did not greatly lessen the satisfaction he felt in having so thoroughly secured her father’s favour. He imagined that Geraldine’s coldness proceeded only from her wish that her father should not suspect her secret communication with him on Laurence Gray’s behalf.

Mr. Lucas, meanwhile, was privately thinking that his daughter did not show enough cordiality to this handsome man who talked so charmingly, and looked at her with adoration in his eyes. The cheery old gentleman fancied that his own presence was a stumbling-block between them. Perhaps, if he left them alone for a little while, Vickers would be able with his clever tongue to stir Geraldine to interest and warmth.

So, shortly after coffee had been served, the well-intentioned father announced that he had a letter to write in his study, and, making his excuses, he left the drawing-room.

This was an opportunity that Vickers had hoped for, yet scarcely dared to expect. His dark face glowed with satisfaction as he crossed the room to where Geraldine sat in a low chair near the now fireless and fern-filled hearth. To be alone with her made his pulses throb. And yet he did not scruple to deceive her.

"I am glad of this chance of speaking to you," he began softly. "I wanted to tell you that there is good news of Laurence—that your protection is still ensuring him comfort and kind treatment."

"Have you had a letter?" asked Geraldine quickly.

"No," was Vickers’s suave reply. He remembered that on the last occasion of his appeal for money she had wanted to see the letter. He must guard against such a request this time.

"No, not a letter," he went on, "only a newspaper. I told the warden that unless he had anything very particular to say he was to communicate with me by means of signs on newspapers. This time he informs me that Laurence is in good health and spirits. He also puts the red ink cross—a sign that he expects more money. Considering the risk he runs, I suppose he deserves it."

"Certainly he deserves it," said Geraldine; "and
if you will give me his name and address outside the prison, I will give it to him.”

Vickers started at these unexpected words.
"You—give it to him!" he exclaimed lightly, and yet with a faint thrill of anxiety in his tone.
"Yes," she replied. "I am going down to Grimley to see Laurence in a few days' time."

An inward trembling shook Ralph Vickers's nerves, and the blood ebbed away from his face. He had not counted on such a move as this. It must be prevented somehow. And yet she must not see that he dreaded it.

He controlled himself to meet the searching of those lovely eyes of hers, that had for him now the coldness of gems rather than the tender softness of the violet. Something in their look told him that her old doubt and dislike of him had revived, and a resentful disappointment filled him with bitterness. But he braced himself to fight against the threatened danger.

"I am afraid you will find it impossible to see him," he said, with assumed regret.

"I have obtained an order to do so," she returned.
"Prisoners are permitted to receive visitors at certain intervals. In any case, I am determined to make the attempt."

"Does Mr. Lucas approve?" Vickers asked, with a fleeting gleam of malignity in his sombre eyes.

She looked at him over the edge of her dainty fan.
"That is a matter entirely between my father and myself," she answered, with dignity.

Rage sent the dark red blood in a torrent to his cheeks and brow. But secret dread clutched like a vulture at his heart. Nevertheless, he kept his soft seductive smile.

"You are cruel to Laurence. Passionately though he must long for a sight of your face, he cannot wish to be seen by you as he is now—close-shaven, degraded, with the broad-arrow mark upon his rough prison clothes."

She smiled coldly.
"Do not be disturbed on his account. He will soon know how little I care for those outward things. It is enough for me that he has not the broad-arrow mark on his heart, as many have whom we meet day by day."
She rose in all the dignity of her graceful beauty, and moved across the room towards the conservatory, where the air was cooler. Without turning his head, Vickers listened to the soft susurrus of her skirts of creamy silk and billowing lace. He hated her and worshipped her at once.

The broad-arrow mark on the heart? What did she mean by that? What did she suspect? Surely not the truth about the crime?

A cold perspiration started out upon his delicate white brow. But in the next moment he had recovered himself, and was smiling at his own fears. She had meant nothing, suspected nothing; the words had only been chance ones. It was his secret guilt, not her intention, that had given them their peculiar fitness.

The soft murmur of her skirts came again. She was re-crossing the room towards him. He rose and stood before her, with his subtle fascination of look and manner, that might well have enthralled the heart of any woman not steeled against him by another love.

"Kindly give me the warder’s name and address," she said, with an imperiousness that made the request a command; "then I shall not trouble you for any further help."

"In what have I been so unfortunate as to offend you?" asked Vickers, with assumed humility.

"We will not discuss that," rejoined Geraldine.

"Give me the address I ask for."

"I cannot."

Geraldine recoiled a few steps.

"You are afraid?" she cried, in mingled scorn and indignation.

"I am afraid for what may come of it," Vickers said coolly. "I promised the warder that no living soul but myself should ever know his name in connection with this affair, and I must keep my word. It is a dangerous business for him at the best, and it would be doubly dangerous if you were to persist in your intention of taking an active part in it. I can disguise myself, and can penetrate into places where your sex and your
delicacy would never permit you to go—places where, even if you should overcome all scruples and venture into them, your beauty and fine clothing would make you too conspicuous. I am better fitted for acting in this matter than you. And I am sure that if Mr. Lucas knew the facts he would uphold me in what I say."

Geraldine looked at him closely.

"You are sheltering yourself behind my father’s authority," she said suspiciously. "And what if I promise you that I will never seek this warden at Grimley, but will only write to him from here—would you tell me his name then?"

Again Vickers shook his head.

"I told you I promised him never to reveal it."

Geraldine smiled at him—a smile of unbelief that goaded him to inward fear and fury.

"You doubt me?" he cried reproachfully.

"I do," she answered, with calm truthfulness. "There is no reason why you should withhold that name from me. It is I who am the principal in this matter, not you."

She moved to and fro over the luxurious carpet, thinking. Then again she stopped before the undetected murderer, who was keeping his place among honest men at the cost of her lover’s anguish."

"Listen, Mr. Vickers," she said. "I am going to Grimley, as I have told you, to visit Laurence. That will be in three days’ time. When I have seen Laurence and heard from his own lips that his condition has been improved by your intercession, then I will give you more money to transmit to the warden in the usual way. Until then I must refuse to trust you."

Ralph Vickers paled with rage and secret terror. He felt, that, had he dared, he could have killed her as she stood there before him—ay, killed her as cruelly and as swiftly as he had killed Charles Kesteven. And yet her beauty dazzled him, overcame his malignant hatred, made him covet her as the only thing in all the world that he cared to win.

Later in the evening he walked home from Fenton Court, baffled, perplexed, fear-stricken. Was his treachery about to be discovered?
For a moment he thought of using his influence with Mr. Lucas to prevent him from taking his daughter to Grimley. But he soon realised that this hope was vain. His word carried weight with the kind-hearted old merchant, but the wishes of his dear child would be weightier still.

Then suddenly an idea flashed on Vickers, bringing certain relief. If Laurence Gray had been ill-treated as Warder Gannaway averred, and had rebelled in consequence, he must have lost all privileges, and as a result would not be permitted to see any visitors whatsoever. If Geraldine went to Grimley she would go in vain! The very persecution of which Laurence had to complain cut him off from opportunity of complaint.

Vickers, on reaching his room, gathered together what money he had and sent it to Gannaway with a letter, in which he commanded him not to relax for a single day his harshness towards Convict 99. The letter was type-written. Vickers was far too clever to risk possible detection by handwriting.

He had now but one more difficulty to face. But that was a serious one. Where should he get money where-with to continue the bribery? Geraldine would give him no more unless he gave her proof of the faithfulness of his trust. And he would need a large sum by and by as the reward for Laurence Gray's premature death.

CHAPTER XVII

THE CROWNING SORROW

On the night after the disappearance of his treasured letter, Laurence Gray did not sleep a single instant. It was partly the pain from his wounded hand that kept him awake; but more than all, it was bitter mental anguish. When Gannaway had served him his supper, Laurence had accused him of taking the letter, to which the warder had replied with a savage and abusive denial. In the morning Laurence had put his broom outside his door as a sign that he wanted to see the governor, and on the governor's arrival he had complained to
him of the theft of his letter, and stated his suspicions of the warder. But in reply to Captain Podmore’s questioning Gannaway had stoutly denied having touched the “precious document,” or even known where it was kept. As a prisoner’s word is never, under any circumstances, taken against an official’s, the governor had merely shrugged his shoulders, and turned away, remarking drily that No. 99 must have swallowed his letter himself.

Little did Laurence dream that almost at that same moment his missing treasure—Geraldine’s cherished message—sent by Gannaway, was being delivered by the first post to Ralph Vickers.

His hand was now daily getting better. Once a day the doctor, accompanied by the apothecary, came round to see him in his cell. Their visit always took place during the dinner-hour, and whatever medicine was given had to be taken at once, between mouthfuls of his food. Sometimes, unless he had prepared something to receive it, the evil-smelling ointment given him by the hurrying doctor would be dabbed down on the side of his tin dinner-plate. Then Laurence, accustomed as he had been to refinement and cleanliness, would turn sick, and could eat no more.

Meanwhile, the persecutions of the warder continued. While Laurence’s hand was bad, and he could not get out with the quarry-gang, Gannaway was perforce baffled during the day. But in the evening and the early morning he made Laurence pay the penalty of this respite. His ingenious system of constant worrying must have cost him a good deal of planning. Every petty torment that the low cunning of an ignorant and greedy man could devise he inflicted on his innocent victim, whose gentlemanhood held him patient under tyranny that would have goaded an ordinary convict to furious self-defence. Laurence might have acted differently had he suspected the warder of personal ill-will against him—had he guessed that Gannaway was the hired tool of an outside enemy. But as it was, he thought he was being treated only as the rest of the convicts were treated—strictly in accordance with the
prison rules—and he submitted to these cruelties as a necessary part of the great affliction which Fate had dealt out to him.

But worse was yet to come. One morning, when Laurence was cleaning his cell, he found, stuck in under the flaps of his little table, a sharp and formidable-looking weapon of steel, which he quickly recognised to be one of the blades of a pair of large shears, such as those used in the tailors' shop of the prison. He started back in astonishment, gazing at the blade. How came it there? Who had brought it and hidden it so between the joints of the table? He could have sworn it was not there on the day before.

Although at imminent risk of being disturbed, since now was the time for the cell doors to be flung open, and for the prisoners to commence washing their portion of the gallery floor, Laurence stood with the blade in his hand. A suspicion entered his brain that it had been placed in his cell with the deliberate object of tempting him to suicide. It had been newly sharpened at the point, and it offered an easy death, such as many a convict whom he had spoken to hourly longed for. Many a poor wretch, who was planning to cut short his life with the edge of a button sharpened on his cell floor, or with a rusty nail, would have leapt at such a chance as was offered by this weapon. As by a flash, Laurence now remembered how often Gannaway's abusive talk to him had contained suggestions of suicide, such as "If this 'ere life isn't good enough for the likes of you, why d'you keep going on in it?" or, "If I was such a miserable wretch as you, I'd kill myself, that I would!"

But Laurence would not kill himself. Not for a single instant had the hideous thought lingered in his mind. Self-murder might be well enough for the cowardly and the guilty; but not for a brave man whose honour and conscience were stainless, and who, if there were justice in either heaven or earth, would assuredly ere long be free. To kill himself—while Geraldine lived and loved him! Such an act would be madness; and even had there been no Geraldine, if the whole world were as dark for him as was the inside of those
prison walls, yet the memory of his mother would have stayed his despairing hand, and the Lancashire endurance in him would have borne him through until God sent the end of His own will.

What was he to do with the dangerous implement? The discovery of it in his cell by any of the warders meant that he would have to pay a bitter penalty. To give it up voluntarily to Gannaway would be as dangerous as keeping it concealed, for Gannaway had never yet believed him. He resolved to wait till dinner-time, and then ask for the governor, and explain the facts to him. Meanwhile he carefully hid the blade again in the place where he had found it, and went out to the light work that had lately been allotted him of attending to the stove in the tailors' shop. He little dreamed what that delay would cost him.

At dinner-time, when he returned to his cell, the blade was gone. Scarcely had he recovered from his surprise at this discovery, when a warder—not Gannaway—summoned him to the governor's presence.

The governor was seated in a little room like an office, with the chief warder at his right hand, and Warder Gannaway standing deferentially near by. Laurence was placed in a kind of cage, a space divided off from the rest of the room by thick iron bars. He saw the missing shear-blade lying on the table before the governor.

"Number-Ninety-nine," said the governor, lifting the weapon, "this blade has been found in your cell. You know that the possession of such a thing as this is an offence against the bye-laws of the prison, and renders you liable to severe punishment."

"If you please, sir," cried Laurence, "I had nothing to do with the bringing of that blade into my cell. I found it there this morning when I got up, and I left it there, meaning to give it to you at the dinner hour. But it seems that while I was out of my cell the man who put it there took it away again."

The governor's fierce moustaches seemed to bristle in contemptuous disbelief.

"Pooh! pooh!" he retorted sharply. "I've heard that sort of tale before. Who do you think is likely
to hide anything in your cell? I think it far more probable that what Warder Gannaway suspects is true—that you secreted this weapon in order to make a des-
tardly attack upon him. Ever since your ridiculous suspicions about the taking of your letter, your conduct
towards him has been violent, and your language abusive.
I sentence you to seven days in a dark cell, and the loss of forty-eight marks."

Laurence caught desperately at the bars in front of him. The dark cells! Prisoners who had been in them said that hell itself could scarcely be worse.

Oh, the agony of those seven days! The agony of darkness—a darkness so thick as to be almost palpable —horrible, suffocating. the agony of solitude, of utter desolation and abandonment such as make the strongest
mind rock in the balance between sanity and madness, and force from out the bravest heart wild prayers for death! And lastly, the agony of time—of moments that are dragging hours, of hours that stretch to centuries.

Stripped of his outer clothing, and deprived of every article or utensil that might aid him in a possible attempt
at self-murder, Laurence heard the heavy door clang to,
and found himself in a darkness that was as the dark-
ness of the tomb. His feet that were covered only by
his socks at once felt the damp coldness of the stone
floor. The cell was empty of furniture saving only a
stool and a plank bed.

At first he neither ate nor drank the bread and
water that were given to him, but fought with his des-
pair, turning and tossing throughout the night on his
hard plank bed of punishment. His head throbbing,
his brain fevered and his weary limbs stiff with cold
under the miserable coverlets, for although it was
still summer-time the cell was like a refrigerator.

The only diet allowed him for the first three days
was half a pound of dry bread morning and evening,
with as much cold water as he wished to take. On the
fourth day a dish of thin gruel was added. The opening
of the trap-door for the passing in of this food formed
the sole diversion that was permitted. For the rest
of the time Laurence could only lie upon his plank, pace
the few feet of the floor, or crouch, motionless, in a corner, thinking. A man must have a wonderfully well-balanced and cultivated mind who can find resource in the pleasures of fancy under such conditions.

Laurence Gray, undistracted by outward light, saw inward things more clearly. He went over all the incidents of Charles Kesteven's murder as he remembered them, striving to find a clue, a suggestion that should lead him to the truth. He assured himself passionately that if he were only free he would certainly discover and track down the perpetrator of the crime whose bitter weight of punishment had fallen unjustly upon himself.

He was a changed man when he came forth from the dark cell. The semi-starvation had thinned him, weakened the splendid fibre of his limbs, and the slow, numbing torture of blackness and solitude had brought a wild look into his eyes. His face was marble-like in its deadly pallor, but it had not even yet lost its nobility.

It was at dinner-time when he was taken back to his old cell. He was eating his portion of fat boiled mutton when his door opened and the prison chaplain entered. Laurence was glad to see his reverend face. There was something of comfort in the presence of this good old clergyman.

Laurence rose and offered his wooden stool but the chaplain declined it.

"No, no," he said kindly, "sit down. You look weak and ill. I will stand." Then he added with sorrowful tenderness: "I was deeply grieved to hear of your punishment."

