

For The Term of His Natural Life

By MARCUS CLARKE

CHAPTER XII.—(Continued.)

By and by, having eaten of this miraculous provender, the poor creature began to understand what had taken place. The coal workings were abandoned; the new commandant had probably other work for his beasts of burden to execute, and an absconder would be safe here for a few hours at least. But he must not stay. For him there was no rest. If he thought to escape, it behooved him to commence his journey at once. Here was provision for his needs. The food before him represented the rations of six men. Was it not possible to cross the desert that lay between him and freedom on such fare? The very supposition made his heart beat faster. It surely was possible. Twenty miles a day was very easy walking. Taking a piece of stick from the ground, he made the calculation in the sand. Eighteen days, and twenty miles a day—three hundred and sixty miles. More than enough to take him to freedom. It could be done! With prudence, it could be done! He must be careful and abstemious.

Having come to this resolution, the next thing was to disencumber himself of his irons. This was more easily done than he expected. He found in the shed an iron gad, and with that and a stone he drove out the rivets.

Before dawn the next morning he had traveled ten miles, and by husbanding his food he succeeded, by the night of the fourth day, in accomplishing forty more. Foot-sore and weary, he lay in a thicket, and felt at last that he was beyond pursuit. The next day he advanced more slowly. The path terminated in a glade, and at the bottom of this glade was something that fluttered. Rufus Dawes pressed forward, and stumbled over a corpse!

He recognized the number imprinted on the coarse cloth at that which had designated the younger of the two men who had escaped with Gabbett. He was standing on the place where a murder had been committed! A murder!—and what else? Thank God, the food he carried was not yet exhausted! He turned and fled, looking back fearfully as he went.

Crashing through scrub and brake, torn, bleeding and wild with terror, he reached a spur of the range, and looked around him. He raised his eyes, and right against him, like a long dull sword, lay the narrow steel-blue reach of the harbor from which he had escaped. One darker speck moved on the dark water. It was the Osprey making for the Gates. It seemed that he could throw a stone upon her deck. A faint cry of rage escaped him. During the last three days in the bush he must have retraced his steps, and returned upon his own track to the settlement! More than half his allotted time had passed, and he was not yet thirty miles from his prison.

For four days he wandered aimlessly through the bush. At last, on the twelfth day from his departure from the Coal Head, he found himself at the foot of Mount Direction, at the head of the peninsula which makes the western side of the harbor. His terrible wandering had but led him to make a complete circuit of the settlement, and the next night brought him round the shores of Birches Inlet to the landing place opposite Sarah Island. His stock of provisions had been exhausted for two days, and he was savage with hunger. He no longer thought of suicide. His dominant idea was now to get food. He would do as many others had done before him—give himself up to be flogged and fed. When he reached the landing place, however, the guard house was empty. He looked across at the island prison, and saw no sign of life. The settlement was deserted!

The shock of this discovery almost deprived him of reason. For days, that had seemed centuries, he had kept life in his faded and lacerated body solely by the strength of his fierce determination to reach the settlement; and now that he had reached it, after a journey of unparalleled horror, he found it deserted. He struck himself to see if he was not dreaming. He refused to believe his eye-sight. He shouted, screamed and waved his tattered garments in the air.

At last the dreadful truth forced itself upon him. He retired a few paces, and then, with a horrible cry of furious despair, stumbled forward toward the edge of the little reef that fringed the shore. Just as he was about to fling himself for the second time into the dark water, his eyes, sweeping in a last long look around the bay, caught sight of a strange appearance on the left horn of the sea beach. A thin blue streak, uprising from behind the western arm of the little inlet, hung in the still air. It was the smoke of a fire.

The dying wretch felt inspired with new hope. God had sent him a direct sign from heaven. The tiny column of bluish vapor, seemed to him as glorious as the pillar of fire that led the Israelites. There were yet human beings near him! And turning his face from the hungry sea, he tottered, with the last effort of his failing strength, toward the blessed token of their presence.

CHAPTER XIII.

Frere had gone on a brief fishing expedition. At last a peremptory signal warned him. It was the sound of a musket fired on board the brig. Mr. Bates was getting impatient, and with a scowl Frere drew up his lines, and ordered the two soldiers to pull for the vessel.

