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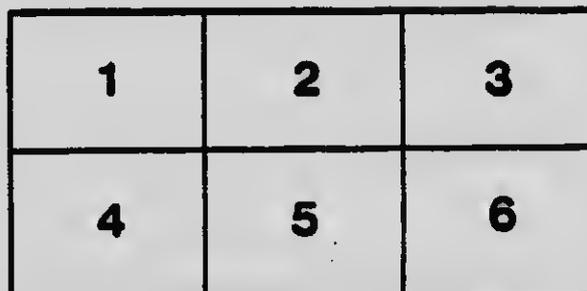
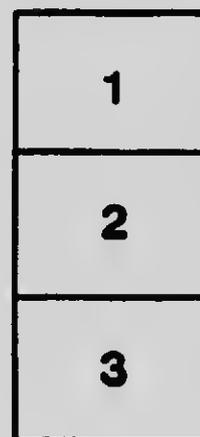
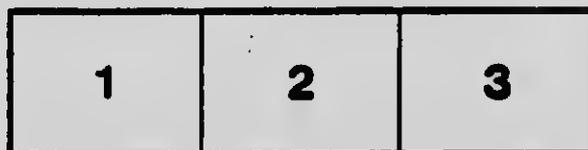
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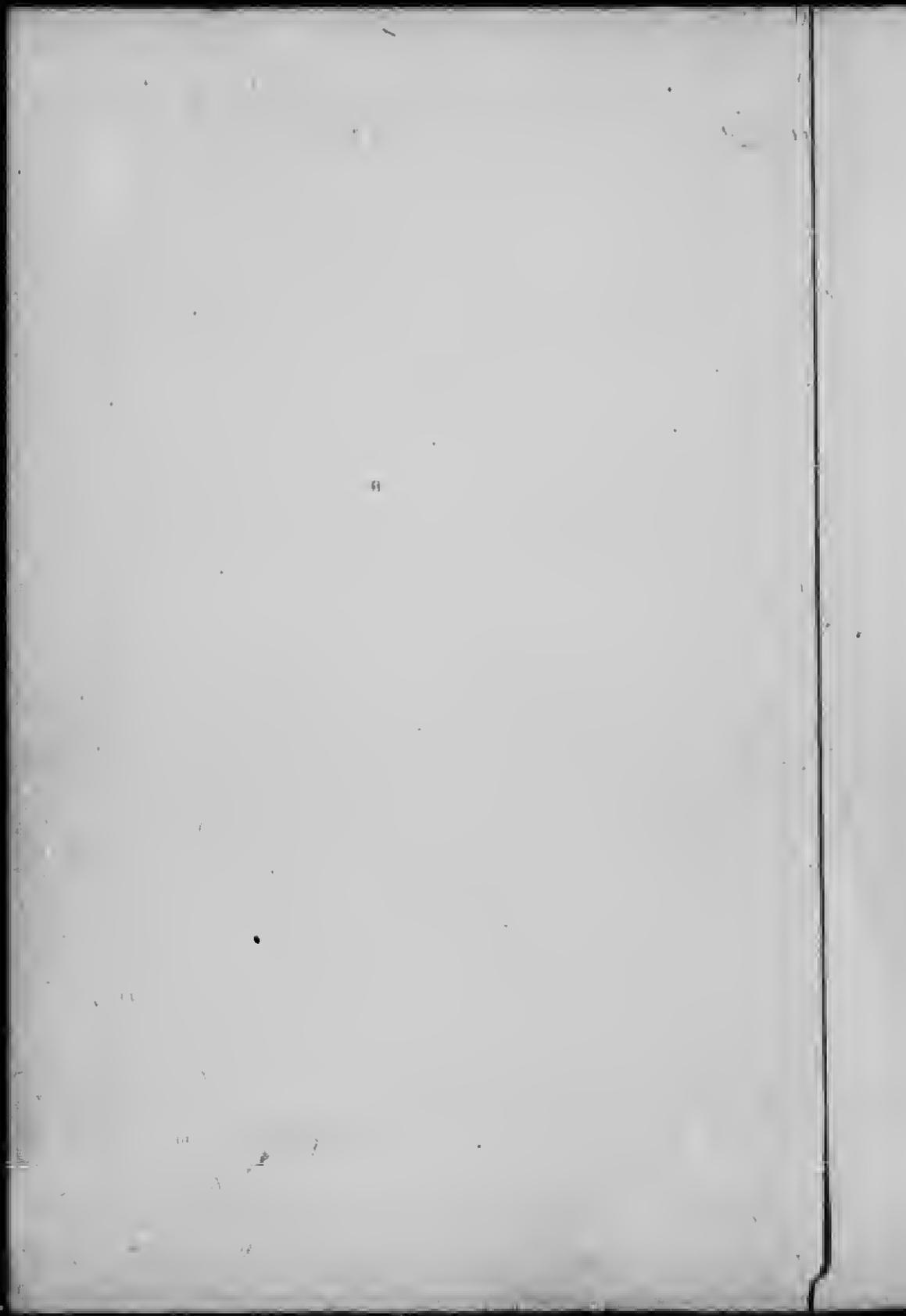
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**GREATER LOVE HATH NO MAN**

**THE MIRACLE MAN**

# **GREATER LOVE HATH NO MAN**

**BY  
FRANK L. PACKARD**

**AUTHOR OF "ON THE IRON AT BIG CLOUD"**

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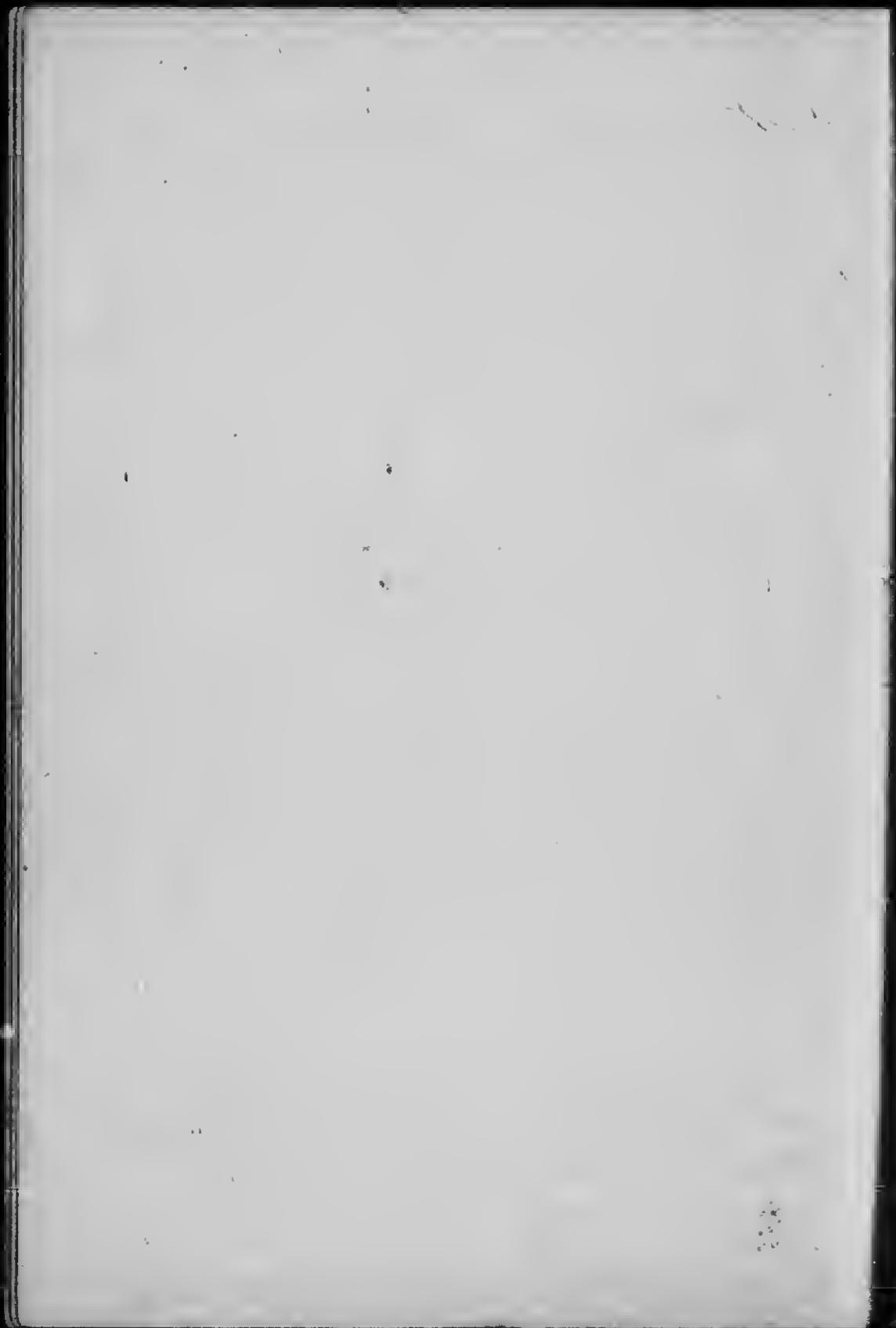
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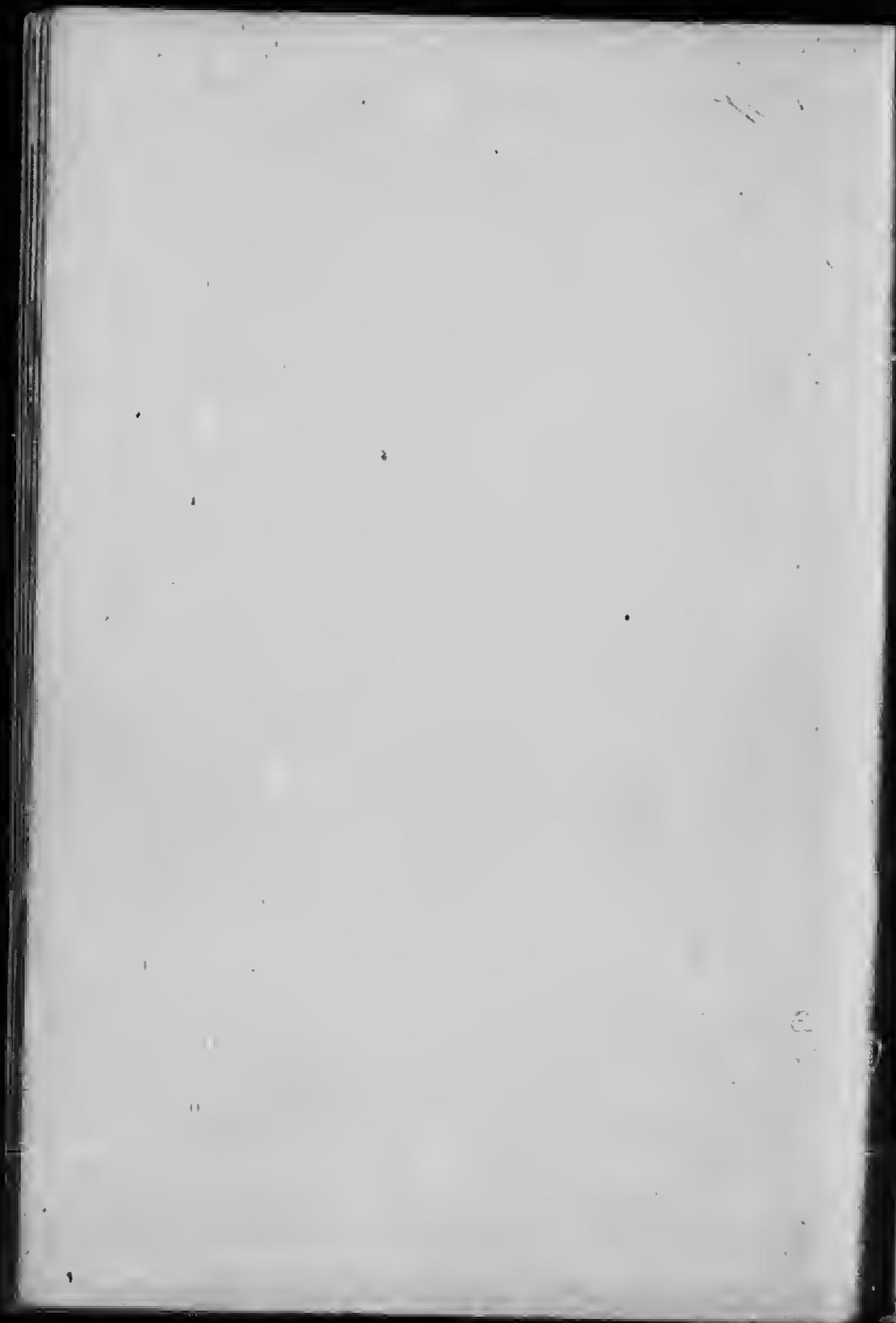
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# Greater Love Hath No Man

## CHAPTER I

### THE DARKEST HOUR OF NIGHT

UTTER stillness. Utter blackness. And then a faint, indeterminate, far-away sound. The sleeper's eyes opened, and, as calmly, as naturally as he had lain asleep, he lay now alert. There was neither alarm nor shock in the transition. There had been a sound foreign to the serene silence of the peaceful, sleeping household; a sound too low to rouse a slumberer from repose by its mere *volume*, too low almost to be *heard*; a sound so low as to obtrude itself only upon the most super-sensitive sub-consciousness — Varge lay awake.

And now it came again. Then a long pause — then again — and again. It came from the east end of the house, at the rear — from the back stairs. Some one was mounting them with extreme caution — a prolonged wait between each step, one foot following the other only after the body's weight had been gradually, very gradually, thrown upon the first, lest the bare wood stairs should creak — creak out the secret confided to them in this small, silent hour of morning.

It was black — dense black. Once the step stumbled slightly and there was a soft rubbing sound, barely audible, as of a hand thrown out to feel the way against the wall.

The minutes passed, perhaps three of them. The footsteps now had reached the landing and had begun

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to come along the hall — nearer and nearer, with the same ominous stealth, to the door of the room in which Varge lay.

Still relaxed, still in repose, not a muscle of Varge's body had flexed by so much as a ripple as he listened; the beat of his pulse was the same calm, strong, even beat as in sleep. And yet every faculty was atune, stimulated to its highest efficiency. What brought Harold Merton, the son of the house, at two o'clock in the morning to the little chamber over the kitchen, that was apart, shut off, from the rest of the dwelling; and brought him stealing there, where none could hear or mark his movements, like some guilty, evil prowler with cautious, frightened tread?

A hand fumbled for the doorknob outside with a curious sound, as though the knuckles were beating a tremulous, involuntary tattoo upon the door as they came into contact with it. The knob turned, the door was pushed slowly inwards, slowly closed again, there was a faint click from the released catch — and against the door, without form or outline in the darkness, was an added opaqueness.

"I am awake" — there was an almost imperceptible pause between Varge's words as he spoke, comparable somewhat to one building the phrase of a strange language one word upon the other, but comparable only in that regard — the pronunciation held no trace of foreign accent. "I am awake" — his tones were quiet, composed. "Why have you come to me in my room in this way, Harold?"

A low gasp, the sharp-drawn intake of a breath, came from the door.

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"You — you know that it is I," — the words were a hoarse, shaken whisper.

"I heard your first step on the stairs," Varge answered simply. "I heard you come up each stair. I heard you stumble once and feel along the wall. I heard you come down the hall on tiptoe. I know your step. I heard your hand shake like a frightened man's against the door."

"Sometimes" — the other seemed to shiver as he spoke — "you see a more than *human*."

"Why have you come to me in my room at this hour?" asked Varge again, rising now to a sitting posture in the bed. "What has happened? I will light a candle and you will tell me."

"*No!* In God's name no light" — Merton's words, low-breathed, came with frenzied quickness, quavering, dominant with terror. "No light; and, for mercy's sake, speak low. Speak very low. Wait! I am coming close to you where I can whisper."

Varge made no answer. His eyes were on that darker spot that, once by the door, now was moving across the room toward him. And then a hand, thrust out, groping, touched his shoulder — it was wet with cold moisture and shook as with the ague.

"Varge, you must help me," Merton burst out hysterically. "I am in danger, Varge — in awful danger, do you hear? You can save me. You are the only man, *the only man*, who can. For God's sake say you will! It can't mean anything to you — there's nothing you can lose — you don't even know who you are — you haven't even so much as a name, except what we've always called you — Varge. You'll help me, Varge —

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say you will! We've brought you up all these years and treated you like—like one of us, and all you've had and all you've got you owe to us. You'll—you'll repay it now, Varge, won't you?"

The blackness of the room was gone, transformed into quick, shifting scenes and pictures that staged themselves in the little chamber before Varge's mind—colourful, vivid, real—pictures of childhood, memory-dimmed; pictures of boyhood, standing out more sharply; in clearer focus; pictures of later years; pictures of yesterday. The years passed in lightning sequence before him. A foundling, nameless, a child of five, adopted from an orphan asylum, here he had been given a home; here he and this man beside him had been brought up together in the little country town, until the other had gone out to college and he, his own common school education finished, had begun to work for Doctor Merton, his benefactor; here he had grown to manhood, he was twenty-five now; here he had spent his life, knowing almost a father's consideration, almost a mother's care, which in turn had kindled a love and gratitude in his own heart that had grown almost to worship with the years, a gratitude and loyalty that had caused him to crush back longings for a wider sphere—contenting himself meanwhile by constant study, acquiring in a hard school the knowledge of medicine that one day, when these two should be gone, he meant to make his profession—for Harold Merton, ten years his senior, was little at home now, and they, growing old, had come to lean intimately upon him, to depend on him, to need him. And so he had lived on there—as Varge, the doctor's man.

## THE DARKEST HOUR OF NIGHT

"It is true," he said slowly. "You had no need to tell me so. It is true. I owe everything to your father, to your mother, and through them to you. I will do anything for your sakes."

"Yes, yes; I told myself you would," Merton babbled wildly. "I knew you would. You promise, Varge? Give me your promise. You've never broken it."

"I will do anything for your sakes," Varge repeated quietly. "I could not do anything else."

"Then, get up," urged Merton feverishly. "Get up quickly and dress. I have brought money enough to take you anywhere — you can get away where they will never find you. Hurry, Varge, hurry! Why don't you hurry? You have promised, Varge."

Varge's hands went out and rested in reassuring pressure on Merton's two shoulders.

"I have promised, Harold," he said gravely; "and I will do this thing whatever it may be, I will go anywhere if it is necessary — but you are talking wildly, you are not calm. You imagine something that is worse than the thing is. What is this danger that my going will save you from, and how could my leaving here save you from anything?"

"I have been seen," Merton muttered hoarsely. "I have been seen," he repeated, with a shudder. "They will know that I did it unless suspicion is directed somewhere else. Don't you see? Are you blind? If you are in the night, if you disappear, they will think it was you. But they'll never catch you, you are too clever, and you've nothing to lose, no family, no name even — you see, I thought of that. I'll give you plenty of

money. Hurry, Varge! Get up and get your clothes on! Don't make a noise, not a sound!"

"What is this thing that you have done that I must take upon myself?" Varge's hands tightened imperatively on the other's shoulders. "What is this thing that you are afraid of?"

"Father," Merton mumbled. "Father. Father — and he is dead."

"Your father — dead!" Varge pulled the shaking form toward him, as though to search and read the other's features even in the darkness. "When did he die?"

"A — a few minutes — great God, a year ago" — the words were a chattering, fearsome whisper. "In the library. We had a quarrel. I — I struck him with the fender bar. *I have killed my father.*"

## CHAPTER II

### "I AM VARGE"

**C**LOSE, Varge had drawn the other to him, and the breath of one was upon the other's cheek. For a moment, that seemed to span eternity in that little chamber, the two forms on the bed held rigid, motionless — and again there had fallen an utter stillness, a silence as of death, a silence in grim harmony now with the black shadow, blacker than the shadow of the night, that lay upon the house.

As a sudden knife gash shocks veins and arteries into inertia for a brief moment before the blood spurts madly from the wound; so, for that moment, Varge's faculties were shocked to numbness at the other's words. Then his fingers on Merton's shoulders shut vise-like. Horror, loathing of the awful deed revolted him; the inhuman selfishness that had tricked and played upon his gratitude, demanding that he should take this hideous crime upon himself, swept him with seething passion — and only the mighty will power, the self-centred grip of the man upon himself, kept back his fingers from flying at the other's throat to wring the breath from the shaking thing that shivered now in his grasp.

No words passed his lips — tighter his fingers closed. Straight out before him he held Merton — and the blackness between them, cloaking their faces, grew tenser charged as the seconds passed, until it seemed

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to live, to palpitate, to move and throb and breathe out dread, soundless words.

"Vargel *Vargei*"—the words gurgled in choking terror from Merton's lips. "Why are you holding me like this? Let me go; let me go, I tell you!"

"I said I would do this thing"—Varge spoke in a low, deadly monotone. "But I will *not* do it. For your father's sake and your mother's sake, I said I would do anything—"

Merton was battling now wildly, striking out frenzied, aimless blows; mad with a new fear, a physical fear, of Varge; struggling, squirming to free himself. Varge's body swayed not by so much as the fraction of an inch. His arms, like great steel rods, were motionless. It was as though he held, without thought of effort or exertion, some inanimate, paltry object in his grasp.

"—I will *not* do this thing"—Varge still spoke on, still in the same dull monotone. "What right have you to ask it, you blood-guilty son? What right have you to life that you ask my life for your life? I have no name, you say, to make a curse of—I have nothing to lose, you say, because I do not know who I am. I? *I am Varge*. You think that I have no soul, no conscience, that the foulest crime in God's sight means nothing to me—because I am a *nobody!*"

A faint, purling sound came from Merton. He had ceased to struggle. No hurt nor blow had Varge given him; but the cold fury of the man who held him, the fearful power of the grip upon him, that all his own strength would not avail to shake by one iota, seemed

to have sunk into his soul and left him swaying sick with terror.

"Save you!"—Varge, like an outraged judge, was summing up his terrible arraignment. "Save you from the punishment of a crime too awful to speak aloud! Save you because I owe *gratitude* to the one whose life an inhuman son has taken! It would be better to end it here myself than to let you escape. It would be better to end —"

Slowly, very slowly, Varge's fingers relaxed — slowly, as though some unseen power, stronger than himself, plucked them one by one from the hold to which they clung, lingering, reluctant to let go. A limp thing dropped from his grasp and fell across the bed. And slowly, very slowly, Varge's hands crept through the darkness and clasped themselves over his own temples.

It came shadowy at first, as though just beyond the range of mental vision, eluding it; it came then gradually more and more distinct, as if folds of some gauzy texture — each fold transparent in itself, the whole but a misty covering that no more than blurred the object that it veiled — were being drawn aside one after the other. And now he saw clearly. Breathing, living, pulsing life, a picture, hallowed, softened, from the brush of the Master Painter was lifted up to his gaze — the silvered hair, with its old-lace cap, smoothly parted across the fair, white brow; the tiny furrows in the skin, scarcely discernible, as though age, regretful of its part to touch at all, had touched with gentle, reverent hand; the grey eyes, soft and tender, looking into his, full of trust, pure, serene, calm; the lips, half-parted, smiling at him with the loving, happy smile he knew so well — the face, full

of sweet dignity, was the face of her who had taken a mother's place in his life, whom he had come to reverence and love, as he realised he would have revered and loved his own mother had he ever known her — the face of Mrs. Merton.

The fine-poised, agile brain of the man, full of simple majesty that obtruded neither thought of self nor doubt of consequence, leaped in a lightning flash from premise to conclusion. Grief and sorrow that would bow the grey head down, anguish that would break the tender heart, he could not save her from; he could not bring back to life the form, already cold, she loved so well. But from this other thing, this awful thing, that would strike at her very reason, shatter her faith in the existence of her God, outrage her mother love to hideous mockery and drag her gentle soul in shuddering torture to her grave, crush from her life all that in life was left to her, love, comfort, hope, trust — the great heart of Varge welled with the love he bore her — this thing she should never know, this thing should never touch her.

Merton lay across his feet. He pushed the other away, got out of bed and for a moment stood by the open window motionless. The still, cold air of the winter night was grateful, thin-clad though he was. Not a sound broke the silence from without. Everywhere the snow, under a black, starless sky, lay white-mantling the ground — whiter, it seemed somehow, than he had ever seen it before. Across the river, lower down in a hollow, lay the town, two miles away. Scarcely more than pin-points, two or three lights, twinkling faintly, indicated its position. A moment he stood there,

then feeling his way to the chair beside the little washstand over which his clothes, as usual, had been carefully folded, he began to dress in the darkness. A light to *him* now was abhorrent—he dared not even trust himself to look on the other's face.

A rustle came from the bed. Merton, evidently judging that Varge's actions were the result of some decision relative to himself, had started up in an accession of terrified apprehension.

"Varge," he mumbled huskily. "Varge, what—what are you going to do?"

As though voicing his thoughts aloud unconsciously, rather than in answer to another, Varge spoke in a low, concentrated way.

"I will do it. It is I who have killed Doctor Merton."

It was as if it crept upon Merton slowly. An instant he held silent, still. Then came reaction. A mad paroxysm of relief seemed to sweep the coward soul, he sat upright and struggled to the edge of the bed, babbling, whispering, incoherent almost in his craven transport.

"You will, eh?—yes, you'll do it, Varge. I've money enough to begin with—and I can get more. You'll do it after all, eh? Yes; I knew you would. I knew you'd stand by me. I knew you wouldn't fail me, Varge; we've been good friends you and I, and—" The words froze on Merton's lips. Varge had crossed to the bed, his hand had reached out through the darkness, closed on Merton's leg just above the knee and tightened with the same crushing grip that before had stricken the man with terror.

"Can you not *understand?*"—Varge's whisper came now hoarse and tense. "Do not speak, except to answer my questions—I am afraid of myself with the thought of saving *you*. You were seen, you said. How were you seen so that the crime would point to you and yet would be of no proof against you if suspicion were turned upon some one else?"

"Varge, let go!" Merton cried faintly. "For God's sake, let go—you are breaking my leg!"

With a curious movement, as one suddenly releases his hold upon an object he has unwittingly, unconsciously grasped, which to the sense of touch is utterly repugnant, Varge drew away his hand.

"Answer my question," he said. "If you have been seen at all, there cannot be much time to spare."

"No, no; there is not much—there's not a moment to lose"—this phrase, not new, but for a while dormant through other terrors and now awakened again, brought the words in pitiful eagerness from Merton's lips. "I'll tell you everything—everything. Listen. I got into trouble in New York a little while ago—serious trouble. There was a woman in it. I thought it was all hushed up. The day after I came down here for a visit last week I received a letter—and the whole cursed business was in it. I lost the letter, Varge. Father found it, and without saying anything to me investigated the whole thing. To-night he called me into the library after mother had gone to bed—he said he hadn't dared to tell her anything. He opened one of the little square cupboards in the wall at the side of the fireplace, you know the one, the one on the right hand side, where he keeps his books, papers and money, and took out the

letter with a lot of others he had received about it and showed them to me. He was in a fearful rage. We quarrelled. But there was no noise—we were afraid of awakening mother. Then I don't know just what happened. I was standing by the fire poking it with that long fender bar. I think he meant to snatch it from my hand, just with angry impetuosity. We struggled and—it wasn't cold blood, Varge. We—we'd been quarrelling. I didn't know what I did. I struck him on the side of the head with the bar and he—he fell."

Merton paused, and in the silence came the sound as of hands hard-wrung together till the finger joints crackled.

Varge moved away from the bed, back to the little washstand and resumed his dressing.

"Go on," he said.

"I tore up the letters and burned them in the grate"—Merton's voice was a low moan now. "And then, I don't know why, I went to the window and drew up the blind, and looked out onto the lawn. It was all snow, white, white, white, and not a mark in it. I was trying to think what to do, when I heard a sound back of me from where—where It lay. It startled me and turned my blood cold. I whirled around and jumped back across the room, and—and bent over father before I realised what had made the noise. It was only a piece of coal falling in the grate, only a piece—" Merton broke off jerkily, and a short, sobbing laugh of hysteria came from him.

"Go on," said Varge again.

"I—I bent over father then. I—I was cool again.

The thought came to me that he might be only stunned — but, but he was dead. I was perhaps three minutes, perhaps longer, I don't know how long, bending over him, and then I looked up — *there was a face pressed close against the window pane and the eyes were glaring in at me.* Something held me still — I couldn't move. I must have taken my eyes away instantly, so I am sure he didn't know I saw him. When I looked again the face was gone. Then I got up, it seemed at once, though I suppose it must have been another minute, and went to the window. There was no one in sight, but there were footprints in the snow and the trees hid the road. I jerked down the blind, and then — and then — I thought of you. I turned off the light, crept out of the room and stole up here. I wanted to get you to run away — it was my only chance. I wanted to get you to run away, to make them think you did it, and I — I had a story all ready to tell that would account for my being seen in the room as I was. I would say that I had been reading late upstairs and heard your voice and father's in the library; then silence. That I had kept on reading, and after a while, wondering why father hadn't come up to bed, I went downstairs softly so as not to awaken mother and found him dead — and that then I went for you and you had disappeared. It was Mart Robson's face at the window — he's never liked me anyhow. I suppose the MacGregors must have sent him from the farm for a doctor, and he saw the light and instead of ringing the bell and waking up the house he went first to the window. I know what he's done now — he's gone on to the town to tell the sheriff what he's seen. Varge, do you hear, he's on his way there now!"

Varge's mind was working quickly — mapping, planning out his course of action — weaving the finer threads of detail into the web that was to enmesh himself and free the other. His coat was on now, and he turned to face Merton through the darkness. It was all clear, all plain, even to that one thing that had troubled him — to lessen, to soften the shock to *her*.

"Listen," he said. "I am dressed. I am going. You must make no mistake now. You should not have turned off the light nor drawn down the shade again — *you did not do either* — I will attend to them. You did not see any one at the window. For the rest, you can tell your story as you intended — but there are two things you must do. First, you must telephone the sheriff; if you cannot get him, do not waste time over it — you must have *tried*, that is the important thing. Then you must go at once for Mrs. MacLaughlin, your mother's friend, and bring her back here before Mrs. Merton is awakened — that should not take you more than fifteen minutes, and you must not be longer. When you come back, go into that room again and fix each detail *as you find it then* in your mind, and be careful that your story agrees in every particular. Do you understand?"

"Yes, yes" — Merton struggled from the bed to his feet — "I will telephone at once, and then —"

"Wait," said Varge sharply. "Two of us on the stairs at once may make a noise. Wait until I have gone down." He moved across the room, felt for the door and opened it.

"Yes; but, Varge, money" — Merton was whispering wildly — "you can't get away without money, and every-

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thing depends on your getting away, you've got to get away — here, take —”

“I shall have no need of money,” Varge answered, as he stepped out into the passage.

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nswered,

## CHAPTER III

### IN WHICH THE WEB IS WOVEN

**S**WIFTLY, with sure, light, noiseless tread, Varge made his way along the short passage and down the stairs. It was a fight now with and against time — with it, physically, to accomplish what must be done without the loss of a moment; and, still more important, against it mentally, to coördinate the discrepancy that already existed.

Robson, MacGregor's farmhand, could have done but one of two things — gone on to town, or to the nearest neighbour. Varge's mind had already weighed the alternatives — and, discarding one, agreed with Harold Merton. He had known Robson all his life — Robson was of that type, illiterate, sensational, full of cheap bluster, to whom notoriety would be as the breath of life — he would lose none of the importance attaching to the discovery of a crime, none of the opportunity of being the central figure in the affair by sharing his discovery with any one, who, later on, participating in the furor and excitement, would detract from his own prominence — Robson would tell his tale to the authorities and to no one else. Any feeling Robson might have against Harold Merton; the fact that in all probability he was seeking medical assistance and the other doctors lived in the town itself, which would have an added tendency to take him there; the fact that no one had as yet come, as might have been the case had Robson

stopped at the next house, though there was still time for that yet—all these were extraneous considerations to Varge. It was on the man's temperament, an intimate appraisal of the man himself, as Varge appraised all men with whom he came in contact, that his conclusion was based.

The roads were heavy. There had been a fall of snow during the previous afternoon and evening. Robson could not cover the two miles to the town at best under twenty minutes. It would take him some time to arouse the sheriff, for the sheriff to dress, hear the story, secure a deputy perhaps, and start back—just how long it was impossible to judge specifically; it might be half an hour, or twice that. Then there was the return trip. In all, at the closest calculation, not less than an hour. Debited against this was the time that had elapsed since Robson had looked in at the window; say, five minutes for Merton to creep upstairs, and then the scene in the little chamber—how long had that been? What was the difference between the seemingly limitless time that it had occupied and reality? Varge's mind, eliminating impression, with lightning rapidity rehearsed every act that had taken place, every word that had been spoken—fifteen minutes, it could not have been more. And fifteen and five were twenty. It would be another half-hour, then, before the sheriff would start back.

Varge had reached the bottom of the stairs now and crossed the kitchen. Between the kitchen and the front hall was a small crockery pantry from which swinging doors led, one to the dining room directly in the rear of the library, and one to the hall itself. As he entered the pantry, Varge took his knife from his pocket and

felt along the wall with his hand. An instant's groping and his fingers touched the telephone receiver, followed it down to the base of the instrument, and then, stooping, he slipped his knifeblade in between the wires and the wall and severed the connection.

He straightened up and listened. From the rear above him, he could hear Harold Merton's step at the top of the stairs — then the door at Varge's right swung under his hand, and he went quickly along the hall past the dining room to the library door. There was no flurry, no excitement in his movements — every action, swift, rapid though it was, was one of deliberate precision. With his hand on the library doorknob, just opposite the foot of the front staircase, he paused for an instant to listen again. And now there was not a sound — neither Mrs. Merton nor Anna, the old maid-servant, had been disturbed. Varge's lips drew together in hard compression, the knob turned silently, he pushed the door open, stepped over the threshold and closed it again behind him.

A faint red glow from the grate fire at the lower end of the room and directly opposite the low window that gave onto the lawn in front, rather than illuminating, seemed, by contrast, to accentuate the darkness of the apartment in all but the little, shifting, flickering space around the fireplace itself. On this space Varge's eyes had fastened instantly. A form with arms out-flung lay upon the great bear-skin rug before the hearth, silent, motionless; the face was turned toward the fire, and the light, as though in grim defiance of death, tinged the cheek with its own rich, deep colour, gave to the features the appearance of the rosy hue of health. It

was as if the man had thrown himself down to rest and relaxation, to watch the firelight's play — and had fallen asleep. Poor, pitiful illusion that could last no longer than to enhance the stern awfulness of reality! From the temple upwards across the thick, white hair was a deep open wound, and below it the hair itself was dark and matted; while a little trickling stream of something red, a red deeper even than the glowing coals, still ran down, but very slowly now, behind the ear, and as though to hide itself and its telltale story, disappeared beneath the dead man's collar.

At the Doctor's feet lay the fender bar — a long piece of stout, square, wrought iron, some four feet in length, drawn to rough, ornamental javelin points at the ends. And that it, fashioned once by kindly hands, should be the instrument of death, seemed to Varge, as his eye fell upon it, to lend a curiously mingled touch of pathos and irony to the scene. He remembered the day, a day last summer, the Doctor's birthday, when Joe Malloch, the blacksmith, had brought the gift to the house. The Doctor had been away, and he had helped Joe to set it up before the grate — two small iron pedestals, cleverly forged to represent little mediæval towers, and the bar to rest between them. He remembered the old Doctor's surprise and keen delight when he had seen them. One of the pedestals, knocked over, lay now on its side against the inner edge of the hearth.

A sudden, low, choking sound, like a strong man's stifled sob, came from Varge's lips as he stepped across the room, and, on his knees between the fire and Doctor Merton, knelt for a moment over the other's body. Against the fire, Varge's form loomed up for an in-

stant, throwing into relief a figure well above medium height, but whose proportions were hidden by a heavy overcoat buttoned to the neck. A fur cap, pulled close over the forehead and ears, was on his head. His face was completely in shadow, but as he turned now quickly and, rising, picked up the fender bar, there was a momentary gleam of dark eyes—and the eyes were splashed and wet.

The fireplace, wide, old-fashioned, built of brick, jutted out into the room, leaving a space barely more than five feet on each side between it and the walls; and here, on either side, just in the middle of this space and at the height of a man's shoulders—where the wainscoting ended—were the small cupboards, some two feet square, that Harold Merton had spoken of. They had been built originally with glass doors for Mrs. Merton's best china in the old days when she had presided there over her afternoon tea-service, but, with the years, the Doctor had come to appropriate the room as library, study and consultation room, and the glass doors had been replaced with stout wooden ones—and the china by the Doctor's cash-box, account books and papers.

Varge stepped at once past the fireplace to the right hand side and felt out with his hand. The cupboard door was still wide open, the key still in the lock; inside, his fingers closed on the metal cash-box. This he took out, closed and locked the door, and abstracted the key from the lock. He turned back for a moment now to where Doctor Merton lay, placed the cash-box on the rug and slipped the key into the Doctor's pocket.

Another instant, and he returned to the cupboard. He raised the fender bar across the door, his hands

moved along it as though measuring—and then he stood motionless, listening. From the pantry, behind the dining room, came the muffled ringing of the telephone, very low, very indistinct, as though a hand were held over the bells to deaden the sound. Harold Merton was trying to get a connection. Again and again Merton rang, and Varge waited. The seconds were flying by. It had been necessary to destroy the connection to account for Merton's otherwise suspicious tardiness in communicating with the authorities, and he had refrained from telling the other what he had intended to do in the hope of instilling into the nerve-shaken, incoherent man a little confidence on finding a grain of *truth* in the story he was to tell—that he had *tried* to get connection and couldn't; and, also, there would be, perhaps even more important, the very evident *genuineness* of Merton's surprise when some one else should call his attention to the cut wires. But he had told Merton to waste no time. Would the man never—the ringing stopped, a guarded step came down the hall, passed the library door, halted a bare moment by the hall-rack, evidently to secure hat and coat, and then the outer door opened and closed softly—Merton had gone for Mrs. MacLaughlin.

Varge's hands, one at each end of the bar, rose to his chin, his elbows straight out from his body. Then very slowly the elbows closed in and downwards, a sweat bead sprang to his forehead, a panting gasp came from his lips, and slowly, very slowly, his hands crept together.

And now, guided by the sense of touch, Varge inserted one of the thin, flattened, javelin ends of the bar

into the crack between the edge of the door and the jamb and just under the lock, and, with a steady pressure, began to lever backward. There was a slight creak of splitting woodwork, and then a little sharper sound as the lock began to yield and give. Varge put out his left hand against the door to keep it from flying back with a thud against the wall — and wrenched it free.

Coolly, methodically, but still with the same sure swiftness that held neither haste nor indecision, he stepped back to the fireplace, placed the cash-box under his arm and laid the fender bar where he had found it at the Doctor's feet — only now the heavy wrought iron bar was no longer straight — *halfway down its length it was bent at right angles.*

Varge walked quickly to the front window and let the shade roll full to the top; then to the door, reaching up to press the button and throw on the light as he passed out. He closed the door behind him, went down the hall toward the rear, through the pantry, crossed the kitchen, unbolted the back door, and, stepping out into the night, ran the hundred yards to the bottom of the snow-covered garden. Here, he hurdled the high fence with a strong, agile swing; and now a wide, open tract of land was before him, leading upward in an easy rise to a pine wood a quarter of a mile away to the right, for which he headed.

The soft snow, lately fallen, was ankle deep above the harder crust beneath, but it did not seem either to impede his progress or cause him added exertion to maintain the pace he had set for himself. With arms close in at his sides, his head well up, every movement born

of the instinct of the athlete, he was running now with long, tireless strides as he had never run in his life before.

Again and again, intruding upon that on which his mind was bent, surged with chaotic impetuosity a whirl of thoughts—the past, Mrs. Merton, the Doctor, his own life; and once, in a flash, the thought of the future. Again and again, he drove them back—there would be time enough for that, God knew, in the days to come. *Now* it was his own acts of the past few minutes that were vital—carefully, logically, as he ran, he weighed and balanced them one by one, their relation to each other, their coherence as a whole. Had he made any mistake? Was there anywhere the little forgotten point, the flaw, that the keen wits to be pitted against him would pounce upon?

He had reached the edge of the wood now and plunged into the undergrowth. A few hundred yards in, he stopped and abruptly sat down on the trunk of a fallen tree where the snow lay thickest upon it. He rose immediately and sat down again at once upon the same trunk, but this time at a spot a little removed from the first. Again he rose, and now very rapidly tramped up and down, up and down, for a space of ten yards before the tree, sometimes varying his direction by erratic steps to the right and left.

And now, not *running*, but walking swiftly, he made his way out of the woods again, and, taking a course diagonal to that by which he had come, headed across the fields for a point on the town road a mile lower down than the Merton house—*a mile nearer the town*.

Again his mind was concentrated on his problem.

The weak link in the chain was the *motive*—he had realised that, sensed that from the first—therefore the stronger must be the constructive, supporting evidence, irrefutable, positive, each small detail fitting as inevitably and significantly into the whole as little cogs fit essentially into ponderous and complex machinery. For, from the moment Varge had accepted the guilt as his own, he had accepted it with all and everything that *finality* meant. To run from it, to beg the issue, was not only foreign to his every instinct, but it was certain eventual discovery of the truth. As a possibility it had undergone the almost unconscious, quick, accurate, mental surgery of Varge's mind—and had been eliminated from the outset. To count on suspicion being deflected from Harold Merton to himself by running away was almost worse than folly—at best it could but *divide* suspicion. Then would come investigation. Harold Merton was unpopular, disliked, and always had been from a boy; his New York record would be unearthed, one thing would follow another; the man himself, a mental, moral weakling, not big enough even in a vicious way to lie without stumbling, would be trapped and the end would be inevitable—and meanwhile over Mrs. Merton would hang the *shadow* of the truth, accentuating by days of agonised suspense the hideous certainty that sooner or later would be established. There had been only one way, only one *sure* way from the first.

There was left then, strange paradox! only the law itself to battle with. A plea of guilty to the crime of murder in that staid old New England state was neither accepted as a plea nor as proof of guilt. A confession he could make, but after that would come the probing,

the investigation that must establish guilt "beyond a reasonable doubt" to corroborate the confession. And this, Varge, as he reached the road, was finally satisfied that he had done.

It was very black—only the white of the snow seemed to supply any light. It was very silent, very still—only his steps, and those deadened in the soft, yielding flakes, gave sound. And in the blackness and the stillness there seemed a great mystery, a vastness, typifying a still most vast and mysterious beyond—an other world, the world which lay on the other side of life. Varge raised his eyes to the dark, heavy cloud-mass overhead as he walked. There was no qualm of fear within him, just the serious, sober recognition and acceptance of the fact that each step brought him nearer to this mystery whose solving was in death. A month, two months, three, perhaps a little longer, and he would see these things from the *other side*.

Varge crossed the bridge over the little river and entered the town. He had met no one on the road—Robson then had not yet started back. He reached the square and quickened his pace as he headed across it. From the window of the sheriff's office on the ground floor of the courthouse—Berley Falls was the county seat—a light streamed forth, and from a sleigh before the door a man got out and hurried inside the building.

Varge was barely more than a couple of minutes behind him. The sheriff's door was wide open as Varge stepped into the corridor. Marston, the sheriff, was at the telephone. Handerlie, the deputy sheriff, the last arrival, his hands deep in his overcoat pockets, was star-

ing, jaw dropped a little, at Robson. Robson, round, fatuous-faced, was talking in a high, excited key.

"No; of course, I didn't see him *do* it — but I see his *face* as he bent over the old Doctor with his head all covered with blood. If you'd seed that, you wouldn't need to ask who done it. Crickey, I tell you, it scart me! If he didn't do —"

Marston half-turned with the receiver at his ear.

"I'll admit," he said, "it looks kind of queer that young Merton, knowing his father had been murdered half-an-hour ago, hasn't notified any one, and that I can't get any answer from the house now; but if I were you, Robson, I'd go kind of slow with my tongue. Accusing a man of murder is pretty serious business."

"I ain't accusing no one of anything," returned Robson, a little defiantly. "I'm only telling what I seen. And all I've got to say is that if Harold Merton didn't do it, why then — well, I'd like to know who did?"

"I will tell you," said Varge, stepping quietly into the room. "It was I."

## CHAPTER IV.

### LOOSE THREADS

**B**ERLEY FALLS awoke that morning in stunned and awe-stricken gloom. Men gathered in little knots on the street corners, in the square, in their various places of business, and talked in hushed, subdued tones. It was as though to each had come, as indeed it really had, a personal and intimate bereavement, for none but had known and loved old Doctor Merton almost from their births. And yet as they talked, and deep as were their feelings, there was a marked absence of either execration or invective against the self-confessed author of the brutal, cowardly crime.

Varge, the Doctor's man, had confessed and given himself up! Incongruously enough, where then there should be no mystery this very thing brought mystery into the affair — and they shook their heads in amazed incredulity. As they had known Doctor Merton, so, too, if not for so many years, they had known Varge. They had watched him grow from childhood amongst them, and had come to respect and esteem him for the kindly, modest nature, the fine consideration of others that was his; for his calm-tempered disposition; for his personality itself, retiring, unobtrusive, that yet seemed always to exude an intangible sense of latent breadth and power — but most of all they had come to hold him in high regard for the manifest gratitude and loyalty he bore toward the two who had brought him up and given him a home. That Varge should have struck down and

killed his benefactor seemed beyond credence — impossible.