"It was wrongfully given," cried Laurence passionately. "I know nothing of the thing they accused me of having hidden. Somebody else must have brought it into my cell."

The chaplain looked perplexed and troubled. It was not often that a convict's protestations of innocence were worthy of belief, and yet, in spite of himself, he felt inclined to believe Laurence now.

"If that is so," he said gravely, "pray to God for strength to forgive the man who wronged you. Ask
God to forgive him, too; for his guilt is heavier with all the weight of your suffering. And guilt without punishment is harder far, could we but see things truly, than punishment without guilt. The man whose soul is stainless is only ennobled and purified by unjust suffering."

The wild look died out of Laurence’s eyes. He drew a deep breath of relief.

"The worst of such punishment is that it sometimes brings severer ones in its train," pursued the chaplain.

"You lose your marks, and consequently your privileges.

"For instance, yesterday a visitor called with an order to see you. But, because of your temporary loss of good-conduct marks, she had to be sent away again."

Laurence sprang up, letting his dinner-tin fall on the bare slate floor.

"She! Was it a lady?" he cried.

"Yes."

"And she was sent away—told that I could not see her because I was undergoing punishment for ill-conduct?"

"I am afraid so."

"Oh! oh!" cried Laurence, swaying for a moment uncertainly, as though a physical blow had been dealt him. He locked his hands together hard, and then flung them wildly above his head. "Oh, my God, have pity on me! have pity on me!"

He fell on his knees on the bare floor, and, flinging his arms across the stool, leaned his head upon them and sobbed bitterly—dry, tearless, convulsive sobs that shook his whole frame.

Tears came into the white-haired chaplain’s eyes. It was terrible and pitiful to see that strong man in his prison clothes, with the hideous black arrow marked upon them, kneeling there, shaking like a leaf with violent grief.

Laurence had forgotten that he was not alone. But presently he found the chaplain kneeling at his side, and heard his comforting voice.

"Ask God for help to bear. He will help you. No suffering human creature ever yet called to Him in vain."

"Ah, you do not know," sobbed Laurence brokenly.
"She was all I had in the world—all, all! No father, no mother—no one but her. And she loved me, trusted me through it all. Ten years in that dark cell would not have hurt me so much as this—that she should come to see me, and should hear that I was in disgrace."

"Pray God to set it right," murmured the chaplain.

"He can and He will."

"At least," cried Laurence, "I can write to her. It will soon be six months since I wrote the last letter. I can write. What! does my punishment take away that privilege, too?"

He had read the answer in the good clergyman's face. With a dull cry he sank down upon the floor, and lay there sobbing. The bell for the return to work resounded through the echoing iron walls.

CHAPTER XVIII
DEADLY NIGHTSHADE

One evening when Laurence was suffering from an unusually bitter instance of Gannaway's tyranny, Warder O'Reilly looked in upon him.

"My bhoy, look here," he said, "it's meself that believes that Gannaway's just being paid by somebody outside the prison to put the screw on yez. He never treated any one so devilish bad before, at all, at all. Ay, and it's amazin' flush of the rhino he's been ever since yez came to live wid us at Grimley, me bhoy. Don't say nowt about it, ye mind now; but keep yer eye on him, and yez'll see. Faith, and it's just bribed he's been."

These words sank deep in Laurence's mind. He pondered over them day and night. Since he had heard of Geraldine's fruitless visit, his character seemed to have altered. Deadened to all outward things by his gnawing heart-anguish, he had grown reckless, and had given Gannaway many an opportunity for getting him into trouble. So merciless was the warder now become, that but for the ministrations of the good chaplain, Laurence's life in prison would have been unbearable.
DEADLY NIGHTSHADE

But this suggestion of O'Reilly's made him his former self again. It threw a sudden light upon his path, where before all had been darkness. Everything that had happened to him, viewed by this light took a new aspect, and pointed clearly to an outside enemy. But who was that enemy?

He asked himself first who had any motive for injuring him. There was but one man possible, and that was Ralph Vickers, whose openly-declared love for Geraldine made it likely that he would rejoice at the degradation of his successful rival. Yet even Vickers had been his friend! Laurence remembered now how often he had playfully rebuked Geraldine for her groundless mistrust of him. But that mistrust of hers weighed with him now. He saw it no longer as feminine caprice, but as true insight, a Heaven-sent warning against the villain who was to wreck her happiness.

The embezzlements must have been done by Vickers. And, great Heaven! was it possible that the crime also had been committed by him to cover those embezzlements—to silence the voice of Charles Kesteven, who was about to make the disclosure of the office accounts? And, this done, was it Vickers who had falsified the accounts, transferring the deficiencies from his own books to those of his innocent friend?

These questionings, which, ever since the time of his first examination by the magistrate, had been vaguely haunting him, now became vivid probabilities. His former doubts amounted now almost to certainties.

From the moment when this conviction presented itself, Laurence Gray resolved to make his escape from Grimley. The consciousness of his own innocence took away all wrong from the act. He might fail; but the attempt was worth trying. If he did fail, his hardships could scarcely be increased. If he succeeded, he would prove his innocence and that other's guilt, would redeem his life, redeem Geraldine—oh, the sweetness of that last hope!

Unceasingly, day and night, he pondered how his escape should be made. He saw with his own eyes, as well as heard from what the other lags told him, how
terribly difficult a thing it was to get away from a convict prison. Even to venture the attempt required a degree of daring of which only the most desperate and determined man could be capable.

Laurence quickly saw that escape from inside the prison was absolutely impossible. His only chance lay in profiting by a moment in which the guards’ eyes might be off him during the outdoor work, and then trusting to his swiftness of foot.

On account of the lingering weakness of his hand he had for a time been occupied in the tailors’ shop, minding the pressing-irons at the stove, but when his hand was well he was to be sent again to outdoor labour. He asked to be put with a clearing gang instead of with the quarrymen, and his request was granted. He had hoped by this chance to avoid Gannaway, but he soon learned that his enemy had followed him even here. His new gang was engaged in clearing a tract of waste land previous to bringing it under cultivation. This piece of land was at a considerable distance from the prison, for year by year the penal-colony thrust its reclaiming hands farther out into the desolate wilds that lay around it. Here it was a far-stretching waste of tangled brambles, with patches of coarse grass, and about a quarter of a mile below was the river, narrow at this point, but deep.

Every day when he went out, Laurence carefully, but furtively, reconnoitred the ground. Covert talk about escape is frequent among convicts, and an old lag had once told him that some years before a convict working at gardening farther up by the prison had at a happy moment made a run for it, and would have got clean off if he had been a swimmer, but the river stopped him, and while he was searching for a fording-place he was recaptured.

Laurence almost smiled to himself now as he thought that the river would have no power to stop him. He had been a clever swimmer from his boyhood. He readily resolved that should he ever have the chance he would swim along with the stream, and not attempt to cross direct, and if the warders’ bullets should be sent after
him, he would swim under water and so escape them. His greatest danger, however, lay in his prison clothing and his cropped head. These make it well-nigh impossible for a convict to escape very far, and there is a standing reward of £3 for the capture of an escaping prisoner. To this the prison governor often adds a liberal gratuity, as he has to forfeit £500 for every man who escapes. Consequently the whole countryside is always on the lookout for men with cropped heads and the broad-arrow mark.

Laurence knew this, and was tormented with the fear of final recapture. But there was no help for it. He must be bold and trust to his fate. He was resolved now, and he bided his time, waiting for his chance.

One morning, while his gang were at work, the man next him—a middle-aged man, doing five years for burglary—carelessly picked some berries that were growing among the tangled furze, and was about to put them in his mouth, when an old convict, whom Laurence recognised as his acquaintance, the ex-doctor from Mayfair, caught his hand, saying excitedly:

"What are you up to, man? Those berries are rank poison—the *atropa belladonna*—one of the deadliest poisons in the world."

"Ugh!" muttered the ex-burglar, flinging the black berries away. "Poison, eh? Well, I don't want to kick the bucket yet, mate. Got a few more cribs to crack before then," and he went on with his work.

Laurence observed that the attention of another of the gang had been arrested by the mention of poison, a young lag who was in for twenty years for manslaughter. The young man stepped forward to examine the berries that his companion had thrown away, and day after day he continued to hover near the bush from which they had been gathered.

Laurence Gray was too deeply absorbed in his own plans to seek to penetrate his fellow-prisoner's intentions. He did not dream that the fulfilment of those intentions would bring him the opportunity he himself waited for.
CHAPTER XIX

FOR LIBERTY AND LOVE

The sixth morning after the five-year man's careless picking of the deadly nightshade berries dawned foggy, and it was at first thought that the outdoor gangs would not be allowed to go beyond the prison walls. But after a while the fog cleared away, and they went out as usual. Only a slight ground mist lingered in the raw air, clinging to the undulations of the desolate land.

But even this slight mist was enough to help one of the convicts to the death he desired. Unseen by the warders or the civil guards, unnoticed also by Laurence Gray, the young lag who was doing his twenty years for manslaughter crept up to the brambles over which the belladonna trailed, and began to eat the fatal black berries with a wild eagerness that would have been terrible for any human eye to behold. When he had eaten a large quantity of them, he went back to the rest of the gang with a strange smile on his face.

Soon afterwards Laurence observed—although without suspecting the dreadful cause of it—that he was working with remarkable speed and vigour. His eyes had a glassy brightness, two red spots burned in his cheeks, and his whole body seemed to have been suddenly endowed with marvellous strength. He laboured on the hard ground with herculean force. The over-look ing warders approved, and the rest of the gang wondered, little thinking that it was the last time he would work among them.

The fog, which had been rolling up again, began to thicken ominously. Laurence glanced about him. Presently, if the fog continued, he might make his long-meditated attempt at escape. But he must wait for a favourable moment. His heart sank a little as he observed the civil guard were gradually closing in around the prisoners.

He worked on unceasingly, yet with his whole attention concentrated upon the movements of the warders. Once, on looking up, he caught Gannaway's eye fixed
curiously upon him. A thrill ran through his veins. Did the tyrannous warder suspect anything. Could he read his thoughts?

He little guessed that Gannaway would even have suggested escape to him if he only dared, in order that he might shoot him down and win his reward from Ralph Vickers.

The fog grew denser. Laurence dreaded at every moment to hear the great bell of the prison ringing to call the convicts in. The warders pressed in about the gangs. But suddenly there was a commotion; shriek after shriek rent the heavy air.

The man who had eaten the deadly nightshade was in the convulsions of death!

Warders and convicts alike were seized with consternation. Now was the time for escape.

Laurence gave a look around, assured himself that even Gannaway had turned aside. Stealthily he crept away from the ranks, looked round again to make sure that he was not being watched, and then darted off towards the river.

Away—away, over the wild waste land, down into the valley he ran with all his speed, making a zigzag course, lest any of the guards, seeing him, should fire their rifles. Some of the convicts had seen him start off, but they said no word. And in the very instant of his flight the prison-bell clanged out its summons to return.

But scarcely had its first harsh note rung through the ever-thickening air when Laurence, running madly down the slope, heard a warder's shrill whistle. His flight had been discovered; the whistle was the sound of the alarm!

He trusted to the fog to screen him. But already he could hear the footsteps of his pursuers. The fog would not screen him from them.

A moment later a shot whizzed through the air, striking him sharply. He stumbled and fell. The footsteps came nearer and nearer to him. He heard Gannaway's voice, and then darkness closed over his quivering senses.

On the following day Ralph Vickers received a letter
from Warder Gannaway containing this announcement:
   "Shot in trying to escape."

Below these words was a red ink cross.

Vickers, never doubting that his victim was dead, leaned back in his chair with a deep-drawn breath of relief.

"I am safe at last," he muttered to himself triumphantly. "Safe at last!"

CHAPTER XX

THE INFIRMARY WARD

When Laurence Gray recovered consciousness he found himself lying upon a stretcher in the prison infirmary. He felt a dull aching in his side and back. He was faint from loss of blood, but he quickly realised that he had been trying to escape, and that his attempt had failed. Despair crept over him at the recollection. He knew that his condition, even if he should recover from the shot-wound that he had received, would now be worse than ever, that his punishment would be far more terrible than had been all the tyranny of Gannaway, and all the mental and physical torture that he had hitherto endured.

Two of the infirmary orderlies were undressing him. The doctor meanwhile was examining the dead convict who had eaten the poisonous berries, but finding that the suicide was beyond medical aid, he now came to Laurence, and, turning him over, made an examination of his wound. Gannaway's bullet had entered his left side. Fortunately for Laurence it had glanced aside after striking one of the ribs, and no vital organ was seriously injured. But Warder Gannaway, on seeing the doctor probing the wound, 'did not for a moment doubt that Convict 99 was done for. He remained no longer in the hospital, but hurried out to his gallery, took the roll of the prisoners under his charge, and was not sorry when the bell rang for the change of warders.

That night he sent off his letter to Mr. John Hardy
—the name by which Ralph Vickers was known to him—announcing what had happened, and demanding his blood-money. He had not waited to learn if Gray was really dead; indeed, so far as his own share in the transaction was concerned, he did not care. It was sufficient for him to know that he had obeyed Vickers's diabolical orders, and had seized the first chance of shooting Laurence Gray. He was heartily glad of being able thus to bring to a climax the risky business that he had been engaged in. He had lived in constant fear of being discovered taking bribes, and he now saw his opportunity of ending his danger by claiming the final lump sum that had been promised him as his reward for Gray's death. Already his special harshness to Gray had been noticed by the other warders, and Jerry O'Reilly in particular had dropped some very pregnant hints on the matter.

"Bedad!" the Irish warder had said one evening in the public house where they were wont to meet; "it's mortal strange, me boy, that yez can afford to treat us like this, and you wid a wife and childer to keep. It's little a Government officer like you an' me can earn on the top of his wages; and what's twenty-one shillings a week, at all, at all? But so flush of the rhino as ye are, Mither Gannaway, I'd just like to be after askin' how yez manage it?"

"I've nothing but my wages, Jerry; I swear it," said Gannaway.

"What? And wasn't it five shillings that yez spent here on the drink only last Saturday night? Arrah! be careful, boy, be careful now."

"Well, if you must know," returned Gannaway, "I had a few quid left me by my old aunt that died a few months ago."

"Well, well, then, me boy, if that's the way of it, all right. But, d'ye see, it's mighty suspicious-lookin' when a man has such a full pocket; and it was just meself that was remembeering about the lag that was put into chokey last week for having the tobacco in his cell. Of course we all know fine that the weed couldn't get inside the walls of its own accord. Many's the pretty
bribe I might have pocketed myself for smuggling in a
taste of it to a lag. But it wouldn’t do, me boy; no,
faith! I’d sooner send in me resignation to her Majesty
at wans.”

“You make a mistake if you think I’ve been taking
in tobacco to any lag,” said Gannaway. “I wouldn’t
run the risk.”

“No, yours is a safer game, eh? What about No.
99, now? Ah, it’s devilish hard yez are on the poor
boy. Shure, it’s a decent well-behaved gentleman that
he is, if he’s only left alone. What’s the good of puttin’
the screw on him so mighty hard? Why don’t yez
pocket the bube and leave him alone?”

Gannaway made a sullen retort. He knew very
well that his harsh conduct towards Gray was becom-
ing the talk of the whole prison, and he was in terror
lest the cause of his severity should reach the ears of
the Principal. Accordingly, the climax that had now
arrived gave him supreme satisfaction. He determined
that when he received the expected reward from London
he would quietly make the money secure, and as soon
as possible apply for removal to another station.

Until his letter of application to Vickers was actually
posted he believed that Gray was beyond the doctor’s
skill; and it was only on the next morning, when he
was called upon to attend the perfunctory inquest upon
the body of the suicide, that he heard that Convict 99
was alive and progressing well.

