Written By Hawley Smart

"BROKEN BONDS"

Author of "Saddle and Sabre"

CHAPTER XII.—Continued.

"You are right, dear—you might bring destruction upon him. Yes, we must go—go tonight, Rosie. Call Frank, and tell him we shall be ready in less than an hour. Oh! Maurice, my boy, to think that I must not be with you in your trouble! No, Rose, I'm not going to be foolish. We must pack, girl, quick! I see it all now." And with streaming eyes Mrs. Ellerton hurried from the room.

Miss Fielding slipped downstairs to the dining-room.

"Dainty," she said, "it is all settled. We shall be ready whenever you want us. I suppose you still think it best?"

"Yes," he replied tersely, "I am sure it is."

That night Frank Ellerton, his mother, and Rosie crossed into Normandy.

CHAPTER XIII.

The Courts at Westminster.

Mr. Laroom is especially jubilant. The day of his revenge draws near—that day which is to blast the name of Ellerton, and to put him, virtually, if not nominally, in possession of Miss Fielding's estates; while she shall sit rocking herself in agony at the loss of her lands, the disgrace and ruin of her friends. So Rolf Laroom pictures her. To Mr. Laroom the loss of goodly acres of arables and pasture-land, or, for the matter of that, any property, would seem to far transcend such petty privation as the loss of friends or relations. Mr. Laroom did not indulge in the luxury of these last, and had been heard at times to congratulate himself on standing entirely alone. A miserable man, with whom no one wept, with whom no one exulted, standing in selfish, sensual isolation. Not that Mr. Laroom, in his strong, riotous nature, with faculties and animal passions all in their full strength, deemed himself subject of pity. Far from it; he laughed at the weaknesses of his fellows, and derided their craving for sympathy and companionship.

The shutters of Ellerton & Son are up at last. That they have been "on the go" has been no secret in the City for the last fortnight. It has been, indeed, almost surmised that they kept open only to facilitate matters in the Bankruptcy Court—to enable them to lay hands upon such assets as were obtainable, and so exhibit a better schedule before the commissioner. But they have suspended payment at length, and speculation is now rife as to who are to have the picking of the carcase—who are to be the liquidators?

Mr. Laroom has stepped into bankruptcy in the most perfect and finished way. He still, we must recollect, belongs to the firm, so that it is his interest to see their insolvency proclaimed on most orthodox principles. He has most unimpeachable books to produce—is prepared to demonstrate the prudence and sagacity of their most disastrous speculations. This is no plunge, no topple over, no being drawn beneath bankruptcy's troubled waters; Ellerton & Co. step delicately, like Naaman, into the stream. They mean but to bathe and be cleansed—to issue immaculate, with no leprosy of fraud clinging to their character—that is, as regards Laroom.

How, then, is Maurice Ellerton to be stricken? Simply through the foreclosing of those mortgages on the Fielding estate; upon which occasion Rolf Laroom intends it to be perfectly transparent that a great treachery has been committed. Such knavery, indeed, as he deems will lead to the attachment of Maurice for breach of trust and embezzlement.

Ellerton & Co. are in the Gazette, and amongst those of the London world to whom the Ellertons are known, there is much gossip and speculation upon the causes and consequences of such disaster. "Pooh, bless you! it's a mere nothing," says jolly Sir John Trumbleton; "a sort of influenza getting broke is to these big city swells. They rise like the what d'ye call 'em, from their ashes in a few months, and renew their wonted thingemy-bobs—I mean dinners, at the end of a half-year's mourning always. I never get such good hock and turtle as I do from men on the verge of insolvency, except from those who've just satisfactorily cleared into the Bankruptcy Court. Catch me refusing Ellerton's ticket to feed next season."

"The best of life is but a dinner-party," was the unctuous old baronet's creed, and he knew none other.

"Always thought he'd make a mess of it," drawls Horace Sylvester; "not a man of business a bit, you know."

The speaker's own faculty in this respect hardly extended to ordering a satisfactory banquet at Greenwich, or to the organization of a drag for Epsom.

"What a fool the man must have been not to marry that pretty cousin of his!" exclaims Lady Mandrake. "She had money, I know, and he, well—he'd opportunities, and would be comfortably provided for now. I wonder whether Mrs. Ellerton has a good jointure. If I knew her a little better, I'd call and condole. I should like to know that."

And some few—yes, there were perhaps a few—who had feasted, drank, and made merry in Portland Place, who honestly grieved and were sorry for the misfortune that had befallen the genial hostess and her good-tempered, easy-going son. But the world goes on, and in these days, as they have been aptly called (transposing Wordsworth), "of high living and plain thinking," we have apparently no time to grieve much for any one or anything.

