



HALF A CHANCE

By Frederic S. Isham,

Author of "The Strollers," "Under the Rose," "The Lady of the Mount," Etc.

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A gripping story having to do with the most vital forces that affect the human being; a thrilling narrative of the combat of an American against the worm eaten aristocracy of the old world--as such may the novel "Half a Chance" be briefly described. The brilliantly drawn characters, typical of London, range from Jocelyn Wray, the beautiful young debutante, sought and worshipped by a score of noblemen, to Tom Rogers, the brutish filcher, highwayman and debased magsman. A feature of the story is the influence that can be exerted on her associates of low and high degree by the sweetness, simplicity and purity of a little girl. She was confident that there was something good in a man, no matter how low he might have sunk. She set out to prove it. The manner of her endeavor and the events associated with it go to make the story one of rare fascination. And the vivid pen picture of the struggle of a great human spirit to emerge from the abyssal depths of wrong living and degradation will long be imprinted on the memory of the reader.

CHAPTER I

MR. GILLET'S CHARGE

"By all means, m'deah, let's go down between decks and have a look at them."

"Of course, if you wish, Sir Charles, although-- Do you think we shall be edited, Mr. Gillett?"

"That depends, m'lady--and the speaker, a man with official manners and ferret-like eyes, shifted from one foot to another--on what degree or particular class of criminal your ladyship would be interested in. If in the ordinary category of skittle sharper or thimble-rigger, with a suspicion of mild scorn, then I do not imagine your ladyship would find much attraction in the present cargo. But, on the other hand, in a livelier tone, "if your ladyship has any curiosity--or shall we say a psychological bent?--regarding the real out and outer the excursion should be to your liking, for," rubbing his hands, "a proper lot of cut-throats and bad magsmen it has never been my privilege to escort across the equator, and this is my sixth trip to Australia."

"How interesting--how very interesting!" The lady's voice floated languidly. "Sir Charles is quite right. We must really go down. At any rate, it will be a change after having been shut up so long in that terrible stateroom."

"One moment, m'lady. There's a little formality that must be observed first. No one allowed on the prisoners' deck without the captain's permission. There he is now."

"Then he is good enough to beckon to him," said the lady.

But this Mr. Gillett, agent of the police, discreetly declined to do. Captain Macpherson was a man not to be beckoned to by any one, much less by him.

"Sir Charles and lady and Sir Charles' party have expressed, Captain Macpherson, the desire to obtain permission to visit the prisoners' deck," said Gillett.

Captain Macpherson looked toward Sir Charles and his lady, the other passengers lounging around them, a little girl at the rail, her hair blown windward, a splash of gold against the blue sky. "What for?" said the skipper brusquely.

"To have a look at the convicts, I suppose."

"What good'll that do them?" growled the commander. "Idle curiosity--that's what I call it. Well, go along and keep them away from the bars. The weather has me improved the tempers of a few of the rascals, and they'd like naught better than a chance for their claws."

"Thanks for the permission, and," a little stiffly, "the admonition, which latter," turning away, "a man whose lifelong profession has been dealing with convicts is most likely to stand in need of and heed."

"May I go too?"

The child with the golden hair dejected in her occupation of watching the flying fish and other real winged creatures and, leaving the rail, walked toward the group that was about to follow Mr. Gillett. She was a very beautiful girl of ten or eleven, slim, delicately fashioned, of a definite proud type.

"May I go, too, aunt?" she repeated.

"Why, of course," interposed a blase, cynical appearing young man who had just emerged from the cabin. "Don't know where she wants to go or what

she wants to go, but don't say she can't; really you mustn't, now."

"Well, since you insist on spoiling her, Lord Ronsdale!"

He twisted a blond mustache which adorned a handsome face that bore many marks of what is called experience of the world. "Couldn't do that! Besides, Jocelyn and I are great chums, don't you know. We're going to be married some day when she grows up."

"Are we?" said the child. "The man I marry must be very big and strong and must not have light hair."

Lord Ronsdale laughed tolerantly. "Plenty of time for you to change your mind, don't you know. Meanwhile I'll not despair. Faint heart, and so on. But," turning to Sir Charles, "where is it she wants to go?"

"To see the convicts."

"Convicts? Ah!" He spoke rather more quickly than usual, with accent sharper.

"You didn't know who your neighbors were going to be when you decided so suddenly to accompany us?"

"No." His voice had a metallic sound.

Sir Charles addressed Mr. Gillett. "Tell us something more definite about your charges whom we are going to inspect. Meant to have found out earlier in the voyage, but been so jolly seasick, what with one gale after another, I for one until now haven't much cared whether we had Claude Duval and Dick Turpin themselves for neighbors or whether we all went straight to Davy Jones' locker together. A bad lot, you have already informed us, but how bad?"

"Well, we haven't exactly M. Duval or Mr. Turpin in the pen, but we've one or two others almost as celebrated in their way. There's Billy Burke, as desperate a crackman as the country can produce, with," complacently, "a record second to none in his class. He--" And Mr. Gillett, with considerable zest entered into the details of Mr. Burke's eventful and rapacious career. "Then there's the 'Frisco Pet,' or the 'Pride of Golden Gate,' as some of the sporting papers call him."

"The Frisco Pet?" Lord Ronsdale started; his color slightly changed; his lashes drooped over his cold eyes. "He is on board this vessel?"

"Yes. You remember him, my lord, I dare say?"

"In common with many others," shortly.

"Why," asked Jocelyn, "did they call him such a funny name--the Frisco Pet?"