This discovery made no difference to him, however.
Vickers would never know any better.

“But if there’s any particular reason why he wants
him out of the way,” Gannaway said to himself, “why,
he’ll be just as comfortable believing he’s underground
as if he really was there.”

Laurence Gray was badly wounded, and his loss of
blood weakened him terribly. But the shot had been
extracted, and the doctor, who was a humane man,
had given Laurence an early hint that he was out of
danger. The comfort and the better food of the infirmary
ward were welcome to him, as they always must be to a
wretched and half-starved convict.
Among the Grimley prisoners every conceivable device was resorted to in order to gain admission to the hospital, and the pains taken by convicts to sham an illness were unending. Many, while at work, would deliberately maim themselves, or they would eat soap, and, foaming at the mouth, make pretence of having fits. They would even chew glass so that they might spit blood and persuade the doctor that they had pulmonary haemorrhage. Fainting fits were frequent; but in order to test the reality of the illness, both real and sham invalids were treated alike. A great bucketful of cold water was thrown over them, and the process, though hard upon the genuinely sick prisoner, was a speedy means of exposing a malingering. Every one who complains of illness in prison is regarded with suspicion. Many a man among his fellow-convicts would have willingly changed places with Laurence Gray for the sake of the daily glass of port, the beef-tea, and other luxuries with which he was indulged.

But Laurence had not been long upon his sick-bed before he learned that the bitter penalties that he had foreseen were all too surely threatening him. The prison governor was furious. The fine of £500 exacted by Government on the successful escape of a prisoner had been so nearly forfeited that Captain Podmore now looked upon Convict 99 as his personal enemy, and he determined to punish him to the fullest extent in his power.

No more now—not for years—could Laurence hope to hold communication with the outside world that for him meant only Geraldine Lucas, his beloved, his friend, his all.

CHAPTER XXI

FATHER AND CHILD

"Ah, yes. Ralph Vickers is a fine fellow—a thorough business man, and at the same time a thorough gentleman, upright and honourable. He's come to be my right hand in the office. I think of making him my junior partner."
Mr. Lucas made these remarks at the close of a little speech on business matters as he sat at break- fast with his daughter one morning in late autumn.

Geraldine did not answer. But her father saw that she did not look pleased, and he sighed as he leaned back in his chair.

"I wish you liked him better, my dear," he said. "I wish that every day."

"Why, father?" asked Geraldine, with a sudden fear at her heart.

"Well, in the first place, because he deserves it. And, secondly, because I should be very well pleased if you could reward him for his long devotion to you."

"Father!"

Geraldine had started violently and grown pale. Mr. Lucas bent forward with an earnest look in his kindly blue eyes. But before he spoke again his gaze dwelt anxiously on her delicate face, dead-white as a narcissus petal above the dark heliotrope colour of her dress.

"You are getting pale and thin, Geraldine," he said tenderly. "You fret too much. This will never do. If it goes on I shall have you ill."

"It is nothing," she returned, smiling. But her father shook his head.

"It is very hard for me to see you sacrificing your health and happiness and beauty to the memory of a bad man, my dear."

Instantly her too colourless cheeks were flooded with vivid crimson.

"Oh, father, can you speak so?" she exclaimed, in bitter reproach. "Laurence is not a bad man. Have you—you!—turned utterly against him now?"

Mr. Lucas's cheery face clouded at sight of her pain.

"It is right that we should be merciful, my child," he said gently. "I, as you know, have never been quick to condemn any man. But we must not be blind. I loved Laurence Gray almost as my own son, and it has been hard for me to withdraw my trust from him. I fought against the facts as long as I could. But now I am convinced that he is an embezzler, and in all probability a murderer. His bad conduct in prison,
too, makes his guilt certain. Such a man, Geraldine, has no right to a place in your pure heart; and if he had loved you, would he have acted so as to forfeit the privilege of writing to you, let alone seeing you? No, no, my child. He's bad; irretrievably bad!"

The flush had faded again from Geraldine's face, leaving her deadly white as before.

"More than that," continued her father warmly, "you don't think it, and can't help it, but it is a disgrace for you to have been engaged to a man who is now in penal servitude, branded for life. People talk of it a great deal—that you, my good, beautiful girl, who hardly knew what crime meant should be betrothed to a convict! It is a great grief to me, Geraldine—a very great grief."

And the old merchant's eyes filled with tears.

"It will all come right in time, father," said Geraldine, rising and putting her arms lovingly around his neck. "But you must not ask me to give up my faith in Laurence. I cannot. I believe in him still, as strongly as ever. That report of his prison offences made me waver a little—for a time—but now I am convinced that there is some terrible mistake—if not something worse—at the bottom of it all. Every day since then I have been thinking over it, trying to find a clue to the mystery. What about these investigations you told Laurence's solicitor to make? Have they resulted in nothing?"

"They are abandoned," answered Mr. Lucas sadly. "I saw that it would be of no use to continue them."

She drew away from him quickly. A rush of sudden tears blinded her beautiful eyes.

"I don't ask you to lose faith in Gray, Geraldine," said her father, turning towards her, "but I think it right that you should give up all personal connection with him. Why should you hesitate? His own acts have broken the engagement between you. Besides, what is the good of keeping it up? He will not come out of prison until his time is finished. He will be dead to the world for at least twenty years. Indeed, young Vickers said he thought it very likely he would never come out at all, considering the terrible hardships
of the life, especially if he continues to behave badly, and so bring upon himself these extraordinary punishments?"

"Ralph Vickers said that?" interrupted Geraldine, stopping suddenly in her walk to and fro.

"Yes," replied Mr. Lucas, not noticing the passionate meaning that underlay the quietness of her tone—not knowing, either, how every word of his was stabbing her young heart. "He said so some time ago, and I must say I agree with him. It grieves me very deeply to reflect that Gray's behaviour in prison has been such as to draw upon him punishment that is only given to the worst prisoners."

Geraldine did not speak. She was pacing the room again, slowly, full of inward tumult.

"I am getting old," continued her father, with a little sigh," and I should like to see you settled in case anything should happen to me. I want to see you safe in the care of a husband who loves you and will devote his life to you—one in whom, after long trial, I can repose perfect confidence. Ralph Vickers is such a man, Geraldine—open-hearted, noble to the core, and deeply in love with you."

"Did he tell you he was in love with me?" asked Geraldine quickly.

"I have seen it for a long time," answered her father, with a sagacious smile. "But yesterday I taxed him with it, and he confessed it. I promised to speak to you on the subject, and his face showed his gratitude. I should certainly be glad, my child, if you could set aside your prejudices against him and see him as he is. I am growing attached to him, and could receive him very heartily as my son. I should like to be assured that my wealth and business would pass into the hands of one who would well look after them."

Mr. Lucas looked at his daughter appealingly. To his surprise her whole face was aglow with burning scorn.

"Father," she cried vehemently, "I would not marry Ralph Vickers if there were not another man in all the world! You praise him, you think he is good; but he is only deceiving you as he deceives others. He is cunning and heartless—a false friend, a hypocrite, and
a scoundrel! I warn you against him. Scarcely a word of truth ever comes from his lips."

Mr. Lucas looked shocked and grieved.

"Geraldine, those are hard things to say of a man, who, I believe, would lay his life down for you—hard things to say of any man without real cause and proof."

"Ralph Vickers is the sort of man to take care that there never shall be any open cause or proof," she returned earnestly. "He does his ill work in secret. If I were in your place, he should not remain in the office another day. I am convinced that he is dangerous, that every kindness you do him now will turn back upon you and stab you at some future time."

"At any rate, he can't treat me worse than the other one did," said her father bitterly. "And I must say, Geraldine, it seems very strange to me that you, who refused to believe strong evidence against Gray, should speak so uncharitably of Vickers without any cause whatever. It is all prejudice, nothing more. But it makes me very unhappy."

And with that Mr. Lucas left the room.

CHAPTER XXIV

BLOOD MONEY

From the very moment in which he had received Warder Gannaway's significant message, "Shot in trying to escape," Ralph Vickers had been a changed man. A weight had been lifted from his mind. Anxiety and terror, that for months had stalked with him unseen, fled, and in their place came smiling self-confidence. His youth was renewed; the premature lines of care disappeared from his face. Now, as he looked at himself in the glass, he felt more worthy to be Geraldine Lucas's lover.

It did not occur to him that the insertion of the word "dead" in Gannaway's hurriedly-written sentence would have made the announcement more satisfactory—that, in short, a man might be shot without being killed. He never doubted that Laurence Gray
was really dead. His belief was supported, too, by
Gannaway’s demand for the reward money, a demand
that had since been repeated more plainly in a second
message. If doubts had troubled him, he had only to
go round to the office of the Director of Convict Prisons
in Parliament Street and there verify the warder’s
information; but he would have shrunk from doing this
lest it should somehow direct suspicion against him.
Probably Gannaway had counted upon his caution
in this respect, otherwise he could scarcely have hoped
that his deceiving report would bring him the money
he so impatiently awaited.

Meanwhile, the necessity of immediately providing
that reward money was the only difficulty that re-
mained to harass Vickers. The sum he had promised
Gannaway was a large one, and he must pay it. But
where was it to come from?

He had not got it himself. Neither could he now
get it from Geraldine, although he knew that she had not
been able to confirm her suspicions of his dishonesty,
and that she suffered acutely from the doubt as to
whether she was injuring Laurence Gray by thus with-
holding the money that might have lightened his hard-
ships. The failure of her attempt to get an interview
with her lover had left her as perplexed as before with
regard to Vickers’s conduct. She did not know whether
to consider Laurence’s prison offences and punishment
as proof that nothing had ever been done to relieve his
condition, or as the bitter result of her own sudden
withdrawal of help. She inclined, however, to a deeper
distrust of Vickers, especially as, at the time of her visit
to Grimley, the warder’s money had only been due
two days. She had taken it with her to the prison,
intending to pay it herself, despite the risk. But her
failure to see Laurence, and by any means to discover
the warder’s name, had made that course impossible.
She was utterly powerless, and it was the anxiety of this
forced inaction that was preying on her health and spirits.

Vickers knew well enough that no plea he could
invent would now be plausible enough to induce her
to give him the money he required. Otherwise it
would have inspired him with a kind of fiendish pleasuer that she should unwittingly pay the price of her lover's blood. The thought of this made his tongue itch to tell her that Gray was dead. But he must not—he dared not. No one must suppose that he had any private communication with Grimley Prison, any private source of information concerning Laurence Gray. Geraldine herself must not think that he had received any news from the prison since ceasing to act on her behalf. No, no. He must wait. He knew that the prison authorities would not notify the death. A convict dies like a dog, and is buried like one.

He must wait patiently, satisfied in the consciousness of his own safety. His heavy debt of guilt had been paid by Laurence Gray. Now that Gray was silenced for ever, none other would seek to drag that past crime of the killing of Charles Kesteven out of the obscurity into which it had sunk.

It was probable that Geraldine would only learn of her lover's death when letter-writing time came round. There would be no letter from him, and in her suspense she would implore her father to write to the authorities in Parliament Street. Then the truth would be known.

The blow would half kill her, of course, but Vickers trusted in the recuperative powers of youth, and the healing effect of time. After an interval she would consent to marry him in obedience to her father's wishes. So would his triumph be secured.

He flattered himself that he had by this time thoroughly worked his way into Mr. Lucas's confidence. He was now well-nigh indispensable to the old merchant, and his personal fascination had helped to win for him what he had schemed for—an influence over Geraldine's father second only to that of Geraldine herself.

Now in his perplexity about Cannaway's reward he thought of Mr. Lucas. He must borrow the money from him. It would seem only like an advance upon his salary. He had thought first of a possible embezzle-ment, but that would not do now. With wealth, love
and honour within his reach, he would be a fool to commit an act of petty dishonesty. It would be much better to go openly to his employer and ask him for the money. He would not be required to state what he was going to do with it. Even if he were asked, his invention would not be at fault for a lie.

He waited in his room in the office for Mr. Lucas to come in. It was later than the usual time of his arrival. What could be detaining him? Vickers wondered a little, impatiently. He had a letter to write—to Gannaway. He was obliged to write it at the office because of having no typewriter at home. Handwriting, even in a disguised style, would have been too risky, although his communications were always short and his statements adroitly veiled. Sometimes they were unsigned, but usually they were signed "John Hardy"—that being the only name by which he was known to Warder Gannaway.

He reflected, now, while waiting for Mr. Lucas, that the moment was opportune for writing this letter—the one that was to accompany the reward money, and the last that he intended to send.

The typewriter was on his table, and he began to work at it. There was no danger of interruption except from the arrival of Mr. Lucas, and he was of all men the least to be feared. Perfectly candid himself, he suspected no one of secrecy. Twenty letters might have lain about, open, and he would not think of prying into their contents.

As it happened, after having waited so long before beginning, Vickers had hardly composed half-a-dozen lines of his letter when Mr. Lucas made his appearance. He greeted his favourite as warmly as ever, but Vickers noticed at once that he was unlike his usual self. He looked older, and his florid, kindly face had a cloud upon it.

"Something has disturbed you?" Vickers asked quickly, moving his chair meanwhile so as partly to screen the typewriter, in which was still the half-finished letter. "Yes," nodded Mr. Lucas, sinking into a chair, "I've had a talk with Geraldine this morning."
And then he told what had been said, omitting only
the strongest parts of her passionate condemnation
of the young manager. Vickers listened with a grave
face and eyes slightly drooped.

“So there’s no hope for me?” he said, when the
account of the interview was ended.

“Not just now, it appears,” reluctantly answered
Mr. Lucas. “She’s bitterly unjust to you, Vickers.
I can’t understand it. But you must forgive her.
She’s blinded by her grief about Gray. I believe she’d
hate any man who wanted to supersede him. We can
only look to time to alter her mind. But meanwhile
she’s growing very frail and white.” He shook his
head sadly. “It grieves me to see it. I’m afraid
she’ll get ill unless something can be done.”

“Something must be done,” said Vickers almost
ferociously. “She must be made to forget that man.
Heavens!” he exclaimed hotly, “it’s a shame, a sin, that
she should fret about a worthless blackguard like that.”

At the end of this outburst he sighed bitterly. At
the same moment he cast a quick glance backward at
the machine upon his table to assure himself that his
letter was safe. Mr. Lucas sighed too.

“I know it, Vickers: I feel the same. It is painful
to me to see her suffering for the sake of a man who
was never worth a thought of her heart. But women
are made so. We can’t help it.”

“Why not take her away for a change of scene?”
Vickers suggested. “Somewhere abroad—to the
south of France, for instance. For her own sake,
perhaps, she might not consent to go, but if you urge
it upon her for your sake, she would yield.”

“For my sake?”

“Yes. You have not been well lately. You need
change badly. Take it—at least for a short time I
will look after everything here.”

“A good idea,” said Mr. Lucas, his countenance
brightening. “A very good idea, indeed. I will talk
to Geraldino about it.”

“Tilhen when she comes back perhaps she will hate
me less,” murmured Vickers with another sigh.
There was a tap at the door. The office-boy entered with a telegram, which he handed to his master. Mr. Lucas, after reading it, sprang up in haste.

"It is from Rivers. I must go at once," he said.

"Good-morning, Vickers."

And the money subject that had yet to be broached! Vickers rose in alarm, inwardly cursing that business telegram. He must make sure of Gannaway's money to-day. If he lost this opportunity he might not readily get another. In his eagerness he followed Mr. Lucas through the outer office.

Meanwhile, Stinchcombe, the office-boy, who had loitered behind, looked round the manager's room.

His sharp eyes caught sight of the half-composed letter in the typewriter. He bent over to look at it, observing that it was not the ordinary office paper. Vickers was an expert typewriter, and James Stinchcombe, who was learning, was interested in Vickers's work. He now went to pry into it with no other object but that of admiration. But, as he read the few lines that were visible, he gave a low whistle.