"But he confessed to it himself," protested, in a puzzled, self-argumentative tone, one of the group gathered in the blacksmith's shop.

Joe Malloch, the smith, drew a glowing piece of iron from the forge and laid it viciously upon the anvil.

"S'posin' he did," he said gruffly; "I don't believe it for all that — nor none of you don't neither. There's something behind it, you mark my words. He's got some reason for sayin' it was him. Why, dang it, what's the use of talkin'! Don't you *know* Varge? 'Ain't he stuck to the old Doc all these years just out of gratitude, when he could have been anything about he liked if he'd only been willin' to leave the old couple an' strike out for himself? He's got a head on him, Varge has. Look what he's done with what he's had to do with. He's studied, he has; and I'll bet if he had college papers, or whatever it is, to let him practise, he'd show he was as good as the old Doctor himself. D'ye think a man that's done as he has an' acted the way he has would do a thing like this?"

"It don't look likely, that's a fact," agreed the first speaker.

"No; it don't — an' it *ain't!*" grunted Malloch.

"But, anyway, there's one consolation — a man's just sayin' he did a thing ain't enough to fit a noose around his neck in these days."

"No," admitted another of the group; "but it goes a long way toward it, just the same."

The smith's arm came down with a sudden swing and a shower of sparks flew from the hammer blow.

"We'll see what we'll see when they get to the trial," he asserted. "And what we'll see 'll be that Varge's story won't hold water, an' what's behind it 'll come out. Why, gol-blame it to blazes, look at the town! There ain't one of us but 'd give our right hand to have the old Doc back, but who's sayin' a word against Varge? An' ordinarily we'd be for lynchin' the man that done it if we could get our hands on him! Now if it was that sanctimonious-faced Harold, son of the Doc though he is, I wouldn't say a word — but Varge! No, siree! An' he'll have the dog-gonest job makin' any jury in these parts believe it, either."

Another view, though utterly at variance with that of the brawny blacksmith and Berley Falls in general, was expressed that morning by Miss Amelia Higgins, the president of the Berley Falls Ladies' Hermeneutic and Historical Society. It is worthy of mention because, later on, in the absence of any competing theory, it gained some acceptance, *faute de mieux*.

"I believe," announced Miss Higgins, shaking her grey ringlets at the executive committee, who were engaged in the preparation of a somewhat ambitious program for the society's next meeting, "I believe, and I believe firmly, and I always *have* believed in heredity. I spoke to poor dear Mrs. Merton about it years ago when she first adopted that boy, and I warned her then. To adopt a child without the slightest inkling of who his parents were is simply tempting Providence. What is bred in the bone *will* come out. I always knew something would happen."

"Gracious goodness!" said the executive committee, in sudden dismay. "We never thought of that."

"Yes," said Miss Higgins, with a sigh; "there is so much in the accident of birth — it should broaden our sympathies." Miss Higgins adjusted her spectacles with precision on her sharp, literary nose, and turned to the lady on her right. "But I have mentioned this only in passing. I think, Mrs. Ambrose, you proposed a paper on Sophocles by Miss Farrington. Does any member of the committee desire to discuss the proposal?"

As the hours went by that morning, the tension and suspense in the little town rose steadily. Doctor Merton had been murdered; Varge had confessed to the deed — that was all anybody seemed to know.

But in the district attorney's office in the county courthouse a more intimate scene in connection with the crime had been taking place. For an hour Sheriff Marston had been closeted with the prosecuting officer. And now he was pacing up and down the room, stopping every once in a while to lay a fat forefinger in emphasis on the edge of the other's desk; while Lee, the district attorney, bent forward a little in his chair, tapped thoughtfully with a paper cutter on the desk-pad as he listened.

"That's the whole story summed up the way he told it to me," said Marston at last. "I didn't believe him last night, but there was nothing to do except lock him up and notify the coroner. I went up to the house and spent the rest of the night looking things over, and I'll admit they bore out what he said — the way he had run from the house at first to make his escape, I could tell that by the stride in the snow; then the bit trampled down in the woods; and then his tracks back across the

fields to the road — he *walked* that, just as he said he had. This bears out Harold Merton's statement that when he discovered his father dead Varge had disappeared. Varge certainly must have been gone then, it would seem, to have done what there is plain evidence in the snow he did do, and yet get to town and give himself up before we started back; for, of course, if all this is true, Robson's discovery of Harold Merton bending over the Doctor was coincident with Harold Merton's discovery of his father's death. Now then, inside the house it was just the same — his story fits. The coroner says Doctor Merton was undoubtedly killed with that bar. The bar was bent, evidently in prying the cupboard door open, though the door must have held pretty solid for it's a right stout bar, and it fits into the marks and indents on the cupboard door and jamb. Well, that's about all. Every little point, as I say, seems to bear out his story, and yet "—the big sheriff's genial face was troubled, as he halted abruptly and leaned far over the desk toward the district attorney—"and yet I don't believe it *now*. Lee" — impulsively "we've both known him for years; what is there about that man that there isn't about you or me, or any other man we've ever met? You've only to *look* at him, and something in your soul tells you he's white, white clean through — and innocent. What is it, Lee?"

Lee tossed the paper cutter on the desk and his hand rumbled through his greyish hair.

"I don't know," he answered gravely. "I'm willing to admit a good deal of what you say — but I don't know. Anyway, we can't let sentiment carry us off our feet, Marston."

Marston walked to the window, stared out for a moment and came back to the desk.

"It isn't all sentiment," he said slowly. "Putting all that aside, there's something else — there's the *motive*. It isn't big enough or strong enough — and that's flat. Leaving out the kind of man altogether, providing, of course, he wasn't a fly-by-night, hairbrained crook, which we're not considering, it isn't likely *any* ordinary man would do that suddenly after all these years, is it?"

"Go on, Marston," prompted the district attorney, glancing shrewdly at the other as the sheriff paused. "What's the answer?"

"It's this," said Marston, his eyes holding the district attorney's steadily. "*I can't get Robson's story out of my mind*. It's natural enough for young Merton to have found his father as he says he did, and for Robson to have happened along just then, but — well, I talked to Robson again. I took him back with me as far as the Merton's house last night on his way home. Mind you, I know as well as you do that Robson wasn't dealt with any too generously when the brains were handed out, and I wouldn't be the first to subscribe for a large enough block of stock in what he says ordinarily to head the shareholders' list, but for once I'd lay a good deal he wasn't drawing any on his imagination — I could *see* young Merton's face the way he saw it — and it got me."

The pivot on Lee's swivel chair squeaked a grating, drawn-out note, as he swung slowly around to face the sheriff more directly.

"You mean?" he demanded bluntly.

Marston smiled grimly.

"I don't mean anything, do I?" he returned. "But I'd like to try an experiment."

Lee's scraggy eyebrows lifted ever so slightly, and into the keen grey eyes crept a whimsical light.

"Don't you know, Marston," he said, "that the popular conception of the attitude of a district attorney is to railroad any man that falls into his clutches—quite regardless of guilt or innocence, of course—to the noose or pen, as the case may be, with the utmost expediency? Surely, you don't expect me to aid and abet you in establishing the possible innocence of a self-confessed murderer, and take any chance of his slipping through my fingers! I'm surprised at you, Marston! What's the experiment?"

Marston placed his hand on the other's shoulder.

"Just this," he said impressively. "I want to bring Varge and Harold Merton face to face *suddenly* in the room where Doctor Merton was murdered—and I want to do it *now*, while the iron's hot."

Lee whistled a low note under his breath, as he reached again for the paper cutter. He dropped this after a second or two, and looked at his watch.

"It's eleven o'clock," he said abruptly. "The coroner's inquest is at two. I'm not sure it's quite regular, but if it isn't we'll stretch a point. Get a sleigh, Marston, and we'll go out there now."

"The sleigh's been waiting at the jail door for the last hour," said Marston quietly.

"Oh!" remarked Lee with a low laugh, as he swung to his feet.

Marston started for the door.

"I'll get Varge in, and pick you up here by the time you get your coat on."

"Wait!" said Lee suddenly, and his voice had lost its laugh. "Just a minute, Marston. Let's be sure there isn't any mistake about where we stand. I'll go the limit to see that he gets a square deal, but if he's guilty there'll be no let up and I'll see that he gets his."

"He'll deserve it," said Marston gruffly, as he went out.

## CHAPTER V.

"VARGE, IS IT TRUE?"

**T**HE battle had begun. During the short drive through the town, the cynosure of hastily attracted eyes; during the longer drive on the country road, meeting only now and then a passing team, Varge had sat quietly between the sheriff and the district attorney, giving by no slightest sign an inkling of the suspicion aroused within him that there was an ulterior motive for this visit to the Merton homestead.

"Varge," the district attorney had said bluffly, when they started, "we are taking you out there to have you show us exactly what you did and what happened. You understand though, of course, that you are perfectly within your rights to refuse to say a word."

And Varge had answered him quietly: "I have already said I am guilty. What have I to conceal? I am perfectly willing to go."

And then, without logical, tangible reason for it, he had sensed some trap being laid for him by these two, and had set his mind to discovering it. His first thought had been the fender bar — it was there, a final, absolute point should it be needed; he had seen to that, but he had slurred it over in his story, deliberately, intentionally, through a sensitive, innate diffidence that had been his all his life, a modesty that shrank from notoriety that prompted him — rather than to thrust it forward vauntingly — to keep the knowledge of his own

strength, that was beyond the strength of other men, to himself. But a moment's thought had dismissed that as being their object — on the surface it did not appear important; the chances were they would overlook the *cruz* of it, and, besides, they would have questioned him first about it at the jail. And then from one possibility to another his mind had flown, but it was not until they had neared the house that, in an intuitive flash, the answer had come, perplexing, disturbing him — they were going to confront him with Harold Merton. Logic then had come instantly, buttressing intuition. Robson's story had not been without effect — his own explanation of the motive, the only possible one available that would lend itself to unalterable conditions, was, as he had appreciated from the first, not over-strong or convincing. Yes, undoubtedly, that was the trap, he had decided — and one that, he had realised, would tax him to the utmost to counteract. The danger lay with Harold Merton — a wrong word or act, a misdirected look, a falter in the other's voice, then a collapse and the man would be like putty, a pygmy, in the hands of the cleverest criminal lawyer in the State, and this was almost certain to ensue if he were exposed to the shock of a sudden, unexpected meeting — but that, Varge had determined, somehow and at all hazards, to prevent.

And now, as they stood within the storm door on the porch of the Merton home, Lee turned to Varge while his hand reached out for the knocker.

"You quite understand, Varge," he said again, gravely now, "that anything you say or do is entirely voluntary?"

Varge faced him slowly — and answered him with a

smile, at once patient and appreciative, that barely moved the firm, closed lips and found its greater expression in the deep, clear, brown eyes.

"Very well," said the district attorney—and rapped softly.

They stood there for a moment waiting, a silent group. Marston, big, burly, six feet in height, fumbling a little uneasily with the collar of his coon-skin overcoat as he turned it down; Lee, of medium height, slim, nervously-active, engaged in pulling off his glove; Varge, perfectly proportioned, straight of figure, almost up to the sheriff's height, stood motionless, quiet, calm, composed, a sober expression on his strong, clean-shaven face that seemed to enhance the power and vigour that lived dominant in every separate feature—the steady eyes, deep-set beneath the broad, high forehead; the large, straight nose, wide-nostrilled, sensitive; the chin and jaw, square and determined, but without hint of aggressiveness; the mouth, perhaps a little wide, at once reliant and tender, that charmed with the kindly smile which constantly hovered upon it seeking expression.

The door opened a little way—then wide, as Anna, her eyes riveted on Varge, fell back before them. The next moment she had covered her face with her apron and was sobbing bitterly.

Varge's eyes dropped instantly to the ground—Marston's glance, keen, searching, was upon him. He stepped obediently inside at a slight pressure on his arm from the sheriff.

Marston turned at once to the library door on the right, and motioned Varge to enter.

Lee, bringing up the rear, stopped for an instant beside the old maid-servant and patted her soothingly on the shoulder.

"There, there," he said gently. "You mustn't give way." Then, dropping his voice so that Varge, now in the library, would not catch the words: "Listen. I want you to tell Mr. Harold Merton that the district attorney would like to speak to him for a moment. You need say nothing about any one else being here. You quite understand?—just the district attorney."

Anna lowered her apron and cast a frightened glance at him, as she nodded her head—the district attorney, to her simple mind, inspired much the same terror that is accredited to the inquisitors of old.

"Very good, then," said Lee. "I will be in there"—he motioned toward the library door. "Please go at once."

He turned from her, stepped briskly into the library and closed the door.

"Now, Varge," he said quietly, "everything here is as it was last night, I believe, except that, the coroner having viewed the remains early this morning, the body of Doctor Merton has, of course, been removed. But before you describe what took place, I want to ask you a question or two. You told Marston here that the cause of the murder was through Doctor Merton catching you in the act of stealing his cash-box, and that your reason for taking the cash-box was because you were tired of your hum-drum, aimless life here and wanted money to get away. Now, let's see—er—I suppose the Doctor has paid you something for a num-

ber of years past — didn't you have any money of your own?"

"Yes," said Varge. "But once I'd made up my mind to go, I wanted all I could get to make a new start on."

"How much of your own money did you have?"

"About six hundred dollars."

"Where?" — sharply.

"In the bank," Varge answered quietly.

"Hum!" commented the district attorney drily.

"And it's there *now*, isn't it?"

A wan smile, tolerant, tinged Varge's lips — but while his eyes held Lee's steadily and his wits were pitted warily against the other, his ears were strained to catch the first sound of an approaching footfall.

"I didn't expect that what *did* happen would happen," he countered instantly. "I didn't expect to be caught taking the cash-box. I didn't expect that suspicion would be directed against me when it was found to have been taken. I didn't intend to leave here for perhaps weeks yet, not until it had all blown over. That's why I hadn't drawn the money out of the bank."

"Well," said Lee, frowning, "the cash-box, I understand, was always kept in the same place, always there — how did you come to hit on *last night* for the robbery?"

"Because," Varge answered, "I knew there was more in the cash-box than usual. I saw Doctor Merton open it yesterday afternoon."

Lee turned to the sheriff.

"How much was in it when you opened it, Marston, after Varge gave it to you?"

"Three hundred odd," Marston replied tersely. Things were not going quite as the big-hearted sheriff liked them. He wheeled after giving his reply, and, with his back to the interior of the room, gazed out of the front window.

Varge had moved quietly in front of the fireplace where, with a side view of the door, he could both see and be seen the instant that it was opened a crack.

Lee stood by the wall directly opposite the door, and between Varge and the sheriff.

"Tell the rest of the story your own way, Varge," said the district attorney, after an instant's pause.

"It was one o'clock" — Varge spoke slowly and distinctly — "I had heard the kitchen clock strike twelve and then the half-hour and then one. I thought all of the family were in bed and asleep. I came downstairs and along the hall to this room. It was dark, all except the fire in the grate which only made the rest of the room seem darker a little distance away from it. The possibility of any one still being here never occurred to me, of course. I stole across to the fireplace, picked up the fender bar and pried that cupboard there in the wall open. And then the lights went on in a flash and Doctor Merton jumped at me. He had been lying down on the couch over there and had fallen asleep, I suppose. I don't know what he said. He spoke several times and I answered him. He was surprised and horror-stricken, I think — and I was beside myself. I tried then to get away and he tried to stop me and we struggled. The fender bar was still in my hand. I struck him with it across the head and he fell. Then I snatched up the cash-box, crept out of the room, went down the hall and

cut the telephone wires on my way out—I wanted as long a start as I could get before the alarm was given, and I knew that sooner or later some one of the family, wondering why the Doctor hadn't gone up to bed, would come down to investigate and that the first thing they would do would be to telephone the town and notify the police. I went into the kitchen, snatched up my overcoat and hat from the peg, got out the back door, ran with all my might through the garden and then for the woods on the hill." Varge's voice, without perceptible change, had been gradually rising louder. The door of the parlour across the hall opposite the library had opened and closed softly, and the sound of a step, scarcely audible, muffled by the heavy carpet in the hall, had come to him. He glanced at the other two. Lee was intent on the story; Marston was tapping fretfully with his fingers on the window pane. Neither of them had noticed the sound. Varge had not paused; there had been no break in his words—but his voice in subtle warning was carrying easily to the hall without. "It all came over me then—what I'd done. There's no use telling you what I went through, the remorse and horror of it all. I didn't know how long it was then, but it must have been an hour, judging by the time I reached the town, that I fought it out with myself there in the woods. And then, well then, you know the rest; I walked—"

The words seemed to die in Varge's throat, and slowly a grey pallor crept into his face. The door had opened enough for Varge to see who was on the other side, not far enough for either Lee or Marston to do so.

Marston, at the click of the doorhandle, had swung

"VARGE, IS IT TRUE?"

quickly around from the window; and now both his and Lee's eyes were fixed sharply, critically on Varge — the next instant, like Varge's, they were strained on the doorway.

*It was Mrs. Merton.*

She stood there, a frail, pathetic figure in black, the sweet, patient face worn and haggard with grief — and, swaying a little, caught at the door jamb for support. Then steadying herself with an effort, she stepped into the room and shut the door.

"Good God!" Marston muttered in dismay under his breath, and mopped helplessly at his forehead with his hand.

She moved slowly toward Varge. Lee stepped forward as though to interpose, but she waved him away.

"I was in the other room with *him*," she said dully, "and I saw you drive up. It seemed almost an answer to prayer. I have asked on my knees through the night that it might not be so, that this at least might be some horrible mistake — and I have not believed it and I will never believe it unless I hear it from your own lips" — she had stopped before Varge, and was talking to Varge, to Varge alone, with a strange concentration that seemed to make her obliivious of all else, of the others, of her surroundings even — "why, you are just like another son, Varge, and, of course, I couldn't believe it any more than I could believe it of Harold. Why, I've brought you up and taken care of you and loved you ever since you were a little boy. Don't you remember, Varge, I taught you your letters? Of course, it isn't true. It's like an answer to prayer and

you've come to tell me so yourself, haven't you? Tell me, Varge, that it isn't true."

A silence as of death fell upon the room. His hands tight-clasped at his sides, the skin over the knuckles as white as the marble in his face, Varge neither moved nor spoke. The veins in his temple swelled, and, throbbing, seemed to stand out like great blue welts raised from the blows of a whip-lash.

For a moment she stared at him, standing as one numbed, robbed of all power of movement; then heavily, as though drawn back by some invisible power, she retreated from him—and her hands clasping her face, elongating it as she pressed against her cheeks, seemed to accentuate the dawning horror that was creeping into it.

"Varge! Varge, is it *true?*" she cried wildly.

Varge's hands brushed back the clustered brown hair from the forehead, damp now with beads of agony.

"It is true," he said hoarsely.

She was swaying now again and seemed about to fall. Lee reached out his hand to her and took her arm.

"Come, Mrs. Merton," he pleaded gently. "Come; let me take you from here."

"Wait!"—her face was colourless; her voice scarce above a whisper. "*You* have done this! It is true; oh, God, it is true! I did not know that such a being as you could live—that God created such monsters. Go! Go, from this house! How dared you come here—how dared they bring you here!" Her voice had risen—and distraught, almost insane with grief and outraged love, the bitter words, so foreign to the gentle, kindly lips, fell with cruel, blighting force on Varge.

"You stand there, *there*, where it was done — it is too horrible! Are you here to mock me — the woman who has been your mother in everything but birth? Go, do you hear, go! — and carry with you to the hour of your death my curse upon the day that I took you into my life! *Do not look at me like that!* You are asking for mercy. What mercy did you give? I have no mercy. I — I think my soul — is dead — and —"

Lee and Marston sprang together and caught her in their arms as she fell — Mrs. Merton had fainted.

They carried her from the room, and, as they passed out of the door, Varge turned and buried his face in his hands on the mantelpiece. A man's step, descending the stairway, came to him, and Anna's steps running along the hall as well; then Lee's voice:

"The matter can wait, Mr. Merton. Another time will do. Your mother needs your attention now."

Presently some one touched his arm. Varge raised his head. It was Marston.

There was a new ring, gruff and hard, in the sheriff's voice as he spoke.

"We'll go back now," he said tersely.

"Yes," said Varge, and followed the other quietly from the room. But that night in the darkness of his cell, alone, where none might see, he turned upon his face on the prison cot, his great shoulders shook — and he sobbed as a little soul-torn child sobs out its heart.

## CHAPTER VI

### COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENCE

FOUR days had passed.

The scene with Mrs. Merton, though a contretemps to the intention in visiting the house, had, to the district attorney's mind, at least, accomplished the object sought in a more positive manner than he had perhaps hoped for. Varge was guilty.

To Marston it seemed less positive, and he still wavered.

Berley Falls, ignorant of what had transpired, held doggedly to its first impressions and watched the formal, routine progress of the law—the finding of the coroner's inquest against Varge; the finding, the next morning, by the grand jury, then in session, of a "true bill"; Varge's arraignment in the afternoon before Judge Crosswaite—with the confident expectation that at the actual trial it would be vindicated in its belief.

To Varge, as a sort of compensation for the ordeal to which he had been so unwittingly subjected, bringing a measure of relief, had been the attitude then adopted by the district attorney. Believing him guilty, Lee would make quick and summary work of the case without further sifting and probing of details. But in this, at the arraignment following the grand jury's indictment, he had been met with a new turn that had not only dissipated entirely the relief thus experienced, but had brought him a fresh anxiety.

Judge Crosswaite had, as Varge had known he would do, refused to accept a plea of guilty; but, then, instead of proceeding at once with the trial, he had, despite Varge's persistent refusal to be represented by counsel, appointed a lawyer for the defence and adjourned the trial for three days to give the appointee an opportunity to prepare his case. This action in itself was sufficiently disturbing, but increasing Varge's concern was the fact that Judge Crosswaite's choice of counsel should have fallen where it did — on John Randall.

Randall was young, but little older than Varge, and between the two there had always been a strong, mutual liking — and keen, bright, clever, what Randall lacked in experience to make him the equal of Lee, the district attorney, he made up in youth and unbounded enthusiasm in his belief in the innocence of the man who was now both his friend and client. And it was this enthusiasm that had troubled Varge.

Nor had Varge's fears been without reason. For the first two days Randall had haunted him in the jail, alternately cajoling, threatening, pleading in an effort to make him talk. "I am guilty, John. I did it. There is nothing more to say," Varge had told him invariably each time — but it had been useless. Again and again, Randall had returned to the attack. At last, however, on the third day, Varge's refusal either to talk or discuss the case appeared, finally, to have had a discouraging effect on the young lawyer, to the extent that, apparently giving it up as hopeless, Randall had left Varge entirely to himself. To Varge, this had been as a weight lifted from his shoulders, for he had lived in hourly dread that the well-meant persistency might, in

some unexpected, unanticipated way, result in supplying a line of defence to the other that would shatter the structure he himself had so carefully reared.

And so the four days had passed; and now, on the morning of the trial itself, Varge rose soberly confident and prepared. He dressed quietly and ate the breakfast that was brought him. There was still some time before he would be taken into court, and he sat down on the edge of the cot to go over his story in his mind for the last time, as a final rehearsal, detail by detail. The sun streaming in through the grated bars caught a glint of gold in the brown of his hair, seemed to caress the massive, splendid head exultantly, and play softly on the clean-cut, thoughtful face, as he leaned a little forward, his chin cupped in one hand. For perhaps five minutes he sat there without motion, buried in thought, and then, as a key grated in the lock, he turned his head in calm inquiry.

The door opened and closed — Randall stood in the cell.

"I thought you had given it up, John," said Varge quietly.

"You'd deserve it if I had," responded Randall tartly. "You've tried hard enough to go to the devil in your own way. Well, what do you say this morning?"

Varge shook his head.

"There is nothing to say, John," he answered, with a serious, patient smile. "I am guilty, and I am ready to answer for it."

Randall, short, broad-shouldered, leaned against the door for a moment, and his cheery face clouded as he

fixed his clear, penetrating blue eyes, a troubled look in them now, on Varge; then he stepped suddenly across the cell and laid both hands impulsively on Varge's shoulders.

"Varge, for God's sake, open up on this," he pleaded, with a catch in his voice. "What have you done this for?—*who* are you doing it for? You're as innocent of this crime as I am!"

Varge's two hands clasped over Randall's, still on his shoulders, and tightened in a friendly pressure.

"John," he said steadily, "I have only the same answer for you as before. Don't force it from me again. You are wrong—I am guilty."

Randall pulled away his hands and drew back—and abruptly his manner changed. He shook his finger in Varge's face.

"You lie!" he cried passionately. "You lie; and you know it! And what's more, *I* know it. If you think I'm going to stand by and see an innocent man go to his death for some one else, you're mistaken. Do you hear, Varge? I thought from the first you were innocent—but I *know* it, *know* it now, and I'll *prove* it upstairs in that courtroom this morning in spite of you. I wasn't idle yesterday, even if—"

"What do you mean?"—quick as the winking of an eye Varge had risen from the cot and his hand had closed on Randall's left shoulder—and Randall, seeming literally to crumple up on his left side, went down to his knee. "What do you mean?" repeated Varge, but more slowly now, and his hand dropped to his side.

Randall rose, white-faced, and felt his shoulder with his right hand.

"My God, Varge," he muttered, with a shiver, "you're *strong*."

Varge sat down on the cot again, smiling, as quiet as though he had never risen from it.

"I'm sorry, John," he said; "but you have no one but yourself to blame. You tried to trick me, didn't you? You tried to startle me into what you would call giving myself away—well, I don't like that sort of thing, and I don't think you will try it again."

"I did not," said Randall. "I meant what I said. You can lay me out again if you like, but I'm going to repeat it. I meant what I said. I *know* you're innocent—and I can *prove* it." His voice dropped to a pleading tone once more. "Varge, what's the use? I tell you, I *know*. You might as well drop the mask with me."

"And again," said Varge, "whatever you may think or believe, you are wrong."

"You stick to that, do you," demanded Randall, with sudden impatience. "Even to me?"

"Even to you," said Varge. "What the proof you imagine you have to the contrary is, I do not know, but—"

"Ah!" interrupted Randall quickly. "Confidences should be mutual. All I ask is yours, and—"

"You have *my* confidence," said Varge. "I am guilty. Your position is not very strong, John, I am afraid. Why do you make conditions? If you had any such proof there could be no reason for hiding it from me."

Randall, from pacing up and down the cell, stopped in front of Varge.

"There's a very *good* reason," he said bluntly. "I am afraid of you. And as long as you persist in trying to run your neck into a noose, I am afraid of you. That's honest, isn't it? I am afraid that if I gave you the chance to let that head of yours work, you'd beat me even now. Now then, Varge, for the last time, won't you let us go into this shoulder to shoulder? Won't you open up?"

"I have nothing to open up," said Varge monotonously.

"That is final?"

"That is final," answered Varge.

Randall moved slowly to the door and rattled for Handerlie, who had let him in. Then he turned and looked at Varge.

"There's a verse in the Bible, Varge, I've been thinking about a good deal these last few days," he said, in a low, husky voice. "You know it—it begins like this, 'Greater love hath no man . . .'"

Varge's chin was cupped again in his hand, his eyes were on the stone floor and he did not look up.

Handerlie's step sounded along the corridor. Then Randall spoke again.

"You're a big man, Varge—according to that verse, there aren't any bigger. And so—well so, thank God, I can save you."

## CHAPTER VII

### THE SENTENCE OF THE COURT

“**T**HE prosecution rests”—the district attorney sat down, and, his hand rumpling in habit through his grey hair, looked over at John Randall, a stern, though not altogether unsympathetic smile upon his lips.

There was a sudden stir in the little courtroom—and a tremulous, sibilant sound, the involuntary intake of many breaths, seemed to waver, tense, full of suspense, over the packed and crowded benches.

It was already afternoon. One by one the witnesses had testified as Lee had called them, and now the State's case was at an end. One by one as Lee had finished with his witnesses, he had glanced toward Randall and nodded, signifying that they were at the disposal of the defence for cross-examination, but each time Randall had merely shaken his head.

It had not lasted long, Lee's examination of his witnesses—most of the forenoon had been taken up with the impanelling of a jury and the court formalities. The coroner had testified that Doctor Merton had come to his death from the blow of a heavy instrument over the left side of his head; the fender bar had been put in evidence; Marston had testified to Varge's confession; Robson had given his evidence; Harold Merton had followed; and after him, corroborating one point in his story, the disappearance of Varge from the house, had come Mrs. MacLaughlin—and that had been all.

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Once only had there been any demonstration — and that no more than a low rustle, the rubbing of clothes on chairs, the faint shuffle of feet, as Harold Merton had taken the stand. But this, Merton, for the first moment or so, had appeared to sense, for his face had seemed to pale a little as his restless black eyes had shot glances around the room, and his first words had come hoarse and jerky, stumbling. After that, he had made an excellent witness, creating an impression of credibility, speaking quietly without haste or hesitation, facing the prisoner, his eyes holding steadily on Varge's face.

And through it all, Varge had sat with scarcely a movement, his head slightly bowed, beside Handerlie, the deputy sheriff; his eyes, except during Harold Merton's testimony, when from between clasped hands they had held the other magnetically, dividing their attention for the most part between John Randall and a large oblong parcel that lay on the table before the young attorney.

There had been something of quiet confidence in the way Randall had allowed each witness to step down unchallenged, implying something in reserve, a masked battery, to which all this was but extraneous and futile, that had troubled Varge more and more as the trial had progressed. "Thank God, I can save you," had been Randall's last words to him that morning. What had Randall discovered — what was in that unwieldy parcel on the attorney's table? Randall could not have got at the truth — he had let Harold Merton go from the stand unquestioned. What then? What was this thing that kept Randall sitting there so sure a master of himself?

Nor had the young attorney's actions been significant only to Varge. From Joe Malloch, the blacksmith, who sat amongst those on the front bench, his doubled fists crowded between his knees, his honest, bearded face out-thrown a little from bended shoulders, to the twelve men in the jury box, each in attitudes of strained attention, to the set sea of faces behind Malloch, to Lee, the district attorney, whose glance more than once rested with speculative curiosity on the package before Randall, to Judge Crosswaite on the bench, silver-haired, his kindly face grave and serious, all seemed subtly conscious of some startling thing impending, that gradually had charged the courtroom with suspense until now that the crucial moment had arrived the very air seemed electrified with expectation.

John Randall rose with slow deliberation from his chair.

"Varge to the stand!"

A murmur, instantly hushed, swept through the room.

Varge stood up, and, for the first time since the trial had begun, the eyes of the two men met — in Randall's there was a light that seemed to mingle determination and assurance with a lurking sense of ironic command; in Varge's eyes there was only grave scrutiny.

As Varge, led by Handerlic, stepped into the witness box, and, with hand upraised, took the oath, every eye in the room was upon him. Motionless as he stood, he seemed like some splendid statue, the masterpiece of a famous sculptor, in which grace, strength and rugged beauty were wrought and blended with a master's skill — the hair, as it fell over the clear, white, broad brow, might have been put there by Michael Angelo himself;

and the expression on his face, half sombre, half patient resignation, in perfect consonance with the rôle he played, might, too, have been the work of no less cunning fingers.

Varge's hand dropped and rested on the rail. His eyes swept the courtroom with a single rapid glance — and held an instant upon the round, red, blatant face of Mart Robson, that somehow seemed to stand out and force itself upon his vision. Flashing, quick, curiously inconsequent it seemed, his mind went back to the day when, boys of ten, he had fought and licked the other for shoving Hettie Elmslie into a mud puddle; he remembered that very well, and he remembered Mrs. Merton's dismay and anxiety at his own puffed cheek, her gentle reproof tempered with a large slice of apple-sauce cake — no, it wasn't so curiously inconsequent after all — it was Mrs. Merton's face he saw now, steeling him against he knew not what was to come, as he fixed his eyes on John Randall again.

"Varge," began Randall, in a brisk, pleasant voice, "you have stated that at one o'clock in the morning, believing all of the household in bed, you stole downstairs to the library for the purpose of stealing Doctor Merton's cash-box?"

"Yes," Varge answered quietly.

"You did this deliberately, with premeditation?"

"Yes."

"You knew that the cash-box was kept in the wall cupboard?"

"Yes."

"Was this cupboard usually locked or unlocked?"

"Locked," replied Varge — and a load seemed sud-

denly swept from his mind; he knew now what Randall's "proof" was — it was to come out after all, to come out almost ironically. "Doctor Merton always carried the key with him."

"You expected, then, to find it locked?"

"Yes."

"And that night when you went to it, was it locked or unlocked?"

"Locked."

"How did you open it?"

"I pried it open with the fender bar."

"This one here, that has been put in evidence?" — Randall pointed to where the bar lay on the table.

"Yes."

"Where did you find the bar when you went into the room?"

"In its usual place — before the fireplace."

"Was it bent then, or straight?"

"It was straight."

Randall's voice rose suddenly, caustically.

"If you deliberately, premeditatively started out to burglarise a receptacle that you knew, or, amounting to the same thing, expected would be locked, doesn't it seem a rather strange thing that you went unprepared with any tool or implement with which to open it?"

A low sound, indescribable, more like a deep, prolonged sigh than anything else, swept through the courtroom. The jury, as one man, leaned forward more intently.

"I knew the fender bar was there — I intended to use that," answered Varge.

"Ah, I see!" said Randall smoothly. "You stole

across the room, and at once picked up the fender bar from the fireplace?"

"Yes."

"The bar, you have said, was straight when you found it?"

"Yes."

"Where did you go then?"

"I went to the cupboard in the wall where the cash-box was kept."

"Let us be exact on this point," said Randall. "It is not more than two steps, three at the outside, the matter of a moment, to go from the fireplace to the cupboard. You stepped directly to the cupboard without going anywhere else in the room, or leaving the room?"

"I did."

"The bar was still in your hand and naturally, then, still straight when you reached the cupboard?"

"Yes."

"Very good," said Randall gently. "Now between the time you reached the cupboard and the time you say Doctor Merton leaped across the room upon you, did you leave your position in front of the cupboard?"

"No."

"And during that time you pried open the cupboard door with this bar?"

"Yes."

Randall whirled from the witness box and faced the jury. Gone now was his calm, easy manner, his quiet, conversational tones — passionate earnestness was in his face, and his voice rang strong and clear, carrying a thrill through the courtroom.

"Gentlemen of the jury," he cried impressively, "this

*man is innocent!* The court will tell you, the district attorney himself will tell you that there is not a shred of evidence on which to convict him aside from his own confession. Now, a man who voluntarily and of his own free will gives himself up to the authorities and confesses to a crime has no reason to tell anything but a bona fide story; it would be absurd to imagine that he would do anything else—*if, gentlemen, he really committed that crime.* There is no evidence, I say against the prisoner except his own story. If you convict him, you must convict him on that—and yet I will prove to you beyond the shadow of a doubt that according to that story it is impossible for him to have committed this crime. What does it mean, gentlemen of the jury? You know the prisoner. Most of you have known him all your lives. You know him for his clean, upright life. You know him for a man who, through love and gratitude to his benefactors, has put self aside and stayed with them because they needed him—a sacrifice the greater because, ambitious, a man whose intellect would carry him to a high place in any sphere, he has curbed ambition, crushed it back while those two he loved and would not leave still lived. But during these years Varge has studied and neglected no single opportunity for self-improvement. He has studied medicine with Doctor Merton, and I have heard Doctor Merton say myself that if he could have afforded it he would have sent Varge to college—but Doctor Merton could not afford it, gentlemen—and no one knew that better than Varge himself. Look at him, gentlemen of the jury! He stands there for the man he is, a man as utterly incapable of this thing as you or I

—but a man, a man, gentlemen, *capable of taking this thing upon himself to shield another.*”

A buzz stirred the courtroom, grew louder, swelled into a suppressed cheer—and stilled to an expectant hush at Judge Crosswaite’s stern command for silence.

Varge had not moved even by so much as a slight change of position, but at Randall’s words a faint tinge had dyed his cheeks, and into his eyes had come a soft, almost tender light as they rested on his friend. He had no choice—once started, Randall must go on. And now, as Randall paused, Varge, with well-simulated nervousness, threw his weight from one foot to the other, faced a trifle to his left—and across the room to where Harold Merton was already beginning to huddle in his chair, the dark eyes flashed a swift, reassuring signal.

Randall, quick in his movements now, had taken up the bent fender bar and was holding it out before the jury.

“This bar, gentlemen,” he said, in a low, earnest voice, “is the bar that struck down Doctor Merton; this bar is the bar that forced open the cupboard door. That is positive, certain. The prosecution has told you so, and it is a fact—the marks and indents on the door prove it. Varge tells us that it was straight when he stepped with it in front of the cupboard. The prosecution appears to have assumed that it was bent in prying open the door, and it *looks* as though that might be so. There is nothing remarkable about the bar—it *looks* as though that might be so. But examine it again carefully—note its size and weight. Gentlemen, I am casting no reflections on the prosecution that they over-

looked the point I am going to bring out. Their position and mine was different. With them the confession had been voluntary and practically stood for guilt—with me, I knew in my soul that the prisoner was innocent. But he would not talk to me, gentlemen. I knew that, clever as he was, clever as was the story he had manufactured to save another, there was almost certain to be a little flaw somewhere that had escaped him. His life, gentlemen, was in my hands—I *had to find that flaw*. I thank God that I have been able to do it: Gentlemen, this bar was not bent in prying open the cupboard door; it was bent *before* it ever went near it—or, in other words, before the door could be pried open with this bar, as it was beyond question, the bar *must* have been bent. See here, gentlemen; see how simple is the proof of that statement.”

Randall stepped to the table, picked up the parcel that had been the subject of so much curiosity and speculation, removed the wrapping and exhibited a drawing, some five feet long by three feet wide.

“I have here,” he said, “a sketch, drawn to scale, of the cupboard and the end wall itself between the fireplace and the side wall of the room; and here”—he picked up a little pointer that had been enclosed with the package—“I have a piece of stick that is the exact length of the fender bar, if the fender bar were straightened out. See then, what we have. Here is the lock of the cupboard where the end of the bar was inserted. It is just one foot and six inches from the side wall. The bar is four feet long. We stick the thin end of the *straight* bar in by the lock to pry the door open. See, like this”—he set the drawing on end on the floor, and,

holding it by one hand, dropped to his knees and placed one end of his stick at the indicated position. "The floor represents the side wall projecting at right angles, of course. What happens? Nothing. *The bar is too long.* There is absolutely no leverage, not enough even to take up the little slack in the crack of the door itself. The bar is too long — it must first be bent before it can be of any service. But wait! There must be no possibility of error here. You may say that while the door could only be opened from this side and that the bar had to be bent to do it, the bar might first have been inserted and levered the other way, or even upward or downward, where there is more space, and so bent. But that, waiving aside all consideration of the strength and thickness of the bar, which to begin with would make it improbable, is, with a moment's consideration, proved to be a fallacy. There was room only to insert the thin, flattened, spear-shaped ends of the bar, anywhere around the casing, between the door and the door casing, and these would have bent or broken long before the thicker part of the bar, the middle of the bar, yielded to the strain — *and yet these ends are as straight to-day as the day they were forged.*"

Randall rose to his feet, put aside the drawing, took up the fender bar again and walked directly to the jury box.

"Gentlemen, the man who bent that bar is the man who murdered Doctor Merton — but it was not the prisoner at the bar. I have told you before that if you convict him, you must convict him on his own story. Take that story from his lips. He stood there before the cupboard holding the straight bar, he had nothing to bend it

with except his bare hands, and yet he *must* have bent it before he could pry open the cupboard door with it. Take the bar"—he shoved it suddenly into the foreman's hands—"try to bend it against the floor, with your hands, across your knees, in any possible way that was possible to him—struggle with it, I beg you with all reverence in God's name, for a man's life is at stake."

A breathless silence fell upon the room. From one to another of the twelve men's hands the bar passed, each in his own way exerting futilely all his strength upon it. The foreman returned it gravely to Randall.

"You cannot bend it," said Randall passionately. "Of course you cannot bend it—it requires mechanical means to bend it. I believe that it was bent by some mechanical means outside and brought there before Varge ever entered that room; and I believe that when he entered that room Doctor Merton *was already dead*—murdered, gentlemen; at the hands of some one Varge is offering his own life to save—murdered at the hands of the man, who for some purpose that Varge is trying to conceal, had previously bent that bar. Yet wait! You are strong men and you cannot bend it, but let us put it to still further proof."

Randall turned from the jury, walked rapidly across the room and halted before the blacksmith, seated on the front bench.

"Joe Malloch," he said quickly, "you are the strongest man I know in Berley Falls. Can you bend this bar?"

The smith shook his head.

"Not me," said he. "I can't."

"Try," said Randall.

"Ain't no use to try. I can't," repeated Malloch.

"Try," insisted Randall.

Malloch rose from his chair, took the bar, swung it over his shoulders and strained with it against his thick bull-neck, then against the floor, across his knees, across his chest. His face was purple as he snook his head and, handing it back, sat down.

Straight then, Randall strode to the witness box and extended the bar to Varge. His face was flushed with emotion and he swept the hair, straggling into his eyes, away with a jerky motion of his hand, but his voice rose vibrant, strong with triumph.

"Varge, as you stand there you have the same opportunity to accomplish what you must have done as you had that night. If you are guilty, you bent this bar. Show the jury how you did it."

Varge took it quietly from the other's hands.

"John," he said, in a low, grave undertone, "I am guilty. Have you forgotten what happened in the cell this morning?"

A sudden, startled look flashed into Randall's eyes, the colour fled from his face leaving him deadly pale, and he stumbled back a step.

Varge raised the bar.

Neither court nor courtroom officers could stop it — as one, from the rear bench to the front, men rose to their feet and craned forward.

The veins on Varge's neck and wrists were standing out like great knotted cords, his wrists seemed to go as white as the colour of milk, a sweat bead burst from his forehead, then another — *and the bar was straight in his hands.*

The wild confusion died finally away in a sullen murmur. Five, ten minutes passed. Voices, somehow incongruous, unnatural, broke the otherwise tense silence — those of the judge, the district attorney, and once Randall's in a broken plea for clemency to the jury. And then Varge stood up to face the twelve men who had not left the box, and the single, ominous words fell from the foreman's lips.

"Guilty."

The district attorney rose from his chair.

"May it please the court, it becomes my duty to move that sentence be passed upon the prisoner, and I so move."

Judge Crosswaite, too, had risen, and a stillness, awed, more intense than any that had preceded it, was upon the room, as he spoke.

"Varge, have you anything to say why sentence should not be passed upon you?"

"Nothing," Varge answered, in a low voice — and bowed his head.

"The extreme penalty under the statutes of this Commonwealth for the crime you have committed," said Judge Crosswaite, in stern, grave tones, "is death. But your previous record, your voluntary confession, seem to me just grounds for invoking the mercy of the law." There was a pause, then came the solemn words: "*The sentence of this court is that you be taken to the town of Hebron and be there confined in the State Penitentiary for the rest of your natural life.*"

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE GREY PLACE

**V**ARGE saw it first, as the horses, toiling up the long hill over the heavy, snow-banked road, gained the summit. A quarter of a mile away and below it lay Grey—it was all grey—sullen grey. It was early morning; and with the sun, under cloud, just struggling through a rift in the hills to the eastward, it was as though the grim presence mocked and bade defiance even to God's own blessed sunlight that seemed to creep now so timidly to the shadowed walls, pleading warmth and love and hope and divine compassion. Silent—no sound came from it—it was as a vast tomb, from which emanated a terrible, impersonal, immutable sense of isolation; a sepulchre that had neither part nor being in the world around it, that had usurped the very place it held and, usurping, chilled all joy and gladness and stilled all laughter. It was only a thing of stone, inanimate, reared by human hands, but it lived as a cold, dead thing lives, as death lives in its awful finality.

Beside Sheriff Marston in the back seat of the sleigh, Varge felt the quick, questioning scrutiny of the other. No muscle of his face moved, no change came to the grave, sober expression that has been there during the eight-mile drive from Berley Falls—but under the buffalo robe his manacled hands tightened over each other. For *life*. Black hour of bitterness! LIFE—it

stretched away through the years in a soul-sickening vista. Five years, ten years, twenty years — how many? — he was young yet — but he had already lived his *life* — what was before him was a living death, years of drear hopelessness, of degradation, of shattered ambitions — he would eat and breath would be in his body, and at command, as a beast obeys its master, he would obey — *for the rest of his natural life*. Strong man and brave, of tender heart, who loved the flowers and trees and blades of grass, and children with their prattle and their happy mirth, who loved his fellow men, who knew their smiles and tears and was one with them in all, he faltered now. And silently, fervently, reverently, as one asks for an immeasurable boon, he asked for help in simple words.

“God, in Thy mercy, give me strength,” he prayed.

And, as though in answer, blotted from his eyes was the reality that lay before him, and in its place he saw again the gentle, patient face, the loving smile, the smoothed-grey hair beneath the old-lace cap, the eyes that looked into his, serene and calm and full of trust — the face of Mrs. Merton. It brought him comfort now and a strange contentment, that blended peace and resignation.

Then slowly the mental picture began to fade away, and loathe to let it go, to hold it with him longer, Varge closed his eyes — when he opened them again another face was before him, a heavy-bearded face with sharp black eyes that were fixed on him with blunt, unpromising intentness.

A mounted man in uniform had swung his horse to Varge's side and was keeping pace with the sleigh. A

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short-barrelled carbine lay across the pommel of his saddle. The man did not speak. He edged his horse a little nearer to the sleigh and leaned from the saddle for a long and closer view of Varge's face — as though to note the minutest detail of every feature. And but once, during a full five minutes, did the man remove his eyes from Varge — to pick up his horse as the animal stumbled. Then his eyes came back again instantly.