Lisbonne est abymee et l'on danse a Paris.

The bankruptcy is progressing satisfactorily. Mr. Laroom bustles about the city, looking far more like a thriving trader than an insolvent merchant. Foreclosure of the mortgages on the Fielding estate has duly taken place, and that property is now virtually in the hands of Mr. Laroom, although nominally in the hands of his agent, Simmonds. He knows that Maurice Ellerton is living in Berners street, that the house in Portland Place is shut up (Mrs. Ellerton's property that, and unseizable by hungry creditors), and that the family have left town. Still Mr. Laroom is not satisfied. Although it was clear to those concerned in the foreclosure of those mortgages that Maurice Ellerton and his father had made away with their ward's property, yet was there no one to take cognizance of the same. It was whispered about freely in commercial circles that the Ellertons had been guilty of breach of trust; but still, if Miss Fielding declined to move, who was to impeach Maurice on these grounds. This troubles Mr. Laroom much. He had counted on seeing his foe in the felon's dock. There is the fraud undoubtedly, but there is no one to prosecute. Rolf Laroom rages inwardly at this blot in his game. Maurice Ellerton had equally overlooked this contingency.

Suddenly Mr. Laroom receives a slight check to his hilarity. It comes to him, too, in a most mysterious shape. It is simply a notice of action of ejectment served upon Mr. Simmonds, regarding the Fielding estates, and couched in that young lady's name.

"What can that mean?" mutters Rolf Laroom. "What the devil can it mean?" he asks himself angrily, getting more emphatic in his self-communing the more the puzzle appears insolvable. He goes down to see the solicitors from whose office the notice has been served, but obtains nothing from them but the driest politeness.

He mused a good deal on this. Can there be a weak place anywhere in his schemes? Impossible! Yet every shilling he has of his own—every shilling he has been able to raise, is invested in this affair. He may well feel a little anxious. Pooh! he knows the estate well. He has seen, and indeed had something to say to the drawing up of those deeds. He has seen Mr. Fielding's will, and knows that the Ellertons had power either to sell, or otherwise deal with the estate under it. He can swear there is no flaw there; the property is worth more than has been raised upon it by perhaps twenty thousand pounds. Can there be a previous mortgage that he knows nothing about? Not likely. So many years as he has been in Ellerton & Son's, he must have known it had there been such. What can be the meaning of this notice of ejectment? Bah! some frivolous conception of Maurice Ellerton's to avoid exposure and obtain a compromise. Yes, that must be it.

It is the week before the long vacation; all London is hot, jaded, and thirsting for the moors, mountains, or the salt waters. Half the fashionable world have fled. Goodwood is over, and in "the Park" the few loiterers hail each other with such geniality as travelers meeting in the desert might do. Professional men look harassed and worn, as with limp shirt-collars they bustle about their avocations, trying to get as much work finished up before the holidays as possible. The flagstones burn through the soles of your boots, and even the moustaches of the foreign element in Leicester square hang drooping and disconsolate. The weather has overcome bandoline and cosmetique. About the clubs men smoke cigarettes on the steps, and talk of yachting and Scotland. Down in Westminster the barristers are perspiring in their wigs, the judges sweltering on the bench, and the solicitors threatening to dissolve into mere grease spots. It is hot everywhere, but if there is one place where, perhaps it is a little hotter than another, it is in the courts at Westminster.

There is some languid excitement observable around the Law Courts this August day; might probably have been considerable, but when the thermometer stands close on eighty in the shade, it is hard to get up enthusiasm about anything except iced drinks. It has been rumored that Fielding versus Simmonds is likely to be a very curious case. This report is by no means confined to legal circles. It has reached the club smoking-rooms, and been vaguely discussed there. Still, in what manner, or why, this is to be an interesting trial, has in no way leaked out. Many have been the conjectures on the subject. Many are the canards afloat concerning it; but all palpably unfounded, and merely speculative. Still the bar are firmly convinced that it will be a singular and somewhat sensational case.

Two men are pacing up and down Westminster Hall, engaged in deep and earnest conversation. One of these is Laroom; his companion is a sandy-haired, wiry, wizened man, with light cat-like eyes—eyes that cast furtive glances about them; that shrink from encountering direct gaze; that never dwell but for a moment on any one object, but which, nevertheless, in those stealthy glances, take in a great deal of what is passing around them—eyes ever restless, wandering, fathomless, and false; lips thin, passionless, and treacherous. Of an age that it would be scarce possible to guess at, he might have been anything from five-and-thirty to fifty. This is Mr. Simmonds, the defendant in the case about to be heard, and of whose antecedents there is little favorable to be related. It is not requisite to say more of Mr. Simmonds than that he would have sold any friend he ever had for a very limited quantity of silver, and that he is to some extent Laroom's puppet upon this occasion. A very malevolent puppet to boot—not one to allow the strings to be pulled longer than it shall conduce to his own interests; and capable of turning very spitefully on his employer, at short notice, should their joint performance prove unsuccessful.