The Osprey yet sat motionless on the water, and her bare masts gave no sign

of making sail. To the soldiers, pulling with their backs to her, the musket-shot seemed the most ordinary occurrence in the world. Suddenly, however, they noticed a change of expression in the sullen face of their commander. Frere, sitting in the stern-sheets, with his face to the Osprey, had observed a peculiar appearance on her decks. The bulwarks were every now and then topped by strange figures, who disappeared as suddenly as they came, and a faint murmur of voices floated across the intervening sea. Presently the report of another musket-shot echoed among the hills, and something dark fell from the side of the vessel into the water. Frere, with mingled alarm and indignation, sprang to his feet, and, shading his eyes with his hand, looked toward the brig. The soldiers, resting on their oars, imitated his gesture, and the whale-boat, thus thrown out of trim, rocked from side to side dangerously. A moment's anxious pause, and then another musket-shot, followed by a woman's shrill scream, explained all. The prisoners had seized the brig! "Give way!" cried Frere, pale with rage and apprehension, and the soldiers, realized at once the full terror of their position, forced the heavy whale-boat through the water as fast as the one miserable pair of oars could take her.

Mr. Bates, affected by the insidious influence of the hour, and lulled into a sense of false security, had gone below to tell his little playmate that she would soon be on her way to the Hobart Town of which she had heard so much, and, taking advantage of his absence, the soldier not on guard went to the fore-castle to hear the prisoners singing. He found the ten together, in high good humor. While he listened James Lesly, William Cheshire, William Russen, John Fair and James Barker slipped to the hatchway and got upon deck. Barker reached the aft-hatchway as the soldier who was on guard turned to complete his walk, and passing his arm round his neck, pulled him down before he could utter a cry. In the confusion of the moment the man loosed his grasp of the musket to grapple with his unseen antagonist, and Fair, snatching up the weapon, swore to blow out his brains if he raised a finger. Seeing the sentry thus secured, Cheshire leaped down the after-hatchway and passed up the muskets from the arm-racks to Lesly and Russen. There were three muskets in addition to the one taken from the sentry, and Barker, leaving his prisoner in charge of Fair, seized one of them and ran to the companion-ladder. Russen, left unarmed by this maneuver, appeared to know his own duty. He came back to the fore-castle, and passing behind the listening soldier, touched the singer on the shoulder. This was the appointed signal, and John Rex, suddenly terminating his song with a laugh, presented his fist in the face of the gaping Grimes. "No noise!" he cried; "the brig's ours," and ere Grimes could reply he was seized by Lyon and Riley and bound securely.

"Come on, lads!" says Rex, "and pass the prisoner down here. We've got her time time, I'll go bail!" In obedience to this order, the now gagged sentry was flung down the fore-hatchway, and the hatch secured. "Stand on the hatchway, Porter," cries Rex again; "and if those fellows come up knock 'em down with a handspike. Lesly and Russen, forward to the companion-ladder! Lyon, keep a lookout for the boat, and if she comes too near, fire!"

As he spoke the report of the first musket rang out. Barker had apparently fired up the companion-hatchway. When Mr. Bates had gone below, he found Sylvia curled up on the cushions of the stateroom, reading. "Well, missy?" he said, "we'll soon be on our way to papa."

Sylvia answered by asking a question altogether foreign to the subject. "Mr. Bates," said she, "pushing the hair out of her blue eyes, 'what's a coracle?'"

"A coracle," asked Mr. Baas, "A coracle. Co-r-a-cle," said she, spelling it slowly. "I want to know."

The bewildered Bates shook his head. "Never heard of one, missy," said he, bending over the book. "What does it say?"

"The Ancient Britons," said Sylvia, reading gravely, "were little better than barbarians. They painted their bodies with woad—that's blue stuff, you know, Mr. Bates—and seated in their light coracles of skin stretched upon slender wooden frames, must have presented a wild and savage appearance."

"Well," said Bates, "I think it's a carriage, missy. A sort of pheayton, as they call it."

Sylvia, hardly satisfied, returned to the book. It was a little, mean-looking volume—a "Child's History of England"—and after perusing it a while with knitted brows, she burst into a childish laugh.

"Why, my dear Mr. Bates!" she cried, waving the history above her head in triumph, "what a pair of geese we are! A carriage! Oh, you silly man! It's a boat!"

"Is it?" said Mr. Bates, in admiration of the intelligence of his companion. "Who'd ha' thought that now?" and he was about to laugh also, when, raising his eyes, he saw in the open doorway the figure of James Barker, with a musket in his hand.

"Hallo! What's this? What do you do here, sir?"

"Sorry to disturb yer," says the convict, with a grin, "but you must come along o' me, Mr. Bates."

Bates, at once comprehending that some terrible misfortune had occurred, did not lose his presence of mind. One

of the cushions of the couch was under his right hand, and snatching it up, he flung it across the little cabin full in the face of the escaped prisoner. The soft mass struck the man with force sufficient to blind him for an instant. The musket exploded harmlessly in the air; and, ere the astonished Barker could recover his footing, Bates had hurled him out of the cabin, and, crying "Mutiny!" locked the cabin-door on the inside. The noise brought out Mrs. Vickers from her berth, and the poor little student of English history ran into her arms.