A slow flush crept to Varge's face — and died away. He understood well enough — too well. It was the first searing touch of the branding iron that marked him as one of a *herā* — and it was more than that. It was the first touch of the *whip* — from the *master*. And it was meant for that — the rude, callous, prolonged, contemptuous stare, meant for that — meant to instil within him even before he passed inside those looming walls, so close now, upon whose tops men paced with carbines on their arms, a fear, a *prescience* that should break his spirit, bend his will, a grim, subtle, mocking invitation, with an iron-mailed fist behind it, to begin then and there to understand that he was — a *convict*.

And, in his fine sensitiveness, it roused within Varge a cold merciless fury. After one glance his eyes had dropped and fixed on the driver's back in front of him — he dared not keep his eyes on the other's face. Every instinct within him prompted him to leap to his feet, tear the steel links on his wrists apart — yes, he could break them — and fling himself upon this man who thought so ruthlessly, so readily to rob him, to strip him of his God-given franchise of manhood.

Marston stirred a little uneasily. The tension broke. Varge felt the gaze lifted from him. The man had

touched his horse with the spurs and was galloping on ahead.

"It ain't pleasant," said Marston, with gruff kindness. "But you do what they tell you in there — that's the only way to get along. That's Kingman, one of the outside patrol — they say he's never been known to forget a face."

Varge made no reply. They were passing the end of the wall now that flanked the road. A guard stopped in his pacing and, leaning on the iron railing near the little circular guard-house on the corner of the wall, looked down upon them.

The sleigh stopped. Marston took Varge's arm and got out. They were in front of a large stone building set forward a little from the penitentiary walls which joined it on either side. The sheriff led the way up the short flight of steps to the entrance. A key grated in a ponderous lock, the heavy bolt shot back with harsh retonancy, a guard flung open the door and blocked the way for a moment as he stared into Varge's face — it was the same callous stare, galling, contemptuously impersonal — then he stepped aside, allowing them to enter.

A short hallway was before them, and at its end, the entrance to the prison proper, was a massive steel-barred door. Halfway down the hall, a room opened off on the left-hand side. The door of this room was open, and the sheriff, nodding familiarly to the guard and with his hand still on Varge's arm, turned toward it at once and stepped inside.

It was a square, spacious room. Varge's eyes swept it with a quick, comprehensive glance — and for the sec-

ond time that morning a slow colour mounted to his cheeks. A row of four leather-cushioned chairs stood on one side beneath the windows near a large flat-topped desk that faced the door; on the other side was another desk similar to the first, and behind it and along the wall were large filing cabinets and general office fixtures; at the far end was the open door of a vault, the safe within. Three persons were in the room. A young man in plain, dark uniform was at the side desk; by the other, standing, her back half-turned, a girl leaned close to the chair in which sat a short, broad-shouldered man in gold-trimmed uniform, with clean-shaven face and iron-grey hair. The girl turned quickly, slim and lithe and graceful, as they entered.

Marston was taking some papers from his pocket.

"Good-morning, Warden Rand," he said, as he laid them on the desk.

"Hello, Sheriff!" returned the warden, rising and shoving his hand out cordially to Marston; then, half turning: "Janet, you know Sheriff Mars—"

"Indeed, I do, dad"—the girl was already moving around the desk to meet the big, kindly-faced County officer.

For the bare fraction of a second, blue eyes met Varge's blankly and passed him by—there was neither thought, nor concern, nor cognisance even of his presence in the look, as she quickly asked a few homely questions of the sheriff, of his wife and family, of friends in Berley Falls.

Warden Rand picked up the papers, and glanced through them.

"Here, Stall!" he said, extending them to the clerk

at the other desk — but the steel-grey eyes were sweeping Varge from head to foot.

A moment the look held, then the warden pushed a button on his desk and turned to his daughter and Marston.

And as Varge stood there, it was as if suddenly he stood alone in some place of vast expanse, barriered and set apart, where no human being had ever been before, where no human love was known; a place of intense cold where neither life nor green thing was; a place of valleys and chasms and mountains, and one mountain of stupendous height from whose pinnacle he looked out into a great blackness that was everywhere around, and there was no light of stars or moon or sun, and all was utter desolation — and out of this desolation there came at first no sound; then there came one seemingly from far below him, faint at first, that gradually grew more distinct, and the sound clutched at his heart, for of all sounds it had no place there, for *there* was death — it was the sound of a sweet-toned *woman's* voice. The imagery was gone. Varge raised his shackled hands and brushed them across his eyes. A *woman's* voice — here! The warden's daughter was still talking unconcernedly to Sheriff Marston.

The clerk laid a slip of paper on the warden's desk. The warden turned, picked up a pen, bent over the paper, signed it, blotted it, folded it, placed it in an envelope and handed it to Sheriff Marston.

"Here's your receipt, Sheriff," he said.

Some one touched Varge on the shoulder. 'A guard had entered and was at his elbow.

Marston took a small key from his pocket and stepped to Varge's side.

There was no slow creeping flush of colour now mounting to Varge's face — it came in a hot, mad, burning tide, as he held out his wrists.

Marston pressed his hand as the manacles slipped away.

"Good-bye, Varge," he said in a low, kindly tone;

"I'll speak to the warden and do what I can for you."

Varge scarcely heard him. The girl's eyes had followed the operation, lifted from his wrists and looked into his face — indifferently. It was an *incident* to her. The delicately fibred chivalry of the man, that held all womanhood in reverence apart, leaped now into sudden anger against her — she could have saved him this added hurt so easily — so easily — just to have turned her head. And then the anger died. To him, the end of hope, the portal to that place where life was but a hideous, mocking word; to her, it was but an *incident*, part of her environment, but another guilt-stained creature facing his just punishment. And yet — and yet — a woman's heart, dead to sympathy, calloused —

The guard led him from the room and out into the hallway. The massive, steel-barred door swung back. A murmur of voices followed him from the warden's office — and then, in a sudden exclamation, a world of pity, of infinite mercy in the low, shocked tones, the girl's voice reached him.

"Oh — for life!"

And behind him, cold, dull, remorseless, ringing like a shuddering echo to the words, the steel-barred door clanged and shut.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE WHEEL

**I**N neither a day nor yet in a week did Varge find himself. Battling, battling, battling incessantly — at night in his cell, by day in the carpenter shop where he had been put to work — the fight went on within him. And it was an uneven combat; for, fine-grained, keenly sensitive, delicately strung, even his mental faculties revolted at every detail of the life about him, and joined issue with the full-veined, red blood within him that would not know restraint.

Men talked around him, men moved around him — and they were all alike. At first, he did not differentiate one from another — each was as the others were — a black-and-grey striped form that shuffled in heavy boots, whose hair was close-cropped and whose faces were like white parchment in colour.

These were his associates; and in outward appearance each one of the hundreds was *himself*. It was as though on every hand, at every turn he faced a *mirror* that was thrust suddenly before him with inhuman jest, that mocked and taunted him and aroused within him a terrible, crushing sense of the annihilation of all personality, goading him to some wild act that would at once vindicate his individuality — and end it all.

These were his companions — and none but these, in his and their narrowed world, could have any community of interest with him. Amongst themselves they

seemed to find some satisfaction, some relief in the common bond, grim, drear and heavy-weighted though it was, that linked them together — Varge found none.

He had shuddered as he had felt the hands of the man behind him on his shoulders when the lock-step formed — and once, that was the first day, he had involuntarily jerked the man's hands away, and the guard, Wenger, one of the day guards in the carpenter shop, had struck him smartly with his short cane. It was not easy yet to lay his own hands on the shoulders of the man in front of him in that dull-treaded, scuffling, humiliating march. It was not pride in its caddish sense — it was the natural revulsion of a clean-souled, clean-handed man from the familiarity, the touch, the intimacy of *guilt*.

Pitiless days! — that ate into the iron of his soul as remorselessly as drops of acid eat to the metal's core. Even the air around him, the air he breathed, was different from the air of the world without — it was heavy, always heavy, charged with the nauseating odour of disinfectant. And always, ever, there were bars of steel, and iron doors, and walls of stone — and eyes upon him, watching him with cold relentless vigilance even in his sleep.

At night, he would awaken and listen — a terrible silence would be around him; then a soft tread would mount the iron steps, up one tier, then another, come along the steel bridge and stand like a black shadow before the bars of his cell. He would sleep again. Cheerless dawn, harbinger of waking hopelessness, would creep through the high windows that faced the cells across the empty space between the outer wall and the iron-railed platform that ran the length of the corridor

before the cell doors of the upper tiers. A gong, strident, harsh, imperative from the central hall, would echo clamorously through the prison. Another gong and another — always the same — the locks along the cells would lift with a sharp, metallic click — the huge, steel gates at the end of the corridors swing back — and he would be one of the striped line that stood in sullen silence on the platform waiting the command to move. "Tier Number One — march! Tier Number Three — march!" — the bark of the guards' voices from the different wings would come rolling raucously to his ears. Then that dull, dead fall of feet in heartless unison, as a file moved forward — and another, and another — the routine of the day begun.

It never changed — that march to the prison yard in the morning, one hand on the next man's shoulder; carrying their night-buckets in the other — the first, deep-drawn intake of fresh air robbed of all its sweetness, for even here there were grey walls everywhere; and men, sharp-eyed and keen, leaning on grounded carbines, looked down on them from above.

They marched back; they filed by the kitchen and took their tin pans of food, and bread from the stacked slices — and as caged beasts ate it — their keepers watching from high stools between the long bare tables and against the walls. In lock-stepped files they went to their work — Varge across the yard again to the carpenter shop close to the centre of the rear wall. At noon again they ate their tins of food; at evening again they ate their tins of food — then the same huge, steel gates before the corridors closed behind them as they tramped through; each stopped before his cell, entered, pulled

the barred door shut behind him and the locks from end to end of the tier fell into place — another leaden day was at an end.

Those hours of night! Varge fought it slowly out — and slowly his splendid mental constitution rallied — steadily the fine reason, the equipoise of the man gained strength; and turbulence of spirit, if not dissipated, was subjected.

At times, even in his bitterest moments, he had been conscious of what had seemed an unmanly inconsistency in his rebellion against that to which he himself, of his own free will, had elected to submit; and this, indeed, had been a powerful factor in his process of reconstruction. It had seemed a small, weak part to play that he should turn his face away and refuse to drink the cup he had so confidently volunteered to take because he found the first taste more bitter than he had thought. Then, by degrees, he had understood. It was not inconsistency — only that he was human, with human limitations, with human endurance — and heart and soul and brain had reeled and staggered before that which, momentarily, had been beyond his strength to support, that had turned his mind sick and robbed it of its sane virility. He had expected death, no other thing but that — and death he had been prepared to meet, he hoped calmly, bravely, patiently — but this was worse than death. Not that it would have altered his decision had he known this thing was before him, not that it would have held him back — that thought never came to him — but this was worse than death. For those around him, for even that weak, sickly, hollow-checked man of sixty years in the next cell, who coughed at nights, there was hope —



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at the end of the long, black tunnel glimmered the pin-point of light on the other side, and as the years dragged by and the dark place was traversed, the pin-point grew and brightened with the Heaven-given sunlight of freedom — for them. For him, it was all blackness and there was no guiding, inspiriting light, and he must move in the darkness, stumbling, feeling with his hands his way along against the wall — for life.

Twice, at two o'clock in the morning — neither clock nor timepiece told him the hour — he had risen up in his cot and the face of Harold Merton had been before him. It had swept him with an all-engulfing passion that racked him to his soul, and his finger-tips had bled as they dug into the stone wall of his cell and the sweat had poured from his forehead. Twice this happened before he conquered it — and he conquered it only then with that other face, *her* face — the face of Mrs. Merton.

Gradually Varge found himself, in his own strong, big way — chiselling with soul-wrung bloody sweat from the fearful flint of his surroundings the laws by which he could best govern himself.

And from him first, as a dangerous, fatal thing, he put all thought of Harold Merton; and quiet control and patience came to lessen the misery that rebellion could but nourish. He forced himself to see the life around him, the conditions, the environment, not with the eyes of one who was part of it, who wore a convict's stripes, not with the eyes of *guilt* — but with the eyes of *innocence*. It was a place of *punishment* — and it was just. But, too, as one who understood too well the hungry eyes that stared from out of strained white faces, as one

who lived their life and wore their stripes and knew their gall and bitterness, he saw their side as well; and pity for the wretched souls around him stole into his heart, and grew as the days went by. Endorsement he could never give them — they were guilty men, hard and vicious for the most part, unreclaimed, and it was right and it was just that they should be there; but pity, sympathy, was now where once there had been aversion and repugnance. Great heart of Varge, so heavily weighted, so nearly broken — there was room there for compassion for others!

“Seven-seven-seven,” said Twisty Connors, and he leaned in close, furtive, confidence toward Varge across the workbench in the carpenter shop. “Say, take it from me, youse are de lucky one. Youse are a lifer, ain’t youse? Well, mine’s ten spaces; but say, so help me, I’d swop wid youse quick. Any guy dat can pull dat number in de bull-pen lottery don’t lose, an’ he’s got de luck wid him fer fair.” Twisty Connors dropped his already low, guarded tones to a whisper. “Say, mabbe there’s something I’ll let youse in on one of these days if —” Twisty Connors’ shrewd, cunning, pinched little face drew suddenly back; he cast a sullen look sideways and slunk away.

Wenger, the guard, had taken Twisty’s place — he looked at Varge for nearly a minute before he spoke, and there was a half-sneer, half-threat upon his curled lips.

“We’ve got something for them that haven’t any good-conduct time to lose,” he snarled. “I marked you that first day — remember? I ain’t surprised to see you

making up with Twisty — he's the worst we've got. Keep on, and I'll get you — understand?"

But Varge's eyes, dropped to his jacket, were studying speculatively the three black figures stamped across one of the wide grey stripes and he made no answer.

Wenger's cane fell across the bench with an ugly slap.

"D'ye hear?" he snapped roughly.

"Yes," said Varge.

"*Sir!*" prompted Wenger viciously.

"Sir." said Convict Number 777.

And Wenger, with a short-flung, brutal laugh, turned on his heel and walked away.

## CHAPTER X

### A COWARD SOUL

**F**ATE plays grim tricks sometimes; and acts performed of seemingly little consequence at the moment may be but the first unconscious step, from which, once taken, there is no turning back, that leads irrevocably, and ever deeper, into that darkest maze of life's tragedy where all is confusion and panic and from which there is no egress—save one.

Harold Merton had not left Berley Falls after the trial. Associations that he did not care to face in New York, together with his mother's persuasions, had led him to decide, for the time being at least, to remain where he was. The doctor's estate brought to his mother a sufficient, if modest, competence, which, too, was no small factor in his determination; so, with an eye to public opinion, he announced his intention of practising his profession—that of law—in his home town.

Following the trial, his first feelings had been ones of relief; relief so great that the revulsion was like a deathly weakness, the swooning horror of one snatched from the edge of a precipice upon which he had stumbled. Then came fear. And thereafter upon the coward soul, as the shuttle in its guides, fixed, undeviable, moves backward and forward, came relief and fear, relief and fear, forward and backward—relief and fear.

Gratitude toward Varge he had; but it was a strange

gratitude that lost itself in the wish — that even he drew back with a shudder from formulating in so many words, but which lived dominant in his consciousness — that Varge's sentence had been — *death*. That would have been the end of it then. There would be no further cause to fear — it would have meant safety, absolute safety, beyond the chance, the possibility, that some-day, in some way, the truth would become known. The very fact that, once found guilty, Varge's sentence should have been any other than that customary one, the full penalty of the law, was like a dread finger-post that pointed with grim, premonitory foreboding to the future.

But the case *was* closed, it was at an end, the law had been satisfied, it was over, it was done, it *was* ended — relief would come upon him again. But supposing Varge should weaken! — a clutch at his heart, and hot fear would have him in its grip.

At times, he argued pitiful, specious justification to himself. He had never asked Varge to do what he had done; Varge had brought that on himself; all he had asked Varge to do was to run away — just to run away. Poor, miserable cavil, of as little avail as its worth! — Varge loomed up ever before him. What was he to do? What attitude was he to adopt toward Varge? He dared not ignore him.

The crime itself was swallowed up in the all-possessing, craven selfishness for self-preservation — it lived as a black, hideous phantom behind him, it is true, but it lived chiefly in a sort of ghastly proxy — lived because it was that from whence came the haunting dread and fear of the present — and the future.

Day in and day out, Varge was an obsession to him — the fear that Varge would weaken preyed upon him. Too small himself to understand the bigness of the other, to realise that such an act could be performed other than by sudden impulse, which, afterwards, dying gradually away, would, in the face of its own consequences, tempt and lead Varge to undo it all, he sought for means to bolster up the other's constancy. One way alone seemed open to him. To go to Varge, to visit him in the penitentiary, to show him that he was not deserted, to exhibit gratitude, to procure for him such favours as the prison regulations would permit — and, above all else, to speak of his mother, to keep her before Varge. He *must* do that.

But to visit the penitentiary, to visit his father's murderer — what would people say? It was a strange thing to do. Would it look *suspicious*? What excuse could he give for going there? There could be but one reason that would seem natural in the eyes of others — that it was a simple, kindly act prompted by generosity. But in this, blinded by his impure motives, he feared to put reliance.

The shuttle again. From one side to the other he swerved, trying to make up his mind, daring to do neither one thing nor the other. He chose in the end what seemed to him the lesser of the evils — his safety lay with Varge. But his choosing was not soon in coming, and it was a month after Varge's incarceration before he drove over one morning from Berley Falls to the penitentiary and was admitted to the warden's office.

Nerved to a preliminary trying ordeal, he found him-

self instead almost confidently at ease — such impressions of a penitentiary warden as he had formed here and there from different sources, that involved as their prime factor brutishness, were not at all applicable to the pleasant-faced, short, sturdy man who greeted him.

A glance at his card, and Warden Rand, shaking hands, pulled up a chair for him beside the desk and waved him into it.

“I’m glad to see you, Mr. Merton,” said the warden with unaffected cordiality, leaning back in his own seat. “I’m glad to see you — I knew your father slightly — not as well as I would have liked, but well enough to hold him in the highest regard and esteem.”

“Yes,” said Merton, in a low voice, and his black eyes dropped to his hands that were playing with the glove he had taken off.

Warden Rand bent forward with a quick, impulsive movement and laid a hand on Merton’s shoulders with kindly pressure.

“Pardon me,” he said gently; then briskly, changing the subject: “You’ve come over in reference to Varge, Mr. Merton, I suppose?”

“Yes,” Merton answered. He pulled himself together and looked up. “Yes; I wanted to see you about Varge. I don’t know whether you know all the circumstances, rather strange ones — how he came to be with us, the years he was there and —”

“I know,” interposed Warden Rand. “It is a very peculiar case. Sheriff Marston told me all about it.”

“Then,” said Merton, forcing a sober smile, “I think you’ll understand why I’ve come. The man is not bad at heart; what he did was in the hot impulse of the mo-

ment, and though he has brought a terrible sorrow upon us, his own punishment is terrible too. I do not know just how to explain myself, I am afraid. He was almost one of us — like one of the family. Neither my mother nor myself can harbour any vindictive feelings — there is only great sorrow and — pity for him."

"I understand," said Warden Rand quietly.

"And so" — Merton was more confident now, surer of his ground, feeling a sympathetic response from the other, "and so any leniency or favour or anything that a little money" — Merton took out his pocketbook — "will procure him that would brighten —"

Warden Rand shook his head.

"There are no favours here, Mr. Merton," he said gravely. "It does you credit; do not think I am insensible to that, but it is impossible."

"But," said Merton, "surely there is something that —"

Again the warden shook his head.

"No," he said; "there is nothing."

Merton put his pocketbook slowly back into his pocket.

"I had no idea the prison regulations were so stringent — aren't they almost too strict, too severe, warden?"

"This is a penitentiary," replied the warden seriously.

"We are strict, at times perhaps harshly so, but it is not because we want to be or because we take delight in it — it is because we have to be. We are dealing for the most part — there are exceptions, I am glad to say, even if they are wofully in the minority — with the dregs of the criminal world, men to whom crime has

become almost second nature, men who would stop at nothing. I can bring a hundred of them into this office one at a time, open that window there, lay a knife on the desk, my clerk being, of course, for the moment absent, turn around, say, to glance toward the safe, and, desperate as their chances would be, there's not one of the hundred but would take them — and leave the knife in the small of my back!" The warden smiled, and flung out his hand deprecatingly. "That sounds overdrawn perhaps you think." He turned to his clerk. "Stall," said he, "would you take a chance?"

"I would *not!*" said the clerk with a promptness and emphasis that left no doubt of his sincerity.

Warden Rand laughed; then growing serious again:

"You see, Mr. Merton, why discipline can never for an instant be relaxed. But if I am severe, I try to be just. Their lot is a hard one — it has to be or there would be no punishment in it — and what leniency or favour I can show I do, but it is shown impartially — what one man gets, they all get."

"I see," said Merton — he had barely heard what the warden was saying. He was screwing up his courage to the request that he dreaded both to make and to have granted. "I see. But, at least, they are allowed to have visitors, aren't they?"

"Oh, yes," responded the warden, "a limited number."

"Then, if I can't do anything else" — Merton spoke suggestively — "perhaps I could see Varge?"

"Why, yes," said the warden promptly. "Would you like to see him now?"

"Yes," said Merton.

Warden Rand's steel-grey eyes played for a moment over Merton appreciatively.

"You've got a good heart, Merton, a good heart — like your father," he said; then to the clerk: "Stall, have Number Seven-seventy-seven brought to the visitor's room, and send Willett to me."

"Yes, sir," said Stall, and, rising, left the office.

A moment later a guard entered and saluted.

"Willett," said the warden, "this is Mr. Merton. He is to see Number Seven-seventy-seven." Then to Merton: "The guard will take you to the visitor's room, Mr. Merton. Come back here afterwards; it is nearly noon and you can't drive home before dinner — I shall expect you to come over to the house and have it with my daughter and me. I'll see that your horse is looked after."

"Why, thank you," said Merton, "but I —"

"Nonsense!" smiled the warden genially. "I couldn't hear of anything else." He nodded at Willett.

"This way, sir," said the guard, starting toward the door.

"Oh, by the way, Willett!" the warden called, as they reached the doorway.

"Yes, sir?" said the guard, returning to the desk.

Merton did not catch the warden's words; they were spoken in a low tone, but, whatever they were, they were few and brief, for in another minute Willett had returned to his side and they were going down the hallway together.

A guard on the other side of the great, steel-barred door before them swung back the ponderous barrier and they passed through; it closed with a remorseless clash,

and they were in a small, open space from which a corridor led off at either end. A convict, on his knees, scrubbing the floor, darted a furtive glance at them — and upon Merton came suddenly a cold, clammy weakness.

"This way, sir," directed the guard.

They turned to the left; and, presently, in the corridor, Willett threw open a door.

"Just step in here, sir — behind the grating, please. They'll have him up in a jiffy."

Dully, Merton obeyed. An icy hand seemed to be at his heart; his mouth was dry. He moistened his lips with his tongue. Frantically now he regretted his decision; if he could but draw back, give some excuse, he would take the chances, a thousand of them, the other way.

He stood behind a mesh-like grating that reached to the ceiling and ran the length of the room, all except the little opening by the door that had allowed him to pass behind it. Another grating, similar but for the fact that it had no opening, paralleled the one behind which he stood. The two gratings were separated from each other by a space of about a yard, allowing room for a guard to pace between them.

Again Merton moistened his lips. There was a door behind this second grating that led to somewhere, from *somewhere* — Willett was leaning unconcernedly against the wall outside in the corridor. A tread, dull, muffled, came nearer, grew more distinct. Merton's knees were shaking, and it seemed as though Willett must hear the pound of his heart — but Willett still leaned *unconcernedly* against the corridor wall without — uncon-

cernedly, that was it — what did Willett know, what did any one know except Varge? — he was a fool to give way to —

The door behind the other grating opened and closed, and in front of him, close against the grating, there was a sudden blur — a blur that wavered in curiously alternating stripes of black and grey; and there was a white face above the blur staring at him, a face that held nothing of familiarity in it, just a face which because it was very pale made the eyes very luminous and that was why they seemed to bore through him. Once before he had seen a face — yes, *that* night, that cursed night — but this had nothing to do with that, nothing at all, nothing — He wrenched himself together — he was acting worse than a madman — what if Willett, the guard, should notice it! He glanced that way. Willett was still leaning unconcernedly against the corridor wall — he wasn't even looking into the room.

Merton's eyes fastened on the grating — there was no blur now — the splendid physique seemed to stand out intensified by the loose-fitting convict garb, the massive shoulders, the strong, white neck, the upright form — and the face; yes, it was Varge's face. The clustering brown hair was gone and the skin was of a curious pallor, but the eyes were undimmed, clear, deep and steady — yes; it was Varge's face, a face like a carven god's, of ivory, of wondrous strength and power, and there was no savagery, no passion, no anger in it, but there was — yes; there was pity. It was a cold pity, perhaps, contemptuous pity — but it was *pity*. Merton snatched at it ravenously. Pity — that was his cue.

Only an instant it had been since Varge had entered

—but it was an instant that seemed to have spanned hours. Merton's eyes dropped.

"Varge!" he said, in a numbed voice.

"I know why you have come," said Varge quietly. "I expected that sooner or later you would come. You are afraid that some day I shall speak, that this will be too much for me; but that day —"

"No, no, Varge," Merton broke in quickly; "it isn't only that — I mean it isn't that at all. I wanted to see — I wanted to try and help —"

"But that day has passed, the day when I might have done what you fear now" — Varge spoke on, calmly, evenly, ignoring Merton's interruption. "That day was past with the first week here. You have nothing to fear — I shall never speak."

There was something in Varge's voice that Merton caught — a world of passion suppressed, like a mighty tide that purls and bubbles and seethes against the dam that holds it back and will not let it have its way; but there was also something else that filled him with wild elation — finality. But he mustn't show that. He was perfectly in control of himself now — he was safe — he *knew* that.

"I know it, Varge," he said huskily; "I know it. But there must be something I can do for you; I know Warden Rand; there must be something —"

"There is nothing," said Varge.

"But —"

"There is nothing," repeated Varge, "except for you to go. You have got all you came for. Do you think it is easy for me to stand here and look at *you*? One question — and then go — and answer that question

with a single word—even *you* will understand why. Mrs. Merton—is she well?”

“Yes,” said Merton, and the hoarseness in his voice this time was not assumed.

“You are allowed thirty minutes for a visit,” said Varge, “and they may think it strange if, without reason, you stay only five for you are going *now*—so I am going to make a disturbance in order that no suspicion may be directed against you, do you understand?”—he glanced toward the guard outside in the corridor, then he raised his fist and brought it down with a crash on the steel mesh in front of him. “I don’t want to talk to you!” he shouted. “Do you hear, I don’t want to talk to you! You’ve got no business here, anyway!”

Willett, from unconcern, sprang instantly into attention, and jumped forward into the room.

“Shut up, you!” he flung at Varge. “What’s the matter with you, you surly cuss? Shut up—don’t answer back! If you can’t appreciate a gentleman’s kindness in—”

“Perhaps,” said Merton hastily, “perhaps I’d better go.”

“I guess you might as well,” grunted the guard. “They’re all alike—you’d only waste your breath.” He banged with his cane on the grating, the door behind Varge opened, he nodded to the guard who entered—and the next minute Varge had passed out of sight.

Hysterically, Merton wanted to laugh when they got out into the corridor; his spirits seemed as light as air; he was safe, *safe*; he could hardly control himself; the

steel doors, the convict still scrubbing at the floor affected him now with no sense of chill; Varge would never speak. He was cordial to Willett — apologetic for Varge.

"Yes, sir," said the guard affably, pocketing Merton's dollar; "they're a hard lot — sympathy's lost on 'em."

Willett left him at the warden's door.

"Well," said the warden, with a smile, "your visit didn't last very long, but it seems to have done you good."

"Yes" — Merton glanced at the grey eyes, saw the frank smile, and smiled in return. "Yes; I think it has. I can't say that it has been quite as I had intended and hoped — Varge seemed to resent my coming — but I feel, at least, that I have done my duty."

Warden Rand nodded his head.

"Yes," he said, with unaffected sincerity; "and you have a right to feel so. Few would have acted as you have done." He rose from the desk. "And now," he laughed pleasantly, dismissing the subject, "duty done, if you are ready, we'll go over to the house and have dinner."

The hour that followed for Merton over the warden's table was an hour that seemed strangely genuine compared with the hours of the month and more just past. He laughed and talked through it all — mostly with Janet Rand. And after dinner he stayed on, while the warden returned to his office.

He was a good talker, pleasant-mannered, and now with the uplift upon him and the presence of this girl who attracted him, he exerted himself to the utmost to be entertaining and agreeable — or perhaps, better, gave

way unrestrainedly to a sense of easy spontaneity in an effort to please and impress her favourably.

Janet Rand was pretty and good fun. He decided mentally that he would see more of her. In the meantime, the day that he had dreaded to face, in anticipation of which he had lain sleepless the night before—and more than one night before that—had turned out to be a red-letter day. He was safe; Varge would never speak—Varge had said so; he had heard it from Varge's lips. And the afternoon had been a windfall of luck; he had not expected to meet any one like Janet Rand—she was a mighty good-looking girl, trim-figured and dainty; a picture of gold hair, and laughing eyes and lips, and charmingly rounded arms exposed by the half-sleeved dress she wore. Yes; he would see more of Janet Rand.

It was quite late in the afternoon, and the warden had come back to the house with a guard and two convicts to have some work started which he wanted done, when Merton left for his drive back to Berley Falls.

Janet, from the front window, watched him drive away; then she turned with a perplexed little frown to her father.

"I can't make up my mind whether I like him or not, dad," she said. "Somehow, he doesn't seem quite natural, but perhaps that may be no more than nervous mannerisms. What I did like about him, though, was his coming here to see that man—that was perfectly splendid of him."

"So it was," agreed the warden. "Yes; so it was. It's a curious case. I've never had anything to do with a man like that before, and I must confess I'm puzzled."

"Why, what are you talking about, dad? Had anything to do with whom — Mr. Merton? I didn't see anything so very extraordinary about him."

"No; not Mr. Merton" — Warden Rand pinched his daughter's cheeks playfully. "Varge, the man who murdered Mr. Merton's father — the man that Sheriff Marston brought in last month when you were in the office."

"I remember," said Janet slowly. "I remember I was very sorry for him — after he went out. What has happened, dad? What has he done?"

"He hasn't done anything," replied the warden soberly, taking a turn or two up and down the room. "I can't explain it — he's *different*, that's all. I thought I had seen all kinds and all types and had had years enough of experience to see through any veneer any criminal ever thought of coating himself with — but this man is different. I've gone midnight rounds with the guards and listened in front of his cell — he sleeps as sweetly and easily as a babe. I've spoken to him suddenly in the shop, come up behind him when he was off his guard — never a start or tremor. He's *clean*, clean-skinned, clean-eyed and —" Warden Rand paused and looked at his daughter thoughtfully.

"And therefore he ought to be clean *inside*," completed Janet. "You nearly said it, dad. I actually think you believe he's innocent."

Warden Rand's fine, ruddy face relaxed and a whimsical smile crept into his eyes and flickered on his lips.

"My dear," said he, "I've got seven hundred and ninety-three prisoners in there, and this man is the only guilty one amongst them."

"Why, dad!" exclaimed Janet. "What a thing to say — you don't mean that."

"Well," said the warden, "I'm only taking his own say-so for it — the other seven hundred and ninety-two are ready to swear they're innocent until they're black in the face."

Janet laughed; then she slipped her arm through her father's.

"What else is there, dad? You know I'm chief confidant. The man is worrying you."

"No; not worrying me, dear — he's puzzling me," said the warden. "There's nothing else, except, curiously enough, while he's a model prisoner in every other respect, he seems to be taking up with the worst element in the shop, according to Wenger's report."

"Wenger!" Janet burst out. "I — I think I hate that man."

"Tut, tut," chided Warden Rand. "I know you dislike him, but —"

"He's brutal and overbearing," insisted Janet. "You needn't shake your head, dad. I wish he wasn't here. Some day there'll be trouble. I believe he nags and picks at the prisoners and that's probably what he's doing now — he's taken a grudge against this man, and that's at the bottom of it."

"I've never found anything wrong with Wenger," said Warden Rand gravely.

"No," said Janet, "and for a very good reason — Wenger is a sublime hypocrite."

## CHAPTER XI

### TRAINING A VIRGINIA CREEPER

**H**AROLD MERTON'S first visit to the warden's house was but the prelude to many more. He drove often during the following two months from Berley Falls to the little penitentiary town; but on these occasions, while he never failed to ask Warden Rand about Varge, he did not ask again to see the other.

Acute enough where his own interests were involved, he realised that not only was nothing further to be gained by seeing Varge, but indeed much might be lost, or at least risked, in so doing. He had shown Varge that he did not mean to desert him, that he was not ungrateful, and now the less he obtruded himself upon the other's thoughts the better — it made it easier for Varge to keep his promise. Constant irritation produces a sore, and from the sore a poison might spread through the system that would undermine the strongest constitution. He understood that very well — Varge, too, had shown him that very clearly. It was best now to let Varge alone — Varge had given him the promise that he wanted — it was best now to let Varge alone.

His interest in Janet Rand had grown to passion, and he fostered that passion feverishly, as a man drinks whisky sometimes for two reasons — for the glass itself, and for the open door it offers through which he may pass and — forget. Janet Rand became to him lit-

erally an intoxication in which he sought to steep and lose himself.

As for her feelings toward him, with his complacent, all-possessing selfishness, he was well content. He had no reason to feel otherwise. They had grown to be great friends. His welcome was always cordial and unaffected — and Janet was always the same — laughing, happy, care-free. Shallow himself, incapable of depth, he saw her only through his own perspective, as one sees a picture which, though captivating the fancy by the scene or subject it depicts, loses its true beauty through the observer's inability to appreciate the art and breadth behind it which makes it live. Janet was dainty, trim, a divine little figure, merry, contagiously gay. He told himself he loved her — he promised himself that he would have her.

At times, at first, in her presence, the shadow of the grey walls about him would loom up suddenly with sickening mockery, and the sense of a ghastly irony at their nearness and his surroundings would sweep momentarily over him. But that had grown less and less; and the sight of a convict on the road, either a trusty or one under guard, no longer startled him. Familiarity, allayed fear, a blunted conscience, gave him of their common offspring — callousness.

It was the first breath of spring — in the hollows and the shady places snow still lingered; but the roads were drying, green was tingeing the faded colouring of the fields, and a fresh, sweet, vernal scent was in the air.

They were out on the wide veranda of the warden's house, and Merton was making pretence at helping Janet

to arrange some runners on which was to be trained the Virginia creeper she had planted the year before.

He had been watching her with covert admiration; and more than once, as she stood on tiptoe, reaching up to fasten a piece of cord, their hands had met, as, deliberately seizing upon the excuse, he had taken the string from her. More graceful, more adorable, more to be possessed than ever she seemed. And why should he not possess her?—why should he still have to come to her here where these bald, ugly prison walls, even if they affected him less now, were nevertheless forever thrusting themselves sardonically before his eyes?—why should he wait any longer? The passion, the desire that was in him for her seemed this afternoon to be climaxing, to be greater, more uncontrollable than it had ever been before. The touch of her hand seemed to fire him with a mad impulse to grasp it fiercely, to draw and crush her to him. And she had felt it too, he told himself with elation. He had never seen her so sober, so quiet, so subdued, less inclined for conversation, less of gaiety about her.

She stopped suddenly in the midst of a plaintive little air she was humming.

“Does the spring ever affect you like that?” she asked abruptly.

Merton started as she spoke.

“Like what?” he inquired mechanically.

“I do: 't know just how to explain it,” she said, smiling a little wistfully. “It should be the happiest time in the year, shouldn't it? Everything is so fresh and new and clean; it's like the beginning of life all over again — old life making a fresh start with the scars and

smirches all wiped out, and new life budding into being. It should be the gladdest time of all the year, but somehow, sometimes, like to-day, it — it isn't for me."

"Shall I tell you why?" said Merton quickly, snatching at a lead that seemed opportunely opened for him. "It's *that*" — he pointed to the high, grey prison wall across the lawn.

She turned slowly and looked. A guard at the corner by the little turret stood motionless, carbine in hand; the dome of the main building, with the topmost row of barred windows just showing over the wall, loomed in the background; on the road, a mounted patrol was riding by.

"Perhaps," she said thoughtfully, facing him again. "Perhaps you are right. I had never thought of that. There is no spring for them, poor heavy-laden souls, no fresh start, no beginning all over again, is there?"

"Miss Rand — Janet," Merton burst out, stepping toward her, "this is no place for you —"

"No place for me?" — her eyes widened as she caught up his words. "Why, what can you mean by that? I've always lived here; I was born here. My mother came here when she was married, and — and died here. Dad has been warden here for twenty-five years."

"Yes" — Merton's voice was eager, passionate — "that is just it. You have been here too long. Your whole horizon has been those four walls; there's been nothing but prison atmosphere around you all your life. Janet, I want to take you away from here, out into the world, anywhere, where you will see new things and people and a different life — anywhere, so that we will

be together. I love you, Janet — you know I love you. I loved you from the first day."

She had drawn back from him; the colour had gone a little from her cheeks, but her blue eyes, wider now, while troubled, were steady, full of calm self-possession.

"Oh, I am sorry for — for this, Mr. Merton," she said in a low voice.

Merton stared at her a moment a numbed, almost surprised look on his face. Tastefully dressed, of tall, good figure, his dark face not unhandsome, there was something almost appealing in him as he stood there.

"You mean," he said hoarsely, "you mean you do not love me?"

She shook her head.

"No," she said; "I do not love you. I do not want to hurt you. I am very, very sorry this has happened. I did not know that you — that you felt that way toward me; I —"

"But these months, two months, that I have been coming here," Merton interrupted quickly. "Surely you knew that —"

Again she shook her head.

"I did not think of it in that way," she answered. "We were friends, and dad and I were glad to have you come. I liked you for what brought you here first, and we were very sorry for the — for what had come into your life. We thought you liked us, that you found some relief in coming here and — and that was all. I do not love you, Mr. Merton; indeed, I do not even know you."

"Know me?" repeated Merton, a tinge of affront creeping into his voice.

"As a woman should know a man before she gives him her heart," she explained quietly. "I have seen you here only as our guest and —"

"Isn't that your own fault?" he broke in. "You have not tried to know me."

"No," she admitted, "I have not tried to know you — in that way."

"But you will," he said eagerly, "and love will come. Once away from here, together, in a new life, with wide interests, I will make you love me. I will work for you, slave for you, I will give you everything your heart can wish. I love you, Janet."

"I don't think you quite know what you are saying," she said gently. "Even if I wanted to go, if it were the dearest wish I had, I would be afraid to barter my love for the opportunity; it — it would not be a very sacred thing then, would it? But I have no wish to go away. My place is here. I have always been happy and contented here, and this is my life."

"Yes," said Merton, with sudden, impulsive bitterness — the calmness with which she spoke gave a finality to her words which maddened him. "Yes; and that is the trouble. It is your life and it has warped you. You are satisfied and contented with it because you cannot comprehend anything apart from that grey, grinning, hideous place. Your whole life, your thoughts, everything, are bound up with prison this and prison that. You won't marry me, because you say you don't know me. No! — you only *know* those striped-animals in there. So, at that rate, if you only marry whom you *know*, your love will have to find its object within those four walls, amongst —"

"Mr. Merton! Let me go!" — he had caught her hand, and now she wrenched herself free. Her face was crimson with amazement. "Are you mad to speak to me like that! I — I think, please, you had better go."

For a moment they stood facing each other without speaking. Then Merton, as though awakening from a dream, brushed his hand across his eyes.

"Yes; I am mad," he said penitently. "I did not know what I was saying. But I cannot bear to lose you. I love you and I cannot give you up. I will not give you up. You do not love me now, but some day I can win your love. And I am right about this, Janet — Miss Rand, if you would only go away, even for a little while, you would see."

Janet's eyes were on the ground.

"It is quite useless to say anything more," she said monotonously. "I shall never love you."

"But you *must!*" — he was leaning toward her again earnestly. "I cannot give you up. I love you; you are everything to me. I cannot take that answer."

"You must take it," she answered dully, "because it is the only answer I can ever give you."

"You think so now," he said softly, "but 'ever' is so long a time. Perhaps you are right; perhaps you may never love me, and if that prove so, then I must accept it, but surely I am not to lose your friendship too" — Merton was pleading now. He had gone too far, been too sure of himself, had foolishly given vent to temper; contrition, an appeal to her sympathy was his only hope of reinstating himself in her eyes. "You are angry with me now. But see! I am sincerely, bitterly

sorry for what I said. I was carried away. I was beside myself for the moment, but now I am sorry with all my heart. Won't you forgive me and forget it; and, at least, if we can be nothing more, let us still be the friends we were before this afternoon just as if nothing had happened?"

The pucker, in hesitant, tiny furrows, held for an instant on her forehead; then it cleared, and she looked up at him frankly, a tremulous little smile quivering on the sweet lips, as she held out to him the piece of string she had been twisting in her hands, one end of which was fastened near the roots of the Virginia creeper.

"Will you please tie this, Mr. Merton? — on that nail up there, the highest one — I can't reach it."

## CHAPTER XII

### THE FIGHT

**I**T was not so many hours, so many days, so many weeks, so many months — it was a numberless succession of periods so loosely defined one from the other that they merged without perceptible demarcation into a single whole that, in itself intangible, held no concrete idea of time.

To Varge, it was as though he were in the midst of a space, drear and dead, that had no boundary, that above and below and on either hand was limitless, through which he had journeyed and must journey without hope of coming to the end. What was behind him was not a consciousness of distance travelled, spurring weariness to new life with the cheering knowledge that part of the road was traversed; it was, instead, only a dull consciousness that he had walked for an æon of time as upon a path which was but the circumference of a circle, where with each step taken the distance before him was remorselessly identical with what it had been before.

The earlier mornings, the later evenings, the disappearing snow as he marched to and fro across the penitentiary yard marked a change of season — but that was all. It was a change, purely impersonal, utterly extraneous, that held nothing of interest, nothing in common with him or those within the four grey walls.

There had been breaks in the monotony — not pleasant

breaks, breaks to which the monotony was a boon. Harold Merton's visit—bad days and nights had followed that. And then the horror of that forty-eight hours of solitary confinement in the blackness, that had been—Varge raised his head and looked around him—it was afternoon and he was amidst the now all too-familiar surroundings of the carpenter shop. A sense of strange unrest was upon him, premonitory, pregnant of something he could not define. It had been with him that morning, yesterday in a lesser degree and vaguely, intermittently, for a week now. It was as though this afternoon it were attaining culmination. Yet now the surroundings were as they always were—there was no change—there was never any change.

Down the shop, by the entrance to the stock-room where the lumber was piled and the tools were kept, Wenger, the guard, with heavy, red, florid face, narrow-eyed, the under lids puffed out and hanging like flabby little sacks, leaned against the door. There was the same coarse sneer on his lips that was always there, and the red in his face seemed to flaunt, as it always flaunted, the twenty-two white, bloodless faces that rose above grey-and-black striped bodies here and there about the room. There was the same hoarse, guttural snapping of the planer eating its way along the surface of a rough plank; the shriller note of the flying band-saw, ending each time in a sharp crescendo as it worked clear of the wood. Twisty Connors' cunning little eyes met his and drifted away with a furtive glance toward Wenger; the instructor at his desk was busy over blueprints; old Blackie Lunn, the man who coughed at night, the man on account of whom he had got that forty-

eight hours of "solitary," the most pathetic figure in the room, grey-haired, with hollow, hectic-flushed cheeks and burning eyes, crouched wearily, apathetically, over his work a few yards away.

Varge's eyes dropped to his bench—it was as it always was. His brow clouded—a prescience that had never failed him was with him now. What was it? It embraced Wenger; and it embraced Twisty Connors and the harder element in the shop that tacitly recognised Twisty's leadership—the Butcher, a giant of a man, beetle-browed, sullen-faced; Spud; the Mouser; Scotty and a dozen more—counterfeiters, forgers, cracksmen, desperate men to whom consequence was an unknown word. And it embraced, too, vague rumours, that lived tradition-like amongst the old-timers and was spread to the new, of an old brick sewer long out of use that led beneath the prison walls to the creek a quarter of a mile away, whose abandonment, so it was said, the town authorities had ordered years ago as it polluted the stream. No one seemed to know where it was—all talked of it, and each had his own idea. It lived for them much as the odour of baking bread wafted from a shop lives for the starving wretch without—there *was* bread; its existence held a glimmer of hope.

All these were as pieces of an elusive puzzle which Varge sought now to put together; and in that effort, logically, his mind went back to the first day—when Wenger had struck him with his cane. He had looked Wenger in the eye after that blow for a long time—and *it had been Wenger's eyes that had dropped*. That had been the beginning—he had earned the brutal, bullying enmity of the man then. Daily, with nagging

persecution, that enmity had grown. "I'll break you and I'll make you *crawl*"—the very repetition of the words in Varge's mind brought now a curious whitening of his lips. No day had passed—except those two, that forty-eight hours in the blackness—that Wenger had not said those words, no change, the same words, that phrase, "I'll break you and I'll make you *crawl*," thrown at him casually across the bench, spoken unexpectedly in his ear, but always spoken, never a day without that taunt—a taunt that had brought Wenger more than once very near to death, so near that even now Varge shut his eyes and fought with his beating brain.