"I cannot make out what they are going on," exclaimed Laroom for somewhere about the twentieth time. "I never knew an attack of the kind so consumedly dark. I can't think of a flaw anywhere—can you?"

"It looks all plain sailing," replied the other slowly; "you know best whether you are playing with cogged dice"; and Mr. Simmonds seemed lost in admiration of his own boots.

"No, I tell you once more," exclaimed Laroom vehemently, "it is all square enough as far as we are concerned. If false cards are played, it will be from the other side."

"I suppose they've a case," replied Mr. Simmonds. "You'll remember I've got ten thousand in this, to oblige you, and I shan't feel heavenly if you've made a mess of it. However, Strumley is hard to face in cross-examination; and if they are trying a plant, I fancy he'll break it up pretty soon. It's no use getting anxious, you know," concluded Mr. Simmonds, whose eyes were apparently endeavoring to take note of something behind him.

But now "Fielding versus Simmonds" is called, and loungers from all sides hurry into court. Despite the heat of the weather, there is a full attendance, and in a few minutes places are unattainable. The wigs cluster thick in the barristers' benches, the body of the court is full to overflowing, and the little galleries are filled with fashionably-dressed people, attracted by the rumor of a remarkable case, and that one so lately figuring in West-End circles is somehow mixed up in it.

The leading counsel for the plaintiff opens his case quietly. The present action, he explains, is one for ejectment of a certain John Simmonds, who has unduly obtained possession of an estate, the property of his client, a Miss Rose Fielding, a young lady not yet of age. This estate she inherited from her father, William Fielding, who died ten years ago, and left a somewhate singular will. He appointed as trustees to his daughter her uncle, Francis Ellerton, since deceased, and her cousin, Maurice Ellerton, both of the well-known firm of Ellerton & Son, whose recent commercial misfortunes are probably still fresh in your memories. Mr. Fielding, in the last year or two of his life, gentlemen, was strongly impressed with the idea that land paid a most undue proportion of the taxation of the country. He went the length, indeed, of declaring that he would sell his estate, and invest the proceeds in divers ways, but that most decidedly he would have no more to do with land, which returned him but very small interest for his capital, and which he deemed so heavily and unfairly burdened, compared with other property. Keeping this fact in view, when, in his last illness he made his will, he had a clause inserted, by which he left to his trustees the power to sell or otherwise deal with the estate. I am afraid, gentlemen, he little foresaw what might be the temptation of such power left to them; but unfortunately the result has been the fraudulent mortgaging of the property."

Quite aware of this is Mr. Laroom. Fraudulent, most decidedly, as regards the trustees, but the mortgage is sound and valid enough, he deems, as far as the deed goes.

"I am not going to dispute that the trustees were undoubtedly left with that power legally, although morally they had no right to use it. But, as I am instructed, gentlemen, it is the defendant who will be the victim of a great fraud. It is the shrewd man of business who is about to suffer, and not the innocent girl, who would appear to have been stripped of her all by those whose bounden duty it was to watch over and protect her. But when you give me the verdict, which I have no doubt of receiving at your hands, I shall be open to admit that the defendant has been indeed hardly dealt with. The mortgage deeds, gentlemen, upon which the defendant Simmonds claims possession of the estate, are in effect waste paper. My case lies in a nut-shell. It depends almost entirely upon the evidence of one witness. If you disbelieve his testimony, and I am sorry to say you will find that to be impossible, when you see who it is that I am about to place in the witness-box—I shall have next to no evidence upon which to ask you to decide in my favor. I am not disputing the right of the trustees to contract such a mortgage, although that is doubtful—I simply question whether they both concurred in it. In short, whether both those signatures are genuine. Gentlemen, the deed in question is a forgery. I shall prove it to you, by irrefutable testimony, that Francis Ellerton never broke his trust by affixing his name to such an instrument. I am about to clear the name of an honorable man who is no more—to preserve to an innocent girl her birthright."

And here the counsel for the plaintiff resumed his seat, and mopped his brows with his pocket-handkerchief.

"I can't make it out," muttered Laroom feverishly to his coadjutor.

"It's about as awkward an opening speech as I ever heard," replied Mr. Simmonds drily. "When a counsel is boldly pins his faith on one witness that he's about to produce, depon on it that one is a clincher. By heavens, I see it all—the deeds are waste-paper. And yet he'd never be such a fool!"

"Good God! what do you mean?" exclaimed Laroom.

