

For The Term of His Natural Life

By MARCUS CLARKE

CHAPTER XXII.—(Continued.)

Roused by the morning sun streaming in upon him, Mr. North opened his blood-shot eyes, rubbed his forehead with hands that trembled, and suddenly awakening, rolled off the bed and rose to his feet. He saw the empty brandy bottle on his wooden dressing table, and remembered what had passed. With shaking hands he dashed water over his aching head, and smoothed his garments. The debauch of the previous night had left the usual effects behind it. His brain seemed on fire, his hands were hot and dry, his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. He shuddered as he viewed his pale face and red eyes in the little looking glass. Stealing into the sitting room, he saw that the clock pointed to half-past six. The flogging was to have taken place at half-past five. Unless accident had favored him he was already too late. Fevered with remorse and anxiety, he hurried past the room where Meekin yet slumbered, and made his way to the prison. As he entered the yard Kirkland had just got his fiftieth lash.

"Stop!" cried North. "Captain Burgess, I call upon you to stop."
"You're rather late, Mr. North," retorted Burgess. "The punishment is nearly over."

North stood by, biting his nails and grinding his teeth during six more lashes. Kirkland had ceased to yell now, and merely moaned. His back was like a bloody sponge, while in the interval between the lashes the swollen flesh twitched like that of a new-killed bullock. Suddenly Macklewain saw his head droop on his shoulder. "Throw him off! Throw him off!" he cried, and Troke hurried to loosen the thongs.

"Fling some water over him!" said Burgess. "He's shamming."

A bucket of water made Kirkland open his eyes. "I thought so," said Burgess. "Tie him up again."
"No; not if you are Christians!" cried North.

He met with an ally where he least expected one. Rufus Dawes flung down the dripping cat. "I'll flog no more," said he.

"What?" roared Burgess, furious at this gross insolence.
"I'll flog no more. Get some one else to do your bloody work for you. I won't."

"Tie him up!" cried Burgess, foaming. "Tie him up! Here, constable, fetch a man here with a fresh cat. I'll give you that beggar's fifty, and fifty more on the top of 'em; and he shall look on while his back cools."

Rufus Dawes, with a glance at North, pulled off his shirt without a word, and stretched himself at the triangles. His back was not white and smooth, like Kirkland's had been, but hard and seamed. He had been flogged before. Troke appeared with Gabbett, grinning. Gabbett liked flogging. It was his boast that he could flog a man to death on a place no bigger than the palm of his hand. He could use his left hand equally with his right, and if he got hold of a "favorite," would "cross the cuts."

Rufus Dawes planted his feet firmly on the ground, took fierce grasp of the staves, and drew in his breath. Macklewain spread the garments of the two men upon the ground, and placing Kirkland upon them, turned to watch this new phase in the morning's amusement. He grumbled a little below his breath, for he wanted his breakfast, and when the commandant once began to flog, there was no telling where he would stop. Rufus Dawes took five-and-twenty lashes without a murmur, and then Gabbett "crossed the cuts." This went on up to fifty lashes, and North felt himself stricken with admiration at the courage of the man. "If it had not been for that cursed brandy," thought he, with bitterness of self-reproach, "I might have saved all this." At the hundredth lash, the giant paused, expecting the order to throw off, but Burgess was determined to "break the man's spirit."
"I'll make you speak, you dog, if I cut your heart out!" he cried. "Go on, prisoner."

For twenty lashes more Dawes was mute, and then the agony forced from his laboring breast a hideous cry. But it was not a cry for mercy, as that of Kirkland's had been. Having found his tongue, the wretched man gave vent to his boiling passion in a torrent. He shrieked imprecations upon Burgess, Troke and North. He cursed all soldiers for tyrants, all parsons for hypocrites. He called on the earth to gape and swallow his persecutors, for heaven and open and rain fire upon them, for hell to yawn and engulf them quick. It was as though each blow of the cat forced out of him a fresh burst of beast-like rage. He seemed to have abandoned his humanity. He foamed, he raved, he tugged at his bonds until the strong staves shook again; he writhed himself round upon the triangles and spit impotently at Burgess, who jeered at his torments. North, with his hands to his ears, crouched against the corner of the wall, palsied with horror. He would fain have fled, but a horrible fascination held him back.

In the midst of this—when the cat was hissing the loudest, Burgess laughing his hardest, and the wretch on the triangles filling the air with his cries, North saw Kirkland look at him with what he thought a smile. Was it a smile? He leaped forward, and uttered a cry of dismay so loud that all turned. "Hullo!" says Troke, running to the heap of clothes, "the young 'un's slipped his wind!"

