

For The Term of His Natural Life

By MARCUS CLARKE

CHAPTER XII.

"The old dodge," said Frere again. "Of course, I couldn't let him go; but I took him out of the chain gang, and put him on the Osprey. You saw her in the dock as you came in. He worked for some time very well, and then tried to bolt again."

"The old trick. Ha; ha! don't I know it?" says Mr. Frere.

"Well, we caught him and gave him fifty. Then he was sent to the chain gang, cutting timber. Then we put him into the boats, but he quarreled with the coxswain, and then we took him back to the timber rafts. About six weeks ago he made another attempt—together with Gabbett, the man who nearly killed you—but his leg was chafed with the irons, and we took him. Gabbett and three more, however, got away."

Just then some one came up the garden path and saluted.

"What is it, Troke?"

"Prisoner given himself up, sir. Gabbett. He came back to-night. He's down at the sheds. You can see him at once, gentlemen, if you like."

It was not far to the sheds, and after a few minutes' walk through the wooden palisades they reached a long stone building, two stories high, from which issued a horrible growling pierced with shrill screams and songs. At the sound of the musket butts clashing on the pine wood flagging, the noises ceased, and a silence more sinister than sound fell on the place.

Passing between two rows of warders, the two officers reached a sort of ante-room to the jail, containing a pine-log stretcher, on which a mass of something was lying. On a roughly made stool, by the side of this stretcher sat a man in the gray dress of "good conduct" prisoners. This man held between his knees a basin containing gruel and was apparently endeavoring to feed the mass on the pine logs.

"Gabbett?"

The intelligent Troke, considerably alive to the wishes of his superior officers, dragged the mass into a sitting posture, and awoke it.

Gabbett—for it was he—passed one great hand over his face, and, leaning exactly in the position in which Troke had placed him, scowled, bewildered, at his visitors.

"Well, Gabbett," says Vickers, "you've come back again, you see. When will you learn sense, eh? Where are your mates?"

"Dead," says Gabbett.

"Why don't you eat your gruel?" "I have eaten it. Ain't yer got nuttin' better nor that to bog a man on? Ugh! yer a mean lot! Wot's it to be, this time, major? Fifty?"

"A nice specimen!" said Vickers, with a hopeless smile. "What can one do with such a fellow?"

"I'd flog his soul out of his body," said Frere, "if he spoke to me like that."

The giant raised his great head and looked at the speaker, but did not recognize him. He saw only a strange face—a visitor, perhaps. "You may flog, and welcome, master," said he, "if you'll give me a fig o' tiddbacky." Frere laughed. The brutal indifference of the rejoinder suited his humor, and, with a glance at Vickers, he took a small piece of candied fruit from the pocket of his pea jacket, and gave to the recaptured convict. Gabbett snatched it as a cur snatches at a bone, and thrust it whole into his mouth.

"How many mates had he?" asked Maurice, watching the champing jaws as one looks at a strange animal, and asking the question as though a "mate" was something a convict was born with—like a mole, for instance.

"Three, sir."

"Three, eh? Well, give him thirty lashes, Vickers."

"And if I ha' had three more," growled Gabbett, mumbling at his tobacco, "you wouldn't ha' had the chance."

As he sat there gloomily chewing, he was a spectacle to shudder at. Not so much on account of his natural hideousness, increased a thousandfold by the tattered and filthy rags which barely covered him. Not so much on account of his unshaven jaws, his hare-lip, his torn and bleeding feet, his haggard cheeks, and his huge, wasted frame. Not only because, looking at the animal, as he crouched, with one foot curled round the other, and one hairy arm pendent between his knees, he was so horribly unhuman, that one shuddered to think that tender women and fair children must, of necessity, confess to fellowship of kind with such a monster. But also because, in his slaving mouth, his slowly grinding jaws, his restless fingers, and his bloodshot, wandering eyes, there lurked a hint of some terror more awful than the terror of starvation—a memory of a tragedy played out in the gloomy depths of that forest which had vomited him forth again—and the shadow of this unknown horror, clinging to him, repelled, as though he bore about with him the reek of the shambles.

"Come," said Vickers, "let us go back. I shall have to flog him again, I suppose. Oh, this place! No wonder they call it 'Hell's Gates.'"

"Halloo! what's that red light there?" "Dawes' fire on Grummet Rock," says Vickers, going in; "the man I told you about."

Two or three mornings after the arrival of the Ladybird, the solitary prisoner of the Grummet Rock noticed mysterious movements along the shore of

the island settlement. The building of a pier, or breakwater, running from the western point of the settlement, was discontinued; and all hands appeared to be occupied with the newly built Osprey, which was lying on the slips. Parties of soldiers also daily left the Ladybird, and assisted at the mysterious work in progress.

A fortnight after this, about the 15th of December, he observed another curious fact. All the boats on the island put off one morning to the opposite side of the harbor, and in the course of the day a great smoke arose along the side of the hills. The next day the same was repeated; and on the fourth day the boats returned, towing behind them a huge raft. This raft, made fast to the side of the Ladybird, proved to be composed of planks, beams and joists, all of which were duly hoisted up and stowed in the hold of the brig.

