

Fenn George Manville

Commodore Junk



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Содержание

Chapter One	5
Chapter Two	8
Chapter Three	11
Chapter Four	12
Chapter Five	14
Chapter Six	17
Chapter Seven	22
Chapter Eight	24
Chapter Nine	27
Chapter Ten	29
Chapter Eleven	32
Chapter Twelve	36
Chapter Thirteen	47
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	48

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Chapter One

Down in Devon

“Then you’re a villain!”

“Nonsense, Mary; be reasonable.”

“Reasonable, Captain Armstrong! I am reasonable, and I am telling you the truth. You are a villain!”

“Why, you foolish girl, what did you expect?”

“That you would be an officer and a gentleman. Once more, is it true that you are going to be married to that lady?”

“Well, you see – ”

“Answer me, sir.”

“Oh, well, then, yes, I suppose I am.”

“Then I repeat it, James Armstrong, you are a villain!”

“What nonsense, you fierce-looking, handsome termagant! We have had our little pleasant chats and meetings, and now we’ll say good-bye pleasantly. I can’t help it. I have to marry; so you go and do the same, my dear, and I’ll buy you a handsome wedding-dress.”

“You cowardly, cold-blooded villain!”

“Come, come, my good girl; no more strong words, please don’t spoil a pleasant little intimacy by a vulgar quarrel.”

“Pleasant little intimacy!”

“Why, what did you expect?”

“That you were wooing me to be your wife.”

“A captain in the King’s Navy marry the daughter of an old wrecker, the sister of as utter a smuggling scoundrel as can be found about this port of Dartmouth!”

“When a girl gives her heart to the man who comes to her all soft words and smiles, do you think she remembers what he is? It is enough for her that she loves him, and she believes all he says. Oh, James, dear James! forgive me all I’ve said, and don’t send me adrift like this. Tell me it isn’t true.”

“There, that’s enough. You knew as well as I did that there was nothing serious meant, so now let’s bring this meeting to an end.”

“To an end?”

“Yes; you had no business to come here. But, as you have come, there are five guineas, Mary, to buy finery; and let’s shake hands and say good-bye.”

Captain Armstrong, a handsome man with a rather cruel-looking, thin-lipped mouth, took five golden pieces from his great, flapped, salt-box-pocketed waistcoat, gave the flowing curls of his wig a shake, and held out the money to the dark, black-eyed woman standing before him with her sun-browned cheeks lightly flushed, her full, red lips quivering, and a look of fierce passion distorting her handsome gipsy countenance, as she held out a well-shaped hand for the money.

“Come, that’s right, Mary,” said the captain. “You are going to be reasonable then. One, two, three, four, five – well, yes, I’ll give you another guinea for being so good – six.”

As he spoke he dropped the golden coins one by one into the woman’s hand, smiled, glanced quickly at a door behind him, and caught her in his arms.

“There, one more kiss from those ripe red lips, and then – ”

Spank!

As sharp a backhanded blow across the face as ever man received from an angry woman, and then, as the recipient involuntarily started back, Mary Dell flung the golden pieces at him, so that one struck him in the chest and the others flew tinkling across the room.

“Curse you!” cried the captain, in a low, savage voice, “this is too much. Leave this house, you low-bred shrew, and if you ever dare to come here again –”

“Dare!” cried the woman as fiercely. “I dare anything. I’ve not been a sailor’s child for nothing. And so you think that a woman’s love is to be bought and sold for a few paltry guineas, and that you can play with and throw me off as you please. Look here, James Armstrong, I wouldn’t marry you now if you prayed me to be your wife – wife to such a cruel, mean coward! Faugh! I would sooner leap overboard some night and die in the deepest part of the harbour.”

“Leave this house, you vixen.”

“Not at your bidding, captain,” cried the girl, scornfully. “Captain! Why, the commonest sailor in the king’s ships would shame to behave to a woman as you have behaved to me. But I warn you,” she continued, as in her excitement her luxuriant glossy black hair escaped from its comb and fell rippling down in masses – “I warn you, that if you go to church with that lady, who cannot know you as I do, I’ll never forgive you, but have such a revenge as shall make you rue the day that you were born.”

“Silence, woman; I’ve borne enough! Leave this house!”

“You thought because I was fatherless and motherless that I should be an easy prey; but you were wrong, Captain Armstrong; you were wrong. I am a woman, but not the weak, helpless thing you believed.”

“Leave my house!”

“When I have told you all I think and feel, James Armstrong.”

“Leave my house, woman!”

“Do you think you can frighten me by your loud voice and threatening looks?” said the girl, scornfully.

“Leave my house!” cried the Captain for the third time, furiously; and, glancing through the window as he spoke, he changed colour at the sight of a grey-haired gentleman approaching with a tall, graceful woman upon his arm.

“Ah!” cried Mary Dell, as she read his excitement aright; “so that is the woman! Then I’ll stop and meet her face to face, and tell her what a contemptible creature she is going to wed.”

“Curse you, leave this house!” cried the captain in a savage whisper; and catching his visitor roughly by the shoulder, he tried to pull her towards the door; but the girl resisted, and in the struggle a chair was overturned with a crash, the door was flung open, and a bluff, manly voice exclaimed —

“Why, hullo! what’s the matter now?”

“What’s that to you?” cried the captain, angrily, as he desisted from his efforts, and the girl stood dishevelled and panting, her eyes flashing vindictively, and a look of gratified malice crossing her face, as she saw the confusion and annoyance displayed by her ex-lover.

“What is it to me? Why, I thought there was trouble on, and I came to help.”

“To intrude when you were not wanted, you mean. Now go,” snarled the captain.

“No, don’t go,” cried the girl, spitefully. “I want you to protect me, sir, from this man, this gentleman, who professed to love me, and who, now that he is going to be married, treats me as you see.”

“It’s a lie, woman,” cried the captain, who noted that the couple whose coming had made him lower his voice had now passed after looking up at the window, and who now turned again fiercely upon the woman.

“No, it isn’t a lie, Jem,” said the new-comer. “I’ve seen you on the beach with her many a time, and thought what a blackguard you were.”

“Lieutenant Armstrong, I am your superior officer,” cried the captain. “How dare you speak to me like that! Sir, you go into arrest, for this speech.”

“I was not addressing my superior officer,” said the new-comer, flushing slightly, “but my cousin Jem. Put me in arrest, will you? Very well, my fine fellow; you’re captain, I’m lieutenant, and I must obey; but if you do, next time we’re ashore I’ll thrash you within an inch of your life as sure as my name’s Humphrey. Hang it, I’ll do it now!”

He took a quick step forward; but the captain darted behind the table, and Mary caught the young man’s arm.

“No, no, sir,” she said in a deep voice; “don’t get yourself into trouble for me. It’s very true and gallant of you, sir, to take the part of a poor girl; but I can fight my own battle against such a coward as that. Look at him, with his pale face and white lips, and tell me how I could ever have loved such a creature.”

“Woman – ”

“Yes, woman now,” cried the girl. “A month ago no word was too sweet and tender for me. There, I’m going, James Armstrong, and I wish you joy of your new wife – the pale, thin creature I saw go by; but don’t think you are done with me, or that this is to be forgotten. As for you, sir,” she continued, holding out her hand, which her defender took, and smiled down frankly in the handsome dark face before him? “I sha’n’t forget this.”

“No,” said Captain Armstrong with a sneer. “Lose one lover, pick up another. She’s a nice girl, Humphrey, and it’s your turn now.”

Mary Dell did not loose the hand she had seized, but darted a bitterly contemptuous look upon her late lover, which made him grind his teeth as she turned from him again to the lieutenant.

“Was I not right, sir, to say he is a coward? I am only a poor-class girl, but I am a woman, and I can feel. Thank you, sir; good-bye, and if we never meet again, think that I shall always be grateful for what you have said.”

At that minute there were voices heard without and the captain started and looked nervously at the door.

“I’m going, James Armstrong,” said the girl; “and I might go like this; but for my own sake, not for yours, I’ll not.”

She gave her head a sidewise jerk which brought her magnificent black hair over her left shoulder, and then with a few rapid turns of her hands she twisted it into a coil and secured it at the back of her head.

Then turning to go, Humphrey took a step after her; but she looked up at him with a sharp, suspicious gaze.

“He told you to see me off the place?” she said quickly.

“No,” cried Humphrey; “it was my own idea.”

“Let me go alone,” said the girl. “I want to think there is someone belonging to him who is not base. Good-bye, sir! Perhaps we may meet again.”

“Meet again!” snarled the captain as the girl passed through the doorway. “Yes, I’ll warrant me you will, and console yourself with your new lover, you jade.”

“Look here, Jem,” cried the lieutenant hotly; “officer or no officer, recollect that we’re alone now, and that you are insulting me as well as that poor girl. Now, then, you say another word like that, and hang me if I don’t nearly break your neck.”

“You insolent – ”

Captain Armstrong did not finish his sentence, for there was a something in the frank, handsome, manly face of his cousin that meant mischief, and he threw himself into a chair with an angry snarl, such as might be given by a dog who wanted to attack but did not dare.

Chapter Two At the Cottage

“What’s she a-doing of now?”

“Blubbering.”

“Why, that’s what you said yesterday. She ar’n’t been a-blubbering ever since?”

“Yes, she have, Bart; and the day afore, and the day afore that. She’s done nothing else.”

“I hates to see a woman cry,” said the first speaker in a low, surly growl, as he wrinkled his forehead all over and seated himself on the edge of a three-legged table in the low-ceiled cottage of old Dell, the smuggler, a roughly-built place at the head of one of the lonely coves on the South Devon coast. The place was rough, for it had been built at different times, of wreckwood which had come ashore; but the dwelling was picturesque outside, and quaint, nautical, and deliriously clean within, where Abel Dell, Mary’s twin brother, a short, dark young fellow, singularly like his sister, sat upon an old sea-chest forming a netting-needle with a big clasp-knife, and his brow was also covered with the lines of trouble.

He was a good-looking, sun-browned little fellow; and as he sat there in his big fisher-boots thrust down nearly to the ankle, and a scarlet worsted cap upon his black, crisp curls, his canvas petticoat and blue shirt made him a study of which a modern artist would have been glad; but in the early days of King George the First gentlemen of the palette and brush did not set up white umbrellas in sheltered coves and turn the inhabitants into models, so Abel Dell had not been transferred to canvas, and went on carving his hardwood needle without looking up at the man he called Bart.

There was not much lost, for Bartholomew Wrigley, at the age of thirty – wrecker, smuggler, fisherman, sea-dog, anything by turn – was about as ugly an athletic specimen of humanity as ever stepped. Nature and his ancestors had been very unkind to him in the way of features, and accidents by flood and fight had marred what required no disfigurement, a fall of a spar having knocked his nose sidewise and broken the bridge, while a chop from a sword in a smuggling affray had given him a divided upper lip. In addition he always wore the appearance of being ashamed of his height, and went about with a slouch that was by no means an attraction to the fisher-girls of the place.

“Ay! If the old man had been alive – ”

“Stead o’ drowned off Plymouth Hoo,” growled Bart.

“In the big storm,” continued Abel, “Polly would have had to swab them eyes of hern.”

“Ay! And if the old man had been alive, that snapper dandy captain, with his boots and sword, would have had to sheer off, Abel, lad.”

“Stead o’ coming jerry-sneaking about her when we was at sea, eh, Bart?”

“Them’s true words,” growled the big, ugly fellow.

Then, after a pause —

“I hate to see a woman cry.”

“So do I, mate. Makes the place dull.”

There was a pause, during which Abel carved away diligently, and Bart watched him intently, with his hands deep in his pockets.

“It’s all off, ar’n’t it, mate?” said Bart at last.

“Ay, it’s all off,” said Abel; and there was another pause.

“Think there’d be any chance for a man now?”

Abel looked up at his visitor, who took off the rough, flat, fur cap he wore, as if to show himself to better advantage; and after breathing on one rough, gnarled hand, he drew it down over his hair, smoothing it across his brow; but the result was not happy, and he seemed to feel it as the wood-carver shook his head and went on with his work.

“S’pose not,” said the looker-on with a sigh. “You see, I’m such a hugly one, Abel, lad.”

“You are, Bart. There’s no denying of it, mate; you are.”

“Ay! A reg’lar right-down hugly one. But I thought as p’r’aps now as her heart were soft and sore, she might feel a little torst a man whose heart also was very soft and sore.”

“Try her, then, mate. I’ll go and tell her you’re here.”

“Nay, nay, don’t do that, man,” whispered the big fellow, hoarsely. “I durstent ask her again. It’ll have to come from her this time.”

“Not it. Ask her, Bart. She likes you.”

“Ay, she likes me, bless her, and she’s allus got a kind word for a fellow as wishes a’most as he was her dog.”

“What’s the good o’ that, lad? Better be her man.”

“Ay, of course; but if you can’t be her man, why not be her dog. She would pat your head and pull your ears; but I allus feels as she’ll never pat my head or pull my ears, Abel, lad; you see, I’m such a hugly one. Blubbering, eh?”

“Does nothing else. She don’t let me see it; but I know. She don’t sleep of a night, and she looks wild and queer, as Sanderson’s lass did who drowned herself.”

“Then he has behaved very bad to her, Abel?”

“Ay, lad. I wish I had hold of him. I’d like to break his neck.”

Bart put on his cap quickly, glanced toward the inner room, where there was a sound as of someone singing mournfully, and then in a quick, low whisper —

“Why not, lad?” said he; “why not?”

“Break his neck, Bart?”

The big fellow nodded.

“Will you join in and risk it?”

“Won’t I?”

“Then we will,” said Abel. “Curse him, he’s most broke her heart.”

“Cause she loves him,” growled Bart, thoughtfully.

“Yes, a silly soft thing. She might have known.”

“Then we mustn’t break his neck, Abel, lad,” said Bart shaking his head. Then, as if a bright thought had suddenly flashed across his brain —

“Look here. We’ll wait for him, and then – I ar’n’t afeard of his sword – we’ll make him marry her.”

“You don’t want him to marry her,” said Abel, staring, and utilising the time by stropping his knife on his boot.

“Nay, I can do what she wants, I will as long as I live.”

“Ah! you always was fond of her, Bart,” said Abel, slowly.