Wenger—yes; there was cause for the unrest there—and not alone on account of the other's treatment of himself. Other guards were strict, perhaps harsh, but they were human; this man was a bully of the lowest type who gloried in his malicious tyranny, suave and sleek to his superiors—not a convict in his charge, save one or two of his favourites who fawned upon him, but would have torn him limb from limb if they dared—and some of them dared, given but a shadow of a chance—Twisty Connors, for instance, and the Butcher and their pals.

They had even reached it to him—and hinted darkly at other things as well—sounding him, testing him, trying him out, after Twisty, with the natural superstition of his illiterate kind to whom luck was the only deity at whose shrine homage was ever paid, had taken the initiative. Seven-seven-seven—lucky seven! "Mabbe there's something I'll let youse in on one of these days," Twisty had said. It had a strange ironic effect. He had felt himself gradually being cultivated

and accepted into the fraternity that comprised the worst and most unscrupulous convicts in the penitentiary; he had found himself being invested with unwelcome authority, regarded with envy and something akin to unholy respect by the others, the lesser breed without the fold. But the opportunities for Twisty's confidences, and the Butcher's, and the others', apart from their own caution, had not been many — Wenger had seen to that. It had taken two months to arrive at the point where a rising and the "bumping off" of Wenger was mooted — "*when all was ready.*" Since then, they had drawn away from him — his answer had been little to their liking.

Again Varge's eyes swept slowly, lingering on details, around the shop. Wenger, for the moment, had gone into the stock-room. Twisty Connors and the Butcher were dividing their glances between each other and the narrow, open doorway of the stock-room through which Wenger had disappeared. The instructor still sat at his desk beside the big iron doors in the centre of the side wall that gave entrance and egress to the shop; the heavy steel key, a foot in length, polished from much usage, hung from a hook above his head and glinted in the sunlight. A line of stooping, listless figures, their loose-fitting prison dress adding a uniform appearance of gauntness to each, were dotted along the length of the bench beneath the iron-barred windows. Another bench, paralleling the first, ran halfway down the middle of the room — *his* bench, where he worked. A half-dozen machines, each with a striped form bent over it, occupied the rest of the floor space to the end wall, in which was the stock-room door. A figure scuffled from

his bench, taking some work to the saw; between the two benches, the Butcher and another convict were varnishing a piece of furniture that had just been completed.

Once more, Varge's eyes dropped to his work.

When *what* was ready? Had Blackie Lunn answered that question — or was it, the common rumour as a basis, but a vagary of the old man's mind? Was it really *here*, that sewer — somewhere at hand — were Twisty Connors and his few choice spirits the possessors of the secret, as Blackie Lunn so evidently believed?

The scene of a week ago lived again before Varge in its every detail. The old man sidling, as he believed unobserved, to his, Varge's, bench and plucking with trembling, eager fingers at his sleeve, the hoarse, dull, quavering whisper — Blackie, like the rest of the outsiders, had believed him to be one with Twisty Connors, with the Butcher and the rest.

"You'll let me in on it, won't you?" Blackie had pleaded feverishly. "You'll let an old man in on it, won't you? For God's sake don't say no! You ain't been here long enough to have *your* heart all dried up. Twisty says I ain't got the sand. You speak to him — you tell him I have. I *have* got sand. Oh, for God's sake let me in on it — it's killing me in here — I got to get out or I'll die. I know what's going on. The tunnel's done and they're at the brick now and —"

That had been all. Wenger's sneering face had come between them.

"Tunnel, eh?" the brute had snarled viciously. "What's this about a tunnel, you —"

The words had ended in a piteous scream, as Wenger

with a sudden movement had jerked the old man's arm behind him and twisted it brutally. That scream was ringing now in Varge's ears, the hollow, agonised features were before his eyes, as they had been that day. It had lasted the bare fraction of a second. His fist had whipped to Wenger's jaw — and Wenger had stretched his length upon the floor, stunned, a full ten feet away.

He had not done it impulsively — instantaneously almost as was the act, quick 'as was the rush of anger at Wenger's coward deed, he had struck the blow with cold, sober deliberation. He had known the consequences — an assault upon a guard was the last act he could hope to commit with impunity. It was the offence heinous, and its punishment was — the *lash* — the lash, strapped to the triangular black "horse" that he had seen one day in the corridor of the underground cells. There was no excuse for an assault upon a guard — none — it was the lash.

They had taken him then to the warden's office, and Wenger, smooth, plausible liar, had told his story, guarding himself at every point.

"He's a bad egg," Wenger had stated to the warden. "He's in thick, as I've told you before, with the worst of them. *Why, there ain't a day goes by that I don't have to warn him.*"

Just God! Would it come some day to that? — when human endurance would be at an end, when his brain would stagger and reel with mad drunkenness, and Wenger's blood be on his soul!

He had watched those keen, steel-grey eyes, watched the warden's face, he remembered, trying to read in them his sentence. Six lashes? — twelve? — eighteen? —

twenty-four? His heart had shrunk from it, crying out within him to speak, to give the lie to this man, to plead wildly for himself. It was not the physical pain he feared; it was the degradation, the utter ignominy, the black horror of a disgrace greater, it seemed, than he could bear; it was not his bare, naked flesh that would quiver and writhe from the curling lash, it was his bare, naked *soul*. And he had said no word. He could not demean himself by a defence that he had no hope would be believed and, worst of all, would but add to the malignant satisfaction of Wenger, who would see in it a whine for mercy.

And then Warden Rand had spoken:

"Two days in solitary confinement."

No lash! He could have sobbed with relief. He had been given leniency. Why? He had not known then — he did not know now. He had thought of it through those hours of horrible, dead, silent blackness, and no answer had come. He had escaped what few, if any, had ever escaped before for the same act.

It had not been so bad at first in that cell. It was afternoon when he went in, and the six little round ventilating holes in the bottom of the door threw tiny shafts of light across the floor. In the beginning he had not given them any thought; then they had absorbed his whole attention, and he had watched them with strained eyes, as though to rivet the yellow flickering threads and hold them in their places on the floor. They had grown shorter and shorter, receded to dull grey circles on the door that were like three pairs of glazed eyes mocking at him as the light gradually died in their depths. Then there was blackness in which he could

not see his hand before his face, and the sense of a heavy, crushing weight, growing more and more intolerable, that settled upon him and seemed to rob his brain of its normal functions, filling it instead with wild, fantastic, terrifying thoughts; then a mental suffocation, as one buried alive — forgotten. *That* had taken a strangling hold upon him — he was shut off, lost — if he should be *forgotten* there! He had slept, and waked to watch for those yellow threads; and had slept again and waked once more still to find they had not come, then —

His train of thought was rudely interrupted, and with a shock he was brought back to his immediate surroundings. A convict, with face like chalk, his eyes staring, came racing madly from the stock-room — and then the words poured from him in a high-pitched, jumbled torrent.

"Wenger's seen him!" he yelled. "It's all up. Four months diggin' down to the brick, a handful at a time, my Gawd, an' it's all up! He's seen Scotty comin' out from beneath the lumber pile. It's all up, Twisty — an' us down to the sewer with only a few bricks to kick loose!"

In Twisty was no misplaced leadership.

"Den beat it *now!*" he screamed. "It's our only chance. Youse guys knows what to do. Croak Wenger first, an' beat it! Spud, you an' de Mouser get de rest uv dem bricks loose an'—"

The words were drowned in wild confusion — Varge was already racing toward the stock-room door — over his shoulder he saw the instructor crumple up and wriggle to the floor from a blow over the head from a

billet of wood in the Butcher's hands. Twisty, Spud, the Mouser, a dozen more, were close at his heels. The heavy face of Wenger, his hand locked in the collar of a convict he was shoving before him, loomed up in the doorway.

"Croak 'im! Croak 'im! I tho't youse were all right!" shrilled Twisty, in the belief that Varge was but leading the rush. "T'ree-sevens gets the foist crack at 'im!"

Mad with the lust for blood, mad with the lust for freedom they were. There was no thought now of personal wrongs in Varge's mind — hound and cur though Wenger was, he was at least a human being — they would tear him in pieces like wild beasts. And freedom — they were guilty men — criminals — a prey on society — what right had they to freedom!

Wenger's face had gone from red to grey, fear was in it, then came a brutish look of animal courage. He wrenched at his pocket for his revolver, but the convict in his grasp — Scotty — turned suddenly and flung his arms around him.

A bull-like roar and an oath came from Wenger as Varge neared him.

"I'll get *you* anyway!" he bellowed.

"Fight, Wenger! Get free from that man! Fight for it if you want to *live*!" Varge flashed at him — and turned to face the on-coming rush.

It was upon him like an avalanche. A little crouched, he met it. It seemed to shiver and part and break and go scattering backward as a tempest's wave breaks in futile fury against the rocky cliff.

Execrations, a torrent of blasphemy, curses and yells,

was its echo; two forms were stretched upon the floor.

As then they came on again, a sea of them, the stamp of hell in the starved, white faces and glittering eyes — and leading them now, not Twisty, not the Butcher, was the poor, bent, disease-racked form of old Blackie Lunn.

“I got sand!” the old man shrieked. “I got —”

The words died in a gurgle, and he pitched forward on his face. Blackie Lunn had won his freedom. Wenger, freed from Scotty for an instant, had fired.

Varge was shoulder to shoulder with Wenger now, and the guard's revolver was spurting in a steady stream — but it never checked them — as savage beasts the convicts swarmed upon them, leaping to close quarters to bear the two men down before the very weight of their charge, to *kill* and gain the door that was only a yard away.

From him, tearing them from Wenger's neck and shoulders, Varge with his mighty strength hurled away now one, now two, of the murderous wolf-pack. Again and again, he freed the guard and himself, and swept clear the space before the door. Again and again, his massive shoulders heaved and threw them back, and as his arms worked in and out, in and out, like smooth well-oiled steel piston-rods, men went down before the fearful blows; but again and again, like striped human tigers, lashed to frenzy as much now by fear behind if they should not escape as the hope of freedom ahead, they still came on. The minutes passed. Twisty Connors, with a quick dart forward, wrapped himself around Varge's knees. The towering form of the Butcher, a chisel in his uplifted hand, sprang for Wenger. Varge stumbled — then, a wriggling thing, he swung the form

of Twisty high above his shoulders and flung him, a human catapult, at the Butcher. The Butcher dropped like a log — and Twisty's body lay quivering atop the other's.

Something was blinding Varge — he dashed his hand across his eyes — the blood was pouring over his forehead. They were armed now with chisels, adzes, hatchets, gouges, and they stabbed and struck in desperate fury. His jacket, slashed and cut, hung half-torn from one shoulder.

Wenger with clubbed revolver, long since emptied, was labouring heavily, reeling unsteadily upon his feet; and now, with a groan, he crashed forward on the floor. They snatched at him like ravenous beasts at their prey.

Varge felt his own strength going. There was a wound in his side somewhere that was numbing him; and the gash in his head was making his brain swim in a sickly fashion, filling it with a queer singing noise. They had dragged Wenger toward them along the floor — he sprang and dashed them back, and planted himself over the guard's body.

He was weakening. Turmoil, chaos, flashing lights were before his eyes. He fought mechanically now — they were too heavy for him — five on his shoulders and arms, he could not hold them up — what was that group of striped, timid things that cringed back in the far end of the room against the wall? Why were the big iron doors open? — the bell had not rung. What were those black forms that were rushing through the door toward him? — those hoarse, strident commands? He was free, they were no longer clinging to him, hacking at him — his strength must have come back — they

had given it up — and not one had reached the tunnel. Varge raised his hand again to brush the blood away from his' eyes — it was growing very dark — he was tottering, falling, and his hands, to save himself, groped out — into blackness.

## CHAPTER XIII

### AFTER THE FIGHT

**F**ROM across the yards out of the various shops came the convicts tramping into the main building, into the wings and corridors through the steel-barred gates; and throughout the great prison echoed the ring of clanging doors, the clash of the massive bar-locks, the shuffling tread of lock-stepped files, the hoarse, gruff, curt commands of the guards.

Ever the man of prompt and decisive action, Warden Rand had thrown himself into the breach. Too well he was aware that the news would spread like wild-fire to every last prisoner in his charge; and upon its heels, spreading infection with the excitement, he feared an outbreak of insubordination that, as well as not, might develop into a general uprising. Within twenty minutes following what had been the most desperate attempt at wholesale delivery in the history of the institution, every man of the eight hundred convicts within the penitentiary walls was under lock and key.

And then in his office, man after man of those who, though taking no part in the fray, had been present in the carpenter shop was brought before him, subjected to a stern, searching interrogation and led away again. Over an hour this had taken him, and now as he finished with the last one and settled back in his chair, his usually genial face hard and troubled, a heavy frown on his brow, a white-jacketed form came through the doorway

and stepped up to the desk—it was Doctor Kreelmar, the prison physician. Warden Rand glanced sharply at the other's face before he spoke.

"I was just going to send for you, doctor," he said. "Well?"

Doctor Kreelmar, a short, nervous, little black-haired man of fifty, shook his head.

"It's not well at all," he returned bluntly. "It's—hum!—infernally bad. Wenger shot two dead besides Blackie Lunn and—"

"I know that," interposed the warden tersely. "What about the rest?"

"Scotty can't live, not a ghost of a chance, Wenger's bullet touched his left lung—Wenger'll go out too. As for the others, I never saw anything like it in all my experience—some of them are battered as though they had been literally struck with a trip-hammer, and two of them have their ribs broken, simply crushed in from that chap's hug."

"You mean?" inquired the warden.

"Yes, of course—Varge—Number Seven-seventy-seven," said the doctor. "Rand, that man is wonderful"—Doctor Kreelmar drew in his breath. "Wonderful!" he repeated. "I wouldn't have believed it if any one had told me and I hadn't seen him professionally myself."

"Will he live?" Warden Rand demanded.

"Live!" exclaimed Doctor Kreelmar. "Yes; he'll live—but no other man would with the wounds he's got. He's been stabbed in a dozen places with all sorts of tools, and his head's laid open for three inches to the skull. Of course, he's in bad shape and will need care,

but he's conscious again and doing well. I want you to come into the hospital, Rand, next time I do his dressings — I give you my professional word you'll see something that you don't need any special knowledge of anatomy to be amazed at. He's the most marvellous specimen of the human animal I ever heard of. I don't know how to express it any other way than to tell you to imagine the normal development of a man twice the ordinary size, and then imagine that development with all its strength and power compressed with the utmost harmony and delicate adjustment into this man's body. He's an absolutely perfect man — his skin is as smooth as satin, not a spot or blemish on it, and the muscles under it play like steel knobs in well-oiled grooves. It's no surprise to me he bent that bar that convicted him — his strength, fully exerted, would be something terrific."

Warden Rand nodded his head and looked at the doctor a little whimsically.

"It would seem as though he had given us some evidence of it this afternoon from your report," he said grimly.

"So he did, so he did," jerked out the little doctor. "And do you know, Rand, that's what gets me. How do you account for him doing what he did? — not only in keeping Twisty and his pals from making their escape, but trying to save Wenger's life as well? He surely hadn't any love for Wenger. Wasn't it Wenger who got him the black hole last week? — and wanted to get him the lash?"

"Yes," said the warden quietly; "it was Wenger."

"Well then," urged the doctor, "what do you make of him?"

"Frankly," admitted Warden Rand, "I don't know. I'll confess he has puzzled me ever since he has been here and —"

"And you thought enough of him to save him from the lash," supplied the doctor impulsively. "Well, I'll tell you what I think. I think a man who has done what he did to-day isn't the kind of man ever to have killed Doctor Merton over there in Berley Falls in cold blood, or hot blood, either, for that matter — evidence or no evidence, and whatever he says himself to the contrary."

Warden Rand drummed for an instant with his fingers on the desk.

"I am afraid that is not for us to say," he said gravely. "We can only deal with conditions as we find them. He is here for life — we cannot alter that. However, this afternoon makes a pretty big score to his credit and we'll see what we can do for him. Wenger, you say, can't live?"

"No," the doctor answered. "There is absolutely no chance for him — he is sinking fast now. I'm sorry for him, for he put up a game fight. I'd give him twelve hours at the outside and —"

Doctor Kreelmar broke off and turned suddenly at the sound of a step in the corridor without — then frowned, as the dark, handsome face of Harold Merton appeared in the doorway. As impulsive and irascible as he was big of heart, it was Doctor Kreelmar's boast that he wore his heart upon his sleeve. He had taken a dislike to this man who of late had been so frequent a visitor at the warden's house — and he made no attempt to conceal it now.

"May I come in?" Merton asked.

"Certainly," responded Warden Rand cordially.

"You've met Doctor Kreelmar, I think."

"Several times," said the doctor stiffly.

Merton bowed politely, apparently oblivious of the other's brusqueness — and addressed himself to Warden Rand.

"I met one of the mounted patrol — Kingman — as I was driving in," he said. "Kingman told me that Varge had been in a desperate fight and that he was badly hurt. I was going over to the house, but I hurried in here instead" — Merton sensed a thrill of exultation creeping into his voice and lowered it to a tone of more consistent concern. "I just caught the doctor's last words as I came in. I sincerely hope that it is not as bad as that." He turned to Doctor Kreelmar. "Is there no chance whatever, doctor?"

"None at all," said Doctor Kreelmar curtly, quite well aware of the mistake Merton was labouring under, and deliberately refusing to enlighten him.

"Too bad," murmured Merton in a low voice. "Too bad. I —"

"Doctor Kreelmar was speaking of Wenger, one of the guards," explained Warden Rand quickly, with a slight frown of disapproval directed at the doctor.

"Oh!" said Merton. "Not — not Varge. I — I am very glad. And Varge, then?"

"Will live," said the warden. "And I am sure you will be glad to know that as soon as he is able to be about again, we are going to make things easier for him — thanks to what he has done this afternoon."

"I am indeed," said Merton instantly, with well-simulated sincerity. "Anything that can be done for him,

as I have told you before, will be appreciated by both my mother and myself. What do you intend to do for him?"

"Well," Warden Rand said genially, "I suppose the doctor here would prescribe plenty of fresh air, sunshine and light work — eh, doctor?"

"I would," agreed Doctor Kreelmar with emphasis. "That's just what he'll need — and he's earned it."

"Just so," smiled Warden Rand. "Well then, we'll make a trusty of him, and let him look after my garden this summer — that'll keep him outdoors all day and won't be very arduous."

"A trusty — over there in the garden!" echoed Merton blankly. "Do — do you think that would be wise?"

Warden Rand's eyebrows went up a little in surprise. Doctor Kreelmar looked sharply at Merton.

"Wise?" repeated Warden Rand questioningly.

"Perhaps I should have said safe," said Merton hastily. "That is what I really meant. Of course, I'm interested, deeply interested, in Varge's welfare; but, equally, I — I cannot forget what he has done — what he is. I was thinking of Miss Rand. Do you think it would be safe for her to have a man around there day after day without any guard to watch him who — who has — who is a murderer?"

"I don't think Miss Rand has anything to fear from a man who will offer his life to save another toward whom he has little cause to bear any goodwill," remarked Doctor Kreelmar caustically.

With a quick, startled glance, Merton swept the doctor's face.

"I—I don't know what you mean," he said, his voice faltering a little in spite of himself as the unintentional shot went home.

"Wenger, the guard Varge fought for, and Varge, it seems, weren't on very good terms," explained the warden quietly interposing. "As for the rest, I must say I agree with the doctor. I should have no uneasiness on Janet's account through sending Varge over there, though I appreciate your thoughtfulness. Take it all around in fact, I believe it's the best thing to do, and we might as well call it settled—you can tell him, doctor, when you go back, if you like."

Doctor Kreelmar nodded; and Merton, not daring to take the risk of pressing the matter further at that time, took pains to change the subject of conversation, and presently left the office to go over to the warden's house.

"What's the matter between you two?" demanded Warden Rand abruptly, when he and the doctor were alone again.

"Nothing. Don't like him, that's all," Doctor Kreelmar answered crisply.

"That's very apparent," smiled the warden dryly. "You've got a bigger heart than a woman's on occasions, Kreelmar; but you're the worst man for violent likes and dislikes that I've ever met—and you take no pains to hide them."

"Why should I?" snapped the irascible little doctor aggressively. "I get along better by being honest about it. It gives me less to do with those I dislike; and as for the ones I like, I'd rather tell them now that they're good fellows and that I think so than wait till they're

dead and tell somebody else what I *have* thought of them — does 'em a hanged-sight more good, what?"

Warden Rand laughed good-naturedly.

"Well," he said, "I am not going to argue it. It's a brand of philosophy that Number Seven-seventy-seven, at least, ought to appreciate for the next few days, seeing that he's on the right side of your mental ledger." Warden Rand paused, and his eyes, grown serious, held Doctor Kreelmar's for a moment. "I've official strings on my tongue that you haven't on yours, Kreelmar," he said significantly; "but I'm as much interested in the man as you are, understand? I leave it to you to pull him around in the best shape you can."

"Hum!" said Doctor Kreelmar eloquently, as he turned toward the door. "That's all right as far as it goes — but it isn't medicine that man needs."

"Perhaps not," admitted the warden. "But what else can you do for him?"

"What else!" repeated the little doctor with a grunt, as he walked out. "I don't know, do I? If I did, he'd be a free man."

Doctor Kreelmar passed down the hall into the penitentiary proper through the steel gates opened for him by a guard, turned to his left and kept on along a corridor to where, at the extreme end, it opened into the prison infirmary. As he walked, his small, round face was fiercely puckered, and he plucked continuously at a diminutive black goatee with the knuckle of his thumb and the end of his forefinger.

"Marvellous physique!" he muttered. "Marvellous! Fine fellow. Seen lots of 'em, lots of 'em — know 'em when I see 'em. Murderer — poppycock! Something

queer about it — something underneath. I wonder — hum! Good mind to try it. End justifies the means — always believed in that. Good mind to try it.”

He reached the hospital door, stepped inside, and halted for an instant to sweep each individual form in the six cots, that were lined up together by the doorway, with a swift, critical glance; then he strode on down the ward, motioned the two guards who had been placed on duty imperiously to the lower end of the room, and stopped before the two beds in the upper corner that had been drawn close beside each other and apart from the rest. In the one nearer the door, unconscious and scarcely breathing, the heavy, brutish features strangely softened and refined by the pallor of approaching death, lay Wenger, the guard; in the other, Varge turned his head, swathed in bandages, and fastened his eyes on Doctor Kreelmar.

A moment the doctor bent over Wenger, then he came around to the far side of Varge's bed, nodded to Varge, whipped his clinical thermometer from his pocket, shook the mercury down, and thrust it under Varge's tongue. His fingers closed on Varge's wrist, held there an instant — and a startled look came over his face. He took out his watch hurriedly, recounted the pulse, and finally, reaching for the little thermometer, took it from Varge's lips. He read it quickly, and as quickly held it to the light as though to assure himself that he had made no mistake. A suppressed exclamation escaped him as he glanced back at Varge, his brows knitted; then he turned suddenly, beckoning to one of the guards.

“What's been going on here?” he demanded sternly.

"Nothing, sir," replied the guard.

"Nothing! Nothing!" echoed the little man sharply. "How nothing! Any of that scum down there"—he pointed to the six cots—"been making a disturbance, threatening this man that you're here to protect, doing anything to excite him, or anything like that, eh?"

"Why, no, sir," replied the guard. "It's been as quiet here since you left as it is now."

"Hum!" said Doctor Kreelmar fiercely. "Well, that's all"—he waved the man away—"go back where you were."

He drew a chair to the bedside, sat down, and for a long while studied Varge's face with troubled intentness.

Varge, who had been watching the doctor from under half-closed lids, was the first to speak.

"What is it, doctor?" he asked, the kindly, habitual smile—that in the months had grown to know a tinge of wistfulness—hovering on his lips, in spite of the pain he was suffering.

The doctor did not answer for a moment, and Varge searched the sober, serious countenance of the other curiously. There had been a fight, an attempted escape—he remembered every detail of it until he had lost consciousness. He had been wounded, seriously wounded—his own medical knowledge had told him that. He had come to himself in this room and the doctor had dressed his wounds. He remembered the strange gentleness of the other's touch; the friendly, sympathetic voice, gruff and blunt with chopped-off words, though it had been. Then he had slept a little and awakened again at Doctor Kreelmar's entry into the

room. What was it now? Why was the doctor bending over him so anxiously, so soberly now? If it were over Wenger there might be reason — his practised eye had told him that it was already the twilight of life for the man whose form lay within arm's reach of him upon the next bed.

"You are a brave man," said Doctor Kreelmar finally in low, grave tones, as though forcing himself to speak; "and big enough to want to know the truth. An hour ago I thought there was every chance in the world for you, and now" — he hesitated.

"And now?" Varge prompted steadily, his eyes fixed speculatively on the physician's face.

Doctor Kreelmar shook his head.

"You have taken a serious turn for the worse — I do not want to buoy you up with false hopes."

"You mean," said Varge quietly, "that I am going to die?"

"I mean," said the little doctor gently, nodding his head slowly, "that if there is anything you might want to say, any confession you might want to make, anything in connection with the crime that brought you here, you should speak while your mind is still clear and while you have the strength."

The look of speculation in Varge's eyes vanished — his brain, keen, quick and active, had read the other now.

"There is nothing I can say — there is nothing to say," he answered. "Everything is known — I have confessed to it. What more can I say?"

"Varge," said the doctor, and, reaching out, took Varge's hand, "I want you to believe me when I say that I am your friend. You can trust me. I do not be-

lieve that you are guilty and I want you to tell me the truth. You are growing weaker—you are going to die—*who killed Doctor Merton?*”

“I did,” Varge replied, meeting calmly the challenge in the other's eyes.

Doctor Kreelmar bent closer.

“Don't you believe that I am your friend?” he asked, with gruff tenderness.

Slowly Varge's hand tightened over the doctor's—tighter and tighter—increasing the pressure with his mighty strength. Doctor Kreelmar tried to look unconcerned, then bit his lip, then grasped with his other hand at the seat of his chair, and then with the pain was literally forced dancing to his feet.

“Confound you!” he burst out suddenly, unable to bear it any longer. “Let go, will you!”

With a smile, Varge released his hold.

“It was useless for you to attempt a ruse like that,” he said simply; “for even if you had made me believe you, there was only one answer I could make.” Then, with a catch in his voice, unconsciously repeating the warden's words: “You've got a big heart, doctor; I understand, and—and God bless you!”

“And you've got a fool head!” growled the little man, puckering up his face to its fiercest aspect in an effort to distract attention from the suspicious moisture that had suddenly dimmed his eyes. “A stubborn, mule-headed fool!” He turned away, but halted at the foot of the bed and turned again. “You're a strong man, Varge,” he flung out, “a strong man—both ways. And seeing that you're not going to die, the warden told

me to tell you he was going to make a trusty of you and put you out in his garden where you'd get a bit of sunshine and fresh air this summer."

A flush of pleasure crept to Varge's cheeks, and the fine dark eyes lightened up and brightened — God alone knew the weariness of the days behind; the brave patience with which he had set himself to face the same drear, endless weariness of the days to come. He reached out his hand to the doctor.

"Hum!" said Doctor Kreelmar. "No; I guess not — I'll wait till you get weaker" — and abruptly walked away.

Evening fell, and the hours crept on. At times, Varge dozed fitfully; at others, wakeful, he watched the guards dreamily as they sat together near the cots of Twisty and his pals, or listened to the heavy, stertorous breathing of the convicts that now and then was mingled with a mumbled curse and groan, or, again, his eyes would rest on the grey, almost lifeless face of Wenger beside him — then he would drowse off once more.

Midnight came and went. There was a sudden stir, the quick movement of some one near him, and Varge, instantly aroused, raised himself to his elbow. Doctor Kreelmar was bending over Wenger's bed. A single swift glance Varge shot at the doctor; and then, as his gaze fell upon the white, drawn face turned sideways toward him on the pillow, suddenly Wenger's dull, glazed eyes lighted up with recognition as they met his, and a smile struggled for expression on the lips of the dying guard. Feebly, Wenger's hand stretched out and groped across the space between them — and gently,

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while his eyes grew wet, Varge caught and pressed it in both his own.

“Good-night,” Wenger whispered. “Good —”

There was a fluttering sigh, the hand relaxed — and Wenger had passed out into the long night.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE GUARDS ARE CHANGED

**A** NEW life had opened for Varge. There was the vast, limitless blue overhead; the warm sunshine, tanning his face to a ruddy brown and chasing the pallor of prison and of illness from his cheeks; the balmy air of springtime to drink in full, deep draughts, like precious nectar spiced with the smell of fresh, new earth and growing things — and it was her garden.

He remembered the first morning, a week ago now, when Doctor Kreelmar had discharged him from the infirmary and they had sent him to the warden's house — and he had found her on the lawn. She had seemed like a being from another world, a gift of God of sweetness, purity and innocence, one to worship as above and apart; and his soul, the better, the finer things that were in him had gone out to her in homage and allegiance, as one might reverently lay upon an altar a glad, spontaneous tribute to one of loftier mould, who, diffusing about her intangibly an air of fine contagion, bred the gentler, dearer things of life.

As he had stood before her then, the black-and-grey striped felon suit he wore had seemed a desecration of her presence; and that she should think him what he appeared to be had sent the hot blood flushing to his face. And then with what gentle tact she had put him at his ease! — talking to him of her garden, the work there was to do, her plans for some new flower-beds, the triv-

ming of the honeysuckle hedge that fronted on the roadway, investing him so ingenuously with the counterpart of her own personal interest in it all.

"I have always had such a pretty garden," she had said before she left him; "and I love it so. And this year, you know, I am more ambitious about it than ever. I am so glad you are going to take care of it for me."

"I am afraid," he had answered her honestly, and he remembered the fear that had been his lest she should take him at his word, "that I do not know very much about gardening, and that —"

"You love flowers, too," she had interrupted, shaking her head. "I can see that; so you will love your work, and then — and then, well, it can't help but be well done, can it?" — and she had smiled at him, and nodded brightly — and he had begun to work — in her garden.

That night in his cell, and the nights thereafter, there came to cheer and brighten him not one face only, but two — Mrs. Merton's and Janet Rand's; and when thereafter, with each dawn, the first threads of morning sunlight stole across the corridor from the high windows and, eluding the steel bars of his cell door, awakened him to the rounds of another day, it was to a day different from those he had known before — a day whose prospect no longer tortured him, but one which now he welcomed with almost eager gladness.

The fearful sense of isolation was gone. During the day, the warden would sometimes stop and speak to him; or perhaps Doctor Kreelmar would halt at his elbow to fling a good-natured, jesting warning at him not to plant the bulbs upside down — but mostly it was Janet

Rand, his new guard as the warden laughingly called her, who had brought the change to pass. Much through the day they were together, and her clear, ringing laugh, her rich, full voice seemed like strains of some divine melody that stirred a joyous echo in his own soul. At first, it had been as though he listened to it as one who had no right to listen, as one for whom it was not meant, as a thief who steals, or an interloper who intrudes — a strange barrier that his own, fine supersensitiveness raised. But gradually her frank, open, unaffected attitude toward him had quietly, almost unconsciously swept this aside, and in its place had come a friendly intimacy, a certain comradeship that he cherished and treasured in his heart as a priceless possession.

And so a week had passed, the happiest week he had known in weary months; and now in the fresh, cool, early morning he was beginning another day's work. From the conservatory at the rear of the house and behind the barn he wheeled his barrow, loaded with potted plants, to the lower end of the lawn where a bed had been prepared for their transplanting. He set the wheelbarrow down and for a moment, his back deliberately turned to the grey prison walls, he stood erect and motionless, gazing about him into the cloudless blue overhead, at the fields and farms that flanked the village road, at the village itself — a straggling, double row of cottages that terminated at the bridge over the little creek a quarter of a mile away, where the sawmill, the blacksmith shop and the general store were grouped together. Freedom, blessed freedom, manhood's inheritance! This much at least was his — to look and feast his eyes and, yes, if he would — to dream.

He stooped to the wheelbarrow and carefully began to set the plants upon the ground, a smile half-tender, half-whimsical playing upon his lips. These were very special treasures. She had given him particular injunctions concerning them the afternoon before.

The notes of a song floated across the lawn from the house — clear and true they rang, like a morning hymn of praise, pulsing with happiness and the joy of living, an offering of thankfulness for the beauty of the morning, the coming of another day. Then the song died away, the front door opened and he heard her step upon the veranda.

On his knees over the potted-plants, Varge watched her come. The green sward, the leafing trees, the bloom of the honeysuckle hedge framed her well. Dear God, how wonderful she was! Straight and true, the gold-crowned head erect, the laughing eyes blue as the sky above, the rich, red, smiling lips, the full white throat. God's gift of love, of innocence and purity, a shrine of His own building to His own praise — she could be naught else but that. How rare and sweet and fresh she looked in the simple print dress of dark navy blue with its wide, white collar open at the neck, its short sleeves to the elbows with their deep, white cuffs — how full of radiant health and young strength the lithe, graceful swing of her step!

It seemed as though he should stay upon his knees to greet her reverently so — and it was almost reluctantly that he rose to his feet and cap in hand stood waiting for her.

"Good-morning, Varge," she cried cheerily, as she

came up and — something she had never done before — held out her hand.

Impulsively, Varge stretched out his own, then dropped it to his side — and flushed.

“I have been working,” he said, and lifted his hand for her inspection. “It is not clean enough for you to take.”

For a moment she did not speak and her eyes, suddenly grown serious, searched his face.

“I understand,” she said, her voice low. “But if I choose to believe that it — that it is *clean*?”

“I think it would be very like you,” Varge said slowly. “You are very kind and good and — and I am very grateful, but —”

“We were talking about you last night, Varge,” she said simply, her eyes on the toe of her shoe as she patted down a little mound of earth. “Doctor Kreelmar and I, Doctor Kreelmar believes in you, and I — I think in the last week I have come to know you better than he does — I believe in you, too.” She raised her eyes quickly to his. “Varge, won’t you give me your hand and tell me we are right, and let us help you to clear yourself, and take us as true, staunch friends?”

Something in Varge’s throat seemed to choke him, and he averted his head. Suddenly, dearer than life or freedom, the one thing in all the world that could matter now, it seemed, would be her belief in him. Just her belief — that was all. Temptation as it had never come before, as the horror of the prison life had never tempted him, surged upon him, almost unmanning him for the moment, seeking literally to wrench the secret from his

lips. When he looked at her again, the agony had gone from his eyes and his face was composed.

"I cannot do it," he said steadily.

"Then I will take it on my own appraisement," she said, putting her hand frankly into his, the cheery ring back in her voice again. "You see, my faith is not to be shaken."

The cool, firm pressure of her hand thrilled him and seemed to tear down his self-restraint; the quick, spontaneous act of trust brought a mist to his eyes.

"Thank God for such as you!" he whispered.

He turned from her abruptly, and, with his cap, dusted out the wheelbarrow — it was a favourite seat of hers.

She thanked him, now and took it, resting her elbows on the handles, cupping her chin in her hands.

Varge, on his knees again, began to take the plants from their pots.

For a long time, silence lay between them. He looked up finally to meet her eyes and read a puzzled something in their depths — and in the fair, sweet face a gentle, tender, troubled look of sympathy.

She started slightly, and the pink dyed the white throat and crept to her cheeks.

"How wonderfully you have done with the garden," she said with a little laugh to cover her embarrassment; "and how quickly, for one who said he knew nothing about it, you have learned in the last week. I came to superintend the transplanting this morning and I find there is no need for supervision, so" — gently — "will you talk to me as you work — about yourself? I think it helps sometimes, doesn't it — to talk? And I should

be so glad to listen. About your life and your friends back in the — in the happier days."

"I am afraid there is not much to talk about — that you would care to hear," he said gravely.

The white forehead puckered daintily in pretended severity and rebuke.

"Oh, yes; there is," she said. "Your name — it is such a curious name. How did they come to call you Varge, and what does it mean?"

"I do not know what it means," Varge answered, his quick, sensitive smile upon his lips. "I am afraid it does not really mean anything — a word of babyhood coinage for something perhaps. They said it was the only word in my vocabulary when they found me, and so they called me — Varge. I was left at the door of a foundling home, you —"

"Yes," she said softly; "I knew that. But was there nothing, no mark on your clothes, no message, no little trinket — nothing that would —"

Varge shook his head.

"There was nothing."

"And nothing has come with the years? No clue to your identity? Surely you have tried to find out who you were."

The trowel in Varge's hand grated against the rim of the pot as he loosened the earth, and the massive, splendid head bent forward for an instant suddenly — then he straightened and looked up at her, the calm brown eyes, the whole strong, rugged beauty of his face mellowed with a wistful tenderness.

"Once," he said, in low tones, "the dearest wish I had was to know — my mother."

Quick tears dimmed the great blue eyes, as her hand reached out and rested upon his arm. Her lips quivered.

"I have hurt you," she said, turning away her head. "Oh, I didn't mean to do that!"

Hurt from her! He could have lifted the white hand reverently to his lips. Hurt from that crown of womanhood, that glory of womanhood—the tender heart of sympathy! Hurt—ah, no! Like the balm of some bright, radiant, ministering angel seemed her presence there to him.

"No," he said. "No; you have not hurt me—and you must not feel that you have." Then quickly, as though picking up the thread of a story: "You see, I had little opportunity to search. I dreamed of it as a boy; and as a boy, before I came really to understand, I dreamed of it in fairyland—do you know what I mean? I was very much, and I think a little importantly, concerned in my own mystery, and my imagination was constantly at play. I pictured myself awaking some day to find that I was the long lost, stolen heir of great people, and there would be castles and estates and trains of servants and yachts and—and so many things—everything that my boyish fancy could depict. And I was so very sure of it all, you see, that in my childish conceit I resented it very bitterly when people called me Varge Merton. And so"—he paused and the wistful smile deepened on his lips—"and so I remained—just Varge."

"I see"—the gold head nodded thoughtfully. "And then?"

"Another woman taught me the greatness of a

mother's love," he said with simple earnestness — "Mrs. Merton — and, as I grew older and understood, filled me with the hope to be worthy of my own mother when I should find her. So then, I had two ambitions — that and " — Varge had risen suddenly and was speaking almost eagerly now, looking into the sweet face that seemed so winningly to bid him open his heart — "that, and to procure the means that would enable me to search. The thought of who I was, my identity, was rarely out of my mind. I began to study medicine, not only because no other opportunity seemed to offer, but because, too, I loved the work. I did not think then to stay so long in Berley Falls. I meant to make a beginning there, and then perhaps work through college. But the years passed on and in those years the doctor and Mrs. Merton were as father and mother to me, and there came conditions that I could not —"

Varge stopped suddenly. What glaring incongruity was he leading to! The clear, fathomless blue eyes seemed to be reading his very soul. With a quick, out-flung gesture of his hands, he turned from her to his work.

"Yes?" — the single word came to him low-breathed, a world of sympathy in the voice.

Varge shook his head, but did not look at her.

"Won't you go on?" she pleaded gently. "I would like to know the rest."

He was on his knees once more over the plants.

"There is no more," he said hoarsely, still keeping his face averted. "The rest is — ruin, wreckage and disaster."

He worked on, but his movements were mechanical —

black and grey, black and grey, he could see nothing else, on his sleeves, on his jacket, around his knees, black and grey — that, and the *number* on his breast. Madly he was fighting with himself to keep his self-control, to crush and hurl back the wild impulse that called upon him to stand before her, *as was his right*, a clean-handed, clean-souled man. What mattered anything else than that — at any cost — at any hazard! It stood out paramount, above all else — that she should know. Every pound of his heart, the strange new thrill that swept through his veins with every pulse-beat struggled and battered at him for mastery — that she should know.

A long, long time it seemed, and then she rose from her seat. He heard her step behind him and felt her hand laid with lightest touch upon his shoulder — it rested there a moment, just a moment — and then she was gone — walking slowly across the lawn toward the house.

## CHAPTER XV

### VARGE MAKES A DISCOVERY

**A**LREADY late afternoon, Varge came through the penitentiary gates, and with quick, eager steps traversed the few hundred yards of roadway to the warden's house. Four days had passed since he had been there; four days that had seemed interminably long and restless days; four days, too, that had been miserable, unpleasant ones for him.

Old and familiar faces had crowded the little courtroom in Berley Falls again, and he had shared the sordid honour with Twisty Connors and the Butcher of being the centre of attraction, the sensation of the moment. The eyes that had gazed on him there had lost no whit of the interest with which they had gazed when, once before, he had stood in that same room, then on trial for his own life — they had lost only their *friendliness*. And in the faces of those who crowded the benches to capacity was — strange phase of human nature! — that smug, morbid content that springs from the sometime personal intimacy with one who, having gained celebrity, whether from unenviable notoriety or exalted fame, will presently afford them the exquisite conceit of airing that intimacy to less favoured mortals from the vantage ground of lofty condescension!

It had not escaped Varge in any measure — the nodding, wagging heads, the gaping mouths, the whispered conversations into one another's ears. It was impos-

sible to have been insensible to it, and he was glad that it was over; though, too, there had been compensation—a firm clasp of John Randall's hand, and another from Sheriff Marston.

Each day of the four, he, with a dozen others under guard, had been taken from the penitentiary in the morning and driven to Berley Falls to act as witnesses in the trials of Twisty and the Butcher, as ringleaders, together with their accomplices for the murder of Wenger. Contrary to expectation, but to his own relief, the proceedings had been concluded shortly before noon that day—Twisty and the Butcher receiving the full sentence of the law; and the rest, found guilty of manslaughter, being given an additional twenty years to the terms they were then serving.

And now, as he turned in at the driveway and swept the lawn and shrubbery with a rapid glance, a sense of disappointment came over him, slowing for the moment his step. He had hoped that she might be there; and he had half-promised himself the gladness that would come from the sound of her voice in cheery greeting, and the added sunshine from the smile of her lips and eyes—but she was nowhere in sight.

He kept on up the driveway, his eyes falling here and there, on this bed and that, on evidences of her work during his enforced absence. How dearly she loved her garden, the plants and flowers and trees and vines—and how like them, too, she was in her freshness and her purity, in her sweet, faultless beauty, in the delicate fragrance of innocence that she breathed about her!

Gradually his step quickened again. She was somewhere in the house, probably; and sometime before the

afternoon was over, when she discovered that he was back again at work, she would come out to tell him of a score of little things that she wanted done. Meanwhile, there were the morning glories to be planted that were to cover the trellis of the back porch; and there were the side borders by the hedges between the house and the barn to be made ready — there was plenty to do — the four days of absence had played serious havoc with plans that he knew were very near and vital to her.

In the barn that served as tool-house — for the warden did not keep a horse — Varge collected the various implements he required, and, coming out again, set vigorously to work upon one of the borders.

A half-hour saw this task completed, and then he crossed slowly to the opposite hedge to begin upon the other.

The previous sense of disappointment was upon him again. He had been wrong; she was evidently not in the house, but away somewhere — he had seen Martha, the Rand's servant, at the window, and Martha would surely have told her that he was there had she been within. But still he clung to hope — it seemed as though more than ever that afternoon he needed the uplift of her presence, the sound of her voice in his ears to soothe the heaviness of spirit that was creeping over him — perhaps even yet she would return before it was time for him to go back to his cell and the years of hours before the sunlight came again.

What was it that was weighing him down now so strangely, so insistently? He had been happier during the two weeks that had just gone than he had believed it possible he could be in his hopeless convict life, and

the summer at least held out to him — who of all men had no right to live but in the present — the promise of that same gladness, the same warm, bright glints of sunlight through the rifts of leaden clouds that had been his now for these two weeks. What was it? It could not be just the disappointment that her absence this afternoon had brought him. It seemed more an intuition, a presentiment hanging over him, that in a curious, ironic way strove to warn him against something, while, too, it seemed to mock at him.

The beat of horse's hoofs sounded from the road, the crunch of wheels on the driveway — and suddenly Varge's face lighted up, and the grave troubled look was gone. Her laugh, mellow, silvery, full of genuineness as it always was, came to him from the front of the house, and he leaned an instant on his spade to listen.

Then slowly the light faded from his face and into it crept a white rigidity, and his hands clenched upon the spade handle until it seemed the tight-drawn skin must crack and part over the knuckles — another laugh, another voice he knew as well as hers had reached him.

Motionless he stood there — like a statue in the act of driving a spade home into the ground — one foot uplifted with its heavy prison boot resting on the top of the blade, the grey-and-black striped form bent a little forward as though to bring the body-weight and shoulder muscles into play.

Her step was on the front veranda now. There was a confused murmur of laughter and voices; and then hers, merrily:

“Well, put the horse in the barn first, and then we'll

see about it — I don't know whether there'll be time before tea or not."

A moment more Varge stood without movement, then he laid down the spade, crossed quickly to the barn, and withdrew out of sight behind one of the stalls. He had barely a minute to wait. The carriage wheels rattled on the gravel drive coming toward him past the side of the house, a shadow fell across the barn doors — and as the stamp of hoofs rang loudly on the wooden flooring, he stepped suddenly from the stall to the horse's head. With a little neigh and whinny that was almost human in its recognition and greeting, the animal rubbed its nose against his shoulder.

"Lady Mine," he answered softly — but his eyes played coldly upon Harold Merton on the buggy seat.

Merton's face on the instant had gone grey-white, and the reins had fallen from nerveless hands across the dashboard.

