady, who brought a chair from the kitchen, upon which Mr. Harding sat shaking in the sun, with his full-blooded face turned to purple, and the great jaw sunk upon his stock.

"He was a friend of my friend," explained Daintree, below his breath; but Harding heard.

"A friend?" said he. "Heaven knows about that; but I expected him at my house last night—expected him every hour!"

The personage in plain clothes declared himself a detective from Scotland Yard, and told the landlady that he should require a few words with her alone. The pair then withdrew into the house; but the policeman remained outside, and sold his tongue for half a guinea. The two gentlemen thus learnt before mid-day all that appeared in that evening's papers, with one addition and one exception. The addition was a confident assurance that the police were on the perpetrator's track already. The exception was merely a description of the dead

man's stolen property, which was then being obtained within.

"Now, in such cases," said Mr. Harding, feeling for another coin, "what is done with the dead man's papers?"

"Well, first you've got to find 'em," replied the constable, with a grin.

"But in this case you have obviously found something; or how would you know who he was?"

"We found no papers, however."

"No papers!"

"Not a scrap; but his linen was marked; and then we knew all about our gentleman. I'm sorry to say we've known all about him for some time. It was only the shocking state his head —"

"That will do," said Daintree, bending over Mr. Harding's chair. "You are ill, sir," he whispered. "Let me take you home at once."

Harding yielded, and tottered to his carriage, muttering, "I waited for him hour after hour; and this was why; and this was why!"

Claire was still upstairs on their return, and Mr. Harding nerved himself with a glass of brandy before going to her with the news. But it shook her less than it had shaken him. Her first question was the last to be expected by one as completely in the dark as Nicholas Harding. She wanted to know with what kind of weapon the crime had been committed. He told her (what the constable had told him) with a heavy ash stick, whereupon she nodded singularly, as much as to say that was what she expected. In fact she had divined the worst from the very beginning. But her apathy blinded him to everything else: he asked her

how she could faint at a vague fear, and yet hear the terrible truth unmoved.

"You will know soon enough," was Claire's reply.

"But you seemed in such a state about poor Blaydes?"

"I was."

"I made sure he must be the one you cared for."

"He? Poor fellow! Never for an instant."

"Then who is it, Claire? Daintree has told me the answer you were foolish enough to give him; and now I insist on knowing who it is!"

"You must not insist now; you will know soon enough," said she again. And not another word.

Mr. Harding was nonplussed; there was some new mystery here, and until he should find its key he decided to discuss Claire no further with the suitor on whose success his heart was still set. Indeed, he saw little more of Daintree that day, but drove into the City after luncheon, and was not back for dinner. Hearing this, Claire dressed hastily, and braved the guest across a solemn board, protected from familiar converse by the continual presence of a man-servant behind either chair. Yet Daintree could not avoid the tragic topic.

"I fancy that Mr. Harding must be making inquiries at headquarters," said he. "Have you seen an evening paper?"

"No."

"I have the *Globe*. It gives a pretty full account."

"Do they know who did it?"

"Not yet."

"Not his name?"

"No."

"Nor his appearance? Nor anything at all about him?"

"No, absolutely nothing as yet; but it is only a question of time."

Claire sat without eating a bite, while her fixed eyes slowly filled. "Poor fellow — poor fellow — poor fellow!" she suddenly cried out. "I cannot believe —" and as suddenly she curbed her tongue.

"Well, what?" said her companion.

"That — he — is dead!"

Daintree darkened.

"So you were thinking of Blaydes!" he said bitterly. "I might have known — I might have known!"

CHAPTER XI

COALS OF FIRE

ALL this time there came no word from the master of the house, nor had the coach returned; but between nine and ten it did, and Mr. Harding was out and up the steps before it stopped.

In the hall he inquired for his daughter; she had gone upstairs; he rushed up instantly. Claire was waiting for him at her bedroom door. He thundered in and shut it behind him.

"They have got him!" cried Claire, with both hands to her heart.

"Got whom?" said her father, sharply. "Got whom, eh?"

Her face fell beneath the angry glitter in his eyes.

"The man — they want — for this frightful business," said she lamely, and sank down upon a chair.

"And pray who is he? You seem to know!"

No answer, save twitching fingers, rocked body, lowered lids.

"If you were to hear it was that young Erichsen — would it surprise you very much? No, it would not!" It had only stilled her. "And now I intend to know *why* not! You have thrown sand enough in my eyes; but your manner this morning told me something, and I am determined to know all there is to know — before — I — leave — this — room."

And with no less emphatic deliberation the father strode to the door, locked it and pocketed the key; but was met on his return with such wild eyes and suppliant hands that even his harsh heart melted at the sight.

"Only tell me whether they have captured him," she said, "and I faithfully promise to tell you all."

"Well, then, they have not; but they precious soon will. Now keep your promise."

It was kept to the letter. She had been very wicked, she had deceived and disobeyed her father for months and years; but now she had her reward. She had been lonely at Winwood, so had Tom. They had just made friends when the fathers quarrelled; it was too hard for them to have to quarrel too; and Claire confessed that rough treatment had always stirred up rebellion within her, though never before to such purpose as then. So the friendship had continued, but had never been anything more until two years later, when Tom Erichsen was on the eve of sailing; and then — and then —

"I understand," said Mr. Harding, sarcastically; "that's quite enough. But why didn't he sail? How did you know he hadn't? And what was his connection with Blaydes?"

Claire told him of the chance meeting near the Park; of her letter, and the secret interview that was all her doing; of Blaydes's perfidy to Tom, and of the latter's quick discovery that his enemy was their friend; of her first refusal to give him the address, but her ultimate and fatal surrender of the same. All this she told without fear or further hesitation, extenuating nothing in her own defence, but as much as she could in defence of Tom. A true woman, she had her theory of the crime already, and was quite convinced it was correct. Tom had indeed killed his man — of that even she had never a moment's doubt; but he had not killed him intentionally, or struck a blow until Blaydes had drawn his deadlier weapon. She simply did not believe that Tom had touched either his watch or his pin; somebody else had done that — very likely the man who found the body.

Mr. Harding quietly disabused her on these points. He had spent some time at Scotland Yard, as a friend of the deceased who could give information; but he had contrived to gain more. He had thus kept his lead of the town regarding the facts of the case; and Claire was struck dumb with horror when she heard of the guilty flight from the coachman's house, and of the undoubted possession by Tom of the dead man's watch and chain. The father put it plainly, but without unnecessary brutality; nor did he belabour her with reproaches now that he knew all. On the contrary, he spoke of the suspected murderer with none of the vituperative bitterness which she had often heard him lavish on the detested parson's good-for-nothing son.

"But you see," said he, "what has come of your folly! You have entangled yourself with a young fellow whose fate, if he be caught, one would rather not

contemplate; you may even be called as a witness against him!"

"Against him!"

"You certainly would be if last night's interview leaked out."

"It never shall."

"And if you told a jury all you have told me, about the address and all that, I am afraid it would hang him if nothing else did."

"Hang Tom!"

"Well, Claire, it looks to me very like a hanging matter; it would need a very clever, and probably a very costly defence, to give him the ghost of a chance of having it brought in anything less."

"Then he must have it!" cried Claire. "Oh, he never could have done it—wilfully! He must have the very best defence that can be got; but, oh! who will pay for it?"

"I am thinking of doing so myself," replied Mr. Harding, quietly. "I don't say I will, but I may."

"You!"

And the girl was sobbing upon his breast, with her arms about his thick red neck, as they had not been for many a year now. He removed them, but almost gently, and told her not to jump at conclusions, as he had by no means made up his mind: indeed, let them first catch their man. But as the lad's father had been his constituent as well as his enemy, on whom he had perhaps been a little hard, he thought that on the whole it might prove the right and proper thing to do. Claire was overwhelmed, not only with gratitude for a first gleam of comfort, but also with shame. All these years she had misjudged that magnanimous man, her own father; and

what coals of fire was he heaping on her undutiful head! She cried herself to sleep with shame and hope; and that was when Tom Erichsen was flying south from Westbourne Park, with the police in full cry at his heels.

Next day was the Saturday, and Claire was almost herself again, to the outward eye. She was early afoot, and met the newspaper boy in the road; she had thus first sight of the *Times*; but it told her little that she had not learnt from Mr. Harding overnight. Tom was still at large, that was the chief thing; but to-day there was a full description of him, and its accuracy sickened the brave heart which beat and trembled for him every minute of every hour.

This day was complicated by the return from school of the elder children of the second family. Two were still in the nursery; but two were weekly boarders at a luxurious seminary at Gunnersbury, and the tragic fate of Captain Blaydes was ordered to be kept from their young ears. This was difficult. The children were in evidence from the Saturday afternoon until the Monday morning. Then they were very fond of Claire, in whom they discerned a difference, and she would not tell them what it was. But on the Sunday morning, when they were all ready for church, and only waiting for Mr. Harding, in he came at the gate with a newspaper in his hand; and Claire ran forward to meet him; and she did not go to church with them after all.

Thomas Erichsen had been apprehended at Kew on the Saturday evening, and lodged for that night in the local lock-up. The bare fact was read by Mr. Harding in next day's *Dispatch*, and by Claire in her father's face, before she heard it from his lips at twenty minutes

to eleven in the morning. The girl created no scene before the children, and thus made a still firmer friend of her father for the time being; but her mental torture admitted of no further surprise at his amazing attitude; she was grateful to him, but that was all. On the Sunday night he came to tell her that he had made inquiries, and that the prisoner had been removed to the cells at the Marylebone police-office, where he would come before the magistrate next day. On the Monday morning she gave him his breakfast early and alone; and he then assured her that he was going to see what could be done.

“But not a word of this to anybody,” he added, as the coach came around. “If I do anything, it may be best to do it secretly after all. But I shall first consult my lawyer. I don’t want Daintree, for instance, to know anything at all about it; he might misconstrue our interest in so near a neighbour; and I have already told him that we hardly ever saw and never spoke to young Erichsen in our lives. Do you hear me, Claire? You are to back me up in this, or I wash my hands of the whole affair. I have forgiven you freely for what is past; you must promise me to keep it rigorously to yourself, not only now, but hereafter always!” Claire promised.

Mr. Harding did not consult his own lawyer at all. But he went on foot to the purlieu of the Old Bailey, and there mounted to a noisome den, with his shoulders up and his hat well over his eyes. He departed as furtively some minutes later; and was followed down the breakneck stairs by an unclean vulture of a man, with snuffy beak and grimy talons, who skipped into a cabriolet and was driven at speed to the Marylebone office.

There was a dense crowd outside, but with the free use of his own elbows and Mr. Harding's money, the Old Bailey lawyer fought and bought his way in. He was in time to witness the formal remand of Thomas Erichsen, and to draw his own conclusion from the bold fixed eyes and tremulously scornful lips behind the iron railing of the dock. That look was less for the magistrate than for the opera-glasses of the noble lord whom the magistrate had allowed upon the bench. But the Old Bailey lawyer read it his own way: here was a glaringly guilty man putting a face of brass upon a heart of putty: the very type with which he was best accustomed and most competent to deal. So the vulture took a pinch of snuff that resounded through the court, and, on the prisoner's removal, squeezed out himself to make inquiries. It was as he expected. The prisoner would be conveyed immediately to the new prison at Clerkenwell. But the attorney managed to get away first through the swelling crowd now on tip-toe for the prison van; and in a neighbouring tavern he had his heartiest meal that year, also with Mr. Harding's money.

Between three and four he presented himself, well primed, at Clerkenwell, and sent in a greasy card to the prisoner.

"He is much obliged, but he doesn't want to see you," said the turnkey, on his reappearance.

"Tell him I am commissioned by his friends to get up his defence. No expense to be spared. Tell him that."

The turnkey was gone longer, but came back shaking his head.

"He says it is impossible. He has no friends. And you mention no name."

“That is true; but my client’s name is the one thing my client will not give.”

This did it; the ambassador returned beckoning, and conducted the visitor to a narrow dark cell, at the end of which glowered the prisoner on his bed. Two more turnkeys joined them at the door.

“Do you want to be alone with him?” said they.

“It is absolutely necessary.”

“Very well. We wait outside.”

And the three officials withdrew across the corridor, and chatted a little, but kept an eye on the open door. They saw the lawyer seat himself upon the chair, at a gesture from the prisoner, who restrained him with another as he edged it nearer and nearer the bed. They heard the lawyer’s whisper, low and rapid, and saw his dirty gesticulating fingers; but not his face; only that of the prisoner, very calm and cold. Suddenly it flared up; and next instant the visitor was hurled through the open door, and Thomas Erichsen stood with the empty chair poised a moment, before dashing it after him with a yell of rage.

Two of the turnkeys rushed in and secured this caged tiger, while the third knelt over the Old Bailey lawyer, who lay moaning outside.

“It’ll be a strait-waistcoat for you, my beauty, after this.”

“You’ve half killed him!”

“Half killed him?” roared Tom. “Only let in another of them, to insult and threaten me, and I’ll kill him quite, and deserve all I get!”

And he tore away from them, and flung himself, unstrung and sobbing, upon the bed.

CHAPTER XII

WHEEL WITHIN WHEEL

MR. HARDING drove home in a dull fury, and was met by Claire upon the steps. Her heart sank at his face. He passed her without a word. She followed him into his library, and there besought him to tell her what had happened now.

"Oh, nothing. I wash my hands of a young demon; that's all."

"Tom Erichsen?"

"Yes."

"You have changed your mind!"

"I have."

And he told her how the prisoner had treated the attorney he had sent him that very afternoon; committing a brutal and unprovoked assault upon the very man who was there to save his life, if that had been possible. It was not. The villain would hang, and rightly too. But there was gratitude! There was a young tiger in human shape!

Claire kept her head, and gradually Mr. Harding cooled down. Then she asked questions, and discovered that it was not the family lawyer who had been so grossly handled, but one whose name was new to her.

"Hattersley never touches criminal work," said her father; "besides, I should have been ashamed to ask him. No; I went to the very man for the job; and this is all the thanks I get!"

"Did he know it was you?"

"No; I sent word I would give any money, but not my name."

"That message was delivered?"

"It was."

"Something more must have been said!"

"Hardly a word; my man was proceeding to business, when this maniac sprang upon him and flung him out of the cell."

Claire shook her head.

"I cannot think that's all that passed," said she.

"It was, though; you ask the warders. There were three of them outside the open door, and they've put him in a strait-waistcoat for it, at any rate! So you see how he has made use of the chance I gave him. Don't ask me to give him another, that's all."

"No, no," said Claire, sadly; "it was only too noble of you to give him one at all, and I shall never, never, never forget all this — your forgiveness — everything! Papa, dear, you may not have me with you very long; how can one go on living after such a thing? I loved him, and I long to die. But until I do, I promise one thing. I may deceive others, but never again will I deceive or disobey my own dear father!"

She spoke with the sad fortitude of sheer despair; and she left Nicholas Harding in an icy exhalation, with one tingling spot, where she had stooped and kissed his face.

Claire had hardly reached her room, when there was a knock at the door, and in came Hannah with a neat sealed packet.

"Oh, please, miss, Mr. Daintree said I was to give you this."

"Mr. Daintree!"

She had seen him during the day; then what could he have to say to her which would not bear plain verbal

utterance? Claire opened the packet when the maid was gone, and found a smaller packet and a letter inside. The letter ran,—

“DEAR MISS HARDING, — Think what you will of me for slandering the dead; I can bear it better than to see you mourning one who was never worthy to touch the hem of your garment. The enclosed will give you a true insight into the character of the late Captain Blaydes; but I make a separate packet of it, so that you may destroy it unread, if you prefer not to know, and to think me the liar.

“You may remember telling me that Captain Blaydes had the room that I have now, when he was here and I was not. That was the week before last. The weather has been so warm, the fire has not been alight since my return; and to-day, quite by chance, I discovered, torn up in the grate, the fragments which I have put together and now enclose. I will not tell you the word that caught my eye and irresistibly impelled me to put the letter together and read it through. Nor will I seek to defend an action that will no doubt condemn me in your eyes for ever. It was dishonourable. I admit it. But I am a believer in instinct. My instinct always told me that that man was a bad man; and my instinct told me then that I was within reach of proving its own unerring truth, and the measure of a villain's villainy. I have done both, as you will soon see, if you can nerve yourself to know the truth; if not, condemn me with a glance, or with words as bitter as you please, and I leave this house to-night and for ever. I shall never regret what I have done. You mourn a traitor; and I had rather forfeit your respect — nay, and my own honour to boot — than let one so divine waste another sigh on one so devilish!

“But if you forgive me, oh, let me hear it from your own sweet lips; and I will move heaven and earth to atone for what present misery this may inflict. One day you will thank me: meanwhile, if you do not spurn, command me, and your lightest word shall be my law. If only I could *do* something for you! My one remaining chance of happiness is in serving her I may not love.

“Humbly and sincerely always,

“JAMES E. W. DAINTRÉE.”

Claire arrived at the last paragraph with a mind made up. She perceived with amazement the writer's theory regarding the wretched Blaydes and herself; it had never struck her that her every agitation might be thus misconstrued; and her first impulse was to set Daintree right upon the point. She would then return the incriminating enclosure unopened: that would be a sufficient rebuke for an action as it were so honestly dishonourable; and at these decisions her nimble mind had arrived before she came to the last paragraph.

This she read over more than once, with a puckered forehead and a changeful eye, as eagerness, reluctance, hesitation and decision, shame and pride, whipped across her face like shadows and sunbeams on a gusty day. And suddenly she tore open the enclosure, and felt as mean as Daintree from that moment, though she barely glanced at what she found.

It was an obviously genuine letter, addressed to Blaydes by some poor woman, but that was all Claire allowed herself to discover. A feeling of incredible meanness made her hot all over, and she turned the letter upside down to examine the method of reconstruction. With abominable ingenuity Daintree had pasted the scraps upon a sheet; a few were missing; many were black from the coals. Claire shuddered, and glanced at her own fireplace; it was laid and all ready for lighting. A moment later it was lit, and the dead man's letter was blazing in its midst. Then Claire breathed again, and took another look at Daintree's warning before burning it too.

"An interesting revelation of character," said she, when this was done. "I shall never think the same of him again; nor of myself either; but what does that matter, since I can never think the same of Tom?"

Nothing matters, except saving his life! And here is a man who says he'll do anything for me. *Will he?* We shall see!"

She had a word with Daintree before dinner. "Forgive you? I thank you with all my heart!" said she. And great was the change in her this evening. It was no time for gaiety, but Claire was animated; her eyes sparkled; she conversed freely on the topic of the hour; and when Mr. Harding was moved after all to give Daintree a judicious version of his attempt to provide fair play for a dastardly constituent, with the result, the girl took her father's breath away by looking hard at their guest, and declaring that she would finance the defence herself if she had the money.

"What on earth did you mean by saying that?" asked Mr. Harding afterwards. "Have you forgotten your word of honour, that nobody should ever suspect what had existed between you and Erichsen?"

This was when the girl had said good-night. Mr. Harding followed her upstairs. It was his first chance of speaking to her, for Claire and Daintree had been together in the garden all the evening.

"No, papa," she replied; "I have forgotten nothing that I said to you. Mr. Daintree, at any rate, suspects nothing at all."

"You said enough to make him!"

"I don't think I did."

"Not when you said you'd pay for a defence if you had the money? Are you aware that he thinks you were in love with the murdered man?"

"He thinks I *was*, but that something has since caused a complete revulsion of feeling—as to which I may as well explain everything." And she told the incident

of the letters without hiding a thing. "So he thinks it quite natural that I should fly to the other extreme, and want no human creature to hang for one so base. You see," said Claire shrewdly, "he is a man of extremes himself."

"Then, instead of undeceiving him, you have literally fooled him to the top of his bent?"

Claire blushed hotly. "I cannot help that. I may make up for it some day. Any woman would do the same."

Mr. Harding was slow to understand.

"That he should never know what *I* know," said he, "is right enough; but why carry the thing so far? Why pretend this revulsion?"

Claire hung her head.

"Come, come!" he cried. "You promised to hide nothing more from me. You are hiding your chief motive. What is it?"

"I would rather not say."

"And I insist on knowing."

"Very well, then; it is to give Tom Erichsen another chance."

Harding turned livid.

"That young —"

"Oh, don't be angry! You know you thought of it yourself. And I loved him; could I leave a stone unturned?"

"But what can Daintree do?"

"What you thought of doing yourself."

"He has never consented?"

"Eagerly. He is going to have a solicitor at Marylebone to-morrow morning."

Mr. Harding glared at the girl, who flung back her ringlets and met his look, unafraid and unashamed.

"And suppose I put *my* oar in?" said he, savagely.

"Then you would have to tell him the truth."

"Oh, curse your infernal woman's wit!" cried he. "Are you not ashamed of yourself, that you can stand there looking me in the face?"

"No, I am not ashamed to try to save this life by hook or crook. It is the life of the man I loved."

"Loved! So you don't love him now? Like everybody else, you believe him guilty? Well, well, that's something!"

"Not of murder," she said. "That I'll never believe. The other struck first; that is what we want the best man at the Bar to prove!"

He supplemented his cruel irony by laughing aloud at her notions of criminal law. She reminded him it was himself who had put them into her head; her view to-night was only his of the night before.

Harding changed his ground. "If you get him off with his neck — what then?"

"I shall be grateful to Mr. Daintree all my life."

"I daresay, but I want more than that. You said something about making up to him for this. Will you marry him if he asks you when it's all over?"

Claire turned very pale. "I pray God he never may," she whispered.

Mr. Harding looked her through and through. "Well! I may or may not interfere," said he. "I make no promise either way." And at last she was left in peace.

She fell upon her knees, and prayed more fervently than ever in her life before.

"Oh, God," cried this loving heart, "forgive me, and save poor Tom! Thou knowest these sins I have

committed for his sake; forgive them, Lord, for the sake of Him whose Love passed the love of us poor women. Or let me never be forgiven, but save poor Tom from the most terrible death a man can die. Save him, O Lord; and forgive him too. And in Thy mercy, give me strength and time to atone to whomsoever I have wronged and deceived; then take me quickly, for my poor love's sake. Amen."

CHAPTER XIII

A FORLORN HOPE

ABOUT a quarter to eleven next morning, before the adjourned examination had been many minutes in progress, a smart, slight gentleman was seen to shoulder his way into the well of the Marylebone police-office and touch the prosecuting barrister on the arm. The capable face, now a trifle flushed, was well known in that court, and at sight of it the learned counsel shrugged his shoulders and sat down. Thereupon the interloper bowed briskly to his worship, who had already recognised him with a sigh.

"Well, Mr. Bassett?"

"I must apologise to your worship for being late; but, in point of fact, I have just this minute been instructed for the defence."

"Do I understand that you have not yet seen the prisoner with reference to the charge I am now hearing against him?"

"There has been no opportunity, your worship. Up

to ten o'clock this morning I had received no communication upon the matter."

"Dear me! dear me! Then I suppose you want to confer with him here in court?"

"With your worship's leave —"

"And mine!" said a hollow voice heard for the first time by every ear; it was that of the prisoner in the dock.

The effect was instantaneous; a volley of eyes hit the accused as one pair; but his own remained unshaken upon the raised eyebrows and creased forehead of the smart young solicitor secured by Daintree that morning.

"Do you object to being defended?" inquired this mercenary.

"Certainly; until I know by whom."

"Indeed! Well, my name is Bassett. I am tolerably well known in this court —"

"That's not what I mean, sir," said Tom, respectfully. "Who has instructed you? That is what I want to know."

"One who has taken your case and your interests to heart."

"An anonymous friend?" And the prisoner's voice trembled.

"Exactly."

"Then I'll take nothing from him. I know that friend! I know him!"

A policeman whispered to Bassett, who approached the dock and said in a lower and a friendlier voice, "You are quite mistaken. This is another gentleman altogether. He wishes you to have fair play."

"Then let him give his name."

Bassett turned and ran a keen eye over the crowded court. At the same moment a slip of paper was passed across the sea of heads, and put into his hand. "Ah! Here it is, I make no doubt," said he. It was not, however, and his eyebrows showed it; but he handed the paper to the accused without comment.

And Tom read —

"Solicitor instructed by one who believes you innocent, and will save you if he can. For God's sake let us try."

The words danced beneath his eyes, and these were swimming when he raised them behind the iron railing of the dock.

"I accept with gratitude!" said he, searching pitifully among the faces for that of his unknown ally; and he placed the slip of paper in an inside pocket, with expressive deliberation and a touching smile.

"Then if your worship will grant us a few minutes?"

And as the magistrate bowed, the dead silence, which had prevailed ever since the prisoner opened his lips, ended as suddenly; it was like the upsetting of a slumbering hive.

"They've been telling you about yesterday," said Tom, nervously, through the rails. "The fellow took it for granted I was guilty — among other things. Do you?"

The smart solicitor shook his head, and said they had no time to waste. What he wished to hear was the prisoner's version of his last interview with Blaydes, from its origin to its end, and the prisoner would please be brief, and speak in a whisper.

Tom was brevity itself; indeed, he had his story almost suspiciously pat, for he had already made up his mind as to the one fact which he intended to sup-

press. This was the source of his information as to Blaydes's latest whereabouts. He owned to no such information at all. The meeting was a chance meeting, that was to be his solitary lie.

He told it and it passed unchallenged; but when he came to the transaction of the watch, the solicitor's eyebrows shot to such an involuntary height, that the glib flow froze that instant.

"Go on, go on."

"You don't believe a word I say!"

"Nonsense, my good fellow. I believe every word. Come, come, they're getting impatient. You gave him a receipt — and then?"

Tom finished with a leaden heart and tongue. To his surprise, however, Mr. Bassett was all smiles when he had done; then he put a few questions; and the lamer the answer, the sprightlier the solicitor's nod. The latter, in fact, foresaw a defence about as weak as one could be, but a case even more sensational than he had supposed. And sensation happened to be this brisk practitioner's professional loadstar.

Proceedings were resumed at two minutes past eleven, when the witness Adcock, recalled, identified a pair of dilapidated shoes, and the mutilated elements of a beaver, as having belonged to the accused. Bassett had no idea what point the prosecution designed to make, but at once he gave a taste of his quality. He pressed the witness, and shook her as to the hat; but to the shoes she stood firm; she had cleaned them oft enough, so she ought to know. Then she cleaned the lodgers' boots herself? Well, not all; and an adroit question or two revealed the fact that Erichsen had been her pet, and "one it was a pleasure to do for," against whom she had



appeared with profound reluctance. Indeed, she left the box, and rejoined the husband who had brought her there, in tears; and so the defence made a first meretricious point.

Nor was it the last. Jonathan Butterfield, unlike his relatives, had not been called at the previous examination; but he was now; and his feelings were worked upon in the same deft fashion. As, however, there was no jury to be simultaneously touched, all this was wasted dexterity; but it looked neat in the newspapers; and (what was better, but unintentional) imposed upon poor Tom, and gave him momentary heart.

Meanwhile the shoes and hat had done real damage; and this evidence was the more deleterious from being new to all. Guilty flight and ultimate capture had been fully dealt with on the previous occasion; but the equally incriminating interim was only now filled in, by the officers who had chased and lost a desperate housebreaker in the small hours of Saturday, but only afterwards connected him with the Hampstead murderer. The connection was established by the beaver hidden but discovered in the empty house, and by the shoes left on either side of the nursery-garden gate. Only two officers appeared; the third was in hospital, and one of the two had a bandaged head.

The medical evidence had been taken on the Monday morning; so had that of the crafty householder of Kew; yet his powdered head was again in court, and his humorous, sly smile looked as benevolent as ever, only broader and more subtly droll. Tom heard this public benefactor taking snuff in every pause.

The other new witness was one Richard Vale, who brought a whiff of cognac into the crowded court. His

Tom

words ran into one another, but his evidence was all too clear. Witness described himself as a very old friend of the deceased. He swore that deceased had frequently told him he went in fear of the prisoner, who had repeatedly threatened him by letter, and to whom, in fact, the deceased owed a sum of money. The letters were now put in. They all related to a worthless cheque for £35—the sum in question—and without a blush witness explained about the cheque. The cheque-book was an old one of his own; he remembered the deceased telling him he had made use of it in the manner alleged in the letters; but he could not himself describe the incident, as, to the best of his belief, he was intoxicated on that occasion. And the witness stood down, having supplied the motive of revenge to a case strong enough, in all conscience, as it was.

Bassett hurried to the dock.

“I suppose you lost that cheque?” he whispered.

“No; I gave it him back with the receipt.”

Bassett turned abruptly and stated that the prisoner reserved his defence; a minute later he stood formally committed for trial at the next sessions of the Central Criminal Court.

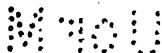
“I’ll see you down below,” said Bassett, nodding airily to trembling Tom; but the latter pulled himself together on his blessed release from the public gaze; and the subsequent interview, in the bowels of the police-office, was business-like on both sides.

“When are the sessions?” asked Tom.

“They begin next Monday. No time to be lost!”

“Five days more. Well, it’s better than waiting. So you won’t give me my benefactor’s name?”

“I am pledged not to reveal it to a soul.”



"Do I know him?"

"No."

"Does he know me?"

"No."

"Yet he thinks me innocent! God bless him!— God bless him! He must be an eccentric man, though, to help the helpless like that?"

"Somewhat," said the solicitor, so dryly that Tom winced.

"You think I haven't the ghost of a chance?"

"I never said so. Nor do I think it. But you made a mistake in destroying that cheque."

"*He* destroyed it when I gave it him back."

"There would have been less possible motive with the cheque in your possession; you could have taken proceedings on that alone."

"Ay, but I meant to take them with my own hands!"

Tom would have recalled the words next instant. He saw even the hardened and alert police-court attorney shrink away as he said them. Bassett took a handful of silver from his pocket, counted a sovereign's-worth, and handed it to Tom.

"There," said he coldly, "I had that for you with my instructions, and you will need it at Newgate if you want to be comfortable. Use it freely. See you there to-morrow." And he was gone with repulsion ill-concealed. Half-way to his office in Clipstone Street, he overhauled Daintree crossing Portland Place.

"Well? well?" cried Daintree. "I didn't want to be seen waiting for you; but what do you make of it?"

"You'll be throwing your money away — that's a guilty man."

"You think so?"

"Think?" said Bassett. "Why, he's as good as confessed to me already! But that doesn't matter; if you still wish it I'll do my best."

"I do wish it, sir," replied Daintree, sternly. "Either the best you ever did in your life, or nothing more. Which do you say, sir?"

"Oh, I'll do all I know; that I promise you," said the solicitor. "I was thinking of you entirely. Why, the case fits me like a coat of paint!"

CHAPTER XIV

OLD NEWGATE

TOM ERICHSEN was committed for trial about four in the afternoon, by which hour the High Street of Marylebone was thronged by would-be witnesses of his removal in the prison van. But a recent experience, when a posse of police had to accompany the van with drawn staves, had taught the officers a lesson; and their prisoner was spirited away by the side entrance and a hackney coach, while the crowd were watching the gateway for that live man's hearse. The coach started westward down Paddington Street, but was on its course in a couple of minutes, without a solitary follower.

The two police-officers congratulated themselves and each other, but never took an eye off Tom, though they had him handcuffed and held by one arm. Tom, however, paid no heed to them. It was the third of May. The sun was as high as at a winter's noon; it blazed in the bright shop-windows; it rimmed the cobble-stones

with tiny bands of gold; for there had been a heavy shower during the day, that had purged the London air, and cleansed and sweetened the whole of London town. Tom looked out wistfully, and inhaled all he could, but it was not to be borne beyond a minute. The beautiful streets, full of happy people, were as a knife twisted round in his heart; he buried his face in his manacled hands, and could look no more.

By half-past four they were at Newgate.

Tom stepped through the sunlight into a forbidding vestibule—a very porch of despair—where a dimly burning lamp avowed eternal gloom. Here the newcomer was entered in a book, relieved of his handcuffs, and forthwith led through humid passages and nail-studded doors into the black heart of this horrible place.

In one corridor a large cell was being swabbed out as they passed. A horrid intuition chilled Tom's blood.

“Whose cell is that?”

“Nobody's now.”

“It was Greenacre's! I had forgotten him; did he—die game?”

“Game? Not he; like a cur.”

Tom set his chattering teeth; but suddenly his eyes blinked: they were out again in the sun, in a yard some fifteen paces long, and half as broad as its length. A parallelogram of brilliant blue sky smiled cruelly overhead, cut on all sides by the high dark walls, and showing from the wet flags as the mouth of a well seen from its base.

“You're consigned to Chapel Yard,” said Tom's guide, “and this is it. I'm just looking for a wardsman, and then I'm done with 'ee. Ah, here he comes!”

A great, gross being, with an irregular walk and a face

of solidified beer, tacked towards them as the turnkey spoke.

"Now, wot's all this?" inquired a voice to scale. "Wot for are you a-bringin' noo boys here for? Recepshun ward's the place for them; they've got no business 'ere."

"Well, them's the orders, and this is a special case. It's Erichsen!"

The wardsmen opened his half-shut eyes, and blinked incredulity.

"Gerrouit!" said he. "That kid? Pitch us another."

"It's right," said the turnkey. "Committed this afternoon."

"Well, I'm darned: you wouldn't think it of 'im, now would yer?" asked the fuddled connoisseur, half-sobered by surprise. A slow, dim admiration glimmered in the clouded face like a rush-light in a yellow fog. "Why, Master Erichsen," he continued, "I'm proud to have ye in my ward. We know all about you 'ere, and this is a proud day for Number Twelve. I'll do my best to make ye at home."

"An' it all rests with he," whispered the turnkey, taking his leave. "Pay you his dues, and you'll do well."

Tom had already glanced down the yard, and noted two prisoners playing pitch-and-toss at the far end; another sitting on a wet flag, back to wall, knees up, chin down, an abject picture; and a third, in tatters, drawing near, open-mouthed. He now turned abruptly to the wardsmen.

"What's this about dues?"

"On'y a little weekly trifle for the pore wardsmen; nothing to hurt, Master Erichsen —"

"I double it if I don't hear that name again!"

The man stared. "You *are* a noo boy, no error!"

cried he. "It's very clear you don't know Noogit, let alone Chapel Yard, where all the best men comes to, like yourself. Why, they'll give you the 'artiest welcome ever you 'ad; you've done it big, sir, that you 'ave; and you that young! Come away to Number Ten, I'll introduce ye, and ye'll see. Number Ten's where they've all got to, as you can 'ear for yourself." Along the yard were, indeed, three open doors, and through the farthest of these came oaths and laughter, snatches of song, the ring of money and the rattle of dice.

Tom clutched the wardsman's sleeve.

"Didn't you understand? I don't *want* them to know who I am — I double your dues if they don't."

"But know they must; they'll soon find it out."

"It's half-a-crown a day until they do! Here's the first shilling, and the rest to-night."

"Well, as you like. It'll be 'alf-a-crown a week for use of knives, forks, kittles an' saucep'ns."

"Here it is."

"Thank'ee, master. I never forgit the blokes wot pays in advance. I sha'n't forgit Thomas Erichsen!"

Tom was blazing. The man with the open mouth was within three yards of them. He rolled his light-blue eyes, and laughed high up in his head as Tom pointed to him in his rage.

"Oh, 'e don't count," said the wardsman. "'E's stark starin' mad."

"What! you keep madmen here as well?"

"All sorts — mad — bad — glad an' sad. See that poor devil against the wall! Now come and I'll show you Number Twelve."

The ward was a fair-sized room, with mats hung round the walls, for the prisoners' beds at night. One such

mat was in use thus early, whereon a human lump lay snorting in a drunken sleep beneath a couple of rugs; otherwise the ward was empty. Tom noticed the vestiges of a gaming-board chalked upon the deal table, and at the other end a pile of newspapers, in which, no doubt, his fortunes had been daily followed. After Clerkenwell, where the separate system even then obtained, Newgate was a revelation, or rather a succession of them, with the most amazing yet to come.

The wardsman opened a cupboard, invited Tom to have a glass of beer, and drank three glasses with him. The whole place stank of beer; its stains were on everything; there seemed to be an unlimited supply. Tom took his glass, and soon saw that he was being treated with a view to business. He was offered a flock-bed, instead of the mat, at an extra half-crown a week. This he declined; whereupon the wardsman, now fast returning to intoxication, offered to draw up his brief for a pound. He professed an unrivalled experience; was the recognised brief-drawer for the yard, under sanction of the governor himself; and had drawn up twenty-three last sessions, of which more than half led to acquittals. The boys reckoned him worth a waggon-load of lawyers any day in the week; he would do his very best for a pound.

Tom looked at the great sot sprawling over the table, and shook his head with a civil word.

"Fifteen bob, then."

"Thank you, no."

"Well, I don't want to be 'ard on a gent on trial for his life. Say 'alf a couter!"

"No, thanks; the fact is—"

"Oh, if you're that 'ard up, let's make it five and be done with it."

Five shillings happened to be his regulation price.

"No," said Tom. "The fact is a solicitor is engaging counsel—"

"Then why the hell couldn't you say so at first?" roared the other, in a drunken fury. "But lemme tell you five *couters* wouldn't draw the brief as'd save *your* neck; no, nor yet five 'underd; nor all the lousy lawyers in the country. An' I'll trouble you for twopence for that glass o' beer!"

Tom threw the coppers on the table and went out, followed by his own name hurled after him in loud derision; but the wardsman's articulation was no longer intelligible, and the brute himself stopped where he was, and lay down upon the one bed in the room, which was his own.

This man was himself a prisoner, under sentence of two years for criminal conspiracy. Newgate contained no wretch more mercenary or more debauched. Yet the regulations of the time set such a one in authority, countenanced his iniquitous emoluments, and allowed him to spend them upon unlimited beer!

The madman was still wandering in the yard, crooning to himself in a high falsetto. His blue eye, happy and vacant as the clear evening sky, fixed Tom as he emerged, and set him envying the man who came to Newgate but left his wits outside. The pitch-and-toss pair had disappeared; in Number Ten the sounds of revelry were louder and more continuous than before; but that dejected figure, with the bent knees and the fallen chin, still sat outside in the damp. Tom's compassion was aroused. He approached, and found a stripling with a white, damp skin, bony wrists, and fleshless knees.

"You oughtn't to be sitting out here," said Tom. "Why not get up and go inside?"

"Why should I?" rejoined the youth, raising eyes deep-sunken in a mass of skin and bone.

"Because if you don't you may catch your death."

"All the better! That's my lay. I'm cold an' wet, but it's no use goin' in there; there ain't no fire when you do. I want to go straight to hell."

Tom shuddered, but stooped down.

"Come, come," said he; "I'll give you an arm."

"You're a rum cove," replied the other, looking carelessly up; "but I bet you ain't kissed this 'ere clink afore, or you wouldn't say that! Nice spot, ain't it? But this is a sight better than the Middle Yard. I've bin 'ere afore, you see; this makes the fourth time; thank Gawd it'll be the larst!"

He suffered Tom to help him to his feet, the shrunken shadow of a man, dressed, however, very respectably, in black clothes eloquently loose. On Tom's arm he was promptly seized with a fit of coughing that sounded as if his bag of bones must split asunder; but he mastered it, wiped his hollow eyes with prominent knuckles, and said: "That's better! One or two more like that'll do my business." Tom's gorge rose to hear him; yet he understood the feeling. It had come to himself in the soaking, inhospitable fields; only now, with the shadow of death lengthening hourly towards him, he knew how little he had ever wished to die.

"You ought to be in the infirmary," he said; "it's a scandal to find you here."

"No it ain't!" coughed the youth. "It's my own doings; Macmurdo ain't to blame. I on'y come in larst night, and dodged 'im on 'is round this mornin', 'cause I

wanted to be with my old pals; and roast me if they 'aven't served me out by waddin' my last chinker!"

Tom wanted to lend him a little. The other refused, but with a gleaming eye. Presently he said he felt stronger, and would take Tom's advice. So he quitted his arm and went into Number Ten.

Deterred by the din of oaths and laughter, Tom lingered without; but curiosity at length conquered aversion, and he entered a den of gamblers who never looked at him, so intent were they upon their petty play. Crowded round the table, upon which lighted candles had now been stuck in their own grease, were some thirty men of every age and type, save that the latter was in most cases one of obvious criminality. Lust of gain was on every face, the scum of every soul had risen to the surface. And in the forefront facing Tom, lean elbows like tent-poles in their sleeves, wet white hands, and the face of the consumptive like a painted corpse. A little heap of silver lay before him on the board; each minute left it less; and this was he who had declared to Tom that his friends had won his last coin.

Instinctively Tom's hand felt in the pocket in which he had carried his pound of silver loose. Not a sixpence remained.

His fist doubled, but relaxed at sight of the hectic pickpocket and his pale, perspiring hands; the hair clung rank to his low forehead; the eyeballs burnt in their receding sockets; and even as Tom watched, his own last sixpence was lost before his eyes.

"So it ain't done you that much good, arter all," said the man who won it.

"Stop a bit!" cried the pickpocket. "I forked the

flat's wipe as well. I'll put it on for a brown!" And he spat blood on it for luck.

"My handkerchief," said Tom, calmly, from the rear.

"Is that the flat?"

"That's him," said the pickpocket, laughing hysterically; but Tom's grudge was not against the thief.

"Shame on you," said he, "to rook that dying man and bring him to this! Are you Englishmen or what? You ought to be nursing him among you, instead of exciting him to his death."

A roar of laughter greeted these words; at an instructive interval, however; and eight or ten eyes looked down.

"A proper flat!" cried one.

"Parson come to rake in the churchyard deserter!"

"The Ordinary'll give him a job. What the blazes did *he* do to get here?"

Suggestions followed, beast capping beast with bestial humour. Tom's eyes, filled with pity, never travelled from the pickpocket's poor face. Suddenly a new voice chimed in, "You're all wrong, boys; it's Erichsen himself!"

The handkerchief was marked, and one had read the name.

The effect of its announcement was something incredible: all rose, save the pickpocket, who was unable. A hushed awe fell, but it was the awe inspired by sudden contact with a master hand. Tom shrank before their vile, admiring looks; they admired him all the more; the tainted air hummed with compliments, condolences, criticisms and cross-questions. One or two said he deserved to die for a clumsy workman. A thick-set young fellow, with a sleek face and his hair in his

eyes, elbowed his way to the front and wanted to shake hands because they were in the same boat.

"Sling us your mauley, old cock!" cried he.

Tom declined the honour.

"Then double them, you cuckoo!"

Tom declined again; a ring was formed, but he refused to enter it, and turned a deaf ear to their taunts. It was notable, however, that only the tongues interfered with him; not a single hand; and the shrewder men saw it was not cowardice. Tom's sad eyes would not leave the dying thief, who was now sprawling across the table, with his death's head on one skinny arm, fast asleep.

To keep an eye on this poor fellow, Tom remained in Number Ten Ward, arranging the matter with the new wardsman, who seemed a well-disposed, weak vessel. At supper-time there came the turnkey who had conducted him to the yard, to whisper that a hot meal had been sent in from outside by his friends, and he might have it in the Bread Room if he liked to make it worth a man's while. "Friends!" thought Tom. "It is my one true friend, who doesn't disbelieve in me, and whose very name I don't know."

He noted the impression that he was one who could pay for things, and its effect upon the small official fry. But he said he would take his supper where he was. When it came he put it before the sleeping consumptive, gently woke him, saw him finish every morsel, and himself supped on gruel from a pail. He was directly annoyed no more that evening, but his challenger talked at him after locking-up time, when they were all upon their mats. And this was in other ways an odious interval.

Tom had never been too particular among his own associates in the little matter of his conversation. At

school, at college, in the stable-yard at home, his language had been more than free at times, and never studiously considered. This is stated as a fact, not a merit. Tom was not without refinement, but his spiritual armour was full of joints, or this his ruin had never come about. To-night, however, he first tossed on his mat—then clenched his fists and sprang up in the dark—but lay down again, recollecting his own footing in that foul place—and finally dug his thumbs in his ears and remained supine and ashamed. Hitherto he had held that he knew everything and could stand much. He altered his opinion in Number Ten Ward of the Chapel Yard at Newgate.

At last they tired of their talk and began to snore. Tom was himself dropping off when the poor fellow at his side woke up groaning.

“The sweat!—the sweat!” he whimpered. “Now I’ll have to lie in it, cold, till morning.”

“That you won’t,” said Tom, cheerily. He had taken the next mat to the pickpocket’s from no unmixed sense of duty. The tragedy of this poor ebbing life had come with incredibly grateful effect between his own mind and his own woes. Besides, there was a fellow-feeling: they were both unquestionably cast for death; the only question was as to which would go first. So Tom was glad to have this comrade in hopeless case; he was thankful for the very glow it gave him to do what he could.

He stripped his companion, he stripped himself, and, by a moon-ray breaking obliquely through grimy glass and iron bars, he got the sufferer into his own dry things. Tom then lay down, half-naked, between the rugs supplied with each mat; having first tucked up his charge with all the care and gentleness he could command.

And the pickpocket said hardly a word ; but in the succeeding stillness Tom felt the feeble clasp of a clammy hand ; and that was all.

He went to sleep with tears in his eyes, and dreamt of Claire at Winwood, on a bluff October day, with the wind in her ringlets, its glow on her cheek, but her little hand so white and innocent that he wasted all the time in longing to take it in his, but not daring for very shame. And from this sweet delusion he woke with a howl of pain. One had tied a cord to his toe, and was pulling it so hard that his very body had budged some inches. He had the cord between his fingers next instant, when it was at once let go at the other end.

But Tom was implacable when his blood was up, and it was boiling now. Trembling with rage, he found and struck a lucifer, and espied a rug shaking across the floor. He sprang up and dealt the carcass beneath as heavy a kick as naked foot could give ; then snatched off the rug and caught one glimpse, as the match burnt his fingers, of the sleek, low, infuriate face of his fellow-prisoner on a capital charge.

“You little beast!” said Tom. “Yes, I’ll fight you now !”

The fellow had him by the legs that instant, and head over heels they went, upon men lying so close together they trod upon two at once. These started up, screaming blasphemies, while on the pair went struggling, the brute’s teeth in Tom’s leg, and Tom’s thumbs at his windpipe : until the place was in an uproar, lights struck, and the belligerents at last torn asunder.

Every man was awake and cursing — some in a passion, some with glee.

“Bedad, boys,” yelled the wildest voice of all, “it’s

the Kilkhinny cats; let 'em chaw each other up, for the love av God!"

"That's it. A ring — a ring!"

"They'll save Jack Ketch his trouble."

"A bonny brace!"

And that they were — Tom stripped to the waist, his nankeen trousers flecked with blood — his enemy foaming at the mouth, and struggling still in half-a-dozen brawny hands. Dips were lighted, the ring formed. Silence was then called, and something like it obtained, save for the innocent laughter of the lunatic in his corner, and the plaintive voice of the consumptive shut out on his mat.

"Let me see," it quavered. "That's no flat. That's the best man above earth. Lend a mauley, old pals, and let a beggar see!"

So they dragged him out upon his mat, and made room for it and him, because he was too weak to rise. And in what ensued, his recumbent figure was the one that ought to have been watched, with eyeballs starting from their sunken sockets, and livid lips that tried so hard to cheer — when Tom spilt his man in the first round — and that failed so pitifully. But only Tom kept an eye on him; and so had it blacked through dropping his hands and darting to the pickpocket, who had fallen forward with the blood gushing from his mouth.

Tom got him in his arms, and pillowed the deathly head upon his naked chest. "Stand aside, lads," he cried. "The excitement — he's going! Let the wardsman fetch help of some kind."

The wardsman had been a weakly protesting party to all that had happened; he was glad to get away.

The shrieking pandemonium was now silent as a

church. The worst man there looked on in awe at Tom with his closing eye and tender hands, and the gasping white face upon his bosom. Unheeded in his corner, the lunatic still chuckled at intervals; there was but one other sound. . . .

A brief rally preceded the end; and a thing happened that might have chilled the coldest heart. Five nerveless white fingers, all skin and knuckles, were seen to steal into the pocket of him in whose arms the poor soul lay dying; and the member, but not the mind, following its vile trade to the end, so he died in the unconscious act.

The grey May morning came creeping through the prison bars. One in the background broke down in sudden sobs. The bell of St. Sepulchre's tolled four; and as Tom laid his burden gently down, he awoke to his own bitter case, and longed for even that hideous night to begin again.

CHAPTER XV

INTERIM

CLAIRE HARDING had now adventured upon a narrow ledge. On the one hand she was bound to show a proper appreciation of Daintree's exertions, which she herself had inspired; on the other, to feign a purely impersonal or benevolent interest in the unhappy youth on whose behalf those exertions were being made. So all day long she must be ready with a smile as false as any other mummer's, even though she spent the night in prayer for Tom and for her own forgiveness. Yet praying did

not bring her peace of mind. She could not convince herself that she was in the right, that even her great end justified means of downright hypocrisy and deceit. There were two ways of looking at her conduct, and Claire, with a breadth of view which was her bane, saw it both ways from the beginning. She was acting a lie to save a life: that was one side of the matter. She was screening the guilty at the expense of the innocent: that was the other side. And if Claire was in any respect singular among women, it was in this inherent and not invariably convenient faculty of seeing the other side whether she would or no.

All her love could not blind her to the terrible strength of the case against Tom, and all her prayers could not unsay what Tom had said to her about the murdered man on the very night of the murder. "I'd hang for the hound, and think the satisfaction cheap at the price!" Those had been his actual words; they were for ever tolling, tolling in her ears; and strong though the case was, would they not have strengthened it still more? And good reason as all the world had to think him guilty, had not she, God help her, better reason than any living man or woman? But oh! she could not and she never would believe it of him; not murder; and even with that cry in her heart she did believe it, but fought to deceive herself a little longer. Her first theory, however, that of self-defence, was virtually shattered by his reported wholesale denials. Then what more was to be said for the desperate hero of a guilty flight, taken at last with the dead man's possessions upon his person?

Claire could not imagine, but a clever barrister might; nay, would; and she set her teeth, and vowed that Tom should have the finest brain at the Bar to defend him,

guilty or not guilty, and though she perjured her soul for the price. But this was not necessary; it was only necessary to act the lie; and Claire scorned herself for the slight comfort that mean distinction gave her against her will. The honest lie was unnecessary because she was dealing with a man of extremes, who neglected many things but did nothing by halves, and whom every passing breath left cold or burning. A breath from Claire could have but one effect, and Daintree was already white-hot for the defence. He had caught fire at a word, and from that moment made it the business of his life to rescue that of an obscure homicide. He could talk of nothing else; his passionate zeal chilled Claire with the thought of what it might turn to should he learn the truth.

Within twenty-four hours of the committal he came in brimful of news and self-importance. Claire was discovered in the garden, and informed who had been retained for the defence in a meaning voice which conveyed no special meaning to her; the name was a big one, but the girl was not a great reader of the newspaper, and she had never heard it before. She looked grateful therefore, but not grateful enough for Daintree, whose greed for her admiration was such that in the next breath he must needs tell her with what figure the big man's brief had been marked. And then he beamed, for the girl stood thunder-struck at his words.

"Five hundred guineas!" she repeated, slowly. "You are never going to find five — hundred — guineas?"

"And why not?" said he, with ready pique. "Do you think that that colossal sum is beyond my means?"