This set Rufus Dawes thinking. Could it possibly be that the timber cutting was to be abandoned, and that the government had hit upon some other method of utilizing its convict labor? He had known timber and built boats, and tanned hides and made shoes. Was it possible that some new trade was to be initiated? Before he had settled this point to his satisfaction, he was startled by another boat expedition. Three boats' crews went down the bay, and returned, after a day's absence, with an addition to their number in the shape of four strangers and a quantity of stores and farming implements.

Rufus Dawes, catching sight of these last, came to the conclusion that the boats had been to Phillip Island, where the "garden" was established, and had taken off the gardeners and garden produce. Rufus Dawes decided that the Ladybird had brought a new commandment—his sight, trained by his half-savage life, had already distinguished Mr. Maurice Frere—and that these mysteries were "improvements" under the new rule. When he arrived at this point of reasoning, another conjecture, assuming his first to have been correct, followed as a natural consequence. Lieutenant Frere would be a more severe commandment than Major Vickers. Now, severity had already reached its height, so far as he was concerned; so the unhappy man took a final resolution—he would kill himself.

Ignorant that the sighs and sounds about him were symptoms of the final abandonment of the settlement, and that the Ladybird was sent down to bring away the prisoners, Rufus Dawes decided upon getting rid of that burden of life which pressed upon him so heavily. For six years he had hewed wood and drawn water; for six years he had hoped against hope; for six years he had lived in the valley of the shadow of death. He dared not recapitulate to himself what he had suffered. Indeed, his senses were deadened and dulled by torture. He cared to remember only one thing—that he was a prisoner for life. In vain had been his first dream of freedom. He had done his best, by good conduct, to win release; but the villainy of Vetch and Rex had deprived him of the fruit of his labor. Instead of gaining credit by his exposure of the plot on board the Malabar, he was himself deemed guilty and condemned. The knowledge of his "treachery," while it gained for him no credit with the authorities, procured for him the detestation and ill-will of the monsters among whom he found himself. On his arrival at Hell's Gates he was a marked man, a pariah among those beings who were pariahs to all the world besides.

In the meantime, the settlement was in a fever of excitement. In less than three weeks from the announcement made by Vickers, all had been got ready. The commandant had finally arranged with Frere as to his course of action. He himself would accompany the Ladybird with the main body. His wife and daughter were to remain until the sailing of the Osprey, which Mr. Frere was to bring up as soon as possible. "I will leave you a corporal's guard, and ten prisoners as a crew," Vickers said. "You can work her easily with that number." To which Frere had replied that he could do with five prisoners if necessary, for he knew how to get double work out of the lazy dogs.

Near Philip's Island, on the north side of the harbor, is situated Coal Head, where a party had been lately at work. This party, hastily withdrawn by Vickers to assist in the business of devastation, had left behind it some tools and timber, and at the eleventh hour a boat's crew was sent to bring away the debris. The tools were duly collected, and the pine logs—worth twenty-five shillings apiece in Hobart Town—duly rafted and chained. The timber was secured, and the convicts, towing it after them, pulled for the ship just as the sun sunk. In the general relaxation of discipline and haste the raft had not been made with as much care as usual, and the strong current against which the boat was laboring assisted the negligence of the convicts. The logs began to loosen, and though the onward motion of the boat kept the chain taut, when the rowers slackened their exertions the mass parted, and Mr. Troke, hooking himself on to the side of the Ladybird, saw a huge log slip out from its fellows, and disappear into the darkness. Gazing after it with an indignant and disgusted stare, as though it had been a refractory prisoner who merited two-days' "solitary," he thought he heard a cry from the direction in which it had been borne. He would have paused to listen, but all his attention was needed to save the timber,

and to prevent the boat from being swamped by the struggling mass at her stern.

The cry had proceeded from Rufus Dawes. From his solitary rock he had watched the boat pass him and make for the Ladybird in-channel, and he had decided that the moment when the gathering gloom swallowed her up should be the moment when he would plunge into the surge below him. The heavily laboring boat grew dimmer and dimmer, as each tug of the oars took her further from him. Presently, only the figure of Mr. Troke in the stern sheets was visible; then that also disappeared, and as the nose of the timber raft rose on the swell of the next wave, Rufus Dawes flung himself into the sea.

He was heavily ironed, and he sunk like a stone. He had resolved not to attempt to swim, and for the first moment kept his arms raised above his head in order to sink the quicker. But as the short, sharp agony of suffocation caught him, and the shock of the icy water dispelled the mental intoxication under which he was laboring, he desperately struck out, and despite the weight of his irons, gained the surface for an instant. As he did so, all bewildered, and with the one savage instinct of self-preservation predominant over all other thoughts, he became conscious of a huge black mass surging upon him out of the darkness. An instant's buffet with the current, an ineffectual attempt to dive beneath it, a horrible sense that the weight at his feet was dragging him down—and the huge log, loosened from the raft, was upon him, crushing him beneath its rough and ragged sides. The log passed completely over him, thrusting him beneath the water, but his hand, scraping along the splintered side, came in contact with the loop of hide rope that yet hung round the mass, and he clutched it with the tenacity of a death-grip. In another instant he got his head above water, and, making good his hold, twisted himself, by a violent effort, across the log.

