For The Term of His Natural Life

By MARCUS CLARKE

CHAPTER VI.—(Continued.)

He spoke truly. Through the roar was heard the rattle of iron on iron, as the guard "stood to their arms," and the wedge of gray cloth broke, in sudden terror of the leveled muskets. There was an instant's pause, and then old Pine walked, unmolested, down the prison, knelt by the body of Rufus Dawes.

"Stand back, my lads!" he said. "Take him up, two of you, and carry him to the door. The poor fellow won't hurt you." His orders were obeyed, and the old man, waiting until his patient had been safely received outside, raised his hand to command attention. "I see you know what I have to tell. The fever has broken out. That man has got it. It is absurd to suppose that no one else will be seized. I might catch it myself. You are much crowded down here, I know; but, my lads, I can't help that; I didn't make the ship, you know. It is a terrible thing, but you must keep orderly and quiet, and bear it like men. You know what the discipline is, and it is not in my power to alter it. I shall do my best for your comfort, and I look to you to help me."

Holding his gray head very erect indeed, the brave old fellow passed straight down the line, without looking to the right or left.

He had said just enough, and he reached the door amidst a chorus of "Bravo!" "True for you, docther!" and so on. But when he got fairly outside, he breathed more freely. He had performed a ticklish task, and he knew it.

"'Ark at 'em," growled the Moocher from his corner, "a-cheerin' at the noos!"

"Wait a bit," said the acuter intelligence of Jemmy Vetch. "Give him time. There'll be three or four more down afore night, and then we'll see!"

CHAPTER VII.

It was late in the afternoon when Sarah Purfoy awoke from her uneasy slumber. She had been dreaming of the deed she was about to do, and was flushed and feverish, but, mindful of the consequences which hung upon the success or failure of the enterprise, she rallied herself and ascended, with as calm an air as she could assume, to the deck.

The Malabar seemed to be enveloped in an electric cloud, whose sullen gloom a chance spark might flash into a blaze that should consume her. The woman who held her in her hands the two ends of the chain that would produce this spark looked down into the barricade. Three men, leaning carelessly against the bulwarks, watched her every motion.

"There she is, right enough," growled Mr. Gabbett, as if in continuation of a previous remark. "Flash as ever, and looking this way, too. There, look at that," he added, as the figure of Maurice Frere appeared side by side with that of the waiting maid, and the two turned away up the deck together.

Maurice Frere had come behind her and touched her on the shoulder. Since their conversation the previous evening, he had made up his mind to be fooled no longer. The girl was evidently playing with him, and he would show her that he was not to be trifled with.

"Well, Sarah."

"Well, Mr. Frere," dropping her hand and turning round with a smile.

"How well you are looking to-day! Positively lovely. I say, though, what is the use of playing fast and loose with a fellow this way?"

She cast her eyes down to the deck, and a modest flush rose on her cheeks. "I have so much to do," she said in a half whisper. "There are so many eyes upon me, I cannot stir without being seen."

She raised her head as she spoke, and to give effect to her words, looked round the deck. Her glance crossed that of the young soldier on the forecastle, and, though the distance was too great for her to distinguish his features, she guessed who he was—Miles was jealous. Frere, smiling with delight at her change of manner, came close to her, and whispered in her ear. She affected to start, and took the opportunity of exchanging a signal with the Crow.

"I will walk with you at 8 o'clock," said she.

"They relieve guard at 8," he said, deprecatingly.

She tossed her head. "Very well, then, attend to your guard; I don't care."

"But, Sarah, consider——"

"As if a women in love ever considers!" said she, turning upon him a burning glance, which in truth might have melted a more icy man than he. She loved him, then! What a fool he would be to refuse. The guard could relieve itself for once without his supervision.

"Very well; at 8, then."

"Hush!" said she. "Here comes that stupid captain."

And as Frere left her she turned, and, with her eyes fixed on the convict barricade, dropped the handkerchief she held in her hand over the railing. It fell at the feet of the captain, and with a quick upward glance that worthy fellow picked it up and brought it to her.

"Oh, thank you, Captain Blunt," said she, and her eyes spoke more than her tongue.

"Did you take the laudanum?" whispered Blunt, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Some of it," said she. "I will bring you back the bottle."

Blunt walked aft, humming cheerily, and saluted Frere with a slap on the back. The two men laughed, each at his own thoughts, but their laughter only made the surrounding gloom seem deeper than before.

Sarah Purfoy, casting her eyes toward the barricade, observed a change in the position of the three men. The Crow, having taken off his prison cap, held it at arm's length with one hand, while he wiped his brow with the other. Her signal had been observed. During all this, Rufus Dawes, removed to the hospital, was lying flat on his back, staring at the deck above him, trying to think of something he wanted to say.

