MARK MEREDITH

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MARK MEREDITH,

A TALE OF SOCIALISM.

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CHAPTER I.

THE FIRST CLOUD.

Seated in a garden chair before his door, Professor Grainger smoked his pipe at ease on the evening of a summer's day. Behind him the western sky was brilliant with heavy crimson clouds on a background of glowing orange; before him the spires of the great University Hall stood out against pale blue-green, faintly flushed with rose. To the left, amid a wilderness of trees and shrubs, lay the ivy-clad quadrangle, its worn stone stairs leading from the cloisters to the class rooms where the Professor had lectured for more than thirty years to generations of Australian youth of the privileged minority who were favoured with leisure for study. Grainger was an old man, the doyen of the teaching staff in the University of Melbourne, but many predecessors had come and gone since the foundation stones of the great grey building had been laid in the throbbing golden years when Australia was young. Thinking, as he often did, of those departed days of freedom, so long departed that only the aged could remember hearing tales of them, the Professor sat with his book neglected on his knee. He knew that there were troublous times ahead, and sometimes he almost wished he could have his youth back again, to play a part in guiding his country through strife to the freedom it had lost for so long. But now dismissing idle fancies with a sigh, he rose from his chair, and walked across the lawn towards the avenue.

Work was over for the day, and the grounds were deserted, save by one or two students who had just left the library, closed with the failing light. One of these youths hesitated at the Professor's gate, as though

about to enter, but he seemed to have changed his mind, and was passing on, when Grainger called to him from the garden: "Good evening, Meredith. I thought you meant to pay me a visit."

"Good evening, sir; I did think of it, but——"

"But what? Come into my house and have a chat. I am depressed this afternoon, and I saw you looking very dissatisfied and combative at my lecture to-day."

With a quizzical expression on his face, Professor Grainger held open the gate, and Mark Meredith entered. He was a tall, athletically built youth of twenty-two, with frank blue eyes, that lighted up a rather serious and thoughtful face when they smiled. He was keen and active, both intellectually and physically, and Professor Grainger, who occupied the chair of history and political economy, and who had few intimates among his contemporaries, counted Meredith as a friend, as well as a pupil, talking to him with a freedom he used to no others.

"I can't help looking glum, sir," answered Meredith; "I hate to hear you teaching those things that you know are all cant and humbug, when you yourself have shown me that they are."

"I don't enjoy it over much, myself, Mark," said the Professor, with a weary smile, "but I must teach what I am paid to teach—more or less—more or less. But never mind me. You did not come to talk of this?"

"Not exactly; I am troubled about my sister."

"What of her? Come into my library, where we can talk undisturbed."

Following the Professor, Meredith glanced enviously at the rows of ancient books as he seated himself. There were volumes of Herbert Spencer, Darwin, Mill, George, Shakespeare, Thackeray, and many others of the old individualist philosophers, economists, and novelists, whose works were strictly interdicted by the Government to the common people, and to the youth of even the official class to which Meredith belonged.

"Now, Meredith," asked the Professor, "what is worrying you about your sister? I thought she was very comfortably situated in the Commonwealth Gazette office."

"So she is," answered Meredith; "but since my father died I don't know what will become of her, or me either; but for myself I don't care."

"You and she will doubtless be chosen by the proper officers of our paternal Government to fill those places in the social economy for which you are best fitted. Liberty, equality, fraternity—the gospel of peace and plenty, love and labour—is not everyone safe, happy, and contented under its realisation on earth?"

"You know that's all humbug, sir," blurted out Mark. "While my father was alive and in favour, we were safe for some share in anything good that was going. But now, since he died, and in disgrace for being honest—

"Well, now?"

"Now her future and mine depends on the editor of the 'Gazette'—that beast Wilkes."

"As a Professor, I cannot admit that anyone's future depends on any individual in the State; but as a man, tell me of Wilkes. Why is he a beast, and what is he doing?"

Meredith laughed angrily. "I suppose he is a beast because God made him so. He wants to marry my sister."

"Oh," said the Professor. "And you object. It would be a splendid match."

"I would rather see her dead."

"And she?"

"She hates him, and," he added, confusedly, "I don't want to tell tales, you know, but you are the only friend of any influence we have got—and—and she is in love with a fellow named Ransome—that Englishman I brought here once and who left a fortnight ago. He's awfully in love with her, and they're engaged."

The Professor got up and paced the room. "Well, well," he said, "I am sorry—very sorry. This comes of allowing foreigners from less highly developed countries to mix with a socialist people, even on permits for a limited time. I have always warned the President that it would not do; their half-savage barbarism captivates our maidens, and they fill people with reactionary ideas." Then, laying his hand on the boy's

shoulder, "I feel deeply for you, Meredith. Your father was a good friend to me, and I am fond of you young people. Wilkes can make himself nasty, but what do you want me to do?"

"Cannot you use your influence, sir?" asked Meredith, eagerly.

"Influence, my dear boy! I have no influence, or, at least, what I have is not worth a snap of the fingers against Wilkes. As editor of the 'Gazette' he has the ear of the whole people. Even his superiors fear and toady to him, and he can break any smaller man."

"And this is our socialist paradise that you preach about in your lectures," sneered Meredth.

The Professor sighed. "Don't be bitter, boy. I am an old man. I have no strength left to fight, and where I am, under cover of my historical lectures, I insidiously sow the seed of freedom in the brave young souls that may some day bring it to fruit. The Government already suspects me. If I crossed a high official I should be dismissed, cui bono? I am a coward, perhaps, but our system breeds cowards. I am a rotten reed—a rotten reed."

Gulping down his disappointment, Meredith turned to go, mumbling some words of thanks, but the Professor detained him.

"Wait," he said; "tell me some more details, and I will think." Meredith told him what there was to tell. For some time Wilkes had praised his sister's work, and she had been delighted, as step followed step in quick succession, until she had been recently appointed one of the editor's private secretaries, in constant communication with him. He had invited her and Meredith to his luxurious rooms in Collins-street, had spoken about suggesting to the Chancellor that Meredith should have another year at the University before joining the industrial army, had indeed promised to be in every way the orphans' adviser and friend. Then he had asked Hilda Meredith to marry him. Utter astonishment and fear for the moment rendered her speechless. Then she had found words for a timid refusal. Again, later, he had asked her, and this time, though he had concealed his disappointment

and anger, Meredith knew he felt himself slighted, and was determined on gaining his way or having revenge.

"How do you know?" asked the Professor. "Has he treated Hilda unkindly since?"

"No," answered Mereith. "He has been as sweet as sugar to her. But to-day the blackguard asked me to call, and told me, with the greatest politeness, that in the bad time coming the Government wanted fewer workers in the sciences and professions and more in agriculture and primary industries. They wanted more brains and education in manual work, to give a fillip to it, and set a good example. There was a lot of this stuff, and then he came to the point. If Hilda were to marry him within the next six months his influence might be sufficient to keep her and me in the professional departments. If not, he feared he must give in Hilda's name as available for work in the Yarraville Jute Factory, and the Government wanted some smart youths for cane cutting in the sugar plantations of North Queensland."

"Um! A pretty strong hint," commented the Professor. "Have you said anything of this to your sister?"

"Not I! If Wilkes thinks that for anything he can do to me or even to her I would persuade her to marry such an old blackguard—well, he doesn't know me."

Grainger glanced at Meredith's flushed cheeks and angrily flashing eyes.

"No, I don't think he does," he answered, "and I don't think he would care to know you with that look on your face. Well, well, keep up your spirits. I cannot possibly interfere if Wilkes should recommend the removal of your sister from his department, but I think I may prevent your immediate departure from the University. It would never do to have you in the Queensland cane fields while your sister needs help. I dare say we shall keep her out of the jute factory yet."

"I am a million times obliged to you, sir," said Meredith, warmly.

"You have very little to thank me for," replied the Professor, smiling kindly. "But the old man means well, and will manoeuvre for you though he dare not fight. I am a true child of Socialism, if an ungrateful one. Stay, one thing before you go. Give me the English Romeo's address, and I shall cable him to come back. If you or Hilda sent him a message it would be reported, and perhaps lead to trouble."

CHAPTER II.

PETER WILKES.

Mark Meredith walked slowly to the railway station, pondering many things. The Professor had promised that he should not go to Queensland, and while he was free in Melbourne his sister would have a champion to be reckoned with. It seemed impossible that Wilkes could send her to the jute factory, which employed the very sweepings of womanhood, and was, in fact, a kind of penal establishment in disguise for those who had shown themselves dissolute and useless without actually breaking the criminal law, and for those who had rendered themselves specially odious to the ruling class. Yet he knew the unswerving ambition, obstinacy, and vindictiveness of Wilkes, who had reached his present position by force of ability, which knew when to fawn and flatter, when to snarl and bite, and had carried him from the dust collector's cart to the editor's chair in the office of the great newspaper of the Commonwealth. There were significant tales of the luck that had befallen his friends, the misfortunes that had dogged his enemies, and throughout the land he was more feared, if less respected, than the President.

These things were but whispered. The Australians of that day were true Englishmen in their passion for retaining dead forms which had lost their meaning, and in pretending respect for what they hated or despised. But the Englishman, however poor, at least feared few things in the shape of man; the Australian Socialist feared many, and among them the official to whose ears might come a whisper that places went by favour, and that rewards of toil were unequal.

Favouritism was notorious, patent, shameless, but the pretence ruled that if one man were a coal heaver, or a ploughman, another a poet or an engineer, their respective callings were decided by suitability, supplemented when necessary by a ballot of scrupulous fairness. That was the proper thing to say, and it was not well with the man who said aught else from the housetops. Meredith himself had only lately begun to realise the hollow sham of their boasted freedom and equality. Two years ago it had seemed to him quite in accordance with right and reason when an agitator who succeeded in collecting a hundred persons to hear him speak some bitter truths concerning the bureaucracy had been banished to New Guinea for disturbing the public peace and order. His father, then sickening with his last illness, had protested; and Meredith's cheek flushed as he recollected that he had felt ashamed of his parent who had been condemned and disgraced just before his death.

Mark's half insolent boyish protests had been kindly answered by his father. The seed of thought was sown. Grainger's half veiled irony in lecturing, his more outspoken cynicism in private talks had developed it; so had many talks with his English friend Ransome, and finally the brutality of Wilkes had filled Mark's heart with rebellion.

He did not doubt that the lot of himself and Hilda had been cast so far in pleasant places by favouritism, because they were the children of an official. He recollected in his school days other boys and girls, just as well fitted for scholarship or professional work, who were now sewing button holes or splitting rails, but he felt no spirit of self-sacrifice urging him to surrender what partial fate had given them. He and Hilda would keep what they had got while he had strength to fight for it, and he glowed with the momentary thought that some day he might help to overthrow the tyrannous system which forced a round of dull, miserable toil upon the masses in order that a few might enjoy leisure and comfort, and a still smaller few riot in unbridled luxury.

Meredith was bent on fighting, he knew not exactly how, but he felt some comfort in the thought that

Hilda's lover, his friend, would be again in Melbourne within three weeks. He was now nearing Colombo, and though urgent business took him back to England, Mark felt sure that when he received Grainger's cable telling him that Hilda was in trouble he would return.

At the corner of Elizabeth and Collins streets Mark passed through Watson Square.

In the early enthusiastic days of the Socialist Republic, buildings, confiscated from their owners, had been pulled down to make way for it, and Mark glanced with a grim smile at the heroic statue of J. C. Watson. Labour crowned him with a garland, Wealth and Freedom, with their arms lovingly entwined round Labour's waist, looked on with an approving smile. "Erected," said the inscription, "to the glorious memory of J. C. Watson, first Socialist Prime Minister, who, though groping, hesitating, faltering, paved the way."

It was long since statues had been erected in the Commonwealth, for it did not accord with Socialist ideals to publicly acknowledge the existence of men who stood head and shoulders above their fellows, and the officials who wielded great power and influence had no interest in running counter to the popular prejudice on a matter of this kind. For all the produce of industry in excess of the amount required to provide the masses with a meagre living they had personal uses which left no labour to spare for erecting monuments or beautifying the city.

Near the railway station in Flinders-street stood one of the large eating houses in which most of the citizens took their meals, and as it was growing late Meredith went in. He usually dined with his sister at the restaurant in St. Kilda, but before this she would have tired of waiting for him. At the table where he seated himself he was shortly joined by a University acquaintance, in high glee because he had secured two permits for an evening's visit to the foreign quarter, one of which he generously offered to Meredith in return for his company. At any other time Meredith would have jumped at the rarely offered chance of plunging into the life and gaiety of the town devoted to foreigners and sailors, which surrounded the piers of Port Melbourne, and was walled off from the Socialist city. Experience had shown the Commonwealth authorities that their people could not be allowed to mix freely with visitors, because reactionary individualist ideas were thereby encouraged, while unrestricted access to ocean going ships led to an undesirable loss of population by unrecorded departures. Hence the establishment in all important seaports of a quarter where foreigners lived and traded under individualist conditions.

The higher officials visited these quarters at their pleasure, but the ordinary citizen could do so only when armed with a permit, which was very difficult to obtain, and permits, granted as a matter of course for a limited time, were also required by foreigners desirous of entering Melbourne.

Meredith had been once before in the Port, where the atmosphere of freedom had strangely stirred his thoughts, and now he longed to breathe it again and delight his eyes with the brightly lit theatres, the cosmopolitan crowd, the busy shops, the cheerful hotels, all the glitter of life, so different from anything in Melbourne, where public exigencies permitted a minimum expenditure on light and pleasure for the masses. To-night, however, he wanted to be with his sister, for whose future he felt so much anxiety, so he refused the proffered treat with a sigh, and, after finishing his frugal meal, he hurried away to the station, whence the electric cars left for St. Kilda.

CHAPTER III.

BROTHER AND SISTER.

As Meredith ascended to the third floor of the great pile of buildings where he and Hilda had their rooms, Wilkes met him on the stairs. Only a dim light came from the lamp on the landing, and Mark, thinking himself unrecognised, was hurrying past with anger and foreboding in his heart when Wilkes stopped him.

"Hullo, Meredith," he said, holding out his hand, and smiling unpleasantly, "you have become very blind all of a sudden. Too much poring over books, my boy. You want work in the open air."

"That is why you are sending me to Queensland, I suppose," answered Meredith, sullenly.

Wilkes laughed. "Don't fancy cane cutting, eh? It would do you all the good in the world. But your sister shares your absurd prejudice against a country life. And now that she has consented to marry me—well, perhaps I may be able to humour her."

"Consented to marry you?" gasped Meredith.

"Yes—luckily for you. Won't you congratulate me?"

"You—you devil!" was Mark's reply. He spoke scarcely above a whisper, for another inhabitant of the building was coming down the stairs, but Wilkes heard.

"Thank you very much," he said, genially. "Of course you had set your heart on seeing her in the jute factory. Well, good night, and take care of your eyes, or we may have to try the open air cure for you yet."

Without answering a word, Mark bounded up the stairs and flung open the door of his sitting room, where he found Hilda lying on the sofa, her face buried in cushions, sobbing convulsively.

"What is the matter, Hilda?" he asked, putting his hand upon her shoulder.

Hilda looked up, wondering at his stern set face.

He felt tenderness for her trouble, but her weakness angered him. He had often rallied her upon her extreme submissiveness and her conscientious belief that resistance to constituted authority was a crime, but he believed her love for Ransome and repulsion for Wilkes stronger than this instinct to obey; and the thought that she had sold herself to Wilkes to escape from the factory made him cruel and hard.

"Tell me why you look like that" she demanded, drying her tears.

"I met Wilkes on the stairs, and he said you had promised to marry him. I want to hear you tell me it is a lie."

"I can't," she moaned. "It is true."

"Why did you consent? You promised me you would not."

"Oh, Mark! I am so utterly miserable. Don't be angry with me. I can't bear it. I am persuaded I

am doing the right thing." She sat up and clasped his hand beseechingly, but he drew it away.

"What about your engagement to Ransome? he asked. "Does that count for nothing?"

"I should never have made it. You know all our books and preachers say it is wrong for Socialists to marry foreigners."

"Curse our books and preachings! Are you not in love with Ransome?"

"Yes," she answered quietly.

"Then you have no right to marry anyone else—let alone such a beast as Wilkes. There must be something influencing you besides that rot about our duty to Society. Did Wilkes make any threat of what he would do if you didn't consent?"

"Yes."

"What was it?"

Hilda hesitated for a moment; then she burst out: "Oh, don't ask me, Mark. It would do no good to tell you, and I promised I wouldn't. Just let me alone and be sorry for me—I can't help myself."