"Strike me lucky!" he exclaimed.

He slipped out just in time to escape observation from Vickers, who was returning with an open cheque on which Mr. Lucas's signature was still wet. Vickers proceeded to finish the letter, never reflecting that he had acted with less than his usual caution in leaving it thus for a moment exposed.

On the evening of the following day Warder Gannaway duly received his expected letter with its enclosure of bank notes.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE Abyss of Despair

It was well into the month of November before Laurence Gray was strong enough to be removed from his bed in the infirmary to undergo his trial on the charge of attempting to escape from prison. The surgeon demurred at the removal of his patient at a time when
to disturb him might cause a relapse, but his remonstrances passed unheeded. One of the directors of convict prisons was then making his periodical visit to Grimley, and Captain Podmore demanded that Convict 99 should be brought up for examination. The governor of a convict prison has great power, but that power, nevertheless, has its limits. He has authority to act as judge in all cases of offence against the bye-laws of the prison, but he may not order any man corporal punishment. In cases where flogging is necessary, the offender is remanded to await the next monthly visit of the director.

On being summoned, Laurence, wearing only his under-flannels, with a blanket thrown over him, was taken out of the warm infirmary by an assistant warder, and conducted to No. 1 ward, which is a prison within a prison. As he passed out of the doorway to cross the infirmary exercise-yard, a blast of cold, wintry wind and sleet met him, and sent a chill through his whole frame.

He was thrust into one of the separate cells to await his turn. This time, as he was an invalid, he was spared the discomfort and indignity of being stripped and searched, but the cold of that cell was terrible, and he felt how very much his illness had pulled him down. Happily he had not to wait very long. Trials in prison are conducted with surprising speed. A large number of convicts on remand were to be brought before the director, but only one of these preceded Laurence. It was one of the carpet-makers, a brutal ruffian, who had made a murderous attack upon one of the warders. Laurence passed him at the entrance to the governor's room, and noticed his pale and terror-stricken face. The man had just been sentenced to two dozen lashes of the "cat."

On entering the room Laurence found himself in the same caged compartment wherein he had been once before, when he was reported by Gannaway for having the scissors-blade in his cell. He stood against the rail, fronting the table at which the director sat side by side with Governor Podmore and the chief warder. The director was looking over the report upon which
the convict was now brought up, and having read this, he referred to a large volume, in which was entered a full and minute history of the prisoner, with particulars of his original crime, his conduct since his arrest, and all reports made against him. The director was thus enabled to see at a glance what sort of a man he had before him, and the offences alleged against Gray were grave and numerous.

In response to some low-spoken remarks of the governor, the director, a severe looking-military man, nodded, believing, no doubt, that the convict, Laurence Gray, was worse even than the brutal wretch who had just been deservedly ordered a flogging.

Warder Gannaway was out with his gang. The charge against Convict 99 was, however, supported by one of the principals who had been present on the occasion of the attempted escape. He briefly described how the prisoner had taken advantage of the fog, and made away from his gang towards the river.

"And you say he was shot?" asked the director.

"Yes, sir," said the principal. "Warder Gannaway promptly fired at him."

"Quite right, too," muttered the governor. "Pity the officer was not a bit more sure in his aim."

"Where did the shot strike?" asked the director.

"It was only a flesh wound, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir," was the reply, and the director turned coolly to the report.

Laurence heard this reply with suppressed indignation. Only a flesh wound! Why the shot had gone within half an inch of killing him.

"And the man is continually losing his marks—he is insubordinate?"

"Very insubordinate. The officers of his ward are continually having trouble with him."

The governor turned to his superior and made some remarks in commendation of Warder Gannaway. Then addressing Laurence again, he asked:

"Number 99, what have you to say in excuse for the very serious offence that you are charged with?"

"I have nothing to say, sir," replied Laurence,
"except that my life here was unbearable. I believe that the day warder of my gang—Gannaway—has been bribed by someone outside to act towards me with unnecessary cruelty. Others, too, have suspected it."

"Impossible—utterly impossible!" angrily retorted the governor.

"I observe an entry here," said the director, turning to the book, "referring to a visit of a Mr. and Miss Lucas. Did either of these have any communication with the warder?"

"No," said Captain Podmore; "they saw no one but myself and the chaplain. They came in a carriage, and drove away again at once. The prisoner was in the punishment cells at the time, and, of course, could not be seen."

"Quite so. I can see he's one of the worst of the men, although I should not have thought so from his face," said the director. "Let him be flogged. Give him three dozen."

The governor then addressed Laurence, who had grown deadly pale.

"For the offence you have committed the punishment must be severe. On your dismissal from the infirmary you will be taken to the punishment cells for a month. You will have three dozen lashes and six months in chains."

The signal being given, the assistant warder led the prisoner away.

Stunned in brain as if from a heavy physical blow, Laurence walked dumbly back to the infirmary ward. It was strange that he did not collide with the walls and doors on the way, for he moved like a sleepwalker, seeing nothing, hearing nothing. Even the bitter cold could not rouse him to consciousness. Once or twice, from sheer bodily weakness, he swayed, and would have fallen but for the support of the warder at his side. He was put into bed. For hours he lay in the same torpor, speechless and motionless. But when night came his dazed spirit awoke. Agony filled his soul—agony mingled of bodily pain and of bitter, intolerable humiliation and indignation. He turned on his pillow with a sharp, fierce cry.
The night warden came to his bedside, but, finding that he wanted nothing, went away again, muttering a reproach. Laurence did not heed him, but lay with close-clenched fingers and fevered brain. He was terribly near to madness just then.

The lash—for him!

His whole body revolted—not from cowardice, for he was no coward. It was not the physical pain that he most dreaded. It was the stinging shame, the branding outrage to his manhood. He writhed as the thought of it burned into his brain. Was there no escape?

A lurid idea came to him. There was death! He was burning and shivering at once from the dangerous chill that his journey across the cold exercise-yard had given him. He would refuse to eat. He would tear open again his half-healed wound. His fingers moved with the intention, when a sudden thought restrained him.

There was Geraldine. If he were to die he would be separated from her for ever. No, he would recover. Hope and love of life sprang up again within him, though still the words that had stunned him rang in his ear.

"The lash! The lash! The lash!"

CHAPTER XXIV

THE TYPEWRITTEN LETTER

"Ah, James, you here? I want to ask you something. Come into the library."

"Yaas, miss," said the office-boy, who had been sent that morning to Fenton Court with a message from Ralph Vickers to his master. The boy followed Geraldine into the large warm room. He stood near the door, twirling his hat nervously between his fingers.

"Have you discovered anything more about that letter in my handwriting that you mentioned some time ago?"

"W'y, no, miss, I dunno as I 'ave. I never seen it agen, not that sime one. But—"

"But what?" interrupted Geraldine, observing a change in his expression. "Have you seen another?"
"Not in your 'andwritin', miss. But I were just a-wonderin' if a letter as Mr. Vickers were a-writin' of the other d'y was anythin' as would interest yer. 'Twere a typewritten letter, yer know. Mr. Vickers, 'e's a dab 'and at that 'ere writin' machine. 'Is words is just the same as if they was printed."

"Tell me about it," said Geraldine encouragingly.

"Well, miss, the letter as I werea-speakin' of, it weren't on the ordinary horifice paper; and I puts my eye on it w'en he went artside wi' Mr. Lucas. 'E'd 'ave bin in a rare state if 'e'd a-known as I seen it, I reckon."

"Why, do you mean that the letter was not a business one—that Mr. Vickers had some reason for not wishing it to be seen?" Geraldine asked.

"That's just abart the size of it, miss. You see Mr. Vickers, 'e's a 'cute un, 'e, is, w'en 'e wants to do anythin' for hissel.'

"Well, and you read the letter?"

"W'y, no, I didn't read it all, coz w'y, it weren't all finished don't yer know. Wot I did see were somethin' abart a 'undred pounds as Mr. Vickers—no; I'm a-tellin' yer wrong, 'tweren't Mr. Vickers as were a-sendin' of the money, but Mr. John 'Ardy, wh'ch, if yer arst me—"

The boy hesitated. Geraldine moved impatiently.

"Who is Mr. John Hardy?" she asked.

"That's just the wery question as I was a'arstin' of myself, miss. 'E ain't got nothin' to do wi' the office; I knows that much, anyway, sez I; and bein' as the letter said as Mr. John 'Ardy sends 'erewith a 'undred pounds in Bank of England notes and will be obliged by your sendin' of a noospiper acknowledg-ment o' the same, in the usual way, I were a bit puzzled, miss. But two or three days afterwards I got a idea 'oo this yere Mr. 'Ardy was. Mr. Vickers were a-lookin' at a noospiper wot 'e took out o' is little black bag, and as 'e were a-foldin' of it in 'is 'and, I seen a address written on it. The name as it were sent to was the same Mr. John 'Ardy, at Mr. Vickers's lodgings, where there ain't no such person a-livin'. And then, miss, I guessed as 'ow this yere chap was Mr. Vickers hissel."
"Ah!" murmured Geraldine

She dismissed him, and then walked to and fro, tortured with perplexity. The boy's information meant more to her than he guessed. That mention of sending a newspaper acknowledgment "in the usual way," was especially suspicious in her eyes. During the time of their joint scheme for relieving Laurence Gray's sufferings Vickers had told her that the Grimley warder acknowledged receipt of the bribes by means of newspapers. Was he continuing to do so unknown to her?

If so, it could not be for good. Ralph Vickers was not the man to spend his money secretly for another's benefit—and that other his rival. Then, too, why did he screen himself under a false name? If his purpose was to do good, there would be no need for this disguise, since the risk lay upon the warder's side.

Geraldine stopped, disturbed and anxious, and leaned her hot forehead against the cold marble edge of the mantelpiece. Her great distrust of Vickers made anything seem possible and yet there was not a single thing she could accuse him of. She could not even question him about this letter that James Stinchcombe had seen, since to do so would get the office-boy into trouble.

She was torn with doubt, and yet her hands were tied. She was like one groping blindly in the dark. She felt that in some way Laurence needed her help, and yet she could not tell how to give it. This powerlessness oppressed her, caused her continual heartache. One thought alone gave her comfort, and that was the belief that Laurence, in his prison, secure under Government charge, must be as much beyond the reach of Vickers's power to harm as of her own power to help. She could scarcely imagine it possible that a warder might be bribed to injure a prisoner as easily as to favour him.

Meanwhile, her desire to know the name of Laurence's warder had not diminished. But she could only learn it from Vickers. If, by any means, Vickers could have been got to reveal it, she would have lost no time in resuming, on her own account, the communication with Grimley Prison which she had bidden him break off.
CHAPTER XXV

A BOLD APPEAL

Geraldine was sitting in the drawing-room alone that evening, leaning back in an easy-chair close by the bright log fire, when Pearse, the footman, entered, with the announcement that Mr. Vickers desired to see Mr. Lucas.

Geraldine started.

"Your master has gone to bed, Pearse. He is not very well." Then suddenly she added, as the man was turning away: "Wait; show Mr. Vickers in here, I will see him."

Pearse departed, and her face, as she waited, assumed a cold, haughty look, very different from the expression of mingled trouble and yearning that it had worn a few moments before. Her whole form seemed to straighten into dignity.

Vickers entered, and she rose to greet him. He stopped by the door, and stood gazing at her, at once fascinated and startled. The fascination was the effect of her beauty, which he had not for months been privileged to look upon. The shock was caused by the change in her—by her waxen paleness and the increased slightness that made her seem taller even than she was. Her dinner-dress of cashmere and lace clung round her figure, showing its slender curves.

She, on her side, contemplated him. He had altered for the better. He looked younger, his colour was richer, and his whole face was gayer, lighter, as though a shadow had passed from it. She little guessed of what unexpected guilt that vanished shadow had been the outward token. She did not offer him her hand or ask him to be seated. She remained standing and spoke in a cold, calm tone.

"I am sorry to say my father is not at all well this evening. He has gone to bed."

"So Pearse told me," answered Vickers. "I am very grieved to hear it. But you—you wanted to see me?"

He came forward slowly as he spoke, flushed and
smiling in a way that showed his white and regular teeth under his black moustache. But her face did not soften at his smile.

"I merely wanted to ask you," she said meeting his eyes, "if you have held any communication with Grimley Prison since our joint connection with it ceased?"

For an instant the suddenness of the question made him hesitate. He thought of the lately-heard news of Gray's death. But he dared not tell it.

"No," he answered. "Certainly not."

"You are sure?" she persisted, looking at him keenly.

"Perfectly sure. It grieves me very much that you should doubt my word," he added, with a sigh.

Geraldine slowly walked back towards the fire. She stood with her elbow resting on the mantelpiece, and her hand partly supporting her head. Her eyes, looking larger because of her paleness, were fixed on Vickers's face.

"My asking this was the result of a chance thought," she said, still coldly. "My father casually mentioned that he had advanced you a hundred pounds and it occurred to me that possibly you might have required the money to send to the warder."

Her eyes searched his intently, and Vickers was conscious that he paled. But the change of colour might be attributed to a feeling that was really in part accountable for it—a feeling of shame that she should know he had borrowed money from her father.

"No," he said steadily. "I needed that hundred pounds to send to a poor relation in the country—a man who had failed in business and applied to me for help."

"Ah!"

The explanation did not wholly satisfy her. And yet her heart, eager for comfort, leapt at the thought that perhaps it was his habit to communicate with people by newspapers—that he might as naturally have requested a newspaper acknowledgment from one of his own friends as from the prison warder. Still this
tale of a poor relation did not explain the false name—John Hardy. She was on the point of mentioning this, but restrained herself for James Stinchocombe's sake. Her knowledge of this fact would instantly betray that someone had been spying.

"What is your relative's name?" she asked suddenly. But directly she had spoken she remembered that the question was one she had no right to ask.

"It is no one that you would know," replied Vickers evasively. "Only a cousin whom I have not seen for years."

"You are quite right not to tell me," she rejoined, with cold dignity. "I ask your pardon for inquiring. Your relations can never have the slightest possible interest for me."

Her proud aloofness stung Ralph Vickers sharply. The hot blood mounted to his face, dyeing it a deep red.

"How cruel you always are to me!" he exclaimed, passionately. "You care no more for me than if I were a dog."

A sudden light sprang into Geraldine's eyes. She turned upon him quickly.

"That reminds me that I have another question to ask you," she said. "A short time ago my father informed me that it would please him if I would consent to marry you, and told me that he had your authority for stating that you loved me and desired marriage with me. Can that be true? I do not doubt my father's word," she added hurriedly, "but I think he must have misunderstood—"

"No, no," Vickers interrupted; "it is so indeed. I love you. It is the hope of my life that I may marry you."

A deep flush of anger rose in Geraldine's face.

"You have been trying to undermine my fidelity to the man to whom I am betrothed," she said sternly, "trying, too, to make my father an instrument in breaking his daughter's heart. Will you tell me how you reconcile this conduct with your pretended devotion to Laurence Gray? If, as you have sworn to me, you are his friend, how can you seek to betray him—to make me false to him?"
Thus confronted with his dishonourable conduct, Vickers gave way to the passion that at sight of her had revived with renewed intensity. Then, too, he thought, what did it matter what he said since Gray was dead and buried? He would not tell her that her lover was no more; but he could act upon the knowledge.

"Because I love you," he cried hotly; "and my love overcame me. I loved you long before Gray did, but I hid it until it was too late, and afterwards I stifled it for his sake. I've been his friend as long as I could, but lately I've been asking myself what is the use of further self-sacrifice. It is impossible that Gray can ever marry you. He is imprisoned for life. It is as if he were dead and buried—dead and buried—"

Vickers stopped so that these last words might fix themselves on Geraldine's heart. Her look of indignation spurred him to resentment. His face glowed as he talked, and his black eyes had the brilliance of strong excitement.