The place where he lay was but dimly lighted. He could but just see the deck above his head, and distinguish the outlines of three other berths, apparently similar to his own. He could hear gasps and moans and mutterings—the signs that his companions yet lived.

All at once a voice called out: "Of course his bills are worth four hundred pounds; but, my good sir, four hundred pounds to a man in my position is not worth the getting. Why, I've given four hundred pounds for a smile of my girl Sarah! She's a good girl, as girls go. Mrs. Lionel Crofton, of the Crofts, Sevenoaks, Kent—Sevenoaks, Kent—Seven——"

A gleam of light broke in on the darkness which wrapped Rufus Dawes' tortured brain. The man was John Rex, his berth-mate. With an effort he spoke.

"Rex!"

"Yes, yes, I'm coming; don't be in a hurry. The sentry's safe, and the howitzer is but five paces from the door. A rush upon deck, lads, and she's ours! That is, mine. Mine and my wife's, Mrs. Lionel Crofton, of Seven Crofts, no, Oaks—Sarah Purfoy, lady's maid and nurse—ha! ha!—lady's maid and nurse!"

This last sentence contained the name-clue to the labyrinth in which Rufus Dawes' bewildered intellects were wandering. "Sarah Purfoy!" He remembered now each detail of the conversation he had so strangely overheard, and how imperative it was that he should, without delay, reveal the plot that threatened the ship. How that plot was to be carried out, he did not pause to consider; he was conscious that he was hanging over the brink of delirium, and that, unless he made himself understood before his senses utterly deserted him, all was lost.

He attempted to rise, but found that his fever-thralled limbs refused to obey the impulse of his will. He made an effort to speak, but his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth, and his jaws stuck together. He could not raise a finger nor utter a sound. He closed his eyes with a terrible sigh of despair, and resigned himself to his fate. At that instant the door opened. It was 6 o'clock, and Pine had come to have a last look at his patients before dinner. It seemed that there was somebody with him, for a kind, though somewhat pompous voice remarked upon the scantiness of accommodation.

"Here they are," said Pine; "six of 'em. This fellow"—going to the side of Rex—"is the worst. If he had not a constitution like a horse, I don't think he could live out the night."

"Three, eighteen, seven, four," muttered Rex; "dot and carry one. Is that an occupation for a gentleman? No, sir. Good night, my lord, good night. Hark! the clock is striking 9; five, six, seven, eight! Well, you've had your day, and can't complain."

"A dangerous fellow," says Pine, with the light upraised. "A very dangerous fellow. This is the place, you see—a regular rat hole; but what can one do?"

"Come, let us get on deck," said Vickers, with a shudder of disgust.

Rufus Dawes felt the sweat break out into beads on his forehead. They suspected nothing. They were going away. He must warn them. With a violent effort, in his agony he turned over in the bunk, and thrust out his hand from the blankets.

"Halloo! what's this?" cried Pine, bringing the lantern to bear upon it. "Lie down, my man. Eh?—water, is it? There, steady with it now;" and he lifted a pannikin to the blackened, froth-fringed lips. The cool draught moistened his parched gullet, and the convict made a last effort to speak.

"Sarah Purfoy—to-night—the prison—Mutiny!"

The last word, almost shrieked out, in the sufferer's desperate efforts to articulate, recalled the wandering senses of John Rex.

"Hush!" he cried. "Is that you, Jemmy? Sarah's right. Wait till she gives the word."

"He's raving," said Vickers.

Pine caught the convict by the shoulder. "What do you say, my man? A mutiny of the prisoners?"

With his mouth agape and his hands clinched, Rufus Dawes, incapable of further speech, made a last effort to nod assent, but his head fell upon his breast; the next moment, the flickering light, the gloomy prison, the eager face of the doctor, and the astonished face of Vickers, vanished from before his straining eyes.

CHAPTER VIII.

The two discoverers of this awkward secret held a council of war. Vickers was for at once calling the guard, and announcing to the prisoners that the plot—whatever it might be—had been discovered; but Pine, accustomed to convict ships, overruled this decision.

"You don't know these fellows as well as I do," said he. "In the first place there may be no mutiny at all. The whole thing is, perhaps, some absurdity of that fellow Dawes—and should we once put the notion of attacking us into the prisoners' heads, there is no telling what they might do."

"But the man seemed certain," said the other. "He mentioned my wife's maid, too!"

"Well," says Pine, "look here. Suppose we tell these scoundrels that their design is known. Very good. They will profess absolute ignorance, and try again on the next opportunity, when, perhaps, we may not know anything about it. At all events, we are completely ignorant of the nature of the plot and the names of the ringleaders. Let us double the sentries, and quietly get the men under arms. Let Miss Sarah do what she pleases, and, when the mutiny breaks out, we will nip it in the bud, clap all the villains we get in irons, and hand them over to the authorities in Hobart Town. I am not a cruel man, sir, but we have got a cargo of wild beasts aboard, and must be careful."

According to the usual custom on board convict ships, the guards relieved each other every two hours, and at 6 p. m. the guard was removed to the quarter-deck, and the arms which, in the day time, were disposed on the top of the arm chest, were placed in an arm rack constructed on the quarter-deck for that purpose. Trusting nothing to Frere—who, indeed, by Pine's advice, was kept in ignorance of the whole matter—Vickers ordered all the men, save those who had been on guard during the day, to be under arms in the barrack, forbade communication with the upper deck, and placed as sentry at the barrack door his own servant, an old soldier, on whose fidelity he could thoroughly rely. He then doubled the guards, took the keys of the prison himself from the non-commissioned officer whose duty it was to keep them, and saw that the howitzer on the lower deck was loaded with graps. It was a quarter to 7 when Pine and he took their station at the main hatchway, determined to watch until morning.

At a quarter past 7 any curious person looking through the window of Captain Blunt's cabin would have seen an unusual sight. That gallant commander was sitting on a chair, and the handsome waiting maid of Mrs. Vickers was standing by his side. His gray hair was matted all ways about his reddened face, and he was blinking like an owl in the sunshine. He had drunk a larger quantity of wine than usual at dinner.

"Cuc-come, Sarah," he hiccoughed. "It's all very fine, my lass, but you needn't be so—hic—proud, you know. I'm a plain sailor—plain s'lor, Srr'h. Ph'n'as Bub-blunt, commander of the Mal-Mal-Malabar. Wors' 'sh good talkin'? You lovsh me, and I—hic—lovsh you, Sarah."

The ship's bell struck seven. Now or never was the time. She seized the moment, drew from her pocket the laudanum bottle and, passing her hand over his shoulder, poured half its contents into the glass.

"Come, finish that and be quiet, or I'll go away," she said.

He balanced himself on his heels for a moment, and, holding by the molding of the cabin, stared at her with a famous smile of drunken admiration, then looked at the glass in his hand, hiccoughed with much solemnity thrice, and, as though struck with a sudden sense of duty unfulfilled, swallowed the contents at a gulp. The effect was almost instantaneous. He dropped the tumbler, lurched toward the woman at the door, and then making a half-turn in accordance with the motion of the vessel, fell into his bunk, and snored like a grampus.

Sarah Purfoy watched him for a few minutes, and then having blown out the light, stepped out of the cabin, and closed the door behind her. The dusky gloom which had held the deck on the previous night enveloped all forward of the main mast. A lantern swung in the forecastle, and swayed with the motion of the ship. The light at the prison door threw a glow through the open hatch, and in the cuddy at her right hand the usual row of oil lamps burned. She looked mechanically for Vickers, who was ordinarily there at that hour, but the cuddy was empty. So much the better, she thought, as she drew her dark cloak around her and passed Frere's door. As she did so, a strange pain shot through her temples, and her knees trembled. With a strong effort she dispelled the dizziness that had almost overpowered her, and held herself erect. It would never do to break down now.

She seemed to be listening for something. Her nervous system was wound up to the highest pitch of excitement. The success of the plot depended on the next five minutes. At that instant the report of a musket shot broke the silence. The mutiny had begun!

The sound awoke the soldier to a sense of his duty. He sprang to his feet, made for the door. The moment for which the convict's accomplice had waited approached. She clung to him with all her weight. Suddenly the rich crimson died away from her lips, leaving them an ashen gray color. Her eyes closed in agony; loosing her hold of him, she staggered to her feet, pressed her hands upon her bosom, and uttered a sharp cry of pain.

The fever which had been on her for two days, and which, by a strong exercise of will, she had struggled again, encouraged by the violent excitement of the occasion, had attacked her at this supreme moment. Deathly pale and sick, she reeled to the side of the cabin.

There was another shot, and a violent clashing of arms, and Frere, leaving the miserable woman to her fate, leaped out on to the deck.

(To be continued.)

Grafter.

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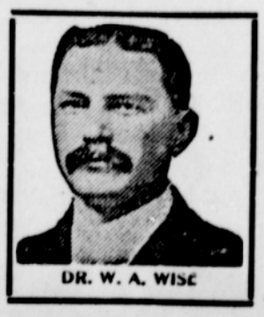

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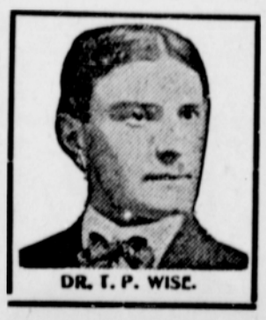

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