"For a man of whom you know nothing — who has no claim upon you? Yes, I do!"

"Pardon me," replied Daintree in his most elaborate manner. "I know at least as much of the young man as does Miss Harding; his case has already excited her sympathy; he has therefore the very strongest claim upon mine."

"Oh, but you must not do it!" cried Claire, impulsively. "It is too much for you to dream of doing! I am sorry I ever said a word about it! You are too noble, too generous, too good!"

He hung his head a moment, and then exclaimed, with the extraordinary passion of the man, that there was nothing he would not do to win such words from her lips; that she had repaid him already a hundred-fold.

"And remember, it is all for you," he added, suddenly, as though he had caught her candour. "Let there be no mistake about that between you and me. Whatever I may do is not done for yonder prisoner, but for you and you alone!"

"For me!" whispered Claire; and she could say no more, thinking her voice had already betrayed her.

"Yes; every bit for you!"

"But how can that be? He is nothing to us either. We did not know the family — you heard of the quarrel? And the young man was very seldom there, never once in our house." So she still swerved instinctively at the lie direct, and despised herself more than if she had told a dozen. The situation was intolerable to her. She was on the brink of a rash confession, and such an appeal to Daintree's magnanimity as should move a stone, when he took the last word and left her time to think.

"Miss Harding," said he, earnestly, "I care not a jot what you may think of this case on mature consideration. I know how it appealed to you the other night, before

your great heart pulled you two ways, as it is doing now. But that's not the point. No, the point is that you asked something of me, and I mean you to know that what you ask of me that you shall receive, if it is in the power of mortal man to give. If I do not rescue this young fellow from the rope, then it is not in the power of mortal man to do so. But I shall, never fear; and then you will perhaps see that your lightest whim is more to me than the commands of God or man! And that's all the reward I ask."

She knew his flowery speeches, and what to allow for his habitual rhetoric; on this occasion, however, he rang only too true. Yet as she looked at him pensively, his eyes fell, as they had sometimes fallen before; it was as though, with all his passion for her, there was a something sinister and dishonest underneath, and he felt it when he looked long enough in her eyes. Claire did not connect honesty with herself at present, nor did she view the question at all from this point; but she found herself speculating upon the origin of the quarrel between Daintree and his people; and she thought of the flowers that had come back to him from his mother's grave.

Later in the evening she worked out her own position, shuddered at the passing impulse to confess (which had long since passed), put Tom's life before her self-respect and determined to act better from that hour. So the play went on before an audience of one, who had been taken behind the scenes, but who now looked on with eyes that saw not, so absorbing were his own affairs. In very truth, however, there was an audience of two; and but little was lost upon the unseen onlooker.

Daintree meanwhile spent hours every day with Mr. Bassett, the solicitor, or in waiting for him at his office;

in the evening he would return to Avenue Lodge with the latest news of the prisoner Erichsen.

One day he had been removed to the prison infirmary; not that there was much the matter with him, but the surgeon was credited with a desire to reward Erichsen's humanity towards a fellow-prisoner, who was said to have died in his arms.

But another fellow-prisoner he had fought tooth-and-nail the night before; and Mr. Bassett had a shrewd suspicion that the real object of the removal was to isolate a desperate man.

However that might be, he was doing pretty well in the infirmary; was said to be depressed, but not unable to eat or sleep. Daintree reminded Claire that the prisoner was having all his meals sent in from a neighbouring chop-house, and who it was that had ordered them. It was himself.

Erichsen was inundated with letters. Most were from religious strangers, who took his guilt for granted, and indicated several only ways to that mercy in another world which was neither to be expected nor desired in this. But the one that had given him the greatest annoyance was thought to have come from a near relative, for it was very long and he had torn it in many pieces, and then retorted in three lines and given it to the surgeon to post.

Claire knew who the relative was. She had gone the length of calling at Avenue Lodge, on her flight through town to the Continent, and her chief lament was not that murder had been committed, presumably by Tom, but that *her* name had been disgraced, *her* trust abused, *her* money spent in riot, and *her* life rendered unendurable in her native land. The lady was Tom's step-mother.

There was another letter which he seemed to expect every day, and yet not to expect, and it never came, but they thought he must be in love. Claire considered it unlikely; how could a lover have done such a thing? And had he ever written to any girl? Daintree said he would inquire.

No friends had been to see him, no relations; but a noble lord, the same who had encumbered the bench at the Marylebone office, brought a party of friends, and received payment in kind for his insolent questions. The prisoner was reported to have asked him if there were no hospitals where his lordship could see the legs and arms cut off and listen to the screams; to have recommended bodily tortures, as likely to provide better sport than a poor dull devil like himself, and suggested the nearest slaughter-house if all else failed. His lordship had raised his cane and been cuttingly invited to lay it on, as he might not have such a chance every day. Whereupon the party retreated, highly amused, all but their leader, who was said to have marched straight across the street to book a window for the execution.

When Claire heard this story, she showed her feelings in a rather perilous manner. "Well done!" she cried, and clapped her hands. "So they have not taken all the spirit out of him yet! Let us be thankful, Mr. Daintree," she added in an instant, "that it is at least a man of spirit whose cause you have espoused. Next to an innocent man, a spirited man has the best claim on one's sympathy. It would be dreadful if he were neither the one nor the other!"

"But you know that I believe him to be both."

"I have heard you say so. Yet you never go near him yourself."

Daintree admitted his repugnance to personal contact with the prisoner. "I certainly prefer to draw the line at that," said he, "especially as it could do no good. No, it was bad enough seeing him at Marylebone. I would give something to forget his face."

"And why?" cried Claire. "Because in your heart, like all the rest of the world, you know him to be guilty! You may be sensitive, but you wouldn't be as sensitive as all that if you honestly believed in his innocence. You do not. Yet you go on spending your money, throwing it away to gratify a passing impulse of mine! It's madness, Mr. Daintree, it is indeed."

The tears stood in her eyes as she spoke. But he had turned away as if unable to deny his latent unbelief; otherwise her face might have betrayed her even then. She felt that it must do so in the end; it was but another question of time. Such interviews left her spirit prostrate, her heart worn out with beating, and yet she sought them herself. The craving for news of Tom only deepened with the sense of his guilt. When Daintree was absent, the girl counted the hours till his return; when he returned, if she was not there to meet him, it was in order that he might think her less eager to hear than he to tell. And once when he not only thought so, but told her what he thought in his touchiest manner, it was a great moment for the actress, who was ceasing to feel ashamed of her part, what with custom and the dire necessity of it.

For now, more than ever, did Claire trust to the genius of the great magician retained for the defence; that vague power was the one hope left for her to cling to, and cling she did with all the might of aching heart and tortured mind. Claire's notions of a trial were exceed-

ingly simple, although her father had stood his within the year. On the other hand, her belief in the efficacy of counsel was unbounded, because Mr. Harding had been defended by a former officer of the Crown, and the charge had fallen to the ground, and everybody vowed it was the fine defence (combined with innocence); at least, everybody whose opinion Claire was in the way of hearing. Mr. Serjeant Culliford had not been Solicitor-General, but Claire was told that in a criminal case his rival did not exist. One night she heard that Culliford had accepted the brief; the next that he had probably earned his fee already, though Bassett would admit nothing of the kind, but complained instead of his own treatment at the barrister's hands.

The fact was that Tom ought to have made a statement before the magistrate; then the defence would have had something to work upon at the trial. As it was they had nothing, until the learned serjeant devised a means of obtaining a statement at the eleventh hour. He went to Newgate, made Tom give him his version of the interview with Blaydes and of his subsequent proceedings; disbelieved every word, but kept nodding so encouragingly with his ugly, inscrutable, attentive face that Tom received the very opposite impression, and told his tale with some spirit and a gleam of hope. The great man heard him out, then glared at Bassett (who had given him a certain look), and addressed the prisoner in a kindly undertone.

"That's all very well," said he; "the only pity is that we didn't have it at Marylebone; for you see your tongue will be tied at the Old Bailey. No, no, *you* couldn't know. You may thank your solicitor. It was his duty to advise —"

"Excuse me, sir," interrupted that gentleman, "but I really must protest! I never supposed we should be unable to call a single witness for the defence, and I did not think the story—"

"Think!" snapped Culliford. "Who wants *you* to think? There's a class of man, sir, that is most dangerous when it thinks; you appear to belong to it. Be good enough not to interrupt me again; we must have that statement by hook or crook to work upon, and there is only one way now of getting it as evidence. Tell a turnkey or a wardman what you have told me, Erichsen, and the other side are pretty safe to put him in the box. Then I shall cross-examine him, and have something to talk to the jury about. Do I think we have a leg to stand upon? Two, sir, two, and better ones than they suppose; only tell the turnkeys exactly what you have told me; and good-day to you. Come, Mr. Bassett; I've something more to say to you."

And so Tom had his eyes opened to the little ways of great lawyers, but his impression of his champion was by no means an unfavourable one; for the glib, spruce Bassett he disliked; but this rough tongue and rugged face filled him with confidence, and so redoubled his gratitude towards his unknown ally, who heard that he had spoken of him with tears in his eyes, and who did not fail to let Claire hear it too.

Upon her, meanwhile, the strain was beginning to tell; more than once she was within an ace of breaking down at a tell-tale moment. And just when her nerves were at their highest pitch, and the situation hardly to be borne, there came the new development which well-nigh turned her brain.

It began with a comparatively small matter, the un-

provoked insolence of Claire's maid; but this was the growth of days, not a sudden thing; though it was only when her jangled nerves could endure it no longer that Claire whipped out her purse, put a month's wages on the dressing-table, and bade the woman begone.

Hannah the maid put her thin, strong arms akimbo, and burst out laughing in her mistress's face.

"This instant, eh? And you think you'll get rid of me for two-pound-five? That you won't then—nor yet for twenty guineas. So now you know."

"We shall see," said Claire, moving over to the bell.

"I wouldn't ring, miss, if I were you."

"Then will you go? You have been insolent beyond words; force me to do it, and I shall send for a policeman to turn you out."

"I wouldn't do that, miss, either; or I may tell the policeman something you won't like."

"What do you mean?"

"What I say; but I don't mind saying it plainer to oblige. I shall tell him who you were with on the night of a certain murder, and what he said to you, and what you could tell against him in the witness-box if they like to put you there! That's all, Miss Harding. You look faint. I wouldn't ring just yet if I were you; here's a glass of water in the meanwhile."

Claire had indeed turned white as paper. Instinctively she took the glass, but it slipped through her fingers and fell into the fender with a crash. The room seemed full of pale faces, low brows and venomous black eyes set close together, all spinning round her in nauseous whirligig like demons dancing. She sank into a chair and hid her face; but started and recoiled from the touch of cool fingers, wet with rose-water, upon her temples.

"Keep away from me!" she cried faintly. "Do not dare to touch me again. So it was you at the gate that night? I remember now!"

"It was me, miss."

"You shut it?"

"I did."

"And pray how do you know who he was?" and her voice was stronger. "You never were at Winwood in your life!"

"Perhaps not; but I can put two and two together as well as most: besides, I'm not that hard of hearing! Come, let's be plain; you've confessed to the master, miss, and you've confessed to *me*."

There was a pause for proper comprehension; then said the young lady, with ineffable scorn, "And to how many more — through your lips?"

"Never a soul! That was too good a one not to keep. No, I just seen him first, and then set to work to find out who he was. But I never said I seen him to a soul."

"And why not to me until to-day?"

"Why, because I wanted to know your game. And it wasn't that easy to find out; you see, miss, you're a pretty deep one yourself!"

Claire sat still in her chair. She was now perfectly calm, and even experiencing an odd sense of relief in facing an overt crisis after so many secret tremors and hidden shocks. "And what is your object, Hannah?" said she at last. "Suppose they put me in the witness-box, what would you gain by it? You probably think I would do anything to avoid the exposure; on the contrary, I would tell everything to the whole world if I thought it could do any good. But the case is so black already that, on the other hand, it could do very

little harm. Your threat is less terrible than you imagine."

"Is that so?" with an evil smile. "Hey-day! but it's an artful one. Suppose I told that there Daintree, instead of the police? What then?"

Claire had suspected this. Yet it took her breath away when it came. "So you are a professional spy!" she gasped. "I might have known it all along, you vile woman, from your face!" To be sure she might have known it then; for the sallow face turned a deeper yellow; the black eyes came as close together as the nozzles of a double-barrelled gun, to blaze as though both triggers had been pulled at once.

"Ah, yes! We don't all show it in our faces, do we?" hissed the woman. "And which is the worst, I wonder — them that does or them that doesn't? Is it worse to cheat the man that's fond of you, like you've done, or to tell him, as I mean to do, that he's being cheated? You think you've found *me* out; *he* shall find *you* out! To make one lover pay for the other lover's defence — a pretty game — and five hundred golden guineas — a pretty price! But he hasn't paid them yet; no, and he never shall; you may take your oath to that!"

"He must," said Claire, in a whisper. "The trial begins the day after to-morrow. He has gone too far to draw back now."

"Not he, when I tell him all I know. He'd pay another five hundred to get your fellow hung! You know him, and you know that, too, as well as I do."

"I don't know it," said Claire, with a last brave effort. "I know that I have been more than once on the verge of telling him myself. But if *you* tell him — now — after all these dreadful days, well" — with a sob — "it

will kill me, and there's an end of it! Oh, I am no match for a woman like you. Tell me what you want, and it is yours if I have it. Money? You shall have all I've got!"

"Which don't amount to much," laughed the other. "No, but I'm glad to see you come to reason. Bothered if I don't admire your game too much not to want to see it out now it's got so far. Maybe I can lend a hand; but not for money. Here's your jewel-box; you've got to make your faithful maid a few small presents."

"Oh, take your choice; only hold your tongue."

So trinkets rang like sovereigns in their tray, as this vulture picked and chose among them, and clawed first a sapphire ring.

"I've had my eye on this ever since I came!"

"Then take it."

"This coral brooch is another of my favourites."

"Take it, too."

"These here earrings that you never wear; you'll never miss them."

"Take anything you like."

"All right, then. Just to finish up, I'll have the diamond pendant—"

"No! That you must leave."

"You said I was to take anything I liked."

"Well, it's true I hope never to have to wear it again. I shall not want it in my grave, and that's where I hope to go. Oh! oh! the sooner the better!" And the poor girl broke down completely.

"Stuff and nonsense, miss! And see here," generously; "all you've got to do when you want to wear them is to ask me, and I'll lend you any one of 'em you

like, and welcome! Now, then; what do you think of me now?"

And Claire, looking up through her tears, saw the woman decked out already, rings in her ears and on her finger, the brooch and pendant gleaming and glittering on her black stuff dress, and a quiet smile upon her wicked face. Claire could almost have smiled herself.

"And for these you'll hold your tongue until after the trial?"

"Till all's blue, you mean! I should think I would—and do anything you like, miss, to lend a hand."

Her mistress leapt to her feet, a living flame.

"Then put those things in your pocket and be out of my sight! Now—now—before I sacrifice *him* for a fiend like *you!*"

And this was how Claire was followed along her narrow ledge, by one who might push her from it at any moment: so that she had now not only her own feet to watch, but the treacherous hand behind her back as well.

CHAPTER XVI

THE TRIAL OPENS

A DAY or two before the trial, when Bassett called at the prison, Tom handed him a little, broken-backed card; and the speaking eye, that had been dull and dumb for six long days, was once more eloquent with light and life. Bassett took the card gingerly between an effeminate finger and thumb, and examined it with a critical brow. It was a pawn-ticket for a suit of clothes.

"Well, my good fellow, and what have I to do with this?"

"Show it to my friend, and pray him, in pity's name, to add to all his other noble kindnesses by redeeming me those things. It will be the greatest kindness of all!"

"What! To find you a change of clothes?"

"No; to help me look a gentleman at my trial. For months and months I haven't cared a rush what I looked. But once I did; and I do now. It came back to me last night, when I found that pawn-ticket in this old waist-coat-pocket. I could hardly sleep for thinking what a sight I should be in court as I am. Oh, sir, you despair of saving me; I have seen it in your face all along; then save my self-respect, and I shall be as grateful as if it were my life." It was his self-respect that had come back to him in the night.

The clothes arrived next morning: a brown frock-coat with three-inch lapels, velvet waistcoat, and Cossack trousers with straps. Tom spread them out with unforeseen misgivings.

"They are smarter than I thought," said he, dubiously. "I wanted to look a gentleman, but not a dandy. I had rather remain a sight than come out jaunty in the dock."

But he wore them after all; and round his neck a new black stock from the unknown open hand that he so longed to clasp in his; and in his eyes (though one was still discoloured) a spirited light that filled some hearts, and silenced every tongue, when the prisoner was brought into court. And so much for Thomas Erichsen's desire to look a gentleman at his trial; it had made a man of him, which was better still. His appearance excited an almost palpable thrill of pity for one so gallant, so guilty, and so young. But we may pity and still condemn; and

in all that crowded court there were but two persons who had not condemned Tom Erichsen before the trial began.

His own impressions may be noted. They were very intense, and very irrelevant. The court was much smaller than he had supposed; the judge and he were scarce twenty feet apart; that was Culliford's wig almost under his nose; and there was a certain homeliness in such proximity, as also in the easy conversational tone with which the barristers presently got to work. The judge was a depressing old gentleman with a permanently pained expression; one of the first things Tom noticed about him was that the scarlet of his robes and that of the judgment seat were a violently bad match. As for the jury, their twelve hats were piled on the window-sill behind their heads; and Tom found himself more interested in the different sizes, shapes and qualities than in the faces of the men who were to decide his fate. Then the jury-box reminded him of the churchwardens' pew in his father's church, and he saw with dim eyes until a strident formula made him start, whereupon he pleaded "Not guilty" with a catch in his voice which so vexed him that he repeated his plea with emphasis, and glanced defiantly right and left. On his right were spectators and reporters in descending rows as at a theatre; but because the court was so much smaller than he had pictured it, there were also fewer spectators than he had been prepared to face. He was some hours in discovering that as many more were gloating upon the hair of his head and the tips of his ears from the public galleries behind his back.

The swearing-in of the jury again reminded him of Winwood days; the functionary employed had just such an intonation as a neighbouring curate there, and was

equally indistinct; for though he repeated his formula twelve times, "well and truly try" were the only words Tom ever caught. Then at the further end of the front row of wigs and gowns, there arose a somewhat diffident gentleman, who proceeded to open the case in a somewhat hesitating manner, which set Tom's heart beating, for this was the senior counsel for the Crown. He did not seem at all a formidable person; his sentences had occasionally no middle, quite frequently no end; and his gentlemanly, mild face was in striking contrast to the powerful, rude visage of Mr. Serjeant Culliford, who sat trimming a quill, with half a smile upon his long, thin lips, the personification of confident superiority. Tom looked from the one to the other, and his beating heart leapt: it was a weak man with a strong case against a strong man with a weak case; there was a chance for him yet.

The first witness was the mechanic who had discovered the body. His testimony was very short. He had run straight for the police, leaving the blood-stained cudgel precisely where he had found it in the grass. This witness was not cross-examined, and the police-officer whom he had summoned soon replaced him in the box.

Matters here became a little technical. The position of the body was elaborately gone into, judge and jury examining a prepared plan of the scene which seemed to demand a deal of explanation. Either the witness was obscure or the jury dense; the dejected judge stood up himself to make things plain to them; and for several minutes the chief sounds in court were the judicial undertones and a continuous crinkling of tracing-paper. Tom wondered at the waste of time upon an infinitesimal point; he had never been at a trial before; and

the extreme deliberation of the whole tribunal was another revelation to a lay mind thus mercifully distracted from the vital issues at stake. It must be remembered, however, that this was not a guilty man; he had the open mind of innocence, the outside point of view; there were whole moments when he almost forgot who it was that was being tried. And, perhaps, in the ceaseless self-consciousness of guilt, Tom Erichsen was spared a keener heart-ache than any that even he had yet endured.

When the finding of the body and its exact position when found had been duly demonstrated to the satisfaction of the court, and counsel for the defence had put a couple of questions, counsel for the Crown informed his lordship that he proposed to take the medical evidence later; he would now trace the prisoner's connection with the crime, adducing in the first place what he conceived to be an adequate motive for its commission. Mr. Richard Vale was thereupon called, but added little to the evidence which he had given at Marylebone as already described. The only difference was a cross-examination more rough than telling, in which disgraceful admissions were accompanied with a dissipated smirk, but which elicited no essential point in the prisoner's favour.

On the other hand, this witness was again the peg upon which were hung the threatening letters; the letters were once more undisputed; and a passage in one of them caused the first "sensation" of the trial. "I warn you," ran the text, "that I would rather hang than starve. Unless you pay me I shall do one or the other; and don't you rely on dodging me much longer, for I am hunting you day and night, and will do till I drop." The dead man's landlady and a club porter gave supplementary

evidence; the latter had forwarded the letters to deceased, and had caused the police to put a stop to prisoner's loitering near the club.

Now came a working man whose face Tom had quite forgotten; but he swore to the prisoner as one of the two men to whom he had said good-night as he passed them at the stile in the Finchley Road, on the night of Thursday, the 27th ult., about half-past ten; and it seemed that at the inquest he had sworn to deceased as the other. Prosecuting counsel had hardly resumed his seat when Culliford was on his legs.

"You say it was about half-past ten. Do you carry a watch?"

"No, sir."

"Then how could you tell the hour?"

"Well, sir, no sooner had I left them two gents than I was sorry I hadn't arst 'em the time; but next moment I met another, and arst him; and *he* told me it had just gone the 'alf-hour."

"And could you identify that gentleman, too?"

Dead silence and a puzzled grin.

"Come, come, my man," cried Culliford. "Could you identify the gentleman who told you the time if you were to see him again? Can you tell me anything at all about him? Could you pick him out if he were in this court at the present moment?"

Witness caused a thrill by taking the question literally and scanning several faces before he would reply; then he shook his head; his recollection of the third gentleman was confessedly indistinct.

"And yet you could swear to the other two!" said Culliford significantly. And he sat down with his first real point ably made.

A similar admission was obtained from Tom's old friend and enemy, the hackney-coachman, who first swore to the prisoner as the man who had stopped his coach overnight, and was then examined as to the entertainment of prisoner in his house next morning, and his ultimate flight therefrom. Tom saw his counsel's eyelids twitching before he rose, and he anticipated one at least of the three successive points now scored in his favour.

"When the prisoner sat at your breakfast-table," began Culliford, "did you then, or at any subsequent moment, notice anything in the nature of a blood-stain upon his clothes or person?"

"No, sir, I can't say that I did."

"Can you say that you did not?"

Witness hesitated but told the truth.

"No," said he, "I saw no signs of blood upon him, either then or afterwards."

"You saw no signs of blood upon the prisoner either then or afterwards. You are quite positive, however, that the man who waylaid your fare in the Finchley Road was the prisoner in the dock?"

"Quite positive."

"Then didn't you recognise him in the morning when your brother-in-law brought him to your house?"

"No, sir, I did not."

"What! Not when he was sitting at your own breakfast-table?"

"I did not."

"Nor yet when you gave him the newspaper, and he read you an account of the very crime with which he stands indicted? You suspected nothing, saw nothing suspicious in his manner, nothing familiar in his face?"

"No — not then I didn't."

"You suspected nothing and did not recognise him then; yet at a word from your wife you identified the prisoner with the man who stopped your coach, and you have so identified him ever since?"

Witness made the necessary admission, but attempted to explain matters, whereupon Culliford cut him short, and having gained the advantage which Tom had foreseen, passed on to one that was less apparent.

"To return to your fare," said counsel; "did you notice any valuables upon his outer person? A watch-chain? Rings? A breast-pin in the stock?"

"I did," was the rather sullen reply.

"Oh, you did; all three?"

"No; a watch-chain and a pin."

"A watch-chain and a pin. What kind of a pin, now, should you say that it was?"

"A diamond pin."

"A diamond pin; you can swear it was a diamond, can you?"

"Yes, I can, for I seen it glittering in the light of my near coach-lamp."

"You saw the diamond glittering in the light of your lamp," repeated Mr. Serjeant Culliford in his cool, ringing voice; and he sat down unexpectedly, but with an expression so satisfied that Tom lost much of the next evidence (that of the coachman's wife) in endeavouring to account for it. He had not succeeded when the court adjourned for luncheon, for the hour of acute perceptions was over and had left him dazed, so that the venerable turnkey who had charge of him in the dock had to take him by the arm to make him leave it. Then it was that Tom discovered the public galleries behind

the dock, and faced a firmament of eyes gleaming and straining for a first glimpse of his countenance. It flushed and fell — he was so taken aback — and he went down the stairs with a sob in his throat.

“Come, come!” said his custodian; “you’re doing much better than I expected. You’ve got the best of it in counsel, anyway; he’s made three or four good points already.”

Tom brightened a little. “But I didn’t quite see the force of that last one,” said he; “what was he driving at there?”

“Why, have you forgotten the only two questions he put the officer who described the position of the body?” asked the other; and he answered his own question while Tom was trying to remember. “The body was lying face down; he wanted to know whether they could see the stock as it lay, and whether there was a pin in the stock when they turned him over. Now don’t you see? That pin’s still missing, and they may prove it was better worth taking than the watch itself!”

Under the turnkey’s supervision, the prisoner was sitting down to eat in a cell beneath the court; but at these words he dropped knife and fork and looked up with hope’s fitful fever on his cheeks and in his eyes.

“I see! I see!” he cried. “Oh, what a magnificent man to defend a poor fellow like me! He’ll save me yet — he’ll save me, I do believe!”

“We’ll hope for the best,” said the turnkey; “but there’s no denying that’s a goodish point. You see,” confidentially, “we know what you done with the watch, but there’s none on us knows what you done with the pin!”

Tom started, stricken to the quick.

"So you think—"

But words failed him, and he said no more.

That hour of respite was the longest of the day.

Tom was thankful to be back in court.

The principal witnesses of the afternoon were Mrs. Adcock, Jonathan Butterfield and the diminutive householder of Kew. Thus the trio who had made the world seem so kind a fortnight before, now typified its cruelty; for the evidence of the first two was reluctant but damning, and that of the last was supplementary in matter, but given with the officious venom and the transparent exultation of a personal foe.

But his old landlady shed tears as she described her last interview with the prisoner at the bar. It was with difficulty that things which Tom had said on that occasion, and to which she had already sworn at Marylebone, could be wrung a second time from her unwilling lips. "I'll pay him" and "I'll break every bone in his infernal body" were not the worst of the words which were extracted by degrees. Then the stick was produced in court; and the knob that had been so clean and creamy was now clotted over with a scaly, russet skin, like a coat of glue, at sight of which the witness turned as white as her hair and was given a glass of water in the box. The stick was then duly identified; the jury informed that the prisoner had described it to witness as "a rod in pickle" for the deceased; and the witness allowed to stand down, after a brief but painful cross-examination, in which the good soul's fondness for Tom was betrayed by signs that touched him as deeply as anything could just then. His brain was reeling under the dread weight of her evidence against him; he felt its

influence upon judge and jury as a palpable force; its very reluctance only heightened its mortal effect.

Jonathan Butterfield exhibited a like demeanour with a like result: it only showed that the prisoner had not lacked those common attributes of the worst rascals, an engaging manner and the power of imposing on the simple-minded. This witness, however, swore very positively that there were no marks of blood upon the prisoner when they were together. And though his sly successor as positively swore that such a stain upon the kerseymere waistcoat had first aroused his suspicions in the garden at Kew, and though this was afterwards proved in the medical evidence to be a blood-stain, it was eventually established that the blood was not that of the murdered man. The point was finally gained in cross-examination of the police-officer upon whom Tom had jumped bodily in his escape from the empty house. Witness admitted having opened his eyes to find the prisoner leaning over him with a bloody nose. And the defence had scored once more, but this after an interval so prolific of incriminating matter that Mr. Serjeant Culliford sat down with a sigh instead of a smile, and the prisoner at the bar longed incontinently for the end.

About this time Tom recognised a forgotten face. The sporting youth who had lent him a copper to toss with, and afterwards treated his starving body to a generous meal, was seated immediately above the clock in the central gallery at the back of the court. Turning in very weariness to see the time, Tom had a glimpse of bottle-green shoulders and a pair of twinkling eyes, set now, however, in a very solemn face, which it took him some seconds to remember. He looked round no more when he had done so, but fell to thinking bitterly of all that

had befallen him through the spin of that borrowed penny. It had brought him here. It would bring him to the gallows in due time. And here in the gallery sat the last of those who had been kind to him in his extremity; since he could not bear witness against him, he had come to gloat over his trial, and would doubtless attend his execution next! Thus did injustice make a normally fair mind unfair and unjust; but the stolid expression of the man above the clock had rubbed salt in his wounds; especially as the same glance had shown him quite a ragged man, who buried his face in a dirty handkerchief as Tom looked up.

The long, tense day wore slowly to a close, but the prisoner's interest was at an end before it: he had lost all hope. No more points were scored in his favour; his very counsel never glanced his way; he was fighting a losing battle with tenacity, but without conviction, and Tom scoured the court for a single face that should look to believe in him. There was none. The plain old judge looked more and more worried and depressed; his raised eyebrows meeting his wig as he leant forward to make a note of some peculiarly damning circumstance. The last witness of the day was the medical man who had certified death and conducted the autopsy. This was a stout gentleman with white whiskers and a benevolent voice, but Tom could only see the light shining on his bald head, as evening fell through the tall windows on that side of the court. Tom had counted the panes, still filled with a soiled, bluish sky, and was beginning to count the sparrows upon a smoke-charred wall without, when he was once more taken by the arm: the court had adjourned in the middle of the medical evidence, of which he had not listened to one word.

As he turned to descend, there arose in the sloping seats behind the barristers a flushed face that gave the wretched Erichsen a new thought for the night: he thought, but could hardly believe, that it was the face of his old enemy, Nicholas Harding.

CHAPTER XVII

END OF THE TRIAL

It was!

Tom had entered the dock with his eyes on those sloping seats; it was Nicholas Harding sure enough, in the very same place, and there in good time, yet ashamed of being there at all, or why did he duck his great head the instant Tom appeared? There were more pressing questions than that, however. Why had he come? What did he know? Had Claire told him all, and sent him to see the end?

The prisoner's heart began to beat as no witness and neither counsel had set it beating yet. A new and fierce desire for life and liberty ran like wildfire through his sluggish blood. Get off he must; his innocence must and should be proved, if only to baulk that vindictive snob come to glory in his destruction. His soul railed and sickened to think it was Claire's father.

But a new light played in his eyes; a new fire flamed in his face; and, to complete the transformation, he leant across the bulwark of the dock, and the gaze that had been so errant and so apathetic was eagerly concentrated upon the white-whiskered doctor in the witness-box. Spectators of the day before looked on and marvelled

at a change so marked. And Nicholas Harding was among the number, for, once satisfied that it was he, Tom had not deigned to look a second time in his direction.

The cross-examination of the medical man was longer and more persistent than that of any preceding witness. But nothing came of it. The object was also unusually patent and direct: it was to prove that death must have been all but instantaneous, and that it could not have occurred before the small hours of the fatal night. But this stepping-stone to an *alibi* was one whereon the witness could be neither led nor driven to set a foot. The upshot of much questioning and some ghastly details was merely to show the impossibility of fixing the time of death to an hour. The later period was not inconceivable, but more than that the witness would not say; whereupon Culliford was rude to him, and Tom sighed, for he felt instinctively that the doctor would have helped him if he could.

"One moment, Dr. Westmacott," said the opposing leader, rising to re-examine as Culliford sat down. "You have told the jury that it is not absolutely impossible for this murder to have taken place as late as two o'clock in the morning; will you kindly tell them whether such a fact would be at variance with your experience as a medical man?"

"It would."

Culliford shifted angrily in his place.

"May we not take it," pursued the other, "that in your professional —"

Culliford sprang to his feet.

"You may not!" cried he. "My lord, I must protest against this form of question. My friend is leading.

He shall not lead! This is a matter of life or death—I say life or death, for my friend's instruction. He need not think that he is going to make it the latter by fair means or by foul!”

This righteous outburst was justified by the incidental letter, but certainly not by the essential spirit of the prosecution, which had struck the very prisoner as a miracle of restraint and moderation. The case against him had never been unduly pressed; all the pressing and browbeating had been upon his own side; and again Tom deplored what struck him as almost prejudicial ungraciousness on his counsel's part. And it did no good; the question was put afresh, with a blush, but in an admissible form; and Dr. Westmacott stood down, having given it as his professional opinion that there was every probability of the crime having been committed before midnight rather than after.

Counsel for the prosecution, with the colour still in his face, then called his last witness, a Newgate wardsman, with the pointed observation that the jury were at length in possession of the facts; they should now hear the incredible story with which the prisoner sought to explain those facts away.

Up came Culliford on the instant, to object to the word “incredible,” which his own asperity had provoked.

“Is my friend going to make two speeches?” said he, sarcastically. “Let him keep his comments until he addresses the jury once and for all; it is for them to say what is incredible and what is not.”

Tom's heart sank, for he had a depressing intuition that all this rancour was the sign of a losing side. But he was not in a position to gauge its effect upon the open mind of the average hearer.

"That fellow will save him yet," said one to another in the sloping seats to the right. "He is fighting splendidly — taking every chance."

"Yes, yes; he has earned his money; may he succeed!"

The other made no reply.

"Have you no sympathy with him — you, of all men?" asked the last speaker in an indignant whisper.

Nicholas Harding lowered his head. "Hush! hush! He is looking this way. I don't think he has seen me yet; he mustn't know that I am here."

And now the full, true, but improbable particulars of the prisoner's last interview with the murdered man were laid before the jury by a hostile witness; and the great Culliford smiled again. Bassett had furnished him with a circumstantial statement of what the prisoner *had* said, whereby those of the witness were checked, amended and supplemented in cross-examination. The great man's artifice had been entirely unforeseen; his "friend" sat aghast, while the infirmary wardsman perspired for twenty minutes under Culliford's fire. Here he had exaggerated; there forgotten and filled in with a fancy detail; and "On your oath, sir!" thundered through the court with thrilling iteration. With the release of this varlet, the case for the prosecution closed upon an anti-climax. Culliford then stated that he should call no witnesses for the defence, in the tone of a man who could call twenty if he chose; and sat down with the most confident air, having thus secured the last word.

Counsel for the Crown proceeded to address the jury upon the whole case, beginning nervously but warming to his work. Stung by Culliford's tactics and irritated

by his manner, this mild gentleman abandoned for the nonce that becoming restraint which is still the accepted note of a criminal prosecution, and described murder and murderer in no measured terms. If the former had been brought home to the prisoner at the bar—if the prisoner were held to stand duly and fairly identified with the latter—then the heaviest punishment known to the law would be light in comparison with his crime. The defence he characterised as “indubitably brilliant”; yet he was afraid that the fireworks of his learned friend but served to illuminate the weakness of his case. For he had browbeaten witnesses as to minutiae of time and place; but what had he disproved? The grievance? The threats? The fact that the prisoner and the deceased were seen together near the spot where the murder was committed, about the time of its commission? No, there had been a gallant attempt to disprove that, but it remained as much a certainty as the ownership of the lethal weapon, the black facts of the prisoner’s flight, and that possession of the dead man’s watch and chain which even counsel’s learned friend had not attempted to explain away. To be sure, he had elicited to the full, instead of attempting to disallow, the extraordinary story with which the accused had sought since his incarceration to account for those stubborn facts. The prisoner said he had given a receipt for the watch and chain! Then where was the receipt? And was that a credible or an incredible tale? Counsel had been reminded that this was for gentlemen of the jury to decide. Then let them do so; and if they found that story credible, then their duty was clear, and they would unhesitatingly acquit the prisoner at the bar; but if incredible, then their duty was no less clear, and they would discharge

that duty like brave men and true, and so keep the oath which they had sworn to Almighty God. Counsel resumed his seat after a speech of astonishing power, and the court adjourned for luncheon.

Tom neither bit nor supped. "There's still Culliford," he kept saying to himself, "and compared with the other, he's a giant to a dwarf. But what can he find to say to all that? Oh, what can he find to say for me now?" And the elderly turnkey's pitying glances were a bitterer thing than his involuntary insult of the day before.

Culliford's great speech may be dismissed in the shortest space, since only a verbatim report could do justice to the passionate eloquence and artistic force of an oration which held the court entranced for close upon two hours. And even then you would lose the dramatic pauses, the fine use of emphasis, the infinite variety of tone, now passionate, now persuasive, now sweetly reasonable; the slow movements and the quick—in a word, the masterly manipulation, by this born advocate, of every note in the oratorical gamut.

The speech opened with wholesale denunciations of a "virulent prosecution," its "witnesses corrupt with prejudice" and their "back-handed identifications," but especially of "that miserable gang of petty cheats—that school of sharks—of whom the witness Vale was a pretty specimen, and the dead man Blaydes the acknowledged ringleader." Was such a man likely to have but one enemy swearing vengeance upon his discreetly hidden head? More probably a hundred, any one of whom might have committed this crime, and any one of whom might have pleaded unparalleled extenuation into the bargain. Why, the man carried a sword-stick—even to an evening party—to protect his

miserable life! And counsel drew a true and vivid picture of the last encounter and the last parting between Blaydes and Erichsen; but here assumed his most matter-of-fact tone and air, because the matter really sounded less like a fact than any with which he had to deal. The receipt? Nothing more natural; the watch was to be pawned, not kept, and the ticket returned to the owner. Its disappearance? Nothing simpler; had not everything disappeared from the dead man's pockets? The receipt had found its way into that of the real murderer; so had the diamond pin.

That diamond pin was the one strong point of the defence, and Culliford treated it beautifully; he treated it from every possible point of view. It was of greater value than the watch; a minor witness, the dead man's landlady, had told them what the dead man had told her, that he had accepted the pin as payment for a debt of seventy guineas; and that statement bore a double significance now. On the one hand, it showed a partiality in the deceased for such transactions as he had afterwards entered into with the prisoner; on the other hand, it proved that if the prisoner had robbed and murdered the deceased, then either he had omitted robbing him of his most valuable possession, or else he had concealed it so skilfully that it had never since been seen or heard of. Surely the one explanation was as unlikely as the other! But the pin was not only the more valuable article, it was the more negotiable; and this capital point was driven home with an irresistible force that lightened every heart in court, that of the prisoner at the bar included. Here was the best argument yet. It left its mark upon every face. Even the judge looked less despondent; but the jury glanced towards the dock as

one man; and there was a visible glow upon their cheeks, a visible gladness in their eyes, as though they could look a fellow-creature in the face once more. Then came the defence of the guilty flight, and in a moment there were twelve averted faces in the jury-box, and a very pale one in the dock. Culliford, however, was of all men the man for such a moment; he did not allow an unnecessary second for dwelling upon the great weakness of his case, but plunged therefrom into that final appeal for justice and the benefit of the doubt, in which the youth, position and gallantry of the prisoner were effective allusions, but no part of the plea.

“Do not mistake me, gentlemen,” cried Culliford in conclusion. “I am not craving mercy for a gentleman. I am demanding justice for a man. A young man, gentlemen — perhaps a younger man than any one of us here present — with all his faults and follies thick upon him — with all his life of serious effort and sober work and honest enterprise — ay, and of human happiness, too! — still shining and still smiling in front of him, but so smiling and so shining, gentlemen, across a gulf that you alone can bridge! And yet you must not bridge it on account of the fact of his youth, but simply and singly on account of the possibility of his innocence. Gentlemen, I pray you to remember that the *possibility* is enough. If a reasonable doubt remains in your mind, if the shadow of a doubt darkens your vision, remember that the benefit of that doubt is the prisoner's by right; and may God in His mercy direct you to a right and just and generous finding!”

Culliford looked around him grandly, glanced at the clock, and sat down.

Tom wrote "God bless you!" in unsteady characters on a slip of paper, and had it handed down to him by Bassett.

Culliford read it without moving a muscle of his face.

The judge then summed up. Of that depressed and depressing, but perfectly able discourse, there is but one word to be said. It was against the prisoner; and the jury retired to consider their verdict at 5.15.

As Tom turned to leave the dock he noticed a ragged creature with a dirty pocket-handkerchief before his face in the forefront of the central gallery. He remembered the same man similarly affected (as he supposed) the day before. It put him in mind of the one who had lent the coin, but he was not there to-day; and Tom thought of neither any more, nor yet of Nicholas Harding himself, as he went below to await his fate.

Refreshments were offered him, but he could neither eat nor sit down. He could only walk to and fro in the torture-chamber while the turnkeys talked of Culliford's speech. One vowed it was enough to save any man; but Tom saw the look he gave his companion with the words. It was a relief when Bassett appeared, fresh and dapper as ever, and in the best possible spirits.

"You know," said he to Tom, "if the worst comes to the worst, we can always get up a petition. There's nothing like being prepared, and my plans are already laid. My good fellow, you shall make such a stir as no man in your shoes ever made before! All London shall have a chance of signing, for I mean to work it on the house-to-house system. I shall engage a special staff for the purpose! My word, yes, our petition will be the talk of the town — if things go wrong."

"So you want them to," said Tom, bluntly.

"I — *want* them to?" cried Bassett, blushing.

Tom had no heart to push the punishment. "No, no," said he, with a wan smile, "I was only joking. Good time for a joke, eh? Ha, ha, ha! Look at those turn-keys; they thought I hadn't a laugh left in me. How goes the time? Six already? I say, do you think that Serjeant Culliford would come down and let me shake his hand? I would like to do that—especially before I *know*."

"Culliford! He'll have nothing to do with the petition, you know."

"Hang the petition! I want to thank him for his speech."

Bassett said he would see. He was away but a minute, and he came back alone.

"Culliford is rather tired," said he. "He asks you to excuse him, but he sincerely wishes you good luck."

Tom nodded. He could not speak.

So the hero of that noble, touching, magnificent speech drew the line at shaking him by the hand!

It was the worst thing yet; nothing else compared with it; but it had this merit, that it anticipated the great sting to come, and made the poor wretch smart so terribly in semi-private that his capacity for present anguish was exhausted before his reappearance in the dock. And, besides, it finally prepared him for the worst; for if his very advocate found him guilty in his heart, and for all his beautiful words, what other verdict could he look for from the jury?

Nevertheless, they deliberated until 6.50. Then a sudden hush upstairs emphasised the returning tramp of four-and-twenty feet. And, in a hushed and twilit court,

Tom heard the fate which was now no surprise to him, and bore it accordingly as such verdicts are seldom borne. His fine eyes and fresh young face were radiant and serene with the divine light of innocence and valour; consequently the judge felt called upon publicly to lament "a demeanour both callous and defiant"; and so sincere was the lamentation that his voice broke, his lips trembled, and the concluding remarks of his lordship were perfectly unintelligible from emotion. But here ended the judge's duty in those days, and the court adjourned for yet another night.

In the morning Thomas Erichsen was brought up for the last time, and condemned to death in thoroughly cold blood by the Recorder of the City of London.

Meanwhile one noteworthy circumstance had occurred. Mr. Harding and his companion, Daintree, had been among the first to leave the court. They thus escaped a scene of some confusion in one of the public galleries, the occupants of which were called to order and made to go out row by row. But so great was the crowd already in the street that to get out at all was a difficulty; to reach one's coach another and a worse. Mr. Harding eventually found his waiting on Ludgate Hill, and directed the coachman to go by Chancery Lane before getting in after Daintree. Just then a man emerged from the seething crowd in the Old Bailey, and waited an instant at the corner; then the carriage drove down Fleet Street with the man after it at a discreet distance.

Harding and Daintree scarcely spoke a word; they were followed up Chancery Lane and across Holborn by the man, a dilapidated creature with a dreadfully disfigured face.

It was now nearly eight o'clock, and in the dusk the man grew bold. The old-fashioned coach had a foot-board, seldom used, and the runner coolly sat himself upon it in the region of Russell Square. And he actually kept his seat until, on the outskirts of Regent's Park, a street Arab shrilly informed the coachman; whereupon the man jumped off, and rushed at the boy with lean arms whirling like windmills, and ragged tails flying in the breeze.

The boy shinned up a lamp-post, and the man stood cursing him from below, with one eye upon the receding coach.

"If I'd the time to waste upon you, I'd break you in two, you blessed little nose!" cried the man, meaning an informer.

"Don't you talk about noses," retorted the boy, meaning the literal organ. "You wait till you've got one yourself, you blessed old nightmare!"

At this taunt the man's mutilated face flared diabolically in the dusk, and with a sudden leap he caught the boy by an ankle and brought him headlong to the pavement; then knelt over him, and dashed his head repeatedly upon the flags, with the insensate fury of a criminal lunatic. When the boy lay still, he sprang to his feet, gnashing his teeth, and looking in vain for the coach. He was instantly seized by a gentleman who had seen this dastardly assault from the balcony of his house.

The gentleman was accompanied by his son, and between them they secured the monster, while servants flew in different directions for the police and a doctor.

The boy had a broken head and broken bones; but he escaped with his life, thus saving that of the man,

who was duly committed, and became an ornament of Chapel Yard while Tom Erichsen lay under sentence of death in another part of Newgate.

And neither occupant of the coach ever heard or read a word about the matter.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE RECORDER'S REPORT

Tom was thrust into a condemned cell measuring but nine-and-a-half by six feet, and in height a foot less than its length. Yet even this hole he was to share with a comrade in like calamity. And in a dribble of summer twilight, as the massive door clanged behind him, he found himself shut up with none other than his tigerish young antagonist of the ward in Chapel Yard.

The recognition was mutual, and Tom held out his hand.

"I refused yours once before," said he. "Come, I apologise. We can afford to forgive each other now."

His hand was taken with an evil grace; in a little, however, the other loosened a not unfriendly tongue, but one so blasphemous and so foul that Tom half regretted his advance. He could not regret it altogether. The vilest conversation was better just then than none at all; that of Tom's whilom enemy was vile enough, with its horrid levity, its coarse swagger and a forced but bloodcurdling contempt of death. Still it was something to listen to; something new to think about and shudder over; and the creature (having been alone at nights

since his conviction on the opening day of the sessions) hardly paused till the small hours of the morning.

His name was Creasey. He had been convicted of stabbing his wife (he was twenty years of age), but had never done it; 'twas a pack of lies. But he boasted to Tom of many a thing he *had* done in his short life; and they were such things as Tom never forgot in his. He lay listening and shuddering upon his bed. Yet when the other seemed to have talked himself out, his own torments only began, and he was grateful when the brute broke out afresh. So the night wore on until one or two in the morning. Then there was a long, unbroken silence; then a sobbing and a shaking, and a burst of frantic prayer from Creasey's bed; then quiet, then snoring, and the bell of St. Sepulchre's marking the weary mile-stones of the night.

Tom never slept a wink.

Next morning, in the bottom day-room, which the condemned prisoners had the use of during the day, he rubbed shoulders with a third convict under recent sentence of death; but this was a heavy, sullen, middle-aged man of the name of Carter, who sat all day with his huge head between his cruel hands, and spoke to nobody; nor did either youth venture to speak to him.

Overhead there was another day-room, and eleven more prisoners under sentence nominally capital; but these were morally certain of reprieve; and could be heard playing leap-frog and larking and singing from morning till night.

"I wish we were up there," said Creasey, mournfully. "But wait a bit: the yard's for us the same as for them, when it's exercise time, and then there'll be a bit o' fun for us all!"

The bit of fun essayed by Creasey was openly to incite the eleven jovial spirits from upstairs to badger Tom and put him in a rage. But by this time Erichsen's reputation in Newgate was such that the plot fell through for want of supporters. Tom shrugged his shoulders at the petty treachery, and was treated by Creasey with a sly servility when they were locked up together once more. Meanwhile the burden of the day had been lightened by several visitors and as many private interviews.

Mr. Macmurdo, the surgeon, and Mr. Cotton, the Ordinary of Newgate, had both shown Tom the kindest attentions; he could see, however, that each regarded him as a man only too justly sentenced to death. The surgeon offered to use his influence in the matter of a separate cell at nights. Tom would not hear of it.

"No, no," said he; "it would be a poor kindness, though I thank you with all my heart for the thought. The greatest ruffian in the gaol would be a better friend to me than my own reflections. Ah! I see what you think!" cried Tom, as a queer light glimmered in the surgeon's eyes. "Well, I have done protesting my innocence; but don't let them leave me by myself, that's all I ask."

Mr. Cotton entered into spiritual matters, to which Tom listened courteously, though chiefly out of loving respect for his dear father's memory: for where was the God who would permit an innocent man to suffer death for another's crime? When, however, the good chaplain closed his books, he referred discreetly, as he rose, to certain efforts already being made to obtain a reprieve, adding that he would himself do what he could to further them, as a matter of course

"Why should you, sir," asked Tom, deferentially, "when you are quite convinced of my guilt?"

The chaplain coloured.

"I never said I was convinced," he cried. "It is no part of my duty to be convinced in such matters either way. No, my poor fellow, your guilt or your innocence is a matter between your own heart and God Almighty. I, His servant, am only concerned with your immortal soul, and the longer you live the more time will be yours for repentance — of *all* your sins — and the greater your chances of immortal life. But build upon nothing of the kind." And with a parting exhortation the Ordinary went his way.

Bassett was the last visitor. He was in a tremendous hurry. The petition was already receiving support and signatures on every hand; the newspapers were full of it. And he who had furnished the sinews of defence was now working heart and soul for the respite, for which there was still every reason to hope; so said Bassett in a breath, and was gone next minute.

It was the last piece of news that heartened Tom most: the news that the Noble Unknown believed in him still, against judge and jury, and was still heroically striving to save his miserable life. Who could he be? Some friend of Claire's? The thought came for the first time; it never came again. Claire was with the judge, the jury, and the world: she had not written him one word.

Tom was now in prison dress, a gaunt, dread figure; but they had let him keep a slip of paper that he had often taken out of a pocket in his own clothes, to pore over and to dream upon. He produced it now. It was the slip of paper Daintree had handed down to him during the proceedings at Marylebone, and he had never

seen the writer's face. But he had made a face unto himself; had built up a character from those few scribbled words; and both face and character were the sweetest, the kindest and the best that had existed upon earth during the last eighteen hundred years.

So, when his last visitor had departed, the condemned man was not ashamed to kiss that flurried scrawl with his lips, nor afterwards to find it smudged with his tears.

Those were the days when the capital convict was first found guilty, next brought up for sentence, and next "reported to the King." The two latter functions rested with the Recorder of London; the last having its origin in the number of offences for which a man might be condemned to death without the least risk of being executed. The Recorder would wait upon his Majesty in Council, and make his report of the prisoners lying in Newgate under sentence of death; whereupon the King would be graciously pleased to respite (say) all but the wilful murderers. The amended report was straightway despatched to the prison, and his final fate broken to each man without a moment's unnecessary delay.

It was the 18th of May and a Thursday night near the stroke of twelve. All was silent in the condemned cells, for even Creasey's voluble tongue had ceased to wag, and Tom lay thinking on his bed. His companion was a trashy hound, ever cursing God or entreating Him with shrieks and tears: unburdening his sordid soul to Tom half the night, venting covert spite and enmity upon him day after day. To-night he had been alternately protesting his innocence, abusing his dead wife, and mocking heaven and hell by the hour together.

Tom lay awaiting the reaction which would follow as surely as the morning, and to-night it was before its time. The silence had been dead indeed, but not long so, when the creature leapt from his pallet with a scream. Next instant he was kneeling by its neighbour, fawning over Tom with trembling arms and twitching fingers.

"I done it! I done it!" he whispered hoarsely. "There — I *had* to tell somebody, and I have! I'd got to tell or burst. I feel better now. . . . No, no!" he was yelling next moment. "What have I said? I was joking, you flat — joking, I tell yer! Ha, ha, ha! It's you that done yours; I never done mine at all!"

And he was strutting up and down the cell, trembling from head to foot, and laughing horribly through his chattering teeth.

But a worse sound yet cut his laughter short: it was the sound of voices and the rattling of keys.

Creasey inclined his bullet head one moment, then stumbled to the door, and fell heavily upon his knees.

"The Report!" he quavered. "Ericksen — the Report! It's come — it's come!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE ROYAL MERCY

THE condemned youths heard the next cell entered, and their comrade Carter roused from his bed. A key then grated in their own door, it was flung open, and there were Mr. Cope, the Governor, and a bevy of turn-keys in the passage.

"Out with it!" gasped Creasey, on his knees. "I'm respited, ain't I? I never done it, sir. I never did! The King wouldn't hang an innocent man?"

"Get up and dress yourself," was the reply. "You will hear the Report upstairs, all of you together. You, too, Erichsen! Slip on your things."

Tom obeyed, and then lent a hand to Creasey, who hardly knew his small-clothes from his jacket, and clung to Tom as a child to its nurse.

"I'm innocent," he kept mumbling. "They'll be the murderers if they let me swing. Didn't I tell you I was innocent, Erichsen? Haven't I said so all along? Oh, my Gawd, if they let me swing!"

"They won't," whispered Tom; "but if they did, why, we've got to die some time; it's an easy death, and there's an end of it."

"But I don't want to die! — I dursn't die! I don't deserve to die — don't I keep telling yer I never done it?"

And the abject thing clung blubbering to Tom's arm, as the turnkey who was waiting at the door conducted the pair upstairs.

The upper day-room, or Cell Ward, as it was indifferently termed, was but poorly lighted with candles, whose sepulchral rays added a pallor even to the white faces of those dragged from their beds to hear their doom. The number of the latter being now complete, all fourteen were ordered to kneel, and Tom found himself between Creasey and Carter, at one end of the line. Creasey still clung to his arm. Carter knelt like a rock, with his great fingers clutched in front of him, and heavy drops falling on them from his bended brow. This was all Tom saw before the Ordinary entered in his gown and halted before him first.

"Mr. Erichsen," said he, with a compassionate tremor, "the Recorder has this evening made his report to the King. I am very sorry to have to inform you that it is unfavourable."

Tom inclined his head. He had cherished no hopes.

The Ordinary approached Carter.

"I am sorry to tell you it is all against you also," he continued. "As for you, Creasey," and the latter tightened his grip on Tom's arm, "I am happy to inform you that your life is spared; and I am very happy to inform all the others that by the Royal mercy their lives are spared."

Creasey withdrew his hand from Tom's arm, and edged further away on his knees. A deep sigh rose from a dozen breasts; then, as the chaplain was about to offer up a prayer, there came a sudden crash at Tom's side, and the wretched Carter was floundering on the floor in convulsions. The rest were hurried back to their cells, and Creasey executed a breakdown while Tom quietly undressed.

"But that's all right!" cried the former, stopping suddenly. "It's no more'n I expected, 'cause, you see, I'm an innocent man, an' allus was; that's why you never caught me showing the white, Erichsen, though once or twice you thought you did. Jiggered if you wouldn't believe anythink, a mug like you! Why, I used to bilk you every blooming night for fun! Not but what I'm sorry it's all up with *you*, old man; though it's a nice an' comfy death, you told me so yourself, and you know we've all got to die some day! Besides, you done yours — no denying it — but I never done mine at all; so it's fair an' square enough, you must admit!"

The little cur was snoring in ten minutes. He was removed to the Transport side next morning. And

Tom, left in solitude, would have given some days of the twelve remaining to have had him back.

The execution was fixed for the thirtieth. He would never see another June.

Bassett came from day to day with news of the petition; it was being signed, but not as freely as at first. Bassett's disappointment was patent to the condemned man. The smart young fellow was in fact beginning to weary of his up-hill work, and to think about the bill.

So next day Tom asked Bassett whether the Noble Unknown had also abandoned hope and effort.

"Not he," said Bassett in a half-disgusted tone. "He is moving heaven and earth; seeking private interviews with the Home Secretary, if not with the King himself. He's quite capable of it. A wonderful man when he gets an idea into his head!"

"But what put this idea into his head?"

"Heaven knows!"

Tom looked the attorney through and through, and asked another question. "Did you tell him how much I should like to see him before I die—to thank him?"

"I did; but he is too busy working for you; he said that would do you more good."

"I see," said Tom, sadly; "another Culliford! Then why is he doing it? Culliford was paid; he paid him; but why, again? See here, you Bassett; both you and he disbelieve in me—I know it now—but you are tired of your job, and he is not. Why not? I believe you know! Then tell me, and let us part friends once and for all; you need bother your head no more about me, only tell me what you must know."

"I know nothing."

"Then what you suspect."

Bassett considered; had his private conviction (that there was a woman in it) on the tip of his tongue; but ultimately shook his shrewd, cool head. There was nothing to be gained by speaking out; a dying man's gratitude was nothing; and there might be something to be lost. At any rate the safe side was the wise side with that bill not even properly drawn up. So Tom and his solicitor parted coldly for the last time; and Tom tore up that slip of writing which had been handed to him at Marylebone, but relented next moment, and treasured the torn pieces till the end.

And now at last his gallant spirit surrendered itself to the apathy of sheer despair; and the physical collapse which supervened was almost as complete as that of the brave but broken heart. A sudden outbreak of morbid appearances brought the surgeon in hot haste to clean the foul tongue, to regulate the irregular pulse, moisten the parched skin, and in a word, to keep his man well enough to die on the following Tuesday. The good Macmurdo would as lief have given him a draught of deadly poison, but such humanity would have sent himself to the gallows instead. So the surgeon did his best for the poor doomed body; and the chaplain did his best for an immortal soul still filled with bitter rebellion and rage; but this physician was less successful, though not less kind — praying in his chamber for the poor impenitent, but yet doing what in him lay to further such efforts as were still being made for a reprieve. Even on the last Sunday, when the stern divine furnished that incredible barbarism, the condemned sermon, the humane gentleman was upon the other tack, and in almost hourly communication with Daintree himself.

Tom could not guess at that. The last to enter, the

first to leave the crowded chapel, he did so with the sense of his indignity heavier upon him than at either Marylebone or the Old Bailey. The very chapel had been filled with sight-seers — and he the sight! He had recognised the noble earl who had come to spy upon him before the trial, and with him ladies. And to cap all, the Ordinary had mentioned him by name in the sermon, taking the Sixth Commandment for his text, and directly addressing Tom from the pulpit. The outrage was unforgivable. When Mr. Cotton came to his cell soon after, the convict flatly refused ever to listen to him again.

“You have insulted me before men,” he cried. “You need plead for me no more before God!”

“But consider who you are — what you were,” protested the reverend gentleman. “A clergyman’s son, your poor father —”

“Not one word of him!” said Tom. “He would never have spoken as you spoke! There, sir, do not force me to say more; you have been kind to me in your own way; but the greatest kindness now is to leave me in peace until the end.”

Next day he asked for pens and paper, and spent the entire afternoon upon one letter. Turnkeys, who came continually to see how he was bearing his last hours on earth, found him always writing, writing, writing, with the tears streaming down his face, and yet the happiest look that they had seen in it yet. The turnkeys were practical experienced men. They never doubted that what Erichsen was writing was his full confession of the crime for which he was to suffer in the morning. So one brought another to spy upon him in the act of historic composition. And still he wrote; and still he wrote.

He was done before dark, and ate his supper as he had eaten nothing for days. He seemed a happier man — that was only natural to the turnkey mind. And yet the sealed packet set in front of him on the table was not yet addressed, and when the Governor, paying him a visit in the evening, said slyly, "Is this for me?" Tom answered with quite a laugh that it was not. It was for a friend, and the last act of his unpinioned hands should be to add the address.

Later in the evening a packet was brought to Tom. It was addressed "Mr. Thos. Errixon, eskwire, Condemmed sells." Tom was for tearing it up unread, when the turnkey acting postman interposed.

"Don't do that," said he. "It's from the chap who shared this cell with you, and he was very partic'lar that you should get it safe. He says he owes you an apology or summut, and here it is, with his last parting love."

"All right," said Tom; "you may thank him, and wish him luck, and say I've nothing to forgive, but I'll read what he says with pleasure." And he thought he would do so towards midnight, for they had mercifully left him his candle.

To his surprise, however, there was no letter at all, but one huge printed sheet, whence (when it was unfolded and spread out upon the table) his own name in a gigantic headline seemed to leap up and lash Erichsen across the face. The headlines ran —

LIFE, TRIAL AND AWFUL
EXECUTION
OF THOMAS ERICHSEN,
THE HAMPSTEAD MURDERER.

Below, there was a grotesque block, in which a colossal figure, white-capped and ready noosed, surmounted a miniature Felon's Gate, with a Liliputian crowd in the foreground. Left and right of the picture figured a set of verses; the letterpress beneath was prose.

The former began —

VERSES

My deeds to you I now will mention,
 Overcome with grief and shame ;
 Pray one moment give attention —
 Thomas Erichsen is my name.
 Reared and trained by reverend parents,
 Who checked me if I done amiss ;
 Educated in their religion,
 They little thought I'd come to this.

There were eight such stanzas, with a chorus to match, but Tom got no further than the above. He had seen such "broadside" before. So they were ready printed for next morning's use! He cast his eye below and read the headings: "The Murder and the Trial," "The Verdict," "The Judge's Address," "The Execution" —

The Execution! He had not realised the meaning of the word in the first staring headlines. Now he did. So they wrote of the execution before it was accomplished, did they? What if it never were accomplished? Yet here was a circumstantial account ready-made in advance. "Long before daylight this morning crowds assembled in front of the gaol at Newgate, to witness the awful yet just extremities of the law carried out on the poor unfortunate young man —" and so forth. Printing, spelling and facts were on a par. "His behaviour in prison has been that of a gentleman and christian, and when the shirriff arrived at six o'clock

this morning, they found him in earnest prayer, with the rev. chaplain, and as the time drew nearer, he was observed to weep a little —”

“Was he, by God!” cried Tom, through his teeth. He crushed the paper into a ball and tossed it across the cell; then looked well at door and window before putting out his candle and sitting down on his bed to think.

A full May moon shot a vivid beam through the sunken eye of the cell, and it struck the wall in a chequered square that hung like a picture low down over Tom's pallet. He jumped into bed and lay very still as steps approached and a head was thrust in to see how he was passing the time. He had to thank his excellent behaviour ever since his first night in Newgate for so much privacy on this his last. He meant to take advantage of it now, for a cold, hard rage possessed him, with a fixed determination to cheat the gallows yet. As good as executed, was he? So accounts of the execution were in type already before the event? He could falsify these, at least; and, so far from cursing the creature that had put them in his way, Tom was grateful to him for an idea which would never have occurred to him otherwise. Prostration had left him indifferent, if not resigned, and he had Creasey to thank for the heating of every drop of blood and for the stiffening of every nerve and muscle in his body. And yet he was cool; by coolness only could he achieve his end; even so, the way was not obvious. Suicide? That was his first idea. He had the means — his braces — his prison bars. But no! If hang he must, better to step out and die as a man than as a rat in its hole. Escape? It was not possible; if only it were!

He sprang up, thrust his head and shoulders in the

window-socket, and hung there, face to face with the moon. The window was open, for the night was warm. What was it that he heard? The lowing and bleating of frightened animals — at Smithfield, doubtless — being penned for the killing like himself! But that was not all. There was something more insistent, something nearer at hand and unceasing; nay, increasing too. The pulse of a multitude — the murmur of a mob. A street song at dead of night — to while away the hours — his last hours on earth. Street cries! "Life and trial of Thomas Erichsen," as like as not; but they should not add "execution." Not yet at all events. He would do something to die for first!

A tug at the bars — they yielded nothing. Another, with all his might, and his knees drawn up against the sill; not an inch, not the sixteenth part of one! The bars were hopeless. He sprang back into the cell, and stood there with the full moon laughing in his white face and blazing eyes. Very well! He would brain the next turnkey who came near him, and so at least deserve his death, even if he could not slip into the dead man's clothes and thus away. So the hot fit had followed the cool; so madness trod upon the heels of rational thought.

The murmur of the crowd had done it; it had left him a wounded lion, and his maddened eyes were now roving round the cell in search of that with which to shed blood for blood. They lit upon the metal washstand fixed (like the iron candlestick) to the wall. In an instant the washstand was torn out by the roots, and poised over the crooked yellow head, while the loose tin things rang like cymbals on the floor. The clatter was slow to cease. It was followed inevitably by hurried

footsteps in the corridor. So much the better. The time was come.

Tom raised the washstand on high in both hands, and himself on tip-toes to give the greater force to his blow as the door was flung hurriedly open; he was bringing it down upon grey hairs, when he saw their colour, and swerving, swung the apparatus with a crash against the wall.

"Lucky for you it *was* you!" he cried as the chaplain threw up his hands. "Unlucky for me: I'd have killed any other man in the place. Now you see what they've made of me! Better send them to tie me up; it's no good your wasting your breath."

The Ordinary wrung his hands, and gazed in the frenzied face with unspeakable anguish in his own; while louder and louder through the cell window came the clamour of the growing mob.

"Have you so utterly forgotten your God?" began the poor man, with the tears in his eyes. "He has never forgotten you!"

"He has," said Tom, doggedly, "or He wouldn't let me suffer for another man's crime."

"He has not!" shouted the chaplain, flourishing a paper from his pocket. "He has moved the hearts of those in authority over us! On your knees, sir, and give Him thanks; for your life has been spared at the eleventh hour!"

CHAPTER XX

SEALED LIPS

THE good news was broken to Claire by her father in the dead of night; she had thus some hours in which to prepare for what she was resolved should be her last conversation with Daintree on the subject of Tom. And she anticipated not only the last, but the riskiest of so many risky interviews. She felt that ineffable relief might prove harder to conceal than intolerable anxiety; and so no sooner were her worse fears dissipated than new fears took their place.

For days and weeks her one absorbing anxiety had been the preservation of poor Tom's life by hook or crook. Now that at the very last this miracle had been performed, her heart did indeed teem with praise and thanksgiving; but it also sank beneath the burden of a new solicitude, never to let Daintree dream what she had done, never to spoil his ideal of her, but to repay his disinterested generosity by all the unremitting kindness of heart, sympathy of brain, and pith and marrow of faithful friendship in her woman's power. Claire did not now carry the last aspiration to its logical conclusion; but her gratitude to Daintree was such that it rose in great waves which drowned even the thought of Tom; and of the two men, if her heart was still with her first love, her admiration and gratitude were all for his preserver. Such was her feeling when she espied Daintree in the garden next morning early, and joined him on an impulse, without having decided upon a word to say.

"I think you are the best of men," was what she heard

herself saying; "and you have proved it on behalf of one of the worst!"

It was not quite sincere; it was not quite insincere. The unconsidered words themselves were a self-revelation to Claire. She would not have unsaid them; yet to feel them less she would have given her moral and material all.

Daintree, as usual, stood to his guns regarding Erichsen, whose innocence he had lately maintained with unreasonable fervour. Culliford's speech, he declared, had convinced him; it should have convinced the jury too, he vowed, had he been one of them. But he took with greedy eyes all the good things the girl now said to him. And in his account of final matters his conceit and his pomposity bubbled out as heretofore.

"I saw Lord John," said he. "Lord John was obliged to see me. Our name is one he cannot afford to despise; and then he knows my position in New South Wales. I told him (in confidence) how this case had interested me, and how I had spent my money upon it. Lord John was very much impressed. I argued for innocence, and (for argument's sake) for manslaughter too. But cold-blooded murder I said it could not be. And there is not the slightest doubt that my arguments converted Lord John."

"You still think it may have been manslaughter?"

"You know what I think," was the reply. "As sure as I stand here, Miss Harding, we have saved an innocent man!"

Mr. Harding was coming towards them across the spangled grass. Claire held out her hand.

"At any rate," said she, "there is some one of whom I shall always think all the more — oh! a hundredfold the more! — for what has happened. There are two others

whose very names I want you to promise never to mention again: the one who died, and"—in a voice both wistful and bitter—"your innocent man!"

Daintree promised.

And he kept his word.

Meanwhile, a minor result of the reprieve was the speedy departure of Claire's wicked maid. She watched a day or two, and then decided that her hold upon her mistress was gone.

The fact was that, though Claire was resolved to atone to Daintree for her long duplicity, the atonement itself came less easily than she had hoped. His mission accomplished, the man of action was sunk once more in the invertebrate poet; and the latter took such advantage of the kind ear now lent him, that Claire was wearied to distraction, and soon forgot the philanthropist in the bore. The poetry got upon her slackened nerves, and an afternoon of the poet would leave her utterly tired out. This Hannah saw: also that her lady's heart was still in Newgate, whether she knew it or not: therefore that to open Daintree's eyes would be to do her no very bad turn, however she might feel it at the time. In a word, this clever woman read her mistress better than her mistress read herself. She gave notice on the spot.

"And I'll forfeit my month's wages, miss, and go this morning—in case you change your mind about them presents!"

"I am not likely to do that," replied Claire, dispassionately. "You held your tongue when I wanted it held: his life is saved, and that's all I care about in this world."

She went for a ride with Daintree that morning, and he wearied her more than ever. It was a heavenly June day, but luscious fields and a gorgeous sky were nothing to the poetaster; his own rhymes thereon at once usurped and exhausted the subject. A volume of his verse was in the press: every sight, sound or word suggested a quotation. Claire tried hard to think of all that he had done. She found herself thinking of Tom instead; and, in sheer depression, turned early homeward, where an unforeseen temptation awaited her.

A hackney-coach stood at the door; and the entire household was discovered in the hall. Servants in a cluster at the green-baize door; Hannah in her bonnet calmly seated on her box; and Mr. Harding and a policeman in conversation in the foreground. The arrival of Claire and her companion on this animated scene was hailed with evident satisfaction, whereupon silence was enjoined by the master of the house.

"This woman," said he to Claire, pointing to the complacent Hannah — "this woman, your maid, suddenly announces her intention of leaving my house. She declares that you knew she was going; but the first her fellow-servants hear of it is the intrusion of a hackney-coachman to bring her box downstairs. They demand to have her box examined — it would seem with excellent reason! An officer is sent for, and this is what he finds!"

Mr. Harding held up a ring, a brooch, a pair of earrings, and a diamond pendant, the former possessions of Claire.

"She says you gave them to her," he proceeded. "What have you to say to that?"

Claire met the culprit's glittering eyes, and read in

them an inflexible intent; she glanced at Daintree, and her great temptation was to tell everything before them all, and so secure her future from she knew not what, but something worse than she had ever foreseen. Now was the moment—here the chance—there would never be such another. The best course—the bold course—sang in her ears as a whisper from her guardian angel's lips. It was not shrinking from the immediate scene, but rather the dread of righteous wrath to come and be her curse for ever, that decided Claire and made her say, with but a second's pause, "It is perfectly true! I *did* give the things to Hannah, and they are hers."

"You gave your maid your diamond pendant?"

"If you come into the library, papa, I will tell you all about it."

They were but a minute closeted; then the constable was dismissed with something for himself, the hackney-coachman called in again to take the woman's box, and the other servants sent about their business through the green-baize door. Claire watched her spy's departure with as much curiosity as relief. Unwonted colour tinged those pallid cheeks, and some unfathomable meaning softened the jet-black eyes as they gazed into hers for the last time. There was not only gratitude in the look, but (as it seemed to Claire) both the will and the power to show it, given the chance. As it was, she was edging near to speak, when Mr. Harding came between them, and himself hustled the woman out of the house. He then sought out Daintree and took him by the arm.

"This will show you the kind of girl Claire is," said Nicholas Harding. "Of course, she had never given the woman a thing; but rather than have her put in prison—you see? Isn't it incredible?"

"Not in her!" cried Daintree, devoutly.

And he posted to the City that afternoon, returning with a beautiful brooch, which he presented to Claire with humility unalloyed.

"A diamond pendant you would not accept from me; alas, nor yet a ring!" he sighed. "But this trifle I think you will — in memory of this morning."

For though he bored her with his poetry, he was very careful not to inflict upon her a second declaration of his love, until his cunning told him that the favourable time was ripe.

So Claire lost her chance, and sank deeper and deeper yet into the toils.

One salve her conscience demanded and obtained. She knew now what was coming better than he did. And she tried day and night to forget poor Tom, and to love the man she needs must marry in the end.

But the end was not yet; for the man had made up his mind to a long, deliberate siege; and he now set about it with all the tenacity and all the ingenuity which were central traits in his complex nature.

Those were the days of Almack's, and of a hard-and-fast Society whose pale Nicholas Harding had never quite scaled. To give him, so to speak, a leg up, Daintree went once more among old family friends, and was actually intriguing with one of the six terrible ladies who guarded the doors of Almack's, in order to secure tickets for one of those historic assemblies at Willis's Rooms, when the King's death, on June 20th, put an end to all festivities. Daintree ground his teeth at having to abandon what he had deemed a potent engine of assault. Claire had shown pleasure at the prospect; its destruction seemed a real blow to her, but was actually a relief.

Genuine sorrow she felt, but it was all for the dead King who had spared Tom's life while under sentence of death himself.

Daintree took a place in Scotland for the autumn. Mr. Harding had made other plans, but at Daintree's nod he threw them to the winds. Only one thing was more remarkable than the sudden ascendancy which the younger man had now obtained over the elder: this was the latter's changed regard for his would-be son-in-law. Not that Mr. Harding had ceased to desire the marriage. His wishes in that matter were made disagreeably plain to Claire, who was only puzzled to hear him speak of Daintree with an oath in her presence, while appearing all smiles to his face. The girl was at a loss to understand this, and yet too absorbed in her own troubles to give her mind to anything else. Only she could not think when the change had come about; she had first noticed it after the trial. It was less remarkable in Scotland, where Daintree was their host; there were seldom any other guests.

"Hours of Exile" was the Byronic title of his book of verse, which was published during this visit. It was dedicated to Clarinda, which confessedly stood for Claire, and the dedicatory lines were the best in the book. The girl felt committed before the world when she read them. Clarinda's name occurred again and again in the volume. Yet all that year he never spoke. He had done so before somewhat prematurely, to own the least, and the man of extremes must needs make trebly and quadruply sure before his lips reiterated the love which had raged in his eyes every day and every hour of all these months.

But with the New Year came ill tidings from Australia: an investment had turned out badly; his interests

in general were suffering from his absence. The very next day James Daintree led Claire Harding into her father's library, and, even with his face in happy flames, struck an attitude before the writing-table.

"She is mine!" he cried. "She has consented to share the poet's bays — to divide with Esau his inheritance in the wilderness!"

It was notable that no consent was asked of Nicholas Harding. He sat back in his chair with a stifled sigh of unspeakable relief. Claire never forgot how his hand felt as he took both of hers and drew her towards him.

"But you spoke of sailing at once," said he, cloaking eagerness with an air of extreme deprecation. "It would have to be a very hurried affair!"

The first cloud crossed Daintree's face.

"Ah, no!" said he. "I could not take her at a moment's notice to a house unfit for her reception. I must go and prepare it for her; that is a stern necessity. But you must bring her out to me yourself in six months' time."

Mr. Harding shook his head. He was a public man.

"Then Lady Starkie must."

Mr. Harding spoke warmly and unselfishly in favour of an immediate marriage. To no purpose, however; they had indeed made up their minds, though the reason was not that which Daintree had given. Vanity forbade him to disclose the real reason. It was her solitary but firm stipulation; and so much for his brave desire to get first to Sydney on Claire's account.

He was to sail in seven days.

Meanwhile the engagement was announced in the *Morning Post* of January 15th.

On the 16th Mr. Harding found a note from Sir Emilius at his office:—

“SIR,—My ‘Morning Post’ informs me that a marriage has been arranged between your daughter and my son. If you care for the young lady’s happiness you will put a stop to this at once.

“Yours faithfully,

“EMILIUS DAINTREE.

“N.B.—I send this word of warning in duplicate, both to your City and to your private address; as I think it hardly likely that you will receive both copies if my son is still with you.”

Mr. Harding started to his feet. He had *not* received the copy posted to his house. Was the father a liar or the son something worse? The father’s reputation—stay!

It was the son.

He had been down before Mr. Harding that morning; the latter had found him in the dining-room when he entered, and on his own plate were such letters as he had received. Harding seized his hat; then reflected, changed colour and took a pen himself. The note which he subsequently despatched by hand was a model of firmness, tempered by tact. He demanded, however, an immediate explanation of Sir Emilius Daintree’s words, and the messenger was to wait for an answer. The messenger returned without one.

Then Mr. Harding called in person.

Sir Emilius was not at home.

But next morning there was another brief note at the office:—

“DEAR SIR,—I have been thinking the matter over. You have my sympathy; but I cannot enter into details. I absolutely decline

to do so. You know the proverb, and a word should be enough for the wise ; or you may go for your explanation to my son, who will tell you it is all my spite. It is for you, as a man of the world, to believe or to disbelieve him on that point.

"I will say, however, that so far as I know, my son is not insane.

"I would to Heaven he were !

"Yours, etc.,

"EMILIUS DAINTREE."

Mr. Harding was now a miserable man. The very sight of the betrothed pair became an hourly agony. Yet he lacked either the courage or the will to interfere. Only four days remained — he called again on Sir Emilius Daintree. But again the baronet was invisible.

This time Harding left an urgent note ; and yet another perfectly civil one awaited him in the City next morning. It was to be the last, however, and said so plainly in the following terms :—

"MY DEAR SIR,—You must excuse my unwillingness to see you, or to correspond further, upon the little matter of my son and your daughter. You will apprehend that the subject is probably more painful to mé than to you — who have your remedy. I have none. My son need never become your son-in-law ; but unhappily he will always be my son.

"Your last question is, however, a fair one, and I will answer it frankly on condition it is the last. So far as I am aware, then, my son has not already, nor (to my knowledge) has he ever had, a wife. I should say he is quite capable of having half-a-dozen. However, this is not 'it' at all. And I must beg you as a gentleman not to question me any further upon what is in fact a family matter, and one only named to you in confidence for your own guidance.

"Upon this understanding I have the honour to remain, sir, your obedient servant,

"EMILIUS DAINTREE."

What could it be? What had he done? Something terrible in his youth—but what?

Mr. Harding tried to smooth his troubled conscience. The feelings of a parent were tossing and tormenting his spirit as they had never done before. Yet the feelings of a parent were apt to lead one to extremes—to a tender over-anxiety in his own case—to a bitter and relentless requital in that of the elder Daintree. Was the latter the first father who had deemed his son's folly a crime, and never forgiven it? "A handful of wild oats," thought Mr. Harding; it could be nothing worse.

But he did not think so in his heart, for Sir Emilius was notoriously no squeamish moralist himself; and then there were those flowers that had not been allowed to lie a single day on Lady Daintree's grave.

Moreover, Mr. Harding had been granted lately some gleams of independent insight into the character of the younger Daintree; and these to his cost; yet he held his tongue.

He held his tongue to the last, and James Daintree sailed away the betrothed of Claire Harding, who was to follow him to Sydney in six months.

A year earlier Mr. Harding might have been tempted to keep silence for worldly reasons, for the sake of the connection—"my daughter, Lady Daintree"—and so forth. He was not himself a man of noble blood, but he loved the nobility, and had of late very nearly cut himself off from their smile for ever. The temptation, on worldly grounds alone, would have been strong enough the year before. Yet the father's heart would have resisted it: he would have spoken out then, and acted, too, like an honest man. Now he did neither, because his mouth was stopped and his hands were tied by

a stronger thing than social considerations. He was gagged and bound by abject fear.

And this was why Daintree the younger was allowed to sail away betrothed to Claire, towards the latter end of January, 1838.

He arrived in Sydney some four or five months later.

It was a mild, pellucid, winter's day. Sky and harbour wore their ancient tint of magic blue; and as the luxuriant shores unfolded before the incoming vessel, headland and inlet, inlet and headland, each with its sash of golden sand, its cord of silver foam, the homing wanderer swept the water's edge for his own bungalow, and found it with a real thrill. He had chosen well in his adopted land; it was one of milk and honey and perpetual sunshine. But even as they dropped anchor in Sydney Cove, there came through the clear air the clank of men at work in heavy irons near the quay; and the first person to greet Daintree in the streets was a magnate who stopped his carriage and alighted with the peculiar shuffle of one who had himself worn those heavy irons in his day. Daintree shook the gnarled, bedizened hand with an inward shiver; he had forgotten that his Canaan was an Egypt—a Land of Promise and of Bondage too.

He was on his way to the club; he went instead to the council-chamber in Macquarie Street, and obtained an interview with the Principal Superintendent of Convicts.

"There was a man called Erichsen sent out last year," said Daintree. "Transported for life; have you ever come across his name?" And he was spelling it when the other gave a whistle.

"So you're interested in *him*, are you?" cried the

Superintendent. "My dear sir, that's one of the prettiest young villains in the Colony. If we all had our rights he'd have swung long ago."

"I believe him to be an innocent man," said Daintree, warmly. "I am positive he never committed the crime he was transported for."

"I know nothing about that," replied the Superintendent. "He's made up for it out here, if that's so. But you shall see his record for yourself."

And in perhaps the ghastliest ledger ever kept, wherein every entry was a human tragedy, and that of Erichsen but one among thousands, his single champion now read the curt official version of the following facts.

PART II

THE LAND OF BONDAGE

CHAPTER XXI

AN ASSIGNED SERVANT

THE capital sentence on the convict Erichsen having been commuted to one of transportation for life, he was transported to New South Wales, where he arrived, in the official phrase, per *Seahorse*, in the early morning of Tuesday, 5th December, 1837.

Some nineteen weeks before, still earlier in the morning, his draft had been chained together in gangs of six, and marched from Millbank across the road and down the stone steps to the tug, which conveyed them to the convict-ship then lying at the Nore.

The voyage was not the worst of Tom's experiences. The first few days they were all in chains, and his leg became excoriated through dragging the cruel harness in and out of his hammock. But presently the chains were struck off, and Tom did not earn a second dose of them. He distinguished himself in no way on board; in the usual attempt to seize the ship he bore no part, nor was it Tom who betrayed the ringleaders and saved so many lives. Yet he was fortunate enough to win the fancy of the Surgeon Superintendent, who employed him pri-

vately during a great part of the passage. This officer was in absolute command of the convicts, and to Tom he was very kind indeed. So much so that at the very end of the voyage Tom asked the other to take his word between themselves that he was innocent. He never asked this of any man again. And the lovely harbour with the vernal shores said no more to his stinging soul than to that of the most hardened felon in the ship.

The exiles were landed and marched to Hyde Park Barracks, two hundred strong. It was quite early in the forenoon, yet the heat of the ground struck through their shoes, and the hot land-smell scorched their nostrils, as the ungainly detachment proceeded along the streets, all roving eyes and lurching sea-legs. Suddenly the air filled with a jingle as of inharmonious bells; and round a corner came a team of twenty men in grey and yellow patchwork, yoked to a waggon filled with stone and gravel; they had their chains to drag as well, and these made the mournful music wherever they went. One of the soldiers in charge of the newly landed draft chanced to catch Tom's eye flashing misery and defiance. "Don't you trouble your head about *them*," cried he; "it'll be your own fault, young fellow, if ever you come to that; there's none on you need."

Tom said nothing, but a convict near him called out, "I believe you, general! We've come out here to enjoy ourselves, and that's what we mean to do."

"And will, too!" said the soldier. "There's plenty of us chaps would change shoes with you if we could," he added below his breath; "assigned servants is more in demand than ever, and a good 'un gets wages just the same as a free man. You'll all be snapped up before you've been in barracks a day. No, this ain't them;

this is the 'orspital; them's the barracks, round the corner to the left."

A high wall enclosed the sombre pile, which looked the more sinister against that sky of unfathomable blue. Immoderate sunshine and the tantalising proximity of the Governor's pleasure-grounds put a point to the ominous contrast; and there were misgivings among those bold spirits that had looked forward to New South Wales as a land of exclusive cakes and ale.

"If they're going to shut us up in there," said one to another, "we might as well have stayed where we was in blessed old Noogit!"

"I tell you they won't keep you above a day," resumed the soldier. "And you'll never see the place again unless you plays the fool and gets turned into Gov'ment. Them as does that comes back, of course, and has a bad time of it too. Hear that! Hear that!"

Over the wall, as the newcomers marched down one side of it, there came from the other a series of shrill screams; and ere they reached the gate, it was flung open, and out marched four men, carrying a fifth—screaming still—shoulder-high between them. The white face was turned to the sky, the naked trunk writhing in agony; and the blood was running out of the man's boots as though he had been wading ankle-deep in it, while his leg-irons hung clanking from his legs.

"Aha!" said the soldier. "That's a Tom-fool who's got turned into Gov'ment, you see! They're carrying 'im across to the 'orspital, 'cause the cat's been scratching of 'im."

"The cat?" cried Tom, who was trembling all over.

"Ay, my lad; the one with nine tails; 'tis the commonest breed out here!"

Tom never knew how his legs carried him through the barrack gates, and when the draft were drawn up within, and formally addressed there by the Deputy-Governor, he caught but little of the harangue. He felt deadly sick; his heart ached like a tooth; and for hours to come those piercing screams pursued his tingling ears. However, he supposed the punishment must have been timed expressly as a salutary warning for the newcomers; devoutly he hoped so; but he soon knew better. Next morning there were two floggings, and one again the morning after. It was, in fact, a daily detail at the Hyde Park Barracks, which were, on the other hand, the headquarters of several hundreds of the most desperate felons in New South Wales. Tom and his draft were only to remain there until assigned into private service, but the rest had all been "turned into Government" as unmanageable by their masters, and were in barracks for re-punishment. Their days were spent in road-gangs or in other organised labour about the town; and not a few of their nights in depredations winked at by the barrack officers.

For the corruption of the place was as flagrant as the discipline was harsh. The very first night, when Tom was driven from his hammock by the fetid heat of the overcrowded dormitory, he witnessed an instructive incident from the window. It was the return of such a depredator, and the division of his spoil with the officer on duty. Tom soon learnt that burglaries and highway robberies were nightly occurrences in Sydney, and as often the work of convicts under nominal lock and key as that of the assigned servants who infested the streets after dark.

Meanwhile he was himself assigned to a resident in

urgent quest of a "special," or "gentleman convict," as such as Tom were termed. The applicant was a genial greybeard, with a philosophic eye, which looked Tom well up and down at their interview.

"What I want," said he, "is a tutor for my son. I hear you are a University man. May I ask what makes you stare?"

"I a tutor!"

"Well?"

"You can't know what I was transported for."

"Oh, yes, I do. I could wish it had been for something else, certainly; but that doesn't make you any the less a University man. And the other specials seem to be a poor lot, and I mean to give you a trial. But we'll drop that name of yours, which I'm afraid may be known in my house, and you shall start fair. In half an hour then, Jones, I shall call for you in my chaise."

And Tom actually found himself quite a privileged member of a decent household before he had time to realise his good fortune. The other servants were ordered to treat him with respect. His pupil was put entirely in his charge. He had his meals with the family, and had revelled for one night in a deliciously clean bed and bedroom, when the master of the house came to him in the morning with a very wry face.

"It's all up, Jones," said that philosopher, with the blunt intimacy which had made Tom like him from the first. "My good wife has discovered who you are, and she refuses to leave her bed while you remain in the house. She has read of you in the English papers, confound them, and she simply won't have you on the premises! It seems unreasonable when you consider that our cook was a bloodthirsty baby-farmer, our coachman

a professional burglar, and so on right through the staff — habitual criminals every one — which I don't think you are. Still there's another side to it: there's the boy to be considered, and though I think you're the very man for him, a mother's feelings must be studied in such matters. You see I like you well enough to be perfectly frank about the matter; but the fact is, the chaise is waiting for us outside."

So ended that chapter, and Tom was back at barracks in time to hear the clank of the chain-gangs shuffling painfully out to work, and the swish and whistle of the morning lash. Those two instruments supplied the street-music of the convict city; there were few days and few hours when you might not hear their melancholy duet. To Tom the sound of it was still physical torture, the more unbearable after this cruel taste of better things. Nearly all his shipmates had been assigned and taken away in his absence. Only one other "special" was left, a London clerk transported for fraud. Tom's late master (a friend of the Superintendent) was allowed to carry him off in Tom's stead, and long afterwards the latter heard the curious sequel of his own misfortune: so thoroughly did his successor teach what he knew that both tutor and pupil were presently transported to Van Diemen's Land for life.

The incident was sufficiently disheartening at the time, and yet it had its hopeful side. It revealed the possibilities of the assignment system, or rather its better possibilities, from the convict's point of view. As a punishment it must needs prove a farce in a community which preferred to estimate convicts by their capacity as colonists, rather than by their crimes as felons. Such was Tom's comforting reflection; for not

yet did he realise how entirely the condition of the convict was dependent upon the character of the master; but having had one good master, though for so brief a period, he looked cheerfully for another.

The other, however, was slow to come. His false start seemed to tell against Tom with the authorities. They were in no hurry to assign him again, and presently he found himself the last man of his draft in the barracks, with his hammock the only one a-swing between the stanchions of the great dormitory upstairs. Then one morning he heard a row in the yard, and there was a very over-dressed, thick-set and thick-spoken young man abusing the officers because there were no convicts left.

"I tell you we applied for three, and I've come down expressly for them," he spluttered out. "Over a hundred blessed miles I've come, from Castle Sullivan near the Hunter River, for two farm labourers and a groom, all properly applied for in lots of time. And just because I get a touch of the sun, and can't come on the right day, I'm to go back empty-handed, am I? We'll see about that. I'll complain to the Board!"

"That won't do no good. We've only one man left, and the Board can't split 'im into three."

"Oh, you have one, have you? Haul him out and let's have a look at the lubber."

So Tom was produced to receive the unsteady scrutiny of a swimming blue eye that told a tale; and was informed with an oath that he was a "special," and they wanted none of that kidney at Castle Sullivan.

Great was Tom's relief, for a coarser face he had seldom seen; but at this the officials remarked that it

was a "special" or nothing; and the bleared eyes were on him once more.

"Come from the country?"

"Yes."

"Saddle a horse?"

"Yes."

"And ride him after?"

"Better try me."

"Well, so I will! You be ready in an hour and a horse'll be ready for you. I'll go back with a groom if with nothing else!"

"Wait!" said Tom.

"What's up now?"

"I'm supposed to have committed a murder," said Tom through his teeth. "In one family they wouldn't keep me —"

The other drowned his words with a bellowing laugh.

"You wont be the only one at Castle Sullivan!" cried he. "We don't mind what you've done, bless you, so long as you don't try it on again up there! If you do—" and he jerked a great close-cropped head in the direction of the barrack triangles, while a bloated lower lip stuck out like a tongue between his short fair beard and moustache. "There never yet was the lag that bested Nat Sullivan," he added with another of his oaths; "and you don't look the fool to try it on. So be ready in an hour sharp, or you look out!"

"Is he Nat Sullivan?" said Tom to the officers as the stout young man staggered off.

"Ay, ay," said they; "that's the celebrated Mr. Nat!"

"Celebrated?"

"They're all that, you'll find, are the Sullivans of Castle Sullivan. You wait and see. I sha'n't say

nothing to set you agen 'em. But I wish you joy of each other; don't you, Bill?"

Bill laughed, and Tom troubled them with no more questions.

Mr. Nat did not come in an hour; he came in three, swaying in his saddle, but still managing to lead a pack-horse and a horse for Tom. His blue eyes were now half-closed, and Tom understood him to curse the sun and to mutter something about a fresh touch that morning. They rode off, however, and were near the outskirts of Sydney when Mr. Nat rolled quietly out of his saddle and lay insensible in the middle of Brickfield Hill.

Tom was at his side in an instant. No bones were broken; he was simply fast asleep. Tom shook him up, and managed to get him to the nearest inn, where he again fell asleep, anathematising the sun, and so never stirred for hours.

And the convict-servant stood over the grunting carcass of his free master, and now he marvelled at the system which sought to accomplish the amelioration of the felon by trusting him in such hands as these. The thing had not even the excuse of an irregularity. There was a brand-new Government document sticking out of a pocket of the loud check coat, within a few inches of the bloated face, and Tom guessed rightly that it referred to himself. Then there had been more preliminaries than he had thought; but that only made matters worse, since what was a scandal in itself was immeasurably more scandalous as part and parcel of a System.

Evening came, and Mr. Nat still lay snoring with his swollen lips wide apart. Tom had not left him yet, being partly occupied with his own thoughts and partly taken up with the various sounds of the inn. Some of

these sounds were sinister, as when stealthy steps came along the passage, and an unseen hand tried the bedroom door, which Tom had locked. He did not care to leave the room, not knowing what the other might have in his pockets; but at last he did so, after turning the key behind him and putting it in his pocket.

He went first to the stables, where he was surprised to find the horses saddled and bridled in their stalls. He had unsaddled them himself after engaging the room for Mr. Nat. There was nobody about, however, to afford an explanation, and it occurred to Tom that the sooner they did get away the better. So he left the horses as they were, but looked into the tap-room on his way upstairs, when all he heard and saw confirmed his impression not only of that particular inn but of the widespread corruption of the convict town. A cattle-stealer was drinking with a constable, and openly boasting before the latter of his exploits; as Tom listened, however, he heard something else that interested him more. It was the sound of hoofs in the yard behind the inn. He darted out and met a man riding his master's horse and coolly leading the other two.

"What are you doing with those horses?"

"What's that to you? Hands off, or I'll brain ye!"

"They're my master's. Come out of that saddle. Ah! you would, would you?"

And Tom, receiving the loaded whip on his forearm, sprang at the rider's neck and brought him heavily to earth among a dozen hoofs. Then he caught and tethered all three animals, and returned to his man as the latter was sitting up and rubbing his eyes in the moonlight. He was a little horsy bowlegs, and Tom dragged him all

the way into the tap-room in the sitting posture, only relinquishing him at the constable's feet.

"Here's something for you!" he cried. "Caught him in the act of riding off with my master's horses!"

"Why, it's my ostler!" roared the landlord.

"I was only fetching of 'em round to the door, 'cos I thought they was goin'!" whined bowlegs.

"It's you that'll get run in, I'm thinking," remarked the constable severely to Tom.

"Fetching them round!" cried the latter. "Then why didn't you say so, and what made you strike at me when I said they were my master's horses? Oh, I see the kind of place I'm in!" And he rushed upstairs to the room, and nearly trod on something crouching at the door, that fled with a flutter, while a little instrument fell from the key-hole and rang upon the floor. Tom picked it up, unlocked the door, and strode in.

Mr. Nat took some waking, but started up at length with clenched fists and an oath.

"We're in a den of thieves!" whispered Tom. "Don't you remember me? Your new groom! We must get out of this as quick as we can!"

"Why, where are we?"

"At an inn: the 'Bull and Tumbledown.'"

Mr. Nat whistled, and flung his legs over the side of the bed.

"One of the worst houses in Sydney," said he. "Ring the bell, if there is one."

There was one, and a woman-servant answered its summons.

"Send up the landlord," said Sullivan, "and tell him to bring plenty of change. Now, landlord," he continued when that worthy appeared with a lighted candle,

“give me change out of that, and don't you force me to give you any out of this!”

He presented a sovereign in his left hand, a pistol in his right; but it was the great besotted face at which Tom stood gazing. Besotted it still was, and brutal and low, but one virtue shone out of it in the candle-light. There was plenty of cool courage in the bloodshot blue eyes, and an indomitable determination about the pendulous lower lip.

“Sir!” whispered the landlord, falling back. “There's a constable in the house. I shall fetch him up. Such an outrage upon a law-abiding citizen —”

“Law-abiding grandmother!” cried Mr. Nat. “I know all about you and your inn; who doesn't? I never would have set foot inside such a den if it hadn't been your infernal Sydney sun that bowled me over. You may know my name. I'm Nat Sullivan, of Castle Sullivan, near the Hunter River, and I never was bested by a convict yet, no, nor an emancipist either, my fine fellow! There, keep the rest; but you lead the way straight downstairs and out to my horses, or you may have something else to keep besides.”

In another minute they were in their saddles, and as they rode away Tom put a skeleton key in his master's hand, saying he had picked it up outside the bedroom door.

“And you give it to me!” cried Mr. Nat. “You don't keep it to use yourself? Well, well, you've not made a bad beginning, Erichsen. You looked after me when I was bowled over, and you saved my horses when most of you chaps would have been the first to take 'em. That landlord's an old lag himself. I know how to treat the breed. I never was bested by one of you yet,

so put that in your pipe and smoke it. But you're a wonder, you are! Seen the inside of a Sydney pub and come out sober! Well, there's one like that to every hundred inhabitants, to say nothing of the sly grog-shops. It's a warm place, Sydney, I can tell you. But the Sydney sun, that's hotter still!"

It was under a brilliant moon, however, that Tom had his last glimpse of the town for several months to come. Nor did he ever see its sad sights again with the same startled eyes, nor hear its sad sounds with the same thrill of horror. It was a different nature—it was another man—that came back to Sydney after many weeks.

The exodus in the meanwhile proved a pleasanter experience than had at first appeared possible. The small adventure at the "Bull and Tumbledown" had established some degree of mutual regard between Mr. Nat and his new groom. Their ride up-country spread over the better part of a week, during which time the master suffered more than once as he had been suffering when the man first met him. But in the intervals he treated Tom with a certain stupid good humour, which, however, never for a moment concealed the capacity for an equally stupid cruelty, and the nearest approach to a quarrel on the way was occasioned by the brutal beating of the pack-horse, in which Tom interfered. They were good friends, however, on the whole, and once or twice Mr. Nat made quite an interesting guide. In Parramatta he pointed out a large building, like a poor-house, and offered to wait outside while Tom went in to choose a wife.

"A wife!" said Tom with a shudder. "What is the place?"

"They call it a factory. It is for the women what Hyde Park Barracks are to you fellows. They go there till they're assigned, and afterwards when they're turned into Government. Cut in and take your choice! I'm not joking. I've chosen 'em for our men before to-day, and you're the sort that deserves one. Get a lightweight, and we'll take her up on the pack-horse!"

Tom shook his head, and thought of Claire until they stopped at an inn where a new surprise awaited him. The resplendent landlord started when he saw Tom, and tilted a white top-hat over his eyes, but not before the latter had recognised a fellow-convict per *Seahorse*. They had parted in the barrack-yard, where Tom had seen the other carried off by a gorgeous female in a nankeen pelisse and bright green veil, to whom he had been assigned. Tom now caught a glimpse of the nankeen pelisse in the bar-parlour, and as they rode away he asked Mr. Nat whether convicts were ever assigned to their wives.

"They have been, often enough," was the reply; "but it's being put a stop to now. Why, some of the best shops in Sydney are carried on by convicts assigned to their wives, and on capital which was originally the proceeds of the robbery the husband was lagged for! The wife brings it out and is here to meet him when he lands! At least that used to be the dodge; but Bourke tried hard to put his foot on it, and if you hear of a case just let me know."

So Tom said no more.

But the most interesting roadside character was encountered at a contractor's store much farther on the way, where Mr. Sullivan nudged Tom and made him take note of a portly man in a magnificent waistcoat,

who sang a song in the most charming baritone while the travellers were having their supper.

"Do you know who that was?" said Tom's master when they were once more on their way. "That was Hunt, the accomplice of Thurtell, who murdered a man called Weare. You remember it, do you? Well, that's the man, and he just bears out what I say: we don't care a kick what a convict has done in the old country so long as he don't go doing it again out here. But there, I keep forgetting you're one yourself; somehow or other you're not like the rest; and you take my advice, and go on like you've begun." As he paused, the voice of Hunt was wafted to their ears in a new song, that died very sweetly on the soft night air.

The latter stages of the journey were marked by looks of recognition wherever young Sullivan baited his horses, but by never a single look of welcome; and an ominous climax was reached when the little cavalcade passed a stockade and a chain-gang within twenty miles of their destination.

Here was a long line of heavily ironed men, some eighty in all, strung together like beads on a rosary, and at work with pick and shovel beneath the burning sun and the eyes and muskets of the military. As the riders approached word seemed to go along the line, and face after face was raised with a curse and a howl as the horses passed. Such faces as they were! Tom had not seen the like in Newgate, nor aboard the *Seahorse*, nor yet, in such a number, in Sydney itself. Those, on the whole, were only on the lower slopes of degradation; but these had reached its lowest depths, and Tom rode by them with an aching heart and averted eyes.

His attention, indeed, became concentrated upon his

companion, who had checked his horse instead of urging it forward, and was walking instead of galloping this horrible gauntlet. Tom could see but one sunburnt cheek and one cold blue eye; but the first kept its colour, the second never flinched, and the gross lip, that jutted out between beard and moustache, never quivered once all the way. Nor until he was well past the gang did Mr. Nat put spurs to his horse; but when he did, it was not to draw rein until they reached the next roadside inn; and there he vanished, to reappear next day with running eyes and shaking hands.

"I wouldn't be assigned to him for something!" said the barman, with whom Tom made friends. "You might as well go to Norfolk Island straight as to Castle Sullivan. Tell you what, mate, I'd give him the go-by to-night, for you'll never have a better chance. And see here, I'll come with you, for I'm dead-sick of my job!"

Tom shook his head.

"No, no, my friend; he may be all you say, but he's treated me well enough so far, and I mean to stick to him."

"Oh, the young cove's not the worst. It's the old cove I was thinking of."

"What old cove?"

"Dr. Sullivan, this one's father."

He had a father, then? Mr. Nat had never mentioned him. And the old man was worse to do with than the son?

Tom put these questions to himself, and then another to his friend the barman, after shortly telling the latter about the behaviour of the iron-gang. "Why was all that?" said Tom.

"Why? Because half them crawlers have worked for

the Sullivans in their time. They get you flogged, and flogged, and flogged, till all the work's flogged out of you: then they get you six months in the crawlers, and like as not that's the end of you."

"Why doesn't somebody put a bullet through them both?"

"Because the coves have got the pluck. That's their secret. They don't know what fear is. So there's seventy strong men up there, and over a hundred in harvest-time, and the whole boiling afraid of them two!"

Tom said no more, neither did he have much to say to Mr. Nat next day in their saddles; neither did Mr. Nat have anything at all to say to him before nightfall, so severe had been his latest "touch of the sun." But towards evening they left the road; and as the moon was rising in a velvet sky, lights also broke upon them through some trees. Dogs innumerable began to bark. And as young Sullivan stooped to open a gate, he pointed across it to the lights, and said that there was Castle Sullivan at last.

"And hark you here," he added, savagely, seizing Tom's bridle on the other side, as though every redeeming trait was now left behind upon the neutral ground that they had traversed together; "hark you to this, and recollect it well! You've been right enough on the way, and you've the makings of a decent groom. But you won't find me as easy up here as I could afford to be down the road; and one word about that sun-stroke —"

He glared at Erichsen, then let the bridle go without finishing his threat; and without another syllable they rode through the trees towards the lights.

CHAPTER XXI

CASTLE SULLIVAN

THE new groom rubbed his eyes in the moonlight. He could have laughed aloud. English castles he had seen, Irish castles he had heard about, but what was this? A jumble of slab-huts upon the right, and facing these a wooden, one-storied, rectilinear eyesore: three sides house, the fourth a formidable palisade, and in their midst an arid courtyard overlooked by French windows and glass doors. No creeper clung to the whitened walls. No shrub softened the rigid angles of the yard, and the verandah was too shallow for real shade. Yet the site had been chosen on a ridge of red gums that had been left unfelled beyond the palisade, and rustled restfully above the slab-huts opposite, rendering the latter the more inviting quarter of the two.

The riders dismounted at a gate in the palisade, and as young Sullivan led the way into the courtyard, a tall bent figure, in a frogged coat and a plaited straw hat, stepped down from the verandah, and then stood still.

"What's this?" cried an arrogant and aged voice. "Only one, eh? What have you done with the other two?"

"Couldn't get them, sir," responded Mr. Nat in a tone quite new to Tom. It was a very model of filial respect and dutiful subservience.

"'Couldn't get them, sir!' Why, what d'ye mean?" the old man thundered. "We applied for two labourers and a groom. Why couldn't you get them?"

"The fact is, I *did*," stammered Nat; "only two out

of the three were hopeless cases, in the last stages of — of —”

“Phthisis?” cried Dr. Sullivan, who was an old army surgeon, and the bugbear of sick convict and malingerers alike. “Not phthisis, eh?”

“That was it, sir! The very word the doctor used when I made him overhaul them. He said it was no use my taking them, as they’d certainly die on our hands.”

“Humph! he may have been right; but I’d trust a convict to sham death itself — with anybody but me!” said the old gentleman, looking hard at Tom. “I wish I’d seen them myself; however, I’ll take his word and yours, and complain to the Assignment Board —”

“I’ve done all that, sir,” hurriedly interrupted the son. “I stayed the week out doing nothing but complain. They’ll remember me, I promise you! It’ll never happen again to us. Then at the end of the week I couldn’t resist another Sunday, and you wouldn’t grudge it me, father, if you’d heard the sermons I heard in St. Philip’s Church, morning and evening! I must tell you about it later on.”

“You must — you must. No; I don’t grudge you that, my boy, heaven knows!” said the old man, mollified in a moment. He took a bamboo cane from under his arm, and rapped Tom smartly across the shoulders. “And what of this rascal?” he added. “What’s *he* good for?”

“Groom.”

“Can the ruffian ride?”

“Not so badly.”

“Understands horses, does he, and has behaved himself on the way?”

"Yes, on the whole, very well."

"Then let him take them round to the stables, and come back here for his supper. He may have it in the kitchen to-night; only recollect, you convict, that if you misbehave either there or anywhere else on Castle Sullivan, you'll smart for it pretty quick and pretty heavy. Recollect that. You're here as a convicted felon, not a free man, and I don't care what you've done to get here; whatever it was, the punishment for it is scandalously light; but the punishment for anything you do amiss on my estate shall be all the heavier on that account. So now you know. And don't you say you hadn't a fair warning at the start."

With this Dr. Sullivan shook his cane in the new groom's face, and called his overseer, for whom he had directions to which Tom did not listen; he was more interested in a lighted door on the right, where stood a female on the threshold of what he conceived to be the kitchen, and whither Mr. Nat himself had thrown furtive glances. But now father and son went indoors arm-in-arm; the overseer came up, a gruff man with flaming whiskers; and Tom caught him also looking wistfully towards the lighted door, before he was bidden to "come this way."

So he followed the fiery whiskers to the stables, a long log building some little distance beyond the house; and here Tom was so smart in unsaddling, and so quick to find chaff-bin and oat-sack and saddle-room, that his surly companion was moved to rude advances.

"You're pretty handy," he growled. "Been a groom before?"

"Only since we left Sydney."

"Well, you're in luck, too; the groom here has a room to himself, next the saddle-room; come and I'll show it you."

The room in question was very small and squalid, with a fixed bunk and a foul paillasse; but Tom thought it would be delightful with nice clean straw; and to be alone at nights was to compass an unexpected and unspeakable luxury. Ginger-whiskers pointed out the other convicts' quarters on their way back to the house. They were the slab-huts opposite the palisade. Two were large, the others all small; that was the overseer's hut with the big chimney and the little verandah.

"And who's the overseer?" inquired Tom. "Mr. Nat?"

"No, I am; and hark'ee, my beauty, here we are at the kitchen, and you're a well-set-up youngster, ain't you? But no games with the girl, or there'll be trouble! In you go; you'll thank me for the warning when you've seen a bit."

Tom thanked him then and there, and was in the kitchen next moment. It was empty, but from the adjoining scullery there came a sound of scuffling, followed by a crash which arrested Tom's steps. Spurs then jingled out of the scullery by an outer door; and in the inner one stood a fine young woman, with black hair dishevelled, and a broken piece of crockery in either hand.

"An' me to pay for it!" Tom had heard her mutter; but in the doorway she stood without a word, her steel-grey eyes upon him till he coloured, when she flung the broken pieces on the dresser and clapped her hands.

"The first blush iver seen at Castle Sullivan!" cried she. "An' is it the new groom ye are? Shake hands,

then, and make frinds wid the cook. It's Peggy O'Brine me name is; so now tell me yours, and all yer histh'ry, while I get ye as good a male as ye can hould."

So he told her his name, but nothing more, and she looked at him closely as she laid the cloth. "Sure, it's a special he is!" she murmured. "Poor man, I might have seen it wid half an eye." And she sighed and clicked her tongue as she put meat and bread upon the board; then looked at him wistfully and long with her clear, bright eyes; for he had rested his elbows on the table, and had hidden his face, touched to the heart by the womanly kindness of her voice. He had heard nothing like it since that fatal night in April, now eight long months ago; nor, when he looked up, had he seen anything, from that night to this, like the womanly compassion in those Irish eyes.

She cut him some mutton and a slice of bread; she put the knife and fork in his hands; but he made no use of them.

"Ah, now, pluck up!" she coaxed. "Pluck up an' ate."

He made an effort, but could not finish what was on his plate.

"Your kindness has taken away my appetite, Peggy," he said with a smile, as he pushed back his chair. "It's the first I've had, from a woman at all events, for many's the long month!"

With that he rose to go, but she got between him and the door.

"Glory be to God an' it sha'n't be the last!" said she, her bosom heaving and a tear in her eye. "Peggy's your frind, remimber that, sorr; an' it's the cook can be the usefulest frind to the assigned servants. If ye'd

only say out what it is that's throublin' ye so this minute!"

"Coming up here as a convict; that's all, Peggy."

"There's hundhreds more in thim huts forninst us!"

"That's no comfort, I'm afraid. You see I am very selfish, I think only of myself."

"But they're all convicts here. Ivery mother's son but the ould cove and Mr. Nat!"

"What, the overseer too?"

"Ginger? It's Ginger we call 'm, an' a dacent man at most times is Ginger, tho' you needn't be tellin' 'm I said so. But faith! he's no better than the rest of us; if he isn't a convict now he's a tickut-of-lave, an' it's ivery wan of us'll be that, sorr, if we live long enough."

"Yes? Don't 'sir' me, Peggy. Call me Tom. I'm not even like Ginger, you know. I'm a convict of the deepest and the newest dye!"

"An' what am I?"

"Not you, too, Peggy?"

"Me, too, Tom; an' it's siven year I'm here for. So don't you make such a song of it, me dear, or it's me ye'll be puttin' to the blush!"

Indeed he had done so already. And, to believe Peggy, the second blush ever seen at Castle Sullivan was still mantling her pleasant face when spurs jingled again in the scullery, and Mr. Nat stood on the inner threshold. Some moments he stood there without a word, a furious glitter in his cold blue eye—his lewd mouth showing through his beard like a gash. Peggy shrank back. Tom was wondering if the brute had ever struck her, when he was addressed in a voice that shook with ill-governed ferocity.

"What are you doing here, Erichsen?" were the words. "I have just had my supper. I was told to have it here."

"Oh, you've had it, have you? Then why the devil haven't you cleared out?" roared young Sullivan, losing all control. "I tell you what, Peggy, this man's a cold-blooded murderer. That's what he is, and that's what he's here for. Why they didn't hang him, God knows; but they didn't, so we've got the benefit instead. Let me never catch him in here again. He'd cut your throat as soon as look at you. Clear out, you gallows-bird, and show your nose inside the palisade again if you dare!"

Tom replied only with his eye, and only scorn was in its steady gaze. When the other ceased, he waited a little to ascertain if that were all; then he turned upon his heel, opened the door, walked out and shut it very quietly behind him.

There were high voices in the kitchen as he went his way. And Tom himself was less cool when he reached his room, where, indeed, he lay awake half the night still wondering whether Nat Sullivan had ever struck Peggy O'Brien, and whether Peggy would admit it if he had. But in the end he slept soundly on the clean straw with which he first took care to line his bunk.

Soundly but not long: for in the middle of the night, as it seemed to Tom, the clanging of a great bell brought him to his feet in a state of high alarm. He slid into his trousers and rushed out. It was that black hour before dawn, and at first in the failing starlight he could see nobody; then he descried a figure in a long coat parading to and fro before the huts; but the bell was silent, though still swaying from the twisted arm of a gigantic gum-tree, when Tom ran up and inquired of

this man what it meant. He found he was speaking to the night-watchman, who said his business was to ring the bell, first an hour before sunrise, then half an hour later, and lastly when the sun appeared.

"So you're to be groom?" added the watchman. "I wouldn't swop my job for yours."

"No?" said Tom.

"Not me! 'Cause why? I'm on all night, but off all day, so I see less of the coves than any other blessed man on the place. Now you'll see more of 'em; and Lord help you if you trot out a lame nag or a piece of harness the old cove can't see his ugly mug in! I wouldn't be in your shirt for something; it'll be stickin' to your back by this day week!"

Tom was returning to his room, when a sash was softly raised in the main building, and there was Peggy at an outer window, in an inky shower-bath of pitch-black hair. She beckoned him with her finger, but transferred it swiftly to her lips.

"You did well! you did well!" she whispered. "I was in the holy terror lest you answered Mr. Nat; if you'd done that—"

She shuddered and shut her lips.

"Well, what if I had?" said Tom, beginning to feel sorry he had not.

"Niver ask me!" she returned. "Only bear in mind that what they'll call 'insolence' is a crime out here. Give 'em cheek, an' it's twenty-five or fifty—an' now I've tould ye! 'Tis well ye should know. There's some poor feller from here gets it ivery Monday as iver is. But you mustn't; so niver cheek 'em, me dear, and niver come near me kitchen anny more. Sure it'd be the dith of a young gintleman like you!"

"Would it?" said Tom. "Well, never you fear, Peggy! I'm not such a fool as all that, and I'll give them no reason, you may depend."

"They may be afther makin' one, Tom dear; faith an' they'd have one ready-made if they cot ye here! There's the second bell. For God's sake be off—an' remember Peggy's words."

"I'll go when I'm ready, Peggy; not until; and don't shut down that window, or you'll take off my fingers. Your hand again! It's to you I shall owe my whole skin!"

He gave her his hand; she took it between both of hers, and pressed it with a fervour that should have given him another warning on the spot. But her kind voice only put him in mind of Claire so far away: nor did he hear it again for some few days. Now and then she would wave to him from the kitchen window; but it was always to wave him back. More often he waved to her from the stable door; but she invariably shook her black head at him with the greatest vigour.

Meanwhile her words came true.

Mr. Nat had conceived a palpable spite against the new groom; and from things the latter heard in the convicts' hut, where he went for his meals, he might have understood the reason; these same things making him the less eager to see very much more of Peggy the cook. Still he gave her a wave whenever he espied her in the distance, for he owed the girl much already: he was daily profiting by her good advice, since no day passed without its measure of wilful provocation from the ruffianly Nat. But Tom was not to be provoked by sneer or taunt or oath; moreover, he made an excellent groom, and being seen no more about the house, gave no further

occasion to the enemy, who dropped his overt persecutions, but detested Tom the more for his unexceptionable conduct.

This feeling was intensified by the effect of that conduct in a certain quarter. Tom became quite a favourite with the despotic old army surgeon; and Mr. Nat went in constant dread of his "sunstrokes" in Sydney and on the road coming to his father's ears. It was this dread that decided him to let Tom alone, and to bide his own time for revenge: for besides being privy to the son's irregularities, and dangerously established in the father's favour, the new groom had indeed done Mr. Nat an injury of which he himself was all unconscious. Days grew into weeks meanwhile; the old year burnt into the new; and one week-day was still much like another on this primitive Australian farm. When the third bell rang at sunrise, every hut disgorged its surcharge of convicts, and Ginger called them over like so many schoolboys in front of the palisade. Then the shepherds to their pastures, the ploughmen to the arable land, the bullock-drivers to their teams, and Tom to his stables for the livelong day. Such as could come were summoned to breakfast at eight, and to dinner at one, by the great bell clanging in its eucalyptian belfry; and all hands were recalled by it between eight and nine at night.

Sunday was a nominal day of rest which included two long compulsory services in the courtyard beneath a savage sun. Dr. Sullivan read the prayers with the voice of an executioner, his bamboo cane on the desk in front of him, for use as a baton or as an instrument of correction for the man who dared to smile or to whisper within his reach. The terrible old man would also take this weekly opportunity of animadverting on the lost

souls and abandoned character of his convicts in general, with particular allusions to those whose enormities had earned them the lash during the preceding week. He never failed to assure future offenders that they would be punished without mercy in their turn, and would slash the desk with his cane to emphasise his words. So religion and ferocity ran hand in hand at Castle Sullivan; nor was hypocrisy very far behind. Mr. Nat led the hymns in a devout, sustained, stentorian bellow, while a maiden sister, the only lady of the establishment, whose voice the convicts never heard, and whose face they seldom saw but on these occasions, supplied a perfunctory accompaniment on the pianoforte.

Amid the branches of the red gums without, flocks of parrots would chatter mockingly, their vivid reds and yellows lighting up the sombre hues of those perennial leaves, that whispered none the less enticingly of cool siestas in the shade. Yet Sunday after Sunday these tyrannical observances were maintained and enforced; and the evangelical doctor loved to boast of the device whereby he had enforced them in the beginning. On the first Sunday nine-tenths of his men had announced themselves Roman Catholics. So he had drawn up these gentry in line outside the palisade, and there kept them standing out of earshot, but in the full glare of the sun, during the entire service. And on the Sunday following there was not a Roman Catholic among them.

What remained of their ruined day the convicts spent in breaking as many as possible of those Commandments which Dr. Sullivan had been dinning in their ears. Larceny, however, was the crime most in favour at the farm, whose boundaries were seldom exempt from that foul parasite of the convict, the squatter of the early

days. He must not be confounded with the squatter of subsequent civilisation. The former was usually a ticket-of-leave man, who built himself a hut in an unoccupied spot, with a preference for the near neighbourhood of a plentiful contingent of assigned convicts. The squatter would supply the convicts with rum. The convict would pay the squatter with the only currency within his reach, namely that of stolen property. The squatter was sly publican and sly pawnbroker in one, and a pretty specimen of his class had his wigwam and his black gin on a creek not a hundred miles from Castle Sullivan.

Hither was Tom taken by one of his fellows on an early Sunday evening; half-a-dozen others were there before them; not one of these were sober when they arrived. And the strong fumes tempted Tom; smouldering misery was in flames at this chance of quenching it for the nonce. He might have followed suit had not his companion produced a screw-hammer in payment for the liquor. Tom glanced at the implement, and then at his mate.

"You're never going to pay with that, Mac?"

"An' what for no?"

"There's the farm brand staring you in the face! It isn't yours."

"What's about it? If a man mayn't bilk the coves, wha may he bilk? They gie us nae wages for our worrk, so we maun help oursels!"

And as this was the principle of all present, and indeed of the average convict throughout the Colony, honest Tom had no choice but to turn on his heel and walk away amid the execrations of his fellows. But not a hand was raised against him; he had still the eye and the bearing that discourage a blow. Even the elder Sullivan

had given up tapping and rapping him with that bamboo wand which was for ever quickening felon fingers and sowing black murder in felon hearts.

But the incident of the screw-hammer made an unpopular man of Tom among his fellows; and worse was to come of it. The theft was brought home to the man Macbeth, and the very next night Tom met him with a white, pinched face, and his coat on back to front.

"Why, Mac!" cried Tom. "What now?"

The foulest maledictions were his only answer: a white lip quivering with the words.

"What on earth have I done?"

"You ken weel. This, then!"

He turned his back, and Tom started back with horror. The shirt beneath the open coat was sopping red.

In vain Tom protested that he had never told a soul about the hammer. Nobody would believe him. His indignation and his sympathy were treated with scorn as so much hypocrisy. His name was execrated in the convict huts; and so much of the convict spirit survived in Ginger that he was with the men in this, and never spoke to Tom now. The overseer besides shared Nat Sullivan's grievance against Tom: a furtive admiration for the girl O'Brien was one of his softer traits; and she was the same to neither of them now.

At the end of a month the groom's truest friend was the terrific old doctor himself. Peggy was his friend indeed; but though her grey eyes watched him wistfully enough from the window, he seldom heard her full, rich brogue. Nor was it consideration for the girl that made Tom deny himself that small consolation; young Sullivan had forbidden him the house, and was sufficiently his enemy as it was. Indeed, the groom discovered

he was becoming a bone of contention between father and son.

The son wanted to have him turned out of the stables and put to felling timber; the father would not hear of it.

The father granted him the usual good-conduct indulgences of tea, sugar and tobacco, in addition to the regulation rations; the son laid himself out to catch Tom smoking at night, and at once put a stop to the tobacco.

Then came the very hottest day of the summer, for which the son had waited. He had brought from Sydney on the pack-horse a quantity of new harness, saddles, bridles and the like, and he made the groom devote the very hottest day to seasoning the brand-new leather with castor-oil, to be rubbed into every inch of it, in the stifling heat of the little saddle-room. When Tom was finishing, nauseated with the smell, swollen with mosquito-bites, and in streams of perspiration from head to foot, Mr. Nat came in and patiently nagged at him. But even this did not compass the destruction of Tom's skin: he perceived the design and defeated it with imperturbable civility.

Mr. Nat was driven into deeper plots: he had never been bested by a convict yet. And now at last Tom read revenge in the jaundiced blue eyes; but revenge for what? He felt more mystified than afraid. All he had to do was to keep his temper; but what had he done? To nobody on the farm had he breathed a word about aught that happened in Sydney or on the road. He never ventured within the palisade. What then was his offence?

One night as he lay puzzling his head about it, and yet half asleep, a sound startled him.

It came from the saddle-room next door. Tom sat up in his bunk.

The sound was very thin and wholly metallic, as the scraping of a dinner-knife between the prongs of a fork; suddenly a bolt shot back with a little slam.

CHAPTER XXII

THE LAST STRAW

Tom sat still in his bunk.

"A licht! A licht!" whispered a voice that he knew.

"He'll hear ye, Mac; he's only next door."

"What's about it? I'll slit his juggler if he daurs to interfere. Heard ye that?"

"I did. That's better!"

The crafty groom was snoring where he sat, with one eye at a cranny in the rude partition between his lair and the saddle-room. In the latter there was as yet no light.

"An' that's better still," muttered Macbeth, as one was struck. "Slit his juggler?" he repeated with a chuckle. "I wadna think twice o't, the mosing blackguard! Now whaur's thae saddles, for my hands is free?" And his teeth snapped on something that gleamed between them in the light.

"Wait a bit. I smell the oil. Aha! here's one."

"An' here's the ither. Dinna heed the bridles. Awa' we go afore Jarman turns in."

Jarman was the squatter on the creek; the hour was still short of midnight; and Tom, who had bounded

lightly to the floor, now stood irresolute. In the end he let the rascals go. Their footsteps had already left the saddle-room; the groom listened and lost them in the night; then he felt about for his clothes.

He was thankful he had not waylaid the thieves at the saddle-room door; the field would have been too unequal, the consequences perhaps too serious for one and all. And he foresaw the neatest triumph now. Jarman's name had given him a foregone victory, for now he knew the way to Jarman's ramshackle hut, and the saddles should be back upon their pegs before morning: so full was Tom of confidence as he dressed himself in the dark. But the thought of betraying his comrades in captivity was as far from his heart as that of allowing his master's saddles to be quietly stolen before his eyes. Stolen they might be, but only for the moment; he would call in Macbeth and his mate to see how nice they looked in the morning.

In a few minutes he was fully dressed, and dodging Roberts (the night-watchman) behind the convict huts. No other man among them would have found this precaution necessary; but the groom was an unpopular character, whom Roberts would have reported none the less readily after winking (as he must have done) at the theft of the saddles. With luck and ingenuity Tom managed to elude him, however, and was soon racing down the wooded slope where the timber was being felled; leaping the stumps as he ran, and steering by the Southern Cross for the southern boundary of the farm, which was, in fact, the creek on whose further bank the squatter was now encamped.

It was a perilously clear night. A white moon grizzled the peeling bark of a small forest of red gums; and the

famous constellation burnt but feebly in the south. Tom kept his eye on it, however, and bearing slightly to his left, struck the creek at last out of earshot of the squatter's hut. Here he paused to cool his feet in the delicious running water. His plan was to cross the creek and then reconnoitre the enemy's position from the rear. And so well did it work out that Tom skipped behind a friendly trunk just as the thieves succeeded in making Jarman hear, who now appeared with his black gin in the mouth of their wigwam.

New saddles? What in thunder was the use of new saddles, or old ones either, to him? Where was he to stow them in the meanwhile? Did they want him to be landed with the swag on his hands, and lagged all over again, to oblige a pair of lubbers like them? And here Tom felt that a door would have slammed had there been one; as it was, the outraged Jarman came to a pause for want of breath, and Macbeth got in his word at last.

Tom could not hear it. But it seemed to make a difference; it made the very plainest difference in the squatter's tone.

"What? what's that? I don't believe it!" cried Jarman in one breath. "Take your oaths to it, will you? Well, if it's a fact, it'll bear thinking about. Said all that, did he? And you think he won't go and round on us after all? Well, then, come inside and we'll talk it over. In you go, missus, and light up."

Tom took a peep as the men followed the black woman into the hovel. They had left the saddles outside; but to snatch them now was impossible. The sacking that did duty for a door had been drawn aside and hitched to a nail; on the lighting of a candle stuck in a bottle within, some eager face was revealed to Tom whenever

he dared to look from behind his tree. Even if he were not seen he would be heard. Besides, the party might break up at any moment.

So he stood where he was, and listened to the voices, but ceased straining after the words. Then a cork popped; the voices were raised in a minute; in less than ten he must hear every syllable, whether he would or no. But he would, for his own name was on their lips, coupled with hideous imprecations and the name of Mr. Nat.

"You savvy?" said the Scotchman's mate, a young convict known as Brummy. "He wants to get the bloke his fifty, if not his spell in the crawlers too!"

"An' sairves him richt!" cried Macbeth, with an oath. "Didna' he squeak and get me *my* fifty for yon screw-hammer? Man, but he'll be squeakin' fine the noo!"

"You've only to say Erichsen brought 'em," added Brummy, "and you were too drunk to see what they were, or you'd never have taken them in."

"He'll know different!"

"Ay, but he's going to pretend," explained the Scot, "an' you've just to do the same."

"Then I'm to lug them back myself, am I?"

"First thing in the morning; and the cove'll tip you the stumpy himself."

"The young cove?"

"Yes."

"Dinna we keep tellin' ye it's Nat's idee? He thairsts for that man's blood as much as I do myself. An' *I'd* slit's juggler if I got the chance!"

The villains went on talking for another hour. But the foul truth clogged Tom's mind, and he took in but little more of what he heard.

So it was not a theft, but a conspiracy; and the arch-conspirator was the beast that Tom had cared for in his cups; the petty tyrant whose property he was even now risking his life to rescue—from his own confederates! Tom ground his teeth. He would rescue it still. And not only Macbeth and Brummy, but Mr. Nat himself, should see the saddles on their pegs in the morning.

The villains went on drinking as they talked. Another cork popped; yet the moon was still high in the lucid heavens when the two convicts staggered off. Jarman at once put out his light; and, in a little, all was still but the leaves, the locusts, and the tiny tributary of the Hunter in which Tom had laved his feet.

He came from behind his tree. The saddles were still outside.

He stole near: nearer yet: near enough to hear Jarman and his gin already breathing heavily in their sleep.

But they might not be sleeping heavily; and what if they awoke? The stirrup-irons might ring together. Tom knelt down and crossed the leathers over the top of each saddle. The new pigskin might creak, for all the oil it had absorbed; in fact, it did, as Tom lifted the saddles; and he stood there with one on each arm, ready to fling them down and to fight for them still. But nothing happened. So he crept away.

This time he crossed the creek without dallying, and only halted within a few hundred yards of the farm buildings. Here he sat on a stump, mopped his forehead, and wondered whether he should take the trouble to elude the night-watchman a second time; and as he sat the moon twinkled in the four stirrup-irons, which shone

like silver, they were so beautifully clean; and as he was admiring them it suddenly came home to Tom the groom that he had cleaned those stirrup-irons himself.

Yes! in spite of all, he had taken a sort of involuntary pride in his work. And that was another thing for which his fellow-convicts had cursed and hated him. But to-night he scorned and cursed himself for it, with twice their bitterness, and an oath broke into a sob as he caught up the saddles and started to his feet.

In a word, the sight of his own honest handiwork, so cruelly thrown away, drew blood from a heart that had remained adamant under studied provocation, and cool, but a minute since, in the face of monstrous treachery. To have done a hand's-turn for such wretches! That was the intolerable thought. It awoke the reckless rebel that had slept so long in this tortured bosom. Not another stroke of willing work would he do; he would be as his fellows from that moment; only, beginning there and then, he would condescend to hide and dodge no more. So the groom marched boldly upon the gate across which Mr. Nat had pointed with his whip to the lights of Castle Sullivan, and would have slammed the gate behind him, but for one circumstance. Mr. Nat was leaning against it now.

Nor was he alone. The girl O'Brien was at his side. Tom was upon them before he could check his steps; but he did not try. He strode up to his enemy and stood before him without a word, but with a saddle speaking for itself on either arm.

"Well — well?" cried Mr. Nat. "What are you doing out of your room? And what — what — what have you got there?"

"The new saddles."

"So I see. My saddles. What have you been doing with them? Where did you find them, eh?"

The tone was loud and blustering, but uncertain and surprised. In the moonlight Tom looked his enemy coolly and steadily in the face. And the girl drew away from her companion and gazed at Tom, who never so much as glanced at her as he replied:—

"They were stolen. Thieves broke into the saddle-room and stole your saddles. I heard them and followed them, but I never saw their faces close to, and I wouldn't swear to a voice. I followed them to Jarman's hut; and, you see, I've brought you your saddles back."

Mr. Nat never said a word. His blue eyes glared fixedly at Tom, out of a white face, from which the girl O'Brien edged further and further away.

"No; I can't tell you who the men were," continued Tom. "But I *can* tell you who put them up to it. It was not a convict, Mr. Sullivan, but a meaner hound than any convict on your farm. One who has a special spite against me—the Lord knows why! So he bribed these men to take the saddles, simply in order to get *me* into trouble. What do you think of that? I overheard all about it out at Jarman's hut. I heard his name, too. Would you like to know what it is?"

"Sure it's himself—the dhirty divil!"

And Peggy O'Brien was at Tom's side, with one hand clutching his arm, and the other pointing scornfully at the baleful blue eye and the vile, quivering lips of the younger Sullivan.

What followed was the affair of a moment. It was as if a mad bull had made a rush, though whether at the girl, or Tom, or both, it was impossible to say. Tom thought the first, dropped the saddles, and his right arm

flew out from the shoulder. A sharp smack, a heavy thud, and Nat Sullivan lay in a heap on the ground, with a livid mark between the ear and the eye that lay upturned to the moon.

"Ye've kilt'm — ye've kilt'm!" cried the girl, clinging in terror to Tom's arm.

"I hope I have," he answered. "It will be a good thing done for all concerned."

"Whisht! They'll be afther hearin' ye — look behind!"

Even as he turned, the gate swung open, and there was Dr. Sullivan himself, with his frogged coat flying, and his night-shirt flapping outside his nankeen breeches. The watchman Roberts was at his master's naked heels, closely followed by Ginger the overseer, in similar dishabille. These two seized Tom, who showed no semblance of resistance, while the doctor knelt over the fallen man, and felt his heart.

"Only stunned," said he, looking up. "But you shall smart for this, you miscreant, if you don't hang yet! The very man he warned me against — the very man whose part I took against him! What have you to say for yourself, you ruffian, before I have you put in irons and locked up?"

"You saw the blow, Dr. Sullivan?"

"You dare to ask me? With my own eyes, you villain!"

"Then you also saw the cause."

"Cause? What cause? As if there could be any!"

"He would have struck a woman if I hadn't struck him first."

"It's a lie," said a hollow voice from the ground. And a bloodthirsty eye covered Tom.

"Ha, my boy! Thank God you are no worse; but sit

still and leave this dog to me. A woman, do you say? An impudent slut who's at the bottom of the whole mischief, and shall go back to Government to-morrow! Be off, you hussy! Be off to your bed before I have you taken there by force!"

Peggy glanced at Tom, and only went at his nod; the tacit interchange brought Nat to a sitting posture with doubled fists.

"I was ordering her there myself," he vowed. "I had found her prowling about."

"A brazen baggage!" cried Dr. Sullivan. "Not another female will I ever apply for; they are ten times worse than the men. So you thought he was going to strike her, did you? Anything else, I wonder?"

"Nothing that you will believe. But he was at the bottom of a plot to get me flogged for nothing: he had bribed two of the men to steal those saddles that you see, and put it on me; but I followed them and had got your property back, when at the gate here—"

"I'll stop his lies!" said Nat, and staggered to his feet, but the doctor pinned him by the arm.

"You will not! You will leave him to me," said the father, sternly. He was the stronger man; the son stood quelled. "We know they're lies," the doctor added; "all convicts are liars. Have any two men been out of the huts to-night, Roberts?"

"Not one, sir—out of the huts. I can swear to that. How this one escaped me—"

"It makes no matter," said Dr. Sullivan, gripping his son's arm still. "The saddles are not the point. I saw the blow, and shall inquire into nothing else. The blow, you ruffian, you shall answer for to-morrow before the nearest magistrate. Now take him away. Clap him in

the heaviest irons we've got. Come, make haste: let me see him in front of me!"

So Tom was led off, unresisting still, but scornfully silent now, between watchman and overseer; and the father stalked, and the son slouched, behind.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE COURT-HOUSE

THE nearest magistrate was an Anglo-Indian of the name of Strachan, another employer of convict labour on a large scale, and a disciplinarian second only to Dr. Sullivan himself. The two were close friends, and indispensable to each other in certain ways. Both, in fact, were magistrates; but no magistrate was competent to deal judicially with his own offending convicts, and thus an interchange of mutual favours was kept up between the pair.

They would meet on Mondays at the court-house situated midway between their respective strongholds, and at this court-house Dr. Sullivan would oblige Mr. Strachan by sentencing any servant of the latter to as many lashes as his master liked, while Mr. Strachan was only too glad to do the same for Dr. Sullivan. So great was the mutual convenience, that either potentate was delighted to hold a special inquiry, in any exceptional case, to oblige the other; and one was held accordingly in the forenoon following Tom's assault upon his master's son.

A mounted messenger was despatched to Mr. Strachan, who sent back word that he would be at the court-house

as soon after twelve o'clock as possible. And he arrived within a few minutes of Dr. Sullivan, his red-bearded overseer, and the culprit, who had spent the night in heavy irons, which he still wore.

The doctor led his brother-magistrate aside, and Tom, raising his lack-lustre eyes for once, watched them walking arm-in-arm in the sunlight for several minutes before entering the court-house. Ginger stood by and told the constables the kind of man Tom was. Tom heard him without a word or a look. The constables agreed that, whatever else he was, he was evidently a sulky brute. Tom heard them too, but sat doggedly in the strong sunlight, with sullen eyes upon the two magistrates, whom he instinctively knew to be deciding his fate before the case began. Not a word had he spoken since the irons had been clamped upon his limbs, and clasped about his soul.

Not a word did he speak in the justice-room within. His attention, however, was engaged at the outset by the extremely moderate tone in which the charge was preferred against him. Dr. Sullivan, put on his oath, gave a perfectly true account of what he had himself seen and heard in the small hours of that morning. He even admitted, in response to a question from the Bench, his impression that his son was the first to raise a hand; and added, of his own accord, a hope that that circumstance would be taken into due consideration on his servant's behalf.

Tom could hardly believe his ears. He was still lost in wonder at this extraordinary intercession, on the part of Dr. Sullivan of all men, when Mr. Strachan addressed him in a tone no less clement and benign.

"You are charged," said he, "with a very grave offence, which you do not attempt to deny. In the ordinary course

I should feel compelled to commit you to another Court, and your lightest punishment would be a term in the chain-gang, even if you were not sent straight away to Norfolk Island. It is your good fortune, however, to have been assigned to a humane and merciful master, who has spoken for you as I am bound to say *I* should not have done in his place. He has magnanimously made the most of the one slender point that might be urged in your favour. He has begged me to deal with you here and now. He is generously anxious to give you another chance, of which, for your own good, I would exhort you to take grateful advantage. Meanwhile, you have not me to thank, but Dr. Sullivan entirely, for the ridiculously inadequate punishment which I am about to order you. You will be taken into the yard, and you will receive fifty lashes with the cat-o'-nine-tails."

At these words Tom turned very white, and opened his lips as if to speak, but shut them tight without a syllable. His dogged eyes gleamed, his handcuffs rattled, and his leg-irons clanked together as the constables took him by either arm and led him, without a murmur, from the room.

"Did I say too much?" asked Mr. Strachan, biting at a cheroot, when the magistrates were left alone.

"Not one word," replied the doctor, cordially. "I am infinitely obliged to you for saying what you did—for the constables' benefit, particularly. They seemed to see nothing wrong."

Mr. Strachan shook his head

"It was distinctly irregular, doctor. A clearer case for quarter sessions I have never heard."

"Perhaps not; but then I should have lost a most competent groom; and now, thanks to you, I shall keep him."

"Are you sure he will be worth keeping after this?" asked the Anglo-Indian, sucking at his cheroot, which was but a shade darker than his withered face.

"Worth keeping? He will be better worth it than before. It does them good."

"That is not my invariable experience," said Mr. Strachan, shaking his head again.

"But it is mine," cried the doctor. "They are never any good until they feel your power. They never feel your power until they have first felt the lash." And he emphasised the sentiment by giving the table a cut with his cane.

"I have not always found it so," maintained the other. "In your place I should have let that man go to quarter sessions. There are the makings of a desperate criminal in him, or I'm much mistaken."

Dr. Sullivan flushed and brightened beneath his white hairs, like a man on his mettle. "Desperate criminal?" he repeated eagerly. "He's one already, my dear sir; and all the better! We'll see what we can do to tame him. We'll see what we can do to break his spirit! You know what my son says, Strachan? He never was bested by a convict yet; it would never do for him to remain bested by this one; and that's another reason why he mustn't slip through our fingers just yet. No; we shall show him who are his masters; we shall bend or break his spirit as I bend—"

He sprang up, with his bamboo cane, and rushed to the door, as a sudden outcry arose in the yard. At the door, however, even Dr. Sullivan paused aghast.

"Strachan — Strachan!" he cried. "Good heavens! You were right! Look here!"

What had happened will be the better understood when it is explained that the court-house was not a house at all, but a mere ring of weather-board huts, of which the justice-room was one, the lock-up another, the constables' quarters a third, and a store and a stable a fourth and fifth. The yard thus formed was furthermore enclosed by a brushwood fence, broken only between the stables and the justice-room, where there was a gate instead; and, in the very centre of this open space, blotting the edge of the deep sky, and scoring the dazzling earth with shadows like scars, stood that worse than gallows, at which men were beaten into brutes, and brutes into devils, week after week throughout the year.

A sergeant and two constables formed the garrison of this lodge of law and order in the wilderness. The sergeant was an emancipist; and of the trio, only one had come to the country on his own account. The third was actually a convict at this very time, and a glaring ruffian into the bargain. Originally a butcher-boy (who had robbed his master in the City Road), he still smacked of the slaughter-house, with his raw red face and cruel eye; and on this young felon devolved the congenial task of administering the lash.

In such hands was Tom led to the triangles, with a white face, but quickened eyes. The ticket-of-leave overseer was also of the party, filling his pipe and grinning to himself between his flaming whiskers, like a man prepared to enjoy the thing thoroughly. The sergeant, however, made him stand back a little, though with a wink, as he touched the culprit on the shoulder.

"Come, my lad," said the sergeant, confidentially, "it needn't hurt you, when all's said and done!"

Tom looked at him in faint astonishment.

"We ain't obliged to lay it on that thick," pursued the sergeant, in the same confidential tone. "It's all left to us. It *needn't* hurt him, need it, mates?"

"Not if he comes up to the mark; but he won't—no fear!" said the ex-butcher, who had got the cat, and was practising with it upon the woodwork of the whipping-frame.

"We'll ask him," said the sergeant. "We'll give him the chance. Will you come up to the mark, my son, or will you take it hot?"

Tom looked at his inquisitors with a sullen, puzzled expression, and chanced to see the overseer, at a little distance, shaking his head and touching his pockets.

"Not got any?" cried the sergeant.

"You ask him," returned Ginger.

"Got no money?" said the sergeant. "That's what we mean by coming up to the mark, you know."

"A pound apiece," suggested the free constable. "That'd soften the job."

He stared at them in dogged defiance.

"I told you so," said the butcher, throwing down the cat. "Let's truss him up."

"Even a pound between us—" the sergeant had said, when the butcher began to grumble, and Tom's lip to curl; and this settled it.

"Up with him!" cried the sergeant. "We'll teach you to sneer at us, my game-cock! Stop a bit, though. His legs won't stretch in these here irons. Who the blazes put them on?" And the zealous officer knelt

himself to unfasten a pair of anklets, coupled by a short but massive chain, and employed quite illegally by Dr. Sullivan on his farm.

A pair of figure-eight handcuffs had been locked upon Tom's wrists at the same time; but both his wrists and his hands were small, and during the night he had found that he could slip out of these at any moment. He was out of them now before a soul dreamt of it — so slyly did he stand to have the shackles off his feet.

The heavy-handed scourge lay on the ground; its raw-faced wielder was half-way out of his coat; the other constable was talking to Ginger in the shade; the sergeant had undone the second anklet, and was just rising from his knees with the pair.

Next moment he was on his back in the dust: and Tom was planted before the triangles, with the scourge caught up by the thongs in his two hands, and the heavy handle whirling round his head.

The butcher rushed at him with one sleeve still in his coat; and received the butt-end of his pet instrument full upon the forehead, where a great green wart sprang out as if by magic, even as he reeled away. It was at this there arose the outcry which brought Dr. Sullivan to the justice-room door; and the sight that staggered even him was the sight of his groom, with the blood all flown from his face to his eyes, gnashing his white teeth, and whirling that thick oak handle round a head of wavy yellow hair. Tom had not improved in looks since his arrival in New South Wales. But at that moment there was a fineness in his ferocity, a sublimity in his despair, which were not lost upon both the gentlemen now watching from the door. Mr. Strachan, for one, beheld a fellow-man fighting for a manhood that was more to him than

life, against a degradation worse than death; and he wished himself back at his farm.

Not so Dr. Sullivan, whose consternation lasted but a moment. The next, he was in the thick of it, rallying the constables, flourishing his cane, and leading a rush which made the rebel slip beneath the triangles and take to his heels. The pack followed, all but Dr. Sullivan, who now fell back, with the sun glistening on his white hair, and a gnarled hand shading his eyes.

Tom plunged between the lock-up and the store, and ran round the fence to the left, like a rat in a ring, but it was too high for him at every point. The pack doubled, and had hemmed him in, when he swerved and was through them, leaving Ginger on the ground with redder whiskers than before. The Anglo-Indian, at the justice-room door, was irresistibly reminded of his youth at Rugby, and had an old cry in his throat, when he recollected himself and gulped it down in time. The convict was rushing straight for the outlet between stables and justice-room. The pack were at his heels; in front of him the gaunt old doctor stood his ground like a grenadier, with his bamboo cane, and the open gate and a tethered horse beyond.

Mr. Strachan stood petrified by sheer curiosity as to what would happen next; it never occurred to him to interfere.

He thought the doctor must give way. The doctor did no such thing; he stood fast with his cane as though it had been a sabre; and Tom, whirling his weapon still, whirled it high into the sky, and bowed to the doctor because he could not strike him down. As he bowed, the bamboo slashed his shoulder, and would have cloven him to the ribs had it been steel; next instant he was

overpowered; and they dragged him back to the triangles, as Dr. Sullivan turned to his brother-magistrate with a heightened colour and sparkling eyes.

"A hundred!" cried the doctor, in his most dictatorial voice.

"A hundred what?" asked Mr. Strachan.

"Lashes!" said the doctor, wiping his forehead with a red silk handkerchief. "You can't give him less after this. I'd like to make it two! But we needn't haul him in again to hear it. Just give the order out here."

"I beg your pardon," said Strachan, nervously. "I decline to give it at all."

"Decline to order him another fifty for a bloodthirsty outrage like this?"

"Yes, I do."

"You must have taken leave of your senses!" cried the domineering doctor. "Or is it that you sympathise with the man who felled my son?"

Mr. Strachan turned a deeper yellow.

"You know me better than that, Dr. Sullivan!" he cried hotly. "Sympathise with a convict! It's not that at all. It's because it's irregular. I doubted whether it was a case for summary jurisdiction in the beginning. I know it isn't now. And I'll have no more to do with it."

"You won't? Then I will!" said Dr. Sullivan. "I'll take the responsibility upon myself!"

"I won't be a party to any further irregularity," said Strachan, "and it's a clear case for quarter sessions, if ever there was one. That's my only point. The man deserves it, of course."

Yet he retired into the justice-room and shut the door, but failed to shut out the rasping sound of Dr. Sullivan's voice, exultantly doubling the sentence, and crying to the

ex-butcher to lay on the whip-cord as he had never laid it on before.

"Trust me!" came the reply through the open window. "Look at my forehead, sir. I'll cut his bowels out for that!"

Mr. Strachan sprang up and shut the window with a bang. He was strangely shaken. Many were the floggings he had ordered, or inspired, and even witnessed, without a qualm. There was a something in this man's face that had appealed to him and troubled him from the first. As he shut the window there was a something else in the white sheen of the doomed nude back over yonder that made him feel instinctively there was the remnant of a gentleman, tied up for whipping like a cur. And this conviction made the Anglo-Indian, who was the remnant of a gentleman himself, more uncomfortable than he had felt for years.

He turned his back on the window and sat down, listening against his will, in the very chair from which he had delivered pre-arranged judgment. He heard it once, and winced and twitched his shoulders, as though the stroke had fallen on them. He heard it again. He began mumbling the end of a new cheroot and listening to the flies on the window-pane, whose buzzing had suddenly become very loud. But louder yet were those horrible sounds outside; and even more horrible was the exultant croak of the old doctor at regular intervals between the sounds.

"Comb your lashes, my good man!" his rasping voice kept crying. "Comb those lashes — comb those lashes!"

Strachan found himself counting them, with that striking face still before him, and those desperate eyes waiting upon his as they had waited here while he was delivering his mealy-mouthed address; and looking at him as they

had looked for one moment when he was done. A white stare of incredulity, a flash of reproach, another of contempt, and a back turned disdainfully with a shrug. That was all—but it had burnt the magistrate at the time—it would burn him in the retrospect ever after.

To stop counting he put his thumbs in his ears (always with an eye on the door so that none should surprise him in that position), but “Comb those lashes!” came to them still, and then he began listening for another voice and a different cry. He listened for these in positive terror, with the perspiration dripping from his nose, and his ears moaning like the sea beneath both thumbs. However, no voice reached them but that of the savage old doctor, crying out about the lashes up to the end. Then came a pause. Mr. Strachan made sure it was a pause, dried his face, put his thumbs in his arm-holes, and tilted back his chair. His features were sufficiently composed when Dr. Sullivan strode into the room with a deeply dissatisfied air.

“Well?” drawled Mr. Strachan.

“Not a sound!” growled the doctor. “Not a moan; but I’ll break his spirit yet! I’ll break him, or I’ll know the reason why!” And he ground what teeth he had, and wiped his wrinkled forehead with the red silk handkerchief.

“Bravo!” cried Mr. Strachan.

Dr. Sullivan looked up sharply, but took this expression of enthusiasm to himself, as a tribute to that indomitable and ferocious will which was his pride.

“You know me, Strachan,” said he. “What I say I mean; and if you’d backed me up just now, and stopped outside, you’d know why I say it. Not—one—solitary—groan! But I’ll break him yet; upon my soul I believe

I could have done it with this cane! The fool of a fellow didn't half lay on. He said he'd give it him all the harder for that nice thing on his forehead, but it's my opinion — ”

The sergeant rushed into the room.

“He's gone, sir! He's gone!”

The doctor whipped a leather case from his pocket, and went out hurriedly. In five minutes he was back. His colleague was sitting like a yellow ghost.

“Gone?” chuckled the doctor. “A little faint, nothing more, and as stubborn as a mule the moment I brought him to. But I'll break him yet, Strachan, I'll break him yet!”

“He had his full hundred?”

“Every lash.”

“His — his skin — ”

“Like tissue paper! Drew at the fourth — but not a sound — not a syllable all through.”

“And he's fit to go back to the farm?”

“Fit enough, if I let him,” the doctor declared. “But I prefer to keep him where he is till to-morrow. Here in the lock-up he can do no mischief — and they know how to look after them here. But what's the matter with *you*, Strachan? You look used up. The heat, eh?”

“The climate altogether!” cried the other, rising. “I'm sick of this country, Sullivan. India was a fool to it. I'd give all I've got to be going back there to-morrow!”

CHAPTER XXIV

THE LOCK-UP

THE sergeant had looked into the lock-up for the last time that night. He had made his last overture to the prisoner, had cursed and cuffed him for a sulky dog, and so taken leave of him for the night. Not a word had Erichsen uttered in all these hours. He had answered no question, replied to no taunt, nor yet once raised his eyes from the ground: there he sat, with a damp blanket about his torn body, and his rough yellow head between his hands. Food had been put before him, and remained there still. A pannikin of tea stood cold, and sour, and black with drowned flies, upon the ground. The flies were the worst of all his outward ills. But the shocking torments of a brain cruelly cleared by pain and weakness were worse than the flies.

And now he was alone for the night; the key had been turned in the padlock, and put in its place on the beam above; the sergeant's bluster had died away, and the sergeant's footsteps followed suit. Across the yard there came a laugh, an oath, a good-night ironically shouted, then a throwing-off of boots that jingled, and a shutting of doors. Now all was still, and in the lock-up the stillness was as unbroken as elsewhere. He never stirred but to shrug away a fly. The moon shone in through holes in the tin-lid roof, through crevices in the match-wood walls; and in the soft, sifted light he sat immovable. It was such a prison as a man of spirit could have broken with preposterous ease. But this one had no spirit left; he was no longer a man. His precious manhood had

been beaten out of him like dust from a carpet. And the sense of that irrevocable loss bit deeper than the glutted flies.

Was it a horse outside against the brushwood fence? The sound was the first Tom seemed to have heard for many years. In his blackened brain it struck a first inappreciable spark of interest. He listened. Then came another and a nearer sound, as of something torn. He listened eagerly. What could it be? Minutes passed; there were no more sounds until the padlock was tried, and a hand went feeling for the key. Tom raised his head for the first time as the moon streamed in through the open door, when he perceived that it was Peggy's bare feet, which had made no noise. With that he lowered his head again, for there was no place in it even for surprise. But unconsciously he gave a moan.

She went upon her knees beside him, and flung out her arms, but drew them back with a shiver from that loose-spread blanket. "Tom!" she whispered. "Speak to me, darlin'. It's Peggy come to see how y'are."

He never spoke, never looked up, nor gave any sign that he heard her words—unless it was that his bowed head hung more heavily than before.

"It's Peggy O'Brine," the girl pursued, with a sob in her throat. "Sure an' ye've not forgotten Peggy the cook? It's to comfort ye I've come, dearie, an' haven't I the right? Ah then, an' wasn't it all through me it was?"

The sob got loose, and she was wringing her hands and gazing at Tom through her tears as though her heart would break for him. In return he stared heavily at her, but shook his head as her meaning came home to him.

"Indeed an' it was," persisted Peggy. "Only for me

you niver would have struck 'm at all. An' to think it was meself that warned ye in the beginning, an' went an' drove ye to it in the ind! If only you had let 'm strike me dead at his feet! It'd have been better than that — an' this!"

Still he looked at her without a word; and still there was no light, no life, no feeling in the look; but only dumb and dead despair.

"You thought I liked 'm!" exclaimed Peggy wildly. "They've been tellin' ye their black lies in the huts. It's little they know how it's been between us from the shtart. I'll tell ye this, Tom, better a hundred times be the man he's a spite agin than the girrl he's his wicked eye upon. That's Mr. Nat for ye; an' I hate 'm — I loathe 'm — 'tis God's truth I'm tellin' ye. Tom, dear, he cot me out there last night — I niver wint out wid 'm. He cot me prowlin' about, as he said, an' that's the truth, too, though he tould it. I couldn't sleep for thinkin' o' the two o' yez. It's well I knew he was up to some divil's work at last. I'd seen 'm talkin' — an' what do you suppose he's up to now?" asked Peggy, going off at a tangent. "What do you suppose he's do'n' at this moment? Lyin' dhrunk on his bed — lyin' ded dhrunk for the shame of 't! You knocked 'm down. You knocked 'm down. He won't get over 't till his dyin' day. Nobody ilse iver so much as lifted a han' agin 'm on the farm. But glory be to God! you knocked 'm down!"

There was more than unthinking exultation in her tone; there was a very singular sort of pride also, and this as unthinking as the other, it was so ingenuous and plain. But Tom saw nothing with those dreadful eyes, and heard but little beyond her soothing brogue. And then she did think, and saw a mark on the blanket in a rod of moon-

light (for she had shut the door), and cried out to God to forgive the most selfish woman in all the world.

She had thought of herself, and not of Tom. She had talked about herself, and not about Tom. In her selfishness she had forgotten what she had brought him; and a medicine-bottle of pilfered milk and rum was at his parched lips in an instant. She made him drink of it, and drink deep; and mutton sandwiches, deliciously cut and salted, she put between his teeth with her own fingers, bite after bite, as though he had been her infant. And all the time she was railing at herself for forgetting this and being the most selfish woman in the world; while he ate and drank from her tender hand and never said a word.

But when this was over he took that hand in his; and so they sat, as it seemed for hours, in a thin rain of filtered moonshine. Still his eyes were steadily down-cast the whole time—thus they missed the happy tears in hers.

At last he spoke, and it was terrible, for she could not understand a word; then he coughed and tried again, and said, "God bless you, Peggy—only there isn't one in New South Wales!" And that left them both silent, and the girl grieving openly, for almost as long again.

Then he said quite quietly:—

"You know I've been in the condemned cell, Peggy. But it was nothing to this. My God, it was nothing to this!"

Peggy pressed his hand.

"The condemned cell at Newgate," he went on. "I was there up to the very last night, and heard the people taking their places to see me swing. Well, that night was nothing to this. And if they had hanged me in the

morning it would have been nothing — nothing — it would have been nothing — ”

The hoarse voice broke, sob after sob shook the tortured body, and the girl glowed with shame to find herself the useless witness of an agony so supreme. But his tears dried hers and bound their fount; it froze her heart to hear and see him. She was afraid to speak to him, to touch his hand. She withdrew a little, and her bare foot pressed a cold oasis on the warm ground; she stooped and picked up a coin.

“Ha!” cried Tom.

His voice was very bitter now, but under control in a moment.

“Where did it come from?” asked Peggy with the coin to a shining crevice.

“I am ashamed to tell you;” and he ground his teeth; “but you will never guess. From a greater brute than either of the Sullivans. He came to look at me just afterwards. I was steaming like a horse in this blanket, and he came and gloated over me, and flung me a farthing — a farthing! — the very beast who ordered me the lashes and pretended to be so kind.”

“A farth’n’!”

“Yes. God help him if ever I get his yellow throat between these ten fingers!” and they were clutching murderously in the air, and there was murder in every vibration of the husky voice.

“Sure, an’ it isn’t a farth’n’ it is at all.”

“What is it, then?”

“A sov’rin!”

And the soft Irish brogue was rich with honest satisfaction. She showed him the coin in triumph. He regarded it with a leaden eye.

"A sov'rin!" repeated Peggy, with enthusiasm. "Stick it in your pockut, an' be grateful iver afther to Peggy's bare fut!"

He shook his head.

"You won't?"

Another shake.

"'Tis sinful pride I call it," remonstrated the girl. "The kind man meant well —"

"The kind man!"

"An' isn't he?"

"I owe him a bit already," replied Tom. "Let me settle that first."

"But this he meant well, man; this is no farth'n' —"

"So much the worse. He thought to heal the wounds I owe him with a sovereign, did he? His conscience and my wounds! May they lie open, and sting and throb and tickle all at once, as they're doing now, till I have my fingers at his throat!" The girl looked so frightened that he gulped at his passion, and said, "You keep it yourself, Peggy, like a good girl; you deserve a purse of them for all you've done for me this night. Why, what now?"

He sat alone in the lock-up; the girl had stolen swiftly out. In the unconscious egotism of his grief and shame, this simply puzzled him. So he sat in the moonbeams, blinking at the moon, until she returned and once more closed the door.

"All's safe," she told him cheerfully. "I heard the thraps snorin' in their slape."

"Had you heard something else?"

"I had not."

"Then what was wrong?"

"Is it why I went out?" said Peggy, fixing him with

an eye that was cheerful too. "To dhrop that sov'rin to the very bottom of their well; an' it's we will dhrop it, too, if you plase."

Tom held out his hand.

"I've offended you, Peggy. God knows I didn't mean to; but I'm capable of all that's brutal to-night; you see what they've made of me already! Forgive me, Peggy. I'll never forgive them. I'll be even with every one of them, curse them! curse them! and then I'll swing as I should have done a year ago. I'm sorry I didn't keep that pound — to give it him back for his coffin!"

It was terrible to hear him; his voice was very low, and full of fresh tears that made it all sound worse. Peggy asked him what he meant to do.

He meant to die, but not of the lash — the rope; he meant to hang as he should have hung the year before. If only he had! If only he had! But at last he recognised the fate reserved for him by a Providence he blasphemed, so now he would meet it half-way. He was sorry he had not done so long ago. He was sorry he had not driven a knife through Nat in the very beginning; but it was never too late to kill and die; it was only too late to die with a whole skin; and again his sobs and blasphemies were horrible to hear. Yet Peggy listened patiently, and gradually soothed him with a tender, tolerant, womanly word here and there; so that at last he looked at her through his tears (for he was utterly unmanned) and asked her, out of pure curiosity, what he had done to make such an enemy of Mr. Nat.

Peggy resumed her cheerful manner.

"An' don't ye know?" said she, masking a trembling lip with a smile. "Is it no notion ye have at all?"

"None whatever."

"Arrah, Tom, 'tis in love ye are entirely!"

At these words, which took him cruelly by surprise, he gave her a kind of wounded glare that was their confirmation, whereupon she forced a giggle, and asked him whom he supposed Nat had suspected him of being in love with.

Tom wearily gave it up.

"Be thinkin' a minute," said Peggy self-consciously.

"Not you, was it?"

Peggy nodded.

"But what nonsense!" he exclaimed.

"An' it was all that," said Peggy.

"I mean we never saw each other. And was that all he had against me?"

"No; there was a little more than that."

She hesitated.

"What?" he asked.

"More of his nonsense then, for he thought I was as bad as you."

"Idiot!"

"Idjut indeed," said Peggy sadly.

"When we hadn't exchanged a dozen words!"

Not a dozen? Not many dozens, perhaps; for up to to-night Peggy had them every one by heart. She was not so sure that she would be able to remember all they were saying now; she was not so sure that she should want to. But she steeled herself to answer cheerfully. And he guessed nothing then, for to speak of love was still to think of Claire; and to think of Claire was to pray that never, in this life or another, might she know or dream what had befallen him that day. But even with the prayer in his heart he remembered there was

no God to hear it; and was retracing his steps in this blind alley of despair, when Peggy took his hand and flashed a suggestion before his mind.

Why should he go back to the farm at all—to be bullied and beaten to death or desperation in a cruel and unequal war? He told her in reply what he calmly proposed to do, and her blood ran cold to hear him; then common-sense came to her aid, and she showed him the folly (rather than the wickedness) of his diabolical plans. He listened sullenly, but said he could not answer for himself after this, and pretended to take less than he really did to the suggestion that he should run away there and then; according to Peggy, there was not another minute to lose.

Tom wanted to know where he was to run to, but he began feeling about for his shirt. Peggy found it for him, and noticed, with a pang of instinctive jealousy, as the blanket fell apart in his movements, a mysterious something that he wore next his breast like a scapula. It was sewn up in oiled silk, which glistened in the feeble light; and in the bitter intuition that this precious possession was a packet of true love's letters, she made him ask his questions twice.

Peggy then told him he must run due east for the sea, for it was but thirty miles from there; and she had a good mind to run with him, since they were going to turn her into Government without fail. This she said with a laugh, but he made no answer. His face was drawn with pain at every movement; it reminded Peggy of some scraps of cotton-wool that she had brought for him to put next his lacerated skin; and a grateful look he gave her was her comfort and her hope, as she left him to fight his own battle with his shirt, and set her-

self to pulling down the brushwood fence. A breach was easily and not noisily made; and both moon and stars were still crisp in the sky when Tom painfully followed the girl's lead, and the two plunged together into the open bush.

"Djue east," repeated Peggy, stopping in the first thicket. "D'ye know the Southren Cross now? I'm afther misrememberin' it meself."

"Up yonder, Peggy. Those five."

"An' as like a cross as a han'-saw! But as ye know 't ye can steer djue east by 't, an' djue east lies the say. If you're wantin' wather on the way, let the Southren Cross shine in your face an' that'll bring ye to the river. I heard 'em say so as I waited table."

"I know, Peggy, I know. And when I get to the sea — if ever I do — well, at least my bones can sleep in it, instead of in this pestilent land!"

He stood eying her, eager to be gone, and yet reluctant to show ungrateful haste.

"An' why would they?" cried Peggy. "It's manny a convict has escaped on raf's before ye, so why wouldn't you? Only fetch up wid the say an' there's hope!"

"Then, Peggy, there's no time to lose." And his hand was out in an instant.

"Ah then, Tom, an' must I be lavin' ye?"

Her voice was altered.

"This is not the way to Castle Sullivan, Peggy; it's the very opposite direction; and I've got you into trouble enough, goodness knows."

Her lips parted as though more arguments were on her tongue; but it was upon his white face the moon was shining, and his eagerness to go, and go alone, was now transparent.

"They have made you crule, Tom," said Peggy, with a sudden sad dignity. "Good-bye. Go your ways. God bless you!"

"Cruel to you?" he said densely.

"Yes, crule to me! To me that brought ye mate and dhrink; to me that 'd —"

"But what can I do?" he asked her in the same dull tone. "I am grateful to you with all the heart they've left me; but they tried their best to cut it out, and I believe they have. Make allowances for me, Peggy, and only tell me what I can do!"

"Take me wid ye, Tom," she whispered.

"To the sea?"

"An' further!"

"My dear, how can I? If they follow me alone I can fight them alone until I drop and die. With you I couldn't."

"An' wouldn't we dhrup and die together?"

And now there were tears in her voice that held his own tongue bound; and now a light in her eyes that shot a ray through his brain at last. He understood, and waited for his heart to bleed for her. When it would not, a great groan came from his soul.

"I can't help it, Peggy," he mumbled, in his shame; "it's as you say! They've cut my heart out—cut it clean out, they have!—and a cruel brute is all I can ever be now. Forgive me, my girl—and let me go. Never think twice about me. I'm not worth it—a brute like me! Peggy—Peggy—"

He had tried, in his weakness, to put his arms about her, upon an impulse of pure sorrow and gratitude, that flickered within him like the last ember in a fire. And the convict girl had turned so fiercely that her black hair

swept and stung his face, as she broke away from him once and for all. He saw her bare feet flashing in the moonlight; they fell too softly for his ears. But he heard her sobbing as she ran. And he pitied himself the more passionately for the little he found it in him to pity her.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE LITTLE GREY MAN

To abscond from assigned service was to break yet another law of the land of bondage. And though he little knew it (but cared less), Tom Erichsen was now liable to further transportation — even to Norfolk Island — and that for life.

Six months in a chain-gang was, however, a likelier term; he might even get off with another fifty lashes, and doubtless would, if he fell alive into the ruthless hands through which he had slipped at last. He set his teeth at the thought. It should never be. They might take his body — there would be one or two more to go with it when they did.

The stars were still sharp in the sky. They remained so for some hours longer, when a breath of wind blew them out like candles, and day broke, or rather burst like a shell.

Meanwhile Tom had struck a creek, waded a mile in it to destroy the scent — waded within a stone's-throw of Jarman's hut — turned tail in a panic — and waded back, and miles further, in the opposite direction. In

the creek also he slaked his thirst and laved his wounds. He had turned his back on it when the sun rose. And towards the rising sun he ran and ran until there was a great belt of blue beneath it in the sky; then hid for the day in a tiny clump of trees in the midst of an open plain.

Here he slept for hours, yet dreamt but one dream — of baying dogs and cantering hoofs. When he awoke the first sound was actually audible, but far away and growing fainter. It passed altogether, and he fell asleep again. Awaking a second time, he found the stars back in the sky, but as yet no moon. And Tom was deadly faint for lack of food.

Also, his wounds were so stiff that he could scarcely stir, every movement caused him pain; yet he struggled up, and tottered east, with those five fixed stars shining feebly upon his wan right cheek and haggard profile.

How long this continued Tom could never tell. It might have been hours later, or only minutes that seemed like hours, when the climax came. All he ever knew was that his head was by this time very light; and that the moon was no higher than the trees when it shone upon the stray wether bleating piteously in his path, which was to stand out terribly in his mind ever after. Yet up to that moment a forty hours' fast had been broken but once — with sandwiches. It was either this or lingering death.

The moon won clear of the trees; it shone into the gluttoned eyes and on the blood-caked mouth and fingers of as desperate and abandoned a young convict as the settlement contained.

He pushed on now with a new and dreadful energy. He thought he smelt the sea. The country, however,

was still well timbered; and instinctively, rather than with conscious precaution, the fugitive made his line where the trees were thickest. He was now steering jealously by the moon, with his head thrown further back the higher it sailed; thus it was that a little later he tripped and staggered without seeing what it was that had caught his foot; but it felt peculiar, and after a moment he turned round, stood still, and went back.

It was the dead body of a man.

The body had not a rag upon it.

Tom knelt to examine it by the moonlight, and a cold thrill ran down him which he resented when he had time to think; it showed there was something human in him yet.

The body was that of a very swarthy man, with wonderful white teeth upon which the moon shone and glistened in the ghastliest manner; and pierced ears from which the ear-rings had been brutally torn; and a chapfallen blue chin. Tom thought the man had not been many hours dead; what puzzled him was the apparent absence of a mortal wound where the other evidences of foul play were so glaring. When found, however, the wound itself puzzled him much more; it was at the back of the sunburnt neck, and might have been a bullet-wound, but Tom had never seen one before; nor would he have expected a bullet to drill a hole so clean and round.

He now behaved as though he had been tripping over murdered men all his life. He had not only recovered his composure, he was able to glory in it as a sign that his heart was dead after all, and so past bleeding for anything or anybody any more. At this moment he raised his eyes, and his new-found composure was at an end.

A light flashed through the trees into his eyes: a tongue of flame from some camp-fire.

Tom listened. No voices reached his ears save those of the nocturnal bush. The fire was farther off than he had thought.

He got up, and first walked, then crept, towards the light. The colony was infested with bands of bush-rangers. What if here were one, and this corpse their handiwork? Now Tom thought of it, one particular and most notorious band had been depredating this very part of the country ever since the New Year. He had heard envious reports of the villains in the convicts' huts at Castle Sullivan, and especially had he heard of their terrible Italian chief, said to be an outlawed brig-and come to seek fresh fortunes in New South Wales. Of the merciless ferocity of this free alien the most horrifying stories were afloat. Yet the worst of these but feebly expressed one who shot men from behind, stripped their corpses, and tore the very rings from their ears.

Tom crept near the fire in a personal fright curiously exhilarating in its intensity. He might almost have been a free man once more—worth robbing—worth murdering for his money. The novel sensation brought back a momentary whiff of unconscious self-respect. It was just the little thought of having a life worth taking once more; of being anything to anybody but a beaten dog; and it came and went and was forgotten in the same moment.

The next, he was gazing on a curious scene; and his fears were also at an end.

In the light of the camp-fire four men were sitting solemnly at whist; and three faces more innocently

intent (for the fourth was turned the other way) Tom had never seen in his life. On his left sat a long-limbed stripling whom the others addressed as Slipper while they shuffled and cut and criticised his play; it was clear that Slipper was a novice, though an anxious student of the game. His partner was a wall-eyed man without a smile; neither did Tom hear a word from the one whose black hair and sullen shoulders were towards him, but opposite whom (facing Tom) sat the visible life and soul of the party.

This was a little elderly man, with grey tufts upon his bloodless cheeks, and horn spectacles pushed half-way up a singularly benevolent brow. He sat tailor-wise, like the rest, but played his cards in a way of his own. He had only one hand for the job; his right arm terminated in a polished hook with a cork at the end of it; but there knelt at his side a gigantic aboriginal, who threw down each card as the player touched it with the cork. Such was the party. At the first glance Tom had looked anxiously for the bloodthirsty Italian brigand; but he soon forgot his existence in the presence of this innocent group, who were not even playing for money.

Tom heard their horses champing hard by beyond the firelight; set them down as a party of drovers; and stepped fearlessly among them the instant the rubber came to an end. The wall-eyed one immediately drew a pistol, while Slipper leapt to his long legs with a knife. But the man with the spectacles ordered them both to put away their weapons and sit quiet; and they both obeyed.

"I saw him some time ago," said he, lowering his glasses (as he had done once before while Tom was looking on), "and I am very much obliged to him. He

didn't interrupt our rub, as a more thoughtless person most certainly would have done. He is a well-bred young man, and I like the looks of him. Do you hear, sir? I like the looks of you; but what on earth's the matter with your mouth?"

Tom hung his head and told his story. At its conclusion the little grey man insisted on shaking left hands with him.

"You're the kind of young fellow I like to meet," said he. "A runaway convict, of course?"

The question was terribly abrupt, but Tom told the truth.

"There, there, never mind!" cried the little grey man. "You're not so singular in that respect as your sensitive imagination would appear to suggest. In fact, you are not the only one in the present circle; so you see that you may hold up your head again, and even trust us with further particulars. May I ask from whose service you have fled?"

Tom hesitated: if they should carry him back!

"You would rather not say!" exclaimed the little man. "Very natural, very natural; but what if I can guess? What if I said his name began with S, and considered that of his homestead hardly justified by the facts, save insomuch as every man's dwelling is his Castle?"

Tom's face convicted him. It was transfigured with amazement. The travellers exchanged significant glances, and proceeded to regard him with an interest obviously redoubled.

"How did you know?" he cried.

"I knew nothing. I only guessed."

"But how?"

"More convicts abscond from that particular establishment than from any other in the Colony. Then I perceive that you are suffering from fifty lashes —"

"A hundred!"

"Indeed?—and more convicts are flogged on that farm than on any other in the land. A nice place! I know something about it—I intend knowing more."

Slipper laughed.

"But you mustn't let a hundred lashes depress you," resumed the little grey man, in his smooth and soothing voice. "Why, my friend Wall-eye here had sixteen hundred in three years—on the same farm, mind you!—before he came to me. What do you think of that? But it's high time I presented you to my friends. That's Wall-eye, this is Slipper, and over there you see De Gruchy scowling at you; but don't be frightened; he's been scowling at us all the whole evening," said the little man, with a gleam of his eyes behind their glasses. "You needn't trouble your head about De Gruchy! The heathen's name is Peter Pindar; he will provide for your needs in one moment; and *my* name is Hookey Simpson, at your service!"

His manner all through had been so softly grandiose as to point the humour of this anti-climax, which, however, was now lost upon Tom. He was too busy trying to remember where he had heard the name of Hookey Simpson before. And he had remembered nothing when soap and water were put before him by the blackfellow, followed immediately by a supply of lukewarm mutton, which kept him silent for some time.

Meanwhile his entertainers kept silence, too; but replenished the fire and lit their pipes with the burning brands; and rested their eyes on Tom in a medi-

tative fashion while he ate. It was he who became communicative when he had finished. Suddenly thinking of it, he told them of the ghastly discovery he had made among those very trees, about an hour before.

The effect was curious. Neither Hookey Simpson nor Wall-eye nor Slipper seemed in the least surprised or perturbed; but De Gruchy showed teeth as white as those of the corpse, and ground them horribly; and Hookey Simpson fixed his spectacles upon De Gruchy, leaning forward with the tip of his hook between finger and thumb.

"The fact is," said Tom, "I thought it must be the work of that Italian brigand-fellow."

All but De Gruchy burst out laughing.

"And when I first saw your fire," he added, "I thought you must be his band!"

All but De Gruchy laughed louder than before. De Gruchy hid his sullen, foreign face in his hands. And the little grey man held up his hook for silence.

"We are!" said he.

"What? Bushrangers after all?"

"The band you speak of."

"Then where's the Italian?"

"You saw him for yourself about an hour ago!"

And the little man's eyes were twinkling through their horn-rimmed lenses as if he had made a joke. But there was no more laughing outright, though Tom heard Slipper chuckle and De Gruchy snarl. As for himself, he was shuddering in the most mortifying fashion under the fascinating spectacles of the little grey man.

"That was your leader!" he stammered out.

"So he flattered himself."

"And I thought it was his handiwork!"

"It was mine," said Hookey Simpson coolly; indeed, a benign smile accompanied the confession, as though it were a public service he had performed, with the utmost mercy. But Tom thought of the stripped body with the torn ears; and those living faces, lit up by the crackling camp-fire, lived ever after in his mind, in the yet more lurid light of this dreadful revelation.

The high forehead, the twinkling spectacles, the grey tufts and the polished hook of the elderly man; the broad, keen, flashing blade with which Slipper sat paring his finger-nails; the wall-eyes' hard, dead stare; the knotted hands that hid De Gruchy's face, and the blue-black hair in turn hiding half his fingers; the harmless playing-cards upon the ground; the ruddy, genial fire; and the white, the watchful moon, peering through a screen of trembling leaves: all these were as pieces of a mosaic, inlaid at this instant in Tom Erichsen's brain, for him to carry there to his grave.

"So you killed him yourself?" he found himself saying at last, in a stouter voice.

"I did," said Hookey. "I was under that painful necessity this very afternoon. It wasn't done for the fun of the thing, you understand, but only when it became evident that one of us must go. I naturally preferred to stay. At the same time, I must admit I was wearying of being hectorred and bullied by a con-founded foreigner; and there were three of us Englishmen of the same mind; so you perceive how it all fitted in. Last night we had words. Now, a house divided against itself cannot stand; neither can a band of bush-rangers, much less when the mounted police are on their track!"

"Are they?" cried Tom.

"Maybe within fifteen miles," replied Hookey Simpson; "maybe within five. An ensign, two sergeants and eighteen troopers, as I understand; but never mind them. We two had words; they had been coming on for weeks. Well, there were three on my side and only two on his; so we made it up, but lay and watched each other with one eye open all night. This afternoon, at his suggestion, we rode behind together, to come to some understanding. But I saw him looking at me queerly," said the little grey man, "and that was enough for me. When I galloped after these good fellows our number was reduced by one, but the little question of leadership was at an end."

"A good job too!" cried Slipper; and Wall-eye nodded a grave assent.

"You see, the change is not unpopular," continued Hookey modestly; "though I'm bound to add that I don't see how it could be — among Englishmen. What was he before they kicked him out of his own country? The word that described our friend Barabbas was already applicable to the late lamented. But what was I before circumstances compelled me to leave mine? What do you suppose? Come, give a guess," said Hookey Simpson.

"You talk like a parson," suggested Tom, to compliment the wretch.

"And I was next door to one!" cried the little man, beaming benevolently. "A schoolmaster! A pedagogue! A pattern to the village, and its model churchwarden, until an accursed organ-fund brought trouble in its train. So here I am, and here I was while our late friend was cutting throats in Italy; yet he thinks I'm

going to knuckle under to him for ever! Likely, wasn't it? No, no; he was a bold-enough man, but he'd met another. And I venture to say that to-night — my first in command — we're on a bigger job than we ever should have tackled under friend Francisco!"

"Hear, hear!" cried Slipper, while Wall-eye nodded again, and Tom caught an evil gleam between De Gruchy's fingers. There followed a pause, for the mellifluous grey man had taken off his spectacles and was breathing on the lenses with as tranquil a deliberation as though he were still in the village school-room, ruling innocent children, instead of grown men as infamous as himself.

Tom watched him still; indeed, his eyes had scarcely left this venerable villain from the moment it appeared he was one; and now his fascination was complete. He glanced at his own legs, crossed in unconscious imitation of the little bushranger; and his trousers were all stained, and his boots still stiff, from the blood that had run down and into them, drawn by the lash. Then he looked at Hookey, so wicked and strong and sly, and his heart leapt as he had never thought to feel it leap again. Here was the man for a whipped dog to follow! He leant eagerly forward, and begged and craved admission to the band, as another might have pleaded for his life.

Hookey Simpson surveyed him strangely. "Well, well," said he, "I was thinking it would never do to leave you here."

"Why not?"

"You were probably heading for the sea."

"I was."

"Well, the ensign and his men are, without a doubt,

between the sea and ourselves. You might have fallen in with them."

"That would have been my look-out."

"Mine too, perhaps."

"What do you mean?"

"You might have put them on my scent."

Tom had seen it coming, yet he lost his temper when it came.

"So you think that of me?" he cried. "You see how I've been treated, and yet you think that!"

"I did think it," was the reply. "I don't say I do now. No; it never occurred to me to trust you on the grounds you suggest."

"Then what did it occur to you to do?"

Hookey Simpson shrugged his shoulders, as one who would rather not say.

"To tie me to a tree, perhaps, and leave me there to starve?"

Hookey Simpson bit his thin lips to avoid smiling, but bent his grey head when that was impossible; and Tom, bending his, saw that the cork was off the polished steel hook, and its point as sharp as a needle. The little grey man was feeling it with his thumb, as he still tried to swallow his smiles.

"I see!" said Tom in a low voice. "Yes, now I see!"

"We never do things by halves," observed Hookey, sucking a bead of blood, not without ostentation, from the end of his thumb. "We do them with all our might."

"So I see," repeated Tom. "Well, and so do I! You stick at nothing — I'll stick at less. I'll be with you in what you please — from whist to wholesale murder — only give me the chance! Man alive, can't you

see for yourself I'm as desperate as any of you? Haven't you told me the mounted police are between me and the sea? Then what do you suppose I want with my life, except to sell it as dear as possible, and be done with it as quick? I tell you," cried Tom, "I'm the very man for you! See here: you're one short. Take me in his place, and serve me the same if I turn out worse than my word!"

His sudden vehemence, his impassioned manner, his fevered and infuriated eyes, all had their effect upon the bushrangers, who now (with the exception of Peter Pindar and De Gruchy) got up and held a whispered consultation some few paces from the fire. Tom watched them eagerly, and each time the wall-eyes or the fire-lit spectacles were turned upon him, he made ready to rise. But now and then they glanced at De Gruchy instead, who was still nursing a sullen face, and at such times their whispers fell lower still, so that Tom was at once startled and interested when a new voice gobbled in his ear:—

"Yabber-yabber 'longa *him*—him bael budgerie—him no dam' use!"

It was Peter Pindar, whose oily locks and curling beard nodded disgustedly in De Gruchy's direction.

"Why not?" said Tom. "What has he done?"

"Him good-fellow belonging¹ Francisco," replied the black. "Me leave 'm alonga Francisco, me Hookey Simp'on. Bael budgerie; me leave 'm alonga good-fellow, my word!"

And the simian face grinned from ear to ear, in each of which Tom now beheld a gold ear-ring smeared with blood. But he was determined to be horrified no more;

¹Friend of.

and, the trio beckoning him, he joined them with what alacrity he could, in the strait-waistcoat of stiff wounds which now imprisoned him.

"Well," began the little grey man, "we're going to give you a trial!"

Tom broke out with impious thanks which the other instantly cut short.

"Stop till you hear what that means," said Hookey. "It means that we saddle up straight away — and stick up Castle Sullivan before morning. It means that you've got to make yourself extra useful there, since you know the place. So what do you say to it now?"

For the moment Tom could say nothing at all. He was too surprised; and, in his surprise, he was thinking of the Sullivans and sweet revenge, of the detested spot he meant never to see again, and of Peggy who must be protected — all at once.

"Well?" said Hookey. "You know the place. What do you say?"

"I'm known there, too!"

"What of that?"

"They'd make a mark of me. The Sullivans would have me back alive or dead. Then I have enemies among the men — they'd side against me out of spite."

"Well, we shall all wear masks."

Tom glanced down at his regulation jacket, shoes and trousers; took off his regulation cap, and shook his head.

"It would never be enough. There are too many of them wearing the very same as these."

"Then you'll just have to take your chance," said Hookey sharply. "Or you may kneel down and say your prayers!"

"Stop!" said Slipper.

"Well, what now?"

"Francisco's rig!"

Hookey considered the suggestion, and finally accepted it, though with an evil grace.

"All right—out with them," said he. "And you slip into them, young fellow, without more of your jaw. We sha'n't wait for you. Saddle up there, saddle up, or we'll never get off to-night!"

The little grey man was altogether changed. The long mellifluous word gave way to the monosyllable of short and sharp command; the horn spectacles seemed to kindle and flash to right, left and centre all at once; and yet, in three or four minutes, they were bent as benignly as ever upon Tom, who was now, however, another man himself.

Long spurs, longer boots and a bright blue jacket with enormous buttons, though some sizes too large, became him wonderfully upon the whole; and a straw hat, such as Dr. Sullivan wore and the convicts plaited, but wreathed with leaves and berries in a foreign fashion, crowned a disguise which only required the mask to render it complete.

"Be good enough to turn round," said Hookey Simpson, with his former urbanity, and some perceptible amusement.

Tom did so; and there was De Gruchy still sitting in the moonlight, with his head between his hands; and the others as busy as bees.

"Now turn back again—and many thanks! That was an admirable idea of Slipper's; they'll take you for Francisco himself, and on the whole it's just as well they should. Yet, mind you, he was a pretty hard nut! You mustn't disgrace his cloth!"

Tom was shaking his head when there was a loud cry of "Francisco! Francisco!" behind him; and he turned in time to catch De Gruchy on his knees, with his clasped hands raised, and a face of ashes that broke into flames as the apparition of the dead man resolved itself into the newcomer in the dead man's clothes. With a single bound the Frenchman was upon him; the hat was torn off; and a gasping, glaring figure crouched with it in both hands, as the others rushed up and closed about him.

"Calm yourself, calm yourself," said Hookey Simpson, stepping forward. He laid an arm upon the Frenchman's shoulder. It was the arm that ended in a hook, but the cork still guarded its terrible point. Nevertheless, the man's face went white again; he started forward, but Hookey Simpson pushed him back. In a moment they were on the ground together.

This was all Tom had seen; all he now saw was Hookey Simpson getting to his feet, with the burst cork forced high up the hook, which gleamed in the moonlight as bright and cleanly as before.

"So that's all right!" said the little grey man, adjusting his spectacles, which had become crooked in the fray. "Half a heart is worse than no man, and as he couldn't get on without the other heathen, why, it was the kindest thing to do. What's more, gentlemen, I rather think that our young recruit here is going to prove himself worth the two of them put together!"

And Tom got a playful prod with the round part of that murderous hook; and yet stood his ground, though De Gruchy lay flat on his face, with the moon beating down on his neck, and on a dark blob there in much the same place as that other mortal wound, which now puzzled Tom no more.

CHAPTER XXVII

ADVENTURES OF A SUBSTITUTE

It presently appeared that Tom had not travelled above a dozen miles towards the sea he fancied he had smelt at eighteen; but this he declined to believe until the grey man produced a tattered map and pricked out the positions with his hook. Tom then gave in, but climbed into De Gruchy's saddle with incomplete convictions upon the point. The delirium of his famished flight still magnified both the time and the space which it had covered. Thinking of the murder done before his eyes, and looking on these villains whom he had joined, he could half believe he was delirious still. The incredible thing was that in two more hours he would be back upon that hated spot whither he had sworn never to return alive.

But a man's fate was stronger than his will, as it seemed to Tom during that midnight ride, when not care, but a very merciful sort of fatalism, sat behind the reckless horseman. Fatalistic he had felt before, but never with this result; hitherto the feeling had only deepened his despair, whereas now it was his single solace. It consoled him for the horrors he had countenanced that night; it even nerved him for what deeds he must himself commit before the night was out.

In the law's eye he was a branded murderer as it was. He seemed destined to deserve that brand. He would kick no more against a fate so plain and so persistent. So he decided as he rode, too slowly for his spirit, to deliberate crime. For (despite philosophy) his one

immediate longing was for a gallop to rekindle blood which the murder of De Gruchy had turned from fire to ice; and a greater comfort than he would have owned to himself came of his resolve to save and protect Peggy and Miss Sullivan from this ruthless crew. Otherwise he was one of them, and would play his part. But he was not yet the villain he had hoped.

Objective details impressed him little at the time. And yet he was left with the very sharpest memories of floating gum-trees and a drooping moon; of the masks they all put on, and the battered top-hat that Hookey wore above his; the pistols that they loaded, and the brace of horse-pistols handed to himself; the little conversation on the way; the startling of an old-man kangaroo, that shone an instant grey and glossy in the moonlight, then boomed and bounded into silence and the shades; of all such things, in fact, to the final plan of attack and division of villainy, made almost within sight of the devoted homestead.

At the time, however, though Tom listened (as he thought) attentively, and was much consulted on the strength of his present knowledge of the place, he grasped very little beyond his own instructions. He was to show them the overseer's hut (the night-watchman would already be on their side or dead), then he was to station himself beneath the great bell, and to ring it furiously so soon as Ginger was hauled out and his hut set well on fire. Tom was also to answer to the name of Francisco, and to affect a foreign accent, because the Italian's terrible reputation had been the best part of him.

The bell and the fire were calculated to tempt both Sullivans forth unarmed. At all costs those two were

to be taken alive. "And then!" said the little man, poking Wall-eye in the ribs with his hook.

"What then?" inquired Tom.

"We shall do unto them as we've all been done by."

"But you were never here yourself?"

"Next door to it," returned Hookey Simpson. "I was at Strachan's, and this old tyrant ordered me my fifties. We'll see how he likes them himself — just for a start!"

"I wish it was Strachan's we were coming to!" muttered Tom, with a flash of his former passion.

"It'll be his turn next."

"But when?"

"To-morrow — if all goes well."

"Then you don't mean to stop at Castle Sullivan?" cried Tom, amazed.

"You'll see," rejoined Hookey, "and so shall I. There's no saying where I may stop with seventy convicts at my back!"

Seventy convicts! That was the rough number at Castle Sullivan. Then what was this to which the little man was leading them? No petty robbery, after all? A grand rebellion instead? Tom's heart lightened at the thought. He gazed at the confident little man — looking more like a monkey dressed up as a highwayman and perched upon a horse — and he felt that he could have followed so spirited a leader with all the spirit he himself had left but for the thing that had been done before his eyes that night. There was no more, however, to be said; they were at the farm.

At the gate (not the gate of former scenes; this one lay east beyond the stables) all dismounted but the little general, who was to keep his saddle as generals do. The

others led their horses to the stables, and while Wall-eye stalled them, Tom showed Slipper and the black his old lair. Another convict had succeeded him as groom, and in a few moments young Brummy was dragged forth by Peter Pindar. So far from offering any resistance, however, the obliging youth at once put himself at the bush-rangers' disposal. His zeal and enthusiasm augured well for the other seventy in the huts. Under his eager guidance the watchman, Roberts, was immediately captured in his sleep beneath the bell; whereupon that official joined the enemy with no more demur than Brummy; indeed he went the length of shaking hands with the supposed Italian, and personally thanking him for having come at last.

Hookey on his horse cut this profession short and drove both prisoners before him towards the overseer's hut, which Tom had already pointed out. The latter was now left in charge of the bell-rope, with a last order not to ring until the hut was well ablaze.

"I thought *he* was gov'nor?" Tom heard Roberts remark.

"The less you think the better," retorted Hookey. "But about this overseer of yours: a ticket-of-leave, I understand? A true man, eh?" By which term Hookey meant its opposite.

"I doubt it," said Roberts.

"Then all the worse for him!"

Ginger's hut was but a few yards from the bell. Tom heard them enter and held his breath. The door was shut, and then he heard no more.

In the main building all was dark and still. He watched it keenly, with his ears, as it were, upon the hut behind. At last the door re-opened, and he heard

the striking of lucifers accompanied by another sound, as of something being dragged from the hut. He looked round, and it was Ginger's bed. The overseer lay upon it, bound and gagged.

Tom drew a deep breath. He had expected worse.

Brummy and Roberts were now despatched to the convicts' huts, to tell the rest, at the right moment, what was happening, and how they would all be free men within an hour if they abstained from interference, but dead men if they did not. Then the black crept up close to the palisade, while Hookey rode to one side and the other two hid behind trees. Meanwhile the overseer's hut was beginning to crackle, and all at once Tom saw the shadow of his tree leap out towards the palisade upon a ground of glaring red.

"Ring! Ring!" cried Hookey from his horse.

Almost with his words a terrific clang, clang, clang, burst out from amid the red-gum's leaves. And almost with the alarum, a couple of white figures leapt out into the red glare behind the palisade.

Tom stood and watched like an actor who has forgotten he is on the stage himself.

He saw the white figures dash through the gate, and a black one glide in front of it next moment. He saw Nat Sullivan stop running, seize his father's arm and point excitedly towards the burning hut. He saw them both about to turn, when the son was lifted off his legs as though he had been an infant; and there were coal-black arms entwined about his night-shirt, and snow-white teeth grinning over his shoulder. Hookey Simpson galloped up; Slipper and Wall-eye darted from behind their trees. All had pistols in their hands and masks upon their faces. And the masks reminded Tom

that he was looking on through one himself, and had no business to be a looker-on at all.

He had vaguely wondered why the bell was still ringing; now he let go the rope, and ran a step or two forward. But they were four to two without him, and the four were armed, and watch he must.

The Sullivans were being dragged or driven backward upon the palisade. Tom could make little of the swaying, struggling group, for Hookey Simpson brought up the rear on his horse; but through the animal's legs he had glimpses of fluttering calico and sparkling spurs, as the glare grew more and more intense. It was now as light as day. Every board of the main building stood out, in abnormal detail, against a blackened sky, while the shadows of the palisade made a glowing gridiron of the yard within.

The scuffle was over; something was happening that Tom could not see, when a flake of red-hot bark lit upon his ear. He was face-about in time to see the roof of the burning hut tumble in, and a column of clean flame spout high into the night. And there was the wretched Ginger, writhing in his bonds within reach of the burning walls, and with the flame of a fallen brand licking the very camp-bed on which he lay.

This time Tom did not forget his part; he ignored it, and had the overseer out of harm's way in a few seconds; in two more his mask was among the rest, and his pistol pointed with the others at the two white figures that now stood side by side against the palisade — with torn night-shirts and clenched fists — defenceless, but still defiant.

"Now look you here, my fine gentlemen!" exclaimed Hookey from his saddle. "If you've got any sense between you, let's see you show it. You'll only cut

things shorter if you don't. What chance do you think you've got? Ah!—it's too late to look that way now, you old fool!"

The doctor's eyes were on his convict huts; the men were pouring out of them pell-mell. Hookey Simpson wheeled his horse, and rode up to them with a magnificent air; dropping his reins to wave his battered chimney-pot, as if it were a general's cocked hat.

"My lads," cried he, "your kind master would call upon you to stand by him in his hour of need. Now's the time to show him your gratitude. Stop! stop!—not all of you at once!" And with his horse he stemmed a rush of zealous spirits who explained themselves in chorus as they unwillingly fell back.

"Stand by him?" cried one. "Get at him, you mean! Only give us the word, and we'll take him off your hands—"

"And cut his throat—"

"An' slit his juggler—"

"And Nat's after—"

"The bluidy tyrants!"

Hookey waved them back.

"Is there a single man who'll take the coves' side in the time of need? Let him speak now or for ever after hold his mouth!"

Not a convict stirred.

"Then," said Hookey, "you leave the rest to us, and don't you interfere. You're dead men if you do, but free men if you stop where you are. Your blood be on your own heads!"

And he cantered back to the palisade, with his chimney-pot hat on the side of his head, and the hook stuck rakishly against his ribs.

Tom ran up to him and caught his rein.

"The women have got into the store — I saw the light — it's where they keep the guns — will you leave them to me?"

"No bloodshed, then: they're scarce!"

"I'll make them prisoners."

"And none of your larks just yet!"

Tom was gone. With a horse-pistol in each hand he dashed into the store, and caught Peggy and Miss Sullivan in the act of lifting down the fowling-pieces.

"Surrender!" he roared.

Miss Sullivan shrieked and hid her face. Peggy advanced.

"Shoot a woman if you dare," said she. "'Tis me that dares ye!"

"Peggy!" he whispered.

"Tom!"

"I am here to save you both. Do as I tell you and make her do the same. I'm here to save you both!" he repeated aloud. "There are horses in the stable. Come with me and I'll put you on them. Undo those outer doors, Peggy."

He had said her name by accident. She gave him a warning glance. And now Miss Sullivan stood her ground steadfastly, and having recovered that mettle which was in the blood, refused to move until she knew what they were going to do with her father and brother.

"Nothing at all," said Tom. "It's you they're after."

"Me, indeed!"

"The two of you," said Tom. "The men are all right, they've given in; but they'll carry off the women if they can — though not if I know it."

By this time Peggy O'Brien had unfastened the great

outer doors at which the store-drays could unload without entering the yard; in another moment Tom had both women out in the open, with the front west angle of house between them and the palisade. Even the burning hut was thus hidden from their view. Yet the voice of Hookey Simpson sounded dreadfully close.

"You shall lay it on yourselves," he was shouting out. "Let the man who had the last fifty come forward and lay on the first."

"That's me," said Macbeth's voice. "Gi'e us the cat!"

There was none.

"Then the auld cove's cane."

Tom had seized Miss Sullivan by the arm.

"I don't stir!" she declared. "Not one step!"

"Then worse will come of it."

"But my father!"

"It's idle threats — they don't mean a word of it."

"Ah, miss, come on!" urged Peggy in an agony for Tom.

"She shall!" he muttered, with the nozzle of one pistol against the lady's neck; and so between them they got her to the back of the house, and thence across the open space to the stables. As they ran Tom turned his head, and just saw one end of a chain of ruddy convict faces, all horribly intent upon some unseen spectacle before the palisade.

The stable proper faced the open gate through which the bushrangers had ridden. Their saddled horses stood two in a stall, and Tom was backing out a couple when he discovered Peggy meddling with a third. He told her three would not be wanted.

"An' what about you?"

"I stay with my mates."

"Wid thim murtherin' vill'ns?"

"I'm one myself!"

"Already?" she cried. "Tom — Tom —"

It was his turn to hold up a warning hand.

Miss Sullivan stood listening at the door; but not to them.

Tom listened too.

For some instants all was still.

Then a thwack, thwack, thwack was greeted with a yell of savage joy; and Miss Sullivan was gone from the door.

"Let her go," cried Tom, seizing Peggy's wrist. "I did my best for her. You at all events shall be saved!"

"Not without you, Tom."

"Nonsense, Peggy; I must see this through."

"An' so must I, then!"

With these words she set her back to the open door; but there stood Tom, looking past and beyond her, as though he had not heard one of them. Presently a soft laugh came from his lips.

"All right, Peggy! You are safer than I thought. Look behind you!"

The girl obeyed; and there, trotting two abreast through the open gate, were a score of troopers, with the glare from the still blazing hut reddening their whiskered faces, jewelling their spurs, and gilding from hilt to point the waving sword of the lad who rode at their head.

Peggy stood aghast with an amazement that left no room for thought; it was only when the cavalcade had swept close by, and so out of sight, at a gallop, that she heard Tom speaking to her from a height. He had himself mounted one of the horses, and was entreating her to stand aside and let him out.

And then she realised how the situation had reversed itself, and how he was now the one to fly and gallop for his life. Without a word she sprang out of his way. He clattered under the lintel and was gone. She came out to see him gallop through the open gate. He had already vanished, but not that way; he had dashed to the assistance of his rascally mates.

But a dozen shots had been fired already, and blue wreaths were curling in the glare like clouds at sunset. Wall-eye lay stretched upon his face. Slipper and the aboriginal were fighting desperately back to back, but both were wounded, and their moments numbered. Troopers surrounded them; others were already endeavouring to restore order among the convicts; while one—a sergeant—was being dragged and bumped about, with one foot twisted in his stirrup, and his dead face smothered with blood.

Tom looked about for Hookey Simpson, and found him on the verge of shaking off four troopers and the ensign. One saddle he had emptied with his pistol; as Tom came near he hooked the ensign out of his, but was within an ace of being dragged to the ground in doing so. The ensign's stock gave way and saved him. Ere he could recover himself, a trooper took deliberate aim at the little man. Tom saw him, however, and fired point-blank at the outstretched arm; it fell; and the next Tom knew was that he and Hookey were galloping neck and neck for the gate, with but one pursuer close upon them.

Hookey had apparently received no hurt. The battered hat was off and his benevolent forehead rose high and white above his mask; it was to be Tom's last memory of the little grey man. He had thrown away

one pistol, drawn another, and turned to fire it with every furrow of that fine brow showing in the glare. But Tom heard the man behind fire first, and saw those furrows leap into space like snapped fiddle-strings; and he galloped through the gate alone.

Whether the slayer came to grief over the slain, or how else to account for it, Tom never knew; but he now got a start which he was destined to keep and to increase. Now also he began for the first time to appreciate the piece of hard-bitten horse-flesh between his knees. He had taken the dead Italian's roan, which had been led riderless to the farm, and was thus comparatively fresh. It was a great gaunt brute, with a mouth like leather, as Tom had discovered to his cost in the skirmish. Once through the gate, however, he felt that no more: the beast had run away without his knowing it.

Indeed he knew very little for the first few minutes except that the moon was setting at his back, and he was once more heading for the sea. This he gathered from the grotesque shadow leaping along between the roan's ears; his first conscious effort was to keep that shadow dead ahead. Now he lost it where the timber thickened, now he found it in an open glade. At length the shadow failed and vanished, and it was very dark indeed. But on went the roan with Tom on its withers to avoid invisible boughs; and when the sky lightened he could have shouted for joy, for the roan's ears took shape against its lightest point.

He did not shout because his pursuers would have heard him; for all this time he had heard them at intervals; and whenever the ground changed from hard to soft, their hoofs rang out the instant the roan's were muffled.

The joy of that wild ride through the gum-trees to the sea! He forgot the little value he had set upon his life, and rode for it now as men ride for nothing else. Yet he recked but little of the result. He knew no fears and no regrets, but instead an exhilaration such as he had never known before. It might be his last hour. He revelled in it the more — was the more grateful for it — on that account. To have tasted such life as this at life's end! To die after this with no more pain! To reach the sweet sea, and swim out to rest!

And now he smelt it; the rushing air was spiced with salt; even in the pungent forest he detected it through all the odours, and was mistaken in that no more. Only one question remained in his mind. Would the roan hold out? Would the roan hold out?

Long ago the pace had slackened. Long ago Tom had stooped and ripped his big boots down to the ankles, and cast them from him with all else that had been the Italian's. He was now riding a light ten stone in his shirt and trousers. His bare feet were numb from standing in his stirrups to ease the roan. But the trees had been rushing past in myriads half the night; and still they stood against the morning sky-line, like blots of ink upon a slate, in myriads more.

On the other hand, he had heard nothing of his pursuers for some time, and was beginning to wonder whether they had given up the chase. Their horses might well have started less fresh than his. Had they given it up or had they not?

Tom had asked himself the question for the twentieth time when something happened and he had his answer sitting stupidly on the ground. The roan was disappearing amid the trees with the saddle beneath its belly;

its startled gallop died away like the roll of a drum; but heavier hoofs were coming up behind.

Tom sprang up, but sat down again with a yelp of pain. His ankle was badly sprained. He felt for a weapon, but he had thrown them all away; even his knife he seemed to have hurled after the long boots, or left in a pocket of the blue jacket, which had been jettisoned in its turn.

He sat still and groaned. To have to surrender sitting still! What an end to his ride! What a beginning of the end of all!

The heavy hoofs came nearer, nearer. Three troopers laboured into view, gave a yell and put spurs to their tired horses, but ceased to spur them when they saw their man.

"Why, who are you?" cried they.

"The man you want."

"I wish you were! You're all we shall get with these horses. But you must have heard him pass?"

A light broke over Tom; he said he had heard it, but some time since, when it was darker and he was half-asleep.

"And what made you think *you* were our man?" asked another trooper suspiciously.

"I—I—I'm a runaway convict."

"Then you're better than nothing," cried the former speaker. "You'll come with us; but the man we've lost is an Italian, and there's precious little of the Italian about you!"

There was less than little: he had thrown everything away, but without a thought of saving his neck by so doing. Nor indeed had he saved it yet.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE OUTER DARKNESS

THE stockade smouldered in the midst of a hard-baked plain, that was as brown as shoe-leather, and as devoid of any sort or kind of vegetation as though it were shaved every morning with some monstrous razor. Trees there were in the distance, marking more than half the sky-line, as though the place had been shaved especially for the stockade; but not a solitary bush was within reach. And the sight of the trees whose leaves they never heard, and whose shade they never felt, was one more torment to those of the eighty prisoners who still lifted their heads to look so far; the majority, however, let their dull eyes redden by the day together on those few hard and blinding yards which might chance to occupy their picks and shovels from five in the morning till the going-down of the sun.

All day they laboured in chains beneath the barrels and bayonets of the military. In the evening, when they returned to the stockade, loaded muskets and fixed bayonets showed them the way. Even in the stockade itself, fixed bayonets and loaded muskets gave them their supper. Thereafter they were locked up for the night in so many small boxes, lined with ledges something more spacious than book-shelves; on these ledges they lay down, as close as mummies in catacombs, until it should be five o'clock once more; and perhaps, after a time, the only sound would be the clank of his fetters as this man or that turned over, in the magnificent space of eighteen inches that was allotted to each.

It was the same stockade of which Erichsen had seen the outside on his way to Castle Sullivan in the early part of December; he saw the inside by the end of February, when Strachan gave him six months of it for absconding, and by so doing made open enemies of the Sullivans. They wanted to have the breaking of Tom's spirit all to themselves, and tried to dictate another fifty lashes and the convict's return to service; but this time Strachan was firm, passing, indeed, the most merciful sentence possible in the circumstances.

The six months began on Wednesday, the last of February, in the year 1838.

First they took his name and made an inventory of his marks, scars and the colour of his eyes and hair; then they cropped the latter, and shaved off the yellow stubble which had lately hidden the hollow cheeks and softened the haggard jaw. And it was an old man's face that saw itself with sunken eyes in the barber's glass.

Next they took away his farm-labourer's clothes, which were not branded, and put him in a Parramatta frock and trousers, which were. And now they clasped round his body a green-hide belt, from which depended, in front, a heavy chain that became two heavy chains at about the level of the knees; and the two chains ended in still heavier rings round either ankle; and the whole made a capital Y upside down. In this harness it was impossible to walk, though with practice you might waddle; and it was never struck off, for a single instant, on any pretext whatsoever.

They now presented him with a spoon all to himself; his knife and fork, his pannikin and his mess-kid, he was to share with five other felons.

Lastly they showed him his eighteen inches, where he passed the intolerable night in wondering why he had not given himself up as the Italian's understudy; and in wondering, even more, why he still would not do so if it were all to come over again — for he knew he would not. Indeed, one of the most dreadful features of this present phase was the tenacity with which the poor wretch found himself clinging to life in each emergency, despite all his cooler longings for the end. He longed for that more than ever, but he saw now that death must come to him. He might sink to murder; to self-murder he could never stoop.

Or so he thought at the beginning of this term of broiling days and fetid nights, with foul company and heavy irons common to both. The combined effect of all these things will presently be seen. Meanwhile such feelings as were left him were still tolerably keen; and it was with a real thrill that, towards the end of the first week, he woke up at his work to hear the others hooting, and turned round to see Nat Sullivan once more riding down the line.

The thrill became a shiver: the blue eyes were fixed on Tom, the great lip was thrust out at him, and before Tom the rider reined up.

"You villain!" said Mr. Nat, with inexpressible malignancy of voice and look. "You villain—I've found you out!"

A line of red eyes blinked and watered in the sun, then fell with a glimmer of interest from the scowling horseman to the prisoner accosted. Tom had already piqued such attention as his new companions were in the habit of bestowing upon any fellow-creature: for few there were who joined that morose and fierce crew

with the stamp of such moroseness and ferocity already on them. Those few were crabbed old hands, but here was raw youth, and yet in three long days they had not heard his voice. Nor did they now. Tom moistened his palms, and took a new grip of his pick—but that was not all. He was seen to tremble, and he nearly pinned his own foot to the ground. What was it he had done and been found out in, this cub whose teeth were always showing, but whose voice was never heard?

A perspiring sentry strolled up, his once red swallow-tail coat hanging open upon his naked chest, and his white trousers sticking to his legs; he was the only one whose curiosity went the length of a word.

"What's he been doing of?" said the sentry, wetting his hand on his chest to cool his musket-stock. "We've only 'ad 'im 'ere these three days."

"You won't have him many more," said Sullivan. "The hangman will have him."

"Yes?"

"Yes. Look at him trembling!"

"I see."

"He'll tremble in the air before long!"

Tom bent over his pick. There was more hooting here, but whether at himself or at his enemy Tom neither knew nor cared. He wished to appear very busy and regardless; he was really intent upon Nat's shadow under his pick; wondering whether he could possibly spring so far forward in his chains and get such a swing as to bury the pick in the substance instead. But this was never known. When the hooting subsided, the noise of light wheels approaching took its place, and Nat Sullivan turned round in his saddle.

The military man who debased himself by the charge

of this iron-gang was a major of gunners, too fat for service, and too gouty to sustain his distended body on his legs; he therefore superintended operations from a bath-chair, in which a blue-jacketed mess-man had to trail him about the works. Major Honeybone had recognised Nat, and had ordered the mess-man to hurry to the spot, but not to seem in a hurry. The major was himself a sufficiently hard and cantankerous man, but some sense of justice he had, and he considered Castle Sullivan one of the angriest plague-spots in a plague-spotted land. The present occasion filled him, therefore, with the greatest glee. He had long desired an opportunity of giving one or other of the Sullivans a piece of his mind, and here was young Sullivan trespassing on the works.

"Go slower," said the major, making up his mind what to say, and not to say it all at once, as Mr. Nat turned in his saddle. Their greeting was in consequence not uncivil, though the major blandly ignored the coarse, ringed hand obtruded by the other.

"You heard of the outrage the other night at Castle Sullivan?" began Mr. Nat.

"By bushrangers?" observed Major Honeybone.

"By bushrangers; only one of them escaped; and there he is!" roared Nat, pointing savagely at Tom.

"Really?" remarked the major, wilfully unmoved.

"Dear me! It was from you he came here — like half my gang — for absconding, I understood?"

"We didn't know it then."

"That he was one of the bushrangers?"

"Yes."

"But you know it now?"

"We do so!"

"Dear me!" again remarked the major, whose expression was rendered inscrutable by the rich shade of the gigantic umbrella without which he rarely ventured abroad. His small, shrewd eyes glanced from the visitor to Tom, who was still looking down, and fidgeting with his pick, the speaking image of sullen guilt. More repulsive to the major was the gloating ruffian in the saddle; but he signed to the sentry to take away Tom's pick, and then favoured the other with a slow, contemplative stare.

"A very singular thing, I'm sure," he resumed, with a sarcastic intonation that punctured even Nat's thick skull. "Very singular indeed. Upon my word, Mr. Sullivan," exclaimed the major, "I find it difficult to believe what you say!"

"Sir!"

"Or, if you like, to understand it."

"If you will allow me to say the rest, and to say it elsewhere—"

"No, sir. Here!" cried Major Honeybone. "Here or nowhere, which you please. This man absconds one night—so I gather—and the next night you are attacked by bushrangers. This man is found the morning after that, and I understand you to suggest he was one of the band that attacked you. Yet you never recognised him at the time! Come now, did none of you?"

"Not then; but he threatened my sister and a female whom we have since returned, and Miss Sullivan remembers hearing him call the female by her name. Now this man and that woman kept company," snarled Nat, in a perfect flame of rage and spite; "and Miss Sullivan will swear he called the woman by her name. He fell in with the thieves when he absconded, it's perfectly

clear; he was the very man to join them in an attack on his own masters, even if he didn't instigate it. Join in it he did. I can prove it. Though not one of the original gang is left alive, I can prove —"

"What about that Italian fellow?" interrupted the major; and Tom held his breath.

"He wasn't in it. I believe *he's* dead, and they put this Erichsen in his clothes. His horse was found a few miles beyond where they found this man, and now his coat has been discovered with Erichsen's knife in the pocket. Yes, you may wince!" cried this good hater. "You shall swing for it yet!"

"Kindly confine your remarks to *me*," said the major sternly. "You'll have to prove the knife was his, and *that* won't prove everything. Never heard such a story in my life! You'll have to strengthen it up a bit if you mean to make a case. What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing at all," said Nat ungraciously.

"Then why the deuce do you come to me?"

"I didn't. I was on my way to your superiors."

Major Honeybone turned to the sentry.

"Cock your piece," said he, "and shoot his horse if he attempts to go till I've done with him. Now, you Sullivan," continued the major, "perhaps you didn't know you were trespassing when you came on these works? But you were, and you'll stop on 'em now till I've done with you. You came to gloat over the man you've hounded here, to tell him you'd hound him to the gallows, did you? To laugh at him, eh? Gadzooks, sir, the boot's on the other leg this time! The whole chain-gang is laughing at *you*; and you may frown upon 'em as much as you like, but if you touch one you'll be

in irons yourself in two minutes. I know you, sir. We know all about both of you here. Half the men who come here have been driven here by you and your father. Silence in the gang! Go on to Sydney and tell them anything you like about the man you mean to hang. But, gadzooks! you don't get him out of this — no, and the Governor himself sha'n't have him out of this until he knows on whose word he's acting! Go to my superiors; they'll never listen to your clumsy yarn; if they do, I'll send down to Sydney myself to tell 'em what I know of you and yours. And Castle Sullivan will be swept into the sea, and you — you slave-driver — you'll be where these men are now! Be off, sir. I hate the sight of you! Sentry, let him go."

About the middle of this tirade Nat had been ready with a retort as virulent; but the concluding sentences were too much even for his hard nerves and sturdy rufianism. Muttering something unintelligible about an "outrage," and "reporting" Major Honeybone, he put spurs to his horse and galloped off, leaving nothing worse behind him than a look. It was such a look as might be seen any day, any moment even, in an iron-gang; yet Tom never forgot the cruel eyes, the low lip, the murderous scowl, nor the peculiarly bestial whole which they made on that occasion. The convicts cursed and cheered him in derision; and, when he was gone, were given to understand by the major that if they ever did it again he should treat the lot of them as they would be treated at Castle Sullivan — to fifty lashes all round.

"Only *I* give you fair warning," said he, "and you don't catch me break my word either way!"

The major was a man who liked a little opposition for the sake of putting it down, which he never failed

to do with the highest hand; but he had his chain-gang in such an exemplary state of broken-spirited subjection that the iron will within that flabby body was growing rusty from disuse. The impudence of young Sullivan was consequently a godsend to this born martinet. It gave him an appetite, and it made him sleep. Furthermore, it fixed his eye on Erichsen, and to some extent his thoughts also. The major was harsh by habit but impartial to the core. He did not believe a syllable of Nat Sullivan's story; but why had Erichsen so taken it to heart? He alone had neither cursed nor cheered; the major was puzzled, but kept watch.

"Fancy he's a gentleman," said Honeybone, in a day or two; and he made inquiries.

The result of the inquiries was the information that Erichsen usually sulked; but when he was in a bad temper, he was more blasphemous than any man in the gang; when in a good one he was more foul.

"He *is* a gentleman — hem! — was," said the cocksure major. "Only it's the old story: the further they have to fall, the lower they sink. Poor devil — poor devil!" And old Honeybone sighed, for he had sunk a little too; and if his conscience was clear of crime, it was more or less saturated with sin, of which the perfume was not a little stale and sickly. Whether from that cause or another, the fat major found himself taking a more human interest in this prisoner than in most. "So that's the most profane tongue in the stockade!" he would think whenever he looked at Tom. "So that's the foulest mouth!"

It was not; but Tom was educated, and had an educated man's sense of emphasis and of selection. His bad things stuck — that was all.

But if those superlatives were not literally justified, others were, and before Tom had been six weeks in chains he had shown a temper as insubordinate, an audacity as brazen, and a callousness as shocking as anything of the sort which the major had yet encountered in his present capacity. It was the reaction from the sulky spirit in which the convict had begun his term. For two whole weeks he broke no rules, but in the next four he was three times flogged.

On the first occasion he knocked down the scourger when it was all over, and so brought it all over again; on the last, the major addressed him from his chair, as the convict positively swaggered from the triangles, with his fetters clanking and his shoes squelching at every step.

"You want to try Norfolk Island," said the major, "but you sha'n't."

Tom shook his head with an ugly sneer.

"The gallows, then," said the major, "is your game; but you're not going to get there either. I can show you as good sport as you'll show me, and we'll see who wins the game!"

It was nothing else to the combative major. He was growing younger for the exercise; he began to get about again on his legs. His only regret was for a palpably fine young fellow gone so utterly to the bad; for the rest, he found poor Tom as stimulating for some weeks as Nat Sullivan had proved on the occasion described. Nat, by the way, had returned to Castle Sullivan, ignobly crestfallen, but not so intoxicated as to ride by the stockade again in daylight. The major's superiors had confirmed that officer's opinion, and Peggy O'Brien, examined on her oath in Parramatta factory, had per-

jured herself for Tom in the most illusive and convincing manner. The Principal Superintendent had made a note of the affair; but there was no case, as Nat was pretty plainly told, and Major Honeybone heard no more of him for some time.

As a matter of fact, the bones of the Italian had also been discovered; but, as there were no clothes upon them, and the native dogs had left little else, they were never identified. So Tom was safer, for the moment, than he supposed. Meanwhile he had become a sort of hero among his degraded fellows; not the most popular sort, however, for enthusiasm is difficult in heavy fetters. Besides, he never tried to be popular.

He might have been, after knocking down the scourger. The man was a convict himself, who received 1s. 9d. a day for his unnatural services. It was the butcher over again, only this caitiff had eighty others always there to loathe him, and every hand could have shaken Tom's for that well-aimed blow. But the very next day they discovered he would as soon turn on them as on their common enemy.

The incident brought to light an interesting fact, and it happened on Tom's third Sunday in the stockade. About half the gang were incarcerated in the common mess-shed, idling, yarning, cursing and proceeding as fast as possible with that mutual corruption which was the chief fruit of this particular branch of secondary punishment. Tom was of the number, a conspicuous unit. It was the dawn of his prominence. He was in one of those good tempers alluded to already. Everybody was listening; those who could laugh still laughed now; and if he had a guardian angel, surely, surely, she must have been weeping then, more bitterly than when

he fought for the bushrangers at Castle Sullivan and put a bullet through a trooper's arm.

Suddenly something, an association, a reminiscence, a forgotten picture, made him want to weep himself; he was past that, however, and went back into the sulks instead. A new diversion being required, one was provided by the discovery of a young convict, a mere lad, writing a letter in a dark corner on the floor. On being detected, the lad first blushed, and then offered to read them what he had written; whereupon he opened his lips and a ribald stream poured forth, but meandered, slackened, faltered and was soon cut short.

"He's making it up as he goes along," cried several. "He never wrote that at all."

"We'll see what he did write," said one who was at hand, cuffing the lad, and snatching the unfinished letter.

With a cry and an uncouth chime from his irons, the young convict attempted to retain his property. It tore in his hand, and a dozen more held him down while the possessor dragged his chains on to one of the long, rude tables, and stood up to read the letter in a silence broken only by the protests of the wretched writer.

"My ever dear mother and father," the brute brawled out, "'I received your kind and welcome letter on the 31st of January, and happy was I to read the delightful letter which I received from you that day.' Ahem! can't he pitch it in? 'O, how 'appy I am to 'ear that you are so comfortable and well. O, my dear mother and father, I 'ope my brothers and sisters will mind what you say to them better than ever I done, for you see what it is to be 'eadstrong.' 'Eadstrong, eh? Stop a bit; now we're coming to it! 'O, my dears, I 'ope you will make yourselves as comfortable as you can, for

perhaps I never may see you again in this world; but I 'ope I shall in the next, where I 'ope to be a comfort to you all, so God bless you all, my dears, for ever — ”

He got no further; nor had many attended to the last sentences. The lad's unavailing protests had ended in veritable wailing and gnashing of teeth; it was this that had aroused Tom from his lethargy, and he also was now upon the table, clanking down the length of it to where the reader stood.

One or two mistook his intentions. “That's it — *you* read it,” said they; but the most of them read Tom's face.

“Give me that letter,” he said sternly, halting before the man.

“Give who it?” roared the other. “Oh, it's you, eh?” he added, and seemed in doubt.

“Lads,” cried Tom, seizing his opportunity, “this is going a step too far, don't you think? We all of us had friends once — in another world as it seems to me — but if any of us like to remember we had them, surely it's that man's business and not ours? He's a better man than most of us, and his letter's the last thing that we should meddle with. We wouldn't have done it once, and we won't now.” His temperate tone surprised himself; but it merely showed how every sensibility had lost its edge. Two months ago he would have argued such a point with his ready hands.

Meanwhile the reader had decided not to fight, being an insufficient number of inches bigger and broader than Tom, and having still in his ears the thud with which the scourger fell. But neither was he going to give in like a man, because men were scarce in those heavy irons. Accordingly he retained the letter a little longer, before handing it to Tom with a mocking bow.

"We won't, won't we?" he sneered. "Well, as it 'appens, we won't, for more of that rot I couldn't read if I was paid. But you look out, my special! If you've come 'ere to give yourself airs, we'll soon learn ye. It's lucky for you I'm in such a good temper, or you'd have gone off this table a bit different, you blighted young upstart!"

Tom had in fact taken his chains in his hands and jumped off: it was when he was on the ground, with his back turned, that the direct abuse was hurled. Others sided with the speaker and added their maledictions to his; yet the group about Butter (for so the poor lad was called) dispersed at Tom's approach, and he returned the letter to its writer with a look that might have made his guardian angel dry her tears, for after many days there was kindness in his eyes once more.

"Here, Butter," he said; "take it—and for God's sake not a word! You're a better man than I am, or you wouldn't have written at all. There—shut up. Gratitude, forsooth! If you must show some, don't set me thinking."

But the lad's emotions were aroused too thoroughly to be soon allayed. They had the corner now to themselves, and he was crying like a girl. Tom envied him his tears.

"Read it through," sobbed the young fellow, forcing the torn letter upon his champion; and to please him Tom perused it from beginning to end.

A while ago it would have made him laugh and cry; now he read it unmoved, save by his own indifference. It contained a touching lie, describing the writer as being still very happy with the master who months since had sent him to the iron-gang. The rest was a wondrous

jumble . . . "and I inform you that snaiks is very bad in this country. We ofttimes see from 14 to 15 feet long. Parrots is as thick as crows in your country, kangaroos too, and it is night here when it is day there, but Arthur Smith, I do not know where he is. Mutton is 4*d. lb.*, beef—" But he had written no further, and Tom said, "Thank you, Butter; it should make them happy," as he returned the letter. He felt that he ought to be touched, and he was not. His heart seemed turned to stone, when suddenly he felt it quicken.

The lad had simply said, "My name isn't Butter; it's Butterfield."

"A Yorkshireman? You talk like one!" cried Tom, with a most painful flash of memory. Once more he was a lucky, hopeful, penitent sinner, in a sweet-smelling waggon, on a night in spring; with Blaydes's watch ticking no warning in his pocket, and with a vivid mental picture of Blaydes himself smiling wistfully across the stile, beside which he was even then lying dead.

"Ay," said young Butterfield, "poor old Yarkshire! I doubt I'll never see it again. My folks have left there an' all."

Tom had more flashes. He was getting used to them now.

"Where did they move to?"

"A little place they call Hendon; an' it was me that drove 'em there by getting into trouble! Oh, it was me disgraced them all, and drove them away!"

Tom let him talk, but said little more in return. It was Jonathan Butterfield's son. How it brought all that back to him! True, it was not a year ago, but it seemed a lifetime. It was terrible to think of the little time and the stupendous change. Tom Erichsen saw

himself as he had been and as he was, and the mental vision hurt him more than the material one which the stockade barber had shown him in a glass. He could not tell Butterfield that he had known his father. Nothing was to be gained by telling him; it would lead to his telling more, and how could he speak of things of which the mere thought was become torture so refined and so exquisite?

His eighteen inches were a very rack that night. He was thinking of Claire for the first time in many weeks. She would hold him guilty still. How could she do otherwise? His sweet friend held him guilty when he was innocent, and his enemy the major held him innocent when guilty. Oh, the irony, the biting irony, that had made a worse man of him when he was bad enough already! All the foul night he lay tossing in his noisy chains; his wild eyes were never closed. Yet once the thought stole over him, had he been worthy of Claire when she loved him, would all this ever have been? And after that he lay quieter — his heart knew why.

CHAPTER XXIX

LIGHT AT LAST

THE red-hot summer cooled gradually into lukewarm winter, with chilly nights, but the same fierce glare all day; and several men had had their chains struck off, and four had died in them, since Tom first felt the weight of his. But the vacant spaces on the shelves were never

vacant very long. Those eighty suits of fetters were in continual use. And still the dual work went on, of chiselling the great road to a given level, and of degrading each newcomer to that of the worst man there before him; for there was no levelling-up in these iron-gangs, wherein mutual converse bred mutual debasement, until best and worst found common ground on the very bed-rock of human infamy.

Tom for one, however, still stood out among the worst; and there was another newcomer whom the gang had nothing to teach, either of misery or of wickedness; indeed he laughed at the one and greatly increased the other.

This was an ancient felon known only as the First Fleeter: a wizened page of dreadful history, with not a tooth in his head, and but the one redeeming trait of incessant cheerfulness. He had arrived with the first fleet in 1788. He had sinned and suffered through those unspeakable early years, until the sense of suffering became as dead as the moral sense, and not a vestige of either remained to him now. But he would recount his crimes with grinning gums, and gloat over unforgotten agonies until there was a writhing man on every ledge but his own. He lay above Tom, who would listen to him by the hour.

According to his own account there was literally nothing this old man had not done or been done to in the early days; he was cannibal, murderer and worse, and his only regrets were for neglected chances of additional crimes. But his spirits never deserted him, and for a cruel man he was singularly good-natured. He had weak and cunning eyes, a perfectly bald head, displaying every criminal cavity and protuberance, and a

million wrinkles which, like his mumbling gums, were never still. Yet it was better to hear his wicked laughter than the clanking irons of men who neither slept nor spoke; and the evils endured by the major's iron-gang, which the First Fleeter pooh-pooched with a quaint superiority, did seem less intolerable after one of his yarns.

"Bad rations?" he would croak, when the salt meat was rancid or the fresh meat strong. "Tell 'ee, there's none on you knows what bad rations is. You should ha' been at Toongabbie forty year ago; we never had no rations at all, except when a ship come into harbour. Toongabbie would ha' learned ye! Many's the time I've dragged timber all day, twenty or thirty on us yoked to the one tree like bullocks, and dined off of pounded grass and soup from a native dog. And glad to get it, tell 'ee; we wasn't pampered and spoilt like you blokes — not at Toongabbie!"

Or perhaps some wretch was groaning from the scourger's lash. The First Fleeter waxed especially eloquent on all such occasions.

"Call that a flogging?" he would quaver from his ledge. "One little fifty? If we'd had you at Toongabbie you'd know what flogging was. Five, six, an' even eight bloomin' hundred I've given an' took. What do you think of that? There was no flies about them floggings, I tell 'ee; no, an' there was no flies about the hangings either. I've seen a man took an' strung up on the spot for prigging a handful of weevilly biscuits, I have. An' all the time we was dyin' by dozens of the bad food an' the 'ard graft in the 'ot sun. Lord, how we did die! There was a big hole dug; we collected 'em every day an' pitched 'em in. I mind seeing one man pitched in before the breath was out of 'im. 'I

ain't dead,' he says. 'You will be by sundown,' says the overseer, 'an' do you think we want you about the place till to-morrow, you selfish man?' There wasn't no flies about that overseer, either; it was him as killed three men in a fortnight, by overwork at the saw. They just dropped dead at their work. 'Take it away,' is all he says, 'put it in the ground'; an' you never heard nothing more. No, no," the old monster would conclude, with his senile chuckle; "there wasn't no flies about them old days in Toongabbie, I can tell 'ee. I'd give a bit to have 'ad some o' this feather-bed gang there; them as thinks they know what 'ardship is!"

The First Fleeter became less loquacious after a time, however, and much less severe upon the luxury of the major's iron-gang. Honeybone's shrewd eye was on him, and that of the First Fleeter began to droop and ruminate with a cunning preoccupation that made him quite silent on his ledge. At length, however, he took to leaning over and mumbling to Tom in the stillest hours. And when Tom listened, the old wretch mumbled to others, including Macbeth, who had soon followed his enemy from Castle Sullivan, and been well-nigh as refractory in the stockade. The Scot was in another den at nights, but the First Fleeter made and used his opportunities with characteristic craft. So now there was a new poison in the air, and the virus had come all the way from Toongabbie in the early days.

One of the last to be inoculated, and yet the one who perhaps took most kindly to the process, was a certain sleek, bullet-headed youth, who came to the stockade on a day in mid-winter. In the evening, as Tom was sitting at the mess-table, with bloodshot eyes downcast as usual, he heard his name in a voice he seemed to know.

"Well, Erichsen," it said, "it's a small world, ain't it?"

Tom looked up, and saw the bullet-head nodding at him across the table; but so bloated and debauched was the low face that he was some moments in recognising his old companion of the condemned cell in Newgate.

"Don't look at a pal like that," continued Creasey, with a smirk; "you've altered worse nor me. No ill-feeling, I say? I was that glad —"

"Silence!" cried the non-commissioned officer on duty. "No talking at your meals, young man, unless you want what-for!"

As for Tom, he had nothing for the newcomer but a surly contempt which he took no trouble to conceal. Creasey, on the other hand, was studiously civil to him on grasping Tom's reputation in the stockade; and secret circumstances threw them not a little together.

"That's a biter," young Butterfield contrived to say to Tom, in a day or two; "where did he know you before?"

"Newgate."

"He hates you."

"Let him."

"I'm jealous he'll squeak!"

"He might if he dare."

"How do you know he dursn't?"

"Too many in it; he'd be torn to little bits. See here, Butter!"

"Yes, Erichsen?"

"You're to keep out of it."

"Not unless you do," said the lad firmly.

"Me! I'm in it up to the neck — and all the better — but you're different. You're younger, your time's

all but up, you've never had the lash, there's a chance for *you*; so give me your word."

The lad hesitated.

"For my sake!"

The lad gave in, but consoled himself by making up to Creasey, who slept in his hut, and was already deeply implicated in that which the other thus forswore.

All was in readiness; the excitement throughout the gang was intense though invisible; and Erichsen, Macbeth, and Creasey were even readier than their fellows (as behoved good ringleaders), when the unforeseen happened at the critical moment. The general failed them on the field of battle. The First Fleeter fell ill and was removed.

It had been coming on for weeks: the old man, who had made light of the iron-gang, was the first to succumb to its hourly hardships. He was older than he had thought; he had it still in him to blacken and corrode every heart in the gang with his own abundant poison, and that he did, but that was all. His irons became very silent all night long. One morning he tumbled at his work; the next, he was sent over to Maitland, unfettered and in a cart. The gang were at work at the time, and the last Tom saw of the First Fleeter, as he waved his cap in the cart, was his bald bad head and his unconquerable smile. Tom wondered whether the last had not in some degree balanced the first, and been doing a little good for a long time in a land that needed light hearts almost as much as pure ones. Still more he wondered how they would manage without him now.

Before nightfall, however, this departure was succeeded by an arrival as unforeseen. It was that of a currie containing a solitary individual, who drove both

up and down the line of ironed men, with the sunset-light first on one side of his swarthy, black-whiskered face, and then on the other. He was obviously and openly searching for some one among the eighty prisoners, and his failure to find his man was announced by a frown that had in it more of pain and apprehension than of mere annoyance. Meanwhile the major, who was still a comparatively active man, was bearing down upon the intruder with the help of his furred umbrella; and the gentleman in the curricle was very soon asked what the mischief he wanted there.

"Mischief, my good man?" replied a rich deep voice, a little overladen with superior scorn. "Nothing more mischievous, I take it, than a few words with the superintendent of this gang. Perhaps you will be so extremely condescending as to give him my card."

"I am he," said the major. "What can I do for you?"

"The honour of glancing at my card," said the stranger, with a bow as elaborate as his scorn.

"Well, sir?"

"My name may be familiar to you."

"Never heard it in my life," replied the major bluntly. "However," he added, as the other coloured terribly, "I live out of the world, Mr. Daintree, as you perceive."

Tom was at work quite near, and he heard the name distinctly. He, too, had never heard it before. And yet he had some dim recollection of the face, so that he was watching it intently, and saw the flush with which Daintree very fussily produced a letter.

"That is *your* misfortune, sir," Tom heard him retort; and the rap put the major in a good temper on the spot. He sang out for a wardsman to come and take charge of the gentleman's horses.

"Nevertheless," continued Daintree, "I take it that even you, sir, are acquainted with the name of the writer of the missive in my hand. I am the bearer, Major Honeybone," with immense pomposity, "of a letter from my friend, his Excellency Sir George Gipps, the Governor of this Colony!"

"Never met him," returned the major, with a twinkling eye. "It is my first acquaintance even with his handwriting." Indeed his Excellency had been not many weeks installed; but it was years since the major had heard tones so rich and periods so round as those of his Excellency's friend, whom he hereupon escorted with hospitality to his house.

Now in this poor hut, opposite that stockade full of felons, and in that desert place, the major kept a few dozens of admirable wine, and some boxes of excellent cigars. Two of these were alight, and the gentlemen had clinked glasses and taken a sip, before Major Honeybone would permit himself to open his Excellency's letter. Hardly had he done so when he regretted both wine and cigars. He looked up suddenly, and in wrath, which, however, was somewhat disarmed by the eager light he thus surprised in the visitor's strong and dusky face.

"What on earth do you want him for? I call this a most monstrous request," said Major Honeybone; and the last sentence was meant to have come first, until Daintree's look inverted them.

"Request?" said Daintree, raising his eyebrows slightly.

"Yes, sir, request!" cried the major. "Command, sir, is a thing I don't take from a gentleman I've never had the honour of setting eyes on; and this is one that

Sir Richard Bourke, sir, would sooner have died than give!"

Daintree pursed up his eyes. As it was only by patient exercise of two characteristic qualities that he had got the letter at all, so he now saw that he must trust to those two qualities to overcome this other masterful man. He must be diplomatic; he must have patience; he must pick his way where he could not force it; and it was very clear that there would be no forcing this Major Honeybone.

The letter authorised and begged the major to deliver and hand over Thomas Erichsen, *Seahorse*, then undergoing sentence in the major's iron-gang, to the bearer, who particularly wished to have him for his assigned body-servant, and undertook to make himself thenceforward responsible for the said convict's good behaviour. It was an irregular letter; no reason was given for granting such a favour at all. It did say, however, that Mr. Daintree would give *his* reasons; and with the letter in both hands, as though on the point of tearing it up, the major leant back in his chair and regarded the other with a prolonged and curious stare.

"What *are* your reasons?" he asked at length.

"He is an innocent man," replied Daintree impressively.

"A convicted murderer, I understood."

"Wrongly convicted. I followed his case. Did you?"

"No, sir," said the major; "they give me quite enough work out here."

"Well, I did follow it," the visitor went on. "Between ourselves, Major Honeybone, I did a great deal more than that. The case interested me from the first. I knew something about this poor lad. That knowledge,

together with the circumstances of the case, convinced me at the time that he was an innocent man."

"He isn't one now," remarked Major Honeybone.

"I — I am not a pauper, sir," proceeded Daintree with embarrassment. "I don't want this to go any further; but you see, I knew something about the boy; and, in short, I found the money for his defence!"

"The dickens you did!" exclaimed the major. "Then you were a friend of his?"

"I *am* his friend, sir, though he has never seen me."

"It was a noble thing to do — 'pon my soul it was," observed the major, very much impressed. "Quite quixotic, upon my soul!"

This open admiration hit Daintree in his weakest spot; he leant forward and quoted the irresistible figures in a sudden blaze of self-satisfaction.

"Lor'!" said the major. "You don't say so. Gad-zooks!"

"When I do a thing at all," remarked Daintree with perfect truth, "I do it with all my heart. Either that or I leave it alone. So I need hardly tell you I didn't stop short at Serjeant Culliford. No, sir, I went to Lord John Russell himself; it would be an affectation were I to conceal my impression that his lordship's final decision was not uninfluenced by what I said."

Major Honeybone was too used to lies not to know the truth when he chanced to hear it. He filled up both glasses and sucked thoughtfully at his cigar. Daintree watched him with an eager eye.

"So he owes his life to you?" said the major at last. "Well, sir, then it is my duty to tell you that he owes you the greatest conceivable grudge!"

Daintree sighed.

"I know what you mean," said he. "I have heard much from the Principal Superintendent of convicts. I am only afraid I have more to hear from you."

"Not a great deal," said the major, shrugging his shoulders. "He has had four floggings here, and one before he came here; but that's always the way. I have known convicts who have never had the lash, but very few who've only had it once. It has a bad effect; but what can you do? I may tell you, sir, now that I think we understand each other, you are not the only man interested in Erichsen. I take an interest in him myself; but there's no doing anything with him; and there would be no doing anything with any of 'em if I didn't come down on him as he will insist on deserving. I am sorry for him, I am sorry for you as his friend; but he's the most dangerous man in my gang, and it would be a piece of madness to set him free. It would amount to that, you know; but Gipps can't possibly push the matter any further after what I shall tell him; and no more must you, Mr. Daintree — you mustn't indeed. Come, sir, I can't say more. I am almost as sorry as you are. He's a good sportsman!" cried old Honeybone, who was one himself. "I only wish he was hunting with the hounds instead of running with these confounded foxes of convicts!"

Daintree took all this meekly. The major was not a little softened; that was something, but he might be made softer yet. It seemed to Daintree that a sufficiently affecting interview between himself and Erichsen, with Major Honeybone looking on, might have that effect. He pictured the convict in tears upon his knees, he heard his grateful broken utterances. He foresaw moisture even in the major's shrewd orbs; and he was

prepared, if necessary, to go upon his own knees to crave the interview.

It was not necessary. Honeybone shrugged his shoulders, and left the room with Daintree sitting very still in his chair; he was not so still when the door shut, however. He sprang up and looked in a glass; he sat down again, wiping his forehead and his lips, and shrinking from what he courted, like a swain. He had taken deep note of Erichsen at his trial. That honest, fearless, guiltless gaze, he could see it still; yet he had sought it in vain half an hour since in the iron-gang.

A soldier entered with a lighted lamp. Daintree pushed back his chair a little, and was kept waiting no longer. Chains jingled outside, and in another moment the convict was ushered in by a sentry under arms, followed by the major, who shut the door.

"Was this necessary?" whispered Daintree, glancing at the fixed bayonet with a shudder.

"Quite," replied the major aloud. "You don't know your man."

He did not indeed: the fearlessness remained, and that was all.

Daintree was speaking nervously, forcibly, with none of his habitual affectations, with little of his customary flow. He was saying he had taken an interest in the case at home in England, and had all along believed in the prisoner's innocence. The prisoner stopped him at that word.

"There's only one man living who thinks so," said he. "I know now where I've seen you before. It was at my trial. You are the man."

"What man?"

"The one that saved my life. My worst friend!"

The hoarse and surly voice stabbed Daintree to the heart. He saw Honeybone look at him, and recalled the major's very similar words. He started up and offered Erichsen his hand.

"Take it away," growled Tom. "Say what you want with me, for God's sake!"

No; it was not Daintree's ideal interview. As little did it resemble the meeting with his benefactor which Tom had once pictured, and even vainly solicited, but all so long ago — in that other life — that upon him the contrast was lost. All he still remembered was that he had once imagined himself indebted to this person for the blessed gift of life; all he now perceived was his mistake, and what a malignant curse that blessed gift had proved. Not that he resented it any more. He no longer resented anything in the world. Even this person's kind, well-meant, emotional remarks moved him to no stronger feeling than one of slight impatience: nor was he listening when a look, an intonation, a pause, informed him that he had been asked a question.

"Say it again," said Tom.

"I want you for my assigned servant," repeated Daintree, disregarding both the decision and the presence of Major Honeybone, who sat there quite enjoying the prospect of further opposition. "I want to be your friend — to take you away from this ghastly place — to sponge the very memory of it out of your mind. The Governor agrees to it — I have his written leave. Will you come with me, Erichsen? Will you come? Will you come?"

"You're very good," said Tom. "I prefer to stop where I am."

"What?" cried both gentlemen at once. The major looked personally aggrieved.

"I prefer the iron-gang."

"To *my* house — *my* protection — *my* friendship?"

Horror and mortification were in the rich, strong tones, and in the flushed and swarthy face.

"I prefer the iron-gang," repeated Tom; but his voice was weaker — he noticed it himself — and with the next breath was crying savagely that he would not go, that he would stop where he was, and who was Daintree to come interfering there? A lot he minded what the Governor or what fifty Governors said; there he was, and there he meant to stick; no power on earth should shift him out of that.

"Oh!" said the major. "No power, eh?"

"Short of a file of red-coats, which you can't spare."

"Sentry, remove that man!"

The rest of the gang were at supper. Tom clanked in and sat down with a rattle. He nodded to one or two desperate kindred spirits, half proudly, as much as to say, "All right, my lads; I'm not the man to desert his pals; I'm true game to those that are true game to me — I'm that if I'm nothing else." Those indeed were the words in his heart; but nobody answered his nod, only some irons jingled, where Creasey had reached out under the table, and given Macbeth a kick.

As they were all shuffling out of the mess-shed, Butter took a pill of paper from his mouth and pressed it into Tom's hand. Tom unrolled it on his ledge, and furtively read it while the sentry still stood with his lantern on the threshold.

These eleven words: —

"All up since fleater went Mac and Cresy mean to squeek."

Hardly had he deciphered them when a wardsman thrust in his head and summoned Erichsen to the major's quarters.

"They've been quick about it," thought Tom, as another wardsman joined them on the way.

The major looked very stern and strong. Daintree was drawing on his gloves. Tom thought he recognised the little heap of clothes upon the floor; the trousers were blood-stained still.

"Now, sir!" cried the major with a glittering eye. "I think you said that no power on earth would shift you out of this? Off with those irons, men, and he shall see!"

Through the black window glowed the curricula lamps.

PART III

MASTER AND MAN

CHAPTER XXX

"THE NOBLE UNKNOWN"

TOM crawled into the vehicle as though those heavy chains still dangled about his legs. Nothing was so strange as the sudden cessation of the horrid jingle which had marked and mocked every movement of his body for four whole months. He felt quite lost without it, and he clambered into the curricie without a word. Daintree cracked his whip, and that was the sole sound from either of them in the first half-hour of keen and starlit freedom.

"Feel cold, Erichsen?"

"No."

"Because you can have my coat if you do. My things are thicker. Only say the word."

He said nothing; such gratitude as he felt in his degraded heart was not yet so poignant as to need expression; it was a very vague, dull sense at present. But Daintree understood: he had simply to sit next that silent, aged, callous figure to understand all.

They drove on to Maitland, where they supped handsomely and lay all night. In the morning Tom was well

and warmly clothed at the best store in the township. And that day the difference was that he kept turning to look over his shoulder, and this at shorter intervals as the day wore on.

"Is anything following us?" said Daintree once.

"Not yet," said Tom.

"Not yet! Why, what do you expect?"

"What I deserve," said Tom; and Daintree had the wisdom not to press him upon this or any other point. He knew what was alleged against Erichsen at Castle Sullivan. He had heard the story from the Principal Superintendent. He began to think there might be some truth in it after all.

Next morning he was sure. They had put up at an unusually comfortable roadside inn, where Tom had a very excellent room, yet he came down with wild, unrested eyes and twitching fingers.

"It's no use!" he bitterly exclaimed.

"Haven't you slept?"

"Not a wink. I heard them coming all night long—heard them coming with the chains. Oh, take me back! They have made me the guilty man they said I was when I wasn't. I deserve everything now!"

And a second day of terror he spent in the curricule, looking backward hour after hour; but when that also passed over, and still nothing happened, he began to think that either Butter was mistaken, or the major incredulous, or his enemies of another mind now that he was gone. At all events he took heart of grace, and at last thanked Daintree for what he was doing: without asking, however, why he was doing it.

On the third forenoon the spires and windmills of Sydney fringed the sky; then they mounted a hill, and

there was the harbour sparkling above the roofs of the convict city.

“We had better drop the ‘Erichsen’ now,” said Daintree, as they drove up to the turnpike gate. “I suggest that ‘Thomas’ will suffice both for Christian name and surname. I think it would be preferable for the present. What say you?” Tom consented with perfect readiness and indifference; and he looked behind him for the last time, as much as to say what was the only thing on earth about which he was not as indifferent as the dead.

They drove down Brickfield Hill, over the spot where Nat Sullivan had tumbled off his horse, and past the notorious inn where he had lain; it flourished still. And still the doleful felon music filled the air, striking more staccato in this crisp weather than six months since in the heavy heat; but it struck to Tom’s heart no more. On the quay there was a crowd, and a fresh shipload of convicts disembarking, but Tom felt no pity for them either. And now, when his indignation was aroused, it was by the lounging laziness of a road-gang, whose overseers were smoking and chatting with the convicts, while the latter moved neither hand nor foot, and the sentries yawned at their posts.

“They want the major there,” said Tom grimly. “He’d have that peck of stones about their ears if they stood looking at it much longer!”

Daintree turned and regarded him with a particularly pleased and kindly smile; then Tom knew that he had just volunteered his first remark since leaving the stockade; and he thought he knew with what sympathetic patience his first voluntary remark had been waited for, though he only now suspected this from Daintree’s smile. His heart swelled a little. They put up at an

inn, and he made himself more useful to his new master than he had been yet.

The bungalow was some few miles out, upon the delightful woody shores of Rose Bay; they drove on there in the afternoon; and the greenwood dipping beyond the post and rails of the Old Point Piper Road, the lush meadows dipping beyond that, and the azure arm of the harbour seen through the one and above the other, were all a very wonderful change after that terrible plateau of the past four months. Nor had they any feature in common with the detested region of Castle Sullivan. Tom had seen nothing like this up-country. To crown all, the bungalow lay bathed in the richest sunset when they reached it, and Rose Bay deserved that name indeed, for its sunlit waters appeared to be dimpled with wet rose-leaves from strand to strand. It was as though Nature herself were trying to soften that frozen heart and to welcome Tom Erichsen to this haven of peace.

An old man came out to see to the horses, a somewhat younger woman stood in the mellow light upon a wide verandah. Daintree greeted them with an air — almost the first he had permitted himself in Tom's company. With another, however, he took Tom's hand and expressed characteristically the hope that the threshold of his house would prove to be also that of a new life for Tom.

"You have left the past behind you, Thomas," said he, "and all your enemies with it. Rest assured of that. If they follow you here they'll have *me* to deal with — I can promise them they have laid their last finger on *you*. No, there's a brighter future ahead of you, I trust; and always recollect — *I* am your friend."

“I suppose you are,” said poor Tom in reply; he could believe and feel but little even yet.

“You suppose I am?” cried Daintree, looking rather queerly at Tom. “You shall dine at my table,” he then exclaimed. “You shall have all your meals with me! Mrs. Fawcett, lay a place for Thomas — and show him his room.”

It was a little room, certainly, but an incredibly pleasant one; the window almost overhung the bay; and the bed was a white feast for bloodshot eyes.

“Dinner’s ready; don’t you spoil it, young man, by keeping master waiting,” said Mrs. Fawcett; and then over her shoulder as she went, “My word, but you’re a lucky one!”

Perhaps he required telling so; it was all so difficult to believe, so impossible to understand. But bewilderment had not yet given place to curiosity.

He was, however, beginning to realise that he had fallen from the cruellest into the kindest hands on earth, when, returning to the verandah, he encountered the kind man, with a gleaming eye and a set face quite inconsistent with that impression. A fox-terrier, indifferently bred, with one ear up and one down, but the most eager eyes, had wildly welcomed Daintree while Daintree was welcoming Tom; this little dog he was now dragging savagely along by its collar.

“Won’t come into my study!” explained Daintree, in a voice of amazing fury. “Once I thrashed him in there, so now he thinks he won’t come in; but he shall — he shall — he shall!” Dr. Sullivan himself, in dealing with a recalcitrant convict, could have employed no more ferocious tone.

The dog was dragged within a yard of the door it would

not enter, then released, and it did not run away. Daintree now went within, and called and whistled to the dog; but there it stood, bristling all over, and yet wagging its tail with immense energy, as if to proclaim its anxiety to please in any other way, but enter that room it could not. Nor was it until Daintree rushed out in his rage that the little dog turned tail and ran away. And again he caught it, and again and again the same thing happened, the man vowing the dog should give in, the dog still wagging his tail and still disobeying; the dinner growing cold on the table; and Tom viewing the whole petty, pitiable exhibition with the most irritating pain and disenchantment. It made his heart sick to see this man of all men in such a passion about so small a thing; in a little he was all but foaming at the mouth; and at last, when he caught up a heavy ivory paper-knife and belaboured his dog with that, the spectacle hurt Tom more than any flogging he had witnessed in the iron-gang. It was not only that his feeling for men was numbed while his feeling for animals remained quick: here was the one man living whom he wished to honour and to admire, and the honour and the admiration were sickening at their birth.

The beating did no good whatever; then Daintree turned on his heel with such a face that Tom took the dog in his arms. He heard a drawer unlocked in the room. When his master reappeared the paper-knife was no longer in his hand; a pistol was there instead.

"Where's the dog?" he cried.

"Here," said Tom, showing him.

"Put it down. I'm going to shoot him. I'll have no stubborn beasts here!"

"Have you had this one long, sir?"

“From a puppy,” said Daintree, cocking his pistol. “Come, put him down, or we’ll never get any dinner to-night.”

“No,” said Tom firmly. “You’ll be sorry for it afterwards; you will be vexed with me for standing by and letting you do such a thing in your heat.”

The other gasped, but never said a word.

“If the dog is no good to you, give him to me,” continued Tom. “Don’t shoot him, sir. Not that I believe you meant it!” And to show his belief he dropped the terrier; whereupon Daintree hesitated, but presently retreated to his room without a word.

The dog was spared. They sat down at last to cool dishes that should have been hot, and their mutual ardour had suffered with the viands. Daintree was very solemn and very stiff, his hapless companion quite certain that he had given mortal and everlasting offence. But the incident was never referred to again. And Tom soon forgot the solitary occasion upon which his champion displayed himself in so sinister a light.

Not that the other lights were all rose-coloured. The man had foibles innumerable, and in their way as extraordinary as his inexplicable kindness to Tom. This continued and increased, and yet there was a something ostentatious, vainglorious, egotistical, even in his kindest acts. Tom hated himself for seeing it, but there it was. It became the more noticeable as Tom himself grew more regenerate, and so made fewer demands upon the other’s consideration. And then the gloomy vanity of the man! His literary pretensions! His solemn belief in himself and all he did!

“Heaven knows he has done enough for me!” sighed Tom, quite ashamed. “I must try to see nothing else;

but what I can't help seeing shall never, never, never make any difference to *my* regard for him."

Tom wanted to get to work at once, in the house, in the garden, anywhere and at anything, but the other would not hear of it for days. He was to rest and forget, and to enjoy his life. They made excursions together in the curriole or in Daintree's boat. Tom would have been almost happy if he only could have given his kind companion the heart-whole admiration which the latter took for granted. And his inability in that respect was so real a grief to him, he could have wept at it and at the other's kindness put together; but there was still not a tear in his heart; he often wondered, was there any heart left in his body? What he deemed his ingratitude seemed sometimes to prove that there was not.

There were qualities he could honestly admire in Daintree, but they were not those qualities upon whose possession Daintree most prided himself. He was a man of iron nerve and will. That was undoubted. One day, in a squall near the Heads, he handled the boat with magnificent coolness and skill, when Tom thought they must both have gone to the sharks: when they landed safe and sound, he inflicted so many of his poems upon Tom, whom the salt breezes had overcome with drowsiness, that the pantry and the knives to clean seemed preferable to such nightly ordeals. Tom asked to be put into livery and to work at once. He insisted upon it; and gained his point through the accidental touch of "livery."

They drove into Sydney next day with specimens of the family crest, which Tom was to bear on every button. Daintree being a magistrate, a cockade was duly included in the order; and for a time the master was in

high feather at the prospective display. But it recalled family troubles ere long; and all the way home he talked dismally of himself as an “exile like Byron — my literary second-self.” Somebody had once called him “own brother to Byron”; he never tired of quoting the phrase; he was destitute of humour, and made Tom blush for him, where he would have shaken with laughter at another.

His contrariety was unique. Not only was he a good magistrate spoilt, through neglecting the Bench for his desk, but an old athlete who bragged about the poetry he could not write instead of about the races he had really won. On the top of his bookshelf stood the row of tarnished silver cups, and his proud eye climbed no higher than the volume or two of mediocre verse underneath. He made little enough of his genuine triumphs, his real abilities; but he would talk with bated breath of a few stanzas which often rhymed as false as they rang. Once Tom cleaned the cups when Daintree was out, and he flew into something very like a rage when he came in and saw them; he was the most unaccountable of men.

“Still he is the kindest,” was Tom’s reflection on the top of that conclusion; and the same night he not only made another of his poor attempts at thanking Daintree for all that he was doing and had done; he at last put the question which seemed to mark a stride in his slow and up-hill return from brute to man. And yet, even now, it was no very sincere curiosity, but rather an uncomfortable feeling that he ought to seem curious, which prompted him to say:—

“I can’t understand your kindness to me! Why did you begin it; why do you go on? I wonder what made you take an interest in me at the start!”

Wonder was the word, for wonder he did, but keenly inquisitive he was not; and the stride was shorter than it had looked.

"I believed in your innocence," replied Daintree with deliberation. "That was all."

"I can't think why! You were the only one. Yet you knew nothing about me, it seems?" And still his tone was that of purely impersonal speculation.

Daintree took the cheroot from between his teeth.

"I knew something about Blaydes," said he.

"Ah!"

"Not much; very little, in fact; but that little was pretty bad. I knew what an infernal blackguard he was, and I felt sure there must be more ruined men than one upon his track. You remember that point in the defence?"

Tom jumped up. "Don't remind me of it," he cried. "The very barrister disbelieved in me! And it doesn't interest me now, it only hurts; don't speak of it, if you please."

"Oh, very well," said Daintree; "only that point was suggested by *me*."

"You?" exclaimed Tom in an altered voice. "Ah, but what don't I owe to you? More than I can ever realise or believe; everything—everything—and yet I refuse to speak of it to you of all men! You see how ungrateful I am; you see what they've made of me among them! Oh, sir, forgive me; have patience with me, and I may be grateful yet. Give me time, and I shall thank you as I cannot now!"

"You shall not," rejoined Daintree firmly; "you were quite right, and we'll speak of all this no more. Good heavens!" he cried out, "how do you know my motives

were so pure? What if it was a mere whim—and not altogether my own? At all events, I take no credit for it; and never you thank me again, do you hear? You'll offend me if you do. You will indeed!"

He spoke earnestly, nervously, and without a trace of affectation or egotism. Nor did Tom remember a single foible, as he looked in the handsome, dark, inscrutable face, and took his benefactor by both hands.

"God bless you!" he whispered. "Do you know what I used to call you in my heart when I had one? My Noble Unknown! Well, you are nobler even than I thought; do you know what you are doing? You're giving me my heart back, little by little! I shall be grateful yet!"

He went to the door, but would stand there gazing at his friend. So long he stood, with burning eyes that seemed to ache for tears; but at length he was gone, and Daintree sat alone with a cold cheroot between his fingers.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE COURSE OF THE "ROSAMUND"

ONCE in livery, Tom sat no more at his master's table; he had, however, to insist on waiting at it, instead, and to make himself the servant he had been hitherto in name only. Daintree would have let the old arrangement continue, but the new one was a boon to Tom. It gave him freedom and independence and occupation, and so helped him wonderfully upon the upward road.

One evening, when a ship had come in and Daintree

had driven into Sydney for his letters, he returned in such extraordinary spirits that he could hardly touch his dinner; he must gloat over a crinkling sheet of paper, while the soup grew cold in the very spoon, and Tom could only suppose that his master's family had come round at last. As a rule he talked incessantly to Tom while the latter waited, but this evening his letter absorbed his whole attention. At last, however, he looked up, and his saturnine countenance was redeemed and transfigured by a perfectly startling radiance and joy.

"Thomas," he said, "you must marry a wife!"

The cheery tone was as new in him as the delighted look. Tom was so astonished, he had to think what the words meant before shaking his head.

"Why not, my good fellow?" cried Daintree.

"Why should you want me to?" retorted Tom.

"Because I am about to marry one myself!"

Had he said he was about to bury one, Tom could not have been more startled and amazed. Somehow he had never conceived of Daintree as a married man. That solitary spirit, centred and immersed in self, and consciously wallowing in its own solitude and gloom, had forbidden such a thought the more easily since Tom had himself abandoned every aspiration of the kind. A twinge of jealousy succeeded his first surprise; but in another moment his heart dilated with unselfish pleasure, and his congratulations were no less sincere than vociferous.

"If you knew her," said Daintree, "you would congratulate me even more." And he proceeded to praise his choice as he could have praised nothing that was not in some sense his; and yet his passion was convincing; his voice shook with it, as his face shone.

"A Sydney lady?" Tom ventured to inquire.

"Good heavens, no! If she only were as near as that! She is on her way out to marry me; this letter was written a month before she sailed."

"From England?"

"Yes."

"You will see her in another month!"

"Perhaps before. You never know how long or how short the voyage will be. Mine was a hundred and thirty-six days, and that was long. I kept a chart of it — stop, I'm going to fetch it! Clear away, I've had dinner enough."

He rushed from the table to return presently with a mariner's chart of the world, upon which he had neatly marked out the daily courses of his recent voyage. It was a chain of many links from England to the Cape, and a chain of longer links from the Cape to Australia.

"Now then!" cried Daintree, arranging the chart under the lamp, and seating himself delightedly at the table. "Now we'll see where they've got to. Hallo! Where's my letter?"

It was on the floor, and Tom picked it up, averting his eyes so that he should see nothing while Daintree referred to the contents.

"Ha! Here we have it," and the letter was thrust into his pocket. "They were to sail on the twenty-third of June. How many days ago is that? This is September the twelfth. Seven — thirty-one — thirty-one and twelve. How much is that?"

"Eighty-one," said Tom.

"Only eighty-one! Then you're right," sighed Daintree, "and they won't be here for another month. I was fifty-five days more."

"They may make a quicker voyage."

"They may, but I never have. The one before was a hundred and forty days. They were both above the average, but not so very much."

"Then all the more time to prepare in," said Tom, entering thoroughly into the situation. "We must get the place to rights, you know, sir!"

"That's true. It will help to pass the time."

"Then we might pin up this chart."

"What, and follow the course?"

"Suppose they came no quicker than you did, and put a drawing-pin in the place every day!"

Daintree was delighted; he shook Tom's hand, and up went the chart, and in went the drawing-pin.

"You see," he said, "they've not got to the Cape yet; they're only just beginning to turn the corner and run their easting down."

"That's assuming they came no quicker than you," said his consoler.

"Well, we will assume it. Still, when they're a hundred days out we'll have a flag ready, and you shall begin going every morning to the point to see whether there's a ball at the south yard-arm. And after that will be the longest time of all!"

Meanwhile there was much to do, and Tom did most of it with enormous zest; he had never thought to be so happy again. His enthusiasm was the one return that he could make to Daintree, and he permitted it no bounds. It was Tom who stuck the drawing-pin through a cork ship of cunning build, full-rigged with needles for masts and paper sails. When Daintree saw it they christened her the *Rosamund*, after her real namesake, with a fitting libation; and from that day forth the cork vessel

ploughed the white ocean of the chart, and was a good half-inch nearer Sydney every morning when the master of the house entered the breakfast-room.

"You sympathetic fellow!" he would say to Tom, and sympathy bred sympathy as it always will. "You must marry yourself, Thomas," he would add. "And you and your wife must live with me and mine; and we'll go into partnership together, up the country somewhere, and all four live happy ever after!"

To all of which the servant would shake his head, but continue to enter into the master's happiness with unabated sympathy and enthusiasm. Nor was this a conscious merit in Tom; it made him think no better of himself. He knew how much was inspired by gratitude, and how much more by the selfish relief of sinking his own woes in the hopes and fears and raptures of his friend. He was not even aware of the essential fineness of a nature capable of this kind of comfort. Eternal dissatisfaction with his own feelings kept his opinion of himself at zero still. And if the new bond between Tom and his benefactor had done no more than provide them with common ground, on which they might meet and be at one in all sincerity, even so it would have done much for Tom's peace of mind.

When Daintree spoke of his beloved, his dark face shone, the darker eyes softened, and the rich voice quivered with no common passion. It was possible to agree and to applaud without hypocrisy, which was not possible when the puny poet stood in the strong man's shoes. Of his poetry enough has been said, but about his passion there was no mistake. The one was genuine; the other was not. It was a man's passion, a selfish passion, but the sheer masterful strength of it was patent

to Tom from the first. Sometimes it made him fear for the girl — and despair of himself. Gratitude apart, it was as though his spoilt and petty spirit was incapable of an honest, whole-hearted, ungrudging admiration and regard.

In all their talks the only name Tom heard was Clarinda: it was characteristic of his state that he never inquired the other. His sympathy and his interest were confined to his friend; real curiosity he had none. He asked no questions, but a crooked answer was ready for him if he had.

"You must let me tell her all I owe to you," Tom said once. "It will be a pleasure to her and a relief to me."

"Perhaps you owe as much to herself!"

It had slipped out, but Tom was not at all excited.

"You mean that she believed in me too?" he asked with a mild sort of incredulity; and he saw from the other's face that she had not. "Upon my soul," he thought, "I begin to disbelieve in myself; especially since I've done as bad out here — and perhaps not heard the last of it yet!"

Daintree wondered why he shuddered in the sun. It was because his one true and fierce emotion was the base fear of further tortures. He despised himself for that most of all.

Meanwhile the cork ship with the paper sails was creeping slowly but surely across the great white South Atlantic of the chart; and the wall on which it hung had been re-papered; and the whole bungalow smelt of paint. It was a fair-sized house of two stories, with a verandah encircling the one and a balcony the other. Very pretty it looked in its new coat of paint for the summer, a white coat with yellow trimmings, which

stood out delightfully on the blue water's edge. The garden lawn merged into a narrow strand that slid straight under the wavelets themselves. As summer set in the trees behind the house broke out in every gay and gorgeous colour; it was the plumage of the parrots, that now came and perched in flocks among the branches.

Tom gave up his room, as two ladies and a maid were expected. It was re-papered for the maid. A room was found for Tom in the pretty little stables amid the trees, where he helped Fawcett with the horses and the cur-ricule, which was in Sydney on some errand every day. Generally the master went alone; once he took Tom with him; it was on the occasion of his cashing a cheque to meet the running expenses of these elaborate preparations.

They were on their way home at dusk, when Daintree pulled up on the outskirts of the town and hailed a disconsolate, soldierly figure with one arm in a sling.

"Why, Harry?" cried Daintree. "That's never you?"

"I wish it wasn't, sir."

"You've left the force?"

"These six months; it was my arm; look there, sir!"

An emaciated hand came through the sling; the thumb and forefinger were uninjured; but half the middle finger, and both the other two, were like dead, distorted branches on a living tree.

"What did it?"

"A bullet; caught me on the funny-bone and paralysed half my hand. My right hand, too. It's set me on the shelf at thirty-three!"

"An accident, Harry?"

Tom held his breath.

"Quite," said Harry bitterly; "it was meant for my

heart! You would hear of the bushrangers at Dr. Sullivan's last summer—that's when it was. And the one that did it was the only one to get away!"

Tom's clothes were sticking to him, freezing to him. "Drive on!" he whispered. "For God's sake, sir, drive on!"

Daintree expressed sympathy with the man, and whipped up his horses.

"Not so fast!" cried Tom. "You offered me wages; advance me five pounds of what you got from the bank!"

His face was white with horror: his tone so piteous and so eager that Daintree pulled up, took five sovereigns from a bag, and dropped them one by one into the trembling hand. Tom sprang out and ran back to the disabled man.

"From my master!" he gasped, and thrust the money into his left hand—and darted back without daring to look in his face. The astonished trooper had not time to say a word.

"God bless you for that money!" faltered Tom, in terrible agitation as they drove on. "I gave it to him from you. I want no wages. Give them all to him!"

The other remained silent.

"You don't ask why!"

"I think I know."

"It was *I* who smashed his arm and spoilt his life!"

"I suspected it."

"When?"

"On the road down, when you kept looking behind and thinking they were after you."

"Ah, no!" cried Tom, almost beside himself with grief and shame, "that was for something else. See what a villain I have been! You should have left me

one. I could have stood it if you'd left me what I was! Oh, what am I to do? — I in luxury, and that man shattered and ruined by my hand! I can't bear it. I must confess. And I an innocent man in the beginning! Oh, that was bad enough, to be condemned for what you never did; but it's as bad to know you're guilty and to go scot-free!"

The other said nothing, but listened attentively as Tom now unbosomed himself of the whole truth of his adventure with the bushrangers; whereupon Daintree justified his offence with such warmth of conviction that Tom was a little soothed. But his lavish friend went further: he undertook that the disabled man should want for nothing; but first they must find out what his circumstances really were.

They found out within an hour, and from the man himself. He had followed them on foot to render thanks; he even wanted to return the money. Not only was the department treating him handsomely; the surgeons had hopes of his arm; and he was ashamed of the way in which he must have exaggerated matters in the street. So Tom was assured when the man was gone; he kept out of the way while he was there.

The assurance consoled him — a little. He never forgot that half-withered hand. He dreamt of it at night, it haunted him by day; and all the while that withered hand was surely though invisibly restoring the shattered temple of this soul. It did for Tom what mere kindness had failed to do: for now a horror of his acts replaced the dread of their consequences. Those ignoble terrors passed quite away. It never even occurred to Tom that he had lightly confessed what no living witness could have proved.

He had been with Daintree now some eight or nine weeks; there were deep lines in his face, but his eyes were no longer inflamed and ferocious, and he was beginning to hold them up again as of old. The debonair glance had not come back — it was gone for ever. And his back was still marked (the master saw it when they bathed), and his walk was still shambling. Yet day by day peace was creeping into his heart; day by day he liked Daintree better; and day by day the little cork *Rosamund* left the Cape farther astern and came nearer and nearer Sydney Heads.

CHAPTER XXXII

A MARRIAGE MARKET

ONE morning, when Tom was busy in his pantry, a tearful voice advised him that he was wanted in the study at once. The woman vanished as he turned; the kitchen door slammed upon her sobs; and in the study Tom found his master in a towering rage.

"You profess some gratitude towards me, I believe?" said Daintree, with a biting ceremony of voice and manner.

"Not more than I feel — not half as much!"

"Then you are the exception, and now's your chance of showing what you say you feel. I'm going to ask a favour of you, Thomas."

"You shouldn't put it so, sir. I love to serve you."

"Then go to Parramatta factory and choose a wife!"

Tom twitched all over, and stood very still without a word. The other covered him with an ugly eye.

"So even *your* gratitude has its limits!" he sneered. "Another time I should protest a little less, if I were you!"

"You ask the one impossible thing," replied Tom, with a groan.

"Pardon me; I did *not* ask it," rejoined Daintree, whose blacker moods inspired him with a perfect genius for picking quarrels. "Though you have not honoured *me* with *your* confidence, it may relieve you to hear that I haven't the least desire to tamper with your loyalty to some lady unknown. I ask you to choose a wife — not to marry her."

"I don't understand you, sir," said Tom respectfully.

"You will if you condescend to listen. The woman Fawcett says we shall require another servant here. I don't believe a word of it; the ladies are bringing their own maid with them; but this idle, impudent, ungrateful woman holds a pistol to my head and threatens to desert me at this juncture if I don't get her a girl. I've had her here bullying me for the last half-hour, and this is the hole that I'm in: either the Fawcetts leave me this day month — when I shall want them most — or I must apply for a convict woman, and God knows what kind they'll send me! Now, if you applied for a wife you'd have your pick and choose a decent one; and, as I say, there's no earthly reason why you should ever marry her."

"Surely it would be unfair not to," objected Tom, who would have used a stronger adjective to anybody else.

"Unfair on the girl? Not at all; you simply let her off a blind bargain, and she gains good wages and a comfortable home. The girl comes out of it deuced well;

the officials are none the wiser and none the worse; while I have the advantage of your selection instead of theirs."

"I might make a bad choice —"

"Oh, if you want to keep out of it," cried Daintree, "keep out of it, and refuse me the first favour I've ever asked *you* to do *me*. I shall know better than to ask another; only, in future, let me hear less of your gratitude till you've some to show."

Tom consented without further words. He disliked the plan as cordially as he resented the outrageous tone adopted by Daintree; but he would submit to both sooner than deny the man to whom he owed more than he could even yet realise. And, after all, a certain irritability on Daintree's part was only natural in his present anxiety and suspense; while it was now sufficiently clear that the little conspiracy would indeed do no harm to anybody. On the other hand, the arch-conspirator was himself a magistrate; and there *was* something startling in the crafty and cold-blooded way in which he set about circumventing those very regulations which it was his duty and his practice to enforce. To Tom this was yet another of those gratuitous revelations which both hurt and shamed him, even as he feared that they would hurt and shame the poor bride before long.

Meanwhile the necessary letters, in which the convict applied for a wife and the master undertook to support her, were written, the one with secret abhorrence, the other with a sinister gusto. Next day Tom received his order to the matron of the factory to supply him with a wife; and started, in the early morning following, on an errand which his whole soul repudiated.

All the way there he had an uneasy feeling that he was about to commit himself beyond his bargain, that

Daintree was disingenuous even with him. How could he trust a man who gloried in a trick? He bore a letter to the matron from that cunning hand. It was sealed, and filled him with suspicion until an enclosure rustled as the matron thrust it into her pocket.

"You are to take her back with you," said the woman, having read her letter, "and to be married from your master's house. Very good; I don't object, I'm sure. But you're just too late for first choice; this young man was five minutes before you."

First choice! The whole business sickened Tom before it began. He had found the matron in the charming garden of the factory; as yet he had seen nothing of the other side; but the matron now led him and the earlier applicant (an ill-favoured, freckled fellow who took care to keep in front of Tom) through a passage and out into a spacious courtyard. It was a dazzling forenoon; a slanting sun raked the yard from end to end. One extremity, indeed, was in hard, black shadow; and here some scores of women and infants were huddled together, in a group that cried for a yet thicker veil.

Sad as it was, however, to see the coarse and brazen women with their sickly, wrinkled, base-born children, the children they had been sent back there to bear, it was sadder still to hear the shrill oaths of the mothers mingling with as many innocent cries. A hateful volley greeted the appearance of the two men, to one of whom his worst experience seemed a bagatelle of horror beside this repulsive scene. Here was neither discipline nor fear, but lost faces and shameless tongues openly trading on their immunity from the lash. And yet women were wheeling barrows in the distance; women were

breaking stones within the walls; and in that ghastly group were mothers as bald as their babes—their shaven heads corresponding with fifty stripes upon a male. Tom had writhed and sunk and hardened among the men; whip-cord and iron stirred his blood no more, but it ran cold enough in the factory yard at Parramatta.

“What ails you?” cried the matron, seeing him shudder and hang back. “Why, bless the man, does he think he’s got to choose from *that* lot? No, no, it’s only the first class we let marry, and that’s the third. Hi! there,” she sang out to an assistant; “turn out the women of the first class!”

And in another minute, with shuffling shoes, fluttering gowns and cackling tongues, over a hundred girls swarmed out of the building amid the jeers of those already in the yard. The matron and her assistant then formed them into two long lines; and so they stood, like competing cattle in a show. And Tom stood by, hanging his head, and blushing for them and for himself.

“Your turn first,” said the matron to the other applicant. “Just step down the lines and take your pick.”

The fellow did so with alacrity, and Tom saw him peering and leering at the girls, and actually shaking his red head in their faces, until he came to one that took his fancy. Her he beckoned from the rank—a bold, bright hussy—and they whispered, but only for a moment. And this time it was the woman who shook her head.

“Too many freckles for me,” she called out saucily. “I’ll hang on for the other one!”

So the convict went on; and tested another, in order to reject her and be even with them; while in those two

long ranks, one hung back here and there to ten who put themselves forward, like boys who know the answer in a class.

Tom had forgotten Daintree, and plucked the matron by the sleeve; he had told her it was no use, he could never go through that, when the woman showed she was not listening to a word. He followed her fixed gaze; and there was the freckled convict importuning an up-standing young woman, who tossed her black mop, and would have nothing to say to him.

"Well, look at that!" exclaimed the matron. "There's a girl who hasn't been in the first class a week, and she gets an offer and turns up her nose at it. May she never get another!"

Tom had looked; and it was Peggy O'Brien, with her hair cut short like a boy's.

It appeared that the man would not take his answer, he was at her still, and Tom advanced between the lines. "One at a time—it's not your turn!" cried out the matron; but at that moment a deep flush dyed Peggy's face, her neighbours laughed derisively, and Tom rushed in amid the protests of the matron and a ribald outcry from the mothers in the shade.

"It's Tom!" gasped Peggy.

"What's he saying?" cried Tom.

"Never you mind," said the man. "First come, first served; you wait till I've done!"

Tom ignored him and looked to Peggy.

"He won't take 'no,'" she said; "an' I'd have no thruck wid 'm to save me immorthal soul!"

"Will you with me, Peggy? Will you with me?"

The girl went white to the lips; he took her hand, and eyed his fellow, whose freckles jumped out through

his pallor, and whose hands were fists that dared not strike. Tom would have reasoned with the man, only the latter was now set upon by a bevy of obstreperous Amazons not lightly to be shaken off.

There was none among them would have looked at Tom with such a fine fellow standing by; nor was there a man in all his senses who would take up with Peggy, if he but knew what they could tell him. So (in effect) cried the girls who fell upon the one man left, and fought for him, and scratched for him, and mauled him in their efforts to hug him to their hearts; for the spice of excitement introduced by Tom had turned their light heads; and it was from a pandemonium of his own making that he had meanwhile led Peggy apart.

"You'll come with me, won't you, Peggy?"

"Yes, Tom, if you want me." And a humid light was in the sweet Irish eyes.

"Then come to the matron, and I'll have you out of this hole in half a jiffy!"

But the matron was otherwise engaged; and when a degree of order had been restored, and the competition for the remaining male had been decided by his capitulation to an Amazon of vast physique; and when the brawlers had been banished indoors with threats of shaved heads and solitary cells, then the good lady would have given much to pack Tom off wifeless for his pains. Not so much, however, as had lain between the leaves of Daintree's letter. So by noon Peggy O'Brien was a comparatively free woman. Alas! she was an unutterably happy one.

Her arm stole within Tom's as he drove: he had neither the courage nor the heart to tell her the truth outright. It was a cruel position for them both; he

glanced with horror at her radiant face; and again he noticed her hair.

"Where's it all gone to, Peggy?" he asked, pointing to the short strong locks. "What have you done with it?"

They had reached the outskirts of Parramatta; new buildings were springing up in every direction, and Peggy jerked her head towards some scaffoldings.

"Is it where me hair's gone?" she said with a laugh. "Mebbe there's some of 't there!"

"Where, Peggy?"

"In them new buildin's, like as not. An' didn't ye hear they strengthen the morthar wid the hair of the women's heads? 'Tis thru, then, in Parramatta. An' 'tis mighty kind they think themselves to give us the razor instid o' the cat—but where's their bricks an' morthar if they bet us?"

"They used that glorious hair for bricks and mortar!"

His praise of it was dearer far than her possession; she coloured with pride and happiness as she told him it happened long ago, when first she came there.

"But why did it happen?" he asked indignantly. "What could you have done to deserve such treatment?"

She hesitated, and squeezed his arm.

"Nat Sullivan came—"

"Nat Sullivan!"

"An' I was to swear whether or not you were one of the bushrangers; so you may think what I swore; an' he said I was a liar, an' I struck 'm in the face wid me open hand; an' they shaved me for that!"

Tom felt miserable; she had suffered for him all along; how could he tell her he was deceiving her now, and had

no intention of marrying her at all? Not one word of that had passed her modest lips, yet the pressure of her homely hand was eloquent with love and joy. What could he do? What could he say? For miles he never opened his lips: they were tight-shut when she glanced at him, and his face so wretched, that at last she could bear it no longer.

"What is it, dear?" she asked him tenderly. "Is it how ye can make such as me your wedded wife? Because ye needn't, Tom dear, if ye think betther not. 'Twouldn't take all that to make me happy!"

Then, in a burst, he told her of his master's plan, and how he had entered into it against his own better judgment, because that master had plucked him from the jaws of death and from the gates of hell; and how, from the moment he saw Peggy, his only thought was to do for her what his master had done for him.

"My one idea," he said, "was to get you out of that horrible place. I give you my word I never thought of anything else. But—"

Her sweet eyes had fallen. There were tears on her lashes. Claire was dead to him, so what else mattered? Better be true to the living than to the dead!

"—but I do now!" he cried through his teeth. "Yes, Peggy, I mean it now! I hate such trickery, I'll have no hand in it. I applied for a wife, and by the Lord I'll marry her too—if—why—"

She had withdrawn her arm, and was shaking her bent black head.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE SHIP COMES IN

SEPTEMBER finished on its sweetest note: a mild breeze blowing off the South Pacific, a temperate sun in a spotless sky, a harbour fretted with waves like azure shells, and winding among shores still green and wholesome from a winter's rains. It was a Sunday, too, and round the woody headlands, and across the dark-blue inlets, came the sound of bells for afternoon church. Tom lay on his back, his head beneath a Norfolk Island pine, his heels in the warm sand at the water's edge. His eyes were closed; but he was listening to the bells.

He fancied the sound as fourteen thousand miles away: for so had he lain and listened amid the Suffolk rabbit-warrens on summer Sundays when his place was in the cool dark rectory pew. His spirit was in Suffolk now. Then the bells stopped. Then he lay very still; and when he turned he half expected his back to smart and his legs to jingle. Once more he was a felon in a felon's country; it was that despite sun and waves and soft white sand; and felon was his name no less for this his unmerited ease. As he looked across the bay a black fin broke the blue and made an allegory with a single smudge: even as those sweet waters teemed with sharks, so the fair land that locked them was rank and rotten with intestine horror and cruelty and corruption.

Fourteen thousand miles! The distance was brought home to Tom by being printed on the chart, beneath an ideal course, in small type which the little *Rosamund*

was sailing over at that moment. It set him thinking of Claire, but the thoughts had no form and little sting. Not even yet could he think or feel acutely: a bundle of dead nerves and clouded brains, he could but ache and work, or ache and bask as he was doing now.

An odd number of "The Pickwick Papers" had found its way to the bungalow, and now lay in the sand beside Tom; he had finished it, to his sorrow, before the bells began. Presently up came Daintree with the dog that still followed him to every haunt but his study. He carried his camp-stool and an armful of books; and Tom's heart sank; their taste in literature differing terribly, though, of the two, only one held himself qualified to judge. The judge glanced at the green cover in the sand, much as he would have favoured a mountebank at a fair, with insolent nostrils and a pitying eye for those who smiled. He opened his Byron and read a canto of "Lara," aloud and admirably, but Tom nearly fell asleep, and was accused of having no soul for poetry. "Or for anything else," Tom reminded the reader, who shut the book with an offended snap, but opened another next minute.

"Perhaps," said Daintree, "you prefer this sort of thing. I shouldn't wonder!"

And he read:—

"Oh! that 'twere possible,
After long grief and pain;
To find the arms of my true love
Round me once again!

"When I was wont to meet her
In the silent woody places
Of the land that gave me birth,

We stood tranced in long embraces.
 Mixt with kisses sweeter, sweeter,
 Than anything on earth.

“ A shadow flits before me —
 Not thou, but like to thee,
 Ah God ! that it were possible
 For one short hour to see
 The souls we loved, that they might tell us
 What and where they be.”

When Daintree began, Tom's eyes had been swimming lazily about the bay; but the first quatrain brought them at a bound to the reader's face, and now he was hanging upon every word. Line after line rang through him like a trumpet-call — waking old echoes — stirring and stabbing him — until the whole man tingled with the rushing of long-stagnant blood. And now came stanzas that went no deeper than the ear, while those three ran their course through every vein. Yet when he next caught up the thread it was his own soul still speaking — the very story was now his own.

“ Alas ! for her that met me,
 That heard me softly call —
 Came glimmering thro' the laurels
 At the quiet even fall,
 In the garden by the turrets
 Of the old manorial hall.”

He had turned his head: a blue mist hid the world, but through it shone a poignant vision of Claire Harding — among the Winwood fir-trees — in the autumn evenings long ago. . . . And this is how the tears came back into Tom Erichsen's eyes, to show him that his soul had lived through a night's bushranging and four months of Major Honeybone's iron-gang.

Daintree looked on with a jealous scorn. That a few stray verses in the "Annual Register" should put fire and water in eyes which the combined Hours of Exile and of Idleness sometimes left in such a very different state! It was a galling thought, and it showed itself in such black looks that Tom was constrained to cut his first heartfelt outburst very short indeed. So he hastily added that the poem appealed to him particularly — he need not explain why.

"I see," said Daintree. "Not altogether on its merits, eh? I'm glad to hear it;" and his face lightened a little.

"I don't know," said Tom humbly; "it *was* on its merits, I think. Surely it must appeal to every miserable man. Oh, it's all, all there — in such words! Come, sir, don't you think it fine yourself?"

"Fine," said Daintree, "is a word which the critic does not employ unadvisedly. Your fine poem is not spasmodic: it takes a metre and sticks to it — as I do, for example, and as Byron did. You don't catch me — or Byron — writing poems with no two stanzas alike in form! No, Thomas, the verdict is not 'fine'; but that the lines have a certain merit I don't deny."

"Who wrote them?" asked Tom after a pause.

"His name is Tennyson," replied the poet. "You have never heard it before, I daresay, and I shouldn't be surprised if you were never to hear it again. There were fair things in his last book, but, upon the whole, I am afraid the production you so admire may be taken as representing his high-water mark — which is a sufficient commentary upon the rest. I understand, however, that he is a very young man, so we must give him a chance. When he is my age he may do very much

better, if he perseveres, as I have done. Now, *my* notion of treating such a theme," said Daintree, "you have heard before, but you shall hear it again."

And with that he drew "Hours of Exile" from his pocket, and read with ineffable unction one of the longest sets of "Stanzas to Clarinda"; while the terrier gazed up at him with eyes of devoted sympathy and admiration; and Tom fed his upon feathery emerald branches and a turquoise sky, as he reluctantly decided that the kindest of men was in some respects the most egregious also. Suddenly — to his horror — the reading stopped. He had been caught not attending! He lowered his eyes, and they fell upon the snowy wings of a full-rigged ship just clearing the woody eastern point of the bay, and sailing slowly and majestically on.

Both men sprang to the water's edge. Daintree's book lay in the sand. The ship was now clear of the point — standing to the north of Shark Island, with the light sea-breeze upon her counter — a noble vessel of six hundred tons, flying the red ensign at her peak.

Not a word passed at the water's edge; but it was Tom who led the rush to the bungalow, who fetched Daintree's immense spy-glass, with the flags of all nations let into the leather, and who bared the lenses before putting it in his master's shaking hands.

"How many days are they out?" asked Daintree, aiming wildly with the glass.

"Ninety-nine."

"She could never do it!"

"It's been done before."

"Oh, no, no; this must be some other ship. Steady the glass for me. I can't get focus. There — now! Yes! I can see her people, but I can't read her name!"

"Let me try, sir."

"Here, then."

Tom tried and gave it up.

"To Piper's Point!" he cried. "She'll pass there much closer!" And again he led the way, with Daintree thundering close behind, and the terrier barking happily at their heels.

Along the shore they raced, the little bay on their right, then across the promontory diagonally, and out at its western point, panting, trembling, streaming with perspiration, but in time: her bowsprit was sticking out behind the island, and they were there to see her nose follow, with the foam curling under it like a white moustache.

Tom had the telescope, focussed still, and he handed it to Daintree without a word; but the one concerned was trembling so violently, the ship jumped right and left, and Tom had to try again. He was steady enough. What was it to him? She was only half a mile off now, and the first thing he saw was a frock fluttering on the poop.

"Now I have it!" he muttered. "The sun's on the letters: one, two, three—yes, there are eight! R—o—"

He lowered the glass and held out his hand.

"I congratulate you from my heart: the *Rosamund* it is, and I think that with the glass you may find the young lady herself upon the poop."

It was Tom who led the cheers a moment later.

"I sha'n't be there to meet them," moaned Daintree as they were running back. "Ninety-nine days—ninety-nine days!"

"They're not doing four knots; they're shortening

sail; you'll see the Cove as soon as they do. Even if you don't, they won't land at once."

"Suppose they did!"

"They won't; we'll put to in five minutes."

Tom was the cheery one, the one with his wits about him; but then it was nothing to Tom. He would not go in with the curricie, though Daintree was as bent as a flurried man could be upon having the livery and the cockade in waiting on the quay. Tom, however, pointed out that the two ladies, their maid, and the driver were all the curricie could possibly hold; also that there was more to do at the bungalow than the other realised; but he promised to receive them in all his buttons, and in less than ten minutes the dazed man started both horses at a gallop down the Point Piper Road.

Tom heard him rattle out of earshot among the trees without audible mishap. He then ran back to the house, where Mrs. Fawcett was already beside herself in the kitchen; but Peggy had paused on the verandah with an anxious face.

"'Tis you should be wid 'm, Tom," said she reproachfully.

"There wasn't room, Peggy."

"Room enough the one way. I take shame o' ye for lettin' the mather go alone in his haste."

"Why?"

"'Tis thrown out an' kilt he may be, on the way to meet his lady!"

"God forbid!" cried Tom — and the words came back to him next day.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE BRIDE-ELECT

Tom had done well to stay behind: there was so much to make ready that none of the others knew where to begin until he showed them. At his best in most emergencies, he was resolved to strain every nerve in this one, and so perhaps show some little gratitude at last. The opportunity was unique. Tom seized it with characteristic ardour.

He began by putting Mrs. Fawcett on her mettle; invented the dinner for her, and got old Fawcett out of his wife's way by sending him to a neighbouring nursery for the asparagus and the green peas. Peggy he set to work to make the beds, while he himself gathered flowers for the table, flowers for the ladies' rooms, flowers for the verandah upon which the bride must tread. The new flag, bought for this day, had never been unpacked. It was soon flying bravely from the flag-staff on the lawn. And by five o'clock Tom had his table exquisitely laid. But it was nearly seven before the curricula lamps shone through the open gate, and the horses swept up to the verandah, where Tom stood in ardent readiness.

He had spent the interim in arraying himself most carefully in all his menial finery — in shaving for the second time that day — in laying out his master's evening clothes — in gathering the books which had been left upon the shore — in reading and re-reading the poem that expressed his case — in talking to Peggy, and in thinking of Claire.

The whole situation put him sadly in mind of Claire; but he was not thinking of her as the horses trotted up — he had forgotten all about her when he heard her voice. Next moment the curriole bridged the stream of lamp-light issuing from the hall. And Tom stood among the roses he had strewn, silhouetted against the doorway, without moving hand or foot, or once lifting his unseen gaze from Claire Harding's face.

What followed seemed to be happening to another man. Daintree cried to him, and he helped the ladies to get down — he touched her hand. Their eyes never met. Daintree jumped down and led Claire on his arm through the roses. Fawcett came up, the curriole was gone, and Tom stood alone in the drive, watching the ladies go upstairs within, followed by their maid and Daintree; and after that he stood watching the staircase until Daintree ran down it and had him by both hands.

"You dear good fellow — you have thought of everything!" he cried. "You couldn't have done more if you'd been the happy man yourself; and I shall never forget it — especially the flowers!"

"Nor I," cried Tom bitterly.

"Why, what's the matter?"

"You might have told me who it was, sir! I recognised Miss Harding at once; her family used to come to our village for the shooting, and her father was my father's enemy. It's hard for me to meet her like this after that! I'd have run away if I'd known!"

"Precisely why I didn't tell you," rejoined Daintree triumphantly. "Come, come, my good fellow, I know all about the relations between the two families, and you mustn't flatter yourself that Miss Harding will

remember you. You've altered considerably, for one thing; and I dropped your surname on purpose to spare you any such recognition. Miss Harding won't know you from Adam."

"I would rather not wait upon her, all the same."

Daintree showed his teeth.

"Not wait upon the lady who is to be my wife and your mistress? You dare to say that to my face? Let me find you at your post when I come downstairs — or take care!"

And he stood a moment at the door, with the most significant and malignant expression; after which he went upstairs to dress, leaving Tom to regret, for the first time, his impulsive confession of complicity in the Castle Sullivan outrage, and to reflect upon the many sides of the man whom Claire Harding had come out from England to marry. Memories lashed him by the score. He had seen how the tyrant could treat his servants and his dog; he had pitied the bride in the abstract; and was it to be Claire Harding, and was he to stand there and see them married?

His head was in a whirl of conflicting emotions and anxieties. Still stunned by the mere shock of seeing her whom he had never thought to see again, in that outlandish place, and all but another man's bride, he was faced by an immediate dilemma which called for instantaneous decision. If Claire were to recognise him at dinner, then she was pretty certain to betray a secret which Daintree, on the other hand, was almost as certain to guess if his servant absented himself after what had just passed. Well, Claire knew best why she had made a secret where none was necessary; but if more trouble was to come of it, let him be there to take her part.

Let him be there for ever, to watch over her in those passionate hands! And Tom found himself mechanically lighting the candles on the dinner-table, and lowering the shades to lessen the chance of his face being seen.

While he was so engaged the inner door opened, and Tom and Claire stood face to face.

Her eyes were great with horror: she shut the door behind her, and then stood close against it, shrinking from him to whom she once had clung.

"I can't bear it," she gasped. "I must either speak to you or go mad! Yes, yes, I know we may be caught — I can't help that! Tell me quickly: did you know who I was before I came?"

"No, indeed!"

"Is it by accident that you are his servant?"

"No; he sought me out. So you knew me again, Claire!"

"What did you say? Never call me that again. Of course I knew you! How could I forget you, after all you have made me suffer? If I only could!"

The cruelty of this speech struck him dumb: he drew himself up and grimly challenged her with his eye. Her sufferings, indeed! What had she suffered? She was on the point of marrying a rich man; no doubt it was distressing to her to encounter him again at that juncture; his lip curled at such distress.

She read his thoughts to the letter. "You think I have not suffered!" she cried in a low voice. "You little know; but this is the last straw — the punishment I so richly deserve! Mr. Daintree saved your life. You knew that, of course? But I don't think you know why he did it: it was because *I* asked him — it was for *my* sake!"

"You?" he said hoarsely. "I see now—I see! I might have guessed it long ago!"

"He wanted to do something for me," she continued in a choking voice; "I let him do that. I deceived him—to save your life. I am here—because I deceived him!"

He thought he had seen everything; he had not, but he was beginning to, now. Good heavens! why was his heart beating so fast? It ought to bleed instead: here was the girl he loved, and upstairs was the man he had reason to love better still; and they were going to marry—like that. He tried to forget, to think only of what Claire had done for him.

"God bless you!" he murmured. "He has saved my life twice over, and much more than my life. And I owe it all to one brave girl who believed in me, and made him believe in me, when all the world—"

"Stop!" she cried. "I never believed in you at all."

"What?"

"I was—sorry for you."

"You believed me guilty—even when you tried to save my life?"

"Of manslaughter—yes!"

"Let us split no hairs! You think—I did it—still?"

"I can think nothing else."

In the dead silence following these words the servant heard his master stamping into evening dress overhead; he felt his own crested buttons glittering in the candle-light that shone upon the table he had set so beautifully for the bride; and, as she tossed back the ringlets that he knew so well, and repeated with unflinching eyes what she had told him in so many candid words, all that had distracted him up to this moment ceased to do

so any more. Her coming was nothing to him now. Her errand was nothing; she was welcome to marry the next day. But believe in his innocence she must and should: injustice from her was the last bitterness, the crowning wrong, the one intolerable misery which absorbed all that had gone before.

Something of this he showed her in his bitter, proud, inexorable look; then suddenly he retreated to the open French windows.

"You are going?" she cried. "I might have known; you were always — generous!"

"I am not now. I hear my master on the stairs."

"You are not going altogether?"

"Certainly not at present."

"When, when?" she cried below her breath.

"When you do me common justice."

Daintree had gone into the wrong room. The girl ran recklessly to the window.

"Tom!"

"Miss Harding?"

"Will you swear — to *me* — that you are innocent?"

But Tom was gone. She heard him treading viciously in the dark verandah. A moment later Daintree found her deeply engrossed before the chart. She wanted to know what the ship meant; he told her in a tender whisper.

"What a beautiful idea!"

"Well, it wasn't mine."

"Whose was it?"

"My servant's; he made her, and he moved her on each day. You would have said he was the lucky fellow himself!"

CHAPTER XXXV

A MEDDLER

THE breeze had freshened: there were white wisps in the blue above, and tiny crests upon the blue below. It was early morning; and Tom, having waited admirably overnight, was setting the breakfast-table when his master came in glowing from the morning dip. As a rule they bathed together; this exception was their first. They had not spoken since the previous evening. But here was Daintree in a glow from more causes than salt water and fresh air; and a glance told the other that he was forgiven.

"Well, Thomas, will you listen to me another time? Neither lady has the slightest idea who you are!"

"I am thankful to hear you say so," said Tom, laying the knives.

"Lady Starkie never set eyes on you before. I feel certain that Miss Harding doesn't know you from Adam. Don't you think it was rather vain of you to imagine that she would?"

"I was afraid of it, sir," said Tom. "That was all."

"And very natural too," said his master kindly. "I quite enter into your embarrassment, and only fear I said more than I meant in the heat of the moment last night. You must forgive me, Thomas; it *was* unpleasant for you, I admit; but you won't mind another day of it, will you? One more day will end it—for the present!"

The swarthy countenance was more radiant than ever. Tom was nonplussed.

"Only one more day?"

"For the present," repeated Daintree; "the ladies return to Sydney this afternoon. They go to the Pulteney. Shall I tell you why — shall I tell you why?"

And now one man was on fire, but the other felt a chill run down him as he nodded his head; he could not speak.

"Because it's to be at once!" cried Daintree, beside himself with joy. "Because a special licence is to be had by paying for it — so why on earth should we wait for banns? My boy, we shall be married by the end of the week. Only think of it! I can't believe it myself; it's weeks sooner than I dared to hope. But women are all alike! The very best of 'em, Thomas, will take you by surprise if they can. What do you think? I'd tell this to no other living man: when I met her on board no day was too distant, and before we said good-night it couldn't be too soon!"

The fine eyes glistened, the deep voice shook; there was no doubt about this man's love. But Tom was thinking of his darker side, and it had never seemed so dark before, for never before had he allowed himself to dwell upon it without shame. Now this was a duty; the point of view was changed; and the regrettable in Tom's benefactor became the intolerable in Claire's husband. Could she be happy with so dangerous a combination of the spoilt child and the unscrupulous tyrant? *Would she be safe?* Tom sweated with the thought; it was horribly entangled with that of his debt to Daintree. Yet for all that was in his heart, the fitting and conventional speech passed his lips, and he found himself shaking the other by the hand.

"Congratulate me?" cried Daintree "I should think

you did! You have only to see her to know how happy she will make me. She is a sweet, true, unselfish girl; she has beauty and goodness and strong common-sense; she can appreciate and admire and understand — she is the poet's ideal! I have been longing for her all my life. And then her manner! She will be a leader of society when I come to my own. Yes, Thomas, you may well congratulate me: she is going to make me the very happiest of men! I can see her now — friend of the wits — patroness of all the arts — gracious queen of an ideal salon — when the exile returns to his own!"

And doubtless he could also see himself — as Tom could see him — swelling with happiness and pride and satisfaction. *Her* happiness he appeared to take for granted; it might be unfair to say that he never thought of it at all; but he very seldom spoke of it, even to Claire.

Tom was in and out at breakfast; he contrived to be out as much as possible. Her face tortured him: he saw marks like bruises beneath the lustrous eyes that never looked his way. He noted the nervous effort of her conversation while he was present. But after breakfast, when he must have met her face to face on the verandah, she turned her back upon him in a manner not only pointed but barbed. And for a while his compassion deserted him altogether.

Claire was indeed not herself; her indisposition became more and more transparent, and when she ultimately confessed to a perfectly sleepless night, Daintree put it down to her great happiness, and was the first to insist that she should "run away and rest" till luncheon. Lady Starkie, on the other hand, made herself extremely comfortable, quite doting on the harbour and Rose Bay, while she declared that she had seldom felt

better in her life. Nevertheless, when her host began reading her his poems, a faintness overcame the lady before he had got very far. It was quite inexplicable, and *most* disappointing; but she feared that both Claire and herself were still suffering from the effects of the atrocious table on board that horrible ship. So Lady Starkie followed Claire upstairs—with the poems—which she took care to leave there when she came down again.

It was a little hard on Daintree; but he was now much too happy to be readily depressed or vexed. His rampant spirits sought relief in activity, and he galloped off to Sydney to secure rooms at the Pulteney Hotel.

Tom was meantime behind the scenes. So was Peggy O'Brien. And already those keen Irish eyes had seen more than he thought, for hopeless love had fitted them with strong lenses, even as his triumphant suit had blinded her master to every passion but his own. The girl had long divined that some other woman stood between herself and Tom. And there were more reasons than might appear for her instantly pouncing upon Miss Harding as the one.

Peggy was sure that Tom and Daintree must have known each other in England; or why were they more like brothers than master and man? Tom would not tell her, and the Fawcetts could not. So Peggy set them down as two old friends; and what if the friends had loved the same woman? The idea occurred to her when she saw Tom manipulating the cork ship and so zealously preparing for the bride. It was then an idea only; it became a suspicion on the evening of the bride's arrival; and Claire was not the only young woman who lay awake all that night.

The other had been transported for a comparatively venial offence, and had come through the thick of her ordeal a better woman than most; she is not put forward as an average specimen of her sex and kind in that Colony and at that time. The Irishwomen were almost invariably the best of a deplorable lot, and Peggy was certainly not the worst of the Irishwomen. But there was evil in her, and passion was to bring it out, as it had already brought out the good. A callous man she could bear with and wait for so long as he was callous and cold to all. But to see and hear him sighing for another woman—and that other woman there on the spot—was to lash a patient and single-hearted devotion into tumults of jealousy and bitter rage.

The thing galled her while it was still a suspicion. It maddened her when she knew it for a fact. And that was when, in the same half-minute, she met Claire on the stairs, in tears, and saw Tom in his pantry with his head clasped tight between his hands. Peggy stole away without a word, and there was mischief in every noiseless step she took.

Her first thought was to tell Daintree. It she dismissed on consideration, and tried making friends with the ladies' maid, in order to acquire information. This young woman, however, could only talk of the fourth officer aboard the *Rosamund*, and it took Peggy half an hour to discover that she had never even seen Miss Harding before the voyage. So she knew nothing; and half the morning was gone; but Peggy was all the more determined to learn everything before the visitors left.

The master's departure on horseback at last inspired the way. Tom in the pantry was still listening to the clattering hoofs when Peggy opened the door.

"Oh, Tom, the mather would like ye to clane out the boat for 'm when ye can find the time."

"Did he say so, Peggy?"

"Sure, he tould me not to tell ye, wid all the extra work ye've got; but he only wished it could be done."

"Then I'll set to work this minute."

"An' ye won't be tellin' 'm I tould ye?"

"No, I'll take all the credit if you like," said Tom, in a voice and with a face which he took no pains to discipline for Peggy's benefit. Both supported her theory and hardened her in her plot. And as he reached the boat-shed she was knocking at Miss Harding's door.

"Askin' yer pardon, miss, I think I know what would be betther for you than lyin' down up here!"

"What is that?"

"Lyin' in a hammock by the say."

"It sounds pleasant. Thank you very much; but I think I'll stay where I am."

"Sure, ye'd find one in the boat-shed, an' it's all the good the air would do ye!"

"You are very kind," said Claire wearily; "but who would put the hammock up?"

"Mather's gone to Sydney," said Peggy reflectively, "and he won't have me meddlin' wid such things. Wait till I tell ye, miss! Go this minute, an' you'll find Thomas in the boat-shed clanin' the boat; he'll have 't up in a twinkle!"

"Well, I'll see."

Claire had coloured.

"Will I tell 'm, miss?"

"No! I'll see. I think I would rather be where I am."

Peggy withdrew. In three minutes she heard the young lady coming downstairs; in two more she was herself outside the shed, crouching between timber and shrubs and sand and sky.

CHAPTER XXXVI

SIDE-LIGHTS

"You won't condescend?" said a scornful voice.

"Since you have made up your mind, why should I?"

"It is only your word that I ask: your solemn word to me that you are innocent."

"If you don't believe in *me*, what's the use of giving you my solemn word? I can't prove it, and never could; the evidence was too strong."

"It would have been stronger still —"

The voice stopped short.

"Well?"

"If *I* had told them all you said to *me* — that very night — that very hour!"

The voice was no longer scornful. Even to Peggy it seemed to falter and to tremble with the pent-up agony of years. But Tom's tone did not change.

"I know that," he said bitterly. "I have always known that you had more reason than anybody in the world to think me guilty. Yet I would rather you had thought me innocent and let me die than saved my life to show me what you still think after all these months. My cup has been pretty full, but that's the bitterest drop!"

"And still you won't deny it," persisted the girl. "I am ready to take your word — yet you will not give it."

"What's the use?" he asked. "What difference could it make — even supposing you believed me?"

"All the difference to me," was the quick but low reply; "it would alter everything — *everything*. Can't you see that it must?"

"No; it is too late to alter anything at all."

Yet his voice shook in its turn.

"Too late? Too late?" cried the girl wildly. "Nothing is too late — if you are innocent. Speak, Tom! Why don't you speak? Oh, Tom, *it would alter all our lives . . .* yet you will not speak!"

"Because I cannot!" he cried out. "Because I — I am *not* an innocent man. I am not — I am not — I am not! And now leave me; leave me, I say, for God's sake! Never you pity me again!"

Almost from a shout his voice died down to a whisper; the last words were hardly audible outside. But they were followed by a silence so heavy that Peggy O'Brien heard herself breathing, and thought she must be heard within. And then came the sound of light, unsteady steps retreating; and nothing more; not another sound within.

The silence appalled Peggy. At last, when she could no longer bear it, she crept over the soft sand to the mouth of the shed, and peered round the corner. He was standing within as the other woman had left him — he had never stirred. His open hands were still extended in some unfinished gesture. A glimmer of sunshine glanced off the waters and pointed the cruel contrast between the lined face and the yellow hair thrown proudly back from it: the one so aged, the other

so boyish. And his eyes — they seemed still to be pouring tenderness and strength upon the other woman — they never saw this one at all.

She stole away, loving him more than ever — but must not the other one too? She had seen the same look — had won it — but his crime made a difference to her. To Peggy it made none: she neither knew nor cared what it was, and there lay her slight advantage. It was too slight. She loved him, but so must the other. Her love lay near to hate; she would see if she could not push the other woman's nearer yet.

She reached the house, and nobody was in the way. Lady Starkie was writing letters in the breakfast-room. Peggy was soon listening at the other woman's door — listening to her sobs. She compressed her lips and nodded to herself with splendid confidence. At length there fell a silence, in which Peggy knocked and entered.

"I beg pardon, miss, but was Thomas not in the boat-shed? It's sorry I am if I sent ye on a fool's errand — savin' your presence, miss!"

"No; he was there."

"An' did he refuse ye?"

"No — I — changed my mind."

"Glory be to God, miss! 'Tis meself would let 'm know 't if he gave any of his sauce to the mather's lady. I'd have no more to do wid 'm at all!"

Claire turned pale.

"You would have no more to do with him?" said she very slowly. "I don't understand you."

"Sure, an' how would you? He wouldn't be afther tellin' a lady like you."

"Telling me what, my good girl?" She was trembling now.

"He came to the factory last week, miss; ye'll niver guess why — to choose a wife!"

"A wife!"

"An' it's me he chose . . . you ask the mather when he comes back!"

The master came back in time for lunch. He found Claire on the verandah, with a white face and an angry eye, loudly declaring she felt another being.

Tom heard and saw her, and waited infamously for the first time. He could not understand it at all. She had left the boat-shed with a very different mien. What could she have found out since then? That he had purposely misled her for her own good? That was impossible. Yet he knew so well from her proud, averted face that Claire had discovered something fresh against him. Whatever that discovery might be, however, it was destined not to be her last that day.

They were still at luncheon when Peggy burst into the room.

"Nat Sullivan an' the thraps!" she gasped. "It's afther Tom they are, an' I tould 'm he absconded last night. Oh, sir, say that same, for Ginger's there too, an' there's the blood in their eyes!"

Here was a bombshell, from the least expected quarter, at the least expected time. Tom felt the blood rush to his face — draining his heart — but he stood his ground until Daintree ordered him out of the way of the windows. Claire sat motionless. Lady Starkie was less calm. But Daintree rose up from the table, with perfect but ostentatious *sangfroid*, and he patted Peggy on the back as a party of horsemen rode in front of the verandah.

"Quite right, my girl!" cried he. "They shall not

lay a finger on him, never you fear. He has me at his back, and so have you." With that he strutted through the French windows, flourishing his napkin and quite delighted at the prospect of a little simultaneous display of power, generosity and laudable cunning, before so select an audience.

"Sorry to trouble you, sir," said a voice, "but I believe you have an assigned convict here of the name of Thomas Erichsen?"

"What name?" cried Lady Starkie.

"Hush, aunt!" whispered Claire.

"I have not," said Daintree.

"You have not?" roared Nat Sullivan himself.

"I have not," repeated Daintree blandly. "I *had* — but he has absconded from my service."

"When?"

"Last night."

"Any notion where he went?"

"Not the least."

"And you don't much care, eh?"

"Not a bit. May I ask a question in my turn?"

"Surely, sir."

"Do you want him for the Castle Sullivan business?"

"We do."

"I thought so. I've heard the idea. But who will you get to swear to him as having been there?"

"This man here," said Nat. And Tom, in the background, listened curiously; he was cool enough now, and his air shameless; it was assumed for Claire's benefit.

"I'm not so sure," said the voice of Ginger, in a rather dejected tone.

"You were sure enough in your cups!"

"That's another thing."

"Well," said the constable, "he's left this, anyhow. No use our wasting any more time here, Mr. Sullivan. Good morning, sir. I'm afraid he's given us the slip again."

"But not for long," cried Nat. "I mean to catch him and to hang him yet!"

They had ridden away. Daintree had re-entered the room, puffed up and smiling. Tom also had a kind of smile, and Peggy was gazing at him with shining eyes, when Claire rose from the table and swept out of the room without a word.

Daintree looked at Lady Starkie in dismay, and hastily ordered the servants to withdraw. Her ladyship rose also.

"Can you wonder at it?" she cried.

"At what?"

"Your bride disliking to be waited on by convicts. And—and—did I understand that young man's name was Erichsen?"

"Yes."

"The murderer of Captain Blaydes?"

"No."

"Who then?"

"His reputed murderer. He is an innocent man. You know I thought so at the time; you know, I believe, how I backed my opinion to the tune of several hundreds? I'm backing it still, Lady Starkie, I'm backing it still—that's all." It was not. He went on to tell of all that Erichsen had gone through, to his knowledge, in the settlement; how he was trying, in his small way, to make up to the poor fellow for the shocking injustice of his fate; and yet how even now the unlucky wretch went in danger of his neck, as Lady

Starkie had seen for herself, and all for siding with some bushrangers under circumstances of extraordinary compulsion and provocation combined. Of all this James Daintree spoke so feelingly, and with such an obviously earnest purpose, that Lady Starkie was quite moved, and undertook to use her influence with Claire in the matter of the convict servants.

But it was of no avail.

Daintree drove the ladies into Sydney, and drove back alone late at night. Tom awaited him, and as they walked from the stables to the house, the master's arm ran affectionately through that of the man.

"My dear fellow," he said, "it grieves me more than I can say, but I cannot go against my young wife where there is apparent right upon her side. She will have no convicts in her house. You and I will be compelled to part."

"It was bound to come," was Tom's reply. "I am only thankful it didn't come before you gave me back a little of what I have lost. I shall be grateful to you till my dying hour!"

"Oh, but I've not done with you yet! I must have you out of this country by hook or crook — that I'm bent upon. That brute Sullivan is actually at the Pulteney. It seems his overseer never meant to split on you, for some reason; but he did so when drunk, and now the other holds him to it. Until we spirit you out of the country you'll never be safe."

"That doesn't matter," said Tom. "I would rather stay where I am and take my chance."

He was thinking of Daintree and his wife; even through his gratitude he was thinking of that darker side.

CHAPTER XXXVII

FARM COVE

THAT was a long week at the bungalow; it was to culminate at St. Philip's Church in Sydney on the Saturday morning. The license was bought; the bridegroom carried the ring in his pocket; everything was ready but a best man. And here another peculiarity stood out: there was no best man to be had. As in London so in New South Wales: this baronet's son and heir, this man of blood and means and literary feats, was unbeloved in spite of all. Claire and her aunt had been absolutely the only guests at the bungalow in all Tom's time there. Nor was it because Daintree had never made a friend in the settlement; it was because he had never kept one in any quarter of the globe.

Meanwhile the ladies came to Rose Bay no more. The happy man went to them instead, and would stop till midnight, to gallop home by starlight and pour out his happiness to Tom until the harbour turned from jet to polished steel; and twice the steel was silver, and once the silver was flaming gold before the poet would hold his peace. It was a long week, but the nights went quicker than the days. Daintree had never been a better companion than in those long, confidential, starlit talks. They were not exclusively on the one subject. Tom learnt at last how the murder had affected the party at Avenue Lodge, and one whole night and day he never closed an eye for thinking of two men in two new and startling lights. They were the living man Harding, and the dead man Blaydes; the first

haunted Tom the longer; why had he insisted on dragging Daintree to the trial?

The days were lengthened by Peggy in the kitchen with her kind, uninjured looks, and the unflinching, friendly, amiable word that made him feel the meanest of men. The girl could be an angel when she had him, with all his coldness, to herself. He never suspected what she had been from the Sunday night to the Monday afternoon. And now they were both under notice to leave.

"If only you two would make up your minds to marry!" said Daintree to Tom. "I have you both on my mind; but I could provide for the two of you at one stroke as a married couple. It has long been my wish to start a model farm up country, and you and Peggy would certainly make model managers! Nor is my wife likely to retain all the prejudices of Miss Harding; in fact, I still entertain hopes of our all being staunch friends all our lives." But Tom shook his head even more decidedly than he had shaken it while the little *Rosamund* was pricking her way across the chart.

On the Friday — the same breeze holding good all the week — Daintree decided to sail round to Sydney instead of driving. He had a solid cheque to cash for the wedding-trip, and the Point Piper Road was no route for a pocketful of money and a life at its very highest value. Tom asked if Nat Sullivan was still in Sydney, and was told that he had drunk himself prostrate at the Pulteney, whereupon Tom volunteered for the voyage, and so escaped Peggy for one afternoon. To make safety doubly safe, however, they ran into Farm Cove, and Tom and the dog were to wait in the Domain while Daintree went to the bank and called at the hotel.

It was then three o'clock, and Daintree was to be at least two hours gone; but he returned in less than one, bringing Claire with him for a sail. Tom's surprise at seeing her was less than that of the girl at sight of him; the indignation was altogether on her side, and sufficiently perceptible, in spite of all Claire's efforts to conceal an inappropriate displeasure. Daintree did not see it — but what they all three missed was the furtive figure which emerged from the trees as the boat put off.

Claire was given the tiller and told simply to obey orders, Daintree took the sheet, and Tom was put into the bows to be out of the way. The sail made a convenient screen; it also prevented Tom from knowing in the least what happened. As a matter of fact, they were just taking the wind — which was by this time fresher than ever — when Daintree's attention was diverted by an apparition at the water's edge. It was the man who had followed him through the Domain, and so rapt was the gaze with which Daintree beheld him that he forgot to let the sheet go at the critical instant. Smack came the wind against a sail like the side of a house. "Let go! Let go!" screamed Tom. It was too late. She was gunwale under, the sail lay a moment on the water, drinking it like blotting-paper. Then the saturated canvas sank, and the boat tossed keel upwards within fifty yards of the shore.

Claire sank clear of the wreck, and had the presence of mind to strike out before coming to the surface. And even as the sun lashed her wet eyes, strong hands slid under her arms, and she was being pushed face forward to the shore. The trees were waving in the sun; it was no distance; and Daintree's dog was swimming happily on ahead. Suddenly, with a piercing yelp, the dog dis-

appeared; at the same moment Daintree began splashing vigorously; and when the smooth sand came under Claire's feet, but a few yards farther on, her knees were too weak to support her weight.

"The happiest moment of my life," said a deep voice in her ear. "I have saved —"

She turned, and there was Daintree, up to his waist in water, with the drops raining from his face and whiskers, and shaded eyes sweeping the blue. The boat was coming in keel upwards with the tide. The dog and Tom had vanished off the face of the waters.

Daintree dashed in again, and met the wreck as her mast struck bottom. Tom was still struggling underneath her, caught fast in the cordage; his struggles ceased as he was wrenched free; when Daintree got him to land, his mouth and ears were in a froth, and Claire stood by like a woman turned to stone.

A small crowd collected slowly; it did not contain the man who had caused the mischief; the trees had swallowed him once more.

The crowd surrounded Tom and Daintree, who had stripped his servant to the waist, and was sawing the air with the drenched white arms and the helpless, sun-burnt hands. Claire stood on the fringe of the crowd, without a clear thought in her head, but in her hand a packet that had fallen at her feet when Tom's shirt and vest were torn off and hurled aside. The packet was sewn up in dripping oiled silk, as transparent as glass; through it she could read a name she but dimly realised to be her own; and the voices of those jostling her seemed a long way off.

"He's dead — he's done for," said one.

"Give him time, you fool!"

"Fool yourself! His time's up."

"What'll you bet?"

"A shilling."

"Done with you."

Daintree and a boatman were working on and on and on with the white arms that had dried already in the wind and sun. Neither said a word; the next minute must settle it one way or the other.

"Ah!" exclaimed the last speaker.

"What was it?" faltered Claire.

"His eyelids trembled."

"It was the death-shiver."

"They're trembling still!"

"They aren't!"

"They are; hand over that shilling."

"He is alive!" said Daintree, looking up. "Has nobody run for brandy?"

Nobody had.

And it was wanted now for two people.

Claire Harding had swooned away.

Daintree had his hands full with the pair of them, but in a little they were both conscious, and able to drive away with him in a hired chaise. They drove to the hotel, forgetting the risk. On the way Tom stretched forth a feeble hand.

"How many more times are you going to save my life?" he asked.

"You saved mine too," said Claire sadly.

"It is the happiest day of my own," replied Daintree, without noticing her tone. "*Non cuivis homini* — what other bridegroom would have had such luck?"

"Or pluck!" cried Tom.

"I trust I am not lacking in that quality either," rejoined the other. "It was nervous work after the way my poor wee dog went. Did you see that, Claire? Poor thing, it was a shark!"

"Yes." She shuddered.

"But if he will but splash a bit, your man of courage is all right. Do you mind if we drive round by the *Herald* office? They publish 'on Monday, but it's just as well to be in time."

So the conceit of him overlapped even his heroism. And Claire and Tom sat shivering in their wet clothes, while Daintree in his was several minutes inspiring and all but dictating the paragraph which duly appeared in the *Sydney Herald*. But during those minutes the pair in the chaise never exchanged a word; and afterwards — in the hotel — not one word.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

TWO FAREWELLS

DAINTREE was driven home before dusk, for his pocket-book was bloated with moist bank-notes, besides which, Lady Starkie positively refused to have him about the hotel that evening. It was against the rules for bridegrooms as laid down by her ladyship, who dined very solemnly with her niece alone, and got to bed at a reasonable hour for the first time that week. Claire then had their sitting-room to herself, and she drew out the oiled-silk packet which had fallen into her hands that afternoon. It was thin and oblong, like the letter it

plainly contained. Under the lamp Claire's name and the address of her old home were still legible beneath the silk, though they no longer stood out as when the skin was wet. And on the reverse side was written very small —

“For pity's sake forward this.”

When? After his death? Fate had forwarded it before — should she read it or should she not? It was addressed to her, it was hers; should she read, or destroy, or return this letter to its writer — to the criminal who had confessed to her his crime? Some minutes after Claire Harding asked herself this question, she turned up the lamp, and cut the oiled silk open with a pair of scissors. She now saw that the letter had been written some time; yet it was with a strange thrill, a wonderment beginning at the heart, that she read the heading within. It was Newgate, and the date May 29, 1837 — the blackest day of all her life — the eve of that on which they would have hanged him.

Agitated as she was, however, by these dreadful memories, and touched by the mere fact of his having written to her on that awful Monday, it was the first sentence of his letter that ran into her heart like molten lead. He called himself an innocent man! From the brink of the grave came that lie, that blasphemy, which he had lived to confess to her with his crime! She read on mechanically. And all at once her pain ceased; she was lost and absorbed in the plain, straightforward, circumstantial story into which he plunged without preliminary. He told her everything from the moment they parted at the garden gate. Nothing was left out, nothing extenuated, nothing enlarged or even commented upon by the writer.

Her heart was beating wildly long before she reached the end of this plain statement. She had forgotten all about his confession. This rang true — this rang true.

"Sweetheart," he went on, "— for I must call you so once more — I cannot tell you how I feel, for I vary from hour to hour. Now and then I feel the murderer they say I am, now and then an abject coward (without the pluck to show it), now and then a sort of Christian martyr! But with God's help I hope to finish up a man. Do not grieve for the ugly way of it: there's no disgrace in that, since it's a mistake, and if there is a God never fear but He will make it up to me one day. Oh, but it is sweet to talk to you again! I used to tell you everything, and so I must until the end. Ah! if only I had been worthy of you I shouldn't be here! I am punished; when I think of your white soul, and of mine that couldn't even be its mirror, then I sometimes think that my punishment is not too great. Those are my Christian moods! They don't live long. The turnkeys are looking through my grating now; they are telling each other what I am at, and coming back and back again to have a peep. My Christianity isn't proof against that. I say nothing, but I could do the thing I'm going to die for — God help me, I may do it yet! You see how I change! There is only one thing in which I can never change — my grateful love and reverence for the great girl-soul that forgave me and would have given me another chance if this had not happened. Sweetheart, my love for you has grown in prison, it has been my only comfort in this vile place, and it will go with me where I go to-morrow — it will stay with my poor soul through all eternity. Only do not grieve for me, Claire, for I never was worthy of your sweet love.

I would not leave this behind for you, I would not have you reminded of me for a single day, but for one selfish thing. Sweetheart, it is to make you believe in me. You have not done so yet—why should you? Nobody knows what you know and have so nobly hidden; but for all I said to you, I am innocent; he was alive when I left him; I did give him the receipt, and we shook hands at the end. That is God's truth. I tell it you with the last words my hand will ever write. I meant to write to the kind fanatic who paid for my defence, and is working still (they tell me) for a reprieve. But now I cannot. If you could find him out, and thank him for me, I should be grateful; but my last words in this life must be to you. God bless you, dear, and give you somebody much better than I ever could have been. Only do know that I never did this thing; and when you realise that, think no more of me, my dear love, but pray to-morrow for the soul of your unworthy boy . . .”

His signature followed—better written than the rest—a touching effort to “finish up a man.” All the last pages were blurred with the condemned man's tears; and now, after seventeen months, her tears were raining, raining, on the same paper, on the same words, that bore the blots of his.

This postscript remained—

“Reprieved at the last moment! I shall not send this now—but I hope that it may reach you when I am gone.”

Claire went to the window, and the rings rattled along the rod as she flung the curtains back. The sky swam with stars, her heart yearned for Heaven, and to the

sweet stars her voice went up in broken and involuntary utterance of her soul's pain.

"Oh, Tom," it cried, "if you had died then it would be better now! I should be dead too. We should both be at peace. Oh, Tom, we might be together now!"

The hotel garden lay very still below. It was the back of the house, and now the hour was late. Suddenly there was a movement on the gravel underneath.

"Claire — is it your voice?"

His whispered — it was Tom.

"Yes," she said at last. "Come up. I want to speak to you."

"Now?"

"Yes! how is it you are still in the town?"

"I lost something. I have been hunting for it on the beach. I came back to have another look here."

"I have it. Come straight up to the room you were in this afternoon."

He appeared to hesitate.

"You—you are not alone?"

But Claire had left the window, and was waiting impatiently at the open door. How long he kept her! It seemed an age before his halting step was heard upon the stairs, while she, on fire to crave his forgiveness, and mindful of nothing else, could not imagine what held him back. Even when he came his eye was timid and his feet slow to cross the threshold: in fact, the inveterate conventionality of the male was not a little fluttered at her receiving him alone, at this hour of the night, and that night her marriage eve. Yet his qualms were entirely on her account. Nor could they quench the inextinguishable love-light in his honest eyes.

As for Claire, however, she forgot everything but the

cruel wrong she had done the man before her, the sufferings cut so deep upon his bronzed face, and her own new and blinding realisation of his innocence and heroism. For a space she could but stand and gaze upon him with burning eye-balls; then, with the noble unconsciousness of a woman stirred to the soul, she took him by both hands, and drew him into the room, and besought his forgiveness upon her knees, but with his hands still clasped in hers.

Tom released his hands, shut the door nervously, and then almost brusquely asked her what he had to forgive.

"I thought you guilty," she sobbed. "I said so—and you were innocent all the time! Oh, thank God—"

"Wait," he interrupted. "How do you know that?"

"What you lost I found. I have it here. Oh, Tom, I have read every word! Oh, why did you not send it at the time? You were innocent—innocent! Can you ever forgive me?"

"Get up," he said. "You have forgotten something."

"Nothing," she answered. "Your marriage has no more to do with it than mine."

"My marriage! With whom, pray?"

"The wife you *applied* for—at some factory!"

She could not help her tone: it stung Tom into telling her the facts, and so inadvertently exposing Daintree's chicanery. He instantly defended it as the accepted course.

"But that's not what I meant at all," he added hurriedly. "You must have forgotten what I told you the other day in the boat-shed!"

Claire had indeed forgotten that. The great truth had swallowed up the little lie, but true and false were now as plain to her as day and night. Moreover, she saw the meaning of the false.

"My hero!" she whispered. "You thought it best that I should never know. And so you said you were not an innocent man."

"Nor was I," he faltered. "You soon saw that for yourself. They may hang me yet!"

"And you wouldn't have me think of you any more," continued Claire, a spasm of pain crossing her face at his words. "But I will—I will! I'll think of you till I die: my own hero!"

He fidgeted horribly, looking towards the door. She would compromise herself—she would do herself harm. That was still his first thought; she saw it, and it floated her to the crest of that emotional wave in whose trough he trembled.

"I believed you guilty—may God forgive me!" she cried. "But—shall I tell you something?"

"Well?"

"I loved you all the same!"

"I won't believe it," he said at last.

"I did—I know it now."

"Then forget it!" he cried hoarsely. "For God's sake, remember nobody but the man you are to marry to-morrow morning. What? Claire?" He started from her; she had shaken her head. She shook it more passionately for that; but she did not speak. So he began—hardly knowing what he said—but pleading for his best friend—pleading for her honour—pleading for sacred duty as his male eye saw it. She was going to marry a generous and brave man, to whom he owed, not only his life twice over, but any good that was left in him. Yet neither was the other a faultless man, though so generous and so brave, and his one great anchor to good sense and good living was his love for Claire.

Tom spoke plainly, even eloquently, as he went on. He would have gone on longer, but there was no need. Claire sat meekly weeping; he bent over her—his face wrung with anguish now that hers was hidden—and so took her hand in his for the last time.

“God bless you always,” he whispered in a broken voice; “and make you good to him—and make him good to you!”

She clung passionately to his hand; she held it to her bosom, and looked piteously up into his face. The tears sparkled in her eyes and on her cheeks. Her sweet lips quivered; it was more than man could bear. He fell upon his knees, he threw his arms about her, and for a very little space these two torn hearts beat and sobbed as one.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE MAN IN THE MASK

THE master was busy at his desk, but there was no rhyming dictionary at his elbow, and the book of synonyms was suffocating under a pile of papers that were stuffed into a drawer as Tom entered guiltily. The clock—an athletic trophy in the form of a kettle-drum—was then striking midnight, and Daintree wheeled round in his chair with the eleventh stroke. The eye nearest the lamp looked wild, but it was his wedding-day, and plainly he was in tremendous spirits.

“Shut the window,” said he. “I have two things to tell you which I don’t want the girl to hear; if her windows are open she might.”

Peggy happened to be listening at the door.

"In the first place," proceeded Daintree, "tell me frankly and finally whether you mean to marry the girl or not. Yes or no?"

"No, sir; it is impossible."

"You shall do just exactly what you like. At the same time, she tells me you did ask her!"

"I did. I wronged her in doing so, but she had the sense to refuse me, and I'm not going to wrong her worse by asking her again."

"That settles it. I've found a captain who's willing to smuggle you over to America for a consideration. All details to be arranged before I leave Sydney to-morrow. Will you go?"

"Will I not! Thank God for the chance!"

"Then that settles that—for the present. You shall be spirited aboard to-morrow night, and by Monday morning you shall have seen the last of New South Wales for ever."

Peggy crept away from the door. Her mind was made up.

"The other thing's a trifle," said Daintree. "A pretty place this New South Wales! I go to the bank and cash a cheque, come in and shove the notes into one of these drawers, and a man breaks into the house and all but into my desk while I am sitting in the next room at my dinner! Look at this—" and he pointed out the marks of a jemmy on the polished mahogany. The circumstance did not appear to excite him in the least. He smiled loftily on Tom's concern, and at once exaggerated an attitude which had been perfectly genuine before.

"Ah, Thomas," he remarked, "even you don't know

your Sydney yet, or you would be like me, and think nothing of such trifles. I was eating my dinner, as I say, when I heard him at his work; unfortunately I let *him* hear *me*; still, I chased him out of that and some way down the road, and could have caught him if I hadn't preferred to come back and finish my dinner. I played a better knife and fork for the exercise."

"And you gave chase unarmed?" said Tom.

"To be sure, except with these arms," responded Daintree with equal truth and bravado, as he tapped an enviable biceps. "Your man of muscle has no business with any other, if he but know how to use his hands as I do. It would have gone hard with our friend, I promise you, if I had laid hold of him!"

"I wish you had," said Tom. "The blackguard must have dogged you from the bank, and hung about the Pulteney both times you were there." Tom paused. His heart was back at the hotel, and his gratitude to the man was once more repelling his jealousy and distrust of the bridegroom, when a second thought sprang from his words. "By Jove!" he exclaimed, "I wonder whether it was the fellow who turned up on the beach almost at the instant we went down!"

"What!" cried Daintree. "Did *you* see him?"

"Yes, I caught a glimpse of somebody as we heeled over. Depend upon it that's our man!"

Daintree turned nasty in a moment.

"Why depend upon it?" he snapped. "Did you see the man's face? Would you know him again? Oh, you wouldn't; then let me recommend you not to make a fool of yourself, my good fellow. Nobody but a fool would connect the two men."

His ill-temper was inexplicable; yet to treat an attempt

upon his property as a joke, and an inoffensive theory of the attempt as something of an insult, was but in accord with the capricious character of the man. And, indeed, Tom would have gone to bed like a lamb, and thought no more about the matter; but yet another caprice detained him. Daintree would not hear of his going; it was their last night together; they must sit up and talk, and he apologised for what he had said. So they sat up once more, but the conversation languished for the first time on these occasions. Something had unnerved and depressed Tom's master; he was never himself until the last night of his single life was at an end, and in the first light of dawn a full-rigged ship sailed in just as the *Rosamund* had done on the previous Sunday afternoon.

"Letters!" he cried. "Letters for my wedding-day! Who knows but what I may get the best of news to crown my joys? What if my wife were never to be *Mrs. Daintree* at all? Yonder ship may dub me baronet; open a bottle, Thomas, and we will drink to all she brings me!"

Then at last they lay down; but sleep came neither to the happy man nor to his miserable valet; and by ten o'clock the one was helping the other into his wedding garments. A few minutes before the hour the coach arrived which was to take the bridegroom in state to church; a few minutes after, a man was observed rowing in the bay, and Daintree insisted on taking a look at him through his spy-glass. Evidently the rower saw him, for he shot out of sight behind a headland, but not before Daintree had brought his telescope to bear upon the rower; and now the glass joggled between fingers which seemed smitten with an ague; and was lowered from a white face that glistened in the sun.

"That was the man," whispered Daintree; "*and he's after me still!* I—I didn't mind last night—I suppose it takes less to turn one queer on one's wedding morning." He was struggling in vain against some growing terror. "Brandy, man, brandy!" he gasped, and subsided in a chair.

Tom rushed downstairs for the decanter, and returning found the terrified man fumbling with his pocket-pistol. He tossed off the spirit and handed the pistol to Tom.

"There," said he, "better withdraw and reload to make sure. Stop, give it back!" He snatched the pistol and fired excitedly through the open window. "That'll show him I'm armed," he cried; "now load up again!"

"You are not going armed—"

"With that fiend at my heels? You must take me for a fool!"

"You would be married with a loaded pistol in your pocket, when you yourself said the only arms—"

"Obey me, sirrah!" thundered Daintree. "Do you know that I could hang you like a dog? Yet you dare to argue with me on my wedding morning!"

He seemed beside himself with excitement. Tom went out without a word, and on his return handed back the pocket-pistol with the same air of tacit disapproval. Daintree cocked it and felt the trigger.

"I've a good mind to fire through the window again," he snarled, "to see if you *have* loaded it; but I'll trust you, Thomas; you're the one man in this world I do trust. And now put on your hat and come in with me to Sydney!"

Tom drew back. This was not in the programme; on the contrary, he was to stay and mind the house.

"Damn the house!" cried Daintree. "The girl can look after the house; your place is at your master's side, or else you are the foulest ingrate in New South Wales! But you are; I have always known you were; you have only waited for this hour to turn and rend me!"

"You are wrong," said Tom grimly. "I do not leave your side again." For the man must be mad: and Tom no longer shirked the ceremony, but for one instant had a mad design himself; the next, his right hand was warmly held.

"Thank God!" cried Daintree in a breaking voice. "I knew you didn't mean it; no more did I mean anything I said; forgive me, Thomas, and don't desert me at the last!"

And Tom's heart sank as it once more softened to the man who was not mad but only unstrung; and again he longed to eschew the church; but he kept his word, and fortune was yet to prove his friend. A mile they had driven when a loud cry broke from Daintree. In his agitation he had forgotten the ring. He burst into tears at the discovery.

"Never mind — never mind!" cried Tom in his oldest rôle. "We can turn back — what, isn't there time? No, I know it would never do to keep her waiting! Then look here, I'll run back and gallop in again on your horse; I'll be there almost as soon as you; and the ring isn't wanted till quite the end."

Daintree thanked him through his tears — the first Tom had ever seen in those fiery eyes — and he sped back strangely touched, but strangely comforted too. At least he loved her! The man might be egotistical and vain and overbearing, all three to the verge of lunacy, but that he was marrying for sheer love was even

more palpable than it had been before. Tears in those eyes! Tears at the thought of losing her for one more day! Then God grant that with Claire at least he might be unselfish, meek and gentle, though an egotist, a coxcomb and a tyrant to all the world beside!

So praying as he ran — forgetful of his own debt to Daintree — for the moment self-forgetting altogether — Tom was at the bungalow gate in time that would not have shamed the bridegroom in his athletic youth. And in the very gateway he stopped dead. He had caught a glimpse of ragged coat-tails disappearing through the study windows; a crazy skiff lay hauled up on the strand.

Tom kicked off his shoes. He made no sound on the verandah, but he wasted some seconds, and heard two drawers burst open as he crept nearer and nearer. He was totally unarmed; his one chance lay in taking the thief by surprise.

The verandah on this side was in deep shadow all the morning. In the cool dusk of the study a masked man was rifling drawer after drawer and tossing the contents right and left. The floor was strewn with papers as Tom leapt across it and hurled himself upon the thief. They crashed to the ground together: the man's head caught the corner of the bookshelf, and he lay supine, with a mouthful of crumbling teeth grinning horribly below the mask.

His nerveless fingers still clutched a packet of bluish letters half-torn from their wrapper. Tom took them from him, and rose up panting. A moment later they might have heard his shout at Piper's Point.

All but one letter had slipped from his trembling hand: on the back of that letter a few lines had been scrawled with a lead-pencil.

It was the Receipt!

Pencilled by Blaydes on the back of a letter, signed by Tom in the moonlit Hampstead fields, and taken by the murderer from his victim's person, it was neither more nor less than the missing document whose production would have acquitted Erichsen at the Old Bailey. And now after eighteen months, and here on these outlandish shores, it had cast up at his very feet; he held it — held his freedom — in his own trembling hands.

The words spun like midges as the paper rustled and shook. He had to set it on the chimney-piece to read it through: —

“Received from J. Montgomery Blaydes (late Captain, Coldstream Guards) his watch and chain, etc., in settlement of all claims, and in consideration of which I undertake to return pawn-ticket for same to said J. M. Blaydes, Ivy Cottage, West End, within three days from this date. — (Signed) T. Erichsen, April 27th, 1837.”

Words and chirography were as familiar as though he had studied them the night before; the very flourishes were old friends; and the glimmer of a mild London moon seemed still to lurk in the shiny blue paper.

He forgot the wedding-ring, forgot the wedding: he was an innocent man: he could prove it now before all the world, by this incomparable testimony, this inanimate witness that could not lie. That was Tom's first reflection. His first emotion was a rush of thankfulness, ineffable and unmixed. Curiosity succeeded: how came the receipt here? But as he wondered, as his thoughts flew from the broken-headed robber to his friend Daintree, it was not the bridegroom that they pursued to the

church, but Tom's benefactor that they followed back to Avenue Lodge. Did Daintree know who had committed the murder, and was that the secret of his belief in Tom? Inconceivable; but the document? Tom turned it over in his hand, and the address on the missive came uppermost. It began — *Nicholas Harding, Esquire, M.P.*

This name plunged Tom in a vortex of new suspicions; it neither recalled the bride as such, nor the marriage, nor the ring. Yet the clock stared him in the face, the short hand almost on the eleven, the long hand rapidly overtaking the short. It was ticking loud enough for dead of night; he both saw the time and heard it flying. But he had forgotten his errand: he could prove his innocence at last. Suddenly there was a groan, then a movement behind him, and as he wheeled round the man in the mask sat up.

"Ha!" said Tom. "So it was you who followed my master from the bank, and tried to break into his desk last night! You've succeeded a bit too late. My master's got his money in his pocket — and he isn't here!"

With these words Tom remembered where his master was, but only for an instant: small eyes were glinting through the mask, and the crumbling teeth showed again in a contemptuous grin.

"I ain't after 'is money," said a harsh high voice.

"What then?"

"What you've got in your 'and."

"This!" cried Tom. "Who are you?"

"Name's Wyeth. I'm a lag, same as you."

"Let me see your face."

Again that grin below the mask, ere it was whipped off, and Tom's eyes lit upon a horrible face horribly disfigured. It was perfectly flat; disease had razed the

nose to below the level of the sunken cheeks; and the beady eyes seemed more prominent by contrast, as they glittered upon Tom's visible abhorrence. In an instant, however, the abhorrence changed to recognition, and a great light blinded Tom.

"My God!" he gasped. "The man that did it!"

"Did what?"

"What I'm here for—the murder of Captain Blaydes! It was you who killed him—it was you! I saw you close to the spot that night. Never shall I forget you—and this is the receipt I gave him! I took it just now from your hand!"

"An' where do yer think *I* took it from?"

"The dead man's pocket."

"That there desk!"

In the cool dark study there followed no immediate sound save the importunate ticking of the kettle-drum clock—beating a roll-call to deaf ears. At last Tom said, "Tell me—tell me!" And his voice was very weak; he was leaning heavily on the chimney-piece, and now his elbow hid the time.

Wyeth removed a hand from the back of his head, looked at the blood upon it, and grimly showed it to Tom.

"You've been rough with me, you 'ave, when you should ha' taken me to your 'art; but I *will* tell you, 'cos I ain't that much to lose, an' it may mean my ticket if you stand by me like a true man. Say you'll do that an' I'll tell you every blessed thing!"

"I will stand by you through thick and thin," said Tom.

The other eyed him for several seconds.

"I do believe you will," said he. "It's a bargain

between true man and true man! Well, then, that night—”

“Stop!” said Tom. “We will have another pair of ears.” He went to the door and called loudly for Peggy. No answer; his voice reverberated through an empty house. He had seen the Fawcetts start for Sydney an hour ago (even now he did not realise why); but Peggy had wilfully deserted; and he was alone on the premises with this hideous ruffian.

“Go on,” said he. “What about that night? I met you not three hundred yards from the stile where the body was found; and you were going that way!”

“I was,” said Wyeth, “an’ when I come near, what d’ye think I heard? A couple of swells having a row; in ’alf a shake it come to blows, an’ I counted five before there was a bit of a thud, and the one who’d been calling out ‘My Gawd—my Gawd!’ ’e shut up, but the other went on saying ‘You devil!’—through ’is teeth—jes’ like that—until I come up. I keeps quiet and sees one swell take a lot o’ papers out the other swell’s pocket, when in I steps. You should ha’ seen the one as was pocketin’ the papers! Up he jumps, with a thick stick dripping at the end, and before you can say Jack Robinson ’e ’as me on the conk, an’ that’s the end o’ me!”

“Did you ever see him again?” Tom’s voice rang strange with horror and weariness; he did not want his freedom; he was sick of the life that Daintree had given him back, of the world to which Daintree had restored him. His benefactor! The man filled his mind in that first light only—and in this last!

“Yes, I see him at your trial,” said Wyeth; “but I’m coming to that. Meanwhile I’m only silly, and what do

I find when I come to? A dead man, a bloody stick, an' me lyin' alongside! Nice, wasn't it? The moon was on 'im, an' he made *me* feel nice, I can tell yer. But I soon see it wasn't robbery; there was that there diamond pin. I boned it, an' there was some loose silver in his pockets, an' that come in 'andy too. I took to my 'eels an' did a slant the way I come, an' I never see that swell no more till your trial. I thought 'e might be there, an' 'e was; so the first day I lied in wait for 'im, but the Charlies knoo me an' I got frightened an' went an' lost 'im. The next night I lost 'im again — an' accident 'appened — an' I come out 'ere, I dessay in the ship arter you. An' yesterday I see 'is lordship comin' outer the Noo South Wales Bank, as bold as brarse! He never seed me till you got afloat, an' that's what upset you all. Arter that I dogged 'im, but dursn't say a word till I found a card or two to shove up my sleeve. So, thinks I, the man who steals papers may steal 'em to keep; we'll 'ave a look! An' so it was; an' now them papers is yours, an' you're as good as a free man. You'll put in a word for that ticket when you git your own free parding? You won't go an' round on a pore chap Gawd Almighty 'as rounded on?" And a hand went in front of the ghastly face, with a gesture which would have added pity to repulsion in a harder heart than Tom's.

"Heaven forbid!" said Tom, from his knees. "You shall have your ticket if this can get it you and I can help." He was gathering all the smooth blue letters together again, and thinking of an account which Daintree had given him in that very room, that very week, of his own proceedings on the night of the murder. Suddenly he sprang to his feet, jumped on a chair, and

examined the silver cups on the top of the bookshelf, one by one. There were seven; all were for winning the mile; it was his old distance from Avenue Lodge to the hollow tree in the fields, between the Finchley Road and Haverstock Hill. Tom remembered his master's anger, inexplicable no longer, on the day he cleaned the cups. He jumped down and was looking at the inscription on the clock when it struck eleven in his face.

Tom clapped his hand to his head.

"WE SHALL BE TOO LATE!"

"Too late wot for?"

"She will be married to a murderer. And I forgot that. God forgive me! God forgive me!" He reeled into the verandah. "No — no — there is one chance. The ring — the ring! This way for your life!"

CHAPTER XL

MADNESS AND CRIME

THE pair dashed to the stables: by seven minutes past eleven the curricie cleared the gate-posts, with Tom driving furiously and Wyeth seated grimly at his side. At twenty past they turned into Macquarie Street, were rattling up Hunter Street next minute, then into George Street — the whip whistling — a wheel on the curb at every corner — pedestrians flying and constables challenging — and so up Charlotte Place to the church. The clock on the round castellated tower made it 11.24: time yet if they had waited for the ring. But there were no carriages outside, and Tom's heart stopped as he saw a woman emerge and lock the church door behind her.

"Is the marriage over?" he screamed.

"There's no marriage this morning. It's put off!"

"For the ring?"

"No, for the bride; she never came!"

"Never came?"

But the woman had been robbed of her fees, and the loss involved that of her temper. "Better go to the Pulteney Hotel if you want to know more," said she, and four wheels would have locked in the mad whirl with which Tom turned curricule and horses.

Over the bridge to O'Connell Street; a vehicle was ahead of them at the Pulteney, a waiter spoke to the occupants, and it drove off without one of them getting out. Meanwhile Tom had seen the Fawcetts in the gaping crowd outside; had left them on guard over the curricule and Wyeth, and himself rushed into the hotel.

"There's no wedding; the guests are being sent away," said a waiter, standing in his path.

"Where's Mr. Daintree?"

"In the ball-room, but there's a gentleman —"

Tom hurled him on one side, and was in the ball-room himself next instant. It was a spacious saloon, the best in Sydney at that time, and the first thing Tom saw was the long table with the vista of silver and glass leading to a snow-clad mountain of a wedding-cake at the far end. The chairs were empty, the table untouched, and only two men were in the room: the bridegroom in his marriage garments, and a person of equal stature, in top-boots and a pea-jacket, whose face Tom could not see. Next moment Nicholas Harding turned his head. It was to him Daintree had drunk in the grey dawn that seemed a year ago.

The ruddy hair was shot with silver, the massive face

refined by suffering; he had aged ten years in eighteen months.

Tom went straight to his old enemy, turning his back on his old friend.

"You came out to stop this marriage, sir?"

"I did — it was the only way."

"I congratulate you on arriving in time. You would have had a murderer for your son-in-law!"

Daintree gave a cry; Tom had turned upon him with flashing eyes.

"How do *you* know?" cried Harding in amazement.

"I will tell you. This man has been my best friend. He paid for my defence, and he took me away from the iron-gang. Do you know why?"

"I know one reason."

"So do I, but there was another. He's been hedging matters with his God. He murdered Blaydes himself."

"Blaydes!"

And Mr. Harding flung up his hands, while Daintree sank into a chair, as yellow as a guinea, but with hot eye-balls fixed searchingly upon Tom.

"Your proofs!" said he hoarsely. "Your proofs in support of this — monstrous — charge!"

"I have clear proof in my pocket," said Tom to Mr. Harding, as he buttoned up his coat. "I have the receipt I gave Blaydes for his watch and chain!"

Daintree sprang up: he was trembling from head to foot, but his fists and his teeth were clenched.

"Thief!" he hissed. "You have broken open my desk! I saved you from the gallows. You think you'll hound me there in return — you fool, when you know what I know! What you have stolen is no proof at all."

Ingrate! serpent! it will only tighten the rope round your own ungrateful neck!"

He turned on his heel, and wrote something on a card. He rang a bell, met the waiter at the door and handed him what he had written.

"That may be so," said Tom to Nicholas Harding. "I may swing yet — but, thank God! not for Blaydes!"

"It is really the receipt?"

"Undoubtedly: written by Blaydes and signed by me: it will clear me of that crime, if it doesn't convict him. I don't want to convict him."

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"It would be useless. There's madness in his blood, as well as crime! But is that your only evidence?"

"No, I have a witness outside who all but saw him do it. He did see him taking the papers from the dead man's pocket."

"Papers!" cried Mr. Harding. His high colour fled and came again. "They belonged to *me*: give them to me, Erichsen, for God's sake!"

"Then keep your eye on him, and you shall have all but the one I may want. I saw they were letters to you." And in an instant they were in Nicholas Harding's pocket, all but the one with the receipt upon the back; and he also buttoned up his coat.

Meanwhile, Daintree was at the other end of the long room, guarding the door; and now they saw him fling it open with an evil smile. Next moment a strange gang entered: two constables, Ginger, Nat Sullivan — and Peggy O'Brien.

Peggy's presence is only too easily explained: when her own ears heard Tom consent to leave the country,

she shut her teeth and swore that he should not. In New South Wales he should remain, though back he went to the chain-gang, but she trusted to her own testimony to save his neck. So she slipped out of the bungalow while the master was being dressed, followed the Fawcetts into Sydney, and went straight to the Pulteney Hotel to tell Nat Sullivan the truth about Tom. She found that worthy in his usual state when in town. Ginger complained that there was no doing anything with him. And so powerfully did the bleary-eyed, thick-lipped sot repel Peggy, now she saw him again, and in this condition, that she had told him nothing when Daintree's message was brought to Nat's rooms.

Nat read it in his shirt-sleeves, and staggered off to achieve a measure of outward decency, leaving Peggy in a strange turmoil. She could have betrayed Tom herself—so she still thought—but the idea of the master turning traitor in this way was to her intolerable. She had heard the marriage was put off, she divined some all-sufficient cause, and with the ebbing of her last hopes of Tom, her first generous good-will to him returned. She looked at Ginger and found Ginger looking at her. At Castle Sullivan he had been a furtive admirer; he was an open one now Nat was in the next room.

“Well, Ginger, an' what is it y' intind to say?”

“I shall have to swear to him, though I'd never have let this out in my sober senses. He saved my life. I meant to save his.”

“An' you will do that same: say you made a mistake—it's his life ye'll be swearin' away!”

“But it's true, Peggy!”

“An' it's meself 'll be thruer still, Ginger darlin', if

you will but say the word an' do by Tom as he did by you!"

She had not thought of it before: it was a sudden inspiration of the quick Irish brain, a sudden impulse of the warm Irish heart. When Nat came in, with wet hair plastered over his thick skull, the coal-black head and the fiery beard were far enough apart. But it had not been so during every minute of his absence. And a pretty fiasco awaited him in the ball-room.

Led up to Erichsen, the overseer shook his head.

"No," said he, "the bushranger was inches taller. I can't swear to him after all."

"Not swear to him?" roared Mr. Nat. "Why, you took your oath he was the man!"

"Not swear to him?" said Daintree, stepping forward. "Happily, my good fellow —"

But Tom's eye was on him, and the police were in the room.

"Try the girl," said one constable.

"Ginger is right," said Peggy promptly. "It's a taller man he was entirely."

"But you're looking at his feet!"

Peggy raised her eyes, and calmly and coldly they met Tom's for the last time.

"No," said she; "this is not the man at all."

"The — liars!" Nat Sullivan screamed. "They've made up their minds to lie; and you two fools stand there and listen!" He stormed and wept; grew violently abusive, and was put out by the constables before they left themselves. In the scuffle and confusion Ginger found an opportunity both to grip Tom's hand and to whisper that one good turn deserved another. But Peggy O'Brien turned her back without word or look.

Warm heart and nimble brain had done Tom Erichsen their last service; had undone their first and only injury; and this was the end between these two.

When the three men had the great room once more to themselves, Tom turned quietly to Daintree, who was now perfectly livid with rage and chagrin, and simply inquired whether he still denied his own crime.

"Deny it!" cried Daintree. "It is too preposterous to be worth denying. Show me what you have stolen; let us see this precious proof!"

"I have a live witness, too, if you force me to call him in."

Tom went to a window and had thrown up a sash before the other two joined him. Outside was the cur- ricle and Wyeth seated at Fawcett's side.

"Stop — stop — don't call to him!" whispered Daintree, in a choking voice.

"Do you deny it now?"

"Yes — no — listen to me!"

"Which do you mean?"

"I — killed him."

"Good God!" cried Nicholas Harding.

Tom shut down the sash.

"Yes, I killed him," cried Daintree, recovering his spirits; "and I'd do it again this minute. Why? You shall hear — and then Claire shall hear — for I mean to see her; it will take all Sydney to keep us apart. That night she refused me — God alone knows why — she loves me now and will stick to me in spite of you all — but she refused me then. I stayed for an hour where she left me. Then I got out by the back way and wandered through the fields — just as I was — thinking of her! At

last—I hardly knew where I was or what I was doing—I heard voices—his was one. Yours was the other, Erichsen—I didn't know it then—and you were just leaving. I heard him say he was thinking of being married. I joined him when you had gone, and asked who the happy lady might be. What do you think he said? What do you think? What do you think?"

"Claire?" said Nicholas Harding.

"Yes—Claire!" screamed Daintree. "That incarnate devil—and my angel! He said he loved her—that smooth hound—and she had hinted she did care for somebody. God knows what more he said! You would consent—he had you in his power. Either he said that or I saw it. At any rate he taunted me—maddened me—and when I looked about for something to strike him with, there was the very thing at my feet. I killed him! I meant to kill him! I have never for one moment regretted killing him! What do you suppose was the first thing I found in his pocket? No, Harding, I'm not thinking of you, my honest friend! It was a letter that showed the kind of cur he had been. I let Claire see it. I thought of a way. I showed her that dead devil in his true colours—I cured her of her folly—and I thanked God I'd put him out of her way and mine! Regret it? Repent it? Never for an instant—never to this hour!"

And the man trembled no more, save with his savage passion. His eyes flashed, his face shone, and never had he looked finer or handsomer than now, as he drew himself up in his wedding-garments and impiously gloried in his crime. The deep chest swelled beneath the pale buff kerseymere waistcoat. The stubborn chin rose proudly above spotless Prussian collar and dazzling

white satin cravat. Bearing and countenance alike were those of a conscious hero rather than of a criminal self-convicted and self-confessed.

"You let an innocent man suffer for your crime!" said Nicholas Harding, with a shiver.

"Did I? And do you suppose I would have let him hang? I was under the impression that I saved his neck. I would have saved it with my own had that been necessary. Only yesterday I risked my life to save his. Who took him away from the iron-gang? I had to commit a forgery and risk my liberty to do it, by God! Who would have treated him like a brother from that day? It was his own doing, mark you, that made him a menial! And he would hang me, would he, for ridding the earth of the crying rascal who picked his own pocket like a common thief? He shakes his head, but I know him better. And that's his gratitude—after all I've done! Something like yours, you Harding! I save your daughter from a poisonous scoundrel, so I am not to marry her for my pains. A just pair—convict bushranger and fraudulent M.P.—a precious pair to join forces against an honest man! Do your worst: I shall marry her against you both—I shall—I shall—I shall!"

Tom knew this voice: he wondered he had not heard the madness in it from the first.

"Never!" cried Harding. "I would rather see her in her coffin."

"You soon will if you prevent it!"

"You would murder her too? I quite believe it—if you got the chance!"

"You fool!" said Daintree, with a superior sneer. "Can't you see that it would kill her *not* to marry me?"

Mr. Harding shook his head.

"She loves me as I love her!"

"She does not love you at all."

At these words a feeling of pity crept over Tom: they rang so true, and they told so palpably upon that distorted heart which could bear up better against a charge of murder.

"Does she not?" cried Daintree. "We shall see!" And he darted from them with an altered face, was first out of the room, first up the stairs and first into the ladies' sitting-room; but Tom's foot was in the door before he could bang it behind him; and Tom and Mr. Harding burst their way in together.

On the threshold they stopped with one accord. Daintree had not turned to confront them; he had flung himself at the feet of Claire, who was seated on a sofa by her aunt's side. Tom noticed that both ladies (in grim contrast to the wretched bridegroom) wore the dresses in which he had seen them the day before; and that Lady Starkie held Claire's hand.

"They say you do not love me," whispered Daintree, in a voice that broke with very tenderness, and yet retained a confident ring. "I love you better than my own life and all the world. Tell them nothing can part us — nothing they can say — nothing I have done. Tell them you love me as I love you!"

Tom's eyes were fast to a sweet face white with terror: it flushed and fell, and then the nut-brown head was all he saw.

"Ah, yes!" said that madly tender voice. "You may blush to see your lover so humbled on his wedding morning; but it was not your fault; you love me as you have always loved me, and as I love you. Tell them

that! Tell them you would marry me if I had to go to prison to-morrow!"

The brown curls moved slowly from side to side.

"What! There is truth then in what they say?"

"Forgive me — forgive me!" were Claire's only words.

"So it is true!"

His tone would have been a marvel of restraint in any man; in this one it was a miracle. Still on his knees he besought her, as a last favour, to tell him whom she did love. Her eye flew to Tom's: the cunning of the criminal lunatic shone through the tears in his. "So it is Erichsen — not Blaydes," he said, getting up and standing harmlessly in their midst; next instant he had whipped out his pistol and fired it point-blank at Tom's heart. The report was appalling; a white cloud filled the room; as it thinned away, there was Tom still standing, with the one calm face present. The charge had contained no ball. Next instant the pistol itself was hurled at his head, and Daintree was upon Tom with tooth and nail — cursing, raving, moaning — fighting Tom and Nicholas Harding both — fighting the constables and waiters who poured in like water — and still wailing, raving, cursing as he fought.

It was a horrible sound — human no longer — though the fist of the sportsman still flew hard and true from the shoulder — though the tears of the lover were still wet upon the madman's face. It was, nevertheless, but the husk of a man that was at last overpowered and carried to a distant bedroom. That complex heart still squirted liquid fire through every vein; but the brain was not; inherent mania had claimed its own.

CHAPTER XLI

"FOR LONDON DIRECT"

THE Sydney papers of the year 1838 contain no reference to the extraordinary scenes enacted at the Pulteney Hotel on the first Saturday of the month of October. They do not report the removal of a magistrate of the Colony to its best and most private madhouse — some from a sense of journalistic charity — others for reasons which the late Nicholas Harding's bankers might even now disclose. The curious, however, may still look up the advertisement which Lady Starkie read aloud from the *Herald* within an hour of the events described. It blew a trumpet for —

THE FINE FAST-SAILING SHIP

FLORENTIA,

FOR LONDON DIRECT,

and the call found a grateful echo in two young hearts, now so light, and now so heavy, that it was an act of mercy to stir them in this way. The *Florentia* was described as even then loading at the quay; it seemed as though they might all sail away from that beautiful and accursed land within a week. As a matter of history, however, the *Florentia* did not complete her cargo until the New Year; no other homeward-bound ship was ready before her; and much happened on shore meanwhile.

Tom Erichsen, having voluntarily confessed the part he had borne in the Castle Sullivan outrage, fell ill as

a man can be just as the road to joy and freedom lay smooth and clear before him: he was in a raging delirium when the free pardon arrived from Governor Gipps, together with an order for the convict's absolute release. It seemed he was about to be released indeed. Long weeks he lingered, battling indomitably; and what hand coaxed him back to light and life, and whose prayers availed, but the loving hand and the passionate prayers of the girl who only lived now to make him forget the past? Meanwhile her father was not idle. Nicholas Harding was useless in a sick-room, and his money could not save Tom's life. But there were other things that it could do, combined with the natural energy and the practical ability which were also his. Turn again to those old Sydney papers. They will not tell you who instigated the inquiry, found the witnesses, paid their expenses and indeed threw his money right and left in the good cause. But they do recount the ruin of the most glaring and atrocious slave-drivers the Colony contained; they do report the several litigations by which that most desirable end was achieved; nor, to their eternal credit, does a single sheet take the side of the Sullivans of Castle Sullivan. The name still lingers in Colonial annals; it is still strong in all humane and honest nostrils; but of Dr. Sullivan and his ruffianly son all traces have been lost.

Not the least telling witness against them was one who certainly could not be accused of extravagant sympathy with the felony. Major Honeybone enjoyed himself enormously in Sydney, both at the courthouse and elsewhere; he and Nicholas Harding became perfect cronies during the weary days of Tom's convalescence.

"Gadzooks, sir, he gave me more trouble than any

three men in the gang," the major would say; "but I knew him for a gentleman at bottom, and I might have known him for an innocent man. They take it worst, gadzooks! Stockades like mine must be a living hell to 'em, though I say it! I'd like to shake his hand and tell him I'm sorry for this and that."

But Major Honeybone was not permitted to see the invalid; and indeed he quitted Sydney rather precipitately in the end. The plucky veteran had asked a question of Lady Starkie, as her ladyship long afterwards confided to Claire, with an obviously pleasurable indignation, on the *Florentia's* poop.

Nor was it until the long and soothing homeward voyage was half over that the convalescent was vouchsafed an answer to certain questions which he had tired of asking in his illness. What had brought Nicholas Harding to New South Wales? He must have sailed but a few days after Claire. What had he found out in those few days, since the discovery of Daintree's crime still came as a surprise to him? Tom never forgot the night when at last he was told; the trade-wind sang steadily through the rigging; every sail was set and drawing; the motion was an imperceptible rhythm; and a monstrous moon made a shimmering path from the horizon to the vessel's side.

"You never saw the woman who took Claire's jewellery?" said Nicholas Harding. "It is to her we owe it that my girl is not a madman's wife! The woman was naturally a spy; she had spied upon her mistress, but on Daintree also; and to Claire she had cause to be grateful, as Claire will tell you if you ask her. The very night after she sailed in the *Rosamund* this woman came to my house. She had fallen very low; death

seemed to me to have set its seal upon her; but she had information which she would only sell, until I told her where Claire had gone, and whom she was to marry. Then and there it all came out. I must say there was no huckstering then! The wretched woman seemed genuinely distressed. She told me"—Harding wiped his mouth, and his voice trembled—"she told me my daughter was gone to be a murderer's wife!"

"Yet you did not know of it?"

"I did not know about Blaydes. *That made the second!*"

"His second murder?" gasped Tom.

"Or manslaughter—call it what you will. The first was the worst: it was—fratricide! There were two brothers; James was the younger. Out shooting, one day, when they were both mere lads, he shot a dog dead in his passion. The brother abused him; in an instant he also was shot through the heart. It was brought in an accident, but the family knew what it was. They drummed him out, they refused to see his face again; he was as much transported as any felon in New South Wales, with as good a cause. We never knew why his family would have nothing to do with him: why, for instance, the very flowers he laid upon his mother's grave were summarily returned to him. It seemed inhuman, but I think it was very human now! God help me, I thought it was only the ordinary wild-oats, made too much of. But I was at fault, grievously at fault! Bitterly I regret it; bitterly I shall rue it till my dying day!"

Nicholas Harding was deeply moved; he was indeed a different man. In a hoarse voice he described the horrors of the interminable outward voyage, the per-

petual dread of being too late, the nightly nightmare of Claire married to a criminal lunatic, if not dead already by his hand.

"Crime and madness," said he, "are in their blood. I found that out too. The mother was a saint, but I discovered she had died in an asylum; the father is sane, but you know his reputation. He had denied me an interview before. I forced myself upon him now. And he admitted the perfect truth of the story I had heard. You ask how that woman came to know of it? Well, so did I. As I told you, she had sunk as low as possible; it seems she made a practice of asking her companions whether they knew aught of the Daintrees, because she suspected our guest of some shameful secret (but never of killing Blaydes), and she had always the thought of repaying Claire the good turn of which Claire must tell you. Well, at last — call it chance or fate, or what you will — but at last she hit upon a trail that led to the truth. She discovered an old gamekeeper who had actually seen the deed, and been pensioned to keep it secret, but blabbed it in his dotage. And then she came to Avenue Lodge."

Once his tongue was loosed, and it was seen that the subject excited the convalescent much less than had been feared, Mr. Harding would speak of it with apparent freedom. Yet the case had aspects which he sedulously shunned. And towards the end of the voyage he became visibly troubled and depressed; but at last one chilly northern night, when the Western Islands had been left astern, he took Tom by the arm, and his hand trembled.

"Erichsen," said he, "I was once your enemy. I am now your friend; in the near future I am to be something more; and I cannot face it a humbug and a hypo-

cite. You remember those letters you gave me back without a question? I have waited for that question all these months. That you have never asked it, that alone shows what you are! It makes it the harder to have to tell you the kind of man *I was*. But I have made up my mind that you shall know.”

And he confessed that he had been guilty enough of the bribery all but brought home to him, and yet not more guilty than a hundred others, many of them in higher places, as he said with perfect truth but little bitterness. The voyage out had purged him of self-esteem and arrogance; the homeward voyage was rearing better qualities in their place.

“Yes, it was a true bill!” he sighed. “True also that my money had silenced the witness who refused to speak—true that I made it worth his while to go to prison. But letters had passed between us. Blaydes got hold of them. He was on his way to me with those letters in his pocket—to sell them to me for a fancy price—when he met his death. Do you recollect the first lawyer who came to see you about the defence?”

Tom started, but said he did remember.

“He came from me. And he not only assumed your guilt—as I fear we had all assumed it—but he wanted to know where you had put what you had taken out of the dead man’s pockets. You were only to tell him that to secure the best defence money could obtain; instead of telling him you threw him out of your cell. You were quite right! *I was well served*. After two years, Erichsen, I tell you that I am sorry—sorry!”

Tom implored him to say no more. There was more, however, that must be said.

“Before your trial,” continued Harding, “I was almost