"He cannot escape," he went on feverishly. "Escape from such a prison as Grimley is impossible, and even if he lives and thrives and is so well-behaved that he gains a remission of his full sentence, he cannot come out for twenty years. Do you ever think what he will be like then? Those years of coarse and scanty food will have wasted his strength and robbed him of all outward refinement. Hard work and a hard life will have distorted his features—spoiled all the handsome-ness you admire so much. The illnesses that come of privation will have shrunk his body, and long-association with the vilest reprobates will have ruined his soul. He will be broken down, prematurely old, changed beyond recognition. Will such a man be worth your fidelity—you, a beautiful poetic woman, whose youth should be crowned with love and happiness, not spent in weary waiting?"

"You forget that Laurence is an innocent man," she said, motioning him back from her. "'He cannot remain a convict twenty years.'"

"So you still cling to that delusion as to his innocence?" said Vickers. And he laughed mockingly.
"Who is to prove him innocent? He cannot do it himself."

"No," returned Geraldine quietly; "I will do it. I have advanced a step towards it to-day."

A shade of anxiety crossed Vickers's face.

"Advanced a step? How?"

"I have set a solicitor to work in the matter."

Vickers's eyes flashed.

"Neither you nor any man, nor God himself, could prove Gray's innocence," he retorted, "for the sufficient reason that he is guilty. As surely as we stand here now, he is the murderer of Kesteven."

Yet, with all his boldness, a shudder ran through Vickers as he dared to utter those words. The cold thrill even shook him outwardly. But Geraldine did not notice this. She had moved a few steps nearer and now stood before him, erect and stately, with burning cheeks.

"Go, Mr. Vickers," she said imperiously, adding in an icy tone, "I wish you a good-night."

Passionate love and quivering hate rose together in Ralph Vickers's soul.

"I will go," he answered her, smiling defiantly in the belief that the lover for whose sake she spurned him lay nameless and lifeless under the cold earth of a prison graveyard. "But I will come again. A love strong as mine is cannot be driven back. Though you reject me fifty times, I will come again. I will pursue you till you yield."

He was gone while yet his last words lingered on the warm, sweet air. She heard the outer doors shut after him. Then she turned and sank down again into the low chair by the fire.

"I will go away, as father wishes," she said to herself, "to escape for a time from this treacherous man. And it will be only for a few weeks: Laurence cannot need me until we return."
CHAPTER XXVI

ON THE WAY TO IGNNOMINY

Under the kind treatment of the prison doctor, and with the better nourishment that he received in the infirmary, Laurence Gray grew gradually stronger. But this return to strength, while it restored his hope, brought him also daily nearer to the ordeal that he dreaded. The horrible thought of the lash dwelt constantly in his brain, burning there like a point of fire. At times he asked himself whether it would not be better to arrest his recovery—to refuse his food, to summon back in some desperate way the devouring fever that had so lately left him. But again the thought of Geraldine deterred him. He told himself that it would be cowardly so to evade his punishment. The old Lancashire spirit rose in him, bidding him boldly confront his fate. The struggle before him was long and fierce, and if he would triumph in it he must maintain his strength.

Laurence had great difficulty in securing for his own use the luxuries that the doctor ordered for him. The infirmary orderlies, who were themselves convicts, took every possible opportunity of stealing his food, and the warders were here more designedly brutal and unkind than those of any other ward in the whole prison. They grudged to a sick convict every extra comfort that his illness required, and being unable to impose any task upon their charges they took it out of them by refusing to listen when they called for help that might relieve their sufferings. The invalid prisoner was thus at his warder's mercy. If unable to move without assistance, he might lie moaning for hours in his agony, but no help would come to him unless the doctor or his official assistants happened to be present.

The day warder who was on duty in Laurence Gray's division of the infirmary happened to be a chum of Warder Gannaway, and Gannaway no doubt instigated some of the undue severity that Convict 99 endured at this man's hands.

Laurence asked him one morning to close a
window behind his bed. The bitter east wind was blowing in upon his close-cropped head giving him severe neuralgic pains.

"I can't close the window," growled the warder; "it's against orders. The doctor says there's not enough ventilation in the ward."

"But the wind is too cold," objected Laurence.

"Can't you see that the snow is coming in too?"

"It's nothing to do with me. If you're cold, shove your head under the pillow and smother yourself."

An hour or two afterwards the doctor came upon his rounds.

The convict in the bed next to Laurence happened to be the ex-physician of Aylmer who had already spoken with him on several occasions. He had been invalided on the previous day. He called the doctor to his bedside and pointed to the open window. The doctor went at once and shut it.

"Did you order that window to be opened, sir?"

the old convict boldly asked.

"No, I did not," said the doctor.

"I am glad to hear it," rejoined the ex-physician.

"I should be sorry to see an off-pupil of mine act thus with such brutality."

"A pupil of yours?" exclaimed the doctor. "What do you mean?"

"Ah," said the convict, "I see you don't recognise me. But as it is likely that I shall remain under your care until the day of my death, it is perhaps as well that I should tell you who I am. I was one of the examining physicians who gave you your diploma. Do you remember me now?"

The doctor drew back and pronounced the convict's name—the name of a once famous West End physician.

"Yes," said the convict, "unfortunately I am he. Since my residence in Grimley I have tried many times to get entered here. This terrible cold weather has at last done for me, and now that I have succeeded I mean to stop. So you need not practise any of the usual economical impositions on me, doctor. Give me the proper drugs and treatment, if you please."
"I am sincerely sorry to find you here," returned the doctor, still looking at him in surprise. "I will certainly give you every comfort that the rules allow."

"I am obliged to you, sir," said the prisoner. "And now, what about this man in the next bed, No. 99? I hear he is ordered a flogging. Can you prevent it? That shot wound in his side should surely be a good excuse."

The doctor reflected a moment, glancing through the iron bars at Gray.

"I will see about it," he replied, as he turned away.

As a result of his conversation, Gray and his next neighbour received special attentions from the medical staff, and were subjected to fewer discomforts from the warders. Laurence was soon in a condition to leave his bed, and to take daily exercise in the infirmary hall. The doctor delayed his dismissal as long as possible; but one morning the governor saw Convict 99 at exercise, and inwardly determined to bring his time of comfort to a speedy close. On the plea that the infirmary was becoming over-crowded he ordered several of the convalescent convicts to be removed to the cells. Laurence was of those selected. He was taken out to No. 1 prison. Still in weak health, he was ordered to strip and stand naked in the cold, while his clothes were searched.

Next came the bath. While he was bathing, he noticed the bare back of one of his companions, and a shudder of horror ran through him. It was the same convict whom he had passed a few weeks before at the entrance of the governor's room. The man's back was scored over with the raw, livid marks of the lash. He was a powerful, muscular man, with the brutal face of a hardened criminal. There was no doubt that he had richly merited every stroke from those terrible thongs; but the sight of the leaden-hued marks filled Laurence with indignant horror. How long would it be before he, too, would be called upon to face that hideous punishment?

On emerging from the bath he was taken to the punishment cells, there to await his flogging. He was led across the open exercise-ground, where several
convicts were sweeping and shovelling away the newly-fallen snow. These men, who had all been guilty of serious prison offences, wore parti-coloured uniforms of yellow and black, with fetters that clanked as they moved.

There was something diabolical in their bright-coloured aspect, and Laurence, who now saw them for the first time, started and shuddered.

He had not yet recovered his warmth, and the cold north-east wind that came in gusts from over the high walls chilled his slow-beating pulses, and made his weak limbs tremble. He followed the warder towards a row of iron doors. One of these was unlocked, and he was thrust into a small dim cell that was lighted only by a tiny grating. The cell was on the west side of the yard, and when the key was turned upon him he found that the wind whistled in through the wide space beneath the door, sending a cold draught into every corner of the narrow place. His fingers and toes were already numbed by the cold of stripping and bathing, and the icy chill of the bare slate floor seemed to creep up through the soles of his feet, and to penetrate into every vein of his body, congealing the sluggish blood. He stamped about, but the effort hurt him; and when he tried to swing his arms his hands knocked against the iron walls of his cell. He looked around in the dim light for some bedclothing to wrap about him. He found a hard plank bed, but there was neither blanket, nor sheet upon it. In that hour of suffering and need, the disappointment, slight though it was, was like a knife-stab in his heart.

He leaned against the wall, feeling faint, as though the numbness were reaching to his brain. He felt that a few days of this suffering must surely kill him. Coming so suddenly upon his removal from the infirmary, the Arctic cold that now struck him threatened to overpower him, as travellers are overpowered in the snow.

He had been in his cell about half-an-hour when he was roused from his torpor by the sudden opening of the door trap. A small brown loaf and a can of cold
water were thrust in by an unseen warder. Laurence took the food and began slowly to eat it. The trap snapped to again in a moment, and he was alone once more in his wretchedness.

Suddenly a clanking sound attracted his attention. It came from the cell on his right hand, telling him that he had a neighbour, and that that neighbour was in fetters. The horrid jangling noise, loud and distinct through the corrugated iron walls, rang in his ears with a desolation that was near akin to despair. It seemed to tell him that all was lost, that his torment and degradation would never end, that for him the wide outer world, with its loves and its joys, had passed away for ever and ever.

And yet, should God permit it to be otherwise—should it be granted him once more to go forth a free man among the free—what vengeance he would take upon his enemy, upon Ralph Vickers! The red of repressed passion flushed his worn features at the thought. Deep and bitter reflection had convinced him more and more that his injuries had come to him by Vickers’s hands.

“What wrong have I done him?” he moaned, as he lay in his half-frozen weakness on the planks that at night were to serve him as a bed.

Presently it seemed to him that there was a knocking on the left-hand wall of his cell. The prisoner there wanted to begin a conversation. It was some time before Laurence, sunk into the stupor of cold, roused himself sufficiently to realise his neighbour’s meaning. When at last he raised his tin water mug to knock in reply, he was prevented from doing so by the sudden opening of his door and the sound of a warder’s voice.

“No. 99, come along here.”

A thrill that was not of cold ran through Laurence from head to foot. Instinct whispered to him whither he was to be taken. But he went in silence, forcing his suffering limbs to do his will.

The distance to be traversed was short, but in the last corridor were sounds that made it long and agony-filled as a corridor of hell. Groans, imprecations, cries as of a wild beast, that rend the heart and make the soul
shrink in horror—all these, intermingled with the subtle "whish! whish!" of the flesh-tearing thongs, came from the room at the corridor's end, the great hall of No. 1 prison.

Lawrence Gray set his teeth hard as he dragged himself along, and clenched his roughened and attenuated fingers. Something of the old dignity looked out from his pallid countenance as he went onward, thus to meet sharp anguish and bitterest humiliation.

The sound of the lash had ceased now, and the groans were getting faint—ominously faint. As Lawrence and his warders entered the hall, the man who had been flogged was being released from the mound to which in the old military fashion he had been bound. He was sinking into unconsciousness. His head hung forward, and his face whose unhuman hideousness proclaimed him one of the worst of criminals—was convulsed and ghastly. His back was scarred with stripes, from which the blood trickled in dark, slow streams.

CHAPTER XXVII

CONFRONTING IGNOMINY

RIVETED at the sickening sight, Lawrence uttered an exclamation. The woman who was present, turned his keen eyes upon him with a satisfied look.

"Now then, off with your jacket and shirt!" cried Smith, the warder who had brought him from his cell.

With a feeble shake Lawrence obeyed. How could he resist? Besides, resistance would be useless. Quietly, however, he braced himself for the ordeal. Outwardly he was cold, but inwardly he was consumed with sudden heat. There was a strange grandeur about him as he stood there, stripped to the waist, confronting ignominy.

He glanced once in the direction of the doctor, but he dared not speak. When he was ready, the warder led him to the triangle. There two of the other warders took him roughly by the hands, and in a moment they secured his wrists and bound him, his arms being stretched out, his face against the upright.
The man holding the lash—a burly ex-corporal, by name Rawlings—turned to the governor.

"How many, sir?" he asked.

"Three dozen is his sentence," replied the governor, glancing at his official list. Then aside to the doctor he added, "I'd have given the dog double that if I'd had my own way."

The doctor, who was kneeling over the still unconscious body of the recently-flogged convict, asked, without looking up:

"What's his offence?"

"Why, breaking prison. The scoundrel very nearly cost me a solid five hundred pounds."

The doctor rose suddenly, and looked at the pinioned prisoner.

"Go ahead, Rawlings. Don't keep us here all day," said the governor to the ex-corporal.

"Stop!" cried the doctor, facing his chief; "this man can't be flogged yet. He's not strong enough. The shock might be fatal to him."

"And a good job, too," cried the governor, almost savagely. "Do you forbid it? Pooh! what the devil—but the man deserves it if ever any prisoner did."

"Possibly," said the doctor drily. "But he's too weak yet to endure it."

"Bah!" rejoined the governor. "You're too soft with these blackguards. There must be a stop put to these attempts at escape. This is the third I've had to do with in a year. Go ahead, Rawlings."

Rawlings raised his "cat," waiting for the doctor to get clear. But the doctor turned upon him, with flushed face and lifted hand.

"I forbid it!" he said firmly.

Rawlings lowered his arm and looked at the governor. But Captain Podmore, though he scowled, was powerless to defy the medical edict. Nevertheless, he made another attempt.

"If he can't stand three dozen all at once, let him have it in two instalments."

The doctor shook his head.
"I cannot allow even that, sir. You forget he has only just come out of hospital."

"But he was not discharged before he was well."

"Before he was well enough to be flogged, though. He is really in a very low state of health."

The governor muttered a curse. "Take him back to the cell," he ordered sharply. "I'll have him brought up again in a day or two. Put him in fetters and the prison-breaker's dress."

All the blood in Laurence Gray's body seemed to rush to his brain. He walked back to his cell unsteadily, leaning heavily on the warder who conducted him. Now that the fearful strain was past, his overtaxed strength gave way. When the cell door shut upon him he sank down into unconsciousness. He recovered his senses to find himself drenched and chill. A bucket of cold water had been thrown over him by the warder who had returned with his fetters.

"Now, then, get up and put on these toga."

Painfully Laurence raised himself to his feet. Shaking with cold and weakness, he took off the wet garments that clung to his wasted figure, until at last he stood naked and barefooted on the slate floor, with the icy wind biting his skin, freezing his very life-blood. Then after his flannel, his fetters were put on him—a heavy chain, each end of which was fastened with riveted rings round his ankles, while the middle part of it was held up to his waist by a broad strap. He caught his breath convulsively whenever the cold iron touched his shrinking skin. The contact was terrible to him, as if the heavy links had been instruments of death.

Then came the dress of disgrace, the punishment clothing of a prisoner who has attempted to escape. One side of this dress was drab, the other yellow; the front of one sleeve drab, the back yellow, and the reverse with the other sleeve. The knickerbockers were parti-coloured in the same way, and were made to fasten at the inside of the legs, so that they might be drawn on and off without removing the fetters.

Night and day, sleeping and waking, for six long months, would Laurence have to wear these chains.
Fortunate would he be if this life of a wild beast did not drag down his nature to its level before help should come!

When the warder had gone, he sank down again on the bare plank bed. He was not absolutely unconscious, and yet he did not notice the passing of the hours. He was roused once by the sound of a distant bell. It was the dinner-bell, but there was no dinner for him—nothing until evening, when his scanty supper of bread and water would come. Once a cry broke from him: "How long? How long?"

But for love, which clings hard to life, the grave would have been better than this unending anguish. The gloom of the little cell was deepening to darkness when clear above the confused clanking that sounded continually from the right-hand cell, whose occupant seemed restless, there came again the knocking from the left. The knocks were distinct upon the corrugated iron.

This time Laurence answered. In his abandonment and desolation this sign of a fellow-creature's interest was passionately welcome to him. Judging from the quick, eager tapping, his neighbour appeared to be a smart young fellow.

"Who are you?" Laurence asked, spelling out the question slowly in the numerical alphabet.

"Jim Lacy. Four weeks solitary for throwing my tool at a screw."

"Which screw?"

"Gannaway. Are you the lag that tried to do a bolt?"

"Yes."

"Have you had your bashing?"

"No," replied Laurence. "The doctor prevented it."

There was an interval of silence. Then the rapping spelt out a statement that startled Laurence.

"You were a regular greenhorn to try to bolt in that way. I know a trick worth fifty of that. A safe one, too. I could get away easy if I wanted to."

"How?" questioned Laurence, in quick, nervous raps. But suddenly he drew away from the wall. He heard the warder approaching.
CHAPTER XXVIII

JIM LACY

When the warder had passed, Laurence listened anxiously for the reply to his question. After about five minutes his neighbour resumed his tapping upon the iron partition. Laurence spelled out the words slowly.

"I saw you when you tried to run a belt for it. But I knew you could not escape. It's impossible that way. Even if you got clear of the prison you'd only be recaptured. Your prison togs and cropped head would betray you anywhere. I knew a bug who tried it on just as you did. He got clear and wandered about for five nights, like a hunted fox keeping under hayricks, feeding on raw spuds and wassels. Never showed himself in daylight. Broke into a cottage once, and was stealing a suit of clothes when a man sprang upon him. He murdered the man and ran off with the clothes and some money, was caught and hunged. No; unless you have someone out in the boundary waiting to take you off into safe hands, it's a fool's game to attempt it."

Thus narrative though it was occupied nearly two hours. At the end of this time a warder brought the evening meal of bread and water and a mat and blankets were thrown into the cell for bedding. The allowance was scanty, and in spite of Laurence efforts to make himself comfortable his limbs remained stiff and numb with cold.

Presently his neighbour rapped again. Gray's bed was next the wall and he raised himself on his elbow to listen.

"You can't sleep to night," were the words that the knocking spelled. "Too cold. I want to talk to you. Listen to me."

The raps came short and sharp, as though the man on the other side were of an eager, nervous temperament. Laurence rapped back in answer:

"I am listening."

The prisoner in the right-hand cell appeared to be
sleepless also, for his chains rattled continually. This noise would in itself have been sufficient to prevent the minor sound of the wall-knocking from distinctly reaching the outside warders’ ears.

"I’ve been watching you for months," said Laurence’s left-hand neighbour; "I wanted to talk to you, and there’s plenty of time to-night. What I’ve got to say is worth staying awake for. Look out that the screw doesn’t catch us. Are you lying down?"

Laurence gave two sharp knocks, meaning "Yes."

The conversation was disjointed, and many words were half-spelled, but the meaning came out clear.

"All right," said the other man. "Now, what’s your name?"

"Laurence Gray."

"Have you a good position outside—any money?"

"Yes."

"That’s good. Now listen. I told you my name was Jim Lacy. By right it’s Jacques de Lacy. My father and mother were French, but I was born in London, and have lived there all my life, except when I’ve been unfortunate. My father was a gentleman, but he got poor, came to England, went wrong, and died in chokey. He was a bad lot, and so am I. It’s in my blood; I can’t help it. This is my fifth lagging. I’ve broken my mother’s heart, and brought her to poverty. But I can’t go on the straight, even for her sake, though I would give my life for her. Are you listening?"

Laurence rapped "Yes."

"My time’s up in another ten months from now. You’re in for life—I know that. If I could manage to get you out in ten months’ time instead of me, would you swear to do what I ask you in return?"

A shudder, half of cold, half of eagerness, ran through Laurence’s frame.

"Tell me what that would be," he rapped back.

The reply came promptly:

"To find out my mother in London, and help her and protect her. I left her alone in the world. She has no relative but me, and I have nobody but her.
She's poor, and perhaps she's starved to death since I've been in prison. Worrying about her has been the worst punishment I've had to bear. Night and day I've been thinking, thinking what I could do to help her, and looking out for some lag, whose time was up, and who might go and find her out. But they're all rough and brutal. There's not one I could trust to keep his word. You seem different. You look good. From the first moment I set eyes on you, I said to myself, 'He'd do it.'"

Laurence was in amazement; he could not see the man's drift.

"But why not do it yourself, if you're going out in ten months?" he asked him.

"Because it would be of no use. I haven't a farthing in the world to give her. I'd go wrong again, and she'd only be made more miserable by seeing me fall once more. There's a fellow knows something about me that would get me another seven years certain, and he'd round on me directly I got out. So you see I might as well stop in here. I could bear life here well enough if I knew mother had a friend."

Laurence was startled at this strange mixture of irremediable criminality with passionate filial love.

"Would you swear to find her out and be a friend to her?" continued De Lacy.

Gray answered, without hesitation, "Yes."

"The chance may never come. But it is worth while being ready for it if it does. It's a bold plan, and a difficult one; yet it has been done before, and can be done again, if we're clever enough. It's this: if by good luck we're both removed to another prison before the first seven months of my ten are out, I'll change clothes, names, and numbers with you, and you shall be liberated in my place."

Laurence, as he spelled out these words, gripped his coarse blanket with convulsive force. He raised himself up on his bed. Oh, for the clearer language of the tongue face to face, eye to eye! This slow and halting process of communication was galling, maddening to his eager mind.
He waited an instant until the pacing step of the
night warder receded down the passage outside. Then
he rapped the anxious, amazed question:
"You would agree to work out my long life sentence?"
"Yes," was the answer, "for my mother's sake."
Gray interlocked his trembling fingers. Then a chill
of doubt crept over him.
"It can never be done," he knocked back. "It is
impossible."
"Wait," was the significant reply. And then a
moment later, "Good-night."
Laurence was silent, although unsatisfied. It was
long past the dead of night, and the jangling of his right-
hand neighbour's chains had ceased, except at intervals,
when the lugubrious sound told that he was moving
in his restless sleep. Nothing now disturbed the silence
but the regular tread of the warder outside, or the little
click of the spy-hole cover as he opened it to flash his
bull's-eye on a prisoner.

CHAPTER XXIX

GRINDING THE AIR

An hour or two later Laurence awoke from a bright
dream of Geraldine. The dream had been so vivid
that for a moment on awaking it lingered with him.
He believed himself still near his beloved, happy in
the light of her smile. Then as he moved came the
rasping of his fetters and the icy touch of the air on
his limbs. All the bitter wretchedness of his real
situation rushed back upon his mind.

He remembered, too, his dialogue with his neighbour,
uncertain at first whether he had not dreamed that
also. When he had convinced himself of its reality it
inspired him with new joy, but only for a few moments.
Then he crushed the hope down. In his present suffering,
relief and redemption seemed impossible to him. The
living, pulsating world seemed to have receded into a
gruesome indistinctness; his former life of freedom was
like a vague vision of long ago, and he almost doubted
that there existed an outside world beyond the prison walls.

When morning came he was unrefreshed. He craved for some warm food, but there was nothing for him but the usual coarse brown loaf and can of icy cold water. He ate his bread piece by piece, almost crumb by crumb.

It was no longer permitted him to take exercise with other convicts. The punishment men had a yard set apart to themselves, and they were not allowed to approach each other on any pretext whatever. Their warders, who were armed with swords in addition to the usual truncheon, carefully watched them as they walked round and round the high-walled yard in single file, with a space of some twelve feet between the prisoners.

On returning from exercise Laurence saw his left-hand neighbour entering his cell. De Lacy's eyes flashed swift recognition into his. Laurence, as he passed him, studied this strange man who had declared himself willing, should opportunity offer, to make so great a sacrifice for his mother's sake. De Lacy was young, slim, handsome, with brown, eager eyes, brown hair, and regular features. Laurence found himself involuntarily thanking Heaven that there was no great contrast between them. This proved that hope, though faint, lived in him still.

The exercise had warmed him considerably, although his thin clothing was but a poor protection against the weather. The sleeves of his jacket were short, and, of course, he had no pockets. His unprotected hands and wrists were blue with cold. He wished for some active occupation, and had almost determined to ask for it when, on returning to his cell, he found one of the warders waiting for him beside a strange machine that resembled a small mangle. This contrivance stood in the middle of the floor.

"There you are," said the warder; "this is the graft you've got to tackle. You've got to turn that there crank handle ten thousand times a day. Set to, now, and let's have no grumbling—ten thousand times, mind you. You needn't do any more than that."
Laurence, left alone, took hold of the handle and began to turn it vigorously. The first few revolutions seemed easy, but the axle was low down, and he was obliged to stoop. He had done about thirty turns when he realised that the wheels required oiling, and that there was a spring in the cog-wheel that gave a sudden jolt at every turn, checking him and requiring a new effort to begin again. Very soon the work became terribly monotonous. He could only turn the handle from one side and in one position, consequently the same muscles were continually brought into action, and his back became painful. The thick, hard strap that supported his fetters rasped against his side, irritating the wound there until every movement made him wince.

He had counted only a thousand revolutions when he felt that he could go on no longer. Then he thought how easy it would be for him to persuade the warder that he had done his allotted ten thousand turns. He would have to tell a lie, but in his weak condition the temptation was great.

At midday the warder came to his cell. Laurence was working laboriously. To his surprise the warder instead of questioning him silently examined the crank. Alas! the machine was furnished with an automatic register, wherein every revolution was recorded.

"Why, you've not done fifteen hundred yet!" growled the warder. "Slip into it. Get through your graft, or it'll be all the worse for you."

"I have not the strength," said Laurence; "I am cold, hungry, and in pain."

"Cheer up, man," was the warder's retort; "you'll get a pint of good hot soup the day after to-morrow, and meanwhile the work'll keep you warm. But you must do your, ten thousand turns, or I shall be bound to report you and then the chief'll put on another five hundred. Do you want any more cold water?"

"No, sir, but I shouldn't mind a drop of oil for this machine. It's rusty."

"I can't help that. You'll soon wear the rust off and get down to the bare iron if you peg away."
Laurence hardened himself to his task and fell to again. Click, click, went the crank. The work was all the more galling since it was utterly useless, producing nothing, but only grinding the air. The machine was simply an instrument of torture.

When he thought he had done another thousand he looked at the register and found he had only done six hundred. ... It was always so. His expectations were invariably greater than the actuality, until, at last, as he moved his weary limbs with ever-increasing pain, he could not bear to look any more at the pitiless dial.

On that first day he completed only half of his wearisome task. On the second day he did better. For four long weeks he was kept at it, working late into the night, but never once achieving his allotted ten thousand revolutions. The task was, in fact, utterly beyond his powers. A man in the full vigour of health, and well nourished, might do it, but not an emaciated prisoner, half-starved, benumbed, solitary, and almost despairing.

At the end of that month of separate confinement, Laurence Gray was wasted to a mere shadow. His hands were blistered by the crank handle, every joint in his body was stiff, and the hard belt that had at first been tight about his waist now hung loosely upon him. It was well for him that there was no such thing as a looking-glass to be had in the prison. Had he seen the reflection of his palid, hollow cheeks and wild, staring eyes, he would have been appalled. But it needed not this to tell him how greatly his sufferings had altered him. His strong nerves were shattered, even his memory seemed to be weakened. He had strange palpitations of the heart. His legs were racked with rheumatic pains, and his head was perpetually tortured with the excruciating twinges of neuralgia. His release from the punishment cell came barely in time to save him from a return to the infirmary. He went back to his old quarters with the thankfulness of one who, on the brink of death, turns back to life.
CHAPTER XXX

THE CONFEDERATES

At dinner-time on the day of Gray's return to his old cell the chaplain came to see him. These visits of the chaplain were very precious to Laurence. They had been the only gleams of light in the long darkness of his imprisonment. In the infirmary, and the punishment ward especially, he had eagerly watched for the approach of that dignified figure, and the first sight of that noble face was like sunshine in the dreary ward shedding on all those convict sufferers beneficent rays of pardon and hope and love.

In the course of one of these visits, Convict 99 had told the good man all his unhappy story. This confidence had created a bond between them that was none the less close because it found no outward expression. It was hard to say whether the chaplain believed entirely in Gray's statement of his innocence, for nearly every convict in the prison declared himself guiltless of the crime for which he was sentenced, but certainly he was convinced that this man was of a very different stamp from the majority of his fellow-prisoners. He showed his regard in a certain added kindliness that encouraged Laurence to implore a favour of him:

"Oh, sir, to give me some peace—a little rest from this perpetual heartache—will you not write to Miss Lucas for me? Only a few lines to tell her how I grieved at not seeing her that time—and how it was that I was punished. Will you not, sir?"

"I am afraid I cannot," added the chaplain regretfully. "It is against the prison rules."

"She will think me hopelessly bad, lost to her and to the world for ever," said Laurence bitterly. "The thought of it is terrible!"

"Ask God for help," said the chaplain earnestly. "Pray for strength to endure."

"But for how long?" was the passionate rejoinder. "How long?"

"That, too, God must decide," returned the chaplain
tenderly. "If, indeed, you are guiltless, it may be that He will make it manifest soon. But even if it be long, we all must learn to say, 'Thy will be done,' and remember there is another world of recompense and glory."

"But if I could only know she does not despise me! Sir, will you not write a private letter, from yourself, as though Miss Lucas were your own friend? That would not be against the prison rules."

"It would be disobeying them in spirit," said the chaplain, "especially now." And he glanced down with sorrowful meaning at Laurence's fetters and drab and yellow dress. Then, as if his heart melted at the sight of the despairing disappointment on the young convict's face, he added. "But in a year's time, if you get no further punishment, I will do as you wish. Does that comfort you?"

Laurence gave a cry.

"In a year's time—another year! I pray Heaven that by that time I may be free."

With a few more words of comfort the chaplain went away, and the dinner hour (which was also the visiting hour) being ended, Laurence made himself ready for the signal to go back to his work of oakum picking.

Now, in his own old cell, he was again on Warder Gannaway's landing, but as he was not yet strong enough to go out with the quarry gang, he only saw Gannaway in the morning, and for a little while in the evenings before the night warders arrived. Still, short though their contact was, Laurence could not fail to notice that a change had taken place in Gannaway's conduct towards him. The bully warder was no longer unnecessarily brutal, but seemed rather to avoid the man whom he had formerly pursued with a ferocity that had awakened comment even in the callous bosoms of his fellow-tyrants. Laurence wondered at the change—wondered most of all what could have caused it. Gradually, his suspicions of an outside enemy died out of his mind. If Ralph Vickers had indeed been paying Gannaway to oppress him, Gannaway would only have ceased the oppression with
the ceasing of the payment. And why should there be a sudden discontinuance of the bribery?

Could it be—and at this thought Gray's heart grew leaden with dread—could it be that Vickers had ceased to harass him because he had gained his end, the hand of Geraldine Lucas, and could now afford to despise a rival whom he had utterly superseded?

Once conceived, this explanation of the matter grew day by day more possible to Laurence's alarmed mind. He forgot that it was wrong in him to doubt the woman who had sworn to love him always, although, to do him justice, he feared the power of circumstances over her more than he feared a change in her own heart. Then the uselessness of her journey to see him and the bad report he had heard of him must surely have undermined her faith, if not her love, and made the alienation of her life from his more possible than it would otherwise have been.

These thoughts were like demons goading the chained convict to delirium. They made his heart their constant dwelling and turned it into a hell. They tortured him at his monotonous work until he could have torn at his chains savagely, like a wild beast, and at night, even after the heavy fatigue of the day, they kept him from sleep, or allowed him only short spells that were alive with dreadful dreams. They hindered him from gaining strength. But for this he was not sorry, since thereby he hoped to be spared the still-threatened indignity of the lash.

Now, more than ever, he panted to be free. His dread and suspense concerning Vickers and Geraldine overcame his bodily weakness, and spurred him to a feverish energy. Night and day he pondered over De Lacy's scheme for his escape. Could he but get free he would fulfil the conditions faithfully and thoroughly; De Lacy's old mother should be cared for as his own. He burned with a desire to talk with De Lacy again, but weeks passed and he did not see him. He began to despair, to look upon that last bright hope as a will-o'-the-wisp that had shone before him only to delude him. A dank chill fell upon his soul. His fine
eyes grew to have a look in them of concentrated gloom that at times bordered on madness.

At last, one morning before breakfast, when he was returning from the tap on the landing, with his new-filled bucket of clean water he saw De Lacy issuing, also with bucket in hand, from a cell about six doors from his own. His heart gave a joyful leap. So they were near to each other still! He dared not speak, but the meeting cheered his sickening hope. He took it as a sign that Providence was watching over him.

Speech with De Lacy would not be possible for three months yet, not until the isolating ban of his chains and parti-coloured dress should be lifted from him.

Meanwhile there was still no mention of the administering of his three dozen lashes. The doctor came often in the course of his daily rounds, examining him carefully and prescribing for him, but never spoke of his fitness or unfitness for the "cat." Laurence was perplexed at this silence. He distrusted it. Every day he expected to be led again to that horrible hall in the punishment prison, whose memory was sickening to his soul. He would have been happier could he but have guessed the state of the prison authorities' opinions concerning this matter.

The governor had for many weeks past been constantly demanding that No. 99 should be brought forward for his flogging, and the doctor had as persistently refused to allow it. At last the governor accused the doctor of intentionally thwarting him, and a coolness ensued between them. The doctor, however, remained inexorable, and the governor, fume as he might, was not empowered to overrule the medical verdict. Hence Laurence's exemption.

So in hourly self-torment, and well-nigh unendurable suspense, the heavy weeks dragged on.

At length came the day when Laurence was released from his chains, and permitted to exchange the parti-coloured dress for the ordinary third-class convict's costume that he had worn before. With this change came comparative freedom, and the opportunity of occasionally talking with his fellow-prisoners.
It was now nearly six months since his first conversation with De Lacy in the punishment cell. He calculated with an eagerness akin to despair that De Lacy's sentence had now only a little over four months to run. Unless God should help him soon, this last, this supreme hope of liberty, would be dashed to the ground.

On the very day after his change of class he met De Lacy—or No 1,007, as he was known in the prison—in the exercise yard, and, by manoeuvring was able to walk with him. Then thoughts were written on their faces, so De Lacy began without explanation, just as if their first talk had taken place only a few hours before.

"It'll have to be soon if it's going to be done at all, because next month I shall have permission to grow my hair and beard."

"It will not be," said Gray despairingly. "No such good thing can come to me. I am doomed."

"Listen here!" whispered No. 1,007; "there's hope yet! It's rumoured that there's a new gang expected from London. In that case some of us will very likely be drafted off to another prison. I will be going with the first lot most probably, and as they generally choose the worst lads to send away—to get rid of em there's a chance of your being chosen too."

And No 1,007 grunted. "The other place, if we go there, will be a blessed sight harder than Grunley. But if our game succeeds, I shall be the one to suffer from that, not you."

The announcement that had filled Laurence on first hearing the strange proposal overwhelmed him again, drowning for an instant his own misery.

"You must be mad to do this thing," he said. "Think, it means slavery for life—at the very least for nineteen years!"

"It is for my mother," returned No. 1,007 simply. "I think what they say is true, that the strongest feeling a Frenchman has is his love for his mother. Anyhow, I know it's strong in me, though in everything else I've been a very devil. I'm in now for forgery. What are you in for?" he asked suddenly.
"Murder," Laurence answered. "But I did not commit it. As God is my witness, I am innocent."

The eyes of the two prisoners met.

"I believe you," said De Lacy gravely. Then he added: "I must know all about your affairs, and you must know about mine, so that if our chance comes we can answer questions. We'll arrange that to-morrow."

The next day was Sunday, when all the gangs exercise together, and scores of men who never see each other during the week meet and exchange glances of recognition. Very few of the convicts have to do any work on Sundays—only the hospital orderlies, about a third of the cooks, and the farm gang, a privileged set of elderly prisoners, distinguished by their blue dress with red cuffs and collars, who have to feed the cows and horses. The rest fill up the day with chapel-going and exercise. On this day the workers in the tailors' shop and other sedentary gangs often contrive to hear the week's out-door gossip from the quarry and bog gangs, and vice versa.

In the course of the morning's exercise Laurence Gray furtively told No. 1,007 his whole life story, and heard that of the forger in return. De Lacy, having been born and lived all his life in England, spoke without a trace of foreign accent. This was fortunate for their plan.

"The prison officials don't know me as French at all," said he. "I am plain James Lacy on the registers. Remember that, for our chance might come at a minute's notice, and there'd be no time for planning. If we do get sent off together we're bound to succeed. Convicts all look pretty much alike to strangers, and we two are more alike than most; same height and build, and same coloured eyes and hair. That's quite enough to deceive a strange governor. But what they look at most are the body marks. Every mole or scratch or tattoo mark a lag has got is down in the report. You've got the mark of a shot wound. Where is it?"

Laurence touched his side.

"What kind of a wound is it?"

Laurence described it.
"All right," said No. 1,007, with a meaning nod.
"If it came to the push I could manage that. And
now, look at this!" He drew up his sleeve and showed
his left forearm. "It's a red birth-mark, you see.
You would need one like it."
Gray's eyes flashed with sudden fire.
"And if my liberty depended on it I would have one," he answered hoarsely.
No. 1,007 fixed his eyes upon him earnestly.
"Give me your hand upon it that if I get you out
you will protect my mother."
"I swear it," replied Laurence solemnly. | And quickly, unperceived by the warders, the two
convicts clasped hands.

CHAPTER XXXI
THE LAST BRIGHT HOPE

A FORTNIGHT later the new gang from London, of
whose coming there had been rumour, clattered into
the courtyard of Grimley Prison.
A short while after their arrival Warder Cannaway
flung open the door of Laurence Gray's cell.
"You needn't begin your work this morning," he
said grimly. "There's a holiday for you to-day, and
pack up your letters and things."
As though struck with paralysis, Laurence remained
for an instant in the same attitude in which Cannaway
had found him. His face was blank with consternation.
No work? Was it then the much-dreaded flogging
that awaited him? But suddenly light sprang into his
eyes—glowed on his hollow cheeks. The prayed-for
chance was come. He was one of those chosen for
removal to another prison.
He threw up his arms in a frenzy of joy. At last!
At last!
He had scarcely hoped that this opportunity would
be granted him, and its granting seemed almost a
promise of freedom. In his excitement he had not
noticed the mockery in Cannaway's order: "Pack
up your letters." The same order was given to every convict selected for removal; but it had cruelty in it when spoken to Laurence by the man who had stolen from him the only letter that he had ever, while in prison, been privileged to receive.

Nervously he looked about his familiar cell. There was not a single article in it that he could call his own, but even here there were things to which familiarity had reconciled him—his little table, his hammock, his stool, even his tin utensils. More than all else there was his prison Bible, whose precious words had comforted him and given him hope in many a sombre hour. He took up the volume in his hands and reverently kissed it. Then, as he laid it down, his eye caught sight of a little grassy blade that grew in a crevice near his window. It was the only bit of green that he had looked upon for seven long months, and he had learned to love it and regard it as a token that God had not forsaken him.

Presently his cell door was again thrown open, and he was ordered to follow a warder along the gallery and down into the receiving-ward. Here he saw about a dozen convicts who were being handcuffed. He rapidly glanced at their faces as he joined them. A sensation of bitter despair came over him like an ominous cloud; his heart sank within him. De Lacy was nowhere to be seen.

The handcuffs were quickly clasped upon his wrists, and the long connecting chain was laced through the loop at his left hand. Thus secured together, a gang of ten convicts, with Laurence at their head, stood ready to be led away. The armed warders took their places, and, as the gates were opened, the order to march was given.

As he passed through the ponderous gateway, and was ushered into the prison van, Gray looked anxiously behind him. He saw that another similar gang was being made up; but, so far as he could see, the man upon whom his only hope rested was not among them.

Ignorant of his ultimate destination, and conscious that his sudden removal from Grimley must make it for ever impossible for him to meet De Lacy again,
Laurence felt a sickness at his throat which told him all too surely how vain his hopes had been. As the van carried him away he moaned and writhed in the agony of his deep despair.

"Doomed! doomed!" he cried, and he clenched his chained hands so that his long-uncut finger-nails pierced the skin.

Alighting at last from the dark chamber of the prison van, the ten convicts were marched into the railway-station and locked in one of the rooms at the end of the platform. Two warders remained on guard while their companions went off to a neighbouring public-house.

After about half an hour's time the rambling of the second van was heard, the room door was opened, and No. 2 gang entered.

As they filed in, Gray had an opportunity of seeing their face. Scarcely had he raised his eyes an instant when they met those of Jacques de Lacy.

CHAPTER XXII

TRAVELLING COMPANIONS

A slight lifting of the eyebrows was all the recognition De Lacy betrayed, but a look of satisfaction passed swiftly across his face.

He was the end man of the ten who composed the second gang; and the last to enter the waiting-room. Laurence Gray, inwardly excited to feverishness, was perplexed as to how he should get near enough to commence a conversation. He soon saw that this was impossible without the swinging round of the whole ten convicts of one of the chained gangs. Had he been at the other end of the chain De Lacy might have talked with him uninterruptedly for a full half-hour. The warders, no less pleased than the prisoners to get a day's freedom from the discipline of the prison, had put aside their strict watchfulness, and talking was not strictly checked. Nevertheless, Numbers 99 and 1,007, having the length of the room between them,
were compelled to remain silent, although knowing that the success or failure of their whole scheme depended upon the exchange of a few final words. 

Presently the two warders on guard were relieved, and two others entered in their place, bringing in large cans of warm tea with mugs to serve it in. Still, there was no change made in the relative positions of De Lacy and Gray.

Laurence had for his neighbour a stout, red-faced little man who went by the name of Johnnie. Johnnie was one of the most brazen blackguards in that company, and he kept up a ceaseless flow of coarse jest and ribald anecdote. Laurence had become inured to this enforced association with criminals, but, chained to this blasphemer, he felt his degradation as keenly as he had done at first. He looked impatiently in De Lacy’s direction. De Lacy was raising his mug of tea to his lips. Meeting Laurence’s eyes he hesitated and then carelessly said, as he lowered his shackled hands:

“Will you drink with me, John?”

Laurence caught in a moment the meaning of his ruse, and was about to approach him when the door suddenly opened, and the warder in charge called out:

“Number 2 gang—left wheel—march!”

The men hurriedly gave up their empty mugs to the two warders. As De Lacy, following at the tail of the wheeling file, passed within a few feet of Gray, he whispered the word “Patience.”

Gang No. 1 was ordered to follow. Gray and De Lacy were now for a few minutes within talking distance of each other. 

“Quick! listen,” said De Lacy rapidly in French. “We’re bound for Jedwood Prison. I heard one of the screws say so. We may not have another chance of speaking. Never mind. It’s all well, so far. Wait till we get into the receiving-ward. We shall be ordered to the bath-house first thing. That’s our opportunity. We have to look about us precious smart. I’ve been in Jedwood before—seven years ago. It’s an open bath, and I expect we shall all be in the water
together. Good. Watch carefully where I put my clothes. Splash about a bit in the water, change places with me, and then, when we get out, dress yourself in my things. Don't be nervous about it. The new warders can't know us, and none of our pals will blab. But mind, as soon as you're dressed in my togs you must forget that you are yourself. Your name will be James Lacy, Number 1,007, in for five years for forgery. If they ask any questions you can't answer, say you've lost your memory in chokey."

"I understand perfectly. Trust me," said Laurence.

"Here comes the train. We shall be in different carriages I suppose! Give me your hand."

The two shook hands, unseen by the warders, unnoticed by any but the stout little convict named Johnnie.

This worthy coughed meaningfully, and, much to Gray's astonishment, muttered a few words in French.

"Be careful, my friends," he said, in a mock clerical tone. "Don't be too assured that none of our warders can understand you. It's a dangerous game you're playing."

Laurence, startled, turned upon the little man nervously.

"I trust that you at least will not betray what you have just overheard," he said.

"You have heard of honour among thieves," returned Johnnie. "Believe in that honour, my friend. It is not for me to betray a brother in misfortune."

The train glided into the station. A special carriage reserved for convicts was brought along the line from one of the sidings and coupled to the brake van. The men were bundled into it, the two gangs with their respective warders being placed in separate compartments.

No sooner had the train started than the men took advantage of the temporary laxity of discipline. For a moment all eyes were turned to catch a last glimpse at the great prison that crowned the heights in the blue distance.

"Good-bye to Grimley," cried one man.
"Ay, good-bye, bad cess to the place," growled another.
"It's au revoir for some of us, I'm afraid," added Johnnie, turning to Laurence.
"Indeed? I hope I may never have the pleasure of meeting you there again," Laurence replied.
"Hope is a delusion—an ignis fatuus," said Johnnie.
"Wot's that ye say about fat?" asked a broken-nosed lag opposite. "'Old 'ard, Johnnie. Don't yer go for to make a chap's mouth water, old pal. 'Tain't much fat we got at Grimley. Give me Brixton prison for fat. Yer can see it a-lyn in the top o' yer cocoa like cream. As fer Grimley, yer can't git much fat there, 'cept on Thursdays, unless yer eats yer candles, as Charlie Wag 'ere did. What did yer do wi' the wicks, Charlie?"
"Stowed 'em in me 'ammock," said Charlie; "'that's w'ere the screw found 'em. I'd 'ave ate them as well, only I couldn't git 'em over the back o' my throat."
"Now, lads, let's 'ave a toone," cried the broken-nosed one.
"Who's got a planner or a concertina in 'is boots?"
"Gentlemen," said Johnnie, with an assumption of dignity, "let us sing the National Anthem."
"We don't want no National Anthems yere," objected a convict sullenly. "Let Johnnie give us one of 'is reg'lar downright good songs. Plenty o' time to sing Anthems when we get outside."
"Don't yer be afraid of no stupid songs where Johnnie is," said Charlie Wag. "Come on, Johnnie, old pal; give us that 'ere song abart the girl wi' the cork leg. I knows the chorus."
Johnnie began to sing solemnly. At first some of his companions moved restlessly, thinking it was a hymn. But soon the double meaning of the words was understood. The solemn notes grew into a quick patter, accompanied by the rattling of handcuffs and the beating of thick boots. Then came the boisterous chorus, full of ribaldry, in which some of the old lags in the next compartment joined noisily.
"Don't tell me as Johnnie was ever a toff," said one
of the men when the song was ended; "that ain't no society song. W'y I 'eard the very same sung in a pub dam near Amersmith Road afore I was nabbed for my third hugging."

Johnny smile I showing his strong white teeth.

"You wasn't really and truly a toff, was you, Johnnie?" asked the broken nosed one seriously.

"Yes, I was, but you see circumstances compelled me to speculate with other people's money. I had to resign my lawful title then I have been living restored at the expense of the State."

"And prison you've made out cully. Education ain't been much service to you," added Charlie Wag.

"I made a mistake returned the ex-missionary (for such he had been). You see, in my case the odour of respectability has had to give place to the more powerful odour ofbellion. I regard myself as a living example of the ill effects of our prison organisation. Before I said 'mischief I was an honest man, walking in God's way. I did no injury to society. I don't say boys, that I was guiltless of the first offence, but I might have been saved when I was released after my first imprisonment. But I was thrown destitute upon a merciless world. I went to the bad—it was my only resource. I was not until the second time—"

"No I livin' you wasn't," broke in Charlie Wag; "I reckon by the time you was as bad a lot as any of us coves here."