Varge's eyes still held upon the other, not a flicker in their steady gaze, a question in their depths that needed no words to amplify it.

Merton wet his lips with the tip of his tongue.

"You — you here?" he stammered. "I — I thought you were at Berley Falls this afternoon."

"You *thought* I was at Berley Falls!" — the words came with quick significance from Varge's lips. "Well?"

"At — at the trial, you know," stumbled Merton, realising that his remark had been unfortunate and clumsily trying to gloss it over. "Everybody knew, of course, that you were there, and everybody thought it would last for several days yet. I — I thought you

were there, and so naturally I was surprised to find you here, and—and—" he stammered again, paused, shifted uneasily in his seat, tried to meet Varge's eyes, and then flung out nervously: "Curse it, why do you look at me like that! Don't look at me like that, I tell you!"

No muscle of Varge's face moved, save a slight contraction around the corners of his lips that gave an added sternness to the grim, set expression already there. When he spoke it was without raising his voice, and the quiet evenness of his tones might almost have been mistaken for nonchalance.

"You knew that after I left the hospital I was made a trusty and since then have been working here?"

"Yes," said Merton sullenly; "I knew it. Why?"

"You were here yesterday?"

"No."

"The day before?"

"Yes."

"The day before that?"

Merton hesitated—met Varge's eyes an instant—and the denial on his lips became an affirmative snarl.

"You have been coming then in the daytime when you thought I was away—otherwise, since I have been a trusty, your visits have been in the evenings—is that it?"

Merton made no answer.

"Get down from that seat and come here into the stall!" Varge ordered abruptly.

"What for?" demurred Merton.

"Because," said Varge curtly, "it will be just as well

for you if we are not seen from the house — and because I have something to say to you. Get down!”

For a moment Merton seemed to debate with himself; then, with a show of braggadocio, he swung out of the buggy and swaggered into the stall.

“Well?” he inquired, a hint of defiance in his tones, as Varge followed him.

Varge stepped close to him.

“How long have you been visiting Miss Rand?” he demanded bluntly.

“I don’t see that it is any of your business,” Merton responded surlily.

“Shall I help you to answer?” said Varge sternly. “Since that day when you came to see me in the penitentiary yonder — is that right?”

“Well,” snarled Merton; “supposing it is? What is it to you?” He broke into a sharp, nervous laugh. “You’re not jealous, are you? One would think you were in love with her yourself the way you —”

The sentence was never finished. The next instant Merton had crouched back against the side of the stall, his hands flung out as wards in front of him.

“No, no, Varge; I didn’t mean that,” he cried out. “I — I was only joking. Can’t you see I was only joking?”

Without a trace of colour in his face, white to the lips, his eyes blazing, Varge had closed the single step between them.

“You have dared to come here,” he said hoarsely. “You have dared to touch that pure life with yours, black to the soul with the guilt of hell! Answer me! How far has this thing gone?” His hand closed sud-

denly down with a crushing, vise-like grip on Merton's shoulder.

"Keep away," Merton grovelled. "Keep away — keep your hands off me with that ghastly strength of yours."

"Answer me!" — Varge's voice was ominously, deadly low. "How far has this thing gone?"

"I — I love her," mumbled Merton. "I — I told her so."

"And she?" — Varge's lips scarcely moved, as the words came tensely.

"She said she didn't love me" — the snarl was creeping back into Merton's voice, and an ugly look into his face.

Varge's hand dropped from the other's shoulder, and he stepped back.

"Thank God," he said, "she has been saved that hurt!"

"Is there anything else you want to know?" Merton burst out violently. "Anything else you can bully out of me because you hold something over my head? If there isn't, I'll go."

Varge looked at him for a long minute — and in that minute the months of prison horror rose before him, came again the scene of a murdered father, then the picture of Janet Rand in all her sweetness, her trust, her innocence, her fair young life — and a red mist swam before his eyes in which Merton's face seemed to assume ghoulish, distorted features, filling him with insensate fury, prompting him to crush out the treacherous, inhuman life as he would that of some foul, creeping thing. He turned suddenly away — he dared not trust himself

to look longer for the moment — he dared not trust himself to speak.

Merton edged out of the stall toward the buggy and started for the door.

Then Varge turned — sure of himself again.

"*Wait!*" he commanded curtly. "There is nothing else I want to ask you — but there is something that I have to say. When you leave here to-night, you leave here for the last time — do you understand?" He paused for an instant, holding Merton with his eyes. "You can write Miss Rand from Berley Falls that you are going away, or make any other excuse that you like to account for your visits ceasing abruptly — *but they are to cease.* That is all."

"And supposing I refuse?" — Merton's tones were ugly.

"Some one will be coming here to look for you in a minute," said Varge calmly. "I will put the horse up."

Stronger than any threat was the quiet assurance of Varge's irrelevant response, and for a moment, with working face, his hands opening and shutting at his sides, Merton stood there; then, with cowed, sullen, whispered words upon his lips, he turned and went out of the door.

## CHAPTER XVI

### A STRANGE MONITOR

**I**T was mid-June. A grateful breeze, tempering the hot afternoon, stirred the leaves and branches caressingly, eliciting from them in response, as though they voiced a friendly welcome, a low, whispering, musical rustle. Through the trees the sun played in flecked, shifting paths upon the lawn, weaving dotted patterns upon the soft, smooth, velvet sward. The vines, in full leaf now, covered the front of the house, the veranda, the porch, with a luxuriant mass of cool, inviting green; the flowers in their long beds, in bloom, blended their colours restfully against the darker background of the hedges. Like the glade of a little park it was, the warden's lawn, studded here and there with trees; while the quaint, old-fashioned house itself pecked shyly, with a charming, demure air of modesty, through the foliage of the giant willow at one corner of the veranda and a monarch elm at the other whose branches almost interlaced.

From the direction of the hedge that bordered the village street came the steady whir of a lawn-mower. And, in the hammock, swung under the shade of the elm, Janet Rand laid down her book, open at her place, across her lap, and, lying back, clasped her hands behind her head.

Reading that afternoon, somehow, did not seem to hold her attention — her mind kept wandering from the text. A little pucker gathered on her forehead and she

half-closed her eyes. That letter of Harold Merton's, more than a week old now though it was, kept obtruding itself insistently. It had come a few days after his last visit — a long letter begging her again, as he had done that day when they had trained the Virginia creeper together, and as he had done once more on that last evening after the drive, to go away for a little while at least, urging her to seek a change, new surroundings, new life, which he was sure would be of so much benefit to her. And he ended the letter by stating that business, a matter of importance, possibly entailing a long trip, forced him unexpectedly to leave Berley Falls that day — that he could not, therefore, give her any address then, but that a letter sent to Berley Falls would be forwarded.

She had not written. In a great measure it was a relief to her that he had gone. The frank, open friendship she had given him had never been the same since the day when he told her that he cared for her. He had kept his promise, it was true, and had not spoken again; but the knowledge of his feelings toward her, which she could never reciprocate, had brought a strained, unnatural note, on her side at least, into their subsequent companionship, imposing a restraint upon her lest she should unwittingly give him reason to believe that in time she might change toward him.

That last evening he had reverted again to the subject of her going away with what had seemed to her almost a strange eagerness and persistency. He had brought the warden into the discussion, converted him, and had almost persuaded him to pack her off instantly in spite of herself — and now her father had been urging it ever since.

The little pucker deepened into a quite serious frown. How nonsensical it all was! She was perfectly happy and contented where she was, and she had never felt the "narrowing influence of prison environment," as he had called it. Of course, that was all subterfuge — no; that was hardly fair. It was not subterfuge, for he evidently believed — though why she could not understand — that a change in her surroundings would effect a change in her feelings toward him. He was certainly sincere at least, and she could hardly be angry with him — for sincerity!

Her thoughts ran on.

How strange the circumstances of Harold Merton's coming had been — and how strange the after events and the present! The frown was gone, the pucker back again. Unconsciously her eyes had been following the grey-and-black striped convict form pushing the lawnmower to and fro across the grass — Varge. She opened her eyes wider now to watch him thoughtfully.

How tragically these two men — Harold Merton and Varge — were associated! One, the son of the murdered doctor; the other, convicted of that murder, serving out a life sentence for the crime. It seemed unnatural, unreal, imaginative, that both should have come almost into her daily life. Often she had been tempted to speak to Harold Merton about Varge; but, from a sense of delicacy that forbade the awakening of thoughts and scenes that must be painful to him, she had refrained. Once or twice he had spoken voluntarily of Varge — his attitude always the same — one of pity for the other's lot, forgiveness for the deed, and without bit-

terness. This had puzzled her in a curious way that she could not quite define. It was magnanimous, splendid of Harold Merton, but it did not seem to harmonise *perfectly* with his character — it was the attitude of a *big* man, big in every way — and Harold Merton could not be said to be that. In just what particular he failed, she could not tell — perhaps she was unjust; but her woman's sense told her that she was right, and that was a guide and mentor that had never failed her.

Her woman's sense! She smiled a little wistfully. Her woman's sense had told her another thing — that this great, strong figure she was watching now was innocent. But here there was something really tangible to support her intuition — and something, too, apart from Doctor Kreelmar's blunt, arbitrary, oft-repeated asseverations, and her father's concordance tacitly, rather than definitely, expressed. It was the man himself, his every look, his every act — the grave, fearless eyes that impelled faith and trust, the strong, brave face so full of power, the expression so indicative of clean, unsullied thought; his unflinching courtesy, his innate tact, his unobtrusive gratitude — he had shown her that so often, always seeming to understand and anticipate her wishes in so many different, simple, little ways about the garden.

What a pitiful tragedy it was! What was the mystery that lay behind it all, wrecking, ruining his life, condemning him to an existence, whose horror she was so well able to appreciate, that he bore so patiently and bravely? Oh, if he could only be made to speak, be shaken in that steadfast assertion of his guilt, she might do something! He had been so much in her mind and

thoughts of late and she wanted so much to help him — and she could do nothing.

Her eyes still followed him. It was a homely task upon which he was engaged, but it riveted her attention and her interest. There was something fascinating in the grace of movement, in the upright, virile figure, in the firm, steady, athletic stride, in the swing of the shoulders, the poise of the head — the face, the splendid, well-proportioned frame that seemed to stand out dominant, to rise above and be apart from the stigma of the black-and-grey striped suit that clothed him, to give almost a dignity to the hideous prison dress itself.

Oh, if she could only help him — in spite of himself! In the hours she had spent with him over the shrubs and trees and flowers, talking to him while he worked, she had come to know and understand him so well — in all but this one thing. How strong, how wonderfully strong he was — and yet his touch upon the tenderest shoot or most delicate flower was all care and gentleness. What was to be the end of it all? Would he go on, and the years go on; would young manhood pass and middle age come — and still find him there? Would the silver creep into the close-cropped hair — and still find him there — a convict? It was too bad, too wrong, too pitiful — the blue eyes filled suddenly — oh, if she could only do something, if he would only speak!

She watched him, troubled, a little longer, and then mechanically picked up her book — Stevenson's "St. Ives" — and, finding her place, began to read again.

Overhead, a gregarious community of sparrows angrily disputed the invasion of a blackbird into the branches of the elm, and flew hither and thither with

great commotion, making a fine pretence of threat and attack. Janet raised her eyes, looked at the petulant tribe for a moment, smiled, and went on with her reading, swinging her white sun-bonnet, which she held by the strings, gently to and fro over the side of the hammock.

Suddenly she sat quite still. A flush of colour tinged the white throat and mounted slowly to her cheeks. "*Place them in a hospital, put them in jail in yellow overalls, do what you will, young Jessamy finds young Jenny*" — she had come without warning upon the passage, and it startled her, frightened her as an abrupt, suggestive corollary to her own thoughts of a few moments before. And then came, quick, instantaneous, as though to complete her confusion, to put her to utter rout before she could recover her composure, those words of Harold Merton's that had angered her so that day in his wild pleading: "Your whole life, your thoughts, everything, are bound up with prison this and prison that . . . your love will have to find its place within those four walls."

Her face was crimson now, and she struggled impulsively from the hammock to her feet. Of course, it was not true — it was impossible. But why, oh, why, *why* should this thought have been thrust upon her to ring a jarring, disturbing note into her sympathy and interest for this man? It was not true — it was not true. Her eyes were on the ground — she wanted to raise them, to look across the lawn to where the whirl of the lawnmower went steadily on — to look there calmly, unemotionally, as an answer, a sort of defiant, incontrovertible denial to this mental indictment that was not hers, that

was forced upon her, as it were, by another self — and somehow her eyes refused to obey her will.

It disconcerted her the more, and, as the colour came and went from her cheeks, she stood there for a long time fighting for control of herself. Then, at last, the fair, gold-crowned head lifted slowly, and slowly the great, deep blue eyes were raised — only to find Varge's fixed upon her. But an instant their glances held; then, naturally, quietly, his was lowered to his work again — but in that instant it seemed to her as though, conscious of her thoughts, he had impelled her look, and, even at that distance, had read with those grave, serious eyes of his what was passing in her mind. Flushed, confused again, she turned abruptly, and mechanically picked up her sun-bonnet from where she had dropped it on the ground.

Her mind rushed into quick, impetuous, eager analysis, seeking a solution that would quiet the strange throbbing of her heart. Yes; Harold Merton had been right in saying that her life was too centred, too much bound up with prison atmosphere, that all her interests, all her thoughts were here. This had brought it home to her — she understood a little better, a little more clearly now what he meant. She had been so used to seeing men in convict garb around her, they had been so intimately a part of her environment since ever she could remember, that she had perhaps come unconsciously to accept them as she would accept the presence of any other men without the instant differentiation that one unaccustomed to such surroundings would have sensed and felt. And so it had doubtless been — it *must* have been — with Varge. She had accepted him solely as

his *personality* presented him, as — as any other man; and her belief in his innocence, her pity and sympathy had led her to think too often, too frequently of him — to dwell too much upon his case.

Her forehead pursed into honest little wrinkles. She *had* thought a great deal about him — that was why this — this thing had startled her so. Perhaps Harold Merton had been right, too, about her going away for a little while. A change for a time amongst other scenes and peoples, where prison life was known only in the abstract, and she would come back with her mind and views better adjusted to the relative values in the conditions existing around her here. Yes; that, perhaps, was the best thing to do — go away for a little while. Her father was anxious that she should; and her mother's people had written her so often to come. Yes — she decided, nodding her head — yes; she would go. She would write her aunt at once and —

Her eyes opened wide, full of sudden, quick attention. The whir of the lawn-mower had ceased abruptly. For an instant the stalwart form beside it seemed to stand perfectly motionless, rigid, strained, intent; then the handle dropped from his grasp; he turned, facing the corner of the grey prison wall, where through the trees she could just see the figure of the guard pacing back and forth upon its top — and his shout rang like a clarion through the quiet of the peaceful afternoon.

"Fire!"

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE FIRE

**T**HE flash and roar of the carbine from the wall, a wild shout from the guard answered Varge's cry; like echoes the alarm flashed around the circuit of the turrets, and the big bell in the central dome of the prison burst into tongue in clamouring, booming, guttural notes.

Varge was already halfway across the lawn. The graceful little figure — all in dainty, spotless white that afternoon — to whom his eyes had strayed so often from his work, still stood by the hammock, the trailing sun-bonnet in one hand, a book in the other, which now she clasped closely to her side in an attitude of startled bewilderment. The blue eyes, full of anxious wonder, were fixed on him as he approached.

"It's in the kitchen, I think," he said hurriedly, but in quiet tones, as he paused beside her. "I am afraid the fire must have got a good deal of headway before it showed itself. See!" A thin, yellow flame-tongue appeared for an instant over the peak of the roof, dissolved into a puff of blackish-grey smoke which, caught by the breeze, came curling toward them down the slanting roof between the dormer windows. "Martha?" he asked quickly. "Where is Martha?"

"She went to the village an hour ago," Janet answered. Her face had gone suddenly white, belying the brave steadiness of her voice. "Do you think that —"

"Please stay here till your father comes, Miss Rand,"

Varge interrupted, with a reassuring smile. "It will be only a moment. I will see if there is anything I can do."

He turned as he spoke, dashed around the corner of the house and raced on along the driveway to the rear. The sharp, biting, vicious crackle of flame came now with a low, ominous roar. It was the kitchen, low-roofed, one-story high, built out as a sort of adjunct to the house, as he had supposed, and the flames and smoke were bursting now from its windows. The fire must have been gaining grim headway for a long time within before it had flung out its challenge, and, with Martha away and that portion of the house hidden from the penitentiary walls by the barn and shade maples on the driveway, it was not strange that it had not attracted notice.

A rush of smoke drove him back from the kitchen door as he opened it — and mingled with the acrid odour of burning wood came the sharper, more pungent odour of burning oil. The breeze, sweeping through the door, whirled back the smoke and fanned a dancing layer of shimmering white upon the floor, that lapped greedily over and ran up the walls, into whiter, angrier fury. He shut the door again instantly to keep out the air current.

His resources were a bucket and the cistern — the latter twenty yards away at the side of the barn. He smiled grimly — as well a thimble to dip in a hand basin! The kitchen, at least, was already long past the hope that lay in buckets, though if there were only men enough it might —

A horse's hoofs thundered up the driveway and a rider flashed into sight around the corner. It was Kingman, the mounted patrol.

"Good Lord!" he yelled. "The whole place 'll go, it's —"

Varge leaped toward the other through a roll of black smoke that surged suddenly — coincident with the roar of an explosion, a can of superheated kerosene probably — across the space between them.

"Is there any fire apparatus in town?" he asked crisply.

"Yes," said Kingman. "There's a hand-tub in the —"

"Then get it — *quick!*"

It was not convict and guard — it was man to man — the one dominant, contained, self-possessed; the other flurried and excited — and without hesitation or question Kingman obeyed. He reared his horse to its hind legs, spun around like a top, and, low in the saddle, tore down the driveway toward the road.

Another glance Varge gave around him — the fire was showing through the kitchen roof and spreading across the shingles of the house itself in an ever widening path — then he ran back along the driveway.

A group of guards, the warden at their head, were just turning in from the road. He saw Janet Rand speed across the lawn to meet her father, and then all came on toward him, running at top speed. At the corner of the house Varge halted and waited for them to join him.

"I think, sir," he said quietly, as the warden came up, "that it would be a wise thing to get the furniture out of the house onto the lawn."

"Nonsense," panted the warden; "it can't be as bad as that; it hasn't had a long enough start to —"

"There is smoke in the front rooms now," Janet in-

terposed. "I saw it just a minute ago — it is coming along the hallway from the back."

"Guard Kingman has gone for the fire-tub, sir" — Varge spoke again, in quick, firm tones. "I do not know how long it will take to get it here, but if we had plenty of men we could form a bucket brigade and keep the roof wet down until we got a stream on it."

Warden Rand's eyes swept the roof for an instant; and then, as though to dispossess his mind of any idea of exaggeration on Varge's part, a swirl of smoke came down the driveway, a shower of sparks spurted upward, scattered, and settled, glowing, in a dozen spots on the shingles. He swung sharply upon one of the guards.

"Bring the good-conduct men over here with buckets, Laidley," he ordered tersely. "And bring them on the double! I'll have a closer look at this — the rest of you can start getting the things out of the house; it's as well to be on the safe side. And a ladder, Laidley" — he called after the guard. "Bring a ladder!"

"There is one in the barn that is long enough, sir," said Varge. "I'll have it up by the time the men are back."

Distant shouts and cries, growing ever nearer, sounded from the direction of the little village; the great prison bell still clamoured its alarm; along the road came scurrying women, some dragging children by the hand, some carrying a babe in arms, others talking, gesticulating, crying excitedly to one another; while, leading them, passing them, the younger element, boys and girls, came scrambling through the hedges and poured onto the lawn — and high now in air, ominously high, shot a wicked, lurid fang of flame.

From the barn Varge dragged out a ladder; and, as

the warden helped him to place it, a burst of cheers and yells went up from the front of the house.

Into the driveway they came, two long parallel files of them, like fast travelling snakes, their striped bodies wriggling this way and that, the right-angled turn from the road like a fold in the monster's tails. On they came, the convicts, thirty to the file, their white faces flushed now with their run from the prison gates, their eyes bright with eagerness and excitement; on they came, the tramp of their feet, the clatter of the swinging buckets sounding dominantly over the cries that hailed them.

Varge sprang upon the ladder and began to climb. They had placed it in the driveway, its top resting against the eaves at the peak of the roof. A clattering file swung by below him, heading for the cistern at the warden's direction. As Varge reached the top, others were already on the ladder behind him, following him up.

He pulled himself to the roof, and, straddling the peak, edged his way along past the chimney to a position near the centre. A dry, blighting breath swept his face; a cloud of smoke, full of eddying sparks, closed down upon him and left him for an instant choked and gasping — then it cleared away, leaving only the blazing patches of shingles around him and the airless, furnace heat of the solid flame from the kitchen roof and the rear side of the house itself, now in fierce conflagration.

A striped form took its place behind him on the roof, another and another, back to where the head and shoulders of a man standing on the ladder protruded over the eaves — then he lost the line until it appeared again close by the cistern's edge beside the conservatory. Below, on the other side, on the lawn, was a sea of upturned, star-

ing faces, women's and girls' and boys', that were constantly being augmented by others who were racing along the road to the fire — the men were still in the village; he could see a black knot of them down by the creek gathered around the little firehall.

Varge's eyes came back to the lawn. A detail of convicts had evidently been told off to do the work that the guards, who had arrived with the warden, had begun. Back and forth they went, some singly, carrying chairs and lighter articles, others in groups of two and three staggering under heavier pieces of furniture — all piling their loads well down the lawn out of reach of even the most ambitious sparks. And now, amongst them, directing them, he caught a glimpse of golden hair, a little form in fluttering white — she turned suddenly, looking upward, her face raised toward him — and then a heavy, curling wave of smoke engulfed him again and settled between them.

A cheer, more a stifled gurgle, echoed along the line behind him — a dripping bucket was thrust into his hand.

He raised himself to his feet now, bracing himself as best he could on the precarious footing, and shot the contents of the bucket over a glowing patch of shingle. The one chance was to keep the fire from creeping any further up the roof of the house than it had already come — and that chance looked slim enough — even with a stream from the fire-tub when it came, it seemed as though everything would go, for the fire, fed by the blazing kitchen, must already have worked its way into the lower rooms at the rear.

They came fast now, at barely half-minute intervals, the buckets — a full one pushed into his hand almost as

rapidly as he could place its contents most effectively without wasting one of the precious drops, and swing it back again empty to the man behind.

The minutes passed, five of them, but with each one the position on the roof had grown more and more untenable — they were choking, gasping for breath — the heat was blistering, scorching them, though they kept their faces turned away — the smoke, a continuous cloud now, settled upon them, dense, suffocating.

Faintly to Varge's ears came a roar of voices, then the beat of hoofs, a clatter and clang in the driveway below — the fire-tub had come. A minute more and he heard the sound of many running steps, the bump and rattle of a light vehicle — it was the two-wheeled hose cart, men straining at the long draw-ropes, flanking the two men at the end of the guiding-tongue. He could not see it, but he could picture it well enough — many a "muster" and "play-out" of Veteran Firemen he had seen in Berley Falls. Presently they would man the long brakes on either side of the fire-tub, twelve men to a side — it would have a name, of course, the fire-tub, like *Excelsior* or *Eureka* — and then *clang-clang-clank, clang-clang-clank* would go the brakes, up on one side, down on the other, then — he swept his hand quickly across his smarting eyes; he was dizzy and his mind seemed to be wavering. Strange that the other men did not feel —

A full bucket dropped from the nerveless hand of the man behind him, rolled splashing, ricocheting down the roof and plumped into the fire below.

In a flash, concentrating, gathering mental and physical faculties alike, Varge whirled around, his hand shot out and locked in the other's collar just as the man

pitched forward, head down, upon the slant of the roof. Varge dragged him back, supporting the limp figure with one hand while he reached for the next oncoming bucket with the other.

"Quick!" he shouted. "Water!"

It was three men behind, and it came with painful slowness—the man he held was but little further gone than those who still fought gamely on.

At last the bucket reached him, and he dashed the contents over the man's head and shoulders and into his face.

A shout came ringing up from below. It was the warden's voice, and he had evidently drawn his own conclusions from the tumbling bucket, or perhaps had seen what was happening through a lifting layer of smoke.

"Come down from the roof!" he ordered peremptorily. "Come down at once!"

"*Clang-clang-clank — spit!*"—a stream of water lashed the roof, broke and splattered like great tumbling drops of rain. The tub was at work.

The man, revived a little by the douche, moaned; but still hung inert on Varge's arm. The men close to the ladder began to back off the roof and descend; the one next to Varge and his charge edged a little nearer to help—he was shaky and weak, and Varge motioned him away.

"Get down yourself; it's all you'll be able to do," he said quickly. "I'll manage all right—send some fresh men to the top of the ladder to get this chap."

With a hoarse gasp of assent, the other moved away.

A moment Varge supported the semi-unconscious man

against his knee while he rapidly unlaced his boots, removed them, tied the strings together and slung them around his neck — his stockinged feet would cling where his boots would give him no chance at all. Then, as though it were a baby, he raised the other in his arms and began carefully to make his way along the peak of the roof.

Once, twice and again he slipped, recovered himself and went on. The smoke blew clear for an instant and left him outlined against space, a grim, gaunt figure, moving slowly on his 'perilous footing, his burden in his arms — and from below in a mad roar, bursting from the full hearts of men, came cheer on cheer. Varge heard it, attributed it to the fire-tub at last in play — and kept steadily, doggedly on. Like a fly crawling around a wall, his burden shifted to one arm and shoulder, leaving the other hand free to cling to the brick, he passed the chimney. A moment more, and the top of the ladder was gained. Here, others took the man from him; and then, putting on his boots again, Varge swung himself onto the rungs.

As he reached the ground, a hand fell upon his shoulder. He turned — and his eyes met Doctor Kreelmar's.

"Hum!" grunted the little doctor. "Come out here in front where you can get some fresh air into your lungs."

"I'm all right," said Varge, with a glance toward the barn where they were changing gangs on the fire-tub. "I —"

"You do what you're told," snapped the doctor, "or I'll see that you get a day of solitary — what? Now, march!"

With a smile at the gruff, big-hearted little man, Varge obeyed. The doctor led him along the driveway and onto the lawn to where the convict who had been overcome with the smoke was stretched out on the grass, and there made him sit down.

For a few minutes Varge lay back, his hands behind his head, inhaling deep breaths. Two convicts reeled out from the front door with a piece of furniture. They carried it to a spot near him, and he heard a guard order them to go back to the rear and help the men at the fire-tub — it was evidently too bad in the house now to continue further the work of salvage, even if there were any more to do — flame and smoke were bursting from one of the upper windows, the one by the big elm.

He sat up, and his eyes travelled slowly over the crowd upon the lawn — and back again over the little knots and groups, still slowly. Then, suddenly, he jumped to his feet, and his glance now was quick, searching, critical.

Close by him stood Martha, a heavy, stupid creature, to whose carelessness probably the fire owed its origin. She was alternately twisting her apron into a knot and unfolding it again, as she stared, wild-faced, at the house. Varge stepped toward her.

"Where is Miss Rand?" he demanded quickly.

Martha started — and the apron dropped from her hands. Then she shook her head.

"I don't know," she said. "I heard her say a little while ago there was something of her mother's in her room that she had forgotten, and that she was going to get it. I haven't seen her since and —"

"What's that?" interposed a voice sharply — and the

little doctor was between them. "She's gone in there? You let her go in there — h'm? — h'm? — h'm?" he jerked out. "My God, my God" — he turned and began to run for the veranda.

Varge's face was set and white as chiselled marble.

"Which is her room?" — Martha, terrified, was whimpering now, and he spoke quietly, laying a hand on her arm.

She pointed to the blazing dormer window by the elm — and burst into tears.

It was a hundred yards to the house from where Varge stood, and the doctor was already two-thirds of the way there — Varge's hands closed down on the other's shoulders, halting him, as he sprang up the steps onto the veranda.

"I will go," he said, with quiet finality.

"You will do nothing of the sort!" snorted the little man, stamping and wriggling to free himself. "You're not fit to go into that again and —"

"I will go," repeated Varge evenly.

For the fraction of a second their eyes met — then he pushed the doctor gently away from him, and sprang through the open door.

Smoke, a thin, hazy, wavering, light-grey veil of it, shut down around him and stabbed at his eyes. A single glance he gave into the dismantled rooms on either side of the hallway — then dashed for the stairs. Heavier, denser here, as though accepting his challenge, a gust of strangling fumes rushed down to meet him, and for an instant checked him, stopped him, drove him back a step.

He tore his jacket from his back, held it over his nose

and mouth—and leaped grimly forward. Above, angry red, a sheet of flame spurted across the head of the stairway—the upper rear of the house was a seething furnace—and somewhere, *somewhere* above him she—he moaned like a man in delirium, his head and lungs seemed to be bursting. He had not thought that the fire had gained such headway within—was he to be forced back, unable to gain the hall above that ran to the front of the house where she must be? Would he, after all, be forced back to make the attempt all over again by a ladder through the window on the side still untouched by the fire? He had thought of that in the first place, but where every second counted he had not dared to risk the time it would have taken to bring a ladder around from the rear. *Where every second counted*—as the thought seared again into his brain, his heart seemed to stop its beat.

“*Janet!*”—her name burst from his lips spontaneously in a fierce, anguished cry; and, as though it were the magic word that rent asunder the flood-gates of his soul, there surged upon him a mighty wave of passion—all that was primal, elemental in him rose in liberation as to some wild, stupendous revelry, full of exquisite torture, of infinite joy, and all of happiness, all of sorrow that a world of life could ever know.

The head of the stairs was impassable—across it, in a very wall *now*, was that fiery barrier. But there was another way. He was far enough up now, and he measured the distance to the top of the hall bannister with a quick glance, dropped his jacket—and sprang. There was a split, a crack of rending woodwork as his hands closed around and gripped the railing—eaten

into, weakened by the fire at the stairway head, it could not stand the strain—he felt it giving away, and with all his strength he flung his weight forward. For an instant he hung there in the balance; and then, with the bannister crashing down around him, he landed on hands and knees on the hall floor. He was on his feet in a second—something white through the smoke caught his eye ahead of him down the passage at the front of the house.

In another moment he had reached her and was on his knees beside her. Half across the threshold of a door she lay, motionless, unconscious, her face bloodless white, one hand out-flung, and tightly clasped in it a tiny ivory miniature—her mother's picture. She had rushed from her own room across the hall, probably, just as the fire burst through from the rear, had tried to make for the window of this other room where it was almost free from smoke, and had been overcome upon its threshold.

“Janet! Janet!”—his words were a strong man's sobs now, as he snatched her from the floor and lifted her in his arms.

The golden hair brushed his cheek. It thrilled him, whipped his veins into fiery streams, dominated him, overpowered him, mastered him. He knew now, knew for all time to come, forever more he knew—he loved her. He swept her closer, tighter to him; and then, with reverently lowered head, as he rushed forward toward the window, his lips pressed the fair, white brow in a long, lingering kiss—the hungry, hopeless, silent cry of his heart, his soul, his being. No; she was not dead. Presently he would give her back to her own

world in which he had no part, no place, in which he was an outcast, where between them would lie a gulf in length and breadth and depth unutterable, where no crossing was — but this one instant, snatched from all eternity, was his. That kiss, a symbol of the holiest, purest thing he had ever known, could never wrong her, never do her hurt.

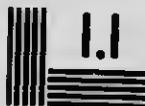
He reached the window and held her where the air would strike her face. They saw him from below — he heard them shout. Her gold-spun hair, loosened, lay in waving masses across his shoulder and his arm. He buried his face in it, touching it with his lips, as he stood there waiting. It was the one moment he was to have in all his life. Gently, tenderly he held her, his head bowed — it was this he was to look back upon, to dwell upon through all the years to come — *his* moment, that he should remember when he came to die.

They were coming now. He heard a ladder thump against the window sill. He raised his head — and upon the parched lips, the scorched face, came the old, brave, quiet smile, as he reached out and laid her in her father's arms.



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## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE ESCAPE

**T**HERE was no other way. Through the long blackness of that night, while the guards' steps, on their rounds, rang along the steel platforms, and the faint, low, indefinable medley of sounds from the sleeping prison seemed to whisper and murmur in stealth together, Varge lay upon his cot fighting out this new problem that had come to him. As a mathematician evolves some strange and abstruse calculation, checking and rechecking his steps to verify his solution and finding ever the same result, so to Varge, over and over again came inevitably the same conclusion. There was no other way — he must escape.

To stay there, to see her day by day, to touch her perhaps, to hear her voice, to have the awful, ironic hopelessness of it all thrust upon him with each look into that dear face that stirred his soul to the depths in an agony of yearning, was beyond his strength to bear. To be with her so and never to speak, to smother beneath a calm exterior a passion that rocked and swayed and dominated every faculty, every thought that was in him, was the path that led irrevocably to the day of madness, which, sooner than have come, he might better take his own life. She must never know — this hurt, to shock and frighten her, that would live in her life and bring sorrow to the tender, sensitive heart so full of human sympathy and love for others, must never

come to her. There was no other way. For his own sake, from torment that would sweep from him his reason; for her sake, that no blight might come upon the fresh, young, happy life — he must go.

And for that other thing, the crime upon his shoulders, Mrs. Merton's belief in his innocence — his going changed nothing — in her eyes, in the eyes of the law all remained the same. Strange that he should do what he had risked his life to prevent others from accomplishing? They were guilty men — he was innocent.

He would have liked to see her, just to have a single glimpse of her again before he went — his heart cried out for that. But he put the thought from him, he dared not yield to the temptation. He must go at once while his resolution was unshaken. It would be days, three or four of them Doctor Kreelmar had told him in an evening visit to his cell, before Janet would be out again. They had taken her to a neighbour's house where she would have every care. No; he must go at once — with the coming day — snatch at the first opportunity that he could make.

And so the night passed and morning came, and once more Varge walked from the prison gates to the warden's home and turned into the maple-shaded driveway by the lawn. A scene far different from that of the days before presented itself. The hedges, torn by the excited villagers, gaped with holes; the flower beds had been ruthlessly trampled upon; in the centre of the lawn were piles of furniture, tarpaulin covered, like strange biers — and everywhere the smell of charred timber vitiated the air. The house itself from the front, however, appeared little changed; within and at the back the

damage had been great—though not so great, he found as he walked around and viewed it, but that it could easily be rebuilt before the summer was at an end.

Disorder was everywhere about—the warden had told him to do what he could to “tidy” up.

Varge smiled a little grimly to himself as he set to work—keeping always where he could command a view of the road. This was to be his last day, or, rather, his last morning there, for he would wait until late on in the afternoon, as near to night-fall as he could. If he made the attempt now, he would be missed at noon, if not sooner, and there would be all the afternoon in which to scour the country for him; if he waited until it was nearly time to go back to the penitentiary for the night, he would be missed then almost immediately it was true, but over-weighing this was the fact that only a few hours then would intervene before darkness set in.

The morning hours dragged by. Villagers came and stared at the house; a gang of convicts, accompanied by guards and wagons, removed the furniture from the lawn to the cover of one of the prison sheds within the walls.

At noon, a little disturbed, Varge went back to the penitentiary and fell into lock-stepped file for the march to the dining-hall—Kingman, patrolling the road, had for the most part passed at fairly consistent intervals; but there had been two occasions, exceptions that caused Varge uneasiness now, when those intervals had been cut almost in half.

From the great stacked slices of bread—of which

each man was allowed to help himself without restriction as he filed by the sort of narrow pantryway where the bread was piled and the tins of food were laid out — Varge quietly took several pieces more than he was in the habit of doing; and by the time the meal was finished these were tucked inside his jacket.

Once outside the prison gates again, he hurried back to the warden's house, anxious to get there while the villagers were still at their noonday meals and before they would come around to gaze and over-run the place again as they had during the morning. To his satisfaction no one was in sight. He walked straight to the barn, stopped to glance with apparent unconcern about him, made sure that he was alone, then stepped inside and drew the sliding door shut behind him.

Janet had sent him one day to look for a pruning knife that had been mislaid somewhere, and in his search he had gone to the hay-loft, which now was used as a storage room for the house, and filled with old trunks, broken furniture and the usual garret accumulation. He had seen an old pair of trousers and a discarded coat of the warden's lying there.

He secured these now, undressed quickly, put on the trousers and drew the striped prison pair on over the others. Placing his store of bread in the pockets of the coat, he folded the garment, wrapped it around his body bandage-fashion and tied it there with a piece of thin rope, which he took from a small chest, or box, around which it had been corded; then he donned his prison jacket, and began to search hastily around the loft. A very dirty and ragged soft-felt hat rewarded his search. This he slipped inside his jacket, went out of the barn,

and calmly proceeded with his work from where he had left off in the morning.

It was as nearly five o'clock as he was able to judge the time by the sun, when he took his wheelbarrow, placed a spade, trowel, rake and hoe in it, went down the driveway to the road and stopped halfway along the outside edge of the hedge. Here, he unloaded his tools and began to busy himself with one of the holes that the children had made in the hedge the previous afternoon. Kingman was just coming up the road from the direction of the creek.

Varge, to all appearances oblivious of the other's approach, worked steadily on, his back turned to the road. Kingman rode slowly by. Varge turned a little now to watch him. Kingman passed the prison, kept on up the road, and presently disappeared from sight behind the rise of a little hill. The *average* time before he would reappear again coming back and be able to command a view of the road clear to the creek was ten minutes — *but twice that morning it had not been ten minutes* — well, that was the risk he had to take, it would only mean a dash for it at the end, and instant pursuit instead of an hour's start before he was missed.

Varge dropped the rake from his hand to the ground, deliberately wheeled the 'barrow onto the road and started with it toward the village. He swung along quickly, but without show of haste. It was the very audacity and simplicity of his plan that he counted on for success. They could not see him from the walls; true, it was unusual for a convict to walk down the road, but after the fire of yesterday a little of the unusual might be expected by those he met; everybody

knew him as the man who worked at the warden's place—and what more natural supposition, deduced from the bumping wheelbarrow, than that he had been sent, perhaps to the village store, for something too heavy, too unwieldy to carry by hand! There was Kingman—only Kingman—to fear.

If he could reach the creek, he would ask no more. The momentary view he had had from the roof of the house yesterday had furnished him with a mental map of the surrounding country—the bank of the creek from the left of the bridge ran flat and bare for a few hundred yards, then grew bush-lined, the bushes gradually blending into a large, heavily-wooded tract, where, he was almost sure, there was a sharp bend in the stream itself. To have attempted to reach the woods by cutting across the fields was to risk being seen, he could have no possible business there and the alarm would be given instantly—it was a very different thing to *invite* observation!

He was well down the road now. The houses were closer together on either hand—the homes of the guards, mostly. He went on unconcernedly—the few people he passed, as he had expected, paid little attention to him—he was too *obvious*. The large building on the bank of the creek at the left of the road—he was within a hundred yards of it now—he could see was the general store.

Suddenly he strained his ears to listen. Behind him, over the thump, thump, thump of the wheelbarrow, sounded horse's hoofs coming on at a sharp trot. He did not turn his head—there was no sound of *wheels*—it was Kingman. The average ten minutes that he

had hoped for was not to be his — Kingman, this time, could have ridden but a short distance over the rise of the hill before turning back.

Not a muscle of Varge's face moved; the slight lengthening of his stride was imperceptible. To run was certain capture — Kingman had seen him, of course, but Kingman was not yet suspicious, only *curious*; if he ran, it would be the signal for Kingman to break into a gallop, yell out a warning, and from the houses on either side would rush out the night guards, off duty now at their homes and probably up, and they would have him in a trap. Neither was there any turning back to make another attempt at a more favourable moment. Once the start had been made, it was inevitably a start to the finish — he had realised and accepted that from the beginning. Kingman evidently believed, so far, that some one, possibly the warden himself, had sent him to the village — the only excuse for his presence there that would avail — an excuse that, if he attempted it, would fall like dead leaves at the first investigation, with the result that he would be taken back, punished for attempted escape, and be kept thereafter strictly confined behind the prison walls.

With his ear he measured the distance of Kingman behind him, and with his eye the distance — fifty yards now — to the bridge. One thing in his favour he had noted ever since he started — the bed of the creek could not be seen by any one coming along the road.

Closer, louder, sharper pounded the hoofs. *Twenty yards to go!* Varge's eyes fixed on what was evidently a little path used by the children, and possibly their elders as well, to scramble up and down on from the road to the edge of the stream. *Ten yards!* It was

just at the corner of the store, too narrow for a horse, the store seemed built almost on the water's edge and the bridge railing came close — *now!*

He turned the wheelbarrow into the path, sacrificed a half second to give an air of leisurely nonchalance to his movements — and then, as the side of the building hid him from the road, he shot the wheelbarrow forward from his hands, leaped down the little declivity and ran like a deer along the bank for the bushes ahead. Kingman's natural course would be to ride onto the bridge to look over to discover what he could possibly be doing with a wheelbarrow on the bank of the creek — perhaps expecting to see him after a load of sand. By that time, when Kingman would catch sight of him and for the first time realise that it was an escape, he should be close to the bushes.

Once in the woods, and he would have a start again; it would take them time to organise a posse. With that start he should be able to elude them until dark. When the advantage would be his and —

Hoofs rattled on the wooden bridge. Varge was running with all his strength, sure, light-footed, speeding like the wind — the bushes, the trees, were growing nearer and nearer, almost at hand.

"*Halt!*" — hoarse-flung rang the command from the bridge.

Just a yard, half a yard, a *foot* still to make — the roar of a carbine echoed and reverberated up and down the little valley — a bullet drummed the air with a low, venomous whir close to his head, and clipped a shower of leaves from the branches — and the next instant Varge had plunged into the bushes and was hidden from sight.

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE ESCAPE (*Continued*)

VARGE swerved instantly to the right, flung himself flat on the ground and began to crawl.

"*Cr-rang! Cr-rang! Cr-rang!*"—the shots followed each other in quick succession from the bridge. Kingman was aiming at the spot where Varge had disappeared—and he was aiming *low*. The bullets hummed angrily, swishing a path through the leaves at the height of the small of a man's back, ending with a vicious "spat" as they found lodgment in the stouter limbs.

Still Varge crawled—every second, every instant counted; but, though now out of the line of fire, the foliage was still too thin—to rise and run was to mark his passage by a trail of swaying bushes, and offer himself for an almost sure and certain shot. A little further, just a little further on the bushes grew thicker—and then the woods.

Would Kingman follow him alone—or wait to gather a posse? The alarm, in the lower part of the village at least, was already given. Like a low, sullen murmur came the sound of many, many voices—then it welled, bursting into shouts and cries—and he could distinguish amongst them the high-pitched, falsetto notes of excited women.

Would Kingman follow him alone—and if he did? Just a few yards further on now and he would be deep

enough in to run again without fear of indicating his position to any one on the bridge or the village street.

*What was that!* Along the bank of the creek some one was running—a man—heavy-treaded. Varge rose to his feet, and, crouching low, bent almost double, began to run cautiously. A crash—the pursuer had plunged into the bushes where, not more than two minutes before, he himself had dashed for cover—there was the thrashing of branches—coming *closer*.

A sudden whiteness spread itself over Varge's grim, set face. He must get away, he must get away, he must get away—the words rang over and over again in his brain. There was more than life, more than years of grey-walled prison existence at stake—he must get away—at *any cost*. If Kingman—yes, that was Kingman coming now—if Kingman reached him! Whiter still grew Varge's face. Was he to chose between *that*—and Kingman!

He dared not straighten to his full height and trust to speed—Kingman could not be twenty yards from him—far too close a shot to risk. Kingman! A man stood between him and what was far more now than freedom. And Kingman was only doing his duty.

He could only run slowly—Kingman was coming at top speed, charging like a bull through the leaves and branches. He could hear the man's panting breath now—and by some grim trick of fate Kingman was heading directly toward him! Presently, others would come, a score of guards, but now it was only—Kingman. Another minute, half a minute, and Kingman would be upon him—a waving mass of tumbled hair seemed again to bathe his face in its rare fragrance, the gold-

crowned head to lay upon his shoulder, his lips to touch the pure, cold brow — he stopped suddenly, edged noiselessly a foot to one side — and waited.

An instant, barely that, and heaving, floundering, red-faced, carbine in hand, Kingman burst into sight not a yard away. There was a cry from Kingman, the carbine was half-lifted — and, in his prison clothes like some striped, hunted tiger at bay, Varge leaped. In a flash his hand had closed on the carbine and wrenched it from the other's grasp.

"Kingman," he said, in a low, deadly voice, "you know my strength. I have no wish to hurt you — *but I am going to get away*. Take your chance — go back."

A moment, Kingman's eyes met Varge's, faltered an eloquent appreciation of the desperate odds against him with his carbine gone, and the red ebbed from his face — then his jaw set hard.

"I *can't* go back," he said hoarsely. "You know that. I've got to get you — *like this*" — he hurled himself forward as he spoke.

It was a brave man's act, a brave man's words, fully sensed by Varge — but there was no choice — no choice. He sidestepped with a lightninglike movement, his left fist shot out and swung crashing upon the point of Kingman's jaw — and Kingman dropped like a felled ox. There had been no malice in the blow that had stunned the man and stopped the headlong rush — but it was a blow that had meant no other one should need to follow it — there was no time — no time.

The carbine was still clasped in Varge's right hand. He turned, and, resuming his doubled posture, ran on. It seemed like years since he had swerved into that little

path by the bridge and had begun his race for liberty — in reality, he knew that as a maximum it could not have been more than five minutes — probably much less.

The woods! He was in them now — at last. A gasp of relief, and he straightened up and swung again into his stride. The sounds from the village were a little fainter now — but now there was another sound, harsh, imperious, far-carrying, that on the still evening air would reach for miles around, a sound that none would misinterpret — the great bell in the central dome of the prison was sending out its warning in quick, furious clamour, each heavy, wavering note ending with a clash as another boomed out impatiently upon the echoes of the first.

He was on the edge of the creek again — it showed through the fringe of trees at his right. He had not been mistaken then — it made a sharp turn here. The carbine he was carrying was useless weight — under no circumstances could he have any need of it — not even as a last resort. It had already served its purpose. They would find Kingman, find the carbine gone, know that he, Varge, was armed and believe him desperate enough to use the weapon — they would, consequently, be a little more cautious, perhaps a little less *enthusiastic* in their chase. A whimsical smile flickered across the compressed lips. He must not destroy any such illusion by allowing them to find the weapon discarded. He stooped at the water's edge, and without splash or noise slid the carbine beneath the muddy current.

For an instant he debated with himself whether to cross here or not — and, deciding against it, ran on again. The other bank was not so heavily wooded at

this point, and it might still be visible from the bridge — women and children would have flocked there to the bridge — it would be crowded with them now — they would be watching, eagerly, intently, the place where first he and then Kingman had disappeared from sight. Hebron was having enough excitement to enable it to lay by a store for the coming winter that would supply an inexhaustible fund of gossip — in two days, a fire and a man hunt!

Again the whimsical smile touched his lips, and crept now to the clear, steady eyes. The rigid tenseness of his features relaxed and gave place to a quiet, composed, yet alert expression. He was comparatively safe now. For miles around the country was wooded and hilly — it would take a small army to scour it effectually. The search of the twenty or thirty men, that would be as large a force as could be mustered, must be haphazard at best — unless they caught sight of him. Even now, probably, they had little hope of getting him — *that way*. They would search undoubtedly until dark — and then go back to wait and let the telegraph do the rest. Peniless, in prison garb, the odds were very greatly against the man who made a dash for freedom. Hunger would drive him to beg for food, his clothes would instantly betray him — and the scent would be picked up again. Where the telegraph reached, there was his description — and there, too, were men eager to pounce upon him.

On Varge ran, tirelessly, swiftly, dodging the lower branches, circling the trunks, keeping his path as nearly parallel as possible with the creek. Against the telegraph and his description — he had three slices of bread and a change of clothing, and the night should mean

twenty miles to him at least. After that — well, after that would be to-morrow, and to-morrow's problems were its own.

A half-hour passed. He stopped, leaning against a tree trunk to listen, wiping the trickling drops of perspiration from his face with his jacket sleeve. Softened, mellowed, the boom of the bell still came to him; that, and the evening breeze whispering through the tree-tops, the gurgle of water from the creek upon whose bank he stood — there was no other sound.

He unbuttoned his jacket — the warden's coat was hot and cumbrous around his body. He started to untie the cord that held the garment in place, with the idea of changing his clothes — and knotted it back into place again. Not yet, not while he was still within the zone of immediate pursuit where, if he were seen, he would be recognised — until dark he must trust wholly to speed. They must believe that he had no other clothing than his prison stripes; otherwise, the change would lose almost all the value it possessed. In time they would know that he must have got rid of his tell-tale garb — but it was to-morrow, the next day, the first few days that counted so vitally — and for that length of time they might well believe him to be hiding in the woods, even if far away from the penitentiary walls.

And now he listened attentively again, then parted the branches and looked up and down the narrow creek. Here the opposite bank was densely bush-lined, and, beyond, the land rose in undulating, hilly sweeps, covered with woods as far as the eye could reach. He must have made a good three miles from the village —

he remembered the dark, tree-topped stretch of country in this direction that he had glimpsed from the roof of the house the day before.

A moment more he stood silent, every faculty alert, looking, listening; then he whipped off his boots, rolled his two pairs of trousers to the knees and waded quickly across the shallow stream—to run for hours in wet boots, all too heavy as they were already, that would chafe and blister his feet, was a handicap compared to which the loss of time required to make the change counted little. He reached the other side, put on his boots, and, taking a course directly away from the creek now, went on again.

The wondrous strength seemed never to flag. On Varge ran, every muscle of his body co-ordinating with its fellows, every movement eloquent of tremendous power in reserve upon which as yet he had had no need to call; always the same splendid stride, light, elastic, sure; always the same easy, perfect breathing.

Twilight began to fall and the shadows in the woods to deepen and strengthen; and then, gradually, his pace slackened as he became obliged to pick his way more carefully. All about him was silence—long ago the clamour of the bell had ceased to reach his ears. He had come now perhaps a matter of four miles from where he had crossed the creek and taken a course at right angles to the one he had pursued when paralleling the stream, in all he must have covered some seven or eight miles; but he could hardly be much more than five miles in a direct line from the penitentiary. Well that, to all intents and purposes, was as good as ten, for in another half-hour now it would be dark and

wherever else the pursuit might have led it had failed to follow the direction he had taken. At least until daylight came he was safe.

He stopped suddenly. The woods seemed to open out ahead of him as into a clearing of some sort. He listened a moment, and then went cautiously forward again — to find that it was a road. He halted at the edge of the woods, assured himself that the road was deserted, prepared to start across it — and abruptly drew back a few feet into the shadow of the trees. To his right, the road ran straight through the woods and he could see along it for quite a distance; but just at his left it was hidden by a turn, and from this latter direction there came the sound of horse's hoofs and the rattle of wheels.

There might be time to cross the road before the approaching team came around the bend, but it was foolhardy to take even a chance of being seen. Varge sat down on the ground, leaned his back against a tree and waited for the team to pass. Quite close to the edge of the road, he could see out with little difficulty and he kept his eyes fastened on the turn.

The clatter of hoofs, the crunch of wheels drew nearer, a horse came into view — and then Varge was on his feet. Through a tangle of wild raspberry bushes at the side of the road a dog rushed at him, yelping and barking madly. The team stopped instantly, and a man, leaping from the buggy, came running forward.

"Down, Briggs! You confounded imp of Satan, down!" shouted a voice.

A foot from Varge, fore paws wide apart, his head straight out on a level with his back, quivering with

excitement to the tip of his shaggy tail, the Irish setter obeyed so far as to drop into a low and prolonged growl — but now Varge leaned coolly back against the tree — he had recognised the man.

Another instant and Doctor Kreelmar, puffing and blowing from his short run, had reached the spot.

“Ha!” exclaimed the little doctor fiercely. “So I’ve got you, have I! I had a suspicion that was what Briggs was after, so I lost no time in following him. Now then, sir, march to that buggy and get in! Quick now! No shillyshallying about it — back you go to the penitentiary!”

Varge’s only movement was to shake his head.

“I think not,” he said calmly.

“What!” snapped the little man ferociously. “You refuse — you resist!”

Varge smiled at him quietly.

“Yes,” he said.

“Hum!” said Doctor Kreelmar. He pulled out his handkerchief and mopped his face unnecessarily. “Hum!” he repeated. “Refuse, eh? — consarned fool if you didn’t! You could make a mouthful of me — I’ve done all I could — a great load off my conscience — hum! Briggs, keep a civil tongue in your head — we’re in the hands of the host of the Midianites and you’re no Gideon! Well, sir, you’ve caused a pretty uproar over yonder, a pretty uproar! About the only person who hasn’t something to say is Kingman — and he can’t because I’ve got his jaw in a sling.”

“Kingman, yes,” said Varge quickly. “I hope —”

“I looked for a compound fracture at least, when I heard you’d hit him,” said Doctor Kreelmar, in a lu-

dicrously injured tone. "But, pshaw, I could tap a man as hard as that myself! Heart wasn't in it, eh? That's it, eh — what?"

Briggs, with a glance at his master as though to confirm his own conclusions, was sniffing now at Varge in more friendly fashion, and suddenly put up his paw. Varge, stooping to pat the glossy brown head, made no answer to the doctor.

"Hum!" said Doctor Kreelmar. "So you made a break for it at last. I've been kind of expecting you to do it. I've an idea it's what I would be tempted to do myself if I were an innocent man shut up in there."

Varge pulled at the silky ears and rubbed the dog's muzzle.

"I said if I were an *innocent* man!" rapped out the choleric little fellow, promptly irascible at failing to draw Varge out.

"I heard you," said Varge, without lifting his head. "I haven't that justification—I am not an innocent man."

"Then I hope they catch you!" announced Doctor Kreelmar, with sudden calmness and equanimity. "If you're guilty, I hope to the Lord they catch you, 'pon my soul I do! And they will," he continued complacently. "They always do. There's been four breaks since I've been at the prison and they nabbed every one of the four. All four of 'em headed north for the Canadian line, trying to make Canucks out of themselves. Fool thing to do, damned fool thing to do—that's the first place they're looked for. If a man is looking for a ghost of a chance to make his escape, why doesn't he hit south, keep away from the big places and, most

dangerous of all, the small towns where one man is the chief of police and the whole force rolled into one—blamed officious and inquisitive that man is generally; then keep under cover by day, travel by night, and never go near anything bigger than a hamlet or a farm-house till the worst of the hue and cry has died down? He could strike the coast, work around, say to Gloucester where there are all kinds of chances of shipping on a fishing smack that would keep him out of the world on the Grand Banks for a few months, and when he got back no one would know him. But do any of 'em do that? Not much! They head for Canada—and they get caught." Doctor Kreelmar resorted to his handkerchief quite as unnecessarily as before, and quite as unnecessarily mopped his face.

Varge raised his head and for a long minute the eyes of the two men held each other's. It was Doctor Kreelmar who broke the silence.

"Well, I've got to be jogging along," he said. "Patient sent for me out this way more'n an hour ago. A man breaking out of penitentiary has got pretty considerable hard digging ahead of him, and even if he goes south he doesn't stand much more show than a hen in a tornado unless he's got some money." Doctor Kreelmar puckered up his face into a wry grimace, dove his hand into his pocket and brought out a roll of bills. "I'm a prison official," said he, "and I guess I'm breaking my oath and suborning duty and acting generally like a blame fool, but then most of us act according to the lights we're supplied with—hum! I guess I wouldn't have much of any hesitation in turning this over to an *innocent* man—what?"

A lump rose suddenly in Varge's throat — the doctor seemed to waver before him through the mist in his eyes. He could only shake his head.

"Well, it doesn't matter," said the doctor, a little wistfully, "only I'd like to have heard you say it; as it is, I reckon I'll have to keep on trusting to those lights of mine. Take the money, Varge, and — and — oh, well — confound it! — take it!" — he thrust the bills suddenly between the buttons of Varge's jacket.

"I don't know what I can say to you," said Varge huskily, "except what I said once before — God bless you. I'll keep the money for I shall need it badly enough — when I can, I'll send it back to you." He held out his hand. "Good-bye."

Doctor Kreelmar eyed the outstretched hand dubiously.

"I shook hands with you once before," he snapped gruffly, "and I haven't forgotten it."

"That was when I was dying," said Varge, smiling through wet eyes.

"Hum!" said the little man. "So it was. Well, I'll risk it."

He caught Varge's hand, wrung it hard in both his own — then turned and walked quickly to the road.

Varge watched him clamber into the buggy and pick up the reins.

"Gidap!" clucked the little doctor to his horse.

## CHAPTER XX

### DOCTOR KREELMAR'S "DREAM"

**I**T was late evening, in one of the small frame cottages, the home of one of the guard's, where Janet had been taken after the fire. A tall glass lamp, with a paper shade of many colours, stood on the red plush cloth of the parlour table. In one corner of the room was the organ; rockers and stiff wooden arm-chairs, each with its spotless white tidy, were ranged with military precision at strategic points upon the blue-and-white wool carpet; on the walls hung the crayon family portraits, interspersed with framed, coloured prints of Washington and the battles of Lexington and Bunker Hill.

On the horse-hair sofa, with its back of severe and uncompromising design, Janet Rand was busy with some needlework. She raised her head suddenly as the door-bell rang.

"You had better go, dad," she said. "Mrs. Woods has gone to bed, and it is probably for us anyway at this hour."

Warden Rand glanced at his watch.

"Why, it's already after ten!" he said in surprise. "I had no idea it was so late. It's time you were in bed, too." He laid his paper on the table, got up, and went out into the little hallway.

Listening, Janet heard the door opened, and as she caught the sound of a voice, rose quickly to her feet.

"Come in, doctor," she called brightly. "Come in."

"Comin'! Comin', young lady!" grunted the little man, appearing in the doorway. "Hum!"—he halted before her. "Going to leave us in the morning, eh? I came in to say good-bye. All the fol-de-rols and fiddle-de-dees and frill-de-rums packed up, eh?"

"What's left of them, doctor," she laughed. "But they all smell so frightfully of smoke that I don't expect any one to come near me for the rest of the summer. Yes; I am going in the morning."

"And there goes the sunlight out of Hebron," sighed the doctor dolorously, puckering up his face. "Same old story—lose your heart to some young scoundrel down there in Maine, that's what'll happen. Lord, if I were only thirty—hum-m—say, twenty years younger now!"

"Well," said Janet merrily, "you've some responsibility yourself to shoulder. You advised my going."

"Professionally, professionally," qualified the doctor; "and that's a very different thing, mind you." He plumped himself into a chair, as Janet resumed her place on the sofa and the warden, laughing, went back to his seat by the table. "How long are you going to let her stay, Rand?" he demanded.

"Well, I don't know," the warden smiled. "Long enough to miss her, though I intend to run down there myself for a few days later on if I can get away. I suppose she will stay until I can get the house habitable. I wouldn't want to impose on Mrs. Woods again—we've about turned her out of house and home as it is."

"Mrs. Woods is a fine woman, a fine woman—heart of gold—splendid wife—Woods is a lucky man,"

jerked out the doctor, a quaint mingling of despotic assertion and lingering resignation in his tones.

"I am sure there must be other women with — with hearts of gold," prodded Janet naïvely.

"So there are, so there are," retorted the little doctor quickly; "but they're all too young — or else they're married, and their husbands are confoundedly healthy!" He shook his finger at Janet, chuckled, and then edged his elbows interestedly forward on the arms of his chair. "By the way," he asked suddenly, "what's become of that chap Merton? I haven't seen him for quite a while. I should have thought he'd have been around after the fire, he must have heard of it — everybody's heard of it this side of Jordan, as near as I can make it out."

"Why," said Janet, "I thought I had told you. He has gone away and —"

"By Jove!" interposed the warden. "That reminds me. He was back to-day."

"Back?" inquired Janet, turning quickly to her father.

"Not here — over in Berley Falls," said the warden. "He telephoned me this afternoon. I forgot to speak of it. He asked after you and about the fire, and said he was exceedingly sorry he wouldn't have time to run over, but that he was only in Berley Falls for the afternoon. He has given up law, it seems, and is travelling for some business house — he said there was more money in it. His mother is very poorly, he said, and that is what brought him up here."

"Oh, I am so sorry!" said Janet, with quick sympathy. "What is the matter with Mrs. Merton? Did he say?"

"No; not exactly," replied the warden. "But I judged it was more a general breakdown than anything else. He appeared to be quite concerned about her."

"Hum!" remarked Doctor Kreelmar uncompromisingly. "Did he ask after Varge?"

"No; not that I remember," the warden answered. "No; I don't think he did."

"Knows he's got away, of course?" snapped the little doctor.

"I'm sure I don't know," said the warden. "Probably — if he reads the papers. Why?"

"Why, why?" echoed the tempestuous little man sharply. "God bless my soul, Rand, things have come to a pretty pass if a man has to have a reason for everything he says! I don't know why. Varge has been gone five days now, and perhaps I was wondering if we could count on Merton's prayers along with ours to make it fifty — years."

"Ours?" — the warden repeated the word mechanically. He had glanced down, and his fingers were beating a nervous, rustling little tattoo on the newspaper.

"Yes — *ours!*" said Doctor Kreelmar; biting off the word belligerently. "Janet's and mine, and most of all — yours. Duty's a high-flown, ennobling sort of word, but it's got the dangdest set of prickles hanging around it — worse'n a bunch of thistles. What's the punishment for a lifer that breaks prison? Can't keep *him* on a few extra years after he's dead, can you? But he has to be punished, doesn't he — in some other way. 'And what's he get, eh, what's he get? — you ought to know. Nice kettle of fish it would be, you putting the screws onto the man we've got to thank for this young

lady's life here. I guess you've been holding your own end up on the prayers, Rand."

"Dad — what is it?" — Janet, watching her father intently, had risen suddenly from the sofa and come to the table.

A grave, serious, troubled look had spread over the genial, hearty features, as Warden Rand had raised his eyes and fixed them on the doctor. He turned now and patted the hand that Janet laid on his shoulder.

"Nothing, dear — nothing," he said. "I was thinking that Doctor Kreelmar was — right."

She shook her head reprovingly.

"You mustn't try to equivocate with me, dad," she said quietly. "I understand you too well for that, you know. Something has happened in reference to Varge. I can see it in your face. What is it?"

Doctor Kreelmar hitched forward a little in his chair, and squinted at the warden.

"State superintendent getting a trifle ahead of the Fourth with his fireworks? Kind of riled up over the escape, eh?"

"No," said the warden, shaking his head. "He's not making any fuss about it."

"Dad," insisted Janet, "you know it is perfectly useless to try and hide anything — I shall only keep on coaxing until I get it out of you. So now — what is it?"

Warden Rand regarded her soberly for a moment.

"Yes; I suppose you will," he said, with a grave, tolerant smile. "I hadn't meant you to know until after you came back. Kreelmar, here, has kind of stirred up something that I've been trying not to think about." He

looked down at the paper again, and with a sudden, impulsive movement pushed it away from him. "Varge has been caught," he said abruptly.

"Oh, *dad!*"—it was a quick, hurt little cry from Janet, as she stared at her father.

"Eh? What? Caught!" gasped the little doctor helplessly. He fumbled for his handkerchief, and after two vain efforts to get it out of his pocket finally jerked it forth savagely and began to mop at his face. "Caught, caught, caught!" he snapped out. "Now, how in he—hum'm'm—how in *thunder* did that happen?"

"As it generally happens sooner or later," said the warden monotonously. He got up from his chair and began to pace the room. "They think they're safe once they're out of sight of the walls and a guard's uniform. I'll admit that personally, not officially, it would have been a relief to me if Varge, once he *had* started, had shown more sense. They caught him this morning across the border. I sent Willets up to identify him and bring him back."

"Caught him—*where?*" inquired the little doctor, and the operations with the handkerchief ceased abruptly.

"Across the Canadian line," said the warden.

"Hum!" said the little man, settling comfortably back in his chair again.

Janet crossed the room impulsively to her father's side.

"Oh, dad," she burst out, her voice quivering, "I wish with all my heart he had got away. He shouldn't be here anyway—I'm sure of that. And it's true, as

Doctor Kreelmar says, that he saved my life. What *will* you do? Will you have to—to punish him as other men have been punished when they were brought back? Dad, dear”—pleadingly, as the warden with a set face turned suddenly away—“I know I am making it harder for you, and that you have your duty to do, but—but isn't there—can't what he has done be made to count in his favour?”

“I don't know—yes, dear; we'll see,” said the warden, with a worried look.

“Fuss and feathers!” announced the little doctor, suddenly screwing around in his chair to eye them both. “Fuss and feathers!” he sniffed.

Janet stared at him, surprised and hurt. The warden frowned, and took a step toward him.

“What do you mean by that, Kreelmar?” he questioned irritably. “A moment ago you took pains to explain what you called the nice kettle of fish I would be in if Varge were caught, and now—”

“So I did, so I did!” asserted the doctor tartly. “And I do yet—but you'd better wait till you get Varge, what?”

“Didn't I just tell you that we've got him?” said the warden querulously.

“How do you know you have?” inquired Doctor Kreelmar, crossing his legs with exasperating deliberation.

“How do I know!” ejaculated the warden. “Why, they wired that they had him and the description tallied with Varge's.”

“Never heard of a police description that wouldn't fit at least a hundred men,” asserted Doctor Kreelmar

composedly. "A dozen stray hoboes all around the country get free board and lodging every time there's one sent out. I'll bet you a cookie — I'll bet you *two* cookies they haven't got Varge."

Warden Rand eyed the doctor for a moment impatiently.

"You veer around like a weather-cock," he said gruffly. "There is no doubt in my mind but that it is Varge."

... "Oh, well," said the doctor airily, "of course, if you've made up your mind, why —"

"I have," said the warden crisply.

"Yes," said the little doctor thoughtfully; "seems as if you had — and you don't like the prospect. Makes me think of a man I knew once just after I'd graduated and was on the hospital staff. He was scared stiff he was going to have cancer. All his people had had it on both sides of the house. He used to come around to the hospital regular as clockwork every week for an examination to see if it had developed, and meantimes he must have gone through a ton of drugs as a preventative. He died while I was house surgeon there."

"Well?" inquired the warden tersely.

"He was run over by a railroad train," said the little man complacently.

For an instant the warden scowled, then he laughed; but, as he sat down at the table again and leaned across it toward Doctor Kreelmar, a puzzled frown crept back to his forehead.

"Look here, Kreelmar," he insisted brusquely, "what makes you so sure this isn't Varge all of a sudden?"

"Nothin'; nothin' in the world," said Doctor Kreel-

mar, clipping off his words. "But I'd hate like Sam Hill to think it was, and there's been enough mistakes made in similar cases, when you come to think of them, to stir up the perky feeling I'm hankering for, so I'm indulging it—guess that's about all there is to it."

With a grunt, that embodied both tolerant contempt and a sense of disappointment, Warden Rand picked up his pipe from the table and began to pack the dottle down into the bowl with agitated jabs of his forefinger.

Doctor Kreelmar watched the process for a moment with quizzical contentment; then he looked over at Janet, and his face puckered suddenly. He began to hum under his breath, beating time with his fingers on the arm of his chair. She had gone back to the sofa, picked up her work and was toying with it listlessly, distraught and thoughtful.

"Hum!" said the little man abruptly. "Convalescents who have to get up very early in the morning with a journey ahead of them should be in bed." He turned to the warden, who since the fire had been sleeping in the penitentiary office. "I've got to see that typhoid case at the prison, Rand; and I'll walk up with you, if you're ready to go."

Warden Rand got up from his chair. "Yes," he said. "All right. Yes; I suppose you should be in bed, Janet." He crossed to her and kissed her. "Good-night, dear"—he pinched her cheek tenderly. "This mustn't spoil my little girl's sleep, you know."

"I'll try not to let it," she answered. "Good-night, dad." Then, holding out her hand to Doctor Kreelmar: "Good-night and good-bye, doctor. You'll look after dad while I'm away, won't you?" she smiled.

"Hum!" said Doctor Kreelmar, in his most medical tones. "I've just a few words of advice for you, professional of course, before you go." He looked toward the warden. "Start along, Rand; I'll catch up with you in a minute. Now, young lady, you are going away for a complete change and rest to build yourself up and"—he glanced over his shoulder—Warden Rand was disappearing through the door into the hallway—"and"—the professional tones vanished like magic, and his voice bubbled up like an excited boy's—"don't you worry that little head of yours one minute over what we've been talking about. The man they've caught isn't Varge."

She looked at him startled, gave a little gasp and caught his arm.

"How do you know?" she asked breathlessly.

"Tut, tut," said he. "Can a woman keep a secret?"

"Yes; oh, yes!" she cried eagerly.

"Hum!" he commented dubiously, cocking his head comically to one side.

"Doctor—what is it?"—she shook his arm feverishly.

"Well," he said, "I had a dream."

"A dream?"—her face fell.

"Yes," he said. "I dreamed that Varge—*had gone the other way.*" His hand held hers for an instant, then, with a little chuckle, he bade her good-bye and started quickly toward the door.

"Doctor!" she called peremptorily. "Doctor—"

But the front door had already closed behind him.

For a moment Janet stood staring at the doorway, then mechanically she walked to the chair her father

had occupied, sat down and rested her elbows on the table, her chin in her hands.

"The man they've caught isn't Varge, the man they've caught isn't Varge"—the phrase repeated itself over and over in her mind. There was no mistaking that last look of Doctor Kreelmar's—Doctor Kreelmar *knew*. How? Had he seen Varge? Where? When? What did it mean?

A flush of colour mounted to her cheeks—relief, gladness, almost incredible in its intensity, possessed her—"the man they've caught isn't Varge, the man they've caught isn't Varge"—the phrase seemed to cling as a priceless thought. The splendid figure in all its wondrous strength, its vigour of fine, young manhood, in all its simple, unaffected heroism, the same heroism that intuitively she knew had led him to accept the hideous prison stripes, the living death, rose before her, sharp-outlined in every detail as she had seen him through the lifting layers of smoke, making his perilous way along the peak of the burning house, carrying another to life and safety—as afterward, at far greater risk to himself, he had won his way to *her*, and carried *her* to life and safety.

It seemed so long ago since that afternoon when she had decided to go away—she was still going away, it was true, but for another reason—her health, because the house was burnt and there was really no place in the village for her to stay—there was no need to go for anything else now—Varge had gone himself. It was only a few days back to that afternoon, but it seemed a long, long time since that passage in the book had come so suddenly to startle and frighten her, and

when in panic she had tried to drive it, and the thoughts it conjured up, from her. The flush upon her cheek grew deeper — why was it that these thoughts, though they had come again unbidden, did not terrify her now? Was it because Varge was gone, because their lives were as utterly apart now as though one or both were dead, because she would never see him again; or was it that these last few days in which so much had happened, in which even her life was owed to his courage, his bravery, his strength, had wrought a change in her that was to be for all the years to come — a change that brought this strange new gladness, and this pain that was full of yearning, full of sadness? Was it — *that*? Had she come — to *care*?

She lifted her head from her hands, the red sweeping in waves over her neck and cheeks, a wild beating of her heart that would not still — the room seemed to swim before her eyes. For a long time she sat there rigidly; then her chin fell slowly to her hands again.

It was very late that night when the light in Mrs. Woods' little parlour went out.

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE OLD "BANKER"

**V**ARGE had headed steadily south — always south. What better plan could he have adopted than that so naively suggested by the doctor — to make Gloucester and ship on a fishing smack for the Grand Banks? He would be away for months, out of touch with the world and safe from pursuit; he would be earning something the while, and on his return — well, the time to think of that had not yet come.

Night after night he had left the miles behind him. The prison suit had long since disappeared — well hidden in the hollow trunk of a fallen tree close to the spot where Doctor Kreelmar had met him. Little by little, in the general stores of the small hamlets, an article at a time, he had supplied himself with the necessities that he lacked. The tell-tale underclothing, with its "777" stamped glaringly, indelibly upon it, was discarded; his coat was no longer buttoned tightly around a bare throat, for he now had collar, shirt and tie; the heavy prison boots were replaced by those of less ostentatious manufacture; the warden's battered soft-felt hat by one of like design but of more respectability. He would have bought new clothes as well, but, though his money was sufficient for the purpose, he had not dared to drain too heavily upon his slender capital — and after all, if old, the clothes had not yet reached that stage of shabbiness or indecency that would provoke suspicion or distrust,

The same general stores too, but more often the farm houses, had supplied him with food. Few questions had been asked him — the money in his pocket had proved a passport that had made his way one of almost ridiculous ease. Yet still he had preserved always the utmost caution, hiding by day, travelling never but by night, making wide detours to avoid the larger towns and more thickly settled districts.

And so the journey had been made — and now, very early one morning, two weeks since his escape, he came out upon a road close to the beach on the outskirts of Gloucester. He stood for a while gazing at the blue sweep of sea; then his eyes fell contemplatively upon his more immediate surroundings.

Near him was a small shack built almost on the sand itself; a dory was pulled up beyond the tide line; and spread out on the beach was a black, tarred net, over which a twisted little old man was assiduously engaged. The man's back was turned, and Varge watched him for a moment speculatively. He had little idea where the fishing fleet was to be found; nor, indeed, in an intimate way, anything about it. In common with every one, he had heard of the Gloucester fishermen — but that was the extent of his knowledge. Inquiries he would have to make, and this appealed to him as a favourable opportunity — he had no wish to be in evidence in the city itself any more than was absolutely necessary.

His mind made up to accost the old fisherman, Varge stepped quickly across the sand.

"Good-morning," he said pleasantly, halting a yard from the other.

The back of the black jersey, darned here and there

in spots with brown yarn, remained presented imperturbable to Varge.

"Good-morning," Varge repeated, raising his voice, and stepping nearer.

The old fisherman turned his head slowly and squinted at Varge.

"Haow?" He jabbed a gnarled forefinger at his ear. "I be a mite deaf."

Varge promptly sat down on the sand, drew up his legs, clasped his hands around his knees — and smiled into the crimped surface of bronzed wrinkles that made the other's face. He liked the puckered little nest of lines at the corners of the old fellow's eyes, and the lurking twinkle in the blue depths of the eyes themselves under the shaggy grey brows.

Varge's smile was contagious.

"Fine mornin'! Fine mornin'!" said the old man, in a high, piping voice; then in cautious amendment: "But I dunno but what we'll have wind. Kind o' looks to me as though we would. 'Baout due naou — allus got the rheumatiz in my knee 'fore a down-easter."

Varge nodded gravely in agreement. The sky and sea were a glorious blue; the sun just creeping over the world's edge kissed the tops of the long, smooth rollers, transforming them into undulating, gleaming streaks of burnished gold. Not a speck, not a cloud showed clear to the horizon rim. Again Varge nodded gravely; then:

"I saw you working down here on the beach," he said. "I'm a stranger here, and I thought perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me a few things I want to know."

"Lord!" said the old fellow simply. "I don't mind. What might it be you want to know?"

"Well, principally, where the fishing fleet is," replied Varge.

The old fellow wriggled his hand into his trousers' pocket, brought out a plug of tobacco, eyed the horizon meditatively, bit generously into the plug, wrestled with it till his teeth met, restored it to his pocket, gazed contemptively again at the horizon, and finally spat profoundly.

"That's a purty tall question," he drawled. "Takin' everything into consideration, weather we've had an' usual conditions, I'd say mabbe they was on the Banquereau, or I dunno but what as mabbe the Saint Pierre."

"Where's that?" asked Varge.

The old fisherman waved his arm with an expansive gesture oceanwards.

"Guess you're kind o' new 'raound these parts, ain't you?" he remarked, his eyes twinkling at Varge. "Them two is twc o' the fishin' banks. There's a hull string of 'em — West'rn, Banquereau, Saint Pierre, Green an' the Grand, an' they gen'rally fishes the hull lot on the v'yage, less they get all their salt wet 'fore they strike the Virgin, which don't happen more'n once in a hundred years — takes a hull heap o' fish to wet all the salt, quintals an' quintals of 'em — old Banker I be myself."

Varge was kicking in the sand with the toe of his boot — the other's words had come to him with a shock.

"You mean," he said slowly, "that they've left here?"

"Why, tee-hee," tittered the old fellow, "you didn't expect to find 'em *here*, did you? But then I dunno as you didn't, kind o' looks as though you did. Weeks ago

they left — 'twon't be more'n another three months naow 'fore they'll be comin' back. What might be your in-est in 'em?"

"Well," said Varge frankly, "I wanted to make a trip on one of the boats."

"Did you naow!" ejaculated the old fellow, screwing up his eyes and regarding Varge critically. "Well, they sometimes takes 'em for a consideration, but you don't look nohow run down. What would it be naow — lungs?"

"Oh, no," said Varge smiling. "I believe my lungs are sound enough — sound enough so that I counted on working my way."

The mender of nets shook his head judicially.

"Mostly," said he, "they starts in as boys, 'baout ten or there'baouts, an' by 'baout the time they're thinkin' o' gettin' married they get to be some handy aboard."

Varge's eyes shifted from the old fisherman and fixed on a sail where, the sun striking full upon it, it lay glistening white far out over the water. A keen sense of disappointment was upon him. He had never questioned the feasibility of the plan — he had imagined that the coming and going of the schooners was a matter of almost daily occurrence.

The old fisherman put an added damper upon his hopes.

"Know anything 'baout slittin' or packin' or, most of all, doryin'?" he inquired, his jaws wagging busily upon his tobacco.

"No," admitted Varge, a little dully; "I'm afraid I don't."

There was a long silence. Varge, still gazing seaward, could feel the other studying him intently.

"Kind o' real sot on it, weren't you?" volunteered the old fisherman, nodding his head sympathetically.

Varge turned now and faced the other again.

"Yes," he said; "I was. I was very anxious to go. Are you sure there aren't any schooners that haven't gone yet?"

"No," said the other, scratching thoughtfully behind his ear, "no; I dunno of any as ain't gone, 'cept inabbe —tee-hee," — he tittered suddenly and very softly — "'cept mabbe Jonah Sully, though I wouldn't advise you on no accounts to go along with him, though I reckon he'd take you, allus purvided you didn't rile him up at first sight."

"Who is Jonah Sully?" asked Varge quickly.

"Jonah Sully o' the *Mary K. Jones!*" — the old fisherman's jaws forgot to work for a moment; then he slapped his thigh a resounding whack. "Lord bless us!" he ejaculated. "Didn't know as there was any one hadn't heerd o' Jonah! Sailed out o' here, man an' boy, these forty year — never knew such a man for everlastin' hard luck. Took 'em a long time 'fore they got 'raound to callin' him Jonah regular — a matter o' twenty-five year — wanted to give him a chance to lose it overboard 'fore they branded him with it solemn; but 'twarn't no use, so fin'ly it come to it an' Jonah says himself there ain't no use callin' things other'n they be. Never see such gol-dinged luck cling to any man. Broke his leg fallin' down the hatch first time he went to sea. That started it, an' it's kept up ever since with one thing or another. Schooner he had 'fore the *Mary*

*K. Jones* was cut clean in two on the Banks by a liner in a fog. Never've known him to make a v'yage something didn't happen—either he'd come back with his flag half-mast, showin' one or more o' the crew had gone, or else he'd had a plaguey poor catch, or else something had gone wrong with the schooner an' he'd come limp'in' in under jury rig."

"That's strange," said Varge, leaning forward interestedly. "I mean it's strange that luck like that would stick to a man so consistently."

"Well, 'tis an' 'tisin't," submitted the old salt reflectively. "I've an idee a hull lot of it lays to the fact that he thinks slow. *Jonah's* a powerful slow thinker. By the time he gets 'raound to makin' up his mind, there's a mite less call to make it up 'cause things have kind o' taken their own course without any interference from him—tee-hee."

Varge laughed outright—the old fellow's chuckle was genuine; it seemed to start from the soles of the heavy sea-boots and work its way along upward till it set the ocean of furrows in the bronzed face to rippling and tumbling over one another.

"And how is it he didn't sail this time when the others did?" Varge questioned.

"Pendyceetus," said the old fellow. "Went down to Boston more'n six weeks ago to have it cut out. Bein' *Jonah*, they had to do it twice, an' it kept him there longer'n it would most folks. I heerd he calc'lated to get off with the ebb tide this mornin' to pick up what he could get, rather'n lose the hull season."

"And you think he would take me?" queried Varge quietly.

"Lord, I dunno! I should think he would. Luck's an awful big thing in the eyes o' the Bankers. Jonah, he's gen'rally scramblin' 'raound for a crew — an' with 'em all away naow he's probably scramblin' harder than ever. 'Tain't everybody hankers to sail with Jonah. Can't keep a wife on a poor catch, to say nothin' o' what else might happen. Yes; I dunno but what he'd take you — but, mind you, I ain't recommendin' it an' I wouldn't want none o' the responsibility — wouldn't go myself, by jinks, not if he gave me the *Mary K. Jones!*"

"Where will I find him?" asked Varge, rising. "I think I'll risk it if he will take me — and if he is sailing this morning I guess I had better hurry along."

"Why, you'll find him fast enough down to Varley's fish wharf — any one 'll show you the place."

Varge held out his hand.

"I'm more than obliged to you," he said gratefully.

"Thanks very much indeed."

"Ain't no thanks called for," said the old fellow, shaking Varge's hand up and down like a pump handle.

"Glad to have met you. Just foller that road there right along till you get into the town."

"Thanks," said Varge heartily. "Good-bye."

He crossed the beach, reached the road, started along it, then stopped suddenly and turned, as the other shouted after him.

"Hi, young fellow! Hi!"

"Yes?" Varge answered.

The old fisherman was scratching earnestly at his head, and conscientious worry was written large on the crinkled face.

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"I ain't takin' no responsibility 'count o' Jonah Sully!" he piped shrilly.

Varge waved his hand.

"All right," he called back, laughing — and went on again.

## CHAPTER XXII

### THE MAN WHO THOUGHT SLOW

AS the old fisherman had said, Varge had no difficulty in finding Varley's wharf. He passed by the large storehouse that faced it on the shore, though he heard a number of men moving within, and went out along the wharf toward where, at the extreme end, a schooner was moored—her rail, with the high tide, riding well above the string-piece.

Across the boat's stern Varge read her name: *Mary K. Jones of Gloucester*. She was a black-hulled little craft of perhaps seventy tons. To Varge, she appeared very dirty and in great confusion, except for the pile of nested dories that fitted neatly into one another just abaft the mainmast. Barrels were about the decks and the hold was open. She smelt very strongly of fish.

Varge walked her length, inspecting her curiously and with interest. He had seen no one about her, but now as he stood near the bow a woolly head and a coal-black face appeared suddenly from the forecastle hatchway.

"Is Captain Sully here?" Varge asked.

The negro regarded him for a moment with an amiable grin.

"I done reckon youall means Jonah," he responded. "Yassir, dat's what I done reckon — an' dar he am now comin' along de w'arf wrastlin' wif a barr'l bigger'n he is."

Varge looked in the direction indicated. A short, very small man, whiskered, dressed in trousers and

heavy blue jersey, with an old black sou'wester tilted back off his forehead far enough to show up a shiny bald spot and disclose the fact that most of his hair grew upon his chin, was laboriously rolling a cask along the uneven timbers of the wharf.

Varge turned to speak to the negro again, but the latter had ducked down into the forecastle and disappeared.

Bumping along came the cask, Jonah Sully supplying the motive power now with his foot and now with his hands; occasionally, he tilted the sou'wester a little further back and flirited his sleeve across a wet brow. As the other drew nearer Varge saw that his face, what showed of it apart from the beard, was white as from illness — the skin, though thick and toughened, lacked the bronzed, ruddy hue of recent exposure.

A plank ran up from the wharf to the schooner's rail. With a grunt, the little man kicked the cask around at right angles to its former course, jolted it with some exertion onto the end of the plank, and started to roll it upwards. He succeeded to the extent of a foot — then he sat down suddenly, and the cask toppled off the plank, landing on the wharf with a scrunch that tried the temper of its staves.

Varge stepped quickly forward, placed the cask on the plank again, rolled it up to the rail, and then, jumping to the deck, reached up and lifted the cask down after him. By the time this was done and Varge was standing on the wharf again, Jonah Sully was picking himself up and yelling at him.

"Heh, there! Heh, there! Don't drop that there cask on the deck; you'll stove a hole in the plankin'!" he screamed anxiously. "Rastus 'll help you."

For an instant Varge stared in astonishment, then he laughed — the old fisherman's diagnosis was evidently not very far wrong.

"What you laughin' at?" demanded the skipper of the *Mary K. Jones*; then: "Oh, you got it done, eh? Reckoned I could roll it fur's the rail, but that all-fired pencyceetus has took it out of me considerable. I'm much obleeged" — and before Varge could get a chance to say anything, Captain Sully had hopped from the rail to the deck and vanished into the cabin, or "house."

Varge's laugh died, and though humour still lingered in his expression, perplexity played the greater part. He was dealing with men and conditions that were entirely new and foreign to him, and it was like groping a little in the dark. The only thing that stood out quite clearly, that he had determined and decided upon, was that when the *Mary K. Jones* sailed he would sail with her.

A procession of three men, each rolling a cask, now appeared from the storehouse coming along the wharf toward the schooner — the balance of the crew, Varge decided in his own mind. Each was dressed much after the fashion of Jonah Sully, but they were quite a polyglot three. They talked and laughed as they came along. A young giant in physique, with blue eyes and straw-coloured hair, a mop of it, was evidently a Swede; the short, dark-visaged one, with red woollen cap, was unmistakably French; while the nasal twang of the third, an elderly man, quite like the old fisherman in face though still straight and sturdy of form, stamped him instantly beyond peradventure of doubt as a native New Englander.

They rolled their casks up the plank, and helped each other down with them to the deck—their united and earnest demands for 'Rastus eliciting no other response than the brief appearance of that coloured gentleman's head in the fore-castle hatchway, who announced piquantly:

"Yah! You lazy debbils, you done do yoh own work—I'se otherwise engaged, I is. Yah!"—and ducked out of sight again.

They hurled a battery of intimate and uncomplimentary remarks at him, and started back along the wharf again. The Swede was a little behind the others, and Varge spoke to him.

"How long before you sail?" he inquired.

The China-blue eyes regarded Varge with the ingenuous stare of a child.

"Ban go with tide," he said gravely, moving on after the others. "Ban go 'bout one hour, Ay tank."

Varge followed him shorewards along the wharf with his eyes, and then turned suddenly as Jonah Sully popped hurriedly and with evident excitement from the "house."

"Well, I swan!" exclaimed the skipper, crossing the deck to the rail. "Knew there was something ought-er'd struck me!" He stretched out his arm, pointing his finger at Varge. "You, there, young fellow! Well, I vum! I wouldn't have thought it!"

"Thought what?" said Varge in surprise.

"What?" echoed the skipper excitedly. "Why, jumpin' jerooshey, that there cask! Put it down on the deck all by yourself like it wasn't any heavier than a baby, didn't ye? Must have weighed three hundred an'

I dunno but four hundred pounds. Well, I swan! Say, what's your name?"

The whimsical smile that had spread over Varge's face gave place to a sober and earnest expression.

"Peters," he said quietly.

"Peters?" — the skipper repeated the name slowly. "Ain't of the Peterses from down Mascoit way, be you?"

"No," said Varge, quite seriously.

"Well," said Jonah Sully profoundly, "of course, there's lots of Peterses. Had an aunt married into 'em down there. Thought mabbe you might be one of 'em. What might you be doin' 'raound here?"

"Why," said Varge, smiling quickly at the other, "I came down this morning to ask you if you wouldn't ship me for the trip?"

"Haow?" — the skipper tilted his sou-wester very far back and rubbed the flat of his hand caressingly backward and forward over his bald head. "Ship on the *Mary K.*?"

"Yes," said Varge.

"You don't look much as if you knew much 'baout sich things," observed Jonah Sully critically, "even if I be a hand short."

"I don't," admitted Varge. "But I can make myself handy, and you haven't got to pay me anything but what you find I'm worth."

"Yes," said the skipper confidentially to his whiskers, "ought to make himself handy, that's a fact. Pesky strong he is."

"You'll take me, then?" asked Varge.

"Well, I dunno, I dunno," said Jonah Sully mus-

ingly. "You hang 'raound a spell an' I'll think it over."

The "spell" dragged on to half an hour, from that to an hour, and became an hour and a half. The casks were lowered and stowed in the hold; the decks took on more semblance of order; the mainsail, with many a protesting creak, was hoisted; a little knot of people, some women amongst them, assembled to say good-bye — and Jonah Sully was still "thinkin' it over."

Varge, as he saw that the final preparations for getting under way were being made, moved quietly to the extreme end of the wharf by the schooner's bows. When the *Mary K. Jones* sailed he would sail with her. As she moved out and the stern cleared the end of the wharf where he had taken his position, he would jump for it, that was all there was to it — they would have some difficulty in putting him ashore again!

There was a sudden shouting of good-byes from the little crowd; the moorings were cast off, and, fended along, the schooner began to slip past the wharf. Jonah Sully was at the wheel — he looked vacantly at Varge as the stern went by.

A foot, two, four — six feet of clear water lay between the schooner's stern and the end of the wharf — and then, with a leap, Varge landed on the vessel's deck.

Jonah Sully screwed around his head, lifted one hand from the spokes of the wheel, tilted back his sou'wester, tilted it forward again, and then pulled thoughtfully at his beard.

"I reckon," said the skipper of the *Mary K. Jones*, "that mabbe if you're serious 'baout comin'. I dunno as I've got any objections."

## CHAPTER XXIII

### "MY NAME IS PETERS"

**T**HE old fisherman's barometer — his knee — proved itself. That afternoon it was breezing in fitful, nasty gusts; by evening it was blowing half a gale. That night the sun set on an angry sea, and the *Mary K. Jones* was making heavy weather of it.

By midnight a merciless North Atlantic hurricane was raging, and the schooner, close-reefed, head into it, pounded and battered, was laying-to, fighting to ride out the storm — and it was an anxious little group in glistening yellow oilskins that gathered by the wheel and in the scanty lee of the "house." What talking they did and it was little, was done in fierce shouts against the roar of the wind that caught up the words and flung them away like flying chaff.

All about it was inky black — save for the great foam-crested billows, churning white, that surged chaotically in mad, wild revel on every hand. A crash of thunder boomed and rolled and reverberated and, muttering ominously, died away in a shuddering, long-drawn-out moan; a great forked tongue of jagged lightning, rending the heavens, illuminated the scene, and for a brief instant made awesome daylight on the clean-swept deck of the heaving, labouring little craft — the dories were gone; loose gear, water cask, everything movable had disappeared.

'At the wheel were Jonah Sully and the Frenchman;

clustered together by the cabin roof were the negro, the Swede, the Gloucester man and Varge.

"I'se done knowed it. I'se done knowed it," sobbed 'Rastus hysterically. "Just Jonah's luck—I'se done know—"

"Shet up!" screeched the Gloucester man at him; then, in a yell that carried high above the battling elements: "Hold fast! Hold fast! Hyar she comes! Hold—"

Over the bows, far, far up, showed a queer wavering white streak, topping a gigantic, on-rushing wall of utter blackness. A moment it seemed to hang in awful hesitancy—then the tumbling tons of water crashed over the bows, shaking the schooner as a terrier shakes a rat, and, burying the deck, came on roaring, seething, hissing high above the rails, engulfing them.

With all his strength Varge clung to the corner of the "house"—he was torn from his hold in an instant. He felt himself lifted, rolled over and over, then flung against something with a vicious shock—mechanically his hands shot out, gripped again, and, smothered, choked, half-stunned by the blow he hung grimly on.

It was not so bad now—the impact, the dead weight of water with its terrific velocity behind it was gone, but there was the suction of the receding water that still dragged and pulled at him as if to wrench his arms from their sockets. He got his head above the water. A wild, tearing, ripping sound was in his ears—then a crack, short and sharp as the report of an explosion. Above him a great misty white phantom seemed to dance and totter and wave its arms and shriek madly—then it seemed to blow away—while, crunching the forward

starboard rail like an eggshell, grinding it to pieces as it fell, the foremast went by the board — and forward was a smother of whipping headsails and wrecked gear.

It had seemed an age since the wave had swept them, but it could not have been much more than a minute, two at the most. Suddenly, he was jerked entirely free of the water as the schooner plunged again head down — and he realised for the first time that he had been swept completely over the stern rail and was still clinging to it, his body hanging down against the vessel's hull.

The plunge that lifted him freed the stern deck temporarily of water. He pulled himself up, clambered over the rail, and his feet, staggering upon the deck, touched something soft and yielding. He stooped and felt it — it was a limp, inert, oilskinned form. He lifted the man in his arms.

A flash of lightning played luridly across the sky. Varge glanced quickly toward the wheel — *there was no wheel*. Then his eyes, full of startled agony, swept about him — and rested on the face against his shoulder. The Frenchman, the Swede, the negro, the Gloucester man were gone — and only the senseless form of Jonah Sully remained.

An instant Varge stood there motionless — and in that instant, as though Nature herself were stunned and appalled at the ghastly tragedy she had enacted, there came a momentary lull, and the hush was as a solemn benediction for the dead.

But an instant, too, it lasted — and then upon the doomed craft the storm broke again with redoubled fury.

And now, even to Varge's inexperienced eye, it was

evident enough that the schooner was lost. With every lift and motion the wreckage forward thrashed and flogged at deck and hull; while, without helm and the headsails gone, she slewed sickeningly around and fell off into the trough of the sea.

He called to Jonah Sully, shouting in the man's ear — there was no answer. Then quickly he laid the skipper down in the shelter of the "house," passed the end of a piece of tackle that was trailing from the cabin roof beneath the other's armpits, and made it fast. There was a sheath-knife in Jonah's belt — Varge snatched it and clawed his way forward.

The *Mary K. Jones*, broadside on, the mainsail drawing, was listing at an angle that threatened every instant to roll her bottom side up. A crest broke, curled, bubbled, foamed, rose to Varge's waist when he was half-way across the deck — and shot him back. His feet brought up against the lee rail and, flung flat on his face, the water surged over him. He got to his knees, and this time crawled across the deck, reached the main-sheet and began to hack at it with his knife.

The schooner rose from the trough, up, up, toward another crest — up, up, almost to the top — then it broke with a roar. The deck canted under him at right angles, but this time, though his feet were taken from under him, he had the main-sheet to cling to and he had made good his hold. He rose, the water streaming from him, and hacked and cut at the tough hemp again.

Suddenly it parted with a report like a pistol shot, and like a monster flail the boom swung far out over the lee rail and brought up with a terrific thud against the stays — but instantly the schooner seemed to feel the relief

— she rode more buoyantly, on a more even keel, and the next crest passed beneath her.

Encouraged by this, Varge began to edge his way forward toward the wreckage of the foremast — making quick dashes as the schooner topped a wave and began to slide down into the black, yawning valley; crouching and bracing himself as she mounted upward, nearing the next on-coming crest.

He reached the forecastle and once more began to ply his knife. The foremast, like a broken limb sagging from a tree, stretched outboard over the schooner's side, but the end, held by a tangle of sail and rigging, pounding and thrashing, was making havoc of rail and deck.

In the utter darkness Varge worked on by the sense of touch, cutting, hewing, hacking — at times thrown upon his face to gasp and choke as a swirl of water passed over him; at times working with more speed and success as the lightning glare lit up the heavens, the wild, turbulent waste of sea and his immediate surroundings.

It went at last, the mast, carrying with it a section of the rail — smashed once, twice, once more against the schooner's hull with crunching, wicked blows — then swept away on the top of a wave and cleared the stern. Varge gathered up some pieces of rope and made his way aft again to the lee of the "house." Jonah Sully still lay there, but now he moved feebly and moaned as Varge bent over him. Varge lifted the skipper into a sitting posture, passed the lashings more securely around the other's body, fastened them about himself as well, and sat down upon the deck, his back to the "house."

He bent his head suddenly close to the other's mouth

— the skipper, partially conscious, was talking to himself.

"'Long 'baout dark," mumbled Jonah Sully, "I reckon it'd been better if I'd thought to run for the lee o' —" his voice trailed off.

Varge straightened up, and a smile, grim, without mirth, was on his lips as he stared out before him into the white-flecked darkness — "Jonah" Sully!

An hour passed and another — and found them both in the same position, Jonah Sully in Varge's arms. What man could do, Varge had done; the slight knowledge of seamanship that he possessed he had utilised to the utmost — there remained nothing but to await — the end.

Hope he had long since given up, in the sense that he was prepared, calmly and fearlessly, to meet the death that seemed inevitable. Little by little, he had realised that the lift of the schooner had grown more sluggish, until now the deck was almost constantly awash and only the little rise by the cabin roof saved them from the worst of it. Either the wrecked foremast had done its work before he had been able to get rid of it, or the strain and fearful buffeting had opened the schooner's seams — the *Mary K. Jones* was filling slowly, but none the less certainly. It was but a matter of hours at best, perhaps but a matter of minutes before she must go down.

Well, better that than a life dragged out in drear hopelessness behind steel bars and clanging doors and grey, mocking walls — far better to die like this than face that living death again, if only — if only she knew!

Out through the darkness the tumbling walls of water

seemed to vanish before his straining eyes, and there was cool green sward and she was walking toward him. How plainly he saw her! — the sun glinting upon the golden hair, the glorious head so fearlessly thrown back, the joy of living in the peerless face, the pure white throat, the neat trim figure in the dark-blue print dress with its collar and cuffs of spotless white. She seemed to smile at him with her eyes, her lips. Involuntarily, he stretched out his arms.

"Janet! Janet!" he cried.

His arms dropped — he bowed his head.

His lips moved again: "Oh, the might have been!" — it was the yearning of his soul wrung from him in words.

After a moment he raised his head. This love had come to him and it was a wondrous thing, a holy thing — and it was deathless, basic. His now, it must dominate him, sway him, be the motive power, the impelling force of his every act, his every thought; to live on through the years without her would be to live through bitter years, each succeeding one harder to bear than the one before it — and his she could never be. Perhaps this was the better way — God's way. But if she only knew! She would think of him sometimes — he knew that. He would have liked to have her think of him as an honest man, an innocent man, to whom her sympathy and kindness had been a boon immeasurable — that her thoughts, from the knowledge of happiness brought to another, might bring her a measure of gladness too. She had believed him innocent, she had said — but if she only *knew!* If he might only have had the right to have told her that with his own lips!

Beside him, Jonah Sully seemed to have sunk into a stupor. Still more sluggishly the schooner rose to meet the onslaught of the waves, rolling heavily, inertly. A great length of time passed that was counted by neither hours nor minutes nor seconds.

Chilled, numbed, Varge roused himself and listened. Over the howling of the wind, the surge of waters, the thud and pound and hiss as wave-tops licked greedily at the deck, came a new sound — a long, continuous, sullen, mighty, deep-toned roar — the beat of surf.

He struggled to his feet. A leaden grey was showing in the east and before him loomed out of the darkness a darker fringe — the shore. And as he looked, suddenly, from this fringe there seemed to stream heavenward with incredible swiftness a tiny streak of light. A cry, hoarse-flung, came from his lips, as a dozen little balls burst into coloured fire. A rocket! The schooner had been seen from the shore — by the coast-guard, probably.

And now a white, strangely troubled patch of water seemed to rise up just before him — then a shock hurled him to his knees. The schooner rose, hung hesitant an instant, then dropped again with a grinding, crashing blow that shook her in every timber — she was fast on a reef — and the shore was a quarter of a mile away.

High over her now broke the seas, like ravening wolves sure at last of their prey — the lashings around him, supporting Jonah Sully in his arms, Varge's eyes fixed shoreward through the smother of spume and the sheets of flying spray. How long would the schooner hold together?

Slowly it grew lighter, slowly the eastern grey spread

and crept higher. Still Varge's eyes held shoreward. A dark speck showed on the foaming crest of a wave — and disappeared. It showed again — nearer — nearer.

A hoarse cheer went up from a dozen throats. Grotesque figures in oilskins with cork belts tied around their bodies were bobbing up and down, now above, now below him, as the lifeboat rose and fell.

He swung Jonah Sully out to them, poised himself on the rail — and at their shout, dropped into the boat.

"Any more?" — they had passed him along to the stern-sheets, and it was a bearded, grizzled form at the tiller that howled the question in his ear.

Varge shook his head. "There are no more," he said.

Once more only during the passage shorewards did the lifeboat's captain speak to him.

"What's her name, an' your names?" he asked.

"How many of the crew gone?"

"*Mary K. Jones of Gloucester*," Varge answered him.

"This is Captain Sully. My name is Peters. Four of the crew were washed overboard a little after midnight."

They lifted Jonah Sully and carried him up the beach. A throng of men and women crowded about the crew, the boat and Varge — the men cheering, the women anxious-faced.

Quietly, Varge drew a little to one side, watching them place the lifeboat on its truck. Some one spoke to him, a woman's voice — and mad, wild fire leaped through his veins.

"I am sure you should not stand here," she said.

"You need dry things at once and something hot — to — to —"

They were staring into each other's faces—to hers rushed a crimson flood—to his there came the whiteness of death.

Neither spoke. Then Varge looked away.

"I have told them my name was Peters," he said simply—and waited.

Her hand touched his arm. The blue eyes looked full into his.

"Your name is Peters," said Janet Rand.

A hearty smack fell across his back.

"Come along with us, matey," cried the captain of the crew, "an' we'll have you tucked up in a jiffy snug as a bug in a rug."

## CHAPTER XXIV

### ON THE BRINK

**A**RE our lives mapped out for us, pre-ordained from the beginning, as most of us at times secretly believe — as many frankly aver to be their only creed? With Varge all things seemed to be set at naught, passed beyond control or effort of his, and it was as though fate plucked at his elbow and, when he turned, chuckled ironically in his face. He had done everything within his power, for her sake and his own, to escape from the consequences of this love that had come to him, and every step he had taken in the belief that it was leading them to lives utterly apart had, instead, been bringing them irrevocably nearer — until it had literally flung him from the sea upon the beach of this little fishing village on the coast of Maine, where, as though by the touch of some magician's hand, the image in his soul, embodied, full of glorious, throbbing, pulsing life, had risen up before him.

Was it a higher power than his, immutable of purpose, that had brought this to pass — was it *meant* that after all — but why dream, why torture himself like that? If temporarily a free man, the gulf between them was no less impassable than it had ever been; and even granting that it were, there still remained — herself. What thoughts of him, save those actuated by pity and her tender woman's sympathy, could ever have come to her? To care for him, to love him, to even *think* of him in

that way — what wild, insane, pitiful folly was this that was possessing him?

A man who is lost in the woods, it is said, in his endeavour to find his way, walks in a circle; and so it was with Varge now — in a mental sense. He had come back to the same point he had left that afternoon when he had made his dash for liberty from the penitentiary — the same conditions, the same considerations faced him now as had faced him then — and the same conclusions must prevail — he could not stay — he must go on and on — somewhere, — it did not matter much now where — somewhere.

And yet a day or two — or three or four — what could it matter? They would be all he could ever hope to have, all that — but he was shielding himself behind *her*, putting risk upon her even now, leaning very heavily upon her, imposing on her generosity, her chivalry.

He straightened suddenly and stood up away from the rock against which he had been leaning. It was early evening and he was upon the beach. The sea in tumult still lashed and flung itself madly against the shore, but here, protected by a jutting ledge of rock at the foot of the pathway from the cliff, it was calm and sheltered compared with the open beach a few feet away, where the huge billows broke with such thunderous reverberations as to subdue the roar of the wind to but a plaintive note running through the wild harmony of Nature's war-song in a minor key.

An hour before she had come to the coast-guard station with a quaint, elderly little lady, her aunt, ostensibly to bring jellies and various delicacies for the invalided Jonah Sully, and professing, at least, great sur-

prise to find the skipper of the *Mary K. Jones* sitting on the doorsteps discoursing volubly to a group of fishermen upon the incidents of the storm, and showing little evidence of the precarious condition he had been in the night before, except for a bandage that swathed the crown of his head and precluded the use of any other head-gear. "In an hour on the beach at the foot of the pathway, half a mile further along the cliff," Janet had found occasion to whisper to him quickly.

And now he was waiting for her.

She came presently, but he did not hear her until she was close behind him—he had been looking the other way, his eyes fastened intently on the path by which he himself had descended, and the slight sound of her steps in the sand had been drowned by the noise of the surf.

She held out both her hands in frank, unaffected greeting, as he turned to face her, but there was a strange shyness in her voice.

"I came by the beach," she said. "I thought it would be safer."

He caught her hands in his—and then he could only stand there and look at her and search her eyes. A little dark-cloaked figure she was, the hood drawn over her head, the wind blowing truuant hairs of gold across her face. So small, so dainty, so trim, so fresh and pure and beautiful—dear God, to sweep her into his arms and hold her there, to have *her* arms creep around his neck, her head to find its place upon his shoulder—through all of life!

The blood swept in waving tides to her cheeks; her eyes, lowered, sought the ground, and she gently disengaged her hands.

He stood a little back from her then. A glint of the setting sun, through a break in the flying clouds, came from across the range of tossing waters and seemed to single him out, throwing into relief against the background of the cliffs the great strong figure, clothed in the dark shirt and belted trousers which the coast-guard men had furnished him. The loose flannel shirt, low at the neck with its turn-down collar, hid nothing of the splendid breadth of shoulder that seemed so proudly glad to poise the well-set, shapely head. The weeks in the woods had bronzed and tanned his face, the dark hair had lost its hideous shortness and was beginning to wave a little now — the beauty of clean-lived young manhood in all its rugged power was dominant in every feature.

His eyes were on the surf — hers had lifted and were studying him. She had tried to picture him without the prison stripes — how little, how crudely she had succeeded!

With a quick intake of her breath, she spoke again, hurriedly now, as though brought suddenly to a realisation of the present.

"Oh," she said, "there is so much to say — and there is so little time."

"Time?" he echoed mechanically — and looked at her.

She nodded. "Yes. Let us go over there beyond those rocks" — pointing with her hand — "away from the path here. Some one is liable to come down at any time."

She started forward as she spoke, and Varge followed her. She sat down upon the sand, her back against a boulder; he took his place before her, full length upon

the beach — she, facing the rolling surf; he, the line of cliffs that seemed to stretch away for miles on either hand.

“Time?” he said again.

“Yes,” she said. “You must go away from here at once — to-night. I would have tried to warn you earlier, but I thought the rest you needed after last night was worth the risk of a little delay. I am expecting father. I came down here, you know, after the fire to spend a few weeks with my aunt, and he promised to take a little holiday himself while I was here.”

“But he has not come yet?” Varge asked quietly.

“No; not yet — not that I know of,” she answered. “He said he was coming to-day or to-morrow, but he did not know just when he could get away.”

“The trains,” said Varge, “what time do they arrive? The evening train —”

“There are no trains here,” she interrupted quickly.

“You have to drive nearly seven miles to the nearest station, and I do not know just when they arrive.”

Varge allowed a handful of sand to trickle through his fingers before he spoke again.

“I have not thanked you for what you have done,” he said finally, in a low voice. “Last night you had only to speak a word and I — I suppose there is a jail even in this little place?”

“They call it a lock-up here,” she corrected, with a queer little catch in her voice.

“Yes,” he said gravely. “And now you have taken the additional risk of coming to warn me. I had no right to force a further false position upon you — I should have gone — last night.”

She put out her hand swiftly, impulsively, to rest upon his sleeve.

"You must not speak like that," she said, her lips quivering. "It — it hurts me. It is as though you — oh, I do not know quite how to say it — as though you admitted to yourself the possibility that I would, or could, have done anything else, when I am so very glad, so very thankful that I could do even this little thing. Oh, Varge, you speak of thanks, and I — what can I say to you? — my life, Doctor Kreelmar told me what you did — how brave you were and —"

"And did he tell you that he had to be kept by force from going for you himself?" Varge interposed, smiling at her and shaking his head. "You see, after all, it was only that I was a little the stronger."

"No," she said slowly. "No; he did not tell me that — dear old Doctor Kreelmar." Then, looking straight at Varge: "But should that make me any the less — the less grateful to you?"

"I have taken unfair advantage of it," he said, evading her question. "I had no right to force to-day upon you. Yes; I should have gone last night, but I" — he hesitated — "I couldn't, I —"

He paused again, and his face went suddenly white, as, their eyes meeting, he seemed to read a quick, startled understanding in hers — then her head bent forward over her lap and only the top of the dark hood showed. His heart was pounding, throbbing wildly — that strange shyness in her voice when first she had spoken, that flood of colour to her face on the beach last night, her eyes but an instant since! Was it but his longing, his utter yearning, that tempted him to wild imaginings?

— it could be no more than that, all else was impossible — and yet — and yet — His brain was swimming — to lean forward, raise the lowered head gently, tenderly, and steal his answer from the eyes that, challenged, could not lie! Was he mad!

He rose to his feet, walked abruptly a few yards away, and stood facing the sea. The wind was grateful, whipping his fevered brow; there seemed something akin in the storm-tossed sea to the tempest raging in his own soul. His lips moved for a moment silently; then he turned, went back, and stood before her. She was still seated as he had left her — as though she had not moved.

“I am a convicted murderer” — the words came from him with cold, deliberate steadiness, and it was as though he drew a line upon the sand at her feet between them, across which there was no passing — “I am under sentence for life; I am an escaped convict.”

A little cry came from her, as quickly she gained her feet and stood there facing him, her hands clasped suddenly together. She seemed to shiver a little.

“Why — oh, why did you say that!” she faltered.

“Because,” he answered monotonously, “sometimes I have dared to forget it — and I must not forget.”

“You are an innocent man!” she cried, in a strained voice. “You deny it — but I *know*.”

“You are very good,” he said softly, but he did not look at her. High up above him on the cliff a figure stood suddenly silhouetted against the skyline. He dropped his eyes after an instant’s glance that she might not notice that anything had attracted his attention.

She stepped to him quickly and raised her face to his.

“Is there nothing — *nothing* in all the world,” she

breathed in passionate earnestness, "no promise of happiness for the future, no single thing that the future might hold in store for you, no dream that might come true, that will make you speak, that—"

Grey to the lips, his face full of the agony he could not hide, he broke in hoarsely upon her words.

"Miss Rand, be merciful!"

"I *am* merciful," she said tensely. "Be merciful to yourself. I shall never try to make you speak again, but for this once—"

"You do not know what you are saying," he said desperately.

"—But for this once," she went on resolutely, "I must not let you put me off. It—it was one of the things I came for. I honour you for what I believe you have taken upon yourself—I think it was one of the finest acts a man has ever done—but it is *terrible*. It is for all your life. If you are not caught, you must always be a fugitive. See, I am pleading with you as if—as if I were fighting for my own happiness—for the last time."

"The last time?" he repeated numbly. He raised his eyes to the cliff again—the figure far above them was still silhouetted against the skyline.

"Yes; for the last time," she said after him. "I must go in a moment, and—and to-night you must leave here to—"

"It is true," said Varge—the figure on the skyline was moving back now, disappearing from view. The distance had made the recognition doubtful, would have made it impossible, in fact, if he had not been forewarned; but there was no doubt now, there was some-

thing too strikingly familiar in the stride and action of the short, broad-built form — *it was Warden Rand*. “It is true,” he said again; “it is for the last time. I did not think when I sailed on the schooner from Gloucester for the Grand Banks that my voyage would end here — with you. I thought then that I had seen you for the last time — it, a thing like that, could never happen again.”

“Then you *will* speak” — she was very close to him, her breath was on his cheek, her lips were trembling, her eyes, tear-dimmed, were raised to his.

Speak! *Yes!* Why not — and grasp at his chance for happiness! To stand a free man, his future before him, to work for her, to win her in the days to come! He had only to speak and let the coward soul he was shielding — no, it was not that — strange that for the moment he should have forgotten! It came to him now bringing peace, strengthening him, calming him — the gentle, patient face of Mrs. Merton, the silvery hair so smoothly parted beneath the old-lace cap, and the eyes of trust looked into his again now as they had looked through all his boyhood — and the dear lips smiled at him. He turned his head from Janet — and shook it silently.

Her voice broke. “It — it must always be — like this?”

It was a long time before he spoke.

“Always,” he said — it was but a single word, low spoken, but it was his doom, his sentence self-pronounced.

She drew back from him, a smile struggling bravely for supremacy on the quivering lips.

"You will go — you must go to-night, at once — before father comes."

"I will go at once," he said.

"Good-bye," she whispered — and held out her hand.

For a moment he held it in his own; then he bent his head and touched it with his lips.

"God guard and keep you and bring you happiness," he said, "through all your life."

He watched her go — watched long after the last flutter of her cloak was lost to view around a little headland of projecting rock far down the beach.

The last rays of the setting sun flung themselves athwart the heaving waters, making emerald valleys of wondrous hue betwixt the waves, tingeing the white, foaming, pearly crests with a crimson radiance. Then the light was gone, and it grew dark — chill, it seemed, and the boom of the surf was as a sullen dirge.

Slowly then Varge walked to the foot of the pathway leading to the cliff above, and slowly began to mount it.

He would go first to the coast-guard station and say good-bye — it would not do to risk suspicion by a sudden and unaccountable disappearance. The warden could not possibly have recognised him from the cliff — had not even seen, in all probability, that there was any one on the beach, for they had been almost entirely concealed from above behind the rock where they had been standing. Nor was the warden's presence on the cliff alarming — finding Janet out on his arrival, it was natural enough that he should stroll along the cliffs and watch the storm.

Almost at the top of the cliff the path swerved sharply to the left. Varge made the turn — and stopped dead

in his tracks. Two men leaped from behind the rocks that had hidden them — and blocked the path behind him. Warden Rand rose from a stone on which he had been seated and came forward; four other men, men of the coast-guard, their captain amongst them, appeared as if by magic from behind other rocks and clustered about him. Seven to one! A grim smile in which was blended a strange apathy settled on Varge's lips as he faced the warden.

"I am sorry for this, Varge," Warden Rand said gravely. "I had rather it had been any other man than I to trap you. As it is, I have force enough here to make resistance, even from you, but an act of folly."

"I saw you from the beach," said Varge calmly; "but I did not think it was possible that you could recognise me at that distance."

"Nor would I," said the warden, "if I had not known that it was you. The man who drove me over from the station told me of the wreck of a schooner from Gloucester; his description of you aroused my suspicions; I went to the coast-guard station and talked with Captain Sully, and after that I was sure — he said that "Peters" was a stranger to him, but was a very strong man who had lifted unaided a cask weighing five or six hundred pounds from the wharf to the schooner's deck."

"It has grown heavier since yesterday morning," said Varge with a whimsical smile; then quietly: "They told you I had gone to the beach — I see. And now?"

Warden Rand motioned the men a little away.

"This will hurt my little girl," he said in a low, sober voice. "It hurts me — but it is my duty. She was with you below there — to warn you of my coming. I under-

stand. I would not have had her do anything else; and I do not want her to know that I am aware she was trying to shield you, or aware that she even knew you were here. I want to keep the news of your capture from her for to-night at least if I can."

"Yes," said Varge—he swept his hand across his forehead quickly. "Yes; I understand."

"There is no train out to-night and I want you to go quietly with these men—and without me," said the warden. "They will put you in the town lock-up—tomorrow, of course, you will go back to Hebron."

"Very well," said Varge steadily, "I will go with them."

For another moment the warden stood there—and each looked into the other's eyes—then the warden, with an abrupt, hasty motion, beckoned to the men, and walked hurriedly away up the path.

"Tough luck, matey," said the captain of the coast-guard. "Blimy, if it ain't! Come on."

## CHAPTER XXV

### THE ALLIES

“CAPTAIN! Captain Sully!”

Out a little from the village on the cliff road leading to the coast-guard station Captain Jonah Sully halted, turned around, and peered through the darkness at a figure that was hurrying after him.

“Be you callin’ me?” he inquired; then, in recognition: “Oh, it’s you, miss, be it? Evenin’ to you—evenin’!”

Janet answered him in little gasps, out of breath from her run.

“Good evening, captain,” she said. “I was afraid I was never going to catch you. I want to talk to you for a few minutes.”

“Why surely—sure-lee,” invited the late skipper of the *Mary K. Jones* affably.

“Alone,” went on Janet. “Where we won’t be overheard.”

“Why sure—”

“We can go over here a little way,” she continued hurriedly, taking his arm and leading him from the road toward the cliff.

Captain Jonah Sully submitted in some wonder, but without hesitation.

“Reckon my luck’s turned,” observed he, with a chuckle. “Ain’t had any young ladies runnin’ after me

for I dunno how long. Yes; reckon it have — full insurance on the *Mary K.* too! An' naou what might it all be 'baout, miss?"

They had halted halfway to the cliff, far enough from the road to be unobserved in the darkness — back along the road behind a score of tiny lights scintillated from cottage windows, but that was all, there was no other light; if moon there was, it was hidden in the black scudding clouds — they could scarcely see each other's faces.

"It's about Varge," she said quickly.

"Varge?" — Jonah Sully shook his head perplexedly.

"Dunno as I ever heerd tell of it," said he doubtfully.

"Varge — the man you know as Peters — the man my father arrested to-night," she said hastily.

"Oh — him!" exclaimed Jonah Sully. "Sakes naow! You know 'baout that, do you? Naow that's too bad! I reckon some of the men must have been talkin' to their wives after promisin' solemn to keep their mouths shet, an' the wives has gone an' blabbed it 'raound." Then, in profound disgust: "Never could count on the women folks to hold their tongues ever since the world began!"

"I am afraid you are doing even your *own* sex an injustice this time," said Janet, and a little laugh seemed trying to struggle through the anxiety in her voice. "I have not heard a word from any one. My father has no suspicion that I know. He does not even know that I am out of the house — I am supposed to be in my room with a bad headache. I saw you passing, at least I was almost sure it was you, and I stole out of the house after you."

"What for?" demanded Jonah Sully, frankly puzzled.

"An' haow did you come to know of it if no one told you?"

"I had walked a long way along the beach toward the headland," Janet replied. "When I returned, I came up the cliff at the other end of the village near the lock-up, and I saw them go in there with him — and come away without him."

"Well," admitted Captain Sully, patting thoughtfully at the bandage on his head, "I dunno but that's tol'able fair evidence. An' naow 'baout seein' me goin' by the house an' you purtendin' to go to your room an' runnin' out after me instead — I don't just seem to get my bearin's somehaow 'baout that."

"I want your help" — Janet leaned forward and caught his arm.

"Help?" said Captain Jonah Sully bewilderedly.

"To get Varge out of there," she said, in a low, strained tone.

"Landsakes!" ejaculated the little skipper, stepping hastily back. "Be you mad? Why — why, it's agin the law!"

"I have come to you because I must have help" — Janet had caught his arm again, and was speaking tensely. "I am not mad. He saved my life once at the risk of his own."

"Jerooshey!" gasped Jonah Sully. "You don't tell! Saved your life, did he? Well, I dunno as I blame you any for wantin' to get him out then, an'—" Captain Jonah Sully stopped suddenly, and his jaw sagged a little — "why, say," said he excitedly, "come to think of it, I reckon he saved mine too — last night — I'd have gone overboard sure or been drowned washin' 'raound on the

deck when I was stunned if it hadn't been for him."

"Yes," agreed Janet evenly. "That is why I came to you."

"Never thought of it," said Jonah Sully, with heavy wonder. "Strange, ain't it? 'Pears to kind of put a different complexion on it too. What they goin' to do with him?"

"Send him back to the penitentiary to-morrow for — for life," said Janet numbly.

"Be, eh?" said the skipper, with a sudden and defiant little grunt. "Well now, come to think of it, I dunno as they will. It's a pesky risky business inter-ferrin' with the law, but there ain't no one ever said Barnabas Sully — Jonah ain't my real name, miss — ever turned his back on any one that ever did him a good turn, an' — an' gol-ding the law, anyhow! Kind of took to him too, come to think of it, dinged if I didn't!"

"I — I knew you would help me" — there was a little catch in her voice, and she pressed his arm gratefully. "I have been thinking and thinking about it ever since it happened, and I am sure it can be done easily — if I were only stronger I would have tried it alone, but I am afraid it would have taken me too long, and besides I couldn't get any tools."

"Well," said Jonah Sully, nodding his head seriously, "that sounds feasible so fur."

"The cell is in the rear part of the townhall, in the basement," Janet explained, "and it has a separate door at the side. I passed there two or three times last week and I noticed that it was fastened with a heavy padlock. It ought not to take a man very long to file away the staples and get the outside door open. I do not know

what kind of a cell it is, but I do not imagine it is very modern or formidable; and, anyway, once inside, Varge will help us. Besides the file, we'll need a good strong bar and a lantern."

"I'll get 'em — up to the coast-guard station," said Jonah Sully cheerfully. "You leave that to me. I'll get 'em. Reckon though it's a mite early to begin operations, ain't it? There might be someone snoopin' 'baout."

"I intended to wait until after midnight," said Janet quietly. "We will be sure then of no interference — and that will give Varge four or five hours before daylight. And now I must get back. Will you meet me then at the other end of the village in front of the church?"

A dry chuckle came from Captain Jonah Sully.

"Lord!" said he, "I never thought of that."

"Of what?" asked Janet.

"Why, the hullabaloo there'll be in the mornin' when they find the young feller's gone. The hull community 'll be dancin' 'raound like hot fat on a griddle," said the erstwhile skipper of the *Mary K. Jones*, with another chuckle. "Reckon though," he added more cautiously, "we'll have to step right keerful after tweakin' the nose of the law audacious-like — we hadn't ought to forget it's a pesky serious business."

"I haven't forgotten it," said Janet, a pathetic grimness in her voice. "At the church then, at midnight, and you — you won't fail, will you?"

"Great snakes!" said Captain Jonah Sully earnestly. "Don't you worry none 'baout that, Miss Rand. I'll be there — sure-lee."

Ten minutes later, Janet regained her room unobserved, and drawing a chair to the window sat staring out into the night. Below, she could hear the murmur of voices, as her father and aunt talked in the sitting-room. By and by — it seemed a long, interminable time — she heard them coming up the stairs; then a light knock sounded at her door.

"Asleep, little girl?" her father called softly.

"No; not yet," she answered.

"How's the head?"

"Better," she said. "It will be all right in the morning, dad, I'm sure."

"That's good," he said. "Good-night, dear."

"Good-night, dad," she responded.

His steps passed on along the hall, and a wistful little smile crept to Janet's lips. It was not often that she and her father played at cross purposes — and it was he who had so solicitously urged her to go to her room and lie down when, early in the evening, she had complained of her headache!

Midnight came at last — how many times had she consulted her watch by the aid of a match! — how terribly, how anxiously the time had dragged by! She put on her cloak, moved toward the door — and stopped. Money — Varge would need money! He would not take it from her — but he would not surely refuse it as a loan from Captain Sully. She went to her dresser, found her purse, took out the bills that were in it, and placed them in the pocket of her cloak — then she crossed to the door, opened it, and stood on the threshold listening.

All was silence — only her heart was beating wildly;

it seemed almost as though she could hear it. She pressed her hand to her side and held it there a moment; then, closing the bedroom door noiselessly, she gathered up the skirts of her cloak and dress, crept down the stairs, made her way to the front door and out into the street.

It was intensely dark—a hurried glance about her showed her that not a light was burning in the village—only the boom of the surf seemed to fill the night.

She went quickly down the street. Five minutes brought her to the rendezvous, and she stopped before the church.

"Here I be," announced Jonah Sully, stepping out from the porch. "Ain't no one seen you up to the house, have they?"

"No," said Janet. "No — it's all right."

"An' I got it," declared Jonah Sully gleefully. "Yes; I reckon my luck's turned. Hooked it, by crickey!"

"You mean the file and bar and lantern?"—Janet nodded her head.

"More'n that," chuckled Captain Sully. "Got the key for the padlock—hooked it from the cap'n of the coast-guard—'pears he's kind of chief magistrate an' head of the fire department an' I dunno but some other things. Anyway, he had the keys an' I borrowed it out of his clothes on the way out. Might as well move along, hadn't we?"

"Just a minute"—Janet took the money from her cloak and held it toward him. "Here is a little money that I want you to make Varge take—as a loan from you, you understand?"

"Got my hands full," said the skipper; "lantern an'

bars an' tools an' things we'll need once we get inside. Jest slip it into my pocket, an' I'll see he gets it."

"There it is, then," said Janet, putting the money into the side pocket of his coat. "Let me help you carry something."

"No," said he. "'Tain't but a step — we'll be there in a jiffy."

"Come then," said Janet quickly.

It was hardly a hundred yards away, a wooden building next to the church, and the last one on the road within the village proper. It took them scarcely a minute to reach it, and, passing along the side of the wall, Jonah Sully laid the things he was carrying upon the ground before the door and reached into his pocket for the key.

"Ain't no fear of us bein' heerd, 'count of the surf," he observed. "An' I dunno but that's just as well, 'cause mabbe we'll have to make some noise when we get inside."

"Yes, yes," breathed Janet — she was trembling a little, excitement and emotion growing upon her. "But hurry, hurry!"

There was a faint metallic click, the rubbing of metal against metal — and then the creak of the door swinging open.

"There you be!" exclaimed Captain Jonah Sully triumphantly.

Janet stepped quickly forward.

"Varge!" she called in a low voice.

There was no answer.

"Varge!" she called again.

Still no answer.

"*Vargel*"—she was terrified now. Her heart seemed to sink and grow cold, as though an icy hand were clutching at it—had they come too late—was he already on his way back to Hebron? She turned frantically to Jonah Sully. "The lantern—a light—*quick!*" she cried.

On his knees, Jonah Sully lighted the lantern, stood up, flashed it around—and, jaw dropped, stared into Janet's white face. Then he leaned back against the wall and patted weakly at the top of his head.

"'Pears—'pears as if he'd—he'd gone," he gasped. "*Jee-rooshey!* Never see anything like that in all my born days. 'Tain't possible—not without dynamite." Captain Jonah Sully's voice trailed off into an awe-struck whisper. "*Jee-rooshey!*" he said.

A tense, rigid little figure, motionless, Janet stood staring silently about her. It was a small, narrow place, cement-floored room. Across one end, the one opposite the entrance, had been a cell of brick and cement, with a heavy door, iron-sheeted halfway up, iron-barred the rest of the way. This hung now in utter ruin, sagging out at an angle, held only by a half-broken hinge at the bottom. The centre and upper hinges had been torn from the walls, and the bars of the door were forced outward as from an explosion. Brick and plaster, strewing the floor, adding to the effect of ruin and wreckage, completed the scene.

"There!" muttered the skipper helplessly, pointing to the single window just above his head, whose bars had been bent apart like pieces of wire. "There's where he went! Well, I swan! Couldn't have been dynamite 'cause he'd have blown himself to pieces." Captain Sully

pulled earnestly at his whiskers. "Well, I swan!" he said.

"Let us go," said Janet, trying to keep her voice steady.

"Yes," said Captain Jonah Sully mechanically, starting toward the door. "Let's go."

"The light!" she said sharply. "Put out the light!"

"Yes," he said. "The light"—and blew it out.

It was Janet who replaced the padlock on the door and locked it; and then together they made their way to the road and started back along it.

Suddenly the little skipper stopped short and grasped Janet's arm.

She turned toward him, startled.

"What is it?" she asked anxiously.

"Why," said Captain Jonah Sully complacently, "come to think of it, I ain't surprised a bit at what I seen in there. Come to think of it, he's pesky strong, he is. Yesterday he lifted a cask over onto the *Mary K.* that weighed seven hundred pounds; or I dunno but mabbe jest a mite under eight hundred, dinged if he didn't!"

"Oh!" said Janet dully — and went on again.

Jonah Sully was still talking, but she did not hear him. Varge was gone — *where?*

## CHAPTER XXVI

### THE GREATEST THING

**I**T was unconquerable. The very greatness, the bigness of the man nourished it and fostered it until, beating down his defences, routing him, it dominated and owned him. A strange paradox? No — rather the inevitable.

A foreshadowing of it had come to Varge on that night of wild turmoil when he had faced death, had momentarily expected it, on the storm-swept schooner's deck — but only a foreshadowing — he had not realised it *all* then. Perhaps, if he had never seen her again, in time he might have come to hold his love as a cherished, hallowed memory, a shrine at which he might kneel, a secret source of strength inspiring him, by thought of her, to keep ever sacred and inviolate the finest and best ideals of manhood — but it was more than that now. It had been more than that since that evening on the beach when, for an instant, the mad thought had come to him that she, in all her glorious, fresh young innocence and beauty, in all her tender purity and sweetness, cared for *him* — a nameless man, an escaped convict, a branded felon. Yes; he had put it from him — then. Not easily — for then in all its meaning, in all its depth, as it had not come to him before, had come the knowledge of the fulness, the completeness of his own love. After that, as a man outwardly himself but mentally almost oblivious and indifferent to events and happenings around

him, they had caught him, the warden had caught him, and put him in the lock-up of the little town. Darkness had come, the numbed apathy had passed, his soul had seemed as a seething vortex and like a wild man he had torn his way to freedom.

Since then, that was two months ago now, the days and weeks had passed as in a dream. He had gone from place to place, working, a little here, a little there, at whatever offered — then on again. Never but a few days at most in the same place — not so much from fear of capture, he felt strangely free and safe from that, but because of the restlessness of spirit that he could not quell, that grew ever stronger, more insistent, more constantly with him as the days went by.

In the hours of night when wakeful or asleep, in the day at whatever task he might be engaged upon the craving of his soul never left him — to hear the sound of her voice again, to see her face, her smile. It was worth any price, any risk — what else could matter? It was his life — the one thing his soul asked for. A hopeless thing — illogical? Perhaps — but it was unconquerable. Logic, philosophy and reason — what part had they in this? What was logic, what philosophy, what reason to the yearning prompted by a love that made all else but naught! Unwise, unsafe? — his was the risk, his the added pang, if pang it would cause him; upon him and him alone the consequences — she would never know!

Just to hear her voice, to see her face, her smile once more, to feel her presence near him — because he loved her.

Well, he had come! He had left the train at a station

ten miles from Hebron, and since afternoon he had walked the rest of the distance. And now? If, after all, the pitiful chance and hope he clung to should be vain! It was so little that he asked — to steal a glimpse of her through the window of the sitting-room perhaps, to hear her laugh, her song float out to him through the night — that was all — just that — and then to go away again. It was so little to ask for, to hope for, the striving for so desperately hard that surely, surely that much would be his.

The night was calm and quiet. Across the fields in front of him the great walls of the penitentiary stood out in black irregular lines in the white moonlight; twinkling lights from the houses dotted the village road; just before him he could distinguish in a dark blur the warden's lawn, the avenue of maples that fringed the driveway. He wondered, a little curiously, a little wistfully, what the house looked like now — the front, of course, would be the same for there the fire had hardly touched it; but the rear — had it been rebuilt just exactly as it was before, or was it changed? — not that it could matter, only it all seemed so intimately a part of her — and this was her home.

He reached the roadside, looked up and down it, listened — then suddenly lay down full length upon the grass. A step crunched on the gravel across the way, and a man turned into the road — it was Warden Rand — and started briskly off in the direction of the village away from the penitentiary. Varge waited until the warden was out of sight and hearing, then he crossed the road quickly, gained the shadows of the maples and, keeping on the edge of the lawn to deaden the sound of

his steps, passed cautiously from tree to tree, making his way toward the house.

How familiar, how full of memory was every object around him — the trees themselves, the flower beds, the sweep of lawn, so delicate a shade of light green now with the moon's softening rays upon it — those blacker shadows ahead, dense, impenetrable, were the great elm and the giant willow, one at each corner of the veranda, whose branches, all but meeting, almost entirely hid the house from view.

How silent, how still, how peaceful it was! There was no sound, not even the stir of leaves in the trees — he stopped abruptly, dazed, as though some blow had fallen upon him and in its sudden hurt had left him dismayed and faint. Yes; it *was* silent, still — and dark. He had come to the elm; the house, barely five yards away, was before him — *dark*. No light in any window — no sound — and he had not asked for much — only for very little.

For a moment he stood silently behind the elm trying in a fogged way to think this out. All that afternoon the picture in his mind had been so distinct, so real, so vivid, so actual — he was standing just where he was standing now, and the window was open and she was sitting there by the table, the lamplight falling, oh, so softly, on the golden head and — his hand brushed swiftly across his eyes — and instead it was all dark and nothingness. He had tried to tell himself that it might be like this, but he had needed her so much, and love and hope and yearning had risen in arms against the practical and the matter of fact — and only the picture had lived.

Calmer presently after the first shock of bitter disap-

pointment, hope came again. It was very early yet — he had only to wait. Perhaps she was down in the village at some house and the warden had gone to join her there and, later, to bring her home. Wait! If that were all — just to wait for a little while longer! But he could not wait there behind the elm — it was too close to the driveway, she would pass it when she came back and he would be seen — at the other end of the veranda, behind the willow, he could see equally well and without risk of his presence becoming known.

He stepped quietly out from the shadow of the elm onto the moonlit lawn; he would go there at once while the opportunity was his, and before —

*"Vargel!"*

It came in a cry — not a startled cry; but soft, broken, like a sudden sob, full of wonder, full of pathos, a naked cry robed in no studied dress, the cry of a soul, that halted him, chained him to the spot and robbed him of his strength.

*"Vargel!"*

Something white showed behind the dark network of the Virginia creeper that trailed over the end of the veranda, a chair scraped and toppled over — and she was coming toward him down the veranda steps.

*What had he done!* In that moment all the joy of Heaven above, the tortures and the sorrows of the lost seemed his. He had never dreamed of this — that she should know — that she should see him. There could be but one reason, only *one*, for his presence there; and she, so sensitive, so sure in intuition — it could not pass her by. And he, who months ago had fought his way to freedom from this very place that she might not have

the hurt, the pain of this, had brought it back, God knew how innocently, how unintentionally, upon her now — grim, mocking irony blending an agony of bliss!

His hand rose slowly to his hat and he stood bare-headed as she came.

Softly, wondrously the moonlight played upon her, seeming to hold her in its embrace, lingering on the little white-shod feet, creeping so reverently around the graceful form, flooding the full throat, the sweet face, the golden hair with its mellow radiance — glorying in its right to its caress.

She stood before him now, so small, so delicate in her beauty, like some pure, God-given angel, and a fragrance as of some rare perfume was about her. The long lashes fell suddenly, hiding the great blue eyes, and her head was lowered, bowed a little.

"You have come here, Varge" — the words came very slowly in an unsteady voice — "here where — where your danger is very terrible, and you have taken this frightful risk because, because — will you tell me why?"

Lie to her? *Yes!* Yes, a thousand times now — if there were but *one* lie to tell! The knotted cords at his temples, throbbing, throbbing, seemed that they must burst their bounds; the brown hair falling over his forehead cloaked beads of moisture that sprang out upon his brow — and no word would come to his lips, his brain seemed blunted, dulled, in chaos, in turmoil.

A long, long time the silence held, and then she spoke again, her head a little lower.

"You — you are making it very hard for me," she whispered. "You will not answer and — and I know. I — I knew on the beach that day — did you think I did

not know? It is so long ago, and — and I have prayed your prayer, the prayer you asked for me, since then — that God would guard and keep you, and — and I prayed that He would bring you back, but not like this — in peril for — for me.”

“Janet!” — all of life and death seemed in the word; rapt wonder, a wild questioning that would not let him yet believe, was in his eyes, his face.

Slowly, hesitatingly, he put out his hands and touched her — her arms, her shoulders — and gently lifted her face and looked into the swimming eyes that for a breathless moment were raised to his — and then he swept her to him, kissing the blue-veined eyelids, the trembling lips, the golden head of hair, the pure white brow.

“I love you, I love you — Janet — Janet” — the words came over and over again from his lips — words he had never thought to say — came voicing a song of wondrous melody in his soul — all else was blotted from him — and only that glad pæon of supernal joy rang out entrancing him.

“Varge — *dear* Varge,” she answered him tremulously — and like a tired child lay passively in his arms.

He held her close to him in a silence that had no need of words, her head upon his breast, his face buried in the golden hair again — and then her hand stole into his, and she led him toward the willow.