Kirkland was dead. "Throw him off!" says Burgess, aghast at the unfortunate accident; and Gabbett reluctantly untied the thongs that bound Rufus Dawes. Two constables were alongside him in an instant, for sometimes newly tortured men grow desperate. This one, however, was silent with the last lash, only, in taking his shirt from under the body of the boy, he muttered "Dead!" and in his tone there seemed to be a touch of envy. Then flinging his shirt over his bleeding shoulders, he walked out, defiant to the last.

"Game, ain't he?" said one constable to the other, as they pushed him, not ungently, into an empty cell, there to wait for the hospital guard. The body of Kirkland was taken away in silence, and Burgess turned rather pale when he saw North's threatening face. "It isn't my fault, Mr. North," he said. "I didn't know that the lad was chicken-hearted." But North turned away in disgust, and Macklewain and Burgess pursued their homeward route together. Mr. North, in agony of mind at what he considered the consequences of his neglect, slowly, and with head bowed down, as one bent on a painful errand, went to see the prisoner who had survived. He found him kneeling on the ground, prostrated.

"Rufus Dawes!"
At the tone Rufus Dawes looked up, and seeing who it was, waved him off. "Don't speak to me," he said, with an imprecation that made North's flesh creep. "I've told you what I think of you—a hypocrite, who stands by while a man is cut to pieces, and then comes and whines religion to him."

North stood in the center of the cell, with his arms hanging down, and his head bent. "You are right," he said, in a low tone. "I must seem to you a hypocrite. I a servant of Christ? A besotted beast rather! I am not come to whine religion to you. I am come to ask your pardon. I might have saved you from punishment—saved that poor boy from death. I wanted to save him, God knows! But I have a vice; I am a drunkard, I yielded to temptation, and—I was too late. I come to you, as one sinful man to another, to ask you to forgive me." And North suddenly flung himself down before the convict, and catching his blood-bespotted hands in his own, cried, "Forgive me, brother."

Rufus Dawes, too much astonished to speak, bent his black eyes on the man, who crouched at his feet, and a ray of divine pity penetrated his gloomy soul. He seemed to catch a glimpse of misery more profound than his own, and his stubborn heart felt human sympathy with this erring brother. "Then in this hell there is yet a man," said he; and a hand-grasp passed between these two unhappy beings. North arose, and with averted face, passed quickly from the cell. Rufus Dawes looked at the hand which his strange visitor had taken, and something glittered there. It was a tear. He broke down at the sight of it, and when the guard came to fetch the tameless convict, they found him on his knees in a corner, sobbing like a child.

The morning after this, the Rev. Mr. North departed in the schooner for Hobart Town. Between the officious chaplain and the commandant the events of the previous day had fixed a great gulf. Burgess knew that North meant to report the death of Kirkland, and guessed that he would not be backward in relating the story to such persons in Hobart Town as would most readily repeat it.

Burgess, however, touched with selfish regrets, determined to balk the parson at the outset. He would send down an official "return" of the unfortunate occurrence by the same vessel that carried his enemy, and thus get the ear of the office. Meekin, walking on the evening of the flogging past the wooden shed where the body lay, saw Troke bearing buckets filled with dark-colored water, and heard a great splashing and sluicing going on inside the hut. "What is the matter?" he asked.
"Doctor's bin post-morticing the prisoner what was flogged this morning, sir," said Troke, "and we're cleanin' up."

North, on his arrival, went straight to the house of Major Vickers. "I have a complaint to make, sir," he said. "I wish to lodge it formally with you. A prisoner has been flogged to death at Port Arthur. I saw it done."

Vickers bent his brow. "A serious accusation, Mr. North. I must, of course, receive it with respect, coming from you, but I trust that you have fully considered the circumstances of the case. I always understood Captain Burgess was a most humane man."

North shook his head. He would not accuse Burgess. He would let events speak for themselves. "I only ask for an inquiry," said he.

"Yes, my dear sir, I know. Very proper, indeed, on your part, if you think any injustice has been done; but have you considered the expense, the delay, the immense trouble and dissatisfaction all this will give?"

"No trouble, no expense, no dissatisfaction, should stand in the way of humanity and justice," cried North.