For a moment he saw the lights from the stern windows of the anchored vessels low in the distance; Grummet Rock disappeared on his left; then, exhausted, breathless, and bruised, he closed his eyes, and the drifting log bore him swiftly and silently away into the darkness.

At daylight the next morning, Mr. Troke, landing on the prison rock, found it deserted. The prisoner's cap was lying on the edge of the little cliff, but the prisoner himself had disappeared. Pulling back to the Ladybird, the intelligent Troke pondered on the circumstance, and in delivering his report to Vickers mentioned the strange cry he had heard the night before. "It's my belief, sir, that he was trying to swim the bay," he said. "He must ha' gone to the bottom anyhow, for he couldn't swim five yards with them irons."

Vickers, busily engaged in getting under way, accepted this very natural supposition without question. The prisoner had met his death either by his own act or by accident. It was either a suicide or attempt to escape, and the former conduct of Rufus Dawes rendered the latter explanation a more probable one. In any case, he was dead. As Mr. Troke rightly surmised, no man could swim the bay in irons; and when the Ladybird, an hour later, passed the Grummet Rock, all on board her believed that the corpse of its late occupant was lying beneath the waves that seethed at its base.

The drifting log that had so strangely served as a means of saving Rufus Dawes swam with the current that was running out of the bay. For some time the burden that it bore was an insensible one. Exhausted with his desperate struggle for life, the convict lay along the rough bark of this heaven-sent raft without motion, almost without breath. At length a violent shock awoke him to consciousness, and he perceived that the log had become stranded on a sandy point, the extremity of which was lost in darkness. Painfully raising himself from his uncomfortable posture, he staggered to his feet, and, crawling a few paces up the beach, flung himself upon the ground and slept.

When he woke up it was past mid-day, and the sun poured its full rays upon him. His clothes were dry in all places, save the side on which he had been lying, and he rose to his feet refreshed by his long sleep. He scarcely comprehended, as yet, his true position. He had escaped, it was true, but not for long. He was versed in the history of escapes, and knew that a man alone on that barren coast was face to face with starvation or recapture. Glancing up at the sun, he wondered, indeed, how it was that he had been free so long. Then the coal sheds caught his eye, and he understood that they were untenanted. This astonished him, and he began to tremble with vague apprehension. Entering, he looked around, expecting every moment to see some lurking constable or armed soldier. Suddenly his glance fell upon the loaves which lay in the corner where the departing convicts had flung them the night before. At such a moment, this discovery seemed like a direct revelation from heaven. He would not have been surprised had they disappeared. Had he lived in another age, he would have looked round for the angel who had brought them.

(To be continued.)

Unwelcome Contents.

"I see you carry a heavy stock of eggs," remarked the caller. "Is there anything in eggs?"

"Well," replied the truthful grocer, "there was something in the consignment that came in last week."

"Indeed! What?"

"Chickens."

"Seeing Gotham."

Gunner—So you went to New York on pleasure bent, eh? Did you get bent?

Guy—Worse than bent. I got broke.

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Usual form, liquid, or new form, tablets, 100 Doses One Dollar.

A Place for It.

"I have hopes," said Cholly Sappy, "of getting a job in Mr. Merchant's office, don't ye know?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if he did find room for you," remarked Pepprey, "he's very systematic."

"Aw—beg pardon—er—why?" "Well, he believes in providing a place for everything and everything in its place."—Philadelphia Press.

A coroner in England points out the little-known fact that all persons there over 12 years of age can be called upon as jurors.

Czar's Wealth in Forests.

Few people who have not traveled about the Russian empire can imagine how boundless is its wealth in timber. "Wooden Russia" is the name applied to the vast forest areas of Russia in Europe, which cover nearly 5,000,000 acres, or 36 per cent of the entire area of the country. In Russia houses built of any other material than wood are almost unknown outside the cities and wood constitutes the principal fuel. The forest belt called the "Taiga," in Siberia, stretches in a direct line from the Urals to the Pacific for 4,000 miles and in many parts is 500 miles broad. All this is the property of the czar.

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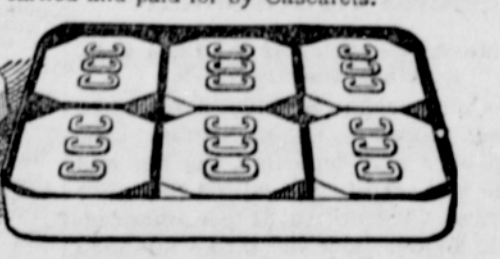
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