“I do not think we could be seen from the road,” she said, a little laughter, a little sob mingling their notes in her voice, “but it will be safer here.”

Beneath the limbs of the great tree it was shadow and the light was gone — and to Varge, suddenly, it seemed

as though a vast pall, cold and chill, had fallen. It was madness—a black, yawning gulf of utter madness—and to its bottomless depths he had hurled himself—and her. A taste of joy, divine beyond all telling, a glimpse into a world of rapture, of enchantment, through gates of dazzling glory, had been his—but now—God pity him—the *price*.

He faced her, pale, haggard, his eyes full of the misery that was upon him.

“Janet! Janet!”—grief, self-condemnation, hopelessness, all were in his voice; and wrung from him in a hoarse cry came the words that had flashed upon him when he had stepped out from the elm upon the lawn and she had seen him: “Janet—what have I done!”

Her hands felt up and rested upon his face.

“I know,” she said softly. “But we could not undo that now if we would. I know—so well. You never meant that I should see you—but, oh, I am so glad, so glad I did. I have wanted you so and—and now you have come and—and I will never let you go again.”

His fingers brushed back the hair from her forehead and smoothed it tenderly.

“I would to God,” he said in a choked voice, “that it were so—that I should never leave you.”

“I can never let you go,” she said, and her hands pressed tightly on his cheeks. “I can never let you go—alone—for it would be—forever.”

He drew her to him, drew her head to his shoulder again, holding her tightly, thinking to soothe her.

She held quite still for an instant; then she raised her head, and her eyes as they met his were blinded with

tears, but there was brave control and quiet resolve in her voice.

"I do not think you understand," she said steadily. "You must go soon — now — but not *alone*."

He looked at her startled, reading her eyes, searching her face.

"Janet!" he cried. "You mean — you mean that you will marry me, that when I go you —"

"Will go too," she said resolutely.

With a strange, slow movement Varge shook his head.

"You do not know what you are saying," he said numbly. "I, who am convicted of a crime of which I cannot even tell you I am innocent; I, who —"

"My heart told me that long ago," she interrupted him. "I have thought of it since that morning in the garden here, since that afternoon on the beach — you could not tell me then, and I do not ask it now — I shall never ask it. If it is a sacrifice that involves other lives, as I know it must be, if it seals your lips so that you can never speak, at least it shall not take from us all happiness — the love that God has given us."

"My name" — his head was bowed, his voice dull. "Have you forgotten that I do not even know who I am — that I have no name but Varge — that I can never hope to find another?"

"Would it be a prouder one?" she said, a quiver in the full throat as she lifted her head. "A prouder name than Varge — just Varge — because you have made it what it is."

"You love me so?" he murmured brokenly.

"Is my love greater than yours that risked more than life to-night that for a few minutes you might be near

ne?" she asked, with a little sob. "Yes; I love you so. I do not know how great my love is, I only know that it is the greatest thing in my life — that you shall not go and face the terrible future that you are thinking of alone." She had drawn closer to him, and now her arms had crept around his neck and tightened there.

"No, no!" he burst out desperately. "I cannot — I must not!"

"Yes," she said passionately. "You *must* — there is no other way. You could not live alone through those years, they would be too terrible, too cruel — but together we will make another future for ourselves somewhere — and you will be happy — and it is my happiness too — we will find happiness together. I — I think that I should die if you left me here."

Find happiness! Make another future for themselves! It was like a glimpse of Heaven! Happiness — ah, yes, there would be happiness — and his life had been clean — if there was a stain upon his name there was none upon his soul — and it *was* God-given, this pure love of theirs, as she had said — and there was no other way — the barriers were down, torn down through no voluntary will of his — nothing could change that now — and they were each other's — for all of life.

"Listen, Varge" — her arms still clung around his neck, but her face was raised to his. "The time is going and it is so precious — every minute is so precious to us now — we must not lose a single one. You know the bridge over the creek? You must go there by the fields. I have a few things I must get together, but it will take you longer going that way than it will take me by the road. I will meet you there, and a little further on there

is some one I can trust who will give us a horse and buggy, and we can drive to Claxton and get a train. Oh, Varge, Varge, did you think that I would let you go alone! That I—"

She was crushed in his arms, his lips to hers, to her hair, to her eyes again—and again in his soul burst forth that deathless song of glad, wondrous joy, and now its melody was carried in high, exultant notes, like crashing strains of martial music that fired his blood—and he was immortal, a god, and power and majesty and might and heaven and earth were his.

"Yes!" he whispered fiercely. "Yes, yes — *yes!*"

She freed herself, half-laughing, half-crying, the blue eyes smiling at him through a blinding mist; then breathlessly, pantingly, she pushed him away.

"Go, then!" she pleaded. "Oh, go at once — *quick!* I will be there before you are — and we have no time to lose."

She turned from him and ran toward the house. For a moment the little white figure paused on the veranda steps and looked back at him—and then she was gone.

The song in his soul rose into higher, wilder, almost barbaric chords—the primal, elemental song that may slumber sometimes but never dies. Quickly he passed across the lawn, down the driveway, over the road and gained the fields. Bathed in the white, clear moonlight, fairy carpeted they seemed, giving a new lightness, a new spring to his steps, as though they too heard the song and would speed him on his way.

But presently his steps grew slower, faltered, and he stopped—and presently the moonlight seemed to hover

curiously, wonderingly, doubtfully over a great form outstretched upon the ground.

For a space, whose passing had no measure of time for him, Varge lay there. The day of madness had come, and it had been stronger than he — but now it had gone for a little season and the nakedness of it all was upon him — the realisation in all its glaring horror of what he would be bringing her to face, to endure, to suffer; the greatness of her sacrifice, a sacrifice that would alienate her forever from all friends and kindred; the thought of children that might come to them; the constant fear, the ever present dread of discovery no matter where they might be; the suspicion that would haunt them in every face they saw, that would be always hanging over them, crushing them down; the possibility of final capture, even if not until far on in the after years; the degradation, the shame that would follow and be her sure and only portion — the whole miserable picture of a desperate, hunted life, of what it meant to her, was before him now. And this, in her great, unselfish, boundless love, she had sought to share, to brighten the awful darkness with her own radiant presence. And he — the temptation had been too great for him, had blinded him, the yearning, the vision of Heaven that had been his had made mockery of resistance — and he had come this far, almost so far that there was no turning back — but now, before it was too late, he must save her from herself — from *himself*.

He lay face down, his head buried in his hands, his body motionless. He was stronger now than the temptation — *for the moment* — but, if subservient temporarily, this temptation was his ultimate master. He re-

alised it, felt it, knew it — grim in leering irony the fact thrust itself upon him, and denial was but added mockery, an added barb. He was weak here, pitifully, helplessly weak — his craving, his hunger for her dominated him, would dominate him, intoxicate his senses — *master* him. Yes; he would, he could, he must stop *now* — but hereafter — *afterwards*? The temptation had not come for the *last* time. It would come again and again, and each time it would grow stronger — and he had so nearly yielded now! Go where he would, put the world between them — *and he would come back* — drawn to her irrevocably by the love that knew no other reason than fulfilment, bigger, stronger than himself, engulfing him — drawn to her as he had been drawn in the last two months — drawn to her more surely, more irresistibly than he had been drawn this time, for now her love was his and he would hear her calling, always calling, across the distance — and sooner or later he would come back to her — his soul told him that. Yes; here he was weak, a pliable thing — here he could not trust himself — he *dared* not trust himself — he would yield again *now* at one word of her voice upon his ears, one breath of hers upon his cheek, one touch of her lips to his — one glimpse of her. And *she* — she was waiting for him *now* — at the bridge.

A cloud veiled the moonpath; the white brightness of the fields faded to a sombre grey, grew darker, and all around was black. Slowly, very slowly, the cloud passed, as though lingering to shield the form upon the ground, and then from its filmy edges the moonlight struggled forth again and the soft whiteness flooded the earth once more.

The terror of that life for her! — as the years went by, the awfulness of it for her! And he could not trust himself — as a fearful, menacing truth that fact burned itself into his soul — he could not trust himself — yet he must never go to her again — at any cost, for all of happiness that might still be left in life for her, he must never go to her again. His, she was his now, she had told him so, and alone, depending on his own strength, when every thought and longing and desire was for her, he could not trust himself — there was nothing in himself to hold him from her — *and the next time he would not stop before he reached the bridge.* But there was a way and he must take it, one way to make it impossible — impossible for him to accept her sacrifice; impossible for her to plead and insist upon it; impossible for them both — a way to put it forever beyond their reach, hers or his. It was a very terrible, cruel way for her — but better than that all her life should be utter wreckage, ruin and dismay.

He rose to his feet, and for an instant stood with his hands tight-clasped across his eyes; then swiftly, with ever quickening step as one bent upon an object where pause or delay were fatal to the resolution, he retraced his way to the road, stepped out upon it — and kept on. The prison walls, high, towering, flung their grim shadows across his path; above him a figure, dark-outlined, carbine slung in the crook of his arm, paced to and fro by the little turret guard-house on the corner of the wall.

Opposite the prison entrance Varge turned from the road, mounted the short flight of steps and pulled the bell. And mechanically, as he waited, his shoulders lurched forward a little, like one bracing himself to meet

a blow — all trusty privileges forfeited, he was standing *outside* the walls for the last time.

*He dared not trust himself* — he was battling now to let no other thought but that creep in upon him — and living in his brain and soul, beyond all strength of his to fight it back, to obliterate it from his mind, was the picture of a little white-robed figure, her arms outstretched toward him, beckoning to him, waiting anxiously, waiting, waiting, waiting at the bridge; and ringing in his ears was her voice calling, calling, calling him to come.

A bead of sweat sprang out upon his forehead — his resolution was weakening with every second of inaction — she was calling, she was waiting — for him — *for him!* Great God, would they never come, would they never open the door until it was — *too late!* He seized the bell again and wrenched at it violently.

And now a hurried step sounded from the hall within, then sliding bolts, the rattle of a steel key — and the door, still held by a chain lock, was opened a cautious inch or so.

"What's wanted?" demanded a gruff voice.

"Open the door" — Varge's voice was strained, low, a whisper — he pushed desperately against the door.

"Open the door — let me in."

"Here now, none of that!" growled the guard roughly. "Keep your hands off the door! Let you in, eh? And who the devil are you?"

Varge leaned suddenly a little further forward, and, thrusting both hands into the opening, grasped at the edge of the door — it seemed that he must literally hold himself, cling to something, something tangible that re-



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sponded to his sense of touch — mind and soul were in turmoil — the bridge, the bridge, she was waiting for him, calling to him from there — his fingers tightened on the door until it seemed that the blood must spurt from the nail-tips to keep that voice from dragging them from their hold.

"Let me in!" he cried out hoarsely. "Let me in! I am Varge. I am Seven-seventy-seven."

It was dark there in the shadow of the doorway, and there was a vicious, threatening note in the guard's tones.

"Yes — like hell you are!" he snapped. "Go on, now — beat it! None of your funny joker business, or I'll let you in in a way you won't like! D'ye hear, beat it or —"

Varge was upon the door like a madman — a wild shout from the guard echoed back through the hallway and rang, reverberating, through the high, vaulted dome of the prison beyond.

*In* — he must beat his way in — tear his way in — *now* — another instant and he would turn and flee — in — *in* — IN! With all his Titanic strength he heaved against the door, and his muscles, leaping into play, hardened like knobs of steel.

For an instant there in the darkness there was no sound save of great breathing, while a form, curiously contorted into crouched shape bulked black against the doorway — then again, and once again, the guard's shout of alarm, full of a sudden terror now, rang out in a high-pitched yell. Came then a low, ominous noise of yielding things, steel and iron and wood — then the chain-lock, torn from its socket, clattered jangling against the steel door — the door shot wide and brought

up against the wall with a terrific crash, hurling the guard on the other side to the floor — and Varge, resistance suddenly gone, pitched forward, recovered himself, and staggered into the hallway.

Shouts and cries were everywhere now — the stillness of the prison, that at night was the stillness of the tomb, was gone — guards, on the run, dashed through the steel-barred gates from the prison proper into the hall. Panting, gasping, his face white with the fearful strain, great drops standing out upon his forehead and trickling courses down his face, Varge leaned heavily against the wall.

The door-guard gained his feet, and his jaw dropped, stared like one looking at a ghost into Varge's face.

"Seven-seventy-seven!" he mumbled. And again: "Seven-seventy-seven!"

There was a smile, grim, ironical, on Varge's lips, as the other guards surrounded him — the door-guard had rushed back to the door and was frantically closing it, shooting home the bolts, nervously, hurriedly turning the great steel key!

## CHAPTER XXVII

### A GAME THAT WAS NEVER PLAYED

WARDEN RAND groped in the darkness for the lamp on the table, as, followed by Doctor Kreelmar, he entered the sitting room of his home.

"Guess Janet must have gone for a walk," said he. "Got a match, Kreelmar?"

Doctor Kreelmar produced the match, lighted it and handed it to the warden.

"Give you a bishop and a pawn to-night," volunteered the warden off-handedly, but chuckling inwardly to himself as he removed the lamp chimney. "Beat you too easily last time."

"You'll do *what!*" snapped the irascible little doctor, who was a very keen chess player and quite, if not more than, the equal of the warden.

"Bishop and a pawn," repeated the warden composedly, replacing the chimney and adjusting the wick with emphasised deliberation. "Get the board and the men — you know where they are — on top of the bookcase. I'll be back in a moment — left my cigars upstairs" — and he hurried from the room.

With a snort, the doctor crossed to the bookcase, jerked the board and the box of chessmen from the top, and returned to the table. He slapped the board open, dumped the boxful of men over it, and began to sort out the black and white pieces — carefully setting up the white ones with which he was to play. This done,

as he heard the warden's steps returning, he reached over, very grimly possessed himself of a black bishop and a black pawn and slipped them into his pocket. He was profoundly engrossed in seeing that the white pieces were exactly in the middle of the squares when the warden spoke from the doorway.

"Kreelmar!"

There was a hollowness, a dull weariness in the other's voice that caught the little doctor's ear instantly. He raised his eyes from the chessboard — and the next moment had jumped to his feet, sending the pieces of flying in all directions over the floor.

"Eh? What! What!" he spluttered out. "Good God, Rand, what's the matter?"

The warden was standing in the doorway, his face set and white, a sheet of notepaper in his hand.

"Kreelmar — *Janet's gone!*" he said numbly.

"Gone!" gasped Kreelmar. "Gone! Gone! Gone where? What do you mean? Gone where?"

"I don't know," the warden answered hoarsely. He came across the room toward the doctor. "I found this upstairs on the dresser. Read it, Kreelmar — read it."

Doctor Kreelmar took the paper and read it hurriedly, mumbling parts of the hastily scrawled sentences aloud.

" . . . Gone away . . . for a long time . . . please, please do not try to find me . . . there was no other way . . . "

Doctor Kreelmar dropped the note upon the table, took customary refuge in his handkerchief and mopped nervously at his face.

"What's it mean, eh? What's it mean?" he inquired

weakly. "Gone where? What for? 'The only way' — what's she mean by that?"

"She was here less than an hour ago when I went down to the village"—the warden's voice choked. "I don't know what it means. She was just as she always was then. There's no reason why she should go away, she—"

"You're sure that's her writing on the note?" demanded Doctor Kreelmar suddenly.

The warden picked up the sheet of paper again and studied it anxiously.

"Yes," he said. "It's her writing — and she's gone, Kreelmar. Do you understand? — she's gone — what are we to do?"

"Do! Do!" flung out the little doctor. "Why, find her, of course — no matter what she says in that note. If she was here an hour ago she can't be very far away yet, and —"

"*Listen!*" — Warden Rand had caught the doctor's arm and was pressing it fiercely.

A step sounded on the veranda — a light step, crossing it very slowly — entering the hall.

"*Listen!*" — the warden's grip tightened. "It's — it's Janet!"

She came into the room like one walking in her sleep — as though she did not see them — her hands pressed to her temples, her eyes half-closed, no single vestige of colour in the strained, drawn face.

"Janet!" her father cried, stepping toward her. "Merciful Heavens, child, what has happened?"

For a moment she looked at them in a dazed, almost unconscious way. Her eyes passed from her father to

Doctor Kreelmar, then rested on the note in the warden's hand. A pitiful smile quivered on her lips and she shook her head.

"Not now," she said in a low, unnatural voice. "Not now — don't ask me now. I did not think you would find that before you went to bed."

"Janet, you are ill — you are sick," said the warden, greatly distressed. "Kreelmar, you —"

"No," she said mechanically. "Not sick, not ill; I am only — very tired. Please do not worry about me, dad. I — I think I will go to my room."

She turned toward the door — and stopped. A dawning something crept into her face — a hope — a fear — her hands, at her sides now, clenched tightly. Some one was running hurriedly outside — running up the veranda steps. Varge! — had Varge come back — had something kept him from reaching the bridge, and he had come back — *here?*

The bell rang perfunctorily; but the outer door was open, and, without waiting for a response, a blue-coated prison guard stepped across the hall to the doorway of the sitting-room and saluted.

"Seven-seventy-seven's given himself up, sir," he panted, out of breath. "Came back ten minutes ago, sir."

For an instant it was as though the hush of death had fallen upon the room — and upon the guard's face came an awe-struck, frightened look as he gazed about him. The warden was staring at him; Doctor Kreelmar was staring at him — the warden's arms had been outstretched toward his daughter, and as though he had been turned suddenly to stone he stood rigidly in that

attitude with his arms still held out; the doctor's hand and his handkerchief were glued immovably to his forehead. Only the slight little figure in white stirred—she seemed to sway queerly from side to side.

An instant the silence held, then it was broken by a low, moaning cry from Janet—then a cry in words, sobbing, anguished.

“Oh, dad! Oh, dad! Don't you understand? I love him. I—”

With a quick step toward her, the warden caught her in his arms—and as quickly, the spell lifted, Doctor Kreelmar rushed impetuously across the room, launched himself upon the guard and shoved the man out onto the veranda.

“You—you confounded, blundering idiot!” he exploded ferociously. “You—you—”

“What's the matter?” gasped the bewildered guard.

“Matter! Matter!” rasped out the little man. “None of your business! D'ye hear? None of your business! Shut up!”

“Yes, sir,” said the guard weakly.

“Don't you know anything—eh?” demanded the choleric little doctor. “Don't you know *anything?*”

“I—I don't know, sir,” stammered the guard helplessly.

“Yes, you do, too!” asserted Doctor Kreelmar fiercely. “Yes, you do, too!”—he stabbed viciously with his forefinger at the top button of the guard's uniform. “You know you *don't* know anything—not a thing of what happened in there—not a thing.”

“No, sir,” said the guard.

"You didn't see a thing" — the forefinger made a bull's-eye on the button.

"No, sir — not a thing."

"You didn't hear a word" — the forefinger went in and out as unerringly as a piston rod, and the while the little doctor's face was puckered into innumerable scowls, and his words, all bunched up together, were flung out like bullets from the muzzle of a Gatling gun.

"No, sir, not — a word."

"Well, then," jerked out the doctor, with earnest inconsistency, "keep your mouth shut about it!"

"You can trust me, sir," the guard assured him anxiously.

"Hum!" commented Doctor Kreelmar; then, with grim complacency: "If I can't, I'll make Gehenna a feather bed compared to what this place will be for you! Now, then, back you go! Tell 'em the warden'll be over in a — when he gets ready — we're playing chess. Seven-seventy-seven'll keep as well as anybody else. There's nothing about him to make a three-ringed circus over any more than any other man, is there — eh?"

"No, sir," said the guard meekly, and, saluting, went down the steps.

Doctor Kreelmar watched the man disappear in the shadow of the trees then he turned and walked slowly back into the sitting room. Janet's face was buried on her father's shoulder, and the warden's arms were wrapped close around the little form that was shaking with convulsive sobs. The doctor shook his head at the question in the warden's glance.

"She doesn't need me," he said, a curious gruffness in his voice. "Carry her upstairs and let her have her cry

out — and let her have it out in your arms, Rand. I'll wait here for you until you come down again."

They passed out of the door, Janet in the warden's arms, and Doctor Kreelmar sat down in a chair and stared at the floor. He sat there for a very long time without any movement; then he got down on his knees and began to pick up the chessmen from the carpet. He picked them up very slowly, one at a time — where two lay together he picked them up separately. When they were all picked up, he packed them back in the box, folded up the board, carried box and board to the bookcase, came back to his chair — and stared at the floor again.

After a while, the low murmur of voices reached him from above. The handkerchief, that had never left his hand, mopped suddenly, uncertainly, at his forehead. After another while, a very long while, the warden's steps, dragging, weighted, descending the stairs, came to him. Doctor Kreelmar with a strange little shake of his body, stood up and faced the door.

There was anxiety, confusion, dismay and a smouldering fire in the warden's eyes as he came into the room and dropped heavily into a chair across the table from Doctor Kreelmar.

"Kreelmar," he said hoarsely, "this is awful. Varge came back here to-night to see Janet. It seems he didn't intend to be seen himself — but she saw him. You heard what she said down here — she loves him — she told him so to-night. He loves her. She says that they were going away together — that she persuaded him they must. She was to meet him at the bridge. She came into the house to write that note and get some things,

and he started to go to the bridge through the fields. He never went there — I don't know where he's been for the last half-hour, but now he's given himself up. She says she understands now — that he has done it for her." The warden raised his head, and his hand on the table curled into a clenched knob. "My God, Kreelmar, what do you stand there looking at me like that for, as if I were talking about the weather? Don't you realise what this means? She, Janet, my daughter, is in love with one of *my* convicts! A *convict*, Kreelmar! Don't you understand? A convict, a lifer — my little girl and a convict!" His fist was opening and closing — a mirthless, unpleasant laugh purred from his lips.

Doctor Kreelmar reached over and laid his hand on the warden's arm.

"Rand, old friend," he said quietly, "there's no use letting go like that — not a bit. I think I understand — better than you do. Let's talk about it a little, as though it were — the weather."

Warden Rand met the doctor's eyes for a moment, then he brushed his hand nervously across his forehead and allowed his body to relax a little in his chair.

Doctor Kreelmar pulled his own chair a little nearer to the table and sat down in it.

"You have called him a convict, a lifer," he said slowly, "and it is true — but he is an innocent man."

"Innocent!" — the word seemed to rouse the warden angrily. "Innocent! Innocent! I've heard that ever since he came here! How do you know he's innocent?"

"For the same reason that *you* know it," replied the little doctor calmly. "You've never said so in so many

words, but you've believed it — ever since he came here. Say it to-night, Rand — now — when it costs more to say it than it ever did before. Be the fair man you are. Go back to the beginning, without the prejudice of what's happened to-night, and picture him and every act of his from the time he came to the penitentiary."

There was a long silence. Warden Rand drummed on the table, his eyes on his restless fingers, his brow knitted. The doctor sat motionless, watching him — waiting for him to speak.

"Well," said the warden heavily, at last, "I'll admit it. I've felt that way, it is true — if it does you any good to have me say so. But what difference does it make to-night whether he is innocent or guilty? He's a convict — in there — under life sentence."

"It makes just this difference" — Doctor Kreelmar's hand reached out again and rested on the warden's arm, and his fingers closed with a quick, earnest pressure. "It makes just this difference — if he's an innocent man, he is the man whose love is the kind of love I'd hope for for a daughter of mine — and never expect her to get. Rand, think of it, if that man is innocent, his sacrifice is as nearly analogous as human sacrifice could ever be to that Divine sacrifice of nineteen hundred years ago. I want you to think of it, Rand — we've got to face this thing calmly, old friend — and fight it out — for little Janet."

He drew back his hand and ran it slowly through his hair. Warden Rand leaned a little further forward over the table, his eyes full on the doctor, both hands out before him; the fingers, interlaced, working over each other, the white showing at the knuckles.

"Janet says he did not intend to be seen when he came back to-night," Doctor Kreelmar went on presently. "A love that would impel him to take the risk he took for just a glimpse, a sight of her, is a love few men would be capable of. I told you that I thought I realised what all this meant better than you did — I think I do — because the shock to you has been greater and you are upset now. You said you did not know where he had been during the last half-hour when he left Janet to go to the bridge — I think I can tell you. He was somewhere alone — with his God. Janet was right — he has given himself up for her. It is not the man who would have suffered in the years to come, it is the woman — Janet. His love had brought him back once, and he had agreed to go with her; if that love had brought him back once when he did not know she loved him — you said she only told him so to-night — it would bring him back again a thousand times more surely when he knew she cared for him — and the next time he would not stop even where he stopped to-night. He took the only way he saw to save her from — himself. I am not a very big man, Rand, not big enough even to grasp it all — there is a great strength there, and a magnificent weakness, born of love, that enhances the strength, for the strongest man is the man who knows his weakness and shackles it at any cost. Rand" — he paused, and his voice broke a little — "Rand, I don't know how you feel about it — but I feel, somehow, that I'd like to be a better man."

It was a long time before the warden spoke. Neither man looked at the other — the warden's eyes were on the table — Doctor Kreelmar had risen impulsively from his

chair as he finished speaking, and had walked to the window.

"All this may be so," said the warden, breaking the silence — his voice was steadier now, but very low, very sober. "I believe it is so, Kreelmar — but does it help us any? Does it do anything but — but make it harder?"

Doctor Kreelmar turned from the window and came back to the table.

"Yes," he said earnestly; "it helps. And it does more than that — it shows us the way. Assuming Varge's innocence, we must *prove* it — it forces us to prove it, to probe this thing to the very bottom. It gives us not only the right to do it, but it makes it our duty to do it — for Janet's sake alone, if for no other reason."

Warden Rand smiled a little wanly.

"It is not an easy thing to do," he said dully.

"Perhaps not," admitted Doctor Kreelmar. "But we've got to try. To begin with, Varge is as much a doctor as I am, all but the name, and it will be natural enough for you to detail him to the infirmary where he will be with me."

"You mean," asked the warden quickly, "that you think you can make him speak for himself — on account of what's happened to-night — on account of — of Janet?"

"No," said Doctor Kreelmar thoughtfully. "No; I have little or no hope of that. In fact, there is less likelihood than ever of it. If he would have spoken, it was his way out to-night — and he went back there instead. No; I was not thinking of that — it simply solves the

problem of his immediate disposal, that's all. It is somebody else who must be made to speak — not Varge."

The warden shook his head doubtfully.

"It is not an easy thing to do," he repeated, passing his hand backward and forward across his forehead in a troubled way. "Who will find this somebody?"

"I will," said the little doctor grimly.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### MRS. MERTON'S REQUEST

**“V**ARGE, Mrs. Merton is very ill.”

Varge laid down the phial in his hand and looked up gravely into the face of Doctor Kreelmar, who had just entered the little prison laboratory.

“I did not know,” he said in a low voice. “I did not know that she was even sick.”

“Been failing,” said Doctor Kreelmar brusquely, “ever since — hum! — all summer.”

Varge's eyes, still grave, but questioning now, held on the doctor.

There was a long pause.

“She's asked to see you,” said the little doctor. “The district attorney endorsed her request and sent it to the governor. The governor has granted it with the proviso that you go without coercion — of your own free will. It is your right to refuse. Do you want to go?”

Varge turned to the barred window at his side and stood silently looking out. The prison yard was dotted here and there with grey-and-black striped forms, some moving hurriedly, some with slouching gait, as they went about the errands upon which they were engaged. His eyes fixed for an instant on a gang of fifty or more convicts who were busy on an excavation at the corner of the power-house, which was to be enlarged — then swept to the grey walls, topped by guards with carbines on their

arms pacing ceaselessly to and fro, that bounded his range of vision.

The horror, the agony, the hopelessness of the three days since he had been back, the torture of his thoughts through the black of sleepless nights, had been a hell of madness sapping at his reason, his strength, his resolution, like unto which the prison days before had been as a deep, still peace. Mind and body, soul and spirit had been in torment — and the face of Mrs. Merton, that in the days gone by had risen so vividly before him, bringing comfort and a new courage, now had come not at all, or, if it came, came only as some blurred, indefinite, misty thing, almost meaningless — whose power was gone. If he could see her again — fix that face, every lineament, in his mind anew — restore the power to this talisman!

His glance shifted to a little group just below the window. A visitor, being shown through the prison, lagged a few steps behind the guard who was conducting him and furtively passed a piece of tobacco to a convict. The convict looked up, met Varge's eyes and grinned.

Why did Mrs. Merton want to see him? What was her reason for the strange request? Why — but what, after all, did it matter? If he could see her again — restore the efficacy of that sweet old face that he needed now as he had never needed it before! He swung slowly from the window and faced the doctor.

"I will go," he said quietly.

"Hum!" said the doctor. His eyebrows lifted a little, and he stared at Varge curiously. "I had an idea you'd refuse." Then bluntly: "What's your reason for wanting to go?"

A smile, gently satirical, played over Varge's lips and crept into his eyes, as he looked at the doctor.

"Did the governor specify that, too—that I must give my reasons?" he asked dryly.

Doctor Kreelmar's face puckered up instantly, ferociously.

"Confound you!" he snapped. "Sometimes I'd like to wring your confounded neck!—and sometimes—hum!—I wouldn't! Well, we'll go at once, this afternoon; and if the warden says so, I'll drive you over in my buggy."

Without waiting for any reply, Doctor Kreelmar strode out of the laboratory and down the corridor. A guard opened the steel gates for him and he passed through into the entrance hallway beyond, and turned into the warden's office.

"He'll go!" he announced tersely, halting before the warden's desk; then, with a glance toward Stall, the clerk: "Better give him some ordinary clothes to wear, hadn't you? There's no use making him conspicuous over there in the town or in front of her—what?"

"Yes," said Warden Rand. "Stall, get what's necessary." He waited until the clerk had gone out of the room, then he looked searchingly at the doctor. "I didn't think he'd be willing to go," he said suggestively.

"Nor I," said Doctor Kreelmar.

"Did you tell him Mrs. Merton was dying?"

"No—that she was very ill."

"Did he ask why she wanted to see him?"

"No," replied the doctor; "and I didn't tell him. He just looked out of the window for a moment with his back turned to me after I told him she wanted to see

him, but that he could go or not as he chose, and then he said he would go."

The warden's chair squeaked suddenly, as he swerved a little sideways.

"I wonder why he wants to go," he said, with a perplexed frown.

"I was fool enough to ask him," confessed the little doctor, with a grimace. "Wasted breath! That's what I'd like to know myself. I've about lived over in Berley Falls since the other night — you know what I've done — not much — not enough to make us turn up our noses at any straw that blows our way — that story of Mart Robson's is rather interesting — interesting enough to make me especially anxious to find out Varge's reason for this — if I can. It may not mean anything, but I'd like to find out — if I can. I'll drive him over in my buggy — what? As far as his trying to get away is concerned, it would be safe enough to send him over alone."

"Anything," said the warden, rising abruptly from his chair, and his voice caught a little. "Anything, Kreelmar. I — I think her heart is breaking."

"You might send her away for a while," advised the doctor, a little helplessly.

"She won't go" — Warden Rand shook his head wearily.

"No," said Doctor Kreelmar, with sudden and suspicious gruffness. "No; I suppose she won't." He pressed the warden's shoulder sympathetically, then wheeled around and walked quickly to the door. At the threshold he halted for an instant. "You can send Seven-seventy-seven out to the buggy," he called back. "I'll be ready in ten minutes."

## CHAPTER XXIX

### THE HOUSE OF DEATH

**I**T was Doctor MacCausland, the old confrère of Doctor Merton, who admitted them to the house; and who, after a kindly word to Varge, drew Doctor Kreelmar to one side.

"This was against my wish and advice," he said, in a grave undertone. "She is very low and liable to go at any moment, but her mind is still clear and she keeps asking for him constantly. I haven't the heart to refuse — it seems the one thing she wants, and ultimately it can make but little difference as the end is inevitable — a matter of hours at best."

Doctor Kreelmar nodded soberly.

"The warden telephoned you?" he asked.

"Yes," Doctor MacCausland answered; "and I told her you were coming, but she knows you are here now — she heard the buggy wheels. We had better go up. Harold and the nurse are with her and she has insisted that we should all be present."

"Hum!" said Doctor Kreelmar, rubbing his under lip with the knuckle of his thumb and the tip of his forefinger. "What's Harold say about it?"

"Emphatically opposed to it from the first," replied Doctor MacCausland. "He brought on a very bad sinking spell an hour ago from which I was afraid she would not rally by positively refusing to be present. Even that

was barely enough to make him consent. He has not been himself lately, especially since I told him two days ago that there was absolutely no hope for his mother. He is not at all well and has taken it very hard indeed; in fact, his condition is such as to cause me serious anxiety — and he won't listen to advice."

"Hum!" said Doctor Kreelmar again. "Well, then, shall we go up?" He turned and walked back to the door, where he had left Varge standing. "Follow Doctor MacCausland," he said briefly.

"Yes," Varge said quietly, as he obeyed. It seemed as though he were present in some strange place, not actually, but sub-consciously present, and in this strange place the surroundings were strangely familiar, as if, in some other state, they had been part of his life — the pattern of the stair carpet, he remembered every one of the little zigzag lines, the little flowers on the dark-green background — that *closed door* at the right of the hallway, as he had entered. There was a heaviness upon him, oppressing his heart — a great weight that seemed to bear his shoulders down and deprive his steps of buoyancy, his mind of the vitality to rouse itself to the effort of analysis.

Mechanically he followed Doctor MacCausland. They reached the head of the stairs and turned along the upper hallway — and then, suddenly, the mist, the fog, the apathy was gone from him. They were standing before the door of the front-room — *her* room — the scene of her gentle chidings, her reproofs for childhood's waywardness — where, at her knee when bedtime came, he had learned to lisp out "Now I lay me" — where, as he grew older, she had taught him to say — "Our Father."

Softly Doctor MacCausland opened the door and motioned Varge forward.

A man with his back turned — Harold Merton — stood at the window; a nurse, in uniform and cap, rose from a chair at the far side of the bed. Varge looked at neither — it was only the smoothly parted silver hair, the sweet, gentle face it crowned he saw — and it was the past upon him, the past of long ago, with all the old dear, tender intimacy of other years — when she had been his mother. There was eagerness in his step, in his arms — that were involuntarily stretched out toward her. And then halfway to the bed he stopped, his arms dropped to his sides and a greyness crept to his lips. She had turned away her head and covered her face with both her hands.

Doctor MacCausland and Doctor Kreelmar entered the room quietly. The dark eyes of Harold Merton, like burning fires they seemed in his drawn, chalky face, shot a glance over his shoulder — there was a soft rustle of the nurse's dress, as she bent forward a little over the bed.

Between her hands Mrs. Merton's lips moved silently.

Suddenly Varge straightened in a strange, alert, startled way, as though listening intently — that breathing — his trained ear knew it well. He turned, and for an instant looked full into Doctor MacCausland's face; then turned again, his eyes, troubled, anxious, upon the bed.

Slowly Mrs. Merton uncovered her face, and her hand reached out to him.

"Yes; come," she whispered, and tried to smile. "That is — that is why I asked for you."

Through a mist now Varge saw her — but through

the mist he read it all. On his knees by the side of the bed, he buried his face in his hands and bowed his head on the counterpane. Doctor Kreelmar had told him she was very ill; Doctor Kreelmar had not told him — *that she was dying* — that the end was very near. And he had not seen it at first — only the same dear face that he had always known had come back to the galleries of his memory like a retouched picture — he had not seen the change at first — the change that comes but once — forever.

She seemed to be speaking again, very slowly, almost inaudibly — as though to herself — and he could not catch the words. Then her voice rose stronger in fervent earnestness — she was repeating the Lord's Prayer.

*“ . . . Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us — ”*

She did not finish — her voice failed, and there was no sound in the room save a low, suppressed sob from the nurse across the bed.

Presently she spoke again — with an effort, with long pauses when weakness overcame her.

“ I have loved you all your life, Varge, almost as though you had been my own boy — but I could not forgive . . . Harold set me the example and forgave you long ago, but I could not . . . I have prayed that I might, but I could not, for in my bitterness I forgot that I was the only mother you had ever known . . . and that — that perhaps I had failed in some way in my duty to you . . . that I had not tried as I should have tried when you were a little child to make you strong for the years to come.”

Blinding hot the tears were raining through Varge's hands — the great shoulders shook.

Her hand found his head and rested upon it.

"I am going home, Varge," she said. "It would have been very terrible to go in bitterness . . . for He taught us to ask for forgiveness for ourselves as we forgave others . . . I could not do it with my own strength, but He has answered my prayer and now I can forgive, Varge . . . I forgive . . . and I have asked Him for pardon for you, too."

The nurse was sobbing audibly now; wet-eyed, both doctors bowed their heads; Harold Merton was facing the bed, his shoulders bent a little forward, his eyes staring at the scene as though they were held upon it by some horrible fascination that he could not overcome. Varge's face was still buried in his hands — there were no words to say — grief seemed to rend wide his soul; the awfulness of the unconscious irony to appal him.

Again a stillness fell upon the room — a long stillness — and then again she spoke, very faintly, struggling for her words.

"Once — that day — those terrible words I said to you — I have asked for forgiveness for them too — and He seemed to bid me ask it first from you . . . you will forgive me, Varge, and — and try never to remember them — Varge —"

His hand reached up to where hers lay upon his head and drew it down and held it against his face.

"Tell me so, Varge," she whispered.

"I have forgotten them long, long ago," he said brokenly.

Her fingers tightened over his, held there for a little

while, and then, as though strength failed them, fell away.

"It is growing dark," she said. "Harold, are you there? Come nearer — I — I want you to —"

There fell again the silence — then a step sounded behind Varge, and Doctor MacCausland leaned quickly over the bed.

Varge raised his head. She lay back upon the pillows, a great stillness, a great peace upon her face — as though she were asleep. For a moment he looked at her, then he rose from his knees and turned away, seeing nothing, heeding nothing, walking from the room as a blind man walks.

He reached the hall — and, shocked, stood suddenly still, as a fearful cry in shuddering cadence, a cry of the damned, rang through the house.

"Dead!" — it was Harold Merton's voice.

And then the man came rushing upon him from the room, and was pawing at his arms, his shoulders.

"She's dead!" he babbled horribly, wildly, insanely. "She's dead — but you said you'd never speak, Varge — you *swore* you'd never speak —"

Upon Varge in a lightning flash, as he stared into the distorted face, swept the meaning of it all — he had not thought of that; he had not expected Mrs. Merton's death — *the other had* — had expected it for days — and now — Merton was still grasping at him, grasping at his hands; still babbling in the same horrid way.

"— You swore you'd never speak, Varge — you remember that day in the penitentiary — you swore you'd *never* speak — you —"

Doctor Kreelinar had stepped suddenly from the door.

way, stepped between them and his hand fell like a vise on Merton's arm. There was a grim, bulldog look on his face as he thrust it close to Merton's.

"Speak of *what?*" he said, in a low, cold voice.

Merton's face, white, full of terror before, was ghastly now — his eyes were fired with a mad light. He clawed at his collar, and tore at it again and again — clawed at it, swaying upon his feet, until he had got it loose.

"It's a lie! — a lie! — a lie! — a lie!" he screamed — and wriggled inertly to the floor.

"Good heavens!" cried Doctor MacCausland, as he came running into the hall. "What has happened? Ah, I see! I was afraid of this — afraid of a collapse, as I told you. Poor boy, it's been too much for him!"

"Hum!" said Doctor Kreelmar grimly. "Yes; I *think* it has."

## CHAPTER XXX

### THE BARRIERS DOWN

**W**HITISH-GREY in the full, bright moonlight the road stretched out ahead, and all the earth seemed bathed in the soft radiance and there was a great quiet, a deep, still serenity over all, as though Nature herself were taking her repose — no sound but the rhythmic beat of the horse's hoofs, the pleasant rattle of the buggy's wheels.

From the brow of the hill, where, in another world it seemed now, in the far past, in the long ago, Varge had first seen the penitentiary at sunrise, the prison stood outlined in the calm light, the walls traced in black, uncouth shapes, the great dome of the central building rising spectre-like against the sky. Around it the fields, the little village, the sweep of country, white-cloaked in the moon-rays near at hand, gradually merged, blurred and indistinct with distance, into shadow, into night.

What men say to each other when their hearts are full, Doctor Kreelmar and Varge had said. They were silent now — as they had been during the last half of the drive back from Berley Falls.

Upon Varge was still a strange sense of unreality; still but the hesitant understanding when the mind is numbed for a time in the face of some great crisis and there lingers the fancy that one is but living in a world of dreams; vivid dreams, it is true, but dreams from

which none the less surely there must come the awakening — to reality.

Harold Merton had told all — Varge raised his hand and passed it slowly across his eyes. To his soul a coward, Merton must have lived a life of frightful terror for the last two days — from the moment he had known his mother could not live — and then, a nervous wreck, unbalanced, half mad, the collapse had come, and, his fears climaxed by the belief that at last there was nothing to stand between him and his crime, the little hold he had left upon himself had been torn from him and he had made his wild, frantic appeal — a damning confession in itself. It had not been a pleasant sight when the man had become more rational and the little doctor, without mercy, pitilessly, tolerating no word of interference, had probed and dragged the miserable story from Merton, and in the presence of Doctor MacCausland as a witness had made the wretched man sign his confession.

And then — it seemed to ring in Varge's ears yet — they had gone downstairs and left Merton tossing upon his bed, locked in his room, where they had taken him. They had stood in the hall, Doctor MacCausland with white, horror-stricken face, Doctor Kreelmar mopping with his handkerchief at his brow, his jaws clamped and outthrust a little; and then — yes, he could hear it yet — the sullen, muffled report of a revolver shot. It was he who had broken in the door and found Merton a huddled heap upon the floor — that was all — the man had never spoken again — but darkness had fallen and evening had come before Doctor MacCausland had finally straightened up from the bedside, and in strange, awed, reverent

tones had said: "It is over. Thank God he took that way."

That was all — they had started back then, Doctor Kreelmar and himself — and now they were nearing the penitentiary again. A dream? Well, there was another dream then, too, in which sombre shadow, chill and blackness had no place, where there were flowers and trees and blades of grass again, and children prattled in their happy mirth, and there was laughter that was not stilled, and there was no dreariness, no hopelessness — where there was life and love. Life — to *live*; and love, a love so great, so true, so strong, to fill to overflowing all the years to come that God should grant.

Dreams? No — he was no longer dreaming now — it was true — all true. Here were the great walls looming over him — one more night within them, perhaps two, or three at most — and he would never enter them again. Just this once — they were stopping now — there was a light burning in the warden's office — *just this once.*

Doctor Kreelmar's hand fell upon Varge's face.

"Get out!" said the little man crisply.

Varge obeyed quietly; and then, as they both stepped from the buggy, they stood an instant silently facing each other before the prison entrance. Suddenly Doctor Kreelmar snatched for his handkerchief and began to jab at his face.

"Hum!" said he. "Hum! I've got to have a little talk with the warden. I telephoned him before we left. He's waiting for me" — he jerked his thumb toward the office window. "I'll be some time with him, and if I were you I'd walk down the road to the first

house on the left — you ought to know it — what?"

Varge was leaning tensely forward, staring into the other's face.

"You mean," he said, and doubt and hope struggled in his voice, "you mean that —"

"Mean what I say — usually do — make a point of it," snapped the little doctor tartly. "You're a free man, aren't you? — all except some fol-de-rol and fiddle-de-dee red-tape. Your pardon 'll be along in time enough to have it framed and hung up before you get to housekeeping! Meanwhile, I'm responsible for you until I hand you over again, and I'll — hum! — give you an hour. After that, if the warden can't find any better accommodation for you than a cell it'll be a different Bob Rand than I've known for twenty years."

Varge's two hands reached out, closed upon the doctor's shoulders and drew the little man's face suddenly close to his own.

"I can go to her — now?" he said hoarsely, and his fingers tightened fiercely on their hold.

"Confound you!" growled Doctor Kreelmar, wriggling himself loose and rubbing glumly at his shoulder blade, "confound you, keep your hands off me — you're as gentle as a grizzly bear!"

Varge's hands fell away; but he still stared into the other's eyes, a great wonder, a great joy upon his face.

"Hum!" said Doctor Kreelmar, and a chuckle crept into his voice as he turned and started up the penitentiary steps. "I forgot to tell you that I telephoned her too!" — another chuckle, and the little man was gone.

It was like that other night — as though the three days had never been — silent, still and quiet — the moon-

light falling calmly all about, on road and trees and fields — and the shadows of the maples on the driveway were the same.

In Varge's heart was song again, and the melody filled his soul, enraptured him — now low, now high it rang; now triumphant, rising to the heights; now softened, rippling over chords of tenderest harmony — crowning him a king of a wondrous kingdom, where he would reign supreme as monarch, and bow the knee as subject in glad, joyous homage to her love — *this* was his inheritance; the song was his acclaim.

And over all, pervading all, was peace, banishing care and sadness, sorrow and strife — a great peace, bearing him onward, in which he seemed to lose himself until, suddenly, out of the beyond he heard his name in liquid, silvery tones that blended like some divine symphony into the music in his soul.

“Varge — *just* Varge!”

She was coming. She had been waiting, watching for him, and she had heard his step upon the driveway.

Yes; it was like that other night — the soft moonlight playing upon the golden head, lingering upon the pure beauty of her face, touching so reverently the full, glorious throat, caressing again the little, white-clad, graceful form. Yes; like that other night it was — as though he had never left her.

“Janet!” he said, and stretched out his arms. “I am free now — we can go.”

THE END