"Of course not. But will justice be done? Are you sure you can prove your case? Mind, I admit nothing against Captain Burgess, whom I have always considered a most worthy and zealous officer; but, supposing your charge to be true, can you prove it?"

"Yes. If the witnesses speak the truth."

"Who are they?"
"Myself, Dr. Macklewain, the constable and two prisoners, one of whom was flogged himself. He will speak the truth, I believe. The other man I have not much faith in."

"Very well; then there is only a prisoner and Dr. Macklewain; for if there has been foul play the convict-constable will not accuse the authorities. Moreover, the doctor does not agree with you."

"No!" cried North, amazed.

"No. You see, then, my dear sir, how necessary it is not to be hasty in matters of this kind. I really think that your goodness of heart has misled you. Captain Burgess sends a report of the case. He says the man was sentenced to a hundred lashes for gross insolence and disobedience of orders; that the doctor was present during the punishment; and that the man was thrown off by his directions after he had received fifty-six lashes. That, after a short interval, he was found to be dead, and that the doctor made a post-mortem examination of the body and found disease of the heart."

North started. "A post-mortem? I never knew there had been one held."

"Here is the medical certificate," said Vickers, holding it out, "accompanied by the copies of the evidence of the constable and a letter from the commandant."

Poor North took the papers and read them slowly. They were apparently straightforward enough. Aneurism of the ascending aorta was given as the cause of death; and the doctor frankly admitted that had he known the deceased to be suffering from that complaint he would not have permitted him to receive more than twenty-five lashes.

North, going out with saddened spirits, met in the passage a beautiful young girl. It was Sylvia, coming to visit her father. He lifted his hat and looked after her. He guessed that she was the daughter of the man he had left—the wife of the Captain Frere concerning whom he had heard so much. North was a man whose morbidly excited brain was prone to strange fancies; and it seemed to him that beneath the clear blue eyes that flashed upon him for a moment lay a hint of future sadness, in which, in some strange way, he himself was to bear part. He stared after her figure until it disappeared; and long after the dainty presence of the young bride-trimly booted, tight-waisted and neatly gloved—had faded, with all its sunshine and gaiety and health, from out of his mental vision, he still saw those blue eyes and that cloud of golden hair.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Maurice Frere found his favorable expectations of Sydney fully realized. His notable escape from death at Macquarie Harbor, his alliance with the daughter of so respected a colonist as Major Vickers, and his reputation as a convict disciplinarian, rendered him a man of note. He received a vacant magistracy, and became even more noted for hardness of heart and artfulness of prison knowledge than before. The convict population spoke of him as "that—Frere," and registered vows of vengeance against him, which he laughed—in his bluntness—to scorn.

One of the first things this useful officer did upon his arrival in Sydney was to inquire for Sarah Purfoy. To his astonishment, he discovered that she was the proprietor of large export warehouses in Pitt street, owned a neat cottage on one of the points of land which jutted into the bay, and was reputed to possess a banking account of no inconsiderable magnitude. He in vain applied his brains to solve this mystery. She had not been rich when she left Van Diemen's land—at least, so she had assured him, and appearances bore out her assurance. How had she accumulated this sudden wealth? Above all, why had she thus invested it? He made inquiries at the banks, but was snubbed for his pains. Sydney banks in those days did some queer business.

He had not been long established in his magistracy when Blunt came to claim payment for the voyage of Sarah Purfoy.

"Well," said Blunt, "I've got a job on hand."

"Glad of it, I am sure. What sort of a job?"

"A job of whaling," said Blunt, more uneasy than before.

"Oh, that's it, is it? Your old line of business. And who employs you now?"

"Mrs. Purfoy."

"What!" cried Frere, scarcely able to believe his ears.

"She's got a couple of ships now, captain, and she made me skipper of one of 'em. We take a turn at harpooning sometimes."

Frere stared at Blunt, who stared at the window. There was—so the instinct of the magistrate told him—some strange project afoot. Yet that common sense which so often misleads us urged that it was quite natural Sarah should employ whaling vessels to increase her trade. "Oh," said he, "and when do you start?"

"I'm expecting to get a word every day," returned Blunt, "and I thought I'd just come and see you first, in case of anything falling in."

Maurice Frere, oppressed with suspicions, ordered his horse that afternoon, and rode down to see the cottage which the owner of "Purfoy Stores" had purchased. He found it a low white building, situated four miles from the city, at the extreme end of a tongue of land which ran into the deep waters of the harbor. A garden, carefully cultivated, stood between the roadway and the house.

(To be continued.)

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