“Ay, I always was, and always shall be, my lad. But look here,” whispered Bart, leaning towards his companion; “if he says he won’t marry her – ”

“Ah! suppose he says he won’t!” said Abel to fill up a pause, for Bart stood staring at him.

“If he says he won’t, and goes and marries that fine madam – will you do it?”

“I’ll do anything you’ll do, mate,” said Abel in a low voice.

“Then we’ll make him, my lad.”

“Hist!” whispered Abel, as the inner door opened, and Mary entered the room, looking haggard and wild, to gaze sharply from one to the other, as if she suspected that they had been making her the subject of their conversation.

“How do, Mary?” said Bart, in a consciously awkward fashion.

“Ah, Bart!” she said, coldly, as she gazed full in his eyes till he dropped his own and moved toward the door.

“I’m just going to have a look at my boat, Abel, lad,” he said. “Coming down the shore?”

Abel nodded, and Bart shuffled out of the doorway, uttering a sigh of relief as soon as he was in the open air; and taking off his flat fur cap, he wiped the drops of perspiration from his brow.

“She’s too much for me, somehow,” he muttered, as he sauntered down towards the shore. “I allus thought as being in love with a gell would be very nice, but it ar’n’t. She’s too much for me.”

“What were you and Bart Wrigley talking about?” said Mary Dell, as soon as she was alone with her brother.

“You,” said Abel, going on scraping his netting-needle.

“What about me?”

“All sorts o’ things.”

“What do you mean?”

“What do I mean? Why, you know. About your being a fool – about the fine captain and his new sweetheart. Why, you might ha’ knowed, Mary.”

“Look here, Abel,” cried Mary, catching him by the wrist, and dragging at it so that he started to his feet and they stood face to face, the stunted brother and the well-grown girl wonderfully equal in size, and extremely alike in physique and air; “if you dare to talk to me again like that, we shall quarrel.”

“Well, let’s quarrel, then.”

“What?” cried Mary, staring, for this was a new phase in her brother’s character.

“I say, let’s quarrel, then,” cried Abel, folding his arms. “Do you think I’ve been blind? Do you think I haven’t seen what’s been going on, and how that man has served you? Why, it has nearly broken poor old Bart’s heart.”

“Abel!”

“I don’t care, Polly, I will speak now. You don’t like Bart.”

“I do. He is a good true fellow as ever stepped, but – ”

“Yes, I know. It ar’n’t nat’ral or you to like him as he likes you; but you’ve been a fool, Polly, to listen to that fine jack-a-dandy; and – curse him! I’ll half-kill him next time we meet!”

Mary tried to speak, but her emotion choked her.

“You – you don’t know what you are saying,” she panted at last.

“Perhaps not,” he said, in a low, muttering way; “but I know what I’m going to do!”

“Do!” she cried, recovering herself, and making an effort to regain her old ascendancy over her brother. “I forbid you to do anything. You shall not interfere.”

“Very well,” said the young man, with a smile; and as his sister persisted he seemed to be subdued.

“Nothing, I say. Any quarrel I may have with Captain Armstrong is my affair, and I can fight my own battle. Do you hear?”

“Yes, I hear,” said Abel, going toward the door.

“You understand! I forbid it. You shall not even speak to him.”

“Yes, I understand,” said Abel, tucking the netting-needle into his pocket, and thrusting his knife into its sheath; and then, before Mary could call up sufficient energy to speak again, the young man passed out of the cottage and hurried after Bart.

Mary went to the little casement and stood gazing after him thoughtfully for a few minutes, till he passed out of her sight among the rocks on his way to where the boat lay.

“No,” she said, softly; “he would not dare!”

Then turning and taking the seat her brother had vacated, a desolate look of misery came over her handsome face, which drooped slowly into her hands, and she sat there weeping silently as she thought of the wedding that was to take place the next day.

Chapter Three

At the Church Door

Captain James Armstrong had a few more words with his cousin, Lieutenant Humphrey, anent his marriage.

“Perhaps you would like me to marry that girl off the beach,” he said, “Mr Morality?”

“I don’t profess to be a pattern of morality, cousin,” replied the lieutenant, shortly.

“And don’t like pretty girls, of course,” sneered the captain. “Sailors never do.”

“I suppose I’m a man, Jem,” said Humphrey, “and like pretty girls; but I hope I should never be such a scoundrel as to make a girl miserable by professing to care for her, and then throwing her away like a broken toy.”

“Scoundrel, eh?” said the captain, hotly.

“Yes. Scoundrel – confounded scoundrel!” retorted the lieutenant. “We’re ashore now, and discipline’s nowhere, my good cousin, so don’t ruffle up your hackles and set up your comb and pretend you are going to peck, for you are as great a coward now, as you were when I was a little schoolboy and you were the big tyrant and sneak.”

“You shall pay for this, sir,” cried the captain.

“Pish! Now, my good cousin, you are not a fool. You know I am not in the least afraid of you.”

“I’ll make you some day,” said the captain, bitterly. “You shall smart for all this.”

“Not I. It is you who will smart. There, go and marry your rich wife, and much happiness may you get out of the match! I’m only troubled about one thing, and that is whether it is not my duty to tell the lady – poor creature! – what a blackguard she is going to wed.”

Captain James Armstrong altered the sit of his cocked hat, brushed some imaginary specks off his new uniform, and turned his back upon his cousin, ignoring the extended hand. But he did as he was told – he went and was duly married, Lieutenant Humphrey being present and walking close behind, to see just outside the church door the flashing eyes and knitted brow of Mary Dell on one side; while beyond her, but unseen by Humphrey, were her brother Abel, and Bart, who stood with folded arms and a melodramatic scowl upon his ugly face.

“She’s going to make a scene,” thought Humphrey; and, pushing before the bride and bridegroom, he interposed, from a feeling of loyalty to the former, perhaps from a little of the same virtue toward a member of his family.

Mary looked up at him, at first in surprise, and then she smiled bitterly.

“Don’t be alarmed, sir,” she said coldly. “I only came to see the captain’s wife.”

“Poor lass!” muttered the lieutenant, as he saw Mary draw back among the people gathered together. “She seemed to read me like a book.”

He caught one more sight of Mary Dell standing at a distance, holding her brother’s arm, as the captain entered the heavy, lumbering coach at the church gate. Then she disappeared, the crowd melted away, and the bells rang a merry peal, the ringers’ muscles having been loosened with ale; and as the bride and bridegroom went off to the lady’s home at an old hall near Slapton Lea, Mary returned slowly to the cottage down in the little cove, and Humphrey went to the wedding breakfast, and afterwards to his ship.

Chapter Four

A Month Later

About a month after the marriage Captain James Armstrong was returning one night on horseback from Dartmouth to the home of his wife's family, where he was sojourning prior to setting off upon a long voyage, it having been decided that the young couple should not set up in housekeeping till his return from sea, so that the lady might have some companionship during his absence.

He had been to the principal inn to dine with some officers whose vessels had just touched there from Falmouth, and Humphrey, who had been present, had felt some doubt about letting him go home alone.

"You've had too much punch, Jem," he said. "Sleep here to-night, and don't let your young wife see you in that state."

"You're a fool," was the surly reply.

"You can get a good bed here, and ride home in the morning," said Humphrey, quietly. "You had better stay."

"Mind your own business, upstart," cried the captain; and ordering his horse he mounted and set off with a lurch, first on one side, and then on the other, each threatening to send him out of the saddle.

"He'll be all right, Armstrong," said a jovial-looking officer, watching. "Come, have another glass. By the time he is at the top of the long hill he will be sober as a judge."

"Perhaps so," said Humphrey aloud. Then to himself, "I don't half like it, though. The road's bad, and I shouldn't care for anything to happen to him, even if it is to make me heir to the estate. I wish I had not let him go."

He returned to the room where the officers had commenced a fresh bowl of punch, for they had no longer journey before them than upstairs to their rooms, and there were plenty of servants to see them safely into bed, as was the custom in dealing with the toppers of that day.

"I've done wrong," said Humphrey Armstrong, after partaking of one glass of punch and smoking a single pipe of tobacco from a tiny bowl of Dutch ware. "He was not fit to go home alone."

He said this to himself as an officer was trolling forth an anacreontic song.

"It's a long walk, but I shall not feel comfortable unless I see whether he has got home safely; and it will clear away the fumes of the liquor. Here goes."

He slipped out of the room, and, taking a stout stick which was the companion of his hat, he started forth into the cool night air, and walked sturdily away in the direction of his cousin's home.

About half an hour later the drowsy groom, who was sitting up for the captain's return, rose with a sigh of satisfaction, for he heard the clattering of hoofs in the stable-yard.

"At last!" he cried; and, taking a lighted lantern, he hurried out, to stand in dismay staring at the empty saddle, which had been dragged round under the horse's belly, and at the trembling animal, breathing hard and shaking its head.

"Why, she's all of a muck," muttered the man; "and the captain ar'n't on her. He be fallen off, I'd zwear."

The man stood staring for a few minutes, while the horse pawed impatiently, as if asking to be admitted to its stable. Then he opened the door, the weary beast went in, and the man stood staring with true Devon stolidity before he bethought him of the necessity for removing the saddle from its awkward position.

This seen to, it suddenly occurred to him that something ought to be done about the captain, and he roused up the coachman to spread the alarm in the house.

“Nay, we’ll only scare the poor ladies to death,” said the Jehu of the establishment, grey hairs having brought him wisdom. “Let’s zee virst, lad, if there be anything really bad. If he be droonk and valled off, he won’t thank us for telling his wife. Zaddle the dwo coach-horses, Ridgard, and we’ll ride to town and zee.”

The horses were quickly saddled, and the two men-servants trotted along the Dartmouth road till about half-way, where, in one of the gloomiest parts, their horses began to snort and exhibit signs of fear, and as they drew up a voice shouted —

“Here! Who’s that! Help!”

“Why, it be Mr Humphrey,” said the old coachman; and dismounting he gave his rein to his companion, and ran forward. “What be wrong, zir?”

“The captain. Much hurt,” was the reply.

“I thought zo, zir. His horse comed home without him. He’s been throwed – or pulled off,” he added to himself.

“It’s something worse, I’m afraid. Here, help me, and let’s get him home.”

The old coachman lent his aid, and with some difficulty the captain was placed across one of the horses, the lieutenant mounting to hold him on and support him, while the two servants followed slowly behind.

“Pulled off?” whispered the groom.

“Mebbe,” said the old coachman; and then to himself, “Looks bad for Mr Humphrey; and if he died, what should I zay to them as asked how I found ’em?”

The old man walked slowly on for half an hour before he answered his mental question, and his answer was —

“They’d make me tell ’em the truth, and it might bring Mr Humphrey to the gallows; and if it did, it would be all through me.”

Chapter Five

A Keen Encounter

The prognostications of his fellow-officer did not prove true, for Captain Armstrong, instead of being sobered by the ride up the hill, grew more drunken. The fresh air blown straight from the ocean seemed to dizzy his muddled brain, and when he rode down the hill he was more drunken than ever, and rolled about in his saddle like his ship in a storm.

This seemed to amuse the captain, and he talked and chuckled to himself, sang snatches of songs, and woke the echoes of the little village street at the top of the next hill, where the tall, square church tower stood up wind-swept and dreary to show mariners the way to Dartmouth harbour.

Then came a long ride along a very shelf of a road, where it seemed as if a false step on the part of his horse would send both rolling down the declivity to the edge of the sheer rocks, where they would fall headlong to the fine shingle below.

But drunken men seem favourites with their horses, for when Captain Armstrong lurched to starboard his nag gave a hitch to keep him in the saddle, and when he gave another lurch to larboard the horse was ready for him again – all of which amused the captain more and more, and he chuckled aloud, and sang, and swore at his cousin for a cold, fishy, sneaking hound.

“He’d like to see me die, and get the estate,” he said; “but I’ll live to a hundred, and leave half a score of boys to inherit, and he sha’n’t get a groat, a miserable, sanctified dog-fish. Steady, mare, steady! Bah, how thirsty I am! Wish I’d had another drop.”

He kicked his horse’s ribs, and the docile creature broke into a gentle amble, but only to be checked sharply.

“Wo-ho, mare!” cried the captain, shaking his head, for he was dizzy now, and the dimly-seen trees sailed slowly round. “Wind’s changing,” he said; “steady, old lass! Walk.”

The mare walked, and the captain grew more confused in his intellect; while the night became darker, soft clouds rolling slowly over the star-spangled sky.

The ride was certainly not sobering James Armstrong, and he knew it, for he suddenly burst into a chuckling laugh.

“I know what she’ll say,” he said. “Ladyship will ride the high horse. Let her. I can ride the high horse, too – steady, mare! What’s the matter with you?”

He had been descending into a narrow pass where the road had been cut down in the hill side, leaving a high, well-wooded bank on either hand, and here it was far more dark than out in the open, and the mare, after walking steadily on for some distance with her well-shod hoofs clinking upon the loose stones, suddenly shied, stopped short, and snorted.

“What’s the matter with you, stupid? Can’t you stand straight?” cried the captain, striking the beast angrily with his heels. “Go on.”

The horse, however, backed and swerved from side to side, making as if to turn sharply and gallop back to Dartmouth; but just at that moment there was a rustling sound heard overhead, where the rough bushes fringed the bank, and directly after a rush and the sound of someone leaping down into the lane between the captain and the town.

This had the effect of startling the horse more and more, but instead of making now for the way by which they had come, it willingly obeyed the touch of the rider’s spur, and continued its journey for half a dozen yards. Then it stopped short once again, for a dark figure leaped down into the lane just in front, and the captain found himself hemmed in.

And now, for the first time; he began to feel sobered as he took in the position. He had been attacked by highwaymen without a doubt, and unless he chose to do battle for his watch and money his only chance of escape was to force his horse to mount the precipitous side of the lane.

Without a moment's hesitation he dragged at the off rein, drove the spurs into the beast's flanks, and forced her to the leap; but it was poorly responded to. The half leap resulted in the mare gaining a footing a few feet up, and then scrambling back into the lane as the captain's two assailants closed in.

"Stand back, you scoundrels!" roared the captain. "Curse you! I'll blow your brains out."

A mocking laugh was the response, and as he dragged at the holster a smart blow from a cudgel fell upon his hand, making him utter a yell of pain. The next moment one of the men had leaped up behind him and clasped his arms to his side, and in the struggle which ensued both came down off the horse, which uttered a loud snort of fear and dashed off at a gallop down the hill for home, while, nerved to action now by his position and stung by the blows he had received from his assailant, the captain wrested himself free and dragged his sword from its sheath.