"Because he's a Yankee bruiser, prizefighter, or was before the drink got him," explained Mr. Gillett. "Some one brought him to London, found out about his talents and put him in training. He was a low, ignorant sailor--could scarcely write his own name--but he had biceps and a thick head. Didn't know when he was whipped, I can see him yet as he used to look, with his giant shoulders and his swagger, as he stepped into the ring. There was no nonsense about him or his fist--could break a board with that. And how the shouts used to go up! 'The pet'--a quid on the pet'--ten bob on the stars and stripes"--meaning the costume he wore. Oh, he was a favorite in Camden Town! But one night he failed them--met some friends from the forecastle of a Yankee trader that had dropped down the Thames--went into the ring with a stagger added to the swagger. Well, they took him out unconscious. Never was a man worse punished. He never got back to the sawdust, and the sporting gentlemen lost a bright and shining light."

"Broke his heart, I suppose," observed Sir Charles.

The police agent proceeded. "After that it was a case of the rum and the toss pots, and when he was three sheets in the wind look out for squalls. He got put in quad, broke out and overpowered and nearly killed two guards. Took to various means of livelihood until they got him again. Trouble in prison and transferred to the solitary, with a little punishment thrown in for a reminder. When he got out limbo again he lived in bad company in one of the tunnels near the Adelphi. Hard place for the police to rout a cove from. He made it quite interesting for the police--quite interesting. So much so he attracted me, and I concluded to take a hand."

Mr. Gillett paused. Obviously in his case egotism allied to enthusiasm made his duties a pleasure. He seemed now briefly commending himself in his own mind. "Up to this time," he resumed, "our friend the ex-pugilist had never actually killed any one, but soon after I engaged myself to look after him word was brought to the department that a poor woman had been murdered, a cheap music hall dancer. She had seen better days, however."

Lord Ronsdale, who had been look-

ing away, yawned, as if finding the police agent "wordy," then strolled to the rail.

"Suspicion pointed strongly in his direction, and we got him after a struggle. It was a hard fight, without a referee, and maybe we used him a little rough, but we had to. Then Dandy Joe was brought in. Joe's a plain, mean little gaubler and race track follower with courage not big enough for broad operations. But he had a wide knowledge of what we term the thieves' catacombs, and, well, he peached on the big fellow--gave testimony that was of great service to the prosecution. The case seemed clear enough. There was some sort of contrary evidence put in, but it didn't amount to anything. His record was against him, and he got a heavy sentence, with death as the penalty if he ever sets foot in England again."

Sir Charles assisted his lady from her chair. "Coming, Ronsdale?"

"Relieve I won't go down," drawled the nobleman at the rail. "Air better up here," he explained.

Mr. Charles laughed, got together the other members of his party, and all followed Mr. Gillett to a narrow companionway. There a strong iron door stopped their progress; but, taking a key from his pocket, the police agent thrust it into a great padlock, gave it a turn and swung back the barrier. Before them stretched a long aisle, at each end of which stood a soldier with a musket. On one side were the cells, small, heavily barred.

Mr. Gillett peered into the cells at his charges with a keen, bright gaze that had in it something of the animal tamer's zest for his part.

"Well, how are we all today?" he observed in his most animated manner to the guard. "All doing well?"

"No, I complained of being ill, but I say it's only the damps. No. 14 has been garrulous."

"Garrulous, eh? Not a little flighty?" The guard nodded. Mr. Gillett whispered a few instructions and asked a number of other questions. Meanwhile the child had paused before one of the cells and, fascinated, was gazing within. What was it that held her--the pity of the spectacle, the terror of it? Her blue eyes continued to rest on the convict, a young fellow of no more than one-and-twenty of magnificent proportions, but with face sullen and brutish. For his part he looked at her open mouthed, with an expression of stupid surprise at the sight of the figure so daintily and slenderly fashioned, at the tangles of bright golden hair that seemed to have imprisoned some of the sunshine from above.

"Well, I'm blowed!" he muttered hoarsely. "Where'd you come from? Looks like one o' them bally Christmas dolls had dropped off some counter in Fleet street and got in here by mistake!"

A mist sprang to the blue eyes. She held her white, pretty fingers tight against her breast. "It must be terrible here," she said falteringly.

The convict laughed harshly. "Hell!" he said laconically.

The child trembled. "I'm sorry," she managed to say.

The fierce dark eyes stared at her. "What for?"

"Because you have to stay here."

"Well, I'm--" But this time he apparently found no adequate adjective. "If this ain't the rummiest Christmas doll!"

She put out her hand. "Here's something for you, poor man," she said as steadily as she could. "It's my King George gold piece, date 1782, and belonged to my father, who wore it on his watch chain and who is dead. Perhaps they'll let you buy something with it."

He looked at the hand. "If she ain't stickin' out her duke to me right through the bars! Blamed if she ain't! Looks like a lily--a bally white lily," he repeated wonderingly, "one of them kind we wunst run across when the cap turned up adrift on an island jest to waller in green grass!"

"Don't you want it?" said the child.

He extended a great, coarse hand hesitatingly, as if half minded to and half minded not to touch the white finger tips.

"You ain't afraid?"

The golden head shook ever so slightly. Again the big hand went toward the small one, then suddenly dropped.

"Right this way, m'lord--m'lady!" The face of the convict abruptly changed. Fury, hatred, a blind instinct to kill, were unmistakably revealed in his countenance as he heard the bland voice of the police agent. From the child's hand the gold disk fell and rolled under the wooden slab that served as a couch in the cell.

"Good heavens!" Mr. Gillett seized the girl's arm and abruptly drew her away. "My dear little lady," he said, "really you don't know the danger you run. And near that cell of all of them!"

"That cell?" observed Sir Charles. "Then that is--"

"The convict I was telling you about--the 'Pet of Frisco,' the 'Pride of Golden Gate.'"

(To Be Continued.)

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