"That I did," retorted the ex-missionary. "You are in for manslaughter. Nosey there is doing his seven stretch for robbing a bank. Number 222 is in for arson, and 99 here for murder. Now, I didn't nothing so bad as any of these, but the law inconsiderately put me in the midst of such companions—that is my grievance. My fall is irretrievable. Intimate association with you rogues has made me what you see me—a degraded, profane blackguard."

"Ay, you're all that now, Johnnie," said Charlie Wag, with a coarse laugh. "You was a puppet saint when you fust I know'd you, wasn't you? But now—well
now I lay you could give any lag a start and beat 'im 'and over 'and. Yer eddication's complete. You only wants a bit more practice outside, and then I bet you'll be as fly a cove as ever nicked a ticker or cracked a crib. Yes, my boy, you don't want no more learning. You'll be all right; you won't stop short until the squeezer nips your scrag, and then it'll be all up wi' you. Now, then, give us another song."

CHAPTER XXXIII

IN THE BATH-HOUSE

The railway journey occupied several hours, and it was late in the afternoon when, having alighted from the train and been conveyed some six miles by road in prison vans, the twenty convicts were delivered up by their old warders into the care of the authorities at Jodwood.

This prison stood in the middle of a wide plain, apart from all other habitations. There was no chance of any of the gang making a survey of the surrounding country, as they were not released from the semi-darkness of the vehicles until they were within the high prison walls.

At once upon alighting, Laurence Gray looked about him for De Lacy. Fortunately, the two vans arrived at about the same time. No. 2 gang entered the long whitewashed passage of the receiving-ward in advance of their ten fellow-convicts. Gray, who was at the head of No. 1 gang, thus followed immediately behind his friend, and they were again side by side, as they had been at Grimley Station.

They exchanged glances, but did not speak. Their chains and handcuffs were at once removed by the new warders. The twenty men were then marched off in single file through the passage and across a yard to the bathing-house. To the dismay of Laurence, he noticed at once upon entering that the bath was not, as De Lacy had foretold, an open one where all would bathe together, but that there was a row of some five-and-twenty separate baths. De Lacy also was somewhat taken aback
by this unwelcome discovery. Between the baths and the long form where the men were to undress there was a wide space, along which the warders walked to and fro.

"What about that birth mark?" whispered De Lacy hurriedly in French, as he unbuttoned his jacket.

"It's all right," returned Gray; "I did it by suction in the van just now."

"Good. Hurry up then and undress. Quick, quick!"

Gray stripped himself rapidly and laid his clothes behind him on the form. De Lacy glanced at the shot mark on Gray's side, and murmured a word of satisfaction. Laurence, had at first dreaded that the unexpected structure of the baths would have prevented the carrying out of their scheme as previously arranged. But De Lacy, in his life of crime, had gained unusual quickness of decision to help his natural cunning, and now, with a sudden, swift movement, he drew Gray's bundle of clothes along the form and adroitly threw his own down in their place. The next moment a warder ordered the men to step forward, each to the bath directly opposite him.

"All's right," murmured De Lacy. "Keep your own place."

Laurence breathed heavily in his suspense as he stepped into the water.

The usual ten minutes only were allowed for undressing, bathing, drying, and dressing again. With inward agitation, but outward calm, Laurence put on the under-clothing that De Lacy had left. It was exactly like his own, and for an instant, in that unnatural tremor of nerve and brain, he almost doubted whether the change of bundles that he had seen De Lacy operate had really taken place—whether it had not been a delusion conjured up by his own heated fancy. Eagerly he caught up the outer garments. "Ah, thank Heaven, it was true! They were trimmed differently from those he had previously worn. He looked at the cloth badge on the jacket, and saw that instead of the familiar "R. 99" and the letter "L," it bore the register number "M. 1,007" and the figure "5," denoting the term of De Lacy's sentence.
He had scarcely drawn on his jacket when the word was given:
"By the right—march!"
De Lacy had not yet put on his boots, and as the files passed out of the bathing-house he hurriedly took his place in the rear, as far removed from Gray as possible. He had now become Laurence Gray, his own old name would henceforth stand on the prison registers as the denomination of a man far better and nobler than he.

Laurence Gray now wore De Lacy's badge. The badges were the only marks by which the Jedwood warders could identify individuals of the newly-arrived gang. Gray's exchange with De Lacy could not be detected by any of the Jedwood officials, and if any of the Grimley convicts should notice it, it was certain that they would not betray the fact. It remained, however, for the governor and doctor of Jedwood Prison to make their examination of the new batch of prisoners, and herein there was great danger of discovery.

CHAPTER XXXIV

From the bath-house the twenty convicts were conducted back to the receiving-ward, where gruel and bread were served to them.

After they had eaten this food, their numbers were taken, and they were told to take off their boots, jackets, waistcoats, and breeches, and to place the clothes neatly in a row of bundles in the exact order in which they were then sitting.

When they were so far undressed, they were marched in line into a large room, where sat the deputy-governor, the prison doctor, and the chief warder.

Here the men were told to strip themselves entirely. Presently the whole twenty stood naked, and the deputy called each man in turn before him to be compared with the written description of him in the official registers.

Laurence Gray waited in indescribable suspense while
four or five of his companions were examined and identified. At length his own turn came. He answered to the name of James Lacy.

The deputy read out the record against him, referring to his crime—forgery—and his sentence—five years. Then the chief warden, standing at his side, examined him, noting the marks on his body as the deputy read out the record of them.

"Brown eyes!" said the deputy.
"Right," answered the chief.
"Good teeth?"
"Yes."

"Small red birth-mark on left fore-arm?"
"Yes.

The chief warden saw the cicatrice on Laurence’s side, and wanted to answer concerning it. But the deputy, apparently already satisfied, turned over the page of his report. Then he addressed Laurence.

"I find that you have lost nearly all your remission marks," he said, "And you have no chance of making them up in the short time that is now left to you. You will therefore remain in your servitude until within twenty-eight days of the expiration of your five years’ sentence. In three weeks’ time you will receive permission to grow your hair."

"Thank you, sir," said Laurence, and in his turn he withdrew to the far end of the room. Another danger was past. He felt his forehead grow cooler and his heart beat less rapidly.

Johnnie, the ex-missionary, was the next man examined. Laurence noticed that the little rogue’s naked back was carefully looked at by the warden for the marks of flogging.

One by one the rest of the men underwent the official inspection, and as Laurence was putting on some clean underclothing that was given to him he heard his own name pronounced.

"Laurence Gray!"

A thrill ran through him from head to foot. He needed all his self-control not to step forward at the call.

De Lacy answered to it and took his stand.
The deputy-governor regarded him with keen scrutiny. The report against Laurence Gray was a severe one. Primarily, the fact of his being sentenced to life-long imprisonment stamped him as one of the worst of criminals, and his punishments at Grimley, first for having a formidable weapon in his cell, and second, for his attempted escape, signified to the officials at Jedwood that in him they had to deal with a very bad character.

"I don't know how it is," muttered the deputy aside to the doctor, "but that Captain Podmore has a deuced easy way of getting rid of his worst men and turning them off upon others. Why he should have sent this particular man here I can't well understand. But come along, it's nearly tea-time and I'm getting peckish. Ninety-nine, this is a black record against you," he added, looking up at De Lacy. "You made an attempt at escape some six months ago, I see?"

"Yes, sir."

"Were you flogged?"

"No, sir; the doctor said I was not fit for it. I was shot at and wounded."

"What punishment did you receive?"

"A month's separate confinement, with work at the crank, and six months in chains, sir."

"Where were you wounded?"

"In the side, sir," answered De Lacy.

Laurence, from a distance, listening intently, marvelled at the coolness with which his confederate spoke. The warden looked at De Lacy's side and saw there a mark which, superficially at least, was not unlike that of a shot wound which had been probed and doctored. The warden, as it chanced, was not sufficiently skilled to recognise that the wound was of much more recent date than six months before. His attention was directed, however, by the sight of a black smear on the convict's left arm.

"What's that?" he asked gruffly. "Why didn't you wash yourself properly just now?"

"It's some pitch that I rubbed against this morning when I was coming out of my cell," De Lacy answered boldly. "I couldn't wash it off."
In reality he had designedly smeared his arm with the pitch in order to cover the red birth-mark of which there was naturally no note set down in the description of Laurence Gray.

"Better ask your warder for some grease and clean yourself," said the chief.

The further examination of the new "R. 99" was concluded without any betrayal of his real identity.

Laurence Gray was the only one of the Grimley squad who was noted in the transfer reports as being in weak health. The doctor, however, did not personally examine De Lacy, but simply told him that if he required any medical help he was to apply for it in the usual way. For the present he would be put in the tailors' shop, where he would have work that would conduce towards his recovery.

On being dismissed, the twenty men were taken out to the passage, where their clothes had been left to be searched. They dressed themselves, and were conducted to their respective wards.

When the door of his cell had been shut upon him, Laurence Gray sank upon his knees, and, leaning his elbows on the wooden stool, buried his face in his hands in an excess of joy that was almost like pain.

"Geraldine! Geraldine!" he cried to his beloved in his heart, "I will come to you soon! Only three months more, and I shall see your face again!"

The hope was intoxicating—maddening. He trembled at his own delight. In the old days he would never have believed that mere freedom could seem so sweet a thing. He wanted nothing else in the world now—save only Geraldine.

He thought of what De Lacy had undertaken to endure in his stead, and earnestly vowed to himself that he would repay to the young convict's mother this great debt of gratitude that he owed to her son. Then suddenly the recollection that he was not yet safe rushed into his mind, chilling his blood. He might be discovered—even at the very last moment of his escape something might happen to betray him. But he would not linger on the terrible fear. He trusted in
his own strength, in his right of innocence, and in God's help.
He knelt praying until the signal for going to bed resounded in the massive prison walls.

CHAPTER XXXV
THE STRESS OF CIRCUMSTANCE

"GOOD-EVENING, Miss Lucas."
It was dusk, and the lamps had just been lighted in the library at Fenton Court. But Geraldine Lucas was scarcely conscious of the soft glow they shed upon her as she leaned back in an easy chair, against whose cushions her head rested wearily.
It was several months since she and her father had taken their trip to the South of France. The change had done her no good, but Mr. Lucas's health had seemed to benefit by it. He had maintained his renewed strength and cheerfulness until about a fortnight ago, when he had caught a chill which had settled on his lungs.
He was now lying seriously ill. Geraldine had just left him. Worn out by devoted watching, she had that morning been persuaded by the doctor to go to her own room and take some rest. She had slept for many hours, and on returning to her father's bedside had learnt that during her absence Ralph Vickers, now junior partner in the firm of Christopher Lucas & Co., had called and spent a long time in the sick-room, and had been appointed sole trustee of her property in the event of Mr. Lucas's death. More than that, her father had implored her to consent to become Vickers's wife. He would not, he said, seek to influence her decision if he lived; but for the sake of his peace of mind, he appealed to her to promise him that if he should die she would marry the man whom he had appointed her guardian and protector.
Torn between her love for her suffering father and her heart's revolt against the thing he asked of her, Geraldine had rushed away from the bedside and downstairs to the empty library. She wanted to be alone to
think, to realise her position. She felt stifled, dazed, entrapped. Wherever she looked she saw trouble and danger awaiting her.

Her father was in a condition so critical that any moment might bring a fatal relapse. This alone was terrible enough without the constant persecutions of Ralph Vickers, and the inexplicable silence of Laurence Gray. And now Vickers, taking advantage of her father's weakness, had used his subtle influence to obtain the post of sole trustee of her property, thereby acquiring a power over her that he would surely afterwards exert to force her into compliance with his wishes.

In despair she asked herself what it was that so blinded her father to Vickers's real nature—how it was that a parent who loved his child so well could thus rashly place her whole future under a bad man's control. And not satisfied with trusting her fortune to Vickers's care, her father now besought her to give her hand and life to him also—besought her with urgent appeals to the love and duty she owed himself.

He had implored her with the authority of one who speaks from what may prove to be his death bed. But she could not yield. Not even for his sake could she forebear her fidelity to her old lover, and consent to marry a man whom her inmost heart abhorred.

And why had Laurence not written? It was more than a year now since her fruitless visit to Grimley Prison, and in all that time she had heard nothing. What could it mean? Had he forgotten her? Or could it be that, as her father had frequently suggested, he had acted so ill in prison as to forfeit entirely the privilege of writing?"

No, no! that was impossible. The prison system must be terrible indeed if one so manly and so noble could be goaded into vulgar insubordination. Yet vague fears assailed her—fears both for him and for herself. Strangely enough, too, her misgivings were invariably associated with the thought of Vickers. His influence seemed to peer out mockingly from the heart of every trouble that came to her. She felt his will like a network encompassing her, paralysing her
efforts. But he should never conquer. Alone she would struggle against him—would baffle him—

"Good-evening, Miss Lucas."

She looked up with a start. There, before her in the lamplight, stood Ralph Vickers himself. He looked paler than usual, and there was an expression of mock gravity upon his face.

Geraldine replied coldly to his salutation. Her beautiful features seemed to harden into stone as she surveyed him.

"You entered very silently. I am not accustomed to be intruded upon so stealthily."

"I beg your pardon," rejoined Vickers. "My excuse must be that I want to talk with you."

Without permission he seated himself in a large chair facing the one in which she sat. Leaning back negligently, yet with one hand grasping each arm of the chair, he fixed his sombre eyes upon her.

"I have just left your father. There is no improvement in his condition."

A shudder passed through Geraldine, but she said nothing. She only coldly returned the basilisk look fastened on her.

"He told me that you were greatly disturbed at a suggestion he made concerning me."

"I do not wish to speak of that," said Geraldine, rising.

"Excuse me." The tone of his voice detained her as she was preparing to walk away. "Your father desires that we should speak of it. Geraldine, it is the dearest wish of his heart that you should give yourself to me."

"I will not hear this, Mr. Vickers."

She moved towards the door; but Vickers, rising suddenly, got before her and barred the way.

"You shall hear it. I will not be treated like this any longer. Your father implores you to marry me. Will you dare to refuse him, ill as he is?"

Geraldine had recoiled a few steps, and now stood before him, white with indignation. At his last words the whiteness changed to crimson in her cheeks.
Even Vickers shrank for an instant before the new fire and anger that darkened her ordinarily tender eyes.

"I shall dare to be true to the man to whom I have sworn fidelity," she answered, with quiet passion. "I love my father deeply. I would buy back his health with the sacrifice of my own—I would gladly die to save him, if I could—but I cannot do wrong at his bidding. Besides, you have blinded him. If he could read your character as clearly as I read it, he would cut out his tongue sooner than demand that I should wreck my life by joining it to yours."

A fleeting gleam in Vickers's eyes showed that her words had stung him. But he controlled himself well. Only her scornful defiance of him precipitated a revelation which he now felt himself secure in making.

"If it is your duty to Laurence Gray that prevents you from consenting to become my wife, you need trouble no more about the matter," he said lightly.

"That obstacle is removed."

She looked at him fixedly.

"What do you mean?"

He stood rigidly immovable, but his eyes seemed to drive into her resisting soul the three short words that his lips uttered.

"Gray is dead."

He saw a convulsion pass over her face. Her eyes had taken a wild look of startled horror. But she said firmly:

"I do not believe it."

"It is the truth," returned Vickers hoarsely, stirred to rage by the thought that he could not in any way move her, nor shake her faith. "It is as true as that we both stand here."

She trembled again, but held herself outwardly calm.

"I cannot trust your bare word, Mr. Vickers."

"How you insult me!" he muttered between his closed teeth. And then, going nearer to her, he repeated fiercely, "I tell you it is true—true—true!" He was now so close to her that his hot breath touched her cheek. "I heard it from the warder. He was shot in trying to escape nearly a year ago."