

For The Term of His Natural Life

By MARCUS CLARKE

CHAPTER X.—(Continued.)

The red lips parted, and the blue eyes, brighter than ever, stared vacantly around. The sound of her father's voice seemed to have roused her, for she began to speak a little prayer: "God bless papa and mamma, and God bless all on board this ship. God bless me, and make me good girl, for Jesus Christ's sake, our Lord. Amen."

The sound of the unconscious child's simple prayer had something awesome in it, and John Vickers, who not ten minutes before would have sealed his own death warrant unhesitatingly to preserve the safety of the vessel, felt his eyes fill with unbidden tears. The contrast was curious. From out the midst of that desolate ocean—in a fever-smitten prison ship, leagues from land, surrounded by ruffians, thieves and murderers—the baby voice of an innocent child called confidently on heaven.

Two hours afterward—as the Malabar, escaped from the peril which had menaced her, plunged cheerily through the rippling water—the mutineers, by their spokesman, Mr. James Vetch, confessed:

"They were very sorry, and hoped that their breach of discipline would be forgiven. It was the fear of the typhus which had driven them to it. They had no accomplices either in the prison or out of it, but they felt it but right to say that the man who had planned the mutiny was Rufus Dawes."

The malignant cripple had guessed from whom the information which had led to the failure of the plot had been derived, and this was his characteristic revenge.

Extracted from the Hobart Town Courier:

"The examination of the prisoners who were concerned in the attempt upon the Malabar was concluded on Tuesday last. The four ringleaders, Dawes, Gabbett, Vetch and Sanders, were condemned to death; but we understand that, by the clemency of his excellency the governor, their sentence has been commuted to six years at the penal settlement of Macquarie Harbor."

CHAPTER XI.

The southeast coast of Van Diemen's Land resembles a biscuit at which rats have been nibbling. Eaten away by the continual action of the ocean which, pouring round by east and west, has divided the peninsula from the mainland of the Australasian continent, the shore line is broken and ragged. From the sentinel solitude of the Iron Pot to the smiling banks of New Norfolk, the river winds in a succession of reaches, narrowing to a deep channel cleft between rugged and towering cliffs.

The climate of Van Diemen's Land is one of the loveliest in the world. Luncheon is warm, sheltered and moist; and Hobart Town, protected by Bruny Island and its archipelago of D'Encastreaux Channel and Storm Bay from the violence of the southern breakers, preserves the mean temperature of Smyrna; while the district between these two towns spreads in a succession of beautiful valleys, through which glide clear and sparkling streams. But on the western coast, from the steep rocks of Cape Grim to the scrub encircled barrenness of Sandy Cape, and the frowning entrance to Macquarie Harbor, the nature of the country entirely changes. Along that iron bound shore, all is bleak and cheerless. Upon that dreary beach the rollers of the southern sea complete their circuit of the globe, and the storm that has devastated the cape, and united in its eastern course with the icy blasts which sweep northward from the unknown terrors of the southern pole, crashes unchecked upon the Huon pine forests, and lashes with rain the grim front of Mount Direction. Furious gales and sudden tempests afflict the natives of the coast. Navigation is dangerous, and the entrance to the "Hell's Gates" of Macquarie Harbor is only to be attempted in calm weather.

"Hell's Gates," formed by a rocky point, which runs abruptly northward, almost touches, on its eastern side, a projecting arm of land which guards the entrance to King's river. In the middle of the gates is an island, which, lying on a sandy bar in the very jaws of the current, creates a double whirlpool, impossible to pass in the roughest weather. The headquarters of the settlement were placed on an island not far from the mouth of this inhospitable river, called Sarah Island.

Sarah Island is long and low. The commandant's house was built in the center, having the chaplain's house and barracks between it and the jail. The hospital was on the west shore, and in a line with it lay the two penitentiaries. Lines of lofty palisades ran round the settlement, giving it the appearance of a fortified town. These palisades were built for the purpose of warding off the terrific blasts of wind, which, shrieking through the long and narrow bay as through the keyhole of a door, had in former times torn off roofs, and leveled boat sheds. The little town was set, as it were, in defiance of nature, at the very extreme of civilization, and its inhabitants maintained perpetual warfare with the winds and waves.

But the jail of Sarah Island was not the only prison in this desolate region. At a little distance from the mainland is a rock, over the rude side of which the waves dash in rough weather. On an evening in December, as the sun was sinking behind the tree tops on the left side of the harbor, the figure of a man

appeared on the top of this rock. He was clad in the coarse garb of a convict, and wore round his ankles two iron rings, connected by a short and heavy chain. To the middle of this chain a leathern strap was attached, which, splitting in the form of a T, buckled round his waist, and pulled the chain high enough to prevent him from stumbling over it as he walked. His head was bare, and his coarse, blue striped shirt, open at the throat, displayed an embrowned and muscular neck. Emerging from out a sort of cell, or den, contrived by nature or art in the side of the cliff, he threw on a scanty fire, which burned between two hollowed rocks, a small log of pine wood; and then, returning to his cave, and bringing from it an iron pot which contained water, he scooped with his toll hardened hands a resting place for it in the ashes, and placed it on the embers. It was evident that the cave was at once his storehouse and larder, and that the two hollowed rocks formed his kitchen.

Having thus made preparations for supper, he ascended a pathway which led to the highest point of the rock. His fetters compelled him to take short steps, and, as he walked, he winced as though the iron bit him. A handkerchief or strip of cloth was twisted round his left ankle, on which the circlet had chafed a sore. Painfully and slowly he gained his destination, and, flinging himself on the ground, gazed around him. A brig was being towed up the harbor by two convict-manned boats.

The sight of this brig seemed to rouse in the mind of the solitary of the rock a strain of reflection, for, sinking his chin upon his hand, he fixed his eyes on the incoming vessel, and immersed himself in moody thought. The ship anchored, the boats detached themselves from her sides, the sun sunk, and the bay was plunged in gloom. Lights began to twinkle along the shore of the settlement. The little fire died, and the water in the iron pot grew cold; yet the watcher on the rock did not stir. With his eyes staring into the gloom, and fixed steadily on the vessel, he lay along the barren cliff of his lonely prison as motionless as the rock on which he had stretched himself.

This solitary man was Rufus Dawes.

In the house of Major Vickers, commandant of Macquarie Harbor, there was, on this evening of December, unusual gayety. Lieut. Maurice Frere, late in command at Maria Island, had unexpectedly come down with news from headquarters. The Ladybird, government schooner, visited the settlement on ordinary occasions twice a year. To the convicts the arrival of the Ladybird meant arrival of new faces, intelligence of old comrades, news of how the world from which they were exiled, was progressing. When the Ladybird arrived, the chained and toll-worn felons felt that they were yet human, that the universe was not bounded by the gloomy forests which surrounded their prison, but that there was a world beyond. To the convicts the Ladybird was town-talk, theater, stock quotations and latest telegrams. She was their newspaper, postoffice, the one excitement of their dreary existence, the one link between their own misery and the happiness of their fellow creatures. To the commandant and the "freemen" this messenger from the outer life was scarcely less welcome. There was not a man on the island who did not feel his heart grow heavier when her white sails disappeared behind the shoulder of the hill.

On the present occasion business of more than ordinary importance had procured for Major Vickers this pleasurable excitement. It had been resolved by Gov. Arthur that the convict establishment should be broken up. A succession of murders and attempted escapes had called public attention to the place, and its distance from Hobart Town rendered it inconvenient and expensive. Arthur had fixed upon Tasmania's peninsula as a future convict depot, and naming it Port Arthur, in honor of himself, had sent down Lieut. Maurice Frere with instructions for Vickers to convey the prisoners of Macquarie Harbor thither.

Seven classes of criminals were established, when the new barracks for prisoners at Hobart Town were finished. The first class were allowed to sleep out of barracks, and to work for themselves on Saturday; the second had only the last-named indulgence; the third were only allowed Saturday afternoon; the fourth and fifth were "refractory and disorderly characters—to work in irons;" the sixth were "men of the most degraded and incorrigible character—to be worked in irons and kept entirely separate from the other prisoners;" while the seventh were the refuse of this refuse—the murderers, bandits and villains, whom nether chain nor lash could tame. They were regarded as socially dead, and shipped to Hell's Gates or Maria Island. Hell's Gates was the most dreaded of all these houses of bondage. The discipline at the place was so severe, and the life so terrible, that prisoners would risk all to escape from it. In one year, of eighty-five deaths there, only thirty were from natural causes; of the remaining dead, twenty-seven were drowned, eight killed accidentally, three shot by the soldiers, and twelve murdered by their comrades. In another year one hundred and sixty-nine men out of one hundred and eighty-two were punished to the extent of two thousand lashes. During the ten years of its existence one hundred and twelve

men escaped, out of whom sixty-two only were found—dead. The prisoners killed themselves to avoid living any longer, and, if so fortunate as to penetrate the desert of scrub, heath and swamp which lay between their prison and the settled districts, preferred death to recapture. Successfully to transport the remnant of this desperate band of doubly convicted felons to Arthur's new prison was the mission of Maurice Frere.

"Well, Mrs. Vickers," he said, as he took a cup of tea from the hands of that lady, "I suppose you won't be sorry to get away from this place, eh?"

"No, indeed," says poor Mrs. Vickers, with the old girlishness shadowed by six years; "I shall be only too glad. A dreadful place! John's duties, however, are imperative. But the wind! My dear Mr. Frere, you've no idea of it; I wanted to send Sylvia to Hobart Town, but John would not let her go."

"By the way, how is Miss Sylvia?" asked Frere, with the patronizing air which men of his stamp adopt when they speak of children.

"Not very well, I'm sorry to say," returned Vickers. "You see, it's lonely for her here. There are no children of her own age, with the exception of the pilot's little girl, and she cannot associate with her. But I did not like to leave her behind, and endeavored to teach her myself."

"Hum! There was a—ha—governess, or something, was there not?" said Frere, staring into his teacup. "That maid, you know—what was her name?"

"Miss Purfoy," said Mrs. Vickers, a little gravely. "Yes, poor thing; a sad story, Mr. Frere."

"Indeed! I left, you know, shortly after the trial of the mutineers, and never heard the full particulars." He spoke carelessly, but he awaited the reply with keen curiosity.

"A sad story!" repeated Mrs. Vickers. "She was the wife of that wretched man, Rex, and came out as my maid in order to be near him. She would never tell me her history, poor thing, though all through the dreadful accusations made by that horrid doctor, I begged her almost on my knees. You know how she nursed Sylvia and poor John. Really a most superior creature. I think she must have been a governess. Her conduct was most exemplary, and during the six months we were in Hobart Town she taught little Sylvia a great deal. Of course she could not help her wretched husband, you know. Could she?"

"Certainly not!" said Frere, heartily. "I heard something about him, too. Got into some scrape, did he not?"

"Miss Purfoy, or Mrs. Rex, as she really was, though I don't suppose Rex is her real name, either, came into a little legacy from an old aunt in England and left my service. She took a little cottage on the New Town road, and Rex was assigned to her as her servant."

"I see. The old dodge!" says Frere, flushing a little. "Well?"

"Well, the wretched man tried to escape, and she helped him. He was to get to Launceston, and so on board a vessel to Sydney; but they took the unhappy creature, and he was sent down here. She was only fined, but it ruined her. You see, only a few people know of her relationship to Rex, and she was rather respected. Of course, when it became known, what with that dreadful trial and the horrible assertions of Dr. Pine—you will not believe me, I know; there was something about that man I never liked—she was quite left alone. She wanted me to bring her down here to teach Sylvia, but John thought that it was only to be near her husband, and wouldn't allow it."

"Of course it was," said Vickers, ising. "Frere, we'll go on the veranda. She will never be satisfied until she gets that scoundrel free."

"He's a bad lot, then?" says Frere, opening the glass window and leading the way to the sandy garden.

"Oh, a very bad lot," returned Vickers; "quiet and silent, but ready for any villainy. I count him one of the worst men we have. With the exception of one or two more, I think he is the worst."

"Why don't you flog 'em?" says Frere. "I cut the hides off my fellows if they show any nonsense."

"Well," says Vickers, "I don't care about too much cat myself. Barton, who was here before me, flogged tremendously, but I don't think it did any good. They tried to kill him several times. You remember those twelve fellows who were hanged? No! Ah, of course you were away."

"What do you do with 'em?"

"Oh, flog the worst, you know; but I don't flog more than a man a week as a rule, and never more than fifty lashes. They're getting quieter now. Then we iron, and dumb-bells, and maroon them."

"Do what?"

"Give them solitary confinement on Grummet Island. When a man gets very bad, we clap him into a boat with a week's provisions, and pull him over to Grummet. There are cells cut in the rock, you see, and the fellow pulls up his commissariat after him, and lives there by himself for a month or so. It tames them wonderfully."

"Does it?" said Frere. "It's a capital notion. I wish I had a place of that sort at Maria."

"I've a fellow there now," says Vickers. "Dawes. You remember him, of course—the ringleader of the mutiny in the Malabar. A dreadful ruffian. He was the most violent the first year I was here. Barton used to flog a good deal, and Dawes had a childish dread of the cat. When I came, he'd made a sort of petition to be sent back to the settlement. Said that he was innocent of the mutiny, and that the accusation against him was false."

(To be continued.)

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