He had hardly raised it in the air when a tremendous blow fell upon the blade close to the hilt, the sword snapped in two, and the captain was defenceless.

This mishap took all the spirit-born courage out of him, and he threw down the broken weapon.

"I give in," he cried, backing away to the side of the lane and facing the two dimly-seen figures in the darkness; "what do you want?"

One of the men burst into a hoarse laugh.

"I've hardly any money," cried the captain; "a guinea or two. If I give you that will you go?"

"Curse your money, you cowardly hound!" cried the second man.

"How dare you, dog!" cried the captain. "Do you know who I am?"

"James Armstrong," said the same speaker. "Now, lad, quick!"

"You shall – "

The captain's words turned into a yell of agony as he received a violent blow from a stick across one arm, numbing it, and before its echo rose from the steep slope of the hill a second and a third blow fell, which were followed by a shower, the unfortunate man yelling, beseeching, and shrieking with agony and fear. He dropped upon his knees and begged piteously for mercy; but his tormentors laughed, and seized the opportunity he offered to apply their blows more satisfactorily. Back, arms, legs, all in turn, were belaboured as two men beat a carpet, till the victim's cries grew hoarse, then faint, and finally ceased, and he lay in the trampled road, crushed almost to a mummy, and unable to stir hand or foot; and then, and then only, did his assailants cease.

"Ain't killed him, have we, Abel, lad?" said the bigger of the two men.

"Killed? No. We never touched his head. It would take a deal to kill a thing like him. Captain!" he said, mockingly. "What a cowardly whelp to command men!"

"What shall we do now?" whispered the bigger man.

"Do! I'm going to make my mark upon him, and then go home."

"Well, you have, lad."

"Ay, with a stick, but I'm going to do it with my knife;" and, as he spoke, the lesser of the two men drew his knife from its dagger-like sheath.

"No, no, don't do that. Give him a good 'un on the head. No knife."

"Yes, knife," said the lesser of the two. "He's had no mercy, and I'll have none. He's stunned, and won't feel it."

"Don't do that, lad," whimpered the bigger man.

"Ay, but I will," said the other, hoarsely; and, dropping on his knees, he seized the prostrate man by the ear, when the trembling wretch uttered a shriek of agony, making his assailants start away.

"Did you do it, lad?"

"Yes; I done it. I'm satisfied now. Let's go."

"And leave him there?"

"Why not? What mercy did he show? He was only shamming. Let him call for help now till someone comes."

The bigger man uttered a grunt and followed his companion as he mounted the steep side of the lane, while, faint, exhausted, and bleeding now, Captain James Armstrong sank back and fainted away.

Chapter Six

Brought to Book

“You dare not deny it,” cried Mary Dell, furiously, as she stood in the doorway of the cottage, facing her brother and Bart Wrigley, who attempted to escape, but were prevented by her barring the way of exit.

Neither spoke, but they stood looking sullen and frowning like a couple of detected schoolboys.

“No,” she continued, “you dare not deny it. You cowards – lying in wait for an unarmed man!”

“Why, he’d got a sword and pistols,” cried Bart.

“There!” shrieked Mary, triumphantly; “you have betrayed yourself, Bart. Now perhaps my brave brother will confess that he lay in wait in the dark for an unarmed man, and helped to beat him nearly to death.”

“You’re a nice fellow to trust, Bart,” said Abel, looking at his companion. “Betrayed yourself directly.”

“Couldn’t help it,” grumbled Bart. “She’s so sharp upon a man.”

“You cowards!” cried Mary again.

“Well, I don’t know about being cowards,” said Abel, sullenly. “He was mounted and had his weapons, and we had only two sticks.”

“Then you confess it was you? Oh! what a villain to have for a brother!”

“Here, don’t go on like that,” cried Abel. “See how he has served you.”

“What’s that to you?” cried Mary, fiercely. “If he jilted me and I forgive him, how dare you interfere?”

“Phew!” whistled Bart to himself. “What a way she has!”

“Why, any one would think you cared for him, Polly,” said Abel, staring, while Bart whistled softly again, and wiped the heavy dew from his forehead.

“Care for him! – I hate him!” cried Mary, passionately: “but do you think I wanted my own brother to go and take counsel with his big vagabond companion – ”

“Phew!” whistled Bart again, softly, as he perspired now profusely, and wiped his forehead with his fur cap.

“And then go and beat one of the King’s officers? But you’ll both suffer for it. The constables will be here for you, and you’ll both be punished.”

“Not likely – eh, Bart?” said Abel, with a laugh.

“No, lad,” growled that worthy. “Too dark.”

“Don’t you be too sure,” cried Mary. “You cowards! and if he dies,” – there was a hysterical spasm here – “if he dies, you’ll both go to the gibbet and swing in chains!”

Bart gave his whole body a writhe, as if he already felt the chains about him as he was being made into a scare-scamp.

“Didn’t hit hard enough, and never touched his head,” he growled.

“And as for you,” cried Mary, turning upon him sharply, “never you look me in the face again. You are worse than Abel; and I believe it was your mad, insolent jealousy set you persuading my foolish brother to help in this cowardly attack.”

Bart tried to screw up his lips and whistle; but his jaw seemed to drop, and he only stared and shuffled behind his companion in misfortune.

“Never mind what she says, Bart, lad,” said the latter; “she’ll thank us some day for half-killing as big a scamp as ever stepped.”

“Thank you!” cried Mary, with her eyes flashing and her handsome face distorted, “I hope to see you both well punished, and – ”

“Who’s that coming?” said Abel, sharply, as steps were heard approaching quickly.

As Mary turned round to look, Abel caught sight of something over her shoulder in the evening light which made him catch his companion by the arm.

“Quick, Bart, lad!” he whispered; “through her room and squeeze out of the window. The constables!”

He opened the door of his sister’s little room, thrust his mate in, followed, and shut and bolted the door; but as he turned then to the window, a little strongly-made frame which had once done duty in a vessel, Mary’s voice was heard speaking loudly in conversation with the new arrivals in the outer room.

“Out with you, quickly and quietly,” whispered Abel.

“Right, lad,” replied Bart; and unfastening and opening the little window, he thrust his arms through and began to get out.

At that moment there was a loud knocking at the door.

“Open – in the king’s name!”

“Open it yourself,” muttered Abel, “when we’re gone. Quick, Bart, lad!”

This remark was addressed to the big fellow’s hind quarters, which were jerking and moving in a very peculiar way, and then Bart’s voice was heard, sounding muffled and angry, warning somebody to keep off.

“Curse it all! too late!” cried Abel, grinding his teeth. “Here, Bart, lad, get through.”

“Can’t, lad,” growled his companion. “I’m ketched just acrost the hips, and can’t move.”

“Come back, then.”

“That’s what I’m a-trying to do, but this son of a sea-cook has got hold of me.”

“Open – in the King’s name!” came from the outer room; and then, just as Abel had seized an old sea-chest and was about to drag it before the door, there was a tremendous kick, the bolt was driven off, the door swung open, and the Dartmouth constable and a couple of men rushed forwards, and, in spite of Abel’s resistance, dragged him into the other room.

“Now, Dell, my lad,” said the head man, “I’ve got you at last.”

“So it seems,” said Abel, who stared hard at his sister as he spoke; while she stood with her hands clasped before her and a peculiarly rigid look on her face, staring wildly back.

“Smuggling and wrecking weren’t enough for you, eh?”

“What do you want here?” said Abel, giving his sister a final scowl and then facing the head constable.

“You, my lad – you,” said that individual, with a grin.

“What for?”

“Attempted murder and robbery on the king’s highway, my lad.”

“It’s a lie! Who says so?” cried Abel, setting his teeth and fixing his sister again with his dark eyes as she gave him an imploring look.

“Never mind who says so, my lad. Information’s laid all regular against you and Master Bart Wrigley. You’re both captured neatly. Here, how long are you going to be bringing forward the other?” cried the constable.

“We can’t get him out,” shouted a voice. “He’s stuck in the little window.”

“Pull him back, then, by his legs.”

“Been trying ever so long,” said another voice, “but he won’t come.”

“I’ll soon see to that,” said the constable, backing Abel into the little bed-room which was darkened by Bart’s body filling up the window. “Here, lay hold of his legs, two of you, and give a good jerk.”

Two men obeyed, but they did not give the jerk – Bart did that. Drawing in his legs like a grasshopper about to leap, he suddenly shot them out straight, when, though they did not alter his position where he was nipped in across the hips by the window-frame, they acted like catapults upon

the two constables, who were driven backwards, the one into a chair, the other into a sitting position on the floor, to the great delight of those who looked on.

“Four of you,” said the head constable stolidly; “and hold on this time.”

The men obeyed, two going to each leg; and though Bart gave three or four vigorous kicks, his captors were not dislodged.

“Now,” said the head constable, as the kicking legs became quiescent, “all together!”

There was a sharp jerk, and Bart’s body was snatched out of the imprisoning frame so suddenly that five men went down on the floor together; while the first to rise was Bart, who kicked himself free, made for the door in spite of a pistol levelled by the head constable, and passed through.

“Come on, Abel!” he shouted as he went.

Abel made a dash to follow, but he only struck his face against the muzzle of a pistol, and the head constable held on.

There was a rush after Bart, but it was needless, for the great stolid fellow had seen the state of affairs, and come back.

“All right, Abel, lad,” he growled; “I won’t leave you in the lurch. What’s it mean – lock-up!”

“Yes, my lad; charge of attempted murder and robbery,” said the head constable.

“Took all the skin off my hips and ribs,” growled Bart, rubbing himself softly.

“You’ll have plenty of time to get well before your trial,” said the constable, smiling. “Are you ready!”

This last to Abel, who was gazing fiercely at his sister, who met his angry eyes with an imploring look.

“And my own sister, too, Bart,” he said, bitterly. “We fought for her, lad, and she gave information to the police.”

“No, no, no, Abel!” cried Mary, running to him to fling her arms about his neck; but he gave her a rough thrust which sent her staggering back, and her countenance changed on the instant for her eyes flashed vindictively, and she stood before him with folded arms.

“Prisoner confessed in the presence of you all that he committed the act,” said the constable; and his words were received with a mutter of assent in chorus.

“Here, I’m ready,” said Abel. “Come along, mate.”

“So’m I,” growled Bart, laying a hand on Abel’s shoulder. “I wouldn’t ha’ thought it on you, Mary, my lass,” he said, and he gazed at her sadly as he shook his head.

Mary made no reply, but stood with her arms folded across her breast and her brow wrinkled while the party moved out of the cottage; but the next instant the scene which followed made her rush outside and gaze wildly with eyes dilated and breast heaving, and her hands now clasped as she watched the chase.

For as the little party stood outside, Bart still with his hand upon his companion’s shoulder, Abel said quickly —

“The boat. Run!”

Bart was, as a rule, rather slow of comprehension; but at that moment the same idea was filling his mind. That is to say, it was already charged, and Abel’s words were as so many sparks struck from steel to fire that charge. Consequently, as the young fellow struck the constable to the left, Bart did the same to the right, and they dashed off as one man towards where, just round the western point of rock which helped to form the little bay, they knew that their boat was lying, swinging with the tide to a grapnel lying on the sands.

As they dashed off, running swiftly over the hard sand, the head constable raised his old brass-mounted pistol and fired, when the shot might have been supposed to have struck Mary Dell, so sharp a start did she give as she clapped one hand to her side, and then peered at the rising smoke, and drew a long breath full of relief.

For, as the smoke rose, she could see the fugitives still running, and that quite a cloud of sea-birds had risen from the mew-stone, a hundred yards from shore, to fly circling round, screaming querulously, as they slowly flapped their black-tipped wings.

“They’ll escape – they’ll escape!” cried Mary, clapping her hands joyously. “The coward, to fire! And they’re afraid to run hard and catch them now they are out in the open. Yes, they’ll escape!” she cried again, as she saw the distance increasing between pursuer and pursued. “They’ll get to the boat; the sail’s in, and there’s a good breeze. Oh, if I were only with them!”

A sudden thought struck her, and she caught up a sun-bonnet from where it lay on the open window-sill.

“I’ll go,” she thought. “They’ll sail west. I could reach Mallow’s Cove across the fields, and signal to them. They’d come in and pick me up, and we could escape together far, far from here.”

All this with her cheeks flushing, her handsome eyes sparkling, and her breast rising and falling in the height of her emotion.

Then a change came over her. Her eyes looked heavy; her forehead wrinkled again.

“Escape! Where?” she said, half aloud. “I’d gladly go – away from all this torture; but they think I betrayed them, and would not come in.”

The elasticity was gone out of her step, as she slowly climbed the face of the huge scarped rocks which towered above the cottage – a risky ascent, but one to which she was, as it were, born; and, with her eyes fixed upon the pursuers and the fugitives, she trusted to her hands and feet to take her safely to the top, passing spot after spot where one unused to climbing would have stopped and turned back, so giddy was the ascent. Higher and higher, past clinging ivy, fern, and clusters of yellow ragwort, with patches of purple heath and golden gorse, till the farther side of the rocky point was opened out, with the boat lying like a speck afloat beyond the line of foam.

Mary paused there with her sun-bonnet in her hand to watch the result; but there was no exultation in her eyes, only a look of stony despondency, for from where she stood she could see now that the effort of her brother and his companion was in vain.

They were still on ignorance as they ran on, for they were on the bay side of the point yet, toiling over the loose sand and shingle, where the washed up weed lay thick; but Mary had a bird’s-eye view of what in the clear south air seemed to be close at her feet, as close almost as where the boat lay in shelter from the north and easterly wind.

The pursuers were now all together, and settled down to a steady trot, which pace they increased as Bart and Abel reached the rocks, and, instead of going right round, began to climb over some fifty yards from where the water washed the point.

“We’re too many for him this time, Bart, my lad,” cried Abel. “You weren’t hit, were you?”

“Hit? No. Shot never went within a mile o’ me.”

“Then why are you dowsing your jib like that?”

“I were a-thinking about she, mate,” said Bart, in a low growl.

“Curse her for a woman all over!” said Abel. “They take to a man, and the more he ill-uses ’em, they fight for him the more.”

“Ay, lad; but to think of her putting them on to us! It don’t seem like she.”

“Curse them!” cried Abel, as he reached the other side of the point, and saw that which his sister had seen from the cliff behind the cottage.

“What for now?” said Bart, stolidly, as he reached his companion’s side. “Hum, that’s it, is it?”

He looked round him for a fresh way of escape.

There was the sea, if they liked to leap in and swim; but they could be easily overtaken. The rocks above them were too overhanging to climb, and there was no other way, unless they returned, and tried to rush through their pursuers; for beyond the point the tide beat upon the cliff.

“No good, Bart; we’re trapped,” said Abel, stolidly. “I’ll never forgive her – never!”

“Yes, you will,” said Bart, sitting down on a rock, and carefully taking off his fur cap to wipe his heated brow. “You will some day. Why, I could forgive her anything – I could. She’s a wonderful gell; but, I say, my hips is werry sore.”

He sat staring down at the boat beyond the point, the anchor having been taken on board, and the oars being out to keep her off the rocks, as she rose and fell with the coming tide.

“No!” said Abel, bitterly. “I’ll never forgive her – never!”

“Nay, lad, don’t say that,” said Bart, rubbing one side. “Hey, lass! There she is. Top o’ the cliff. Look at her, mate.”

“No,” said Abel; “let her look – at her cowardly work.”

“Now, then!” shouted the head constable, as he came panting up. “Is it surrender, or fight?”

For answer, Abel climbed slowly down to the sands, followed by Bart; and the next minute they were surrounded, and stood with gyves upon their wrists.

“Warm work,” said the constable, cheerfully; “but we’ve got you safe now.”

“Ay, you’ve got us safe,” growled Bart; “but it wouldn’t ha’ been easy if Abel here had showed fight.”

“Been no use,” said the constable. “I said to Billy Niggs here: ‘Niggs,’ I said, ‘them two’ll make for their boat, and get away.’ ‘Ay, zhure, that they ’ool,’ he said. Didn’t you, Billy?”

“Ay, zhure, sir, that’s just what I did say,” cried a constable, with a face like a fox-whelp cyder apple.

“So I sent on two men to be ready in the boat. Come on, my lads.”

The boat was pulled ashore. The two constables in charge leaped out with the grapnel, and dropped it on the sand; and then in silence the party with their prisoners walked slowly back, and beneath the spot where Mary stood like a figure carved out of the rock, far above their heads, till they had gone out of sight, without once looking up or making a sign.

Then the poor girl sank down in the rocky niche where she had climbed first, and burst into an agonised fit of weeping.

“Father – mother – brother – all gone! Lover false! Alone – alone – alone!” she sobbed. “What have I done to deserve it all? Nothing!” she cried, fiercely, as she sprang to her feet and turned and shook her clenched fists landward. “Nothing but love a cold, cruel wretch. Yes, love; and now – oh, how I hate him – and all the world!”

She sank down again in the niche all of a heap, and sat there with the sun slowly sinking lower, and the sea-birds wheeling round and round above her head, and watching her with inquisitive eyes, as they each now and then uttered a mournful wail, which sounded sympathetic though probably it was the gullish expression of wonder whether the crouching object was good to eat.

And there she sat, hour after hour, till it was quite dark, when she began slowly to descend, asking herself what she should do to save her brother and his friend, both under a misconception, but suffering for her sake.

“And I stay here!” she said, passionately. “Let them think what they will, I’ll try and save them, for they must be a prison now.”

Mary was quite right; for as night fell Abel Dell and Bart his companion were partaking of a very frugal meal, and made uncomfortable by the fact that it was not good, and that they – men free to come and go on sea and land – were now safely caged behind a massive iron grill.

“Well,” said Bart at last, “I’m only sorry for one thing now.”

“What’s that – Mary being so base?”

“Nay, I’m sorry for that,” replied Bart; “but what I meant was that I didn’t give the captain one hard un on the head.”

Chapter Seven

Gathering Clouds

In spite of the declaration made by Captain Armstrong that he had identified his assailants by the heights, voices, and – dark as was the night – their features, Abel refused to be convinced. He had taken it into his head that Mary had denounced them to her former lover, and at each examination before the Old Devon magistrates he had sullenly turned away from the poor girl, who sat gazing imploringly at the dock, and hungering for a look in return.

The captain was not much hurt; that is to say, no bones were broken. Pain he had suffered to a little extent, for there was an ugly slit in one ear, but he was not in such a condition as to necessitate his limping into court, supported by a couple of servants, and generally “got up” to look like one who had been nearly beaten to death.

All this told against Abel and Bart, as well as the fact that the captain was of good birth, and one who had lately formed an alliance with a famous old county family. In addition, the prisoners were known to the bench. Both Abel and Bart had been in trouble before, and black marks were against them for wrecking and smuggling. They were no worse than their neighbours, but the law insists upon having scarecrows, and the constables did not hesitate to make every effort to hang the son of a notorious old wrecker and his boon companion.

There was not a dissentient voice. Abel Dell and Bartholomew Wrigley were both committed for trial; and Mary made quite a sensation by rising in the court as the prisoners were about to be removed, and forcing her way to where she could catch her brother’s hand.

“Abe,” she cried, passionately, “I didn’t. I didn’t, indeed. Say good-bye.”

He turned upon her fiercely, and snatched his hand away.

“Go to your captain,” he said, savagely. “I shall be out of the way now.”

An ordinary woman would have shrunk away sobbing; but as Mary was flung off, she caught at Bart’s wrist, and clung to that.

“Bart, I didn’t! I didn’t!” she whispered, hoarsely. “Tell him I wouldn’t – I couldn’t do such a thing. It isn’t true!”

Bart’s face puckered up, and he looked tenderly down in the agitated face before him.

“Well, lass,” he said, softly, “I believe – ”

“That you turned against us!” interposed Abel, savagely, for his temper, consequent upon the way matters had gone against him, was all on edge. “Come on, Bart; she’ll have her own way now.”

A constable’s hand was on each of their shoulders, and they were hurried out of court, leaving Mary standing frowning alone, the observed of all.

Her handsome face flushed, and she drew herself up proudly, as she cast a haughtily defiant look at all around, and was about to walk away when her eyes lighted upon the captain, who was seated by the magisterial bench, side by side with his richly-dressed lady.

There was a vindictive glare in Mary Dell’s eyes as she encountered the gaze of Mistress Armstrong, the lady looking upon her as a strange, dangerous kind of creature.

“Why should she not suffer as I suffer?” thought Mary. “Poor, weak, dressed-up doll that she is! I could sting her to the heart easy. How I hate her, for she has robbed me of a husband!”

But the next moment the lady withdrew her gaze with a shiver of dread from the eyes which had seemed to scorch her; and Mary’s now lit upon those of Captain Armstrong, for he was watching her curiously, and with re-awakened interest.

Mary’s face changed again its expression, as light seemed to enter her darkened soul.

“He used to love me a little. He would not be so cruel as that. I offended him, because I was so hard and – cruel he called it. He would listen to me now. I will, I will.”

She gazed at him fixedly for a moment, and then hurried from the court.

“What a dreadful-looking woman, Jemmy!” whispered Mistress Armstrong. “She quite made me shudder. Will they hang her too?”

“No, no,” he said, rising quickly and drawing a long breath. Then, recollecting himself, he sat down again as if in pain, and held out his hand to his wife, who supported him to the carriage, into which he ascended slowly.

“Sorry for you, Armstrong; deuced sorry, egad,” said the senior magistrate, coming up to the carriage door. “Can’t help feeling glad too.”

“Oh, Sir Timothy!” cried Mistress Armstrong, who was a seventeenth cousin.

“But I am, my dear,” said the old magistrate. “Glad, because it will rid us of a couple of dreadful rascals. Trial comes on in three weeks. I wouldn’t get well too soon. Judge Bentham will hang them as sure as they’re alive.”

He nodded and walked off, with his cocked hat well balanced on his periwig. Then the heavy lumbering carriage drove out of the quaint old town, with the big dumpling horses perspiring up the hills; while, as soon as they were away from the houses, Mistress Armstrong leaned back on the cushions with a sigh of relief.

“I do hope the judge will hang them,” she said. “A pair of wicked, bad, cruel ruffians, to beat and half-kill my own dear darling Jemmy as they did. Oh, the cruel, cruel creatures! I could hang them myself! Does it hurt you anywhere now, my own sweetest boy?” she added, softly, as she passed her arm caressingly round her liege lord, who gave such a savage start that she shrank into the other corner of the carriage, with the tears starting to her eyes.

“Don’t be such a confounded fool!” her “sweetest” Jemmy roared; and then he sat back scowling, for she had interrupted a sort of day-dream in which he was indulging respecting Mary Dell, whose eyes still seemed to be fixed upon his; and as his wife’s last words fell upon his ear they came just as he was wondering whether, if they met again, Mary would, in her unprotected state, prove more kind, and not so prudish as of yore.

The honeymoon had been over some time.

Chapter Eight

Mary Begins to Plan

Mary Dell was a girl of keen wits, but her education was of the sea-shore. Among her class people talked of the great folk, and men of wealth and their power – and not without excuse – for in those days bribery, corruption, and class clannishness often carried their way to the overruling of justice – the blind; and in her ignorance she thought that if she could win over Captain Armstrong to forgive her brother, the prosecution would be at an end, and all would be well.

Consequently she determined to go up to the big house by Slapton Lea, and beg Mistress Armstrong to intercede with her husband, and ask his forgiveness; so one morning soon after the committal she set off, but met the carriage with the young married couple inside – Mistress Armstrong looking piqued and pale, and the captain as if nothing were the matter.

The sight of the young wife side by side with the man who had professed to love her was too much for Mary, and she turned off the road and descended by the face of a dangerously steep cliff to the shingly shore; where, as she tramped homeward, with her feet sinking deeply in the small loose pebbles, her feeling of bitterness increased, and she felt that it would be impossible to ask that weak, foolish-looking woman with the doll's face to take her part.

No; she would go up to the house boldly and ask to see the captain himself; and then, with the memory of his old love for her to help her cause, he would listen to her prayer, and save her brother from the risk he ran.

Then a mental cloud came over her, and she felt that she could not go up to the big house. It was not the captain's, it was *her* mother's; and it would be like going to ask a favour of her. She could not do it; and there was no need.

Captain Armstrong would come down to the shore any evening if she sent him the old signal, a scrap of dry sea-weed wrapped in paper. Scores of times she had done this when Abel had gone to sea in his boat, with Bart for companion; and Mary's cheeks flushed at the recollection of those meetings.

Yes; she would send him the old signal by one of the fishermen's children.

No; only if all other means failed. He was better now, and would be about. She would watch for him, and, as she called it, meet him by accident, and then plead her cause.

And so a week glided away, and there was only about one more before the judge would arrive, and Abel and his companion be brought up in the assize court. Mary had haunted every road and lane leading toward the big house, and had met the captain riding and walking, but always with Mistress Armstrong, and she could not speak before her.

There was nothing for it but to take the bold step, and after long hesitation that step was taken; the piece of sea-weed was wrapped up in paper, entrusted to a little messenger, and that evening Mary Dell left the cottage and walked round the western point towards Torcross, her cheeks flushed, her eyes unusually bright, and her heart full of care.

She was not long in reaching the well-known spot – their old trysting-place, where the coarse sand was white, and the rocks which shut in the retired tiny cove rough with limpet, barnacle, and weed.

This was the first time she had been there since James Armstrong had wearied of the prude, as he called her, and jilted her for his wealthy wife; and now the question arose; Would he come?

The evening was glorious; but one thought filled Mary's breast – Abel shut up behind the prison bars, still obdurate, and believing her false to him, and his faithful friend.

The grey look on the face of the sea was reflected upon that of the watcher; and as the sky grew dark, so grew Mary Dell's eyes, only that there was a lurid light now and then glowing in their depths.

“He will not come,” she said. “He hates me now as I hate him, and –”

She stopped short, for her well-trained ear caught the sound of a pebble falling as if from a height upon the strand below, and gazing fixedly above the direction of the sound, she made out something dark moving high up on the cliff track.

Mary's heart began to beat wildly, and she drew a long breath; but she would not let hope carry her away for a few moments till she could be certain, and then a faint cry of joy escaped her, but only to be succeeded by a chilling sensation, as something seemed to ask her why he had come.

"I'm late," cried a well-known voice directly after. "Why, Mary, just in the old spot. It's like old times. My darling!" He tried to clasp her in his arms, his manner displaying no trace of his injuries; but she thrust him sharply away, half surprised and yet not surprised, for she seemed now to read the man's character to the full.

"Captain Armstrong!" she cried, hoarsely.

"Why, my dear Mary, don't be so prudish. You are not going to carry on that old folly?"

"Captain Armstrong, don't mistake me."

"Mistake you! No. You are the dearest, loveliest woman I ever saw. There, don't be huffed because I was so long. I couldn't get away. You know –" and he again tried to seize her.

"Captain Armstrong –"

"Now, what nonsense! You sent for me, and I have come."

"Yes. I sent for you because there was no other way of speaking to you alone."

"Quite right, my darling; and what could be better than here alone? Mary, sweet, it will be dark directly."

"Sir, I sent for you here that I might beg of you to save my brother and poor Bart."

"Curse your brother and Bart!" said the captain, angrily. "It was not their fault that they did not kill me. They're better out of our way."

"Captain Armstrong – James – for our old love's sake will you save them?"

"No," he cried, savagely. "Yes," he added, catching Mary's wrist; "not for our old love's sake, but for our new love – the love that is to come. Mary, I love you; I always did love you, and now I find I cannot live without you."

"Captain Armstrong!"

"James – your lover. Mary, you are everything to me. Don't struggle. How can you be so foolish? There, yes, I will. I'll do everything. I'll refuse to appear against them if you wish me to. I'll get them set free; but you will not hold me off like this?"

"You will save my brother?"

"Yes."

"And his friend?"

"Yes."

"Then I will always be grateful to you, and pray for your happiness."

"And be mine, Mary, my love, my own?"

"You villain! you traitor!" hissed Mary, as, taking advantage of a momentary forgetfulness, he clasped her in his arms and showered kisses on her lips, her cheeks, her hair.

But Captain Armstrong had made a mistake. It was like caressing a Cornish wrestler. There was a sharp struggle, during which he found that Mary's thews and sinews were, softly rounded as she was, strong as those of a man. She had been accustomed to row a boat in a rough sea by the hour together, and there was additional strength given to her arm by the indignation that made her blood course hotly through her veins.

How dare he, a miserable traitor, insult her as he did?

The question made the girl's blood seem to boil; and ere he could place another kiss upon her lips Mary had forgotten brother, friend, the trial everything but the fact that James Armstrong, Mistress Armstrong's husband, had clasped her in his arms; and in return she clasped him tightly in hers.

They swayed here for a moment, then there, and the next the captain was lifted completely from the shingle and literally jerked sideways, to fall with a crash and strike his head against a piece of rock. Then a sickening sensation came over him and all seemed dark, while, when he recovered a few minutes later, his head was bleeding and he was alone, and afraid with his swimming head to clamber up the rough cliff path.

“The cursed jade!” he muttered, as he recovered after a time, and went cautiously back after tying up his head, “I wish I could lay her alongside her brother in the gaol.”

“Yes; I’ll save him,” he said with a mocking laugh, as he reached the top of the cliff and looked down at the faint light seen in the old wrecker’s cottage. “I’ll save him; and, in spite of all, it’ll be a strange thing if Mary Dell isn’t lost.

“Curse her, how strong she is!” he said after a pause.

“What shall I say! Humph! a slip on the path and a fall. I’m weak yet after the assault. Some one will have to plaster her dearest Jemmy’s head – a sickly fool!”

Chapter Nine

Behind Prison Bars

Mary Dell went again and again to the prison in the county town, tramping till she was footsore; but she did not see Abel, for she had to encounter double difficulties – to wit, the regulations of the authorities, and her brother's refusal to see her.

At last, though, she compassed an interview with Bart Wrigley, and the big fellow listened to her stolidly, as he enjoyed the sound of her voice, sighing heavily from time to time.

"But even you seem at times, Bart, as if you did not believe a word I say," she cried passionately.

"Who says I don't?" said Bart, in a low growl. "You telled me you didn't, my lass, and of course you didn't. Why, I'd believe anything you told me; but as for Abel, he's dead-set on it that you told the captain, and there's no moving him."

"But tell him, Bart, tell him I was angry with him for what he did – "

"What *we* did," said Bart, who was too loyal to shirk his share.

"Well, what you both did, Bart; but that I would sooner have died than betray my own brother."

"Haw, haw! That's a wunner," said Bart, with a hoarse laugh. "That's just what I did tell him."

"You did, Bart?"

"Ay, my lass, I did; but he – "

Bart stopped.

"Yes, Bart, what did he say?"

"Said I was a blind, thick-headed fool."

"Oh, Bart, Bart, Bart! you are the best, and truest friend we ever had."

"Say that again, lass, will you?" said the rough fellow.

Mary said it again with greater emphasis, and big Bart rubbed the corner of one eye with the back of his hand.

"Tell him, dear Bart, that his sister was true to him all through, and that he must believe me."

"Ay, lass, I'll tell him; but don't call me 'dear Bart' again, 'cause I can't bear it."

"But you are our friend, and have always been like a brother to us."

"Ay, lass, I tried to be, and I'll speak to him again. Bah! you never went again us. You couldn't. Your tongue thrashed us a bit, as you allus did, but it was for our good. And now, look here, my lass, when we're gone – "

"When you're gone, Bart!" cried Mary, with her lip quivering.

"Ay, lass, when we're gone, for I daresay they'll hang us."

"Bart!"

"Oh, it won't hurt much. Not worse than being drownded, and much quicker."

"Oh, Bart, Bart!"

"Don't cry, my pretty one, only don't forget us. You won't forget Abel, of course; but – I never felt as if I could talk to you like this before – don't forget as Bart Wrigley was werry fond on you, and that, if he'd been a fine hansum chap, 'stead of such a rough un, with his figure-head all set o' one side, he'd ha' stuck up and said as no one else shouldn't have you."

"Oh, Bart, Bart!" sobbed Mary, piteously.

"Ay, lass, that he would; but he often says to himself, 'It wouldn't be kind to a girl like that to hang on to her.' So, good-bye, my pretty lady, and I'll tell Abel as he's the blind, thick-headed fool if he says it was you as got us into this hole."

Bart had to wind up his unwontedly long speech very quickly, for a couple of turnkeys had entered the stone-walled room, to conduct the big fellow back to his cell, and show Mary to the outside of the prison.

“Good bye, dear Bart, dear old friend!”

“Good bye, my pretty lady!” cried the big fellow? “You called me ‘dear Bart’ again.”

“Yes, dear Bart, dear brother!” cried Mary, passionately, and, raising his big hand to her lips, she kissed it.

“Bah!” growled Bart to himself, “let ’em hang me. What do I care arter that? ‘Dear Bart – dear Bart!’ I wouldn’t care a bit if I only knowed what she’d do when we’re gone.”

Then the time glided on, and Mary heard from one and another the popular belief that the authorities, rejoicing in having at last caught two notorious smugglers and wreckers red-handed in a serious offence, were determined to make an example by punishing them with the utmost rigour of the law.

The poor girl in her loneliness had racked her brains for means of helping her brother. She had sold everything of value they possessed to pay for legal assistance, and she had, with fertile imagination, plotted means for helping Abel to escape; but even if her plans had been possible, they had been crossed by her brother’s obstinate disbelief in her truth. His last message was one which sent her to the cottage flushed and angry, for it was a cruel repetition of his old accusation, joined with a declaration that he disbelieved in her in other ways, and that this had been done in collusion with Captain Armstrong to get him and Bart out of her way.

“He’ll be sorry some day,” she said on the morning before the trial, as she sat low of spirit and alone in the little cottage.

“Poor Abel! he’s very bitter and cruel; poor – Yes, do you want me?”

“Genlum give me this to give you,” said a boy.

Mary excitedly caught at the letter the boy handed to her, and opening it with trembling hands, managed with no little difficulty to spell out its contents.

They were very short and laboriously written in a large schoolboy-like hand for her special benefit by one who knew her deficiencies of education.

“It is not too late yet. Abel will be tried to-morrow and condemned unless a piece of sea-weed is received to-night.”

“And I used to love him and believe in him!” she cried at last passionately, as her hot indignation at last mastered her, and she tore the letter in pieces with her teeth, spat the fragments upon the ground, and stamped upon them with every mark of contempt and disgust.

Then a change came over her, and she sank sobbing upon a stool, to burst forth into a piteous wail.

“Oh, Abel! – brother! – it is all my doing. I have sent you to your death!”

Chapter Ten

A Daring Trick

The laws were tremendously stringent in those days when it was considered much easier to bring an offender's bad career to an end than to keep him at the nation's expense, and when the stealing of a sheep was considered a crime to be punished with death, an attack upon the sacred person of one of the king's officers by a couple of notorious law-breakers was not likely to be looked upon leniently by a judge well-known for stern sentences.

But a jury of Devon men was sitting upon the offence of Abel Dell and Bart Wrigley, and feeling disposed to deal easily with a couple of young fellows whose previous bad character was all in connection with smuggling, a crime with the said jury of a very light dye, certainly not black. Abel and Bart escaped the rope, and were sentenced to transportation to one of His Majesty's colonies in the West Indies, there to do convict work in connection with plantations, or the making of roads, as their taskmasters might think fit.

Time glided by, and Mary Dell found that her life at home had become insupportable.

She was not long in finding that, now that she was left alone and unprotected, she was not to be free from persecution. Her contemptuous rejection of Captain Armstrong's advances seemed to have the effect of increasing his persecution; and one evening at the end of a couple of months Mary Dell sat on one of the rocks outside the cottage door, gazing out to sea, and watching the ships sail westward, as she wondered whether those on board would ever see the brother who seemed to be all that was left to her in this world.

That particular night the thought which had been hatching in her brain ever since Abel had been sent away flew forth fully fledged and ready, and she rose from where she had been sitting in the evening sunshine, and walked into the cottage.

Mary Dell's proceedings would have excited a smile from an observer, but the cottage stood alone. She had heard that Captain Armstrong was from home and not expected back for a week, and there was no fear of prying eyes as the sturdy, well-built girl took down a looking-glass from where it hung to a nail, and, placing it upon the table, propped it with an old jar, and then seating herself before the glass, she folded her arms, rested them upon the table, and sat for quite an hour gazing at herself in the mirror.

Womanly vanity? Not a scrap of it, but firm, intense purpose: deep thought; calm, calculating observation before taking a step that was to influence her life.

She rose after a time and walked into her brother Abel's bed-room, where she stayed for some minutes, and then with a quick, resolute step she re-entered the cottage kitchen, thrust the few embers together that burned upon the hearth, took a pair of scissors from a box, and again seated herself before the glass.

The sun was setting, and filled the slate-floored kitchen with light which flashed back from the blurred looking-glass, and cast a curious glare in the girl's stern countenance, with its heavy dark brows, sun-browned ruddy cheeks, and gleaming eyes.

Snip!

The sharp scissors had passed through one lock of the massive black tresses which she had shaken over her shoulders, and which then rippled to the cottage floor.

Snip!

Another cut, and two locks had fallen. Then rapidly *snip, snip, snip*— a curious thick, sharp *snip*— and the great waves of glorious hair kept falling as the bare, sun-burned, ruddy arm played here and there, and the steel blades glittered and opened and closed, as if arm, hand, and scissors formed

the neck, head, and angry bill of some fierce bird attacking that well-shaped head, and at every snap took off a thick tress of hair.

It was not a long task, and when the hair had all fallen, to lie around, one glorious ring of glossy black tresses, there were only a few snips to give here and there to finish off notches and too long, untidy spots, and then the girl rose, and with a cold, hard look upon her frowning face she stooped, and stooped, and stooped, and at each rising cast a great tress of hair to where the flames leaped, and seized it, torching the locks, which writhed, and curled, and flared, and crackled as if alive, while, as if to aid the idea that she was destroying something living, a peculiarly pungent odour arose, as of burning flesh, and filled the room.

An hour later, just as the red moon rose slowly above the surface of the sea, a sturdy-looking young man, with a stout stick in one hand – the very stick which had helped to belabour Captain Armstrong – and a bundle tied up in a handkerchief beneath his arm, stepped out of the cottage, changed the key from inside to outside, closed the old door, locked it, dragged out the key, and with a sudden jerk sent it flying far out into deep water beyond the rocks, where it fell with a dull *plash!* followed by a peculiar hissing sound, as the waves at high water rushed back over the fine shingle at the thrower's feet.

There was a sharp look round then; but no one was in sight; nothing to be heard but the hissing waters, and the splashing, gasping, and smacking sound, as the tide swayed in and out among the masses of stone. Then the figure turned once more to the cottage, gazed at it fixedly for a few moments, took a step or two away; but sprang back directly with an exceeding bitter cry, and kissed the rough, unpainted woodwork again and again with rapid action, and then dashed off to the foot of the cliff, and climbed rapidly to the sheep-track – the faintly-seen path that led towards Slapton Lea and the old hall, where the captain still stayed with his young wife, and then joined the west road which led to Plymouth town.

The risky part of the track was passed, and the open and down-like pastures beyond the cliffs were reached; and here, with the moon beginning to throw the shadow of the traveller far forward and in weird-looking length, the original of that shadow strode on manfully for another quarter of a mile, when all at once there was a stoppage, for another figure was seen coming from the direction of Torcross, and the moon shining full upon the face showed plainly who it was.

There was no question of identity, for that evening, after more than his customary modicum of wine, Captain James Armstrong – whose journey had been postponed – had snubbed his young wife cruelly, quarrelled with his cousin Humphrey, who had been there to dine, and then left the house, determined to go down to Mary Dell's solitary cottage.

"I'm a fool," he said; "I haven't been firm enough with the handsome cat. She scratched. Well, cats have claws, and when I have taught her how to purr nicely she'll keep them always sheathed. I'll bring her to her senses to-night, once and for all.

"Who the devil's this?" muttered the captain. "Humph! sailor on the tramp to Plymouth. Well, he won't know me. I won't turn back."

He strode on a dozen yards and then stopped short, as the figure before him had stopped a few moments before; and then a change came over the aspect of the captain. His knees shook, his face turned wet, and his throat grew dry.

It was horrible; but there could be no mistake.

"Abel Dell!" he cried, hoarsely, as he leaped at the idea that the brother had returned in spirit, to save his sister from all harm.

"Out of my path!" rang forth in answer, the voice being loud, imperious, and fierce; and then, in a tone of intense hatred and suppressed passion, the one word – "Dog!"

As the last word rang out there was a whistling as of a stick passing through the air, a tremendous thud, and the captain fell headlong upon the rocky ground.

Then there was utter silence as the young sailor placed one foot upon the prostrate man's chest, stamped upon it savagely, and strode on right away over the wild country bordering the sea.

The figure loomed up once in the moonlight, as the captain rose slowly upon one elbow, and gazed after it, to see that it seemed to be of supernatural proportions, and then he sank back again with a groan.

“It's a spirit,” he said, “come back to her;” and then the poltroon fainted dead away.

Chapter Eleven In the Plantation

Someone singing a West Country ditty.

“His sloe-black eyes...”

A pause in the singing, and the striking of several blows with a rough hoe, to the destruction of weeds in a coffee-plantation; while, as the chops of the hoe struck the clods of earth, the fetters worn by the striker gave forth faint clinks.

Then in a pleasant musical voice the singer went on with another line —

“And his curly hair...”

More chops with the hoe, and clinks of the fetters.

“His pleasing voice...”

A heavy thump with the back of the tool at an obstinate clod, which took several more strokes before it crumbled up; and all the time the fetters clinked and clanked loudly. Then the singer went on with the sweet old minor air with its childish words.

“Did my heart ensnare...”

Chop! chop! clink! clink! clank!

“Genteel he was...”

“But no rake like you.”

“Oh, I say, Abel, mate; don’t, lad, don’t.”

“Don’t what?” said Abel Dell, resting upon his hoe, and looking up at big Bart Wrigley, clothed like himself, armed with a hoe, and also decorated with fetters, as he stood wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

“Don’t sing that there old song. It do make me feel so unked.”

“Unked, Bart! Well, what if it does? These are unked days.”

“Ay; but each time you sings that I seem to see the rocks along by the shore at home, with the ivy hanging down, and the sheep feeding, and the sea rolling in, and the blue sky, with gulls a-flying; and it makes me feel like a boy again, and, big as I am, as if I should cry.”

“Always were like a big boy, Bart. Hoe away, lad; the overseer’s looking.”

Bart went on chopping weeds, diligently following his friend’s example, as a sour-looking, yellow-faced man came by, in company with a soldier loosely shouldering his musket. But they passed by without speaking, and Abel continued —

“There’s sea here, and blue sky and sunshine.”

“Ay,” said Bart; “there’s sunshine hot enough to fry a mack’rel. Place is right enough if you was free; but it ar’n’t home, Abel, it ar’n’t home.”

“Home! no,” said the young man, savagely. “But we have no home. She spoiled that.”

There was an interval of weed-chopping and clod-breaking, the young men’s chains clanking loudly as they worked now so energetically that the overseer noted their proceedings, and pointed them out as examples to an idle hand.

“Ah! you’re a hard ’un, Abel,” remarked Bart, after a time.

“Yes; and you’re a soft ’un, Bart. She could always turn you round her little finger.”

“Ay, bless her! and she didn’t tell on us.”

“Yes, she did,” said Abel, sourly; and he turned his back upon his companion, and toiled away to hide the working of his face.

The sun shone down as hotly as it can shine in the West Indies, and the coarse shirts the young men wore showed patches of moisture where the perspiration came through, but they worked on, for the labour deadened the misery in their breasts.

And yet it was a very paradise, as far as nature was concerned. Man had spoiled it as far as he could, his cultivation being but a poor recompense for turning so lovely a spot into a plantation, worked by convicts – by men who fouled the ambient air each moment they opened their lips; while from time to time the earth was stained with blood.

In the distance shone the sea, and between the plantation and the silver coral sands lay patches of virgin forest, where the richest and most luxuriant of tropic growth revelled in the heat and moisture, while in the sunny patches brilliant flowers blossomed. Then came wild tangle, cane-brake, and in one place, where a creek indented the land, weird-looking mangroves spread their leafage over their muddy scaffolds of aërial roots.

“How long have we been here, mate?” said Bart, after a pause.

“Dunno,” replied Abel, fiercely.

Here he began chopping more vigorously.

“How long will they keep us in this here place?” said Bart, after another interval, and he looked from the beautiful shore at the bottom of the slope on which they worked to the cluster of stone and wood-built buildings, which formed the prison and the station farm, with factory and mill, all worked by convict labour, while those in the neighbourhood were managed by blacks.

Abel did not answer, only scowled fiercely; and Bart sighed, and repeated his question.

“Till we die!” said Abel, savagely; “same as we’ve seen other fellows die – of fever, and hard work, and the lash. Curse the captain! Curse – ”

Bart clapped one hand over his companion’s lips, and he held the other behind his head, dropping his hoe to leave full liberty to act.

“I never quarrels with you, Abel, lad,” he said, shortly; “but if you says words again that poor gell, I’m going to fight – and that won’t do. Is it easy?”

Abel seemed disposed to struggle; but he gave in, nodded his head, and Bart loosed him and picked up his hoe, just as the overseer, who had come softly up behind, brought down the whip he carried with stinging violence across the shoulders of first one and then the other.

The young men sprang round savagely; but there was a sentry close behind, musket-armed and with bayonet fixed, and they knew that fifty soldiers were within call, and that if they struck their task-master down and made for the jungle they would be hunted out with dogs, be shot down like wild beasts, or die of starvation, as other unfortunates had died before them.

There was nothing for it but to resume their labour and hoe to the clanking of their fetters, while, after a promise of what was to follow, in the shape of tying up to the triangles, and the cat, if they quarrelled again, the overseer went on to see to the others of his flock.

“It’s worse than a dog’s life!” said Abel, bitterly. “A dog does get patted as well as kicked. Bart, lad, I’m sorry I got you that lash.”

“Nay, lad, never mind,” said Bart. “I’m sorry for you; but don’t speak hard things of Mary.”

“I’ll try not,” said Abel, as he hoed away excitedly; “but I hope this coffee we grow may poison those who drink it.”

“What for? They can’t help it,” said Bart, smiling. “There, lad, take it coolly. Some day we may make a run for it.”

“And be shot!” said Abel, bitterly. “There, you’re down to the end of that row. I’ll go this way. He’s watching us.”

Bart obeyed. He was one who always did obey; and by degrees the young men were working right away from each other, till they were a good two hundred yards apart.

Abel was at the end of his row first, and he stopped and turned to begin again and go down, so as to pass Bart at about the middle of the clearing; but Bart had another minute’s chopping to do before turning.

He was close up to a dense patch of forest – one wild tangle of cane and creeper, which literally tied the tall trees together and made the forest impassable – when the shrieking of a kind of jay, which

had been flitting about excitedly, stopped, and was followed by the melodious whistle of a white bird and the twittering of quite a flock of little fellows of a gorgeous scarlet-crimson. Then the shrieking of several parrots answering each other arose; while just above Bart's head, where clusters of trumpet-shaped blossoms hung down from the edge of the forest, scores of brilliantly-scaled humming-birds literally buzzed on almost transparent wing, and then suspended themselves in mid-air as they probed the nectaries of the flowers with their long bills.

"You're beauties, you are," said Bart, stopping to wipe his brow; "but I'd give the hull lot on you for a sight of one good old sarcy sparrer a-sitting on the cottage roof and saying *chisel chisel*. Ah! shall us ever see old Devonshire again?"

The parrots hung upside-down, and the tiny humming-birds flitted here and there, displaying, from time to time, the brilliancy of their scale-like feathers, and Bart glanced at his fellow-convict and was about to work back, when there came a sound from out of the dark forest which made him stare wildly, and then the sound arose again.

Bart changed colour, and did not stop to hoe, but walked rapidly across to Abel.

"What's the matter?" said the latter.

"Dunno, lad," said the other, rubbing his brow with his arm; "but there's something wrong."

"What is it?"

"That's what I dunno; but just now something said quite plain, 'Bart! Bart!'"

"Nonsense! You were dreaming."

"Nay. I was wide awake as I am now, and as I turned and stared it said it again."

"It said it?"

"Well, she said it."

"Poll parrot," said Abel, gruffly. "Go on with your work. Here's the overseer."

The young men worked away, and their supervisor passed them, and, apparently satisfied, continued his journey round.

"May have been a poll parrot," said Bart. "They do talk plain, Abel, lad; but this sounded like something else."

"What else could it be?"

"Sounded like a ghost."

Abel burst into a hearty laugh – so hearty that Bart's face was slowly overspread by a broad smile.

"Why, lud, that's better," he said, grimly. "I ar'n't seen you do that for months. Work away."

The hint was given because of the overseer glancing in their direction, and they now worked on together slowly, going down the row toward the jungle, at which Bart kept on darting uneasy glances.

"Enough to make a man laugh to hear you talk of ghosts, Bart," said Abel, after a time.

"What could it be, then?"

"Parrot some lady tamed," said Abel, shortly, as they worked on side by side, "escaped to the woods again. Some of these birds talk just like a Christian."

"Ay," said Bart, after a few moments' quiet thought, "I've heard 'em, lad; but there's no poll parrot out here as knows me."

"Knows you?"

"Well, didn't I tell you as it called to me 'Bart! Bart!'"

"Sounded like it," said Abel, laconically. "What does he want?"

For just then the overseer shouted, and signed to the gang-men to come to him.

"To begin another job – log-rolling, I think," growled Bart, shouldering his hoe.

At that moment, as Abel followed his example, there came in a low, eager tone of voice from out of the jungle, twenty yards away —

"Bart! – Abel! – Abel!"

“Don’t look,” whispered Abel, who reeled as if struck, and recovered himself to catch his companion by the arm. “All right!” he said aloud; “we’ll be here to-morrow. We must go.”

Chapter Twelve In Deadly Peril

It was quite a week before the two young men were at work in the plantation of young trees again, and during all that time they had feverishly discussed the voice they had heard. Every time they had approached the borders of the plantation when it ran up to the virgin forest they had been on the *qui vive*, expecting to hear their names called again, but only to be disappointed; and, after due consideration, Abel placed a right interpretation upon the reason.

“It was someone who got ashore from a boat,” he said, “and managed to crawl up there. It’s the only place where anyone could get up.”

“Being nigh that creek, lad, where the crocodiles is,” said Bart. “Ay, you’re right. Who could it be?”

“One of our old mates.”

“Nay; no old mate would take all that trouble for us, lad. It’s someone Mary’s sent to bring us a letter and a bit of news.”

It was at night in the prison lines that Bart said this, and then he listened wonderingly in the dark, for he heard something like a sob from close to his elbow.

“Abel, matey!” he whispered.

“Don’t talk to me, old lad,” came back hoarsely after a time. And then, after a long silence, “Yes, you’re right. Poor lass – poor lass!”

“Say that again, Abel; say that again,” whispered Bart, excitedly.

“Poor lass! I’ve been too hard on her. She didn’t get us took.”

“Thank God!”

These were Bart’s hoarsely whispered words, choked with emotion; and directly after, as he lay there, Abel Dell felt a great, rough, trembling hand pass across his face and search about him till it reached his own, which it gripped and held with a strong, firm clasp, for there was beneath Bart’s rough, husk-like exterior a great deal of the true, loyal, loving material of which English gentlemen are made; and when towards morning those two prisoners fell asleep in their chains, hand was still gripped in hand, while the dreams that brightened the remaining hours of their rest from penal labour were very similar, being of a rough home down beneath Devon’s lovely cliffs, where the sea ran sparkling over the clean-washed pebbles, and the handsome face of Mary smiled upon each in turn.

“Abel, mate, I’m ready for anything now,” said Bart, as they went that morning to their work. “Only say again as you forgive our lass.”

“Bart, old lad,” said Abel, hoarsely, “I’ve nought to forgive.”

“Hah!” ejaculated Bart, and then he began to whistle softly as if in the highest of spirits, and looked longingly in the direction of the jungle beside the mud creek; but three days elapsed before they were set to hoe among the coffee bushes again.

Bart let his chin go down upon his chest on the morning when the order was given, and the overseer saw it and cracked his whip.

“You sulky ruffian!” he cried. “None of your sour looks with me. Get on with you!”

He cracked his whip again, and Bart shuffled off, clinking his fetters loudly.

“Do keep between us, Abel, lad,” he whispered, “or I shall go off and he’ll see. Oh, lor’, how I do want to laugh!”

He restrained his mirth for a time, and they walked on to the end of the plantation and began their task at the opposite end to where they had left off, when the rate at which their hoes were plied was such that they were not long before they began to near the dense jungle, beyond which lay the mangrove swamp and the sea.

“I daren’t hope, Bart,” whispered Abel, so despondently that his companion, in a wildly excited manner, laughed in his face.

“What a lad you are!” he cried. “It’s all right; he’s waiting for us. It’s some, sailor chap from Dartmouth, whose ship’s put in at Kingston or Belize. Cheer up, mate!”

But it was all a mockery; and when they approached the jungle at last, hoeing more slowly for, much as they longed to go up at once, they knew that any unusual movement on their part, might be interpreted by watchful eyes into an attempt at escape, and bring down upon them a shot. Bart’s voice trembled and sounded hoarsely as he said playfully —

“Now, Abel, my lad, I’m going to talk to that there poll parrot.”

“Hush!” whispered Abel, agitatedly. “Keep on quietly with your work till we get close, and then call softly.”

“Oh, it’s all straight, lad,” whispered back Bart, chopping away and breaking clods, as his fetters clanked more loudly than ever. “Now, then, Polly! Pretty Polly, are you there?”

“Yes, yes, Bart. Abel, dear brother, at last, at last!” came from the jungle.

“Mary – Polly, my girl!” cried Abel, hoarsely, as he threw down his hoe; and he was running toward the jungle, where a crashing sound was heard, when Bart flung his strong arms across his chest and dashed him to the ground.

“Are you mad!” he cried. “Mary, for God’s sake keep back!”

The warning was needed, for from across the plantation the overseer and a couple of soldiers came running, every movement on the part of the prisoners being watched.

“Sham ill, lad; sham ill,” whispered Bart, as a piteous sigh came from the depths of the jungle.

“Now, then, you two. Fighting again!” roared the overseer, as he came panting up.

“Fighting, sir!” growled Bart; “rum fighting. He nearly went down.”

“He was trying to escape.”

“Escape!” growled Bart. “Look at him. Sun’s hot.”

The overseer bent down over Abel, whose aspect helped the illusion, for he looked ghastly from his emotion; and he had presence of mind enough to open his eyes, look about, wildly from face to face, and then begin to struggle up, with one hand to his head.

“Is it the fayver, sor?” said one of the soldiers.

“No. Touch of the sun,” said the overseer. “They’re always getting it. There, you’re all right, ar’n’t you?”

“Yes, sir,” said Abel, slowly, as he picked up his hoe.

“Sit down under the trees there for a few minutes,” said the overseer. “Lend him your water bottle, soldier. And you stop with him till he’s hotter. I’ll come back soon.”

This last was to Bart, playing, as it were, into the prisoners’ hands, for Bart took the water bottle; and as the overseer went off with his guard, Abel was assisted to the edge of the jungle where a huge cotton-tree threw its shade; and here Bart placed him on an old stump, trembling the while, as he held the water to his companion’s lips.

It was hard work to keep still while the others went out of hearing; but at last it seemed safe, and Abel panted out —

“Mary, dear, are you there?”

“Yes, yes, Abel. Oh, my dear brother, say one kind word to me!”

“Kind word? Oh, my lass, my lass, say that you forgive me!”

“Forgive you? Yes. But quick, dear, before those men come back.”

“Tell me, then,” said Abel, speaking with his back to the jungle, and his head bent down as if ill, while Bart leaned over him, trembling like a leaf, “tell me how you came to be here.”

“I came over in a ship to Kingston. Then I went to New Orleans. Then to Honduras. And it was only a fortnight ago that I found you.”

“But how did you come here?”

“I’ve got a small boat, dear. I asked and asked for months before I could find out where you were. I’ve been to other plantations, and people have thought me mad; but one day I stumbled across the sailors of a ship that comes here with stores from the station, and I heard them say that there were a number of prisoners working at this place; and at last, after waiting and watching for weeks and weeks, I caught sight of you two, and then it was a month before I could speak to you as I did the other day.”

“And now you have come,” said Abel, bitterly, “I can’t even look at you.”

“But you will escape, dear,” said Mary.

“Escape!” cried Abel, excitedly.

“Steady, lad, steady. ’Member you’re ill,” growled Bart, glancing toward the nearest sentry, and then holding up the bottle as if to see how much was within.

“Yes, escape,” said Mary. “I have the boat ready. Can you come now?”

“Impossible! We should be overtaken and shot before we had gone a mile.”

“But you must escape,” said Mary. “You must get down here by night.”

“How?” said Bart, gruffly.

“You two must settle that,” said Mary, quickly. “I am only a woman; but I have found means to get here with a boat, and I can come again and again till you join me.”

“Yes,” said Abel, decidedly; “we will contrive that.”

“But is it safe, lass, where you are?”

“What do you mean?”

“They telled us there was the crocodiles all along that creek, and sharks out beyond, if we tried to run.”

“Yes,” said Mary, calmly, “there are plenty of these creatures about.”

“Listen,” said Abel, quickly, and speaking as decidedly now as his sister. “Can you get here night after night?”

“Yes,” said Mary. “I have been here every night since I spoke to you last.”

“Then keep on coming.”

“Yes,” said Mary; “I will till you escape.”

“You have the boat?”

“Yes.”

“And provisions?”

“Yes; a little.”

“But how do you manage?”

“I am fishing if any one sees me; but it is very lonely here. I see nothing but the birds,” she added to herself, “and sharks and alligators;” and as she said this she smiled sadly.

“Be careful, then,” said Abel. “Bart, old lad, we will escape.”

There was a loud expiration of the breath from the jungle, and Abel continued —

“I must get up and go on work, or they will be back. Mary, once more, you have a boat?”

“Yes.”

“And can come up here and wait?”

“Yes.”

Quick, short, decided answers each time.

“Then be cautious. Only come by night.”

“I know. Trust me. I will not be seen. I will do nothing rash. To-night as soon as it grows dark, I shall be here expecting you, for I shall not stir. At daybreak I shall go, and come again at night.”

“And mind the sentries.”

“Trust me, Abel. I shall not come now by day for six days. If at the end of six nights you have not been able to escape, I shall come for six days by day, hoping that you may be more successful in the daylight; for perhaps you will find that a bold dash will help you to get away.”

“But the risk – the risk?” panted Abel – “the risk, girl, to you!”

“Abel, dear, I am here to risk everything. I have risked everything to join you.”

“Yes,” he said, hoarsely. “But afterwards. If we do escape?”

“Leave the plans to me,” she said, with a little laugh. “I have boat and sail, and the world is very wide. Only escape. Take care; the men are coming back.”

Mary’s voice ceased; and Abel took hold of Bart’s arm, rose, raised his hoe, and walked with him to where they had left off work, to begin again slowly, the two men trembling with excitement now; for, as the overseer neared them, a bird began flying to and fro over the edge of the jungle, screaming wildly, evidently from the fact that somebody was hidden there.

The excitement of the bird, whose nest was probably somewhere near, did not, however, take the attention of the overseer, who came up, followed by the Irish sentry, stared hard at Abel, gave a short nod as if satisfied that one of his beasts of burden was not going to permanently break down, and then, to the horror of the young men, took off his hat, began fanning himself, and went and sat down in the very spot where Abel had talked with his sister!

“Hot, Paddy, hot!” he said to the soldier.

“Dinny, sor, av you plaze. Thru for you, sor, and a taste of dhrink would be very nice for ye; but I shouldn’t sit there.”

“Why not?” said the overseer.

“Because the place swarms with them ugly, four-futed, scaly divils. I’ve gone the rounds here of a night, sor, and heard them snapping their jaws and thumping the wet mud with their tails till I’ve shivered again.”

“Yes, there’s plenty of them in the creek, Dinny.”

“Plinty, sor, ’s nothing to it. There niver seems to have been a blessed Saint Pathrick here to get rid of the varmin. Why, I’ve seen frogs here as big as turtles, and sarpints that would go round the Hill of Howth.”

“Well, look here, Dinny, cock your piece, and if you see anything stir, let drive at it at once.”

“Oi will, sor,” said the soldier, obeying orders; and, taking a step or two forward, he stood watchfully gazing into the dark jungle.

“Have you got your knife, Bart?” whispered Abel, whose face was of a peculiar muddy hue.

Bart nodded as he chopped away.

“Shall we make a rush at them, and stun them with the hoes?”

Bart shook his head.

“Mary’s too clever,” he whispered back. “She’s well hidden, and will not stir.”

“If that Irish beast raises his musket I must go at him,” whispered Abel, who was trembling from head to foot.

“Hold up, man. She heer’d every word, and won’t stir.”

“Silence, there. No talking!” cried the overseer.

“Let the poor divils talk, sor,” said the soldier. “Faix, it’s bad enough to put chains on their legs; don’t put anny on their tongues.”

“If I get you down,” thought Abel, “I won’t kill you, for that.”

“Against orders,” said the overseer, good-humouredly. “Well, can you see anything stirring?”

“Not yet, sor; but I hope I shall. Bedad, I’d be glad of a bit o’ sport, for it’s dhry work always carrying a gun about widout having a shot.”

“Yes; but when you do get a shot, it’s at big game, Dinny.”

“Yis, sor, but then it’s very seldom,” said the sentry, with a roguish twinkle of the eye.

“I can’t bear this much longer, Bart,” whispered Abel. “When I say *Now!* rush at them both with your hoe.”

“Wait till he’s going to shoot, then,” growled Bart.

The overseer bent down, and, sheltering himself beneath the tree, placed his hands out in the sunshine, one holding a roughly rolled cigar, the other a burning-glass, with which he soon focussed the vivid white spot of heat which made the end of the cigar begin to smoke, the tiny spark being drawn into incandescence by application to the man's lips, while the pleasant odour of the burning leaf arose.

"Sure, an' that's an illigant way of getting a light, sor," said the sentry.

"Easy enough with such a hot sun," said the overseer, complacently.

"Hot sun, sor! Sure I never carry my mushket here widout feeling as if it will go off in my hands; the barl gets nearly red-hot!"

"Yah! Don't point it this way," said the overseer, smoking away coolly. "Well, can you see anything?"

"Divil a thing but that noisy little omadhaun of a bird. Sure, she'd be a purty thing to have in a cage."

Abel's face grew more ghastly as he gazed at Bart, who remained cool and controlled him.

"Bart," whispered Abel, with the sweat rolling off his face in beads, "what shall we do?"

"Wait," said the rough fellow shortly; and he hoed away, with his fetters clinking, and his eyes taking in every movement of the two men; while involuntarily Abel followed his action in every respect, as they once more drew nearer to their task-master and his guard.

"There's a something yonder, sor," said the soldier at last.

"Alligator!" said the overseer, lazily; and Abel's heart rose so that he seemed as if he could not breathe.

"I can't see what it is, sor; but it's a something, for the little burrud kapes darting down at it and floying up again. I belyve it is one of they crockidills. Shall I shute the divil?"

"How can you shoot it if you can't see it, you fool?" said the overseer.

"Sure, sor, they say that every bullet has its billet, and if I let the little blue pill out of the mouth o' the mushket, faix, it's a strange thing if it don't find its way into that ugly scaly baste."

The overseer took his cigar from his lips and laughed; but to the intense relief of the young men, perhaps to the saving of his own life, he shook his head.

"No, Dinny," he said, "it would alarm the station. They'd think someone was escaping. Let it be."

Dinny sighed, the overseer smoked on, and the hot silence of the tropic clearing was only broken by the screaming and chattering of the excited bird, the hum of insects, and the clink-clink, thud-thud, of fetters and hoe as the convicts toiled on in the glowing sun.

They kept as near as they dared to their task-master, and he smiled superciliously as he put his own interpretation upon their acts.

"The artful scoundrels!" he said to himself; "they want me to believe that they always work like this. Well, it helps the plantation;" and he smoked placidly on, little dreaming that every time Abel reversed his hoe, so as to break a clod with the back, the young man glanced at him and measured the distance between them, while he calculated how long to hold the handle of the tool, and where would be the best place to strike the enemy so as to disable him at once.

"You take the soldier, Bart," said Abel, softly. "I'll manage the overseer."

"Right, lad! but not without we're obliged."

"No. Then, as soon as they're down, into the wood, find Mary, and make for her boat."

The heat was intense, the shade beneath the great cotton-tree grateful, and the aroma of the cigar so delicious that the overseer sank into a drowsy reverie; while the soldier gave the two convicts a half-laughing look and then turned to face the jungle, whose depths he pierced with his eyes.

Bart drew a long breath and gazed toward the dark part of the jungle, and there was an intense look of love and satisfaction in his eyes as he tried to make out the place where Mary lay, as he believed, hidden. The sight of the sentry on the watch with his gun ready had ceased to trouble him,

for he had told himself that the clumsy fellow could not hit a barn-door, let alone a smaller mark; while Abel seemed to be less agitated, and to be resuming his normal state.

They were not twenty yards from the edge of the forest now, the sentry's back was toward them, and the overseer was getting to the end of his cigar, and watching the watcher with half-closed eyes, and an amused smile upon his yellow countenance.

"Every bullet finds its billet," he muttered to himself; and, stretching himself, he was in the act of rising, when the bird, which had been silent, uttered a shrill, chattering cry, as if freshly disturbed, and the soldier shouted excitedly —

"Theer, sor, I can see it. A big one staling away among the threes. For the sake of all the saints give the wurrud!"

"Fire, then!" cried the overseer; and the sentry raised his piece to the "present."

Bart Wrigley had not been at sea from childhood without winning a sailor's eyes. Dark as the jungle was, and more distant as he stood, it was not so black that he could not make out the object which had oaken the sentry's notice, and at which he took aim.

One moment Bart raised his hoe to rush at the man; the next he had brought it down heavily on Abel's boulders, sending him forward upon his face, and uttering a cry of rage as he fell.

It was almost simultaneous. The cry uttered by Abel Dell and the report of the sentry's piece seemed to smite the air together; but Abel's cry was first, and disarranged the soldier's aim, his bullet cutting the leaves of the jungle far above the ground.

"Look at that now!" he cried, as he turned sharply to see Abel struggling on the ground, with Bart holding him, and the overseer drawing a pistol front his breast.

"Lie still!" whispered Bart. "It was not at Mary."

Then aloud —

"Quick, here! water! He's in a fit."

As Abel grasped his friend's thoughts he lay back, struggling faintly, and then half-closed his eyes and was quite still.

"It's the sun, sir," said Bart, as the overseer thrust back his pistol and came up. "Hadn't we better get him back to the lines?"

"Yes," said the overseer. "Poor devil! No, no! Back, back!" he roared, signalling with his hands as a sergeant's guard came along at the double. "Nothing wrong. Only a man sick, and Dinny Kelly here had a shot at an alligator."

"An' I should have hit him, sor, if he hadn't shouted. But think o' that, now! The sun lights gentleman's cigar one minute, and shtrikes a man down the next. But it's better than the yaller fayver, anyhow."

Five days had passed, and the prisoners were not sent again to the clearing, while, in spite of every effort, they found that their chances of eluding the guard set over them by night were small indeed.

Fettered by day, they were doubly chained by night. The building where they slept was strongly secured and guarded, and in spite of the newness of the settlement it was well chosen for its purpose, and stronger even than the prisoners thought.

"We shall never get away by night, Bart," said Abel, gloomily, "unless —"

He stopped and gazed meaningly at his companion.

"The knife?" responded Bart. "No, lad, we won't do that. I shouldn't like to go to Mary wet with blood."

Abel's countenance grew dark and deeply hard, for at that moment, in his despair and disappointment, he felt ready to go to any extremity, knowing, as he did, that his sister was waiting for him, holding out her hands and saying, "Come!"

Only another day, and then she would give up expecting them by night, and take to watching for them by day, when the attempt seemed hopeless.

And so it proved, for during the following week the prisoners were only once in the coffee-plantation, and so strictly watched that they felt that to attempt an evasion was only to bring destruction upon their hopes, perhaps cause Mary's imprisonment for attempting to assist prisoners to escape.

"It's of no use, Bart," said Abel at last, despondently. "Poor girl! Why did she come?"

"Help us away," said Bart, gruffly.

"Yes, but all in vain."

"Tchah! Wait a bit."

"Do you think she will still come and wait?" said Abel, dolefully.

"Do I think th' sun 'll shine agen?" growled Bart. "Here's a fellow! Born same time as that there lass, lived with her all his days, and then he knows so little about her that he says, 'Will she come agen?'"

"Enough to tire her out."

"Tchah!" cried Bart again, "when you know she'll keep on coming till she's an old grey-headed woman, or she gets us away."

Abel shook his head, for he was low-spirited and not convinced; but that night his heart leaped, for as he lay half asleep, listening to the thin buzzing hum of the mosquitoes which haunted the prisoners' quarters, and the slow, regular pace of the sentry on guard outside, there was the faint rattle of a chain, as if some prisoner had turned in his unquiet rest, and then all was silent again, till he started, for a rough hand was laid upon his mouth.

His first instinct was to seize the owner of that hand, to engage in a struggle for his life; but a mouth was placed directly at his ear, and a well-known voice whispered —

"Don't make a sound. Tie these bits of rag about your irons so as they don't rattle."

Abel caught at the pieces of cloth and canvas thrust into his hand, and, sitting up in the darkness, he softly bound the links and rings of his fetters together, hardly daring to breathe, and yet with his heart beating tumultuously in his anxiety to know his companion's plans.

For an attempt it must be, Abel felt, though up to the time of their going to rest after the day's work Bart had said nothing to him. He must have made a sudden discovery, and there was nothing for it but to obey in every way and trust to what was to come.

Abel felt this as he rapidly knotted the rag round his chains, and as he was tying the last knot he felt Bart's hand upon his shoulder, and his lips at his ear.

"Quiet, and creep after me. Keep touching my foot so's not to miss me in the dark."

Abel's heart thumped against his ribs as he obeyed, taking Bart's hand first in a firm grip, and then feeling a short iron bar thrust between his fingers.

Then he became conscious from his companion's movements that he had gone down upon his hands and knees, and was crawling toward the end of the long, low, stone-walled building that served as a dormitory for the white slaves whose task was to cultivate the rough plantation till they, as a rule, lay down and died from fever or some of the ills that haunted the tropic land.

Just then Bart stopped short, for there were steps outside, and a gleam of light appeared beneath the heavy door. Voices were heard, and the rattle of a soldier's musket.

"Changing guard," said Abel to himself; and he found himself wondering whether the sergeant and his men would enter the prison.

To add to the risk of discovery, there was a shuffling sound on the left, and a clink of chains, as one man seemed to rise upon his elbow; and his movement roused another, who also clinked his chains in the darkness and growled out an imprecation.

All this time Bart remained absolutely motionless, and Abel listened with the perspiration streaming from him in the intense heat.

Then there was a hoarsely uttered command; the light faded away, the steps died out upon the ear; there was a clink or two of chains, and a heavy sigh from some restless sleeper, and once more

in the black silence and stifling heat there was nothing to be heard but the loud trumpeting buzz of the mosquitoes.

Softly, as some large cat, Bart resumed his crawling movement, after thrusting back his leg and touching Abel on the chest with his bare foot as a signal.

The building was quite a hundred feet long by about eighteen wide, a mere gallery in shape, which had been lengthened from time to time as the number of convicts increased, and the men had about two-thirds of the distance to traverse before they could reach the end, and at their excessively slow rate of progress the time seemed interminable before, after several painful halts, caused by movements of their fellow-prisoners and dread of discovery, the final halt was made.

“Now, then, what is it?” whispered Abel.

The answer he received was a hand laid across his mouth, and his heart began to beat more wildly than ever, for Bart caught his hand, drew it toward him, and as it was yielded, directed the fingers downward to the stone level with the floor.

Abel’s heart gave another bound, for that stone was loose, and as he was pressed aside he heard a faint gritting, his companion’s breath seemed to come more thickly, as if from exertion, and for the next hour – an hour that seemed like twelve – Abel lay, unable to help, but panting with anxiety, as the gritting noise went on, and he could mentally see that Bart was slowly drawing out rough pieces of badly-cemented stone – rough fragments really of coral and limestone from the nearest reef, of which the prison barrack was built.

Three times over Abel had tried to help, but the firm pressure of his companion’s hand forcing him back spoke volume, and he subsided into his position in the utter darkness, listening with his pulses throbbing and subsiding, as the gritting sound was made or the reverse.

At last, after what seemed an age, a faint breath of comparatively cool air began to play upon his cheek, as Bart seemed to work steadily on. That breath grew broader and fuller, and there was a soft odour of the sea mingled with the damp coolness of a breeze which had passed over the dewy ground before it began to set steadily in at the opening at which Bart had so patiently worked, for that there was an opening was plain enough now, as Abel exultantly felt.

In his inaction the torture of the dread was intense, and he lay wondering whether, if they did get out, Mary would still be waiting, expecting them, or their efforts prove to have been in vain.

At last, just when he felt as if he could bear it no longer, Bart’s hand gripped him by the shoulder, and pressed him tightly. Then in the darkness his hand was seized and guided where it hardly wanted guiding, for the young man’s imagination had painted all – to a rough opening level with the floor, a hole little larger than might have been made for fowls to pass in and out of a poultry-yard.

This done, Bart gave him a thrust which Abel interpreted to mean, “Go on.”

Abel responded with another, to indicate, “No; you go.”

Bart gripped him savagely by the arm, and he yielded, crept slowly to the hole, went down upon his breast, and softly thrust his head through into the dank night air, to hear plainly the sighing and croaking of the reptiles in the swamp, and see before him the sparkling scintillations of the myriad fireflies darting from bush to bush.

He wormed himself on, and was about to draw forth one hand and arm, but always moving as silently as some nocturnal beast of prey, when it suddenly occurred to him that the glow of one of the fireflies was unusually large; and before he had well grasped this idea there was the regular tramp of feet, and he knew that it was the lantern of the guard moving across to the prison barrack, and that they must come right past where he lay.

He must creep back and wait; and as the steps steadily approached and the tramp grew plainer he began to wriggle himself through, getting his arm well in and his shoulders beginning to follow till only his head was outside, and the dull light of the lantern seeming to show it plainly, when to his horror he found that some portion of his garment had caught upon a rough projection and he was fast.

He made a tremendous effort, but could not drag it free, for his arms were pressed close to his sides and he was helpless. If Bart had known and passed a hand through, he might have freed him, but he could not explain his position; and all the time the guard was coming nearer and nearer, the lantern-light dancing upon the rough path, until it would be hardly possible for the nearest soldier to pass him without stumbling against his head.

Discovery, extra labour, the lash, more irons, and the chance of evasion gone; all those displayed, as it were, before Abel Dell's gaze as he thought of his sister waiting for them with that boat all plainly seen by the gleaming light of that lantern as the soldiers came steadily on.

It was absolutely impossible that the sergeant and his four men, whom the light had revealed quite plainly to Abel Dell, could pass him without something unusual occurred. The sergeant was carrying his lantern swinging at arm's length, on his left side, and the bottom as he passed would only be a few inches above the prisoner's head.

Abel knew all this as he pressed his teeth together to keep down the agonising feeling of despair he felt already as the men came on in regular pace, with the barrels of the muskets and their bayonets gleaming, and he expected to hear an exclamation of astonishment with the command "Halt!" – when something unusual did happen.

For all at once, just as the back of Abel's head must have loomed up like a black stone close by the sergeant's path, and the rays of light glistened on his short, crisp, black hair, there came a loud croaking bellow from down in the swamp by the crook, and Dinny exclaimed aloud:

"Hark at that now!"

"Silence in the ranks!" cried the sergeant fiercely; and then, as if the Irishman's words were contagious, he, turning his head as did his men towards the spot whence the sound proceeded, exclaimed, "What was it?"

"One of them lovely crockidills, sergeant dear – the swate craytures, with that plisant smile they have o' their own. Hark at him again!"

The same croaking roar arose, but more distant, as if it were the response to a challenge.

"Don't it carry you home again sergeant, dear?"

"Silence in the – How, Dinny?" said the sergeant, good-humouredly, for the men were laughing.

"Why, my mother had a cow – a Kerry cow, the darlint – and Farmer Magee, half a mile across the bog, had a bull, and you could hear him making love to her at toimes just like that, and moighty plisant it was."

"And used he to come across the bog," said the sergeant, "to court her?"

"And did he come across the bog to court her!" said Dinny, with a contemptuous tone in his voice. "And could you go across the bog courting if Farmer Magee had put a ring through your nose, and tied you up to a post, sergeant dear? Oh, no! The farmer was moighty particular about that bull's morals, and niver let him out of a night."

"Silence in the ranks! Tention!" said the serjeant. "Half left!"

Tramp! tramp! tramp! tramp, and the men passed round the end of the building just as the alligator bellowed again.

Abel drew a long breath and rapidly drew himself through the hole – no easy task and Bart began follow, but only to stick before he was half-way through.

"I'm at it again," he whispered. "Natur' made me crooked o' purpose to go wrong at times like this."

Abel seized his hands, as he recalled the incident at the cottage.

"Now," he whispered, "both together – hard!"

Bart gave himself a wrench as his companion tugged tremendously, and the resistance was overcome.

"Half my skin," growled Bart, as he struggled to his feet and stood by his companion. "Now, lad, this way."

“No, no; that’s the way the soldiers have gone.”

“It’s the only way, lad. The dogs are yonder, and we couldn’t get over the palisade. Now!”

They crept on in silence, seeing from time to time glints of the lantern, and in the midst of the still darkness matters seemed to be going so easily for them that Abel’s heart grew more regular in its pulsation, and he was just asking himself why he had not had invention enough to contrive this evasion, when a clear and familiar voice cried, “Shtand!” and there was the click of a musket-lock.

What followed was almost momentary.

Bart struck aside the bayonet levelled at his breast, and leaped upon the sentry before him, driving him backward and clapping his hand upon his mouth as he knelt upon his chest; while, ably seconding him, his companion wrested the musket from the man’s hand, twisted the bayonet from the end of the barrel, and, holding it daggerwise, pressed it against the man’s throat.

“Hold aside, Bart,” whispered Abel, savagely.

“No, no,” growled Bart. “No blood, lad.”

“’Tis for our lives and liberty!” whispered Abel, fiercely.

“Ay, but – ” growled Bart. “Lie still, will you!” he muttered, as fiercely as his companion, for the sentry had given a violent heave and wrested his mouth free.

“Sure, an’ ye won’t kill a poor boy that how, gintlemen,” he whispered, piteously.

“Another word, and it’s your last!” hissed Abel.

“Sure, and I’ll be as silent as Pater Mulloney’s grave, sor,” whispered the sentry; “but it’s a mother I have over in the owld country, and ye’d break her heart if ye killed me.”

“Hold your tongue!” whispered Bart.

“Sure, and I will, sor. It’s not meself as would stop a couple of gintlemen from escaping. There’s the gate, gintlemen. Ye’ve got my mushket, and I can’t stop you.”

“Yes, come along,” whispered Bart.

“What! and leave him to give the alarm?” said Abel. “We’re wasting time, man. ’Tis his life or ours.”

“Not at all, sor,” whispered the sentry, pleadingly. “I won’t give the alarm, on my hanner; and you can’t kill a boy widout letting him just say, ‘How d’ye do?’ and ‘Which is the way yander?’ to the praste.”

“Shall we trust him?” said Bart, in a low growl.

“No!”

“Then take me wid ye, gintlemen. Faix, ye might force me to go, for the divil a bit do I want to shtay here.”

“Look here,” whispered Bart; “it’s neck or nothing, my lad. If you give the alarm, it will be with that bayonet struck through you.”

“And would a Kelly give the alarm, afther he said on his hanner? Sure, you might thrust me.”

“Over with you, then, Bart,” whispered Abel; “I’ll stand over him here. Take the gun.”

Bart obeyed, and Abel stood with one hand upon the sentry’s shoulder, and the bayonet close to his throat.

“An’ is that the way you thrust a gintleman?” said Dinny, contemptuously, as Bart, with all a sailor’s and rock-climber’s activity, drew himself up, and dropped from the top of the wall at the side.

“Now, you over,” whispered Abel. “We shall take you with us till we’re safe; but so sure as you give warning of our escape, you lose your life!”

“Ah! ye may thrust me,” said the sentry, quickly. “Is it over wid me?”

“Yes; quick!”

The man scaled the gate as easily as Bart had done before him, and then Abel followed; but as he reached the top and shuffled sidewise to the wall, which he bestrode, there was the sound of a shot, followed by another, and another, and the fierce baying of dogs.

“Bedad, they’ve seen ye,” said the sentry, as Abel dropped down.

“They’ve been in the barrack,” whispered Bart.

“To be sure they have, sor; the sergeant was going round.”

“Quick, take his hand!” said Bart.

“No!” whispered Abel, levelling the bayonet.

“No, no; for my mother’s sake, sor!” cried the sentry, piteously. “She has only six of us, and I’m one.”

“Put away that bagnet!” said Bart, hoarsely. “Take his hand, and run!”

“That’s it, sor, at the double,” said the sentry, rising from his knees, where he had flung himself.

“I’m wid ye to the end of the world. It’s a place I know, and – ”

“Silence!” hissed Abel, as there was the loud clanging of a bell with the fierce yelping of dogs, and they dashed off, hand joined in hand, for the coffee-plantation, away down by the cane-brake and the swamp.

Chapter Thirteen

The Pursuit

The hue and cry rose louder and louder as the fugitives ran laboriously toward the jungle brake. Lights could be seen; a signal-gun was fired, and the little colony was up in arms, ready to hunt down the escaped criminals, lest they should take to the forest, from whence, after a time, they would issue forth as wild beasts. But in the darkness of that tropic night there would have been little danger of recapture but for those sounds which told the evading men that their greatest enemies were now afoot – those who could hunt them down without light or sight, but would track them by scent with the greatest ease.

“Hark at that, now!” said the Irishman, as he ran on, step by step with the escaping prisoners. “D’ye hear the dogs giving tongue? They haven’t got the scent right yet, me boys; but they’ll have it soon. G’long; ye don’t half run.”

He ceased speaking for a few moments, and then continued apologetically —

“Faix, and it’s meself forgot. Ye’ve got the bilboes an, and they make it bad running. There, d’ye hear the dogs? It’s like having the hounds back at home, before I ’listed for a soger, and got sent out here. Run, ye divils, run! But, I say: if we’re tuk, and it comes to a thrial – court martial, ye know – be fair to a boy, now, won’t ye?”

“What do you mean?” said Bart, gruffly.

“Remember that it was you made me desart. I couldn’t help meself, could I?”

Bart did not answer, but kept on with his steady, lumbering trot, which was the more laborious to him from the shortness of his fetters making it difficult to him to keep up with his companions.

“Bedad, they’re well on the scent!” said the Irishman, gazing back as he ran; “and it’ll not be long before they’re up with us. What’ll we do at all?”

“Do?” said Bart, gruffly; “leave you to tell that cursed brute that we sha’n’t want his whip any more; for – ”

“Hush!” cried Abel,

“Ay, I forgot,” said Bart, nodding his head.

“We’ll have to get up the trees before the dogs reach us, or it’ll be awkward for the whole three. They’ll forget to respect the king’s uniform in the dark. It’s no good, my lads; they’ll take us, and ye’ve had all your throuble for nothing. Faix, and I’m sorry for ye, whatever ye did, for it’s a dog’s life ye lead.”

“Silence, man,” whispered Abel. “Do you want the dogs to be on us?”

“Divil a bit, sor; but they’ll be down on us soon widout hearing us talk. Murther, but it’s a powerful shensh of shmell they have. How they are coming on!”

It was quite true. The dogs were after them with unerring scent, and but for the fact that they were in leashes so that those who held them back might be able to keep up, they would have soon overtaken the fugitives. They were at no great distance as it was, and their baying, the encouraging shouts of their holders, and the sight of the lanterns rising and falling in the darkness, helped the Irishman’s words to send despair into the fugitives’ hearts.

“Sure, and we’re in the coffee-tree gyarden!” said the sentry. “Oi know it by the little bits of bushes all in rows. Thin the wood isn’t far, and we’ll get up a tree before the bastes of dogs come up to us. Hark at the onnat’ral bastes; sure, it’s supper they think they’re going to have. Maybe they’d like to taste a Kelly.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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