"It's a mutiny, ma'am," said Bates. "Go back to your cabin and lock the door. Those bloody villains have risen on us! Maybe it ain't so bad as it looks; I've got my pistols with me, and Mr. Frere'll hear the shot anyway. Mutiny! On deck there!" he cried at the full pitch of his voice, and his brow grew damp with dismay when a mocking laugh from above was the only response.

Thrusting the woman and child into the state berth, the bewildered pilot cocked a pistol, and snatching a cutlass from the arm-stand fixed to the butt of the mast which penetrated the cabin, he burst open the door with his foot, and rushed to the companion-ladder. Barker had retreated to the deck, and for an instant he thought the way was clear, but Lesly and Russen thrust him back with the muzzles of the loaded muskets. He struck at Russen with the cutlass, missed him, and, seeing the hopelessness of the attack, was fain to retreat.

In the meanwhile, Grimes and the other soldier had loosed themselves from their bonds, and encouraged by the firing which seemed to them a sign that all was not yet lost, made shift to force up the fore-hatch. Porter, whose courage was none of the fiercest, and who had been for years given over to that terror of discipline which servitude induces, made but a feeble attempt at resistance, and forcing the handspike from him, the sentry, Jones, rushed aft to help the pilot. As Jones reached the waist, Cheshire, a cold-blooded, blue-eyed man, shot him dead. Grimes fell over the corpse, and Cheshire clubbing the musket coolly battered his head as he lay, and then seizing the body of the unfortunate Jones in his arms, tossed it into the sea. "Porter, you lubber!" he cried, exhausted with the effort to lift the body, "come and bear a hand with this other one!" Porter advanced aghast; but just then another occurrence claimed the villain's attention, and poor Grimes' life was spared for that time.

Rex, inwardly raging at this unexpected resistance on the part of the pilot, flung himself on the skylight, and tore it up bodily. As he did so, Barker, who had reloaded his musket, fired down into the cabin. The ball passed through the stateroom door, and, splintering the wood, buried itself close to the golden curls of poor little Sylvia. It was their hair-breadth escape which drew from the agonized mother that shriek which, pealing through the open stern windows, had roused the soldiers in the boat.

Rex, who by the virtue of his dandyism, yet possessed some abhorrence of useless crime, imagined that the cry was one of pain, and that Barker's bullet had taken deadly effect. "You've killed the child, you villain!" he cried.

"What's the odds?" asked Barker, sulkily. "She must die anyway, sooner or later."

Rex put his head down the skylight, and called on Bates to surrender; but Bates only drew his other pistol. "Would you commit murder?" he asked, looking round with desperation in his glance.

"No, no," cried some of the men, willing to blink the death of poor Jones. "It's no use making things worse than they are. Bid him come up and we'll do him no harm."

"Come up, Mr. Bates," says Rex, "and I give you my word you shan't be injured."

"Will you set the major's lady and child ashore, then?" asked Bates, sturdily facing the scowling brows above him.

"Yes," Bates, hoping against hope for the return of the boat, endeavored to gain time. "Shut down the skylight, then," said he, with the ghost of an authority in his voice, "until I ask the lady."

This, however, John Rex refused to do. "You can ask well enough where you are," he said.

But there was no need for Mr. Bates to put a question. The door of the stateroom opened, and Mrs. Vickers appeared, trembling, with Sylvia by her side. "Accept, Mr. Bates," she said, "since it must be so. We should gain nothing by refusing. We are at their mercy—God help us!"

"Amen to that," says Bates under his breath; and then, aloud, "We agree!"

"Put your pistols on the table and come up, then," says Rex, covering the tables with his musket as he spoke. "Nobody shall hurt you."

Mrs. Vickers, pale and sick with terror, passed rapidly under the open skylight, and prepared to ascend. Sylvia clung to her mother with one hand, and with the other pressed close to her little bosom the "English History."

"Get a shawl, ma'am, or something," says Bates, "and a hat for missy."

"Who's to command the brig now?" asked undaunted Bates, as they came up.

"I am," says John Rex; "and with these brave fellows I'll take her round the world."

"What are you going to do with us?" asked Bates.

"Leave you behind. Come, look alive there! Lower away the jolly-boat. Mrs. Vickers, go down to your cabin, and get anything you want. I am compelled to put you ashore, but I have no wish to leave you without clothes." Bates listened, in a sort of dismal admiration, at this courtly convict. He could not have spoken like that had life depended on it. "Now, my little lady," continued Rex, "run down with your mamma, and don't be frightened."

(To be continued.)

Let Well Enough Alone.
There's graft and evil everywhere,
And yet, and yet, my brother,
This world is good—I would not care
Just now to try another!
—Butte Inter-Mountain.

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