"Ah! here he comes," said Simmonds, as, in answer to his name, Maurice Ellerton stepped into the witness-box. Maurice was very pale but very firm, as, bowing slightly to the Court, he took his place. He was followed closely by his brother, who remained standing just behind the witness-box.

Maurice having been duly sworn, the counsel for the plaintiff rose, and after some preliminary questions, to the effect that the witness and his father were the sole trustees to Miss Fielding's property, to which Maurice answered in the affirmative, said:

"And these mortgages were entirely effected by you?"

"Yes."

"In your father's life-time?"

"Yes."

"And with his consent, of course?"

"No."

"Well, perhaps not exactly with his consent, but, at all events, with so much consent as his signature to the deeds implies?"

"No."

"Do I understand you, then, to say that his signature is not his own in this case?"

"Certainly not."

"That it is a forgery, in fact?"

"Yes."

"Now, Mr. Ellerton, I am going to ask you a very serious question," said the counsel impressively. "Did you negotiate those mortgages, knowing that your father's signature was a forgery?"

"Yes—no one better," replied Maurice in low but steady tones.

"It is a lie!" whispered Laroom fiercely.

"It's one you will have to pay for," said Mr. Simmonds bitterly, who already foresaw what was coming.

"You are not bound to criminate yourself; but if you knew that signature was a forgery, you doubtless knew who was the forger?" said the examining barrister interrogatively.

There was a dead silence in the court. Jury, judge, barristers, and the crowd, all craned forward to hear the witness's reply; but Maurice stood pale, silent, and troubled.

"You decline to answer that question?"

"No," he said at length, raising his head and speaking in firm, resolute tones. "I was the forger!"

"He's committed perjury, by God!" exclaimed Laroom in a hoarse whisper, that was nevertheless audible for some yards in his own immediate vicinity, and extorted a cry of silence from the ushers.

The counsel for the plaintiff resumed his seat, and Mr. Strumley rose to cross-examine.

"Mr. Ellerton," he asked, "are you aware that the extreme penalty for forgery is penal servitude for life?"

"I have been given to understand so."

"And in the face of that, you adhere to the statement you have just made?"

"Yes."

"You have no other object in this statement than to repair the wrong you have done Miss Fielding?"

"None."

Even the experienced Strumley was at a loss how to proceed with a witness, who vouched for his veracity by the heavy penalty his testimony involved. It was clear to him that this was evidence impossible to shake—impossible to rebut. If the deeds were forged, they were, of course, waste paper, and the forger, marvelous to say, was here for the express purpose of swearing to his own forgeries! Mr. Strumley shook his head and sat down. This was a case to which the oldest lawyer there could not call to mind the parallel.

It was speedily finished, and Rolf Laroom left the Court an utterly ruined man; those estates, for which he had plotted and schemed so long, still decreed the property of the girl who had spurned him. One satisfaction he had. Maurice Ellerton quitted Westminster in custody for forgery, and there was good hope he might see him in the felon's dock now.

A few days later, and Maurice stood there, to listen to a bitter homily from the judge on the enormity of his offence, which terminated in a sentence of "penal servitude for life." Many of the miserable man's acquaintances were there to witness his degradation—Dainty's hand-grip his sole consolation as the doors of the prison-van closed upon him. For Dainty stood by his brother loyally to the last, and was by his side as that terrible sentence was pronounced.

CHAPTER XIV.

In the Quarries.

A bright scorching August sun pours down upon the stone quarries of Portland, well-nigh as fiercely as it did some twelve months back upon the Courts of Westminster. Not a cloud upon the horizon—scarce a ripple upon the deep blue sea. Standing upon the extreme eastern point of the island (if one may be allowed to call it so) the eye glances over a panorama of exquisite beauty. Directly facing you is the slightly troubled line of broken water that marks the "Shambles"—sand-bank fatal in days bygone, before the light was placed there, to many a gallant ship. You can recognize the shoal easily by the deeper color of the water and the ever-continuous ripple, while the surrounding sea is lapped in slumber. To the east lies the mouth of Weymouth's lovely bay, with Ringstead Point and the Burning Cliff standing out clear and distinct through the bright summer sunshine; while in the far-off horizon one catches the faint coast-line of the Isle of Wight. To the west lies the open Channel, with the ever-troubling, dancing waters of the tumultuous "Race" in the foreground. The faint murmur of the sea kissing the rocks five hundred feet beneath falls upon the ear, mingled with the far-off laughter from the harvest fields that lie between the village of Easton and the cliff.

Gazing over this fair prospect with vacant stare is a man in whom that greatest of all earthly blessings—Hope—lies dead. Think what this means! Can anything be sadder? Can one picture a more awful spectacle than a man in his prime, with the pulse of life beating strong in his veins, and no hope left him in this world—a world, indeed, from which he has virtually departed—a world in which he is never destined again to see all those near and dear to him. No prospect of change or of amelioration in his lot can come, save in the narrow cell by night—the eternal stone quarry by day—to look forward to for forty years, should he reach the threescore and ten laid down as the average span of our existence here.

A barrow full of broken stones stands behind him as, pausing a moment from his toil, his eyes wander listlessly over the glorious scene before him. Tall and well-built, clean shaven, with hair cut perfectly close, and complexion burnt to a brick-dust tan color; such is the man's outward appearance. His inner self can but be guessed at from the sad, weary look of the blue eyes that rove so idly across the glittering waters.

He stands there, one of a party of close upon a score, all attired in the grey drabbet coats, fustian knickerbockers, blue, red-hooped stockings, and grey, red-striped night-caps, that constitute the garb of a convict. Men of all ages, of all characters, of diversity of crimes, all burnt to that same brick-dust hue, and bearing at first sight a strange resemblance to each other. Their clothes are stamped promiscuously with broad arrows. Each bears on his arm a medallion. Maurice Ellerton's has this, in black:

"L 485 P S"

The letters signify Life, Penal Servitude; the figures his number. Hideous distinction! Number four hundred and eight-five shall quarry stone till his life be run, is the interpretation of that terrible badge.

Think what a destiny! to wrestle with the granite rock all your days—at night the narrow cell and your reflections. No change—always this—no end to it save in death—no hope, however distant, for you in this world!

But the bronzed, bearded warder who is in charge of the party gives the word to proceed, and these men, raising their barrows, wheel them steadily on to their destination. The broken stone is thrown out, and then they tramp silently back to the quarry whence they came.

A strange sight! Hundreds of brick-dust-burnt men, clothed in drabbet grey, with pick and hammer, wrenching the stone from its bed, taciturn by compulsion, speechless by command. No sound but the incessant stroke of the tools as they meet the rock, the creaking of the barrows, the falling of the splinters, or the occasional stern voice of a warder. Blue-coated, cutlass-belted, these stand scattered through the throng, an apparent handful amongst those they control. But as one studies the scene, one becomes aware of a cordon of sentries, who, with loaded firelocks, hem in that criminal herd. Clad also in blue these, and known as the convict guard.

A grim spectacle to gaze at, these silent laborers, outcasts of humanity of all ranks. Those whom the community has plucked from its bosom, and ostracised for crimes of supidity, passion, or inextinguishable ferocity. Of all classes, of every grade of depravity, from well-nurtured, well-educated men of Maurice Ellerton's stamp, down to the very sweepings of the kennels; from those who have yielded to temptation in a moment of weakness, to the systematic plunderers of their fellows; from the homicide, whose outburst of hot wrath has been followed by bitter penitence, to the human tiger who would murder for a livelihood always, and at times from the mere lust of killing. For these latter exist, and there is no large public prison but what can furnish its specimens. Not always brutal, uneducated, clownish. Far from it; the most ferocious of this kind are generally possessed of some education, and more than average intelligence; but, having once tasted blood, seem to be conscious of no moral obligation regarding the spilling of it—taking the life, indeed, of their fellows with as little compunction as they would that of a rat. Their only counterpart is "the man-killer," that scourge of an Indian village. Every phase of crime is represented in that quarry—larceny, arson, forgery, felony, burglary, swindling, manslaughter, murder, etc. Exponents of all of them are to be found amongst those grey drabbet-clad laborers.

Maurice Ellerton drops his empty barrow wearily at a place where the rough stone is being squared into huge blocks by the more skilled workmen; other barrows, full of the debris occasioned by their stone-chisels and hammers, stand ready to be wheeled away in their turn. That is his employment at present. He is serving his novitiate—a mere scavenger of the quarry, carrying away the waste stone for road-making purposes. In due course he will be instructed in the more advanced branches of that toil in which his life is destined to be passed. As he pauses for the few minutes the warder grants them before again continuing their labors, he is greeted with a quiet nod from a man busy shaping a rough block with mallet and chisel. A countenance worth looking at that, albeit the prison barber, and the sun, wind, and dust of the quarries have assimilated it much, at first sight, to those around it. A high forehead, with hair preceptibly worn away at the temples, very straight black brows, under which gleam long, deep-set dark eyes, high cheek bones, a large full, sensual mouth, with a heavy jowl and underjaw—not a pleasant face by any means. In figure a little above the medium height, spare and wiry. He bears upon his arm the same terrible medallion that is blazoned on Maurice's. Like him, he also is condemned to chip stone till his life be finished. This is one of Maurice Ellerton's special acquaintances; for, despite all rules against speech, these men always find opportunity of exchanging some few words with their fellows.

Maurice had shrunk at first from opening his lips to any one, but few can stand such dreadful isolation for long. There is a craving at times to converse implanted in our very nature. It is incumbent on our humanity to use our power of language.

Had the prison authorities been appealed to about No. 510 over so stood Maurice's acquaintance in their books—they would have told you that they had no more unmitigated scoundrel among the whole fifteen hundred convicts committed to their charge. His crime had been a robbery characterized by circumstances of brutal and unexampled violence, and it was the merest accident that he had not been arraigned for murder, instead of on the charge for which he had been sentenced to penal servitude for life. They would further have stated it as their belief that he added a career of bloodshed and plunder in Australia to which it would be hard to find a parallel, and that he was perfectly capable of recommencing it, should he ever find himself at liberty. More than once had he displayed the ferocity of his nature since he had been in Portland. Untameable, irreclaimable, and with a fierce thirst for blood, whenever the slumbering devil within him was roused, this man was a human tiger—a tiger now happily caged, but even held in terror by his brethren in captivity. Most of these shrank from friendship with savage James Carnoul.

And yet, with all this, he was by no means an uneducated man; could talk well and with a quiet manner, till something occurred to arouse his ferocious temper. Then blasphemy, execration, and ribaldry, poured like a torrent from between his lips; and if he failed to avenge his fancied wrongs by brutal personal attack upon the offender, it was simply because an opportunity did not vouchsafed him. He would brag fiercely of the men he had slain beyond the seas at these times—of the jails he had broken, and threaten the lives of all those that had to do with him. Warders kept a watchful eye on him, and were wont to loose their cutlasses in their sheath when they had special charge of Carnoul.

Maurice Ellerton as yet knew nothing of this man's history; the bond between them was simply that they had talked together—a bond that nevertheless constitutes friendship within the walls of a prison than it does outside by many degrees. One other associate has Maurice, but he is not in the quarries. Mr. William Blades is employed in the blacksmith's shop, being a cunning craftsman in the science of forging and welding. Indeed, his dexterity in picking locks and the manufacturing of skeleton keys has been his ruin. Hero he of a celebrated city burglary yet to be remembered of the public, should the public think fit to exercise that faculty; an enthusiast in his profession, who demands no more than to be left alone for twenty-four hours with any safe in London—Hobb's Patent Safety, or other. "Never saw the strong box yet I couldn't get into if I'd time," says Mr. Blades. "It's a mere question of time. Nor the strong box I couldn't get out of either!" And then Mr. Blades winks pleasantly, as much as to insinuate that his continued residence at Portland is a simple matter of choice and convenience.

Not quite all braggadocio this upon the part of Mr. Bill Blades; but that worthy knows perfectly well that getting out of Portland prison is one thing, but getting off Portland Rock afterwards is another. Mr. Blades would inform you, in confidence, that he could very soon be outside the prison if that was any good to him, but that his private impression is that he should be back there again within four and twenty hours, only to be punished for such misdemeanor. That Maurice had made acquaintance with this man was only natural. Their cells adjoined, which, of course, gave many an opportunity of exchanging a word or two. Then, to one utterly prostrated as Maurice was, there was great attraction in the irrepressible vivacity of Bill Blades' disposition. Nothing seemed to daunt that jovial burglar. His vanity was extreme. "Lagged for ten years I am," he once whispered to Maurice; "but, damme, it was the job of the year, and I ought to be introduced to visitors when they come round—that's what hurts my feelings. I'm a great public character, and these swells here have entered into a combination to crush my reputation."

Still pours down the fierce August sun, which the grey Portland stone reflects back with intensity. Not a breath of air comes across the hot dust-burdened quarry, while the children of crime continue their task with brick-dust-hued cheeks. The very warders mop their brows and fumble at their collars, to loosen the stiff military stock which their uniform entails upon them. Suddenly the prison clock strikes the half after-eleven, and almost simultaneously clangs out the recall bell, the signal for all working parties to withdraw. The men fall in by squads, upon gaining the parade ground within the prison gates (for be it clearly understood that the quarries lie outside the prison walls, and are perfectly free for the public to pass through), draw up in double ranks to be searched.

A great feature this searching in the discipline of our government prisons. The authorities are incessantly searching, and yet, with all their vigilance, it is perfectly surprising what the prisoners will continue to smuggle in and conceal in their cells, though these latter are constantly overhauled while their occupants are at work. The prisoners lift off their caps, to show there is nothing in them; then stand with uplifted arms, as the warders, with practised hands, run over their dress from knee to arm-pit. This ceremony over, they are marched off to their respective halls.

The universities of crime assimilate to the universities of learning, in so much that they also are divided into colleges, or, as they are here termed, halls. (Is there not a St. Catherine's Hall at Oxford?) These halls are built in the form of a parallelogram. Spacious double entrance doors at either end open upon a broad corridor, from the centre of which springs a light iron staircase, running up for three stories, and breaking off into airy iron galleries on each landing. Along the sides of the hall run the three tiers of cells—Lilliputian apartments, about seven feet by four, and some seven or eight in height. These constitute the homes of the unfortunates. Such light as they receive comes from the corridor, through the window in the door, or from the lamp let into the panel beside the door. That lamp is only to be opened from the corridor, and consequently not to be interfered with by an inmate of any cell, except by breaking the glass.

Maurice Ellerton's abode is on the ground floor, at the extreme northerly end of B Hall. The last cell of all is tenanted by that genial burglar, Mr. William Blades, but Maurice's next door. Once again the lock is turned upon him, and he has recourse to the sole employment of his lonely hours—the eating his heart out. Time was when all this was new to him, when the petty privations and indignities stung sharper than they do now, when his stomach recoiled from the unaccustomed food, and the daily toil seemed a strain greater than his untutored muscles could endure; then Maurice thought he should soon succumb to the punishment laid upon him. He knew better now. He is fain to confess that he never was in better health. As for the rough, homely fare that he was at first unable to swallow, his sole complaint now is that he does not get enough of it. Yet he is leading a horrible life—to an educated mind a terrible life, a mere mechanical existence. All mental life is dead in him. It is apt to die down when hope lies slain, and nothing but an impenetrable blackness represents the future. Alive, but buried! Of this world, yet with the pall thrown over him!

Maurice Ellerton sits upon his pallet-bed, musing upon the past, and peering, with dull, despairing gaze, into the years that lie before him. It is not that he disputes the righteousness of the doom meted out to him, although the sentence was harder than he had anticipated. He acknowledges his sin frankly, complains not at the punishment that it has entailed upon him. But to be without hope, that is hard; to think that he is never again to see other room than that cribbed, confined cell, of seven feet by four, in which he sits; to know no other glimpse of the outside world than those grey, dusty quarries; never again to see a tree, the grass, the corn-fields, the purling brook, to hear the sweet birds singing, the cawing of the rooks, or gaze upon the autumn's golden grain! Prometheus like, bound to the rock, with the vulture of despair battening upon his heart-strings! Such the future that lies before him.

CHAPTER XV.

Portland on Sunday.

It is Sunday at Portland. Far and wide, in pleasant country villages throughout England, the sweet bells are ringing—"music's laughter," as Hood calls them. In the big cities the air resounds with the soft sonorous chime. Gaily-dressed crowds flock to their different temples, to pay thankful reverence to their Maker, to bring away holier and better aspirations for the morrow, it may be hoped. Even the solitary bell of Portland's prison seems mellowed as it summons its inmates to church this gorgeous summer morning. All aglow with color are the public gardens fronting this edifice. Saucily froths and tumbles the Race, reminding one of a merciless coquette, whose relentless cruelty is not to be guessed at, except by those who have found themselves within the nets. Innocent and pretty enough looks that broken, dancing water, this bright September morning, and yet not a Portlander but could tell wild legends of the pitiless Race. Woe betide the ship that should be entangled in the Race in its wrath, when it seethes and bubbles like a cauldron of Hecate's own brewing!

But "the Halls" are emptied, and their grey-jacketed inhabitants march silently and orderly in their respective squads to church. A very curious sight to look upon this. Picture to yourself upwards of a thousand of these brick-dust-countenanced outcasts, ranged right and left of a cruciform building; on raised seats at every ten paces a blue-coated warder, with belted cutlass. Five hundred or more prisoners to the right of you, five hundred or more to the left of you. The pulpit and priest in front. The convict guard, with loaded firelocks, behind.

Quietly and solemnly is the service conducted, as in any other place of worship. How far it touches those untamed natures, it were bootless to conjecture. They are much like any other congregation the writer has ever seen. Some listen attentively, some reverently, some with dull apathy, and others with evident weariness. But the blessing is at last spoken, and that congregation troops off, to enjoy the greatest boon that prison discipline accords them. On Sundays they are allowed to walk round the prison yards together, and indulge in unlimited conversation. No restriction is placed upon how they pair off; for an hour they may mix as they list—are free to consort with each other as it pleases them.

These unfortunates are classified into three grades, such classification denoted always by that dread medallion stitched upon the sleeve of their jacket. It not only denotes the number they are known by, the punishment they are condemned to, but the color of it determines the class to which they belong. They all commence in the third, symbolized by the black medallion, such as is worn by Maurice Ellerton and Carnoul. Good conduct for a certain period transmutes this into a yellow one, and certain privileges accrue to that grade. Further time and good conduct changes this badge to blue, with yet further privileges attached to it. For instance, to the third class is accorded but one hour of this liberty of converse; to the second, two; to the first, three. This privilege is allowed only on the Sunday, and limited to one hour at a time. Maurice Ellerton still wears the black medallion, because time has not yet allowed of promotion to the second class; James Carnoul, because a human tiger is not likely to find favor or mitigation of his sentence—because the prison cat has been busy with his back—because the dark cells and himself are familiar with each other—because nothing but timely intervention saved his adding yet one more murder to the catalogue of his crimes. There is a night watchman now, though a warder once, who limps as he goes his rounds yet from the ferocious assaults of that wild beast clothed in likeness of humanity. Pity for his own and mankind's sake that the gallows had not closed his career some time past. It may seem shocking to say, but there do appear at times in the annals of crime men irreclaimable, irredeemable, untameable, who, both for their own sake and that of society, were best done away with. James Carnoul was one of these.

Maurice Ellerton is as yet strange to Portland and its ways. It is but some few weeks that he has been an inmate there. He had been sent, in the first instance, as is customary, to Millbank, where much solitude and reflection had plunged him into that dull apathy of despair which still possessed him. He leads a purely mechanical life at present; shudders when he thinks of the past—shudders still more when he thinks of the future. Life to him seems but a dreary road, illumined by no ray of sunlight—an abyss of blackness, which no gleam of love or hope can ever brighten. He has nothing left to look forward to but the end—the cynic exultation that, when his soul escapes its prison, then also shall his body break loose and ward; and yet he thinks sadly what weary years must be lived down ere he, in the very prime of his manhood, can hope for that.

He paces mechanically and dejectedly round the yard this Sunday morning, sole one of all that chattering throng who walks in silence and alone. He shrinks from the coarse companionship of his fellows; he is at no pains to make acquaintances. Of the two that he has some slight knowledge of, Carnoul is in trouble, and consequently debarred from this indulgence, while the vivacious Mr. Blades is gossiping with some one else.

But suddenly Bill Blades is struck by the woe-begone air of his neighbor in B Hall. Though a most irreclaimable scoundrel, Mr. Blades is a man of very kindly feeling, and he felt a sore, in his own vernacular, for "a swell so down on his luck." He crosses to Maurice, and exclaims:

"Well, mate, you don't look like having a deal to say, even if you'd some one to say it to; but it's a relief to have a chap gabble something in your ear when you've got the dismals, ain't it? Bless you, I know it. I was struck all of a heap like, the fust time I was quodded, but it ain't nothing when you're used to it. It's a healthy life, and you've no anxieties about the future. Say! put your hand again mine when we come to the far end, and I'll give you a 'chaw.'"

"You're very kind!" replied Maurice, "but I cannot manage tobacco in that form."

"Then the sooner you qualifies the better," retorted Blades. "You see a smoke ain't to be brought off, anyhow. If you don't chew what are you to do?"

"But how do you manage to get tobacco?"

"Well, you ain't fly to much, that's certain. Howsomever, in course you ain't. Why, if you can pay for it, and are clever at smuggling things in, you may contrive to have a good many little comforts. It ain't often I'm without tobacco, I tell you."

"But how do you get these things?" inquired Maurice.

"Well, you see, there's a good many things besides stone to be found in the quarries, for those who knows where to look for 'em. There's plenty of people outside who know how to hide what we wants if they're only paid for it. The officers and warders know it goes on just as well as we do. They does their best to stop it. It's just smuggling all over. Sometimes they seizes a lot, and sometimes we run it all right."

"But how do you get money? Can you get letters?"

"Well, my pals find the money. The people outside who make a business of it charge high, but they deal on the square—yes, they're tolerably fair," said Mr. Blades meditatively; "they make you pay about four shillings for a shilling's worth of bacca, but they run a good bit of risk. Bless your innocence! there are plenty of post-offices in the quarries that I knows of. Getting a chance to visit 'em's sometimes difficult, and smuggling in what you find there somewhat harder still; but there is excitement in it too. I never enjoyed a quid outside so much as I does one here."

"I should like to send away a letter," remarked Maurice musingly.

"D'ye mean it, mate?" asked his companion.

"Yes, very seriously."

"'Spose you never thought about how you were to write it?" observed Mr. Blades, grinning.

"My God, no! I forgot that I had neither pens, paper, nor ink."

"Ah!" replied the burglar with a glance of compassion, "it struck me you'd want a bit of learning before you begin to correspond with the Home Secretary about the injustice he's been a-doing you. Shall I teach you?"

Maurice nodded assent.

(To be continued.)