THE END OF HIS TIME.

By JAMES KNAPP REEVE.

CHAPTER V.

With Chalmers to think was to plan, and to plan was to act. He made a hasty journey to New York and put his affairs there into necessary shape. Then to Cleveland, and made certain that his compact with Laura Leonard had been carried out. Then he went to see Lina Tennant again.

"I can do nothing," he said, in answer to her look of inquiry. "I shall go away and wait until his term is out. Then perhaps I can help him."

"I had not expected much," she answered. "I felt how difficult it would be. But I am glad you have tried, and I am sorry that you are going away. I had hoped you would remain here, where I should see you sometimes. It will be a long while to wait."

For a moment his determination wavered. If he remained beside her, what opportunities might not time bring? This thought had recurred to him again and again. It would not stay down, and the fear that he might yield to it in the end made him only the more determined in his plan. He would make it impossible to be near her, impossible that he should do anything—however much he might be tempted through these long years—to lessen George's "chance" in any way. In these years love might die and love be born again. Without effort or the exercise of volition on his part; by only remaining near her; by doing the offices that a friend might; by steadfast but unobtrusive devotion, might not a change be wrought? And if it were thus wrought would he not have been unfaithful to his brother's cause? Would he not be a supplanter?

With other men the temptation might have been strong, but to him it was not so. For if under such circumstances her love came to him it would not be satisfying, not having been fairly won in a fair field. He would take no advantage of her nor of him—that other who had won her love from him before. And so he answered her gently, as though speaking to a child:

"It will not be so long. You are both young yet. You will still be young when he comes back."

"Yes; you are not very old yet yourself." She smiled at him sadly as she went on: "You are not so old as we shall be then, and you look so much like George tonight—as he did when he was a boy. Why!" she cried, with a little start of surprise, "I did not notice before; you have had your beard and mustache taken off. You do look so much like George."

After this they naturally fell into quiet, friendly talk of old times—when they had been just three friends together—and keeping away from sad or dangerous topics, they talked on until Chalmers felt more at home with her than he had with any woman for years. Less like a wanderer he felt—and more as if life might yet have some purpose in it—than he had since that long ago time when Lina Tennant had said that she cared more for his brother than for him. Yet now, just as there was beginning to be value in life—in this life—again, he was deliberately making ready to go away and leave it all.

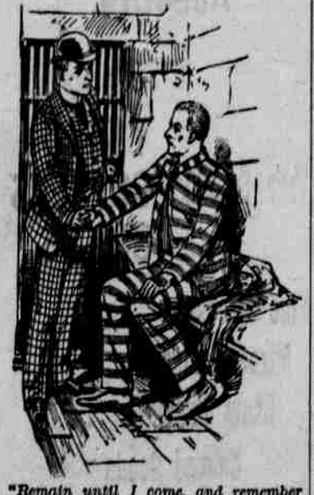
Twenty-four hours later Chalmers was back at the prison again. It was "after hours," and George Chalmers, with the thousand and a half of other wretched inmates who were housed within its gloomy walls, was locked securely in his own narrow cell.

It was against all rules, but by the use of a liberal fee Chalmers overcame the scruples of the guards and was admitted not only to the prison, but taken straight to where his brother was. What a place the prison was at night. Tier upon tier of cells; corridor after corridor; and all built up of solid, forbidding masonry that seemed meant to outlast the destroying hand of time itself. The lights burned dimly in the tomblike halls; the silence was heavy, ominous, except when broken by the labored breathing of men sleeping on comfortless cots behind the grated bars, and now and then to this was added the moans of one, the curses of another and the regular footfall of the guards as they paced their rounds.

Chalmers followed his conductor through this dreary place, and paused only when they had reached the uppermost tier, almost the farthest cell. Then the guard stopped, unlocked and threw open a heavy, grated door, and motioned him to enter.

If the corridors had seemed tomblike this seemed the veritable tomb itself, dug in the solid rock. But it was only the home, safe, snug and secure, that the state had provided for one of her erring sons. Chalmers entered, and as he did so slipped another bill into the guard's hand and motioned him away. The man nodded, closed the grating behind him, turned the key and went back along the corridor.

CHAPTER VI.



"Remain until I come, and remember you are always Ogden Chalmers."

George Chalmers sat upon his cot half dressed.

"You have come back," he said moodily.

"Yes, as I promised," answered the other; "and I can help you now."

"You don't mean that you have secured a pardon," returned the younger man, with sudden interest.

"No, but I can help you now; move quick and ask no questions. Put on my clothes."

"But what will you do? What if the guard comes back?"

"Never mind me. The guard will not dare make trouble. He has already broken his orders in bringing me here. Dress and we can talk afterward."

As he spoke he was already divesting himself of his clothing and helping to place them upon his brother. When this was done he drew on a portion of the convict's dress and sat down upon the side of the cot.

"Now look at me," he said. "No one could say that I am not you; and you resemble exactly the man who just came in here. You are a free man. Go out with the guard when he comes."

"But what will become of you?"

"Have no trouble about that. They cannot harm me. But you must take my name." He spoke low and hurriedly, but every word was distinct and forcible, as if he had studied how to say the most in the briefest possible time. "Take my keys, go to my room at the hotel and open my trunks. Examine all my papers, they will tell you how to put yourself in possession of my fortune. You will find full instructions. Go to the City of Mexico. You will find good opportunities there; engage in business; do the best you can and remain until I come, and remember you are always Ogden Chalmers."

George grasped his brother's hand. "This is too much; I cannot do this, Ogden. I have not deserved it. What if you have to remain here in my place?"

"It will not matter much. It will not be so very long, and maybe I should appreciate life better then."

The guard was coming back; his steps were very near now. Chalmers put his arm across his brother's shoulder and whispered very earnestly:

"Do not try to communicate with me, make a new start, George. Be a good man. And do not go or write to Lina Tennant until you can do so in your own name, when your sentence has expired. Then go to her; be honest with her; tell her the whole truth. She deserves it and she will forgive you."

There was no time for anything more. The grated door opened and closed again, and two men paced steadily down the dim corridor, and one of them was George Chalmers, the criminal, he upon whom the state had a lien for ten of the best years of his manhood. And he was going forth again to freedom.

And behind, in that dreary tomb up there, was Ogden Chalmers—man of fortune and of leisure. He had never wronged any man nor the state. Yet he sat there throughout the slow hours of the night looking hopelessly down a long vista of years wherein he could see himself reduced to an automaton, shorn of his identity, labeled merely "convict number thirteen hundred and seventy-six," mocked at and despised among men. And yet there was no bitterness in his heart.

It is one of the compensations of this life that we are enabled to adapt ourselves to whatever environment we may be placed amidst. Some succeed in this better than others, not because they possess less virility of character, less positiveness in pursuing a set course, but because they are able to perceive in due season the utter futility of an unequal combat with fate or with circumstance. The weak character, forced from its accustomed or congenial environment and into a lower plane of existence, becomes a maudlin railer against the world; while the stronger one, with like occasion, sets himself with grim determination to so fit himself to this new sphere as to receive the fewest knocks possible. On the other hand the weak character, thrown amid a broader environment, would fail to seize its opportunities, while the strong character would rise to the occasion and become the leader of a great movement or the hero of a forlorn hope.

In this respect the two brothers were opposites, the elder representing the latter and more fortunate class. From this it must not be inferred, however, that prison life and discipline sat lightly upon him. Yet it was not in regard to its physical aspects that he was compelled to summon all his fortitude in order to endure without complaint. It was only when he found himself reduced to a mere machine with a number, robbed of his own volition in even the commonest acts of life, his days and hours and minutes ordered at the will of another, that the spirit of revolt surged up in his breast. But Chalmers recognized the folly of such thoughts and curbed them with a masterful will. In the whole prison there was no man who seemed to fall more easily into his place. Even the "lockstep" seemed natural enough to him. Have you ever seen the lockstep? Have you ever seen a chain each link of which was a human being? Have you ever seen some fifteen hundred men bound together with invisible cords march as one man?

You say that you have seen your crack regiment on dress parade! They drill like the awkward squad or a band of country militia compared with this striped coil that winds through the prison yard.

Each link in this coil has allotted to it some fifteen inches of space. This link has two hands, and they are placed squarely on the shoulders of the link in front. The link has two feet, and they rise, swing forward and fall precisely in line and time with those of the link in front, and they fall precisely in the place from which those of the link in front have been lifted. Two eyes has this link, but they must glance neither to right nor to left; in the hollow of the neck of the link in front must their gaze rest, and only there. A lifted hand, a halting foot, a restless eye and the link is marked.

Ah! excellent device is the lockstep. The link forgets that it was once a man, that it has a soul, that it has (or did have) volition. It forgets that it may riot, burn, kill; that it may hew down men and walls that stand between it and freedom. An excellent device.

But for George Chalmers there was none of this. At his brother's word he had gone out from the prison a free man. Armed with his brother's letters, furnished with his brother's money, dressed in his brother's clothes, equipped even with his brother's name, a plain and easy path of life was opened out before him. He went out with good resolves, made the more serious and thoughtful as the full measure of his brother's sacrifice forced itself upon him—more serious perhaps than he had ever been before in all his life.

The consciousness of this sacrifice, the immensity of it, grew upon him; at first it had been so sudden that he did not realize it all. He had thought that maybe Ogden had some plan by which he would be released when it was found that the real criminal was gone. When he did realize, as he finally came to do in a little while, he could almost have gone back; but to that point he could not quite bring himself. But he determined to do his best to follow Ogden's advice, and so to merit, as well as he could, all that had been done for him.

In Mexico he found little trouble in establishing himself. There were many schemes afloat—mining, railroads, colonization—and his knowledge of banking and finance stood him in good stead. He took hold of safe schemes, put money into them, floated the bonds and stock, and was soon recognized as a valuable man in promoting matters of value in the internal development of the newly awakening republic. Into these matters he threw himself with all his ardor, trying to put the past behind him. But it would not wholly down. He often thought of Lina Tennant and would have written to her had it not been for Ogden's injunction. He had wholly given her up now; in fact had done so in his own mind from the day of his arrest, for he knew that sooner or later she must know the whole story, and he understood the depth and force of her nature well enough to know that it would be all over between them when that time came. She might forgive much, but she would not forgive him Leonie. It might be best if he should write now and tell her all—about Ogden as well as about himself. He honestly hoped that she might come to care for Ogden, now that he was out of the way.

If she knew what Ogden had done—and what he himself had permitted—perhaps it would help, and it would be some recompense. So, taking his promise to Ogden as an excuse, he put it off from day to day and it became harder and harder to do. She had loved him once, and now to belittle himself before her thus, and show how unworthy he had been of her love and trust, was more than he could bring himself to do.

And Leonie! Ogden had no right to impose restrictions upon him there, or at least no right beyond what might be implied by the use of his money. But in a little while George had money enough of his own, and this he might use or hazard as he chose. If there was to be nothing between him and Lina Tennant, it would not matter about Leonie.

[To be continued]