"You won't you mean," answered Mark, scornfully. Even in his anger he saw how charming she was, and understood how the exquisite fairness of her skin, and the gold of her tossed rippling hair, had set Wilkes's blood aflame. He saw her with new eyes; the rounded lines of neck and bosom, the graceful length of limb, seemed suddenly revealed to him. He had taken for granted that Hilda was pretty, but she was more than pretty, she was alluring, and this fact added to his heat, for in it he saw how much Wilkes would venture to win her.

"I know why you have given in," he went on. "You have thrown over the man you are engaged to and promised to make a shameful marriage, just because Wilkes threatened to send you out of the 'Gazette' office into the jute factory if you don't. In the first place, he can't do it, and in the second place, if he could, it would be better a hundred times than disgracing yourself and being unhappy for life."

Hilda's eyes grew round with wonder as her brother was speaking. She sprang up and clutched his arm.

"What do you mean?" she cried. "I never heard a

word of this." Then, with a burst of anger, "You ought to help me and sympathise, and instead of that you are heartless and cruel and insult me. Oh, go away and leave me, Mark. You don't know what I am suffering."

Somewhat staggered and ashamed, Mark was trying to soothe his sister and to stem the torrent of her tears, when the door opened, and Mary Jackson entered. She was Hilda's greatest friend, and Mark's. She and he thought themselves a living example of the possibility of comradeship untinctured by sentiment between man and woman; the fact being that they were but boy and girl, and only a spark was needed to set the fire of love in both their hearts aflame.

Mary was shorter than Hilda, thicker set; and while any man would turn to look at the latter, it was only here and there that Mary found admirers. She had clear-cut features, a fine pair of eyes, and was alert and decisive in expression and movement. Like Hilda, she was dressed neatly in blue serge, but while Hilda was able to wear a gold chain round her neck, and a brooch at her throat, Mary's dress was innocent of all adornment. Individuality in dressing was almost impossible, for gowns were turned out, ready made, by the million, but, for all that, both Mary and Hilda wore theirs with an air of distinction, and, like many other girls, they had learnt how to correct any glaring misfit. Mary's hands were rough and brown, and because she had a considerable share of natural vanity, she had acquired a trick of standing with them clasped behind her, to hide the stains, roughness, and broken nails, which the work she laboured at entailed.

She looked in surprise from Hilda to Mark. "Good heavens! What is the matter? No wonder you did not hear me knock. Surely you two have not been quarrelling?" She sat down beside Hilda, and kissed her flushed cheek.

"She is upset because Wilkes has been here persuading her to marry him," said Mark, rather shamefacedly.

"And because Mark scolds and sneers at me instead of being sorry," sobbed Hilda, "and says I consented

because I was afraid Mr. Wilkes would get me sent to some horrid factory. I never heard a word about any factory, and I wouldn't mind if he killed me."

"That just shows what pigs boys are," said Mary, with a scornful glance at Mark. "They never understand a thing even when it is as plain as their face." She put her arm affectionately round Hilda's waist. "But, Hilda dear, you can't have promised to marry that hateful Wilkes. What about Mr. Ransome?"

"That's just what I want to know," muttered Mark, sulkily.

"Hush! You are only bullying her, and I want to know the truth about this. You may listen if you like while Hilda tells me. But don't interrupt." There was pleading as well as command in her voice.

Thus encouraged and gradually growing more composed, Hilda told her story to the friend who, though only twenty, and three years younger than herself, had a force of character that completely dominated Hilda's more yielding nature, and largely influenced Mark as well. He learnt as she spoke of Wilkes's persuasions that he had said not a word of any penalties upon herself, in the case of refusal. The threat which she had declined to divulge to Mark until Mary persuaded her to tell everything, disregarding promises of secrecy, was the banishment of her brother to the field of labour in tropical Queensland. And even this he had mentioned less as a threat on his part, than as a course contemplated by the Government, partly because they wanted educated young men there, and partly because Mark, as the son of his father, a far too out-spoken and liberal minded official, was regarded with suspicion. As Wilkes put it, his influence, which he would exert to the uttermost for a member of his family, if Hilda became his wife, would almost certainly be successful in preventing Mark's deportation. Otherwise he would have to go; and Wilkes painted the horrors of life and labour in the tropical jungle in such lurid colours that solicitude for her brother, reinforced by acute distress at the idea of being left lonely in Melbourne, had finally conquered her repulsion and induced her to succumb.

Mark stormed and raged when he heard the story, and begged Hilda's forgiveness for being so unjust. But she should not, he declared, sacrifice herself and Ransome for him; he would go to Wilkes in the morning and tell him that his blackguardly tactics were defeated.

"That would be an extremely idiotic thing to do," said Mary Jackson, "and just like you, Mark."

"Thanks, very much; and what would you do?" he asked.

Let Hilda say nothing, and stop your saying anything. Hilda ought to be as sweet as honey to Mr. Wilkes, and then, on the first chance she gets, run away."

"Run away where?" asked Hilda.

"To England—to Mr. Ransome. I don't know how it is to be managed; but if only you two are not stupid and melodramatic we can get time to think."

"But what is to become of Mark?" sighed Hilda. "Even if I could get away, I could not bear to leave him, thinking they would do something cruel."

"Let Mark run away too," said Mary. She spoke bravely, but Mark looking up, their eyes met; there was a suspicious dimness in hers, and in that second both realised a strange but sweet embarrassment in their friendship, which was quite new to them.

"Nonsense," said Mark rather brusquely, "I won't run away and—leave you." It was quite hard to get out the words. "Besides," he added, with a manly ring in his voice, "this is my country and I'm going to stick to it. Beastly as things are, I believe something will happen soon. There is change in the air. We have been slaves and dupes of our rotten system long enough, and if a revolution comes I mean to be in it."

"Oh, hush, Mark," whispered Hilda. "Someone might hear you."

"Let them," laughed Mary, clapping her hands. "Bravo, Mark! I like to hear you talk like that. I should just love a revolution, and if you get one up I'll help. But what about poor little Hilda? She wouldn't be the least scrap of good, and we have got to get her away from Wilkes."

"By jove," ejaculated Mark, "I clean forgot to tell you that old Grainger has telegraphed for Ransome to come back."

"What?" exclaimed both the girls in chorus. "Professor Grainger?" added Hilda, blushing. "Oh, Mark, you haven't told him. Do you think that Gerald will really come? Oh, why didn't you say anything about this before?"

"At any rate tell us now," said Mary practically; and thus adjured Mark related the history of his talk with Grainger. Hilda was comforted by the Professor's confidence that he could keep her brother a little longer at the University, but her thoughts had little room for anything else than mingled joy at the prospect of her lover's return, and shame at the thought that when he came he would find her the affianced wife of another man. She was overwrought by her emotions of the evening, and, after a little vague talk of future plans, Mary persuaded her to go to bed and dream of better times.

Then, Mark accompanying her, Mary walked to her home in an adjacent suburb near the fruit canning factory in which she worked. At school she had shown a capacity and brightness far above the average, but she could claim no relatives or patrons among the ruling class, and the very independence and pluck, which had made her the champion as well as the fast friend of the more timid Hilda in the rough and tumble of school life, had been marked certainly by the teachers, but marked to Mary's disadvantage. Consequently she had been drafted into the jam factory at an early age, while girls of more years and half her brains were still being laboriously educated for the clerical and official situations for which their dullness or submissiveness rendered them acceptable.

On the walk to her lodgings Mary listened eagerly to Mark as he poured out the rebellious thoughts and fond hopes which for months past had been taking shape in his brain, and which had been quickened by this crisis in Hilda's affairs and his own. Her rapid pointed questions, her intuitive grasp of his ideas, and the glances of sympathy which flashed from her fine grey eyes stirred Mark strangely, and she was stirred

herself. At the door of her lodging she clasped his hand in a grip that surprised him, and somehow seemed all at once to symbolise the strength and depth of her nature and the comradeship and sympathy whose sweetness he was just beginning to realise in a new light.

"Good night, Mark," she said. "Whatever happens—whether you do anything or not, and whether your dreams come true or not, I feel proud of you and of your dreams."

CHAPTER IV.

HILDA MEREDITH'S ENGAGEMENT.

For the next fortnight Wilkes as an accepted lover was a constant visitor at the Meredith lodgings. He appreciated Hilda's dainty sitting-room. The materials that covered the cushions and formed the curtains were coarse and common, for there was never anything of better quality in the State stores, but as Mary had once remarked laughingly, "Give Hilda a quantity of hessian, some odds and ends of coloured wool, a few old boxes, and she will furnish you a drawing room." There was some truth in this, for the heavy drapery over the door was rough brown material, such material as came by the ship load to make millions of frocks for the State nurseries; but Hilda's artistic brain and clever fingers had embroidered a bold design of dull yellow and white. Her curtains were such as many other rooms boasted, a coarse, dull blue twill, but she had embroidered them with some brilliant silks, a heritage from those old days when the Merediths owned dainty charming things. On her walls were several pictures and photographs; and coming in from the bare grey stairs and landing, the room seemed almost luxurious by contrast. Wilkes's masculine eye was pleased with the evidence of refinement and taste, though he did not know how it was achieved, and he liked to anticipate in fancy the days when this pretty shy girl should, by his generosity, surround herself with these dainty femininities which he realised had so deep a place in her nature. He made himself at home in a way

that Mark bitterly resented. Nevertheless he forced himself to maintain civility, which the older man regarded with a satisfaction at first not altogether unmingled with suspicion. The assertion of independence was so rare, however, and dog-like humility to superiors was such a common phenomenon in the socialistic society, that Wilkes put down Mark's late opposition to a fit of boyish temper, and believed self-interest had shown him the folly of risking a continuance of contumacy. He did not make sufficient allowance for the cunning of the young people, a quality which had developed very strongly in the air so congenial to it, but in which, indeed, the brother and sister were somewhat lacking. Mary Jackson, however, with her way to fight in less pleasant paths, had her full share of this self-protecting attribute, and her influence with her friends was constantly exerted to prevent them showing their real feelings by look or work or deed.

The newspaper announced the approaching marriage, and Hilda blushed with shame when she saw her photograph appear beside that of the mighty editor, wondering what Gerald Ransome would think or say if it should meet his eye. She felt humiliated by the new respect and deference with which she was treated by her fellow-workers in the office, and cried her eyes out in the solitude of her room, but maintained her cheerfulness as well as possible in public. Wilkes did what he could to amuse her, but there was little he could do, for the pastimes of other lands were practically unknown in Australia. There were no races, no balls, no sports, no private entertainments. The Government could spare no labour to organise these things, the common people had not the spirit or the means to organise them for themselves. So they lived colourless grey lives in work and sleep, some employing their scanty leisure hours in sordid dissipation, and others of the better class in reading, walking, and talking with their friends. Even among the officials who dwelt in wealth and ease there was very little amusement or social intercourse. They lived lonely lives, mixing with the people little more than a garrison in a conquered country, and, distrustful and jealous of one another, they cultivated few of the social arts, but sought their

pleasure in frequent visits to other countries where they might flaunt the riches wrung from their own people without fear of rousing them to fury.

Thus Wilkes spent most of his time with Hilda alone, driving her sometimes into the country in his dog cart or motor car, and though she resisted his caresses he was content to bide his time, feasting his eyes hungrily on her fair beauty, made more enticing still by the blush that flushed her clear skin when he clasped her hand and leaned towards her for the kiss he knew would be refused.

That she talked very little to him he did not care. He was not seeking intellect or companionship in his marriage, but youth and freshness in a creature that should be all his own. The man was notorious for his dissolute life in a dissolute age, when the fact that all women were called upon to work made the tending of children—the guardian angels of family life and purity—practically impossible to the mothers of the nation. Children were almost all reared in State nurseries, and the result upon the older generation and the younger was a plentitude of wives who were not mothers, mothers who were not wives, and of women who gave full rein to their passions, without thought of marriage, but with forethought against maternity.

Among such Wilkes was sated with years of experience, and it was his fancy to possess a beautiful and innocent wife as a rare piece of property to be tended with immense care, and to bear him children whose lot would be very different from that of the great herd of little ones dragged up in the nurseries of the State.

Mark meanwhile spent much of his time with Mary Jackson, walking far with her in the moonlight evenings and discussing the plans of escape for Hilda that occurred to them as most feasible.

Wilkes had agreed to postpone the marriage for three months, but any suggestion of further delay made him obstinate and suspicious. Before that time it was absolutely necessary that Hilda should get on board some ocean-going boat, and under the care of Gerald Ransome, for otherwise, when her departure was discovered, she might be stopped at the first Australian port, and in any case it was not in Mark's power to pay her

passage, even if he could smuggle her on board, because the foreign shipping companies wanted money which he did not possess.

The cards issued to citizens entitled them to obtain goods or services to the value of the credit they represented from the Government stores and organisations, but they were useless in dealing with foreigners, and thus passages abroad could be obtained only by application to the Government which carried on all foreign transactions. Stowaways or able-bodied men were often able to work their way to Europe if they succeeded in escaping the vigilance of officers on the watch to prevent them leaving the country, but the women were hopelessly tied to the soil.

"You ought to go, Mark," said Mary one evening as they walked along the river bank. "Wilkes will blame you if Hilda escapes him, and the very day she leaves you must hide yourself somewhere and then slip on board a ship. You might travel by the one she does."

"I could not leave you," he said.

"I should be all right. I am too small a person for any one to trouble about persecuting."

"I did not mean that. I am thinking of myself, so lonely without you. And you would be lonely too, Mary."

"Yes," she sighed. He squeezed her hand and she returned the pressure. Then with a blush and a little laugh: "You might send for me, I mean send me money when you get some. I could dress up in boy's clothes and slip down to the shipping without being caught. And then to see the world! Oh, how I should love it!"

Mark looked at her tenderly, then caught her in his arms and kissed her. She submitted with a faint sigh of resignation—or satisfaction. It was a long kiss, and she returned it, and clung to him till a footstep in the silent walk fell on their ears, and he released her. They looked into one another's eyes and knew that their old friendship had gone for ever, without a regret, for it was changed into or merged in something stronger and more sweet.

They stood in silence until the stranger passed them, and then Mark spoke: "Why do you tempt me, dear? I can't leave Australia. I tell you there is revolution

in the air. It may not come for years yet, but it will come, and I must stay to fight—perhaps to die in it."

"I won't tempt you," she answered bravely. "I shall stay to fight with you—and die, too," she added with a smile—"if you insist on that; but I shan't let you."

Until they reached the door where Mary bade him good-night, they found overflowing happiness in themselves, and the old grey world beneath the moon, which that first touch of their lips had changed into something so new and beautiful. Mark walked home thinking confused thoughts, longing to escape with Mary from their land of corruption and routine to a country that was free; and filled with passionate admiration for her brave willingness to stay and share with him the risks of a fight for better things.

CHAPTER V.

THE HOLIDAY.

Public holidays were few in socialistic Australia, but Nation's Day, which came shortly after Hilda's engagement, was still rigidly kept. It commemorated the formal declaration of socialistic equality, and in past years every anniversary was celebrated with enthusiasm, crowds thronging the streets to cheer the great procession and its myriad waving banners. Now the banners were in tatters, the processions were abandoned; but the people were still freed from toil, and enjoyed themselves if they could.

"You look hungry still, my dear," said Hilda, as she and Mark rose from breakfast in the public dining-room on Nation's Day morning.

"I feel hungry," said Mark. "At least I have tantalising visions of chops and sausages that don't come our way these days. I'm sick of the eternal porridge and messy stew."

"Never mind," she returned? Let us go away from town for the whole day. It's a public holiday, had you forgotten?"

"I had in a way. What is the good of holidays?"

"Well, I've been looking forward to it all the week. It means an escape from the office and Wilkes, for a whole day. He will probably look for me here though, so let us go to Mary's lodgings and ask her to come with us."

"A very good idea," agreed Mark. "It will do you good, too," he added, glancing at her. "It is a bit of a strain for you, isn't it?"

Tears filled Hilda's eyes. "Yes, it is a strain," she answered quietly.

As they passed through the streets, they met many little parties bent on an outing, here and there bands of girls and lads chattering gaily. Once a fragment of conversation caught Hilda's ears as they passed, and she coloured; but glancing at Mark, she was glad to see he had not noticed. His hot temper would certainly have resented it, if he had. That was how they spoke of her, and that was the type of man Wilkes was. "She's the one who's to take Nelly Grant's place with old Wilkes, and Nelly goes as a cook at the Bendigo mines," they had said. She had known it vaguely, but to hear it crystallised thus, and the name of another girl—her predecessor—uttered so contemptuously.

Arrived at Mary's lodgings, Mark lingered to talk to some men he knew, standing at the door, while Hilda went upstairs to seek her friend.

The door of her room stood open, but Mary was absent. Hilda sat down to wait a few minutes. She had often been here before, but the bareness of the room struck her more keenly than ever, now that Mary's bright forceful presence was lacking. All the necessaries of life were there, every thing was clean. A fine fuchsia flourished on the window sill, but the floor cloth was ugly and worn, the white walls blank and depressing. There being no sign of Mary's return, Hilda went out on the landing and called her name. The next door opened, and Mary put her head out.

"Oh, you dear," she exclaimed, "I am glad to see you; come in here."

Hilda entered, and saw that something was wrong with the inmates, who were apparently friends of Mary's.

An old woman, wrapped up in various garments, lay on the sofa. Her eyes were bright, her cheeks flushed, and her lips dry. An old man stood at the window.

"What is it?" asked Hilda.

"This is Mrs. Blake, and she is sick," said Mary. "She is afraid she will be sent to the hospital."

"Are you very sick?" Hilda laid her hand sympathetically on her shoulder.

"I'm afraid so," said the old woman. "Hospital's bad enough, but I could stand that if only I could come back here, but I've been ailing a lot of late, and the overseer's had his eye on me. Only last week he said 'The place for you, Jane Blake, is on a poultry farm.'"

"But surely that would be a nice change," said Hilda.

"It means separation." The old woman glanced towards the man at the window. "It means we'd never set eyes on one another again." The misery in her tone conveyed more of her distress than her words.

"What is your work?" asked Hilda.

"We're in the tailoring. We've been at it all our lives. We've never been parted for forty years, and it will kill us if they part us now."

The room, a facsimile of Mary's, looked out on many closely set rows of houses, and beyond could be dimly seen the big factory where they had worked so long.

The man sighed, as he turned—"We're getting old," he said. "We're getting old." Then he seated himself at his wife's feet. "You'll be better to-morrow, dear."

"Yes, I'll be better to-morrow," she said, almost as if she were speaking to a child; but the expression in her eyes belied her words.

"We want you to come out with us for the day," said Hilda. "Mark is waiting outside."

"I'd love to go. I was wondering what I could do with myself," returned Mary. "The woman next door will look after Mrs. Blake, if she needs it."

A few minutes later they were all on their way to the station.

"It's a shame," said Mary fiercely. "Those old things adore one another, and you scarcely ever see any one like them in that. They only want to be let alone; and they're hiding like rats in a hole, in case it is discovered that she is sick."

"She ought to go to the hospital though," ventured Hilda.

"Ought she! You've never been there, I have. Oh, you're fed and physicked, and if you're strong you get well in spite of them, but it's hell, that's what it is. A white hell, white walls, white floors, white beds, and white-faced people all round you, and the nurses don't care whether you live or die. In fact, they'd rather you'd die, it makes the case shorter. No one speaks to you, the nurses are too busy, or if not busy they've got their own small pleasures to look for. Visitors come in the evening now and again, but not often. It's too far out, unless you're lucky to be an 'urgent'; then you're in the city depot. There's no way out of it for those wretched Blakes. I'm sure she's in for pneumonia, and I only hope they'll finish her off in the hospital. Then there'll only be one to comfort."

"I'll speak to Mr. Wilkes about her," said Hilda quietly.

Mary threw an arm about her friend. "You're a saint. Truly you are. I know how you loathe asking favours of the beast, but this is worth it, it really is."

"I'm taking tickets to Dandenong," said Mark. "There's a man out there on a dairy farm I'm anxious to see."

Arrived at their destination, they strolled away, over the bridge which spanned the shallow creek, on to the Gippsland road. On the hill to the left stood the ruins of a cottage, below it the long bare barracks forming the lodgings of the dairy farmers.

"It must have been absolutely lovely," said Hilda, her eyes on the four desolate walls of the ruin. "To have a nice little place all entirely your own. Your own rooms, any shape you like, with any furniture you like, and to take a holiday when you wanted to. Suppose that was my cottage, and it had white walls and a red roof, and we were all going there to lunch, and afterwards Mark would harness a fat little pony into a carriage and we'd drive into the mountains, and we'd come back just when it was getting frosty, and have tea. Just our three selves, at a round table near a big wood fire. Eggs and tea, and buttered toast, and afterwards we'd sit in comfortable chairs and make blouses; I'd make a white lace one with tiny embroidered forget-me-nots and— "

"And," interrupted Mary, "then there'd be a knock at the door and Mark would open it, and he'd exclaim, 'Well, Ransome, I'm glad to see you.'"

"If you girls are going to make fairy stories why don't you live in a palace?" asked Mark smiling.

"I'm Socialist enough to absolutely disapprove of palaces," said Mary.

"All the same"—Hilda glanced at the huge brick building they were approaching. "All the same I would prefer a palace to these barracks."

Mark entered the wide passage, the girls waiting for him in the doorway. A big coarse man slouched past and stopped.

"Looking for sweethearts?" he inquired. "I'm ready to take the fair one on if she isn't booked," and he went his way with a grin.

Hilda blushed, and instinctively gripped Mary's hand. "Don't mind the brute, dear" she said; "there are penalties to pay for pathetic eyes and a lovely skin."

Mark re-appeared, accompanied by a saturnine looking young man, almost his own age.

"No, it's no good. I would like to take a stroll with you, but I can't," he said. "I'm in the overseer's black books now, and I don't want to go to the cane-fields yet awhile."

"Aren't you to have a holiday?" enquired Hilda, as she greeted him.

He shook his head. "Cows don't recognise holidays," he said, "and though I'm not busy at present, I don't want to have a row with the overseer." He nodded towards the big man who had spoken to them.

"Things are bad in the city," said Mark, "but the boss seems to make it a perfect hell for you here."

"Yes, something like it. He's the worst I've struck. He is a bully and a brute. He half murdered the woman he lives with last week, and she's afraid to complain, because he has got some big pull on the Government. If I ever lay hands on him, I'll kill him, and chance the rest. Until then I eat dirt. It saves bother. We all do, who are not pining for a bad coal mine or the cane-fields."

"Things are going to be different pretty soon," said Mark.

"That's so. We are cowed, but we are ready when the time comes. The worst of it is we have been too well fed. Revolutions go best on empty stomachs. There'll be plenty of them soon, and——"

At this minute McGregor turned round, and Mark and the girls, bidding their acquaintance farewell, strolled on across the wide pasturage.

It was a lovely day, crisp and keen. The blue hills in the distance lay softly against a clear winter sky.

"We may as well walk on, and after lunch take the train back from the next station," suggested Mary.

Here and there they saw other ruined homesteads. All human individuality had been ruthlessly swept away, and a mile or so further on they passed another barracks, built on the same plan as the first, of red bricks—innocent of garden or adornment, just a shelter for the men required in the big dairy. The overseer had a separate room in the building. The pretence of equality was maintained in requiring him to take his meals with the men. In doing this he would watch them better; but if his food was like theirs the sameness went no further. He was master. When physical fear did not restrain him he was a tyrant, and he was always a spy. Espionage led onward to better things.

The young people had brought some food with them, and their day was a happy one. They were early for the train, and took some interest in a hunting party which swept past over hedge and fence, and disappeared in the distance. They had a compartment to themselves when the train did start, though there were on board a large number of excursionists, many of whom had been farther up the line. A long wait was made at Springvale, and Mark put his head out of the window to enquire the cause of the delay. He was told that instructions had been wired that the train was to wait for the hunting party and their horses.

Some half an hour elapsed before the favoured people appeared, and after their horses were disposed of they entered the compartment where were Mark, Mary and Hilda.

"There ought to have been a carriage kept for us!" said one of the new comers, glancing with some disdain at the original occupants. "I'll see that father makes a fuss about it."

Hilda recognised the speaker as a girl she had seen in Wilkes's office, and she was favoured with a slight bow. Hilda was tainted by her father's disgrace and the fact that she worked, but she was going to be a person of importance. Both she and Mary glanced with envy at the well-cut habits, the small neat riding boots, the strong leather gloves. Hilda's and Mary's hands were bare, gloves were counted as a luxury, and times were too bad to admit of even such trifling luxuries. The habits were imported garments; such clothes as that were beyond the skill of an Australian tailor.

"You'll go back to New York thinking us savages, that we give you such a carriage to ride in," continued the querulous girl to a handsome woman of middle age. Directly she replied, Mark and the girls knew she was a foreigner.

"I far prefer this," she exclaimed in clear high-pitched tones. "I see more of things. One can hunt anywhere, but one can't travel among socialists anywhere. And all these people on these cars, they're all equal you say, and they've all got enough to eat and drink, and no one's poor. It's too lovely for words." She looked with kindly curiosity at Hilda, whose delicacy of feature and exquisite colouring attracted instant notice. She whispered something to the young man next her, who lounged boorishly half across the carriage.

He glanced at Hilda with some interest, then whispered something, but loud enough for the others to catch Wilkes's name.

The foreigner was deeply interested, and maintained the conversation in lower tones. However, in a few minutes she went on. "Tell me now, what are the homes like? All alike, as the dresses are? I shouldn't like that. No, that goes against the grain all the time; but tell me about the homes."

"Oh, they all live in lodgings, and dine at the general table," returned the young man with a yawn.

"And where are the children? That struck me several times to-day. Where had they left the children?"

"Oh, they're at the nurseries."

"And don't they go out holiday making with their fathers and mothers?"

The young man yawned again, and flicked a speck of mud from his white breeches. "Oh, that would never do. They're much better looked after where they are."

"You don't say," returned the foreigner drily and thoughtfully. "Were you and your sisters brought up in State nurseries?"

Mark and the girls found it almost impossible to resist smiles, but they knew that an affectation of stolid indifference was wiser.

"Oh, come now, no, of course not." The young man spoke almost energetically. "That sort of thing is merely for the people."

"Then absolute equality is not a sine qua non. The big people get the fat, and the poor people get the lean?"

"Sh! Sh!" one of the girls held up a warning finger. They were evidently somewhat in awe of their visitor, who probably was a person of considerable importance; but such a question as that was scarcely admissible.

"I think I see how she does her hair," murmured Hilda to Mary. "It's very becoming, but it must take a long time."

"I feel as if I was wearing a sack when I see such garments as these," returned Mary. "They make me ache with envy."

"Tell me," continued the visitor, "where will all the people finish up their day?"

"In their homes, I suppose," was the answer.

"Is there no amusement provided for them?"

"Well, not exactly; it can't be managed."

"Can't be managed, why?"

"Well, times are bad, labour is needed for field and factory, and it would be impossible to spare people to provide amusement."

"You say they always have enough to eat, clean lodgings, and warm clothes?"

"You can see that for yourself."

"Humph." The foreigner made a grimace. "It isn't worth it. I'd rather take my chance of starving and have some fun. That's what oppressed me ever since I got here. There's no fun, no mirth. Australians never laugh. I've seen horse play now and again, and a smile now and again, but I've never heard the cheerful howls of laughter such as you'd hear in any holiday in New York, even among our people, thousands of whom are half starved. I'm beginning to think there are worse things than starving."

It was evident that the other members of the party were uncomfortable and annoyed, but the visitor was not the type of woman who was easily silenced when interested. However, the train approached the terminus, much to the relief of her companions.

Ignoring Hilda and Mary, who were nearest the door, the young man, in his anxiety to alight, pushed roughly past them, helped his sisters out, and then the stranger followed. As she passed Hilda and Mary she smiled in a friendly way, "Excuse us," she said, "but we are late, or we would not have got out before you."

As she went along the platform they heard her say, "And this is your National Holiday."

"I like that woman," said Mary; "I'd like to talk to her."

CHAPTER VI.

SMOULDERING FIRES.

Mark had reason in his belief that there was revolution in the air, for, though the sky seemed serene enough, uneasiness prevailed among the more experienced. Mark, indeed, could not be counted of these, but his intelligence, far above the average, and sharpened as it was by the historical teaching and cynical criticism of Professor Grainger, was alive to signs that other men of his years failed to notice. His father's teaching also, which at the time he had regarded as that of a dreamer, and had heeded very little or resented with the ignorant instinctive conservatism of extreme youth, he was at length beginning to recall and appreciate at its true worth.

The official classes were now at the extreme point of power and irresponsibility; the masses had reached the lowest depths of helpless dependence upon their masters. Still there remained the forms of free government through Parliament and President, but the elections had become a farce and the legislature the mere creature of the bureaucracy.

It could scarcely be otherwise, for the press was absolutely controlled by officials. The newspaper factory and the book factory, just as much as the clothing factory, was owned by the State, and therefore produced only what seemed good in official eyes. The press nominated and recommended every parliamentary candidate who sought the people's suffrages. No man, other than an official nominee, had the slightest chance of putting his views and proposals before the electors; and where any citizen, with force of character and public ambition, did seem to be making himself favourably known to his fellow workers, steps were taken to move him to other fields where he was a stranger and comparatively harmless. Cases of this banishment had been latterly so numerous that whispers of them travelled from mouth to mouth all over the continent, combining with other causes to engender a sullen, dangerous feeling among the people, which might be roused to fury by a leader with the art and opportunity to play upon it. After many years of domination by an official clique the spirits of the masses were indeed so tamed and tutored that no mere curtailment of their shadowy liberty alone could stir them to revolt, but when Mark's father had protested in a newspaper, of which he was the managing official, against the banishment of a man who dared to criticise the Government to a gathering of his fellow workmen, the publicity which Meredith's position gave to the affair had awakened dormant aspirations after freedom. Meredith had been promptly removed from the post wherein he was held guilty of encouraging sedition, but, before he went, he succeeded in throwing a glaring light upon official conduct.

With all this had lately come a serious reduction in the quantity of goods distributed among the people, who were reduced to a state of miserable penury. They

still had, it is true, a bare sufficiency of food, but many of the necessaries and almost all the luxuries of life were wanting except to the official class, who made scarcely a pretence of sharing equally with their fellow citizens in the social wealth. Never under the Socialist regime had the common herd enjoyed good living. Now they found themselves ruined, by a short harvest in Australia, together with abundant crops and low prices in the old world.

At the beginning of the Socialist era manufacturing in a hundred different lines had been undertaken by the Government. Existing factories and trades were taken over from individuals and new ones were started; but one by one disaster or confusion had overtaken them, from causes which are dwelt upon elsewhere. Sufficient here to say, in explanation of the approaching crisis, that the Government, finding itself incapable of satisfactorily conducting large industrial concerns, and of foreseeing and providing for the changing wants of the people, had deemed it simpler and easier to abandon all but the most elementary manufacturing, and to expend more and more labour upon the primary pursuits of mining and agriculture. The old motto, "Nothing imported that can be made at home," was changed for a new one, "Nothing made at home that can be imported from abroad."

The people of Australia had indeed become hewers of wood and drawers of water for the people of other lands to an extent never known in the world before. The surplus of raw produce was sold by the Government in America and Europe, in return for the manufactured products of individualist industry, and thus low prices in the selling market, combined with short production at home, were a terribly severe blow to a nation dependent solely on the products of the farm, the forest, and the mine.

Famine, in fact, was beginning to stare the country in the face. There was enough to eat if it were kept in Australia, but wheat and meat went away in shiploads to pay interest on foreign debts, and to buy necessaries for the many, luxuries for the few. Fear and foreboding were in the hearts of all. Scowling groups of men gathered outside the walls of Port Melbourne, grumbling and muttering as corn-laden trains rolled through to the ships, taking away bread to feed other mouths.

Discontent and danger to the prevailing order were aggravated by the means which the Government took to meet the impending trouble. Thousands of labourers were removed from farm work in unfruitful ground, to dig and delve in the feverish hope of increasing production from the mines—for gold never fell in value, and it was always possible to sell coal. From woollen factories, boot factories, clothing factories, and jam factories, other thousands were taken to reinforce the mining contingent, to construct irrigation works, or to clear mountain forests for more plough land, where there was hope of rain. Naturally, this industrial shuffling provoked great discontent, and in the upheaval of social arrangements men and women met and talked of public affairs with a frequency and freedom only rendered possible by divided counsels among the officials themselves. These had grown to form a caste apart, and the offices which they filled were practically hereditary, though in theory every appointment was made upon its merits. New men of ability, who gave proof of willingness to support the existing order, were from time to time admitted to the ranks of the privileged; offices and easy billets of all kinds were manufactured for the children of officials, but as their numbers increased this became more difficult, and now, with the crisis occasioned by the failing harvests, many young men brought up in ease and luxury were forced out into the rough and tumble of Socialist life, wherein they became storm centres for the gathering clouds of disaffection. Among the privileged who still retained ease and place and power there was jealousy and irritation, one against the other. A considerable party wished to meet the crisis in part by a return to manufacturing; and, with its momentary ascendancy, several new industries had been started, only to be incontinently abandoned for a great spasmodic effort to wring more wealth from the soil.

Thus human material which, a few years since nothing could have kindled to anything but a smouldering heat, emitting here and there perhaps an evan-

escent tongue of flame, was now rapidly becoming so inflammable that, if touched by a spark, it might blaze into the fire of revolution.

Mark Meredith knew much of this, and, apart from his knowledge, had an intuitive feeling that some great change was coming of which he could not guess the upshot, but, sleeping and awake, he dreamt of a great struggle soon to be made, and through the flame and smoke of battle he saw always the figure of freedom, grave but radiant, hovering white winged above the storm.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FIRST BLOW.

No letter from Hilda met Ransome on his arrival in Australian waters, for private correspondence addressed to foreigners was not safe in the Post Office, which the bureaucracy found a most useful engine in its control of the people. Grainger had advised Mark that it would be better for neither Hilda nor himself to write, and consequently Ransome got nothing more than a note from Grainger, who described himself as an intimate friend of the Merediths, and urged Ransome to call at the University, to discuss important affairs concerning the young people before going to see them.

Ransome was utterly mystified as to the meaning of it all, until he saw in the newspaper an announcement of Hilda's approaching marriage to Wilkes. Then light broke in upon him. He felt shocked and angry, and at first could scarcely believe his eyes, but after three months' residence in Australia he knew enough of the country and the man to somewhat suspend his judgment of Hilda. The blood surged to his head as he thought of her broken promise, but he could not believe that he was forgotten, or had lost her love so soon. She must have been constrained by force or fraud, or, far from sending to him through Grainger, she would have wished him thousands of miles away. He controlled his impatience to the best of his ability, and on landing in Melbourne hurried away to the Professor's house as soon as the necessary formalities were over. Together with a passport, returnable in a month's time, he received in

exchange for gold a card entitling him to a corresponding value of goods or services, money itself not passing current in the Commonwealth.

The officer who issued Ransome's passport was inquisitive as to the cause of his sudden return, the records showing that he had sailed for England only a few weeks previously, but Ransome gave some plausible excuse that told nothing. Wilkes, who knew more than the Merediths suspected of their former intimacy with Ransome, had become suspicious when he learned that Ransome was again in Australia, especially when, on questioning Hilda about him, he found her overcome with blushes and confusion. He said nothing, but immediately in his own mind connected this Englishman with the Merediths' behaviour towards himself. If they had written or telegraphed he would have found means to know it, and he had directed the enquiries which failed to extract from Ransome the mention of any of his friends in Australia.

The Professor was writing in his study on the afternoon when Ransome arrived. In a few minutes he acquainted his visitor with the state of affairs, urging him to display the utmost caution while in Melbourne, and to waste not a moment in departing with Hilda—if that were possible—under penalty of losing her for ever. "In this country," he said, "we prize our beautiful women so much that we would rather see them dead than part with them to foreigners—if those foreigners are so misguided as to stand in a high official's light."

"You don't mean to say that Miss Meredith and I are in danger of any violence," said Ransome, incredulously.

"You are in danger of no violence, unless you commit some crime. You might do that without knowing it. I have known men imprisoned—foreign subjects—who were quite unaware of having committed the theft or assault of which overwhelming evidence was produced in satisfy their Governments. I prophesy nothing about Miss Meredith except that she will not be allowed to marry you unless you run away with her. And that feat will be by no means easy."

Ransome thanked the Professor heartily for his kindly help, and said he would be as cautious and prompt as possible.

"That is right," said the Professor. "You had better take rooms now at a boarding house in the city, and if you will, call again on me this evening, when Mark will be here to meet you."

"And Miss Meredith?" asked Ransome.

"No," said the Professor, smiling, "that would be unwise."

"I suppose so. I shall have time to call on her before returning here."

"And this is your caution!" laughed the Professor. "My dear friend, you must not attempt to see the lady until it is certain that you can meet her free from observation. Let Wilkes see you together, and good-bye to all your hopes."

With difficulty Ransome kept himself away from St. Kilda, and wandered about the city, fuming at the monstrous tyranny which masqueraded uder the guise of equality and fraternity. There was nothing to do in the dreary streets, lined with rows of tall tenement houses of intolerable sameness and dinginess, the monotony broken here and there by a huge store filled with goods of little variety, and usually of the lowest quality and attractiveness. The costly luxuries imported for the use of the privileged did not find their way into the public warehouse. In Collins-street, and in the vicinity of Parliament House, were a number of the larger public offices, and some finer buildings inhabited by members of the official caste, but nowhere could be found the gay shop windows, the hum of exchange, the crowds on work or pleasure bent, the swift plying vehicles, the hundred phases of life and motion that characterise great cities. Until work ceased at six o'clock in office, store and workroom the streets were almost deserted, save by a few clerks, officials and messengers whose business took them abroad. Trams rattled along at intervals of half an hour, sometimes pasing by a goods waggon, and more seldom still an official's carriage or motor car whirled along the lonely roads. Oppressive quiet reigned supreme, weighing heavy upon the spirits of Ransome and a few other strangers who wandered aimlessly through what seemed a city of the dead. Even the picture galleries and libraries were closed, for during working hours there were no citizens

to visit them, and indeed, in the stress of bad times, labour could not be spared to keep them open at all.

As the places of business poured forth their thousands there was life in the streets, but no brightness. The dull grey multitude quickly dispersed, seeking trams and trains for conveyance from the city, or flocking to the eating houses where they fed before returning to the rooms or cheerless barracks which they called home, in a time and country where all home life was dead. In the evening they might walk abroad through dim streets or on river bank or sea shore, but amusements there were none. The few theatres and music halls had been closed like the libraries, when all available labour power was required elsewhere, and in the atmosphere of Socialism, stifling free discussion and thought, lectures, debates and public meetings were something almost unknown. Lately, indeed, at street corners and in parks, groups of men and women, which grew larger and more numerous, had begun to gather in the summer evenings, talking querulously of the bad times; but no one knew who might be his neighbour, and usually, if any man raised his voice in definite complaint of the administration, his comrades quickly slunk away.

Ransome walked up Elizabeth-street after his evening meal in company with a garrulous old man with whom he had made acquaintance in the restaurant, and from whom he learned that a feeling of uneasiness was abroad. To a foreigner who would not mention it again he even whispered that some people blamed the officials for the prevailing poverty, and said it was their fault.

"Maybe you'll hear such talk there," he said, pointing to a crowd in front of them, where, under a great pine tree in the broad Sydney road, some fifty people were gathered, listening to an angry speaker, who poured forth a stream of bitter words.

Ransome and his companion stayed to hear him, but in a few seconds the latter whispered in Ransome's ear, "Come away, sir; that man will go to gaol for the wild talk he is talking, and it will be ill for the citizens or strangers that are found listening to him."

"Go, if you like," said Ransome, shortly. "I am interested. You had better keep yourself out of trouble if you fear it."

The old man hurried off, and gradually the crowd melted away, some moving slowly and reluctantly, pausing at a distance to catch a few more of the words that frightened yet stirred them. Only a dozen or so remained with their eyes riveted on the speaker, feeling the fire of rebellion slowly kindling in their hearts.

"I tell you, friends, it can't last. We are curs, I know, but even a cur gets savage when you rob him of a bone. It is time for us to turn and bite, while we have the strength left to do it. There is no liberty in this country. There is nothing good in it. You talk of the starvation of other lands. That is bad, but there is not much starvation there. Here we are all pretty well starved, and soon it will be worse. The officials are robbers and frauds. So would we be in their place. They are the creatures of the system. I tell you, friends, that Socialism itself is one great robbery and fraud."

The speaker paused, and before he could resume a tall middle-aged man touched him on the sleeve. He was an officer of the Government and, with a companion just arrived on the scene, had elbowed his way through the group unobserved, for the administration had many police spies who wore no distinguishing uniform.

"What is your name?" asked the officer.

The speaker turned on him with flashing eyes. "What is that to you?"

"I am an officer, and you are talking sedition. You must come with me to the police office."

"Hands off! I will do nothing of the kind." The agitator shook himself free and moved back a pace. The little group of men dispersed, and, with wide open eyes, watched from a distance an episode which resembled nothing they had ever seen. No one, unless drunk, even thought of resisting the police, and drunkenness was a luxury practically reserved for the officials with whom it was not the habit of the police to interfere.

The speaker was now confronted by both the officers, who were utterly astounded for a moment by his defiance. Then they stepped on either side of him, each taking an arm, and as they felt the muscles stiffen one of them produced a pair of handcuffs. While he fumbled with the unfamiliar instrument the prisoner wrenched himself free from the other man and stood at bay, breathing hard with anger and excitement.

"Stand off," he said. "I am a free man, and not a slave to be punished for free words, or to crawl and beg forgiveness. Stand off, at your peril."

For answer the taller of the two officers again seized him roughly by the arm, receiving as he did so a savage blow in the face which felled him to the ground. The agitator was a spare, tall young man, not approaching either of his assailants in weight, but he was stronger than he looked, while his nerves, at the utmost tension, strung all the muscles of his body into bands of iron. One man down, he turned on the other, who stood uncertain, and snatching the handcuffs from him, in a fit of furious rage, he swung them down with all his force upon the head of the officer, who raised his arm in impotent defence, then staggered bleeding against the tree, by which he sank with a groan.

With one glance at him and the other officer who was rising to his feet, the late prisoner hurried away to hide himself in the maze of streets to the west of the great thoroughfare. The officer called fiercely to the few remaining bystanders to give chase, but they had no care except to hide themselves from observation, and, angry, crestfallen, too much bruised for pursuit himself, he turned to assist his more badly injured comrade. Ransome satisfied himself that no dangerous harm was done, and then hurried on his way lest he should be recognised, and perhaps detained as a witness when the rebellious orator should be captured and brought to trial.

CHAPTER VIII.

MARY JACKSON'S DESIGN.

As Ransome made his way to the University thinking of Hilda Meredith, Hilda sat at her window seat with Mary Jackson talking of him. She sighed as she watched a steamer pouring columns of smoke into the still evening air and gliding over the calm waters of the bay on its path to the ocean, and freedom that lay beyond.

"If it were only the day after to-morrow, Mary, and that were our ship—how happy I should be."

"How happy you ought to be now. If I were you I should be singing, not sighing. The day after to-morrow will come."

Mary was busy with needle, cotton and scissors, altering one of the regulation blue serge dresses. She and Hilda were fortunate in having an instinctive knowledge of dressmaking, the result being that though their gowns were in the ordinary slop pattern, they could always alter them till they fitted.

"Oh, I know it will, about a thousand years hence," answered Hilda impatiently. "But when it does, how am I to escape from this hateful place and that hateful man? I feel hopeless and despairing, Mary. How am I to get away?" She dropped her pretty slim white hands on her lap, and then catching sight of the ring, given by Wilkes, twisted it, with a petulant gesture, and sighed.

Mary looked at her with a contemptuous little smile. "Here, stick a pin in where this sleeve has to go. Hopelessness won't help you. Aren't Mr. Ransome and Mark and the Professor discussing what to do now?"

"Yes, I suppose so. But what can they do?" Hilda's thoughts naturally were far from serge frocks, and so were Mary's, but she knew that Hilda's depression was best combated by making light of troubles.

"Frankly, I don't know, but I know what you can do for yourself—if you have the pluck and the common sense." Mary put the bodice down, and spoke deliberately.

"What? What do you mean?" asked Hilda, turning large frightened eyes on her companion. "You look so strange. Tell me what you are thinking of."

Mary laughed impatiently. "You think everything strange, but I should fool old Wilkes, and," shutting her little teeth with a snap, "if I couldn't do that—strangle him."

"Oh, don't talk so dreadfully. I would rather be miserable for life than do anything wrong."

"Then you are an idiot, my dear. Could you do anything more wrong than make Mr. Ransome and yourself miserable for life, for the sake of some silly scruple?"

"I know you consider all scruples silly. I don't think I am better than you, but some things seem impossible

to me. I would give anything for your strength and inventiveness just now." Hilda's eyes filled with tears, and she turned to the window again.

"My dear! My dear!" cried Mary. For Heaven's sake don't do that. I know you're an angel, but you can't have any fun as an angel until you get away. Tell me—I'd like to shake you. Do you really love Mr. Ransome?" She laid an arm round Hilda's waist.

"Of course I do," Hilda impatiently shook herself free. "I would willingly die for him."

"I know you would, but what on earth is the good of dying when he wants you—and wants you alive? Of course you think you love him. If your love is worth anything it will help you to escape."

"How?"

"By being nice to Mr. Wilkes and persuading him to give you an order to see the ship sail."

"I wonder if he would," said Hilda, brightening a little. "But I hate to ask favours of him, and I don't know what excuse I could give. If I just said I wanted to see things in the foreign quarter he would offer to come with me."

"Hilda," said Mary emphatically, "don't play with the idea of getting your old man of the sea to let you run down and just see things at the port. He is not a fool, and he would be suspicious, even if he knows nothing of Mr. Ransome now, which he very likely does."

"Then what am I to do?" asked Hilda hopelessly.

"There is absolutely only one thing. You must boldly take the bull by the horns. You must tell Wilkes about Mr. Ransome. You must confess that you were once engaged to him—that you thought you loved him once, but had found out your own clever, great, strong Peter was ever so much dearer. Say that you still have a sort of sisterly affection for the other man; that he came back against your express orders; that you have refused to see him. That now you are so happy, you hate to be cruel, and just want to say good-bye and ask him to forget you. Ask Wilkes for an order to see the ship sail. If he takes it well, ask more. Ask for permission to go down the bay; to have a few words alone with the poor discarded one, and to return in the pilot boat."

Hilda listened incredulously. "Mary you are not serious," she gasped.

"I am serious, you little fool. It is you who are trifling, flinging away your life's happiness. And I am trying to save it for you." Mary impatiently kicked the precious bodice, lying at her feet.

"But it would be a preposterous request."

"Of course it would. But what does that matter? Is there any request too preposterous for a man to grant if you fool his vanity—if he thinks you love him? Only pity the other man contemptuously enough, and he will pity him more generously than you do. If you play your cards properly Wilkes will let you go."

"Oh, I wonder if it is possible; could it be right to tell such a lie? He would never believe me, so what's the good of thinking about it?"

"He will believe you if you treat him properly."

"What do you call treating him properly?"

Mary smiled a grim little smile. It was something that Hilda went so far as to question the possibility of lying successfully. "Perhaps I should say improperly," she said. "He certainly won't believe you if you tell a bald, stammering, blushing falsehood. That would be burdening your tender conscience for nothing. You must look as charming as possible; make love to him; call him endearing names. Kiss him."

"Kiss him!" moaned Hilda. "Oh, I couldn't. I couldn't do anything of what you say. I should feel disgraced, soiled for ever."

"That sounds very pretty and good," answered Mary fiercely; "but listen to me. You say you can't do these things. If you love—if you know what love means—you can do anything to gain the man you care for."

"Even what would make him hate me—and—and would defile me?" asked Hilda, with an indignant flash.

"Defilement," echoed Mary contemptuously. "A kiss! A dozen, a hundred kisses; what are they compared with the alternative? You shrink from acting a little comedy because it would defile you. How many kisses will Wilkes have from you if your lover sails without you? How many hundred mornings will you wake with his vile head beside yours? How many children will you bear him?"

"Stop! Stop! for pity's sake. You are killing me."

"It is for pity's sake I am warning you, Hilda, dear," said Mary soothingly. "You must—you simply must be brave, and wicked, if you choose to think it so. What right have you to sacrifice your life to a tender conscience, and a brutal man? As you are weak the only brave thing to do is to fling away all your scruples, and win the battle for yourself and your lover."

Hilda clasped her friend's hand and closed her eyes. "I wonder if I dare," she sighed. "And, oh, Mary, what would Gerald think of me?"

"Why should Gerald know? If he is an ordinary man I suppose he would say stupid things. If you truly understand each other, some day you can tell him, and he will thank you and praise you."

Hilda looked wonderingly at Mary. "I feel somehow as if that were true. But how do you know all these things of love? I am older than you, and yet beside you I seem a child."

Mary laughed. "I don't know; I think I know, because I feel I must have been loving Mark for years without realising it, and now"—she sighed happily—"I do—we do. Nothing else counts. I have always wanted to get out of this horrible country, but now I wouldn't leave it for worlds, because it is Mark's."

"Can't you persuade him to leave it too?" asked Hilda eagerly.

"I wouldn't try. He means to do great things in Australia. His life is here, and I mean to help him and be part of it, not to beg him to change it. He may fail, but whether he fails or succeeds," she said proudly, "I am equally proud of him; and his country and work are my work and country too."

Hilda kissed Mary affectionately. "Poor old Mark. I hate to leave him behind. But you understand him better Mary, and will take far better care of him than ever I could do."

"I'll try," answered Mary squeezing her hand. "Mark is rather an old idiot, and wants a sensible woman to keep him out of mischief, and teach him that some brick walls are really harder than his head. But now, my dear, about your affairs. Have you made up your mind to be wicked and sensible, or good and unutterably silly?"

Hilda sprang to her feet and pressed her hands despairingly upon the masses of her fair hair. "I have made up my mind to get free," she said fiercely, "if I wade through oceans of mud to do it."

"That is right. You will see Wilkes to-morrow."

"Perhaps to-night." Hilda shuddered and glanced fearfully at the door. "Didn't you say you would either cajole him—or—or strangle him?" she whispered. "I almost feel as if it would be easier to do that—if I were only strong enough."

"You might do it with your hair, it's long enough," laughed Mary tauntingly. "But on the whole I think you had better stick to cajolery. You are better built for it. Only cry on his shoulder and he will give you anything."

"Don't! Don't!" besought Hilda.

"It is a shame to tease you. But you must be brave. Good-night."

"What, you are not going away already?"

"I must. I want to write to Mark, and besides, if Mr. Wilkes comes you must act before your resolution pales. Remember this, Wilkes did not win you by fair means, therefore you need worry less about deceiving him. He is treacherous through and through, and as such we must meet him with treachery."

Hilda clasped her hand to her eyes with a moan. "I will do it," she murmured.

Mary touched her friend's hair with her lips, and gathering up her sewing, fled down the stairway lest the debate should be re-opened.

A hundred yards from the door of the tenement she met Wilkes evidently on his way to see Hilda.

A sudden resolution gained possession of her and she acted upon it. Wilkes was passing her unnoticed, when she turned back and touched him on the sleeve. "Mr. Wilkes," she said timidly.

He started with surprise. "What," he said. "Who are you? Oh, my little friend, Mary Jackson. Well, what can I do for you?"

He scarcely knew Mary; his flushed face, his genial tone, and the smile which he gave her suggested to the girl that wine had mellowed him. With mingled feelings of triumph at promised victory, and of sympathy for Hilda's added horror in the winning of it, Mary took her cue from his attitude.

"Yes, little Mary Jackson, sir," she said, looking up at him coquettishly; "with a big favour to ask of a kind man."

"Well, well, what is it?" he asked, chucking her under the chin.

She drew back laughing. "I will tell Hilda," she said; and then putting her hand caressingly on his sleeve—"But no, I wont do that, because my favour was about her. She is very unhappy to-night."

"God bless my soul," he exclaimed; "what's the matter? I must go and comfort her."

"Of course you must," Mary boldly drew Wilkes into the shadow of a house and still kept her fingers on his arm. "You will perhaps find her crying. She loves you distractedly, and thinks you misunderstand her. That you are cold."

"My God, she shan't find me cold," ejaculated Wilkes with an ugly laugh.

"No; it is her fancy," answered Mary, checking a gesture of disgust. "But you can show her how you trust her, and make her worship you. There is a man named Ransome."

"Ah, Ransome! Yes, what of him?" asked Wilkes sharply.

Mary was frightened, but determined to play out her part. "You are not jealous, surely," she laughed. "Listen. She was half engaged to that silly young man before you loved her. He has come back to Australia to pester her, and she has sent him away and has refused to see him, but she would just like to go to the ship and have half an hour with him alone to try to teach him his folly, and prevent him from throwing himself overboard, which he swore he would do."

"Well?" asked Wilkes, looking with a smile into Mary's upturned face. Her hand had slipped down to his, which closed upon it, and she returned the pressure.

"Well, she is crying her eyes out because she says you do not love her and trust her enough to let her do it. I said she didn't know you."

"And you do, eh?" grinned Wilkes.

"I think you are big and generous," murmured Mary with downcast eyes. "And I know what I would do in your place."

"What?"

"Grant her request before she had time to ask it. Give her an order to go where she liked, just to show how little you think of that puppy, and how she misjudges you."

"Funny idea," chuckled Wilkes; "send your girl off to sea with your rival. But, by gad, I'll do it—just to please you, my dear. But what shall I have for it?"

Mary slipped from him laughing. "Ask me again when Hilda has gone. When she is out of the way," she added over her shoulder. A few paces down the street she turned and kissed her hand. Wilkes took a step in her direction with a fatuous smile on his coarse face, then muttering to himself, "No: no; not yet," he stopped, and started upon an unsteady course towards the dwelling of his beloved.

CHAPTER IX.

PLANNING THE ESCAPE.

At Professor Grainger's Meredith was awaiting Ransome, rather anxious at his non-appearance. After warm greetings and enquiries for Hilda, Ransome explained his lateness, saying he had stopped to hear a speech and see a fight. Mark's eyes glistened as he heard the account. "That is the first blow struck for freedom," he said. "A paltry one, perhaps, but we shall do better by-and-bye."

"You can do nothing worse than get mixed up in such troubles," said the Professor testily. "At least until you have Hilda safely out of the country. After that court destruction, if you choose. But I have tried to help you all, and the least I am entitled to ask is that you do not render all our efforts nugatory."

"You are quite right, Professor," answered Mark. "You have been a brick to us, and we are grateful. I wont do anything stupid, or anything that will involve you. But a steamer sails the day after to-morrow, and how are we to get Hilda away?"

The question was not easy to answer. The Professor could obtain leave for her to witness the steamer's departure, though the matter was complicated by the fact of her well-known relationship to such a man as Wilkes, who would be the natural person to sign her pass. But there was scarcely a chance of his doing so, and Grainger thought there was nothing for it but to let her use a pass which he would secure for an imaginary relative of his own.

"But," objected Mark, "everybody will know Hilda from her picture in the papers, and she might be stopped."

"There is danger whatever she does. She must change her appearance as much as possible, and take her chance. If she misses this one she will get no other."

The young men agreed with the Professor, and decided they must run the risk.

Even at the ship's side difficulties did not end, but the one thing certain was that Hilda must be securely hidden directly she went on board. Her failure to leave the ship might not be observed. If it were, Ransome trusted to his position as the son of one of the directors of the shipping company for influence enough to make any search that might be instituted unsuccessful.

It was not a very satisfactory state of things, but discussion failed to improve it. Nothing remained but to await the next day but one, when fortunately the ship sailed at eight o'clock, when work would be over, and a failing light would reduce the chances of Hilda being observed. Ransome promised very grudgingly that he would make no attempt to see her before they met on board unless he received an assurance that Wilkes was out of the way.

"Why is it, Professor?" he asked, as he lit his pipe and Grainger put the spirit-stand before him; "why is it that in this country, under this Socialism, when you have so many good things, that there is this awful tyranny and oppression—the gloom, the monotony, the muddling that one sees all around one? I can't understand it."

"Can't you, my friend," said the Professor, smiling. "Pardon me, but I think that shows you have not studied. All the phenomena you mentioned are the inevitable out-

come of our system. But you mention good things. What are they?"

"Well, nobody starves."

"Not yet. We all half starve, except the privileged few of which I, thank God, am one."

"Well, in England we have people who die of hunger, and thousands of idle rich. All your people work."

"Pardon me, they all half work or a quarter work, except those who give all their energies to fleecing the masses. They are diligent."

"I say, Professor," put in Mark laughing, "am I to listen to this, from a teacher of Socialist youth? I can't believe my ears."

"Listen, my boy. Listen with all your ears, and believe them, if you never believed them until now. At last I am serious, if thirty years of lecturing with a sneer on my lips have left me the power to be serious any more. You and two or three other boys, perhaps many others also, guess my true thoughts, for of late years I fear I have worn the sneer a little too boldly. But I interrupted Mr. Ransome, who was detailing the blessings under which we live."

"I don't know about that," said Ransome. "Rather the blessings under which you ought to live, with none of your land monoplised, no capitalistic tyranny, with no class privileged to live in idleness, and no one condemned to live in grinding poverty. With every chance you seem to me to spoil everything."

"My dear sir, our system gives us no chance whatever. The tyranny, the ineptitude, the corruption, are the absolutely inevitable outcome of a social state which, professing to stamp out competition and the human desire to reap the full fruits of one's own labour, merely drives them out of harmless into accursed channels. You are unconvinced Let me tell you something of our history, then you will perhaps understand."

Ransome and Mark settled themselves eagerly to listen, and the Professor, with his hands behind his back, and unconsciously assuming his usual lecturing manner, delivered a lecture such as his class-room had never heard.

CHAPTER X.

THE PROFESSOR EXPLAINS.

"It is more than half a century," said Professor Grainger, "since this unhappy country deliberately entered upon a Socialist policy. There were injustices and inequalities then, as there are in the semi-individualist countries of to-day, all arising from the denial of full freedom to every citizen, of equal access to the natural sources of wealth, and the secure enjoyment of his labour's full fruit whatever it may be.

"But the well-meaning, enthusiastic fools of those days would not listen to any such paltering suggestions for reform as lay in the suppression of monopolies, the establishment of justice and of greater freedom. They conceived the extraordinary notion that social well-being lay in the suppression of freedom all along the line, in the stamping out of intelligent individuality and widening the sphere for unintelligent action by the State. With this end in view they organised the forces of labour and set to work. At first their steps were slow and halting. Factories Acts and Arbitration Acts dictated to men, hitherto free, to whom, for what time, and for what payment they should give their labour; and the privilege of labouring at all was denied to those who refused, or were not permitted, to join organisations called unions, ruled by powerful and often utterly unscrupulous officials. A little later the conduct of banking and insurance institutions—which have no existence in our society now—were entered on by the State in competition with private enterprise. This enterprise was soon crushed out by the restrictions placed upon it, and the competition of the State, in which gross blunders and losses that would have ruined any private firm were made good by drafts upon the public purse. The tobacco industry, the liquor traffic, the iron industry, the woollen industry, were, one after another, taken over as Government monopolies. None of these things were well managed; but the importation of foreign goods of the kind they produced was prohibited, losses were made good by heavy taxation upon the land and private capital; and, while the people were forced to buy the

State made articles, wages were kept artificially high and prices artificially low—higher, certainly, than they were before, but much less than their cost of production.

Of course the Socialist press howled with delight. Workmen's associations insisted on further Government enterprise, not seeing that the high wages paid to them were extracted from the plunder of private enterprise, and that when the golden goose was killed there would be no more eggs.

"The next step was to forbid private persons to follow several occupations, beginning with those of the physician and the lawyer, all men of these callings becoming Government servants. By this time the shipping trade, the sugar industry, and half-a-dozen others, hampered as they were with all kinds of restrictions, and subjected to enormous imposts, were becoming unprofitable, and the Government bought them out at nominal rates of compensation. It might have been warned by seeing that private interest and capacity could not make them pay—might have realised that, this being so, official incapacity and red tape would render things worse; but whom the Gods wish to destroy they first make mad, and for a time the evil was more or less concealed because there were still hard working men and women to plunder in taxation, and still the extravagant rate of wages accompanied lessened production.

"Then, when heavily taxed citizens began to leave the country in despair, while thousands of labourers clamoured to the Government to give them work, the crisis came. The press, with the exception of Labour organs, was unanimously demanding a return towards individualism, and incendiary articles in leading papers gave the Government the excuse, which it promptly seized, of suppressing its most formidable critics. Other papers sprang up to take their places, whereupon printing was made a Government monopoly. This was the master stroke which made everything easy on the road to ruin.

"The old capitalistic press, whereby private persons exercised enormous influence, and often showed utter disregard of truth and fairness, was bad enough, but there were some honest papers—honest men were at least free to initiate papers—but when the Government controlled the press, criticism and opposition were at

once struck dumb, and the last vestiges of freedom began to fade. Then an attempt was made to check the exodus of population by the first of the anti-emigration laws, inflicting a fine of half his property on any man leaving Australia, quickly followed by another confiscating all property for this offence.

"Then, in order to pay a passage, men began to realise the little left to them, which they foresaw they soon must lose, whereupon the Government countered this move by enacting the final and most drastic provision—that no person must leave the Commonwealth without permission.

"It only remained to take all land and buildings from private individuals into the hands of the State, in order to realise the Socialist ideal of public ownership of all the means of production, distribution and exchange.

"The men who had brought about this state of things were for the most part honest fanatics with an ideal of equality and brotherhood before them. They were, however, filled with stubborn bitterness, as, with each so-called advance, well being for all seemed to grow more distant. They blamed the timidity and compromise, the attempts at compensation, which had accompanied the first steps towards Socialism, and, after the suppression of the so-called capitalistic press, the Labour papers, which had been allowed a slightly longer lease of life, occupied their last days in urging utter subordination of individual rights aad freedom to the community, and the refusal of all compensation for the private property remaining to be annexed for common purposes. Their advice was followed, no compensation was paid for the land; and the Labour press, its great work completed, passed into the hands of the Government.

"Until that period every citizen had possessed the right to be idle or industrious, to work or to starve. A few indeed there were who lived in idleness upon what they had saved or plundered under the old regime, but under the new regime every one was to receive subsistence from the State, and every one was to work for it.

"There was talk at first of payment in proportion to services rendered, but with the abolition of trade it was found impossible, with the best will in the world, to measure the value of goods or services one against the

other, and those who had studied the theory of Socialism pointed out that all masters of it had declared the only scientific and just plan of wealth distribution in a Socialistic brotherhood was equality to all.

"This, then, was the plan adopted. Every citizen received a card monthly, giving him credit with the community for a certain number of units of value, and in terms of these units the goods and services at the command of the community were priced.

"The value of what he had received in any form was marked off the card of the individual as he received it, while the store or department supplying him also entered all transactions in its books.

"From the outset of the thorough Socialistic dispensation there was immense difficulty in applying the available labour of the community with advantage, because, reward being equal, there was naturally a rush for employment in the lightest and most pleasant occupations, which made it impossible to consult individual tastes. An honest endeavour at first prevailed to consult natural or acquired aptitudes; but, as the officials who controlled the press began to realise their own power, and the utter powerlessness of the people to criticise or interfere with them, scandalous favouritism reinforced the inherent difficulties of assigning workers to suitable employment, with the result that the quality and quantity of labour done steadily declined.

"Wealth production inevitably declined under this forced labour in spheres for which it was so often unfitted, and under the blighting influence of equal reward, which killed all incentive to special exertion; but it was some time before its malign effects were fully recognisable, for several things tendered to counteract or hide them. Valuable and fertile land, before locked up in private hands, become available to the community. Enthusiasm for the new state of affairs among a large number was at first a force that counted, while a number of idlers who formerly did no work, or work of a non-productive nature, were now employed in wealth production, and the lower output per head of population was momentarily concealed by the greater strength of the industrial army. But not for long. Enthusiasm soon spent itself, and, gradually but surely, the strongest and ablest

reduced his exertion to the level of the weakest and most incapable worker beside him, who shared equally with him in the wealth which they produced in common with the rest of the people; until to-day we have reached the lowest depths of inefficiency. Our officials are chiefly idlers, muddlers and tyrants; the masses of our population are spiritless, useless serfs."

The Professor paused. "But why tell you what you can observe for yourself?" he continued. "The condition to which we have nationally sunk is so bad that it cannot continue. I believe that before many years have passed our follies and crimes will be washed out in oceans of our people's blood."

There was silence for a minute, all the men wrapt in thought. Then Ransome broke in: "Yes, Professor. I see all this; I know it, but why? Why? Why should it be? You tell me that it is inevitable, but I cannot see the inevitability."

"I have tried to show you, in roughly sketching our history. Tell me what puzzles you?"

"Many things. First, why do the people suffer spoliation and tyranny?"

"Because they are helpless. They know nothing, except through rumour, but what the press—which means the tyrants—choose to tell them. These men are tyrannous and corrupt, as men have been in all ages, when in possession of unbridled power."

"But why must they have such power?" persisted Ransome.

"Because all the produce of all the labour of the community, and all the human beings who give that labour, are absolutely in their hands for distribution and direction. They must be, in any Socialist State. In no other State in the world has any man or body of men had such absolute dominion over his fellow creatures, or anything approaching it."

"But you have a Parliament," said Ransome.

Mark laughed, and Grainger went on: "We have a Parliament. But who are its members? The creatures of the bureaucracy, the obedient registrars of its will. If any member proves disobedient his protests are not reported in the press, and at the next election he is heard of no more."

"I still find it hard to see," objected Ransome, "how free men with no fear of starvation before their eyes, with no masters but themselves, should ever have come to give this absolute power to the officials and fall to the abject state you describe."

"My dear young man," answered the Professor a little impatiently, "how could it be otherwise when they deliberately surrendered the first essential of freedom—the right to the produce of their own labour—that is practically the right to themselves—the cardinal blessing for which their ancestors had struggled, fought and died—first, in the fight against chattel slavery, and later in the fight against economic slavery, which gave to one man part of the produce of another's toil? Our fools of Socialists deliberately chose to give it all to others, to their so-called servants; madly expecting to get it back again. The servants became their masters, kept a great proportion of the fruits of their labour, wasted a vast proportion of it, and returned to the labourers the mere husks and skins—all of which was inevitable."

"But this waste? Why should it be?"

"For two reasons. Because the workers, neither choosing what they shall do, nor where they shall do it, nor receiving reward proportionate to their exertions, are practically slaves, and slave labour is always wasteful. But the old slave owners at least directed their slaves' exertions with some of the energy and intelligence which always characterise individual enterprise. The officials direct it with the stupidity and want of energy that characterise all Government departments—even in a country like your own—while in our country circumstances aggravate it a thousand-fold. The Government arsenals and such business concerns in England have private example, private competition, and free criticism to stimulate them. Our officials have no example, no competition, and no criticism to preserve them from the most hideous blunders; and they have a task immensely more difficult. They must foresee all the wants of the people, and provide for them. They must properly allocate the labour at their disposal between the production of goods for immediate consumption, and the making of machinery, the provision of raw

material, and the up-keep of works needed to produce these goods. Or rather, they should do all these things. They don't—they can't—and the result is one of a hundred causes leading to disaster. Only one thing prevents this Socialist community from vanishing from the face of the earth, and that is that other countries have not been such fools as to imitate it, and it is accordingly not left wholly to its own resources. And we perhaps play a beneficent part in the world's economy, by teaching other nations rather to bear patiently those ills they have, than fly to others—that they do know of."

CHAPTER XI.

A SOCIALIST CONGREGATION.

On Sunday morning Ransome decided to go to church, not that the church service of the Australian Commonwealth had any great attraction for him, but because he knew that Hilda would be there. The Australian Socialists were regular church goers. The man or woman who indulged in frequent absence was not looked upon with favour by authority, and partly for this reason, and partly because other means of distraction and enjoyment were so few, ministers had never any reason to complain of small congregations.

This was a comparatively new development. In the early days of Socialism the churches had many enemies, and in fact the wiseacres all prophesied that the triumph of Socialism would mean the destruction of religion. This prophecy was acquiesced in by the early enthusiasts, who, moreover, hoped for its fulfilment, because the churches—which they identified with religion—stood firmly for the established order, preaching submission to all the ills of this life with a promise of harps and crowns in the life to come. At first it seemed that this belief in catastrophe to the church would be justified by fact. The Socialistic State made no provision for public worship or for the payment of preachers, leaving the religiously inclined to meet in their spare time if they chose, in order to pray together and listen to the exhortations of enthusiasts who sacrificed their leisure without hope of earthly reward. Then came the discovery that religion had its roots deep in the people's

hearts; that the churches and priestcraft had been living upon it and strangling it; that, freed from their grip, it was putting forth amazing growth, fostering an aggressive spirit of truth, independence and reform most disconcerting to the officials, to whom independence and reform were anathema.

The foolish ones proposed to forbid religious assemblies of any kind, and to make preaching an offence; but there were wiser heads among the ruling classes who saw that this was simply courting disaster, by the creation of martyrs and zealots whose spirit would be unconquerable. They proposed a far wiser plan—"to collar the machine." The old churches had been bulwarks of the old order; the new church should be the bulwark of the new.

This plan succeeded to perfection. Priests became public servants; they waxed in power and honour, and religion gradually died. The State clergy certainly deserved well of the Commonwealth as represented by the official clique, and in no country in the world did any priesthood preach the Christian faith, as they understood it, with more commendable fervour. The great lesson they impressed upon the people was the impiousness of looking for happiness in this life, beyond the satisfaction to be gained from duty, which consisted in implicit obedience to their masters, and repression of all feelings of envy towards those whose lot might seem more desirable than their own in this vale of tears. All would be clear to them in the next life, upon which they were to fix their hearts, sure of eternal bliss if in this life they were humble and meek, seeking no worldly dross, and piously honouring the spiritual and temporal masters whom a wise Providence had placed in authority over them.

Such was the doctrine preached from a thousand pulpits every Sunday morning; and Ransome made his way to the Cathedral where Hilda and her brother were accustomed to hear it once a week.

Mark and Hilda, accompanied by Mary Jackson, were just ahead of Ransome when he reached the Cathedral entrance, but they did not notice him, and, making no attempt to attract their attention, he secured a seat not

far from theirs. His eyes and Hilda's soon met. She blushed and looked away again, but he could read in her face—what he had scarcely doubted—that, whatever she had done, she loved him still; and she could see that she was forgiven.

Since their parting he had seen many beautiful women, but, as he gazed eagerly now, with beating pulse, on her fine pure profile, the exquisite colouring of cheek, chin and throat, the bright masses of her hair, he realised afresh that his beloved was a beautiful woman, even among beautiful women. Others he knew in other countries were clad in dainty gowns; Hilda had no such advantages. Her dress differed little from hundreds of sad coloured garments, aginst which the smart gowns of a few privileged ones in the front pews stood out like a handful of flowers in a dingy room. The serge line ended abruptly half a dozen rows from the front, and beyond were delicate muslins and silks. One woman, handsome, fair haired, and splendidly built, the wife of the President, wore a pale blue diaphanous material, draped with exquisite filmy lace. On her bosom sparkled fine jewels, and her hat, covered with flowers, was unmistakably foreign in its daring combination of colours and elaboration of shape. Ransome, on his previous visit, had met this lady, and admired her beauty and queenly insolence, which she took no pains to hide from those about her. At all gatherings her gowns and jewels were a cause of envy and interest to her acquaintances, and if at times her more cautious husband urged that such extravagance must rouse an angry feeling among the people, she smiled contemptuously and said, "Let them be angry. If they rebel let them feel the whip." Her little daughter near her glanced curiously and contemptuously now and again at rows and rows of children from one of the State nurseries, and they returned the gaze with wondering, admiring interest. The dainty little creature, with golden curls, and white lace-trimmed garments, was to them as far removed as the angels of which the minister spoke. To them the principal interest in their regular church attendance was the view it gave them of those pews where sat those wonderful beings, in marvellous stuffs and colours. All through the service Ransome waited impatiently

for their meeting, and scarcely heard the sermon from the text, "Servants, obey your masters," wherein the clergyman extolled the virtue of obedience with a fervour that made St. Paul seem cold.

On leaving the cathedral Ransome waited, being aware that Mark had seen him and would let him know whether he might join his party.

Presently Mark approached and drew him aside. "You had better not speak to Hilda now," he said. "You never know who is watching us, and someone might mention it to Wilkes. But he has gone out of Melbourne for the day; and if you come to St. Kilda at half-past eight to-night Hilda and I will be at home, and we can talk about plans."

"It is a long time to wait," said Ransome; "but I suppose you know what is wisest. By the way, who is that man watching us so keenly? Somehow, I seem to know his face."

"Where?"

"There, speaking to the woman, a few yards to our left. I remember now. He is our friend who was lecturing last night, and who escaped from the police."

Mark stared with knitted brows at the man who strolled past them, in earnest conversation with a middle-aged, anxious woman. "I seem to remember his face, too," he said. "Can I know him, I wonder?"

"He appeared to recognise you. At any rate, I am glad he was not arrested."

"So am I. By Jove, I do know him now! He was at the University when I first went. A very clever fellow. Got into trouble for expressing opinions too freely, and was sent to work in the mines in some God-forsaken spot. I must speak to him."

"Be careful," warned Ransome. "He is not a safe man to get mixed up with."

"I will look after myself. Excuse me now, or I shall lose him. This evening at 8.30."

Mark hurried away, and for a little while Ransome watched him following the stranger, who had parted from the woman, and was walking off at a smart pace along Flinders-street.

Left to himself among the dispersing congregation, Ransome felt lonely and depressed, with a long weary

day to live through before he could see Hilda again. She had gone with Mary Jackson to the railway station, and, forbidden to accompany her, Ransome crossed the bridge to walk for a while in the grand avenue upon the river bank.

It was a delightful day of crisp air and brilliant sunshine, which fashioned a mosaic of light and shadow on the gravel beneath the grand old elms, planted years ago when Australia was free. The air was fragrant with the scent of flowers and vocal with the song of innumerable birds; everything invited to content and happiness, and yet none of the faces that Ransome saw were happy; on none of them did he see a cheerful smile. The prevailing expression was one of dull vacuousness. On the very few intellectual countenances he could read the marks of bitterness or discontent. Walking up and down the long avenue, where thousands were promenading or resting on the seats, he did not hear a single merry laugh. There was nothing to distinguish one group or young couple from those who followed or preceded them. Alike in garments, they seemed monotonously alike in features also. Here and there a young girl perhaps looked better dressed and held herself better than her fellows. It was only that her natural vanity had taught her how to make her slop-made clothes fit, and how to wear them. Among the older women he saw the tightly drawn lips, and hard eyes. Women did not give up the joys and sorrows of home life and the laughter and tears of little children without suffering. The large majority had borne children, and then the rest of the story was told in those tight lips and dulled eyes. He passed an old woman sitting alone on a seat. He wondered where he had seen just such an expression as she had, and realised that it had been in a gaol, among prisoners condemned to life sentences. There was neither grief nor misery in it, but listlessness and hopelessness.

Once he passed a State nursery, or the portion of it that had attained to walking age, comprising perhaps a hundred mites of from three to seven years of age, and the expressionless little faces might have been carved from the same pitiable block of wood, just as the mat-

erial of their little garments had been all cut from the same roll of coarse cloth. These were future citizens of the Commonwealth. He pitied it and them. He knew something of State nurseries. He had been through one on his previous visit, and now, as he watched the small people file past, he realised what the huge State machine deprived them of. None of them knew anything of the fond spoiling and nonsense which should attend babyhood. None of them had ever been coaxed and petted since the first absolutely dependent months of infancy. Dressed alike, fed alike, trained alike, they were never ill-treated, but they were never treated as anything much more important than a flock of lambs or a herd of calves. They were never particularly naughty; circumstances did not permit of naughtiness. None of them considered fathers and mothers as almighty beings. Teacher was their one authority. Fathers and mothers were unimportant people, who might visit them now and again, and might not. It was a matter of little consequence.

Ransome realised more vividly than ever how different were his own friends, the Merediths and Mary Jackson, from the hundreds of passers-by, who looked at him with momentary curiosity, recognising him as a stranger. They could not fail to do so, for, with his frank, fearless expression, his brisk step and erect bearing, not to mention his smartly cut clothes of material the common people never handled, he looked like a being from another world than theirs. Even the Merediths were not like the English men and women he knew, though they had little in common with the vulgar herd. Mark and Hilda had been privileged children, and now Mark was a rebel against the blighting Socialist system of caste, while Mary Jackson had been influenced by him, and breathed the atmosphere of his thought.

Yet even they were not untouched by their environment. Mark seldom laughed. He had intellect and vigour, but not the high spirits of boys at home, and there was melancholy in Hilda's eyes; even, Ransome fancied, in her happiest smile. He longed for the time when it would gradually depart in the free atmosphere of the English life he meant to make so happy for her.

Of Mary, Ransome knew little, or he would have seen that she had preserved her individuality, her spirit and her charm, only by philosophic acceptance of her environment, and accommodation to it, which he might call unscrupulous. These three were the only Australians with whom Ransome was acquainted, except a few of the bureaucrats to whom he had brought introductions from England, but with the latter he soon found he had no common tastes or sympathies.

After walking and musing for an hour on the promenade Ransome went back to the city in search of a meal, intending afterwards to while away the heavy hours with a book, perhaps a sleep in his room.

Meanwhile Mark kept his man in sight, and followed at a distance. He remembered now that his name was Donovan, and he recalled legends of the contemptuous disregard for authority which had finally brought punishment upon him, and earned even then Mark's secret admiration, now confirmed and strengthened by his knowledge of the previous night's affair.

When they reached an unfrequented street Donovan slackened his pace, and, with a heart beating rather fast, Mark ranged up alongside.

Donovan regarded him suspiciously. "You have been following me," he said. "What do you want?"

"To speak to you," answered Meredith. "I wanted to tell you that I admire what you did last night, and that I am glad that you are not caught."

"That sounds well," said the other, "but I see your friend has told of me. I thought I knew his face, and somehow yours seems familiar too."

"You might remember me. My name is Meredith. I know yours is Donovan. I can remember you getting sent down from the University, just after I went there."

Donovan stopped for a moment and stared hard at Mark, trying to read his character in his face.

"Meredith!" he exclaimed; "that explains it. I do remember you now. You look an honest, straightforward chap, but there are several things I desire to know, and you must walk with me until I learn them."

"There is no need to say must to me," answered Mark, a little defiantly. "You can see I wanted to

talk to you, or I should not have followed. What do you want to know?"

Donovan glanced at his companion, smiling approval. "Excuse my manner, but I know you are hand in glove with Wilkes. Everyone knows he is to marry your sister. I find that a stranger who saw me fight the police last night immediately tells it to you, a friend of the officials. You and he whisper together, and immediately afterwards you dog my steps. You can understand, can you not, that I don't want to lose sight of you until I know where I am?"

"That's all right; but you've got to understand that half what you've said is quite mistaken, and that you have no real reason to suspect me at all. I hate the Government and the officials as much as you do. I'm not going to let Wilkes marry my sister. I was delighted to hear that you thrashed the police last night, and I came after you because I wanted to know a man like that. I thought perhaps you belonged to an association or something, and that you might help me to join it."

"Did anyone tell you there was an association?" asked Donovan, sharply.

"No; I only know there are rumours of it. If there is I want to be a member, and if there isn't I want to find people who will help me to make one."

"Well, you've told me some very interesting things, and I am very glad we have met. Who is the man who saw me last night?"

"A great friend of mine. An Englishman, who is going to marry my sister.

"An Englishman? Yes, you said you wouldn't have Wilkes for a brother in law. Tell me how you are going to prevent it?"

"I don't quite know, but it has to be done. Perhaps you can advise me."

Donovan and Mark walked on together, the older man drawing out the younger, who felt convinced by reason and instinct alike that he spoke to a friend, and was nothing loth to talk. Donovan, on his part, though careful not to commit himself, was tremendously impressed by Mark's sincerity, by his quick intelligence, his grip of affairs, and his enthusiasm for reform. As a revolutionary, he was delighted to meet such a recruit, and hoped great things of him.

After half an hour's talk Mark had completely gained his confidence, and, without divulging any details, he made the boy's spirit thrill within him by telling him that there was a secret anti-Socialistic body to which he belonged. Donovan had risked a good deal in going to the cathedral, but had been obliged to do it in order to give to a woman whom he met there news for her son, who was wanted by the police. So, indeed, was Donovan himself. Months before he had escaped from the mines where he had been working, and had since lain more or less closely hidden in Melbourne. After his rash adventure of last night, he was going to keep out of sight again.

"But where? How can you do it?" asked Mark, eagerly.

"Have patience. When you began to follow me I little thought I should ever answer such questions to you," replied Donovan, smiling. "Now I think I may do so pretty safely, for we want keen recruits. I have been taking you away from our crib for some time, until I knew you better. But let us turn this corner here, and we will be there in half an hour."

CHAPTER XII.

THE CONSPIRATORS' DEN.

Donovan opened the door with a latchkey, bolting it behind him, and Mark, following, found himself in a long passage, with bedrooms on either side. It was a big house of four stories, containing a great number of small rooms, in two or three of which the doors stood ajar, showing weary men stretched upon their beds, reading, smoking, or asleep.

"Is that you, Donovan?" called one of the men, looking up from a book.

"Yes," he answered. "Come into the back room. I want to introduce you to a friend."

Passing down a passage, he knocked at a door which crossed it, and which was presently opened by a keen eyed grizzle bearded man some fifty years of age. The door led into a short but wide passage lined with cupboards, and the passage opened into a room beyond.

Allowing the two to enter, the third man glanced curiously at Mark, and then sat down again without a word at a table, with a book and a hunch of bread and meat before him.

"It's all right, Cooper—this is a friend, Mr. Meredith," said Donovan.

"One of us?" asked the other.

"Yes, or at least he is going to be."

There was another knock, and as Donovan went to the door, which Cooper had locked behind him, Mark looked curiously about the room. It was large and bare, with white walls, and windowless, lighted above from a skylight, and on the back wall opposite the passage was a large fireplace. A square pine table, a wooden bench, and a few wooden chairs were the only furniture.

The new comer whom Donovan admitted was but little older than Mark. Although his clothes and rough, scarred hands showed him to be a manual labourer, his strong dark face was thoughtful, and one instinctively felt that he had intellect and passion which would make him a dangerous man with whom to quarrel.

His name, Mark learned, was Burns, and he worked in the engine-room of the meat freezing works near Port Melbourne.

"What is Mr. Meredith doing here?" he asked of Donovan. "Have we anything in common with him?"

Mark flushed under the cold, critical survey of his new acquaintance, while Cooper went on with his meal in silence.

"If you hate the Government as much as I do, I have plenty in common with you," he answered hotly.

Cooper looked up with an enquiring glance, and Burns answered a little sneeringly:

"I am surprised to find the man whose sister is going to marry Mr. Wilkes is an enemy of the bureaucracy, especially when I understand he is very comfortable himself at the bureaucratic University. Frankly, Donovan, I think your friend's presence here wants explanation."

Mark was about to retort, when Donovan stopped him. "Certainly it does; and you shall have the explanation."

He went on to tell of Mark's quarrel with Wilkes and the probability that it would lead him into serious trouble, whereupon the others changed their tone of distrust for one of cordiality.

"You must pardon my coldness, Meredith," said Burns, "but you can see it looks dangerous to let strangers in here, especially when you know nothing about them but things like what I had heard of you. And Donovan has shown himself rash by getting into a mess last night. But you look straight, and I believe you are."

"Ditto to that, said Cooper.

Mark assured them that he understood, and his good faith being accepted, the atmosphere of the gathering immediately changed. Mark learned that the inhabitants of the tenement were all men animated by a common trust in one another and common hatred of the Government. This was their private meeting-room, used by a select few, and even to them the door was never opened except in answer to a special knock. Several men fed there upon scanty fare, keeping their credit for other things than food.

"What things?" asked Mark.

Donovan smiled. "For books and newspapers—and various articles, which you shall see in good time. We manage to get our credit changed to coin, and do a little smuggling from the ships."

"And where do you keep these books, and other things?" asked Mark. "Are you not afraid of the place being searched?"

Donovan looked enquiringly at the other two, who both nodded assent. "We do not exactly leave them lying about," he said. "Look here."

With that he stepped to the empty fireplace and pressed a spot on the large flag-stone before the hearth. With a thrill of excitement Mark saw the stone turn slowly and silently upon a pivot, showing, beneath the side of it which rose, steps leading down into the darkness.

Donovan put his foot upon the ladder and called to Mark, "Come down with me, and you will see our library and magazine."

"And my downy nest," added Cooper with a grin.

"Yes, your nest. It seems to me not unlikely you will have to share it with Meredith and two or three more of us before long."

CHAPTER XIII.

DISCOVERED BY WILKES.

At half-past eight precisely Ransome was at the Merediths' rooms, and waited with anxious impatience for the answer to his knock. It came in the shape of Hilda herself. A glance showed Ransome that they were alone, and for a while Hilda was wrapped in his arms suffering happy suffocation, unable to speak, and caring for nothing but the overwhelming fact that she was with her lover again at last, her weak promise to the other man forgotten and forgiven.

Presently he held her from him, gazing at her fondly. "You are more beautiful than ever, darling; but you look sad. That has got to change when we are in England."

Hilda smiled—"If I look sad now, I am afraid I am incurable, for I was never happier in my life, and don't want to be. Oh, I have missed you, Gerald."

"And so you filled in the time by getting engaged to somebody else."

"You could not joke about it if you knew how miserable I have been."

He caught her to him again, disregarding her pretence of resistance. "I do know," he said, "I have suffered too. Mark has told me. We are going to forget all about the past and think only of the future."

She pressed his hand gratefully, then drew herself away, and looking at him with flushed cheeks, she began, "It was your forgiveness that I wanted, and I felt sure that you would pity me and understand when you knew."

"Of course I did—even when I didn't know—I could not believe you had deceived me. Forget it all like a bad dream."

"Soon; but first I want your forgiveness for something else."

"Good heavens," he cried gaily, "more crimes to confess? Confess them, my angel, with your head on my shoulder, and they are all forgiven in advance."

"No," she replied, "I will confess them here where I can see your face, and read in your eyes if I am your angel still."

"Well, read away; I shall stand here with the book wide open until you are content."

Tapping her fingers on the table and lowering her eyes for a moment, Hilda raised them boldly to his: "Well," she said, "you know I have got a pass to see the ship sail, from Mr. Wilkes. How do you think I got it?"

"Asked for it, I suppose," answered Ransome wonderingly. "You didn't steal, it did you?"

"I wish to Heaven I could have stolen it," she cried. "I cajoled it out of him by telling him his—by—by making love to him."

Ransome laughed, "How on earth did you manage it, Hilda?"

"Don't laugh at me," she entreated. "It was dreadful."

"Of course it was," he said soothingly, slipping his arm round her waist, "but what a lucky beggar Wilkes was. You never make love to me. I have to do all the love-making for myself."

"Will you not take it seriously?" she sighed. "If you only knew what an awful ordeal it was to me; how utterly ashamed I felt, and how frightened to tell you, you could not jeer when I am trying to be brave."

"Sweetheart, I am not jeering," he said tenderly. "But I don't want to know anything, except what I know already—that whatever you did or said, you did it for both our sakes. I should like to kill Wilkes for it. I hate him and the country that forced you into such deception. But I am not angry with you. I love you better than ever."

Hilda clung to him full of passionate gratitude and relief that her confession was over. He had shown such merciful lack of curiosity as to the details of the humiliating scene with Wilkes, of which the very

thought made the blood burn in her cheeks. "And if I could love you more," she whispered, "I would, for being so generous and kind."

"Love me as foolishly as you will," he answered smiling, "and don't give your reasons, for then I shall never know how foolish you are. But we must talk about our plans, dear. The old blackguard has given you the pass?"

"Yes; it is a permit to go on board and to——" A cry of surprise and fear broke from Hilda, her sentence unfinished, and turning sharply round, Ransome saw Wilkes, with an evil look on his face, standing at the threshold.

"I hope I don't intrude," he said, grinning sourly, and, entering, he closed the door behind him.

Hilda clung to Ransome, and with one arm round her waist he faced Wilkes. "How long have you been here eavesdropping?" he asked sternly.

"Long enough to know that I am an old blackguard, and that you two have plans, which I shall be obliged to interfere with. By why call it eavesdropping? The door was not shut. I came to see my intended, and on entering I find this. Would you mind releasing one another? It is really very painful to me."

He looked them up and down with an ugly sneer, and Ransome, leaving Hilda's side, stepped threateningly up to Wilkes, who stood his ground without flinching, whereupon Ransome dropped his clenched hand.

"Be careful what you say, or do," he said, "or it will be the worse for you."

"My dear young man, I really think it is from you that care is demanded. It was most negligent of you to leave that door unlocked."

"Quite right," said Ransome, "and I am obliged for the hint." He locked the door, and put the key in his pocket.

Wilkes raised his eyebrows with a sarcastic smile. "I am afraid you are rather late. May I sit down, Hilda?" He seated himself without waiting for a reply, and continued: "Now, Mr. Ransome, let us understand one another. Miss Meredith is my promised wife. Last night she obtained from me an order to visit the ship

by which you are sailing, in order to say good-bye to you, whom she described to me as a rejected and heart-broken lover. I come in here to visit her this evening and find her almost as loving and tender to you as she was to me last night. We had a most tender scene I assure you," he laughed hoarsely. "Sobs, protestations, endearments, kisses. I was never so affected in my life."

Ransome gripped him savagely by the shoulder. "If you don't want your teeth knocked down your throat be careful."

Wilkes sprang to his feet and shook himself free. His sneering manner was all gone, and he spoke with suppressed rage.

"How dare you address me so—you—you foreign puppy," he spluttered. "I have had enough of this nonsense. You shall leave Melbourne to-morrow or it will go hard with you, on the word of a man with power to make it good. Hilda, give me back that pass. But no, you need not trouble. I shall have it cancelled. You can continue your precious farewell, and I will talk to you in the morning." He snatched up his hat from the table and turned on Ransome.

"Now, sir, unlock that door at once, and allow me to go."

"I shall do nothing of the kind," answered Ransome coolly.

"Then I shall have to call for help—and you will spend the night in gaol for assaulting a high official of the Commonwealth."

For answer, Ransome drew a revolver out of his pocket and levelled it at Wilkes's head. "If you raise your voice to utter a word, I shall shoot you," he said. "Now sit down in that corner until I consider what is to be done."

Wilkes glared at his rival with impotent rage. He moved his lips as though about to cry out, but Ransome, stiffening his arm and placing his finger on the trigger, warned him solemnly.

"Don't risk it. If I shoot you I may suffer for it; but I know you and your country, and I will see you lying dead in this room before I allow you to go away and rob me of the woman I love and who hates you. Move

back, you scoundrel; do you hear? Away from that door."

Gritting his teeth together, he roughly thrust the muzzle of the pistol against Wilkes's breast, pushing him to a chair in the furthest corner of the room. There Wilkes sat trembling with vicious wrath, but with an effort keeping control upon himself; for he saw that Ransome was in desperate earnest; and, though worsted for the moment, he knew that he need only wait to win the game.

Still keeping an eye on his enemy, Ransome called to Hilda, who stood by, white with fear, and yet full of exulting trust in the man she loved. "Hilda, dear, we must decide quickly. What are we to do with this creature? If I let him go we are done for. But how to deal with him I don't quite know."

Hilda was unable to offer any suggestion, and Wilkes, who had regained his composure, smiled complacently. "I am quite at your disposal," he said. "But unless Mr. Ransome murders me—which would be noisy as well as brutal—I really do not see how you can escape, without my permission. I think we had better make terms."

"What terms do you suggest?" enquired Ransome.

Wilkes stroked his chin reflectively. "Well, in consideration of your natural disappointment, I am prepared to be generous. I shall allow you to sail to-morrow, without having you arrested for your unprovoked murderous assault upon me."

"And Miss Meredith?"

"Miss Meredith will remain behind, and in time I think I may forgive her."

Ransome treated this proposal with contemptuous silence. Speaking to Hilda as if Wilkes were not present, he said: "Of course terms with him are out of the question. Even if he agreed to let us go he would break his word, and I expect I should find myself in gaol to-morrow, though I agreed to the monstrous suggestion of leaving you behind."

"Really, really," protested Wilkes with a deprecating gesture, "you do me an injustice."

"I am afraid I shall have to do something worse," said Ransome grimly. Then to Hilda: "Do you know where Mark is? When do you expect him back?"

"I do not know," she answered. "He left us after church, and I have not seen him since."

Ransome remembered then the company that Mark had gone to seek, and devoutly hoped that he had not rashly got into trouble.

"I expect he will return soon," he said cheerfully; "and I hope so. We badly want his help."

Just then a footstep sounded on the stair.

"Why there he is," cried Hilda. Mark was already at the door trying the handle. He called to his sister, and Ransome threw her the key.

"Let him in quickly," he said, "and lock the door again at once."

Hilda obeyed, while Wilkes, leaning back in his chair, looked on with a sneering smile, and Mark stared in astonishment at the strangely assorted occupants of the room.

CHAPTER XIV.

WILKES'S DISCOMFITURE.

"I am glad you have come, Mark," said Ransome. We have got an awkard job to tackle here."

Mark glanced at Wilkes and at the pistol in Ransome's hand. "I should think so from the look of things," he said. "But what does it mean?"

"Mr. Wilkes came to the house unexpectedly, and, finding me with your sister, he refuses to allow her to go to the ship to-morrow. She has the pass he gave her and must use it. The problem is how to deal with Wilkes."

"That is a problem you had better leave alone Meredith, if you don't want trouble on your head," put in Wilkes.

"Take no notice of him," continued Ransome quietly. "I think there is nothing for it but to tie and gag him, leaving him shut up here until after the ship sails."

"By God, I won't stand this insolence," cried Wilkes springing to his feet. Ransome shook him by the collar and thrust him backwards.

"Sit down you scoundrel," he hissed angrily. "If you attempt outcry or escape, I won't shoot you. I wont give you the satisfaction of knowing your death had brought people on our tracks; I shall brain you like a dog with that poker there."

Wilkes knew himself physically no match for Ransome's six feet of young muscle and brawn, and sat back in the chair, quivering and almost choking with rage, but silent.

"What do you say, Mark?" asked Ransome. "Can you think of anything else to do?"

"I don't know that I can," he said reflectively. "Of course he will be missed very soon. Long before the ship sails; and there is danger that he might be looked for here."

"And what will happen to Mark when we are gone, if we do get away?" asked Hilda anxiously.

"What a selfish beast I am! I never thought of that," answered Ransome. "Your life would not be safe."

Wilkes grinned and looked triumphantly at Mark, who answered his unspoken threat.

"Grin when you have me in your clutches, Mr. Wilkes," he said. "Perhaps that wont be yet awhile." Then to Ransome: "We must take our chance. I will look after myself somehow, and at any rate you must get clear."

"But we can't sacrifice you for it. Is there no other way?" asked Ransome, knitting his brows in thought.

"I don't know of any—but there is no hurry. We can take our time to think."

"Yes, sit down, and, by the way, take the revolver. I can get something quieter here, in case Mr. Wilkes should be foolish enough to give any trouble."

Ransome handed the pistol to Meredith, and taking up the poker, meditatively twisted it in his fingers.

"If there were only a handy cellar into which we could put him. But even then, what about you when he got out of it? Hullo, there is someone else coming to the door."

Mark had heard the footstep before Ransome, and, snatching the key from Hilda, quietly turned it in the lock, signing to the others to keep silence. Ransome took his stand in front of Wilkes with the poker in a threatening grip, and Mark slipped out on to the landing, where the others heard voices in a few minutes' whispered colloquy, without being able to catch the words. Then the door opened, and Mark returned to the room accompanied by Mary Jackson.

Hilda clasped her in her arms. "Oh, Mary, why do you come in here?" she cried. "How could Mark let you do it?"

"Because of Mr. Wilkes?" said Mary, composedly. "My dear, as I told Mark just now, I could not be deeper in his black books than I am, for helping to make him give you that pass. I might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb; and I may be able to help in killing the sheep. Pretty creature isn't he?" she concluded, looking Wilkes up and down with an insolent little laugh. He maintained a sullen silence, glancing from one to another of his gaolers, humiliated by his position, but confident of baulking their plans, or at least of exacting summary vengeance.

No one spoke for a little space, till Mark exclaimed excitedly, "By Jove, Ransome! I have it. What an ass I was not to think of it before."

"Think of what?"

"A plan to get us all out of this mess. It is risky, but I believe we can carry it through."

All eyes, including Wilkes's, were turned on Mark enquiringly. "Wilkes must not hear what I have to tell you," he said. "Come close and give me your ear."

The young men withdrew to the corner furthest distant from their captive, keeping a sharp eye on him the while, and talked together for two or three minutes in low tones which the others could not hear, Mary plying Hilda all the time with badinage, and thus ensuring all the more effectually that not a whisper from Mark should be overheard.

"That all sounds feasible," said Ransome, at length. "You have spent a fortunate day; but it won't do for some hours yet."

"No," Mark answered, "not until eleven o'clock or after. In the meantime we may as well take things easy."

"Quite so. May we smoke, Hilda?"

Hilda gave her permission. Mary asked for a cigarette herself, and Ransome offered a cigar to the enemy.

"You have got an unpleasant time before you, Mr. Wilkes," he said. "But not till midnight, or thereabouts. In the meantime, make yourself comfortable."

Wilkes took the proffered cigar in the most friendly way possible. "An unpleasant time about midnight, eh?" he said genially. "May I know the nature of it?"

"Not until it comes," answered Mark.

"No violence, I hope?"

"Not unless you force it upon us."

"Not I," he laughed. "This is a fair tussle of wits—scarcely fair, after all, for you are four to one. However, I bear no malice. And when I win, as I think I shall, then you will see how generous I can be."

"Thank you; but I trust we shall not put you to the test," said Ransome, regarding Wilkes curiously. The man's sudden change of demeanour, from scowling bitterness to geniality, puzzled him. Why did it come immediately upon his learning that his captors had devised measures unpleasant to him, and which they thought would secure their victory? The offer of a cigar and the suspension of hostilities for an hour or two were an insufficient explanation.

Ransome drew Hilda aside and whispered something in her ear. All at once she clutched him by the arm. "Yes, yes," she faltered. "I remember now. Oh, Gerald! There is something important for him to decide at the office. I heard him say that he would return there straight from the country, and be in by ten o'clock. How could I be such a fool?"

Mark started up in surprise, and Wilkes threw his cigar away with a muttered curse.

"Don't worry, dear. It will be all right," said Ransome, soothingly. "Do you think they will look for him here, Mark?"

"Most likely. The brute thinks so himself. That's what he is grinning about. It's lucky we found out in time. What time is it?"

Ransome looked at his watch. "Close on ten now. I suppose we must risk it at once."

"Yes; there are not many people about, and it is a pitch black night. Shall we gag him?"

"No; I shall shoot him dead if he utters a word."

The girls listened in terrified bewilderment, and while Ransome spoke to Wilkes, Mark took a tender farewell of Hilda. He might see her again before she sailed, but he could not tell. There were tears in Mary's eyes, also, as he took her hand, though he boldly assured her that they would be parted at most for a day or two, and that if all went right they had nothing to fear from Wilkes.

To him Ransome was addressing a stern admonition. "Now, Mr. Wilkes, we are going to leave the house. You will take Meredith's arm on one side and mine on the other. I shall have my revolver beneath my coat, with my finger on the trigger, and if you make the least resistance—give the slightest sign by word or deed that you go unwillingly where we lead you—you are a dead man. Don't imagine for a moment that you have any chance of escape. Wherever we are I shall shoot; and don't even flatter yourself that you would be revenged, for more likely than not I should get safely away. Now, come."

Ransome handed Wilkes his hat, stooped to kiss Hilda, promising to meet her at the boat train on the morrow, and then, taking Wilkes's arm in his, went to the door. Mary held it ajar, and glanced at Wilkes, whose features were convulsed with passion. "Push his hat down over his eyes and muffle up his face a bit," she said. "If anyone sees him now they will think you are walking with the devil."

"A good idea, agreed Ransome. "Will you carry it out?" Mark had Wilkes's other arm now linked in his, and Mary pulled the prisoner's hat forward on his forehead. "That will do," she said. "After all, they might look more closely at a man muffled up on a warm night. Good luck go with you."

The three passed out of the room and down the stairs together without a word, and the girls, left alone, talked in hope and fear of what the morrow might bring forth. It was not ten minutes after the sound of the men's footsteps had died away when a knock sounded on the sitting room door.

Mary gripped Hilda by the arm, and whispered, "Someone from your office to enquire for Wilkes. Say

he has just left and told you that he was going to the office. I will keep out of sight."

It was as Mary had guessed, and, standing behind the door, she could almost hear Hilda's heart beating on the other side of it, as she stood at the threshold and told the office messenger that Mr. Wilkes, after spending half an hour with her, had just hurried away to the "Gazette" office, where he said that he was due.

CHAPTER XV.

A BOLD STROKE.

Once outside the door, which they gained without meeting anyone, Meredith hurried Ransome and his prisoner by side streets towards the beach that lay close at hand, and there, hidden on the sand beneath a pier, they remained until eleven o'clock had passed. Then Mark led the way towards the house in West Melbourne, determined to ask help of his new-found friends. Two miles from their destination he suggested that it would be well to blindfold the prisoner, and, with a dark scarf of Ransome's tied across his eyes, Wilkes was led by devious ways to the conspirators' lodging house.

All was dark within, but the private knock which Meredith gave was soon answered by Donovan himself.

"What the deuce does this mean?" he asked, with knitted brows. "Who have you there, and what do you want?"

"Let us in quickly," said Meredith, "and I will explain."

Still blinking, but wide awake and half inclined to be suspicious, Donovan admitted the party to the passage, where, leaving Ransome in charge of the prisoner, Meredith drew Donovan aside and rapidly explained matters. Donovan woke Burns without disturbing the other sleepers, and presently, having Wilkes still blindfolded in their midst, the four men were in the inner room, whereupon Donovan opened the secret trap door and called to Cooper, who came fom the cellar below to join their councils, bringing a sixth man with

him. They had been awakened by the noise of movement above, and were on the alert for something unusual, but great indeed was their astonishment upon seeing Wilkes in their private den.

Without waste of words, the dreaded official was disposed of for the moment, being led downstairs and locked into a subdivision of the cellar, whence escape was impossible, and where he could roar himself hoarse without the slightest chance of being heard.

Then Mark told the others what he had done and why, all of them approving his conduct. In the newcomer who inhabited the vault with Cooper, Mark was pleased and astonished to recognise his acquaintance Conroy, whom he had known at the Dandenong Dairy Farm. He was full of praise for Mark's promptness and daring, and Mark learned that he was the friend of whom Donovan had sought news at the cathedral, where he succeeded in communicating with his mother. As a consequence, Conroy had met Donovan at dusk, and being led to No. 79, he was safe at present from the punishment which surely awaited him for insubordination on the Saturday afternoon, to the brutal manager of the dairy farm at which he worked. The crisis had come when Conroy saw Macgregor kick the woman with whom he lived, and knocked him down. Conroy was an irreconcileable,, who had ever done what he could to create disaffection among his fellow workmen, and he was delighted at Mark's bold stroke against Wilkes.

"That is all very well," said Cooper. "I am as glad as anyone to see one of the tyrants defeated, and our young friend was quite right to bring him here. But what on earth are we to do with him now we have got him?"

"Cut his throat," said Burns, savagely.

"Too soon," replied Donovan. "It would give me the greatest pleasure in life, but what good to us at present?"

"I was not serious," said Burns. "We are not strong enough for terrorism yet. We should frighten the wrong people. There is only one thing to do. Keep him shut up until this steamer has sailed, then lead him out tied and gagged and blindfolded at midnight,

and let him go somewhere. He will never know where he has been."

"And what about Meredith?" asked someone. "He will be imprisoned for the rest of his life; for Wilkes at least knows who brought him here."

"Meredith must cast in his lot with us," answered Burns. "There is no place for him but the cellar until we are strong enough to make some move."

So it seemed to the others, and for a moment Mark hesitated. Then he thought of Mary. How could he hide himself and leave her to the vengeance of Wilkes?

"Wait," he said. "That arrangement would suit me. I am quite willing to hide here until we can strike some blow, but there is a lady who has helped in all this business of getting my sister away, and Wilkes knows it. She would be sacrificed, though I should be safe."

"Women should not interfere in these things," growled Cooper.

"Don't say that, Cooper. We want the women, too; but this is awkward. The only thing is, Meredith, to bring her here and hide her if she will come. Can you do so?"

"I might," answered Meredith. But all the same, I don't think it is the only thing to do. There is another."

"What?" asked several voices in chorus.

"To keep Wilkes here a prisoner, and let the lady and me go free. Don't imagine," Mark went on, flushing as he saw a slightly sarcastic smile on Burns's lip, "please don's imagine for a moment that I am afraid of the discomfort or the risk for her and me. It is my one aim in life to fight the Government how I can. But what is the best way? To let Wilkes go—perhaps to ferret out our hiding place; or to keep him shut up here—perhaps to get something out of him; who knows? At any rate, we should frighten the official crowd, and muzzle one of our bitterest enemies. I could go back to the world, to do my little best in spreading the light, in finding and encouraging friends, until it gets too warm for me. Then you can hide me here. By that time we may be ready to strike some open blow at the tyrants. It may be, with daring and caution enough, we can kidnap one or two more of

them, and disorganise the machine. For every reason, I say it would be a piece of folly to let Wilkes out of that cellar without thought, now that we have got him safely in our clutches. What do you all say to it?"

Mark had begun diffidently, but warmed up as he went on, assuming unconsciously a voice of authority, and the others were impressed by it, feeling that here perhaps was the leader who would eventually give form and direction to their efforts.

"I believe it's a good idea," said Donovan, presently.

"And I"—"And I," agreed the others. Cooper added grimly, "If Mr. Wilkes shares my crib, he must be mighty civil, or I'll bump his ugly head on the stones for him."

"I don't think he will have too good a time," said Donovan: "but we shall keep him for a while and see what happens. That is a brilliant idea of yours, Meredith. We will act on it. And what are you going to do now?"

"I shall get home as quick as I can, and Mr. Ransome will go to his hotel. After my sister is clear away I shall come to see you all again."

With wishes for good luck Mark and Ransome left the house, well pleased with the termination of their night's adventure.

"You are going to lead those fellows soon, Mark," said Ransome. "You've shown yourself the right stuff for it."

Mark flushed with pleasure. "I wonder if I am," he said. "I feel as if I knew what ought to be done, and might accomplish something if I have any luck."

"At any rate, you've accomplished something to-night, old man, for which Hilda and I will be eternally grateful. But you are going to do bigger things than that. I think your country has a stormy time coming."

"I think so. Those men mean business, and I feel we shall soon be strong enough to make a move, though I don't know yet exactly what it will be."

"Well, go steady for a time. What have you got down in the cellar where old Wilkes is stowed?"

"A small printing press and some rifles and ammunition. I wish there were more of them. There is room enough there for a regular arsenal, and they are

gradually digging it out bigger. That cellar is going to change Australian history."

"It seems to me quite likely," answered Ransome, "if you can go on undiscovered for a while until you find more recruits. At present you all have halters round your necks, and there is constant danger that you will be betrayed."

"I wouldn't give much for the neck of the man who betrayed us."

"Possibly not. Well, you are all playing a big game, and if it were not for Hilda I should like to stay and take a hand."

"Poor little Hilda," said Mark, tenderly. "I feel happier about her now, for unless you have rotten luck you and she should get clear away. I wish you could stay and help us; but, after all, it's not your country, and you can have a much better life elsewhere."

"If it were not for Hilda I should stay. However, as things are, it is out of the question. But I may be able to help you a little from the other side of the water. At least, I have money I can spare. Shall I see you again before I sail?"

"Yes; I shall be at the train. We take this street to pass your lodgings, where I can drop you and walk on."

It was a long tramp, but the time passed quickly in discussion of hopes and plans, until Ransome arrived at the boarding house, and after that Mark's thoughts occupied him on his lonely walk to St. Kilda. The dawn was breaking when he reached his door, and tip-toeing past Hilda's room, he flung his weary limbs into bed, being unwilling to disturb his sister until he could tell her the good news in the morning.

CHAPTER XVI.

KIDNAPPING OFFICIALS.

The disapearance of Wilkes created a sensation in Melbourne, and many were the theories evoked to account for it, but greatly to Meredith's relief no suspicion fell upon him, while Hilda's departure passed almost unnoticed in the wonder caused by that of the great official.

There were many, indeed, who connected the two, and believed that Wilkes had sailed for Europe, taking his bride-elect with him. Why he should leave thus secretly was not easy to understand, for he could have obtained leave of absence at any time without difficulty, but it was cynically whispered among his brother officials that an examination of the public accounts might later on clear up the mystery, the most popular belief being that Wilkes had embezzled large sums from his office, and departed to Europe without beat of drum, intending never to return. Enquiries made at the ports of Adelaide and Perth failed, indeed, to show either Wilkes or Hilda among the mail ship's passengers, but everyone credited Wilkes with cunning and ability enough to remain unknown or unmentioned if he wished to do so.

Thus Mark went back to the old life with the great dread of evil to his sister lifted from his mind, but all interest in his studies had gone, and he was entirely possessed with feverish desire to speed the revolt against Socialistic despotism, for which events were ripening.

He had become a frequent visitor to the house of his disaffected friends at West Melbourne, but thought it better not to leave his old lodgings, partly because his removal to such an out-of-the-way quarter might attract attention, and partly because he did not wish so far to separate himself from Mary, with whom he frequently dined at one of the local eating houses, while he also sometimes walked with her or met her at the rooms of mutual acquaintances, though he could no longer invite her to visit his own.

At No. 79 he frequently interviewed Wilkes, who at first blustered and threatened dire vengeance when he should regain his liberty, but, on being assured that this was useless, and that he would probably spend his life in imprisonment, he changed his tone by promising dazzling rewards to Mark if he should betray his fellow conspirators and set him free. Such suggestions Mark rejected with contempt, repeating them to Cooper in Wilkes's hearing that he might entertain no illusory hope of their secret acceptance, and then Wilkes tried a third course. More than any other man in the Commonwealth, perhaps, he had his finger on the pulse of the

people, and was aware of the deep unrest among them, which threatened revolt against the established order.

The existence of this dungeon in which he was mewed up, the coming and going of men whose whispered converse he occasionally heard, the life of Cooper and Conroy, thus hidden from the world and supported by others, and, above all, the clatter of the printing press which sometimes reached his ears, must surely, he concluded, have some deep significance. All this machinery had not been called into existence merely to prevent his marrying Meredith's sister, or to punish him therefor, and if it were designed as a focus of revolt against the Government he might make use of it to forward his own ambition. Keeping this end in view he approached Meredith with a startling plan.

"Meredith," he said, "I am sick of this prison, and I see you don't mean to let me go unless it pays you to do so. Now, I want to make it worth your while."

"You can't do that," answered Meredith, shortly. "If you offer me any more bribes I should not be surprised at the others knocking you on the head, for fear I should be tempted to accept them."

"No, no, I don't want to bribe you. I want to make an offer to your friends. I believe you are all conspirators against the Government. Now, I don't love the Government any too well, myself, and if I were free I wouldn't mind helping you to overturn it."

"We couldn't trust you," said Mark, shortly.

"Of course you say that. I don't blame you. But why shouldn't you trust me if I got something for myself out of it?"

"What could you get?"

"Money and power. You know I have influence. I could use it in the direction you want. I am sick of our Socialistic cant. Give me something good enough out of your revolution, and for that—and freedom—I am willing to help it along."

Mark pondered a moment before replying "I can answer nothing to this alone," he said at length. "Will you repeat it and amplify what you mean to the others?"

"With pleasure," answered Wilkes. "Bring them along."

Mark thought it over and spoke to Donovan, with the result that Wilkes was brought up from the cellar to the room above for a conference with half a dozen of the revolutionists. He was blindfolded as before, because as yet Mark's was the only face he knew amongst those frequenting the house, and in view of possible eventualities it was unwise to let him enlarge his acquaintance.

Mark acted as interlocutor, and asked Wilkes to state the conditions upon which he desired to buy his freedom.

"Well," he said, "I can't see you, gentlemen, but I gather that there are numbers of you, besides Mr. Meredith, more or less actively working to upset the Government and the Socialistic system. I have heard some of your talk. I have caught a glimpse of arms down below there; I have heard a printing press clattering; I picked up a leaflet in my prison attacking the Socialist idea, telling the people they are slaves and that sort of thing. The fact that you have this house and its underground apartment, and that you have taken the trouble to kidnap me, all makes me think you are not here for your health, but mean business of some sort. Am I right?"

"If you are, what then," asked Meredith.

"Only this—I am with you. Naturally, you don't trust me."

To this there was an inarticulate chorus of assent.

Wilkes smiled grimly. "Of course not; but I will be frank. I have my own ends to serve. I have wealth and influence, and I want power—power over men, not slaves. I will help you to overturn the Government of the country and bring back individualism if you will give me my freedom, and power in the new Government when we succeed."

"The new Government will be chosen by the men who upset the old," said Meredith.

"Exactly," answered Wilkes; "and if you give me the chance I will be one of them."

The others talked apart for a little, and then Meredith addressed the prisoner again. "Look here, Mr. Wilkes, you may be making us a fair offer, but we have no reason to trust you, and cannot possibly set you

free now—most likely to seek our destruction; but you may be able to give us proof of your bona fides."

"How."

"In the first place, you can put some money into our hands or orders for goods we want, say up to five thousand pounds. An order on an English firm for rifles and ammunition to that amount would suit us."

"How can that be managed until I am free?" asked Wilkes testily.

"Before you are free you can at least put us in the way of getting gold which you have concealed somewhere. We want £5000."

"Well, suppose I could do that, what next?"

"Then you could write to one or two official friends of yours, asking them to meet you at such hours and places as we may dictate to you."

"And what would be the good of that?"

"The good will be that we shall meet those friends and kidnap them, without violence, if possible, with it if necessary. It will disturb the Government and it will compromise you. When we have got them safe we shall spread it abroad that you are the centre of a revolutionary band that has done this."

"All very pretty," sneered Wilkes, "but if I do not consent?"

"If you do not consent you shall stay here as long as it suits us to keep you."

"Alive," put in Burns.

"Yes, alive. We don't want to do you any harm, but if it were a choice between knocking you on the head and letting you go to injure us, we should knock you on the head."

"Well," answered Wilkes, "you put the matter very plainly, and I will think it over. I don't suppose you want an answer this minute?"

Meredith looked at the others. "No," said Donovan. "Let him have time. We want time ourselves to get our plans clear."

When Wilkes had been taken back to his cell the others discussed the matter pro and con, deciding to make a beginning by extracting money from Wilkes. If he showed his heart was in the business, by devising means to put some of his reputed wealth in their hands, they might go further. They had friends through whom the money could be converted into foreign arms and ammunition—none were made within the Commonwealth—and these things they greatly needed.

Mark found that his voice carried more and more weight with the others, that he had in fact become the leader of the band, and his spirit thrilled within him. Much as he disliked and mistrusted Wilkes, all his personal feeling was swallowed up in devotion to the cause, and he thought it possible that by cautious handling and skilful playing upon the strings of his ambition, they could convert their most powerful enemy into an exceedingly useful ally.

In the meantime, Mark and his friends indefatigably carried on their work on such lines as were yet possible to them, growing a little bolder, as discontent increased, in broaching revolutionary ideas to men who were likely to welcome them. In many parts of the Commonwealth, but especially in Victoria, they had members of the inner brotherhood who were communicated with and urged to step out a little further. In Melbourne and Sydney factories, inland mines, and on bush clearing camps, revolt in the near future was urged at secret meetings, sometimes not sufficiently secret, for several arrests were made on charges of sedition, while other agitators escaped to Melbourne, where they were met by members of the committee and conveyed by night to the hiding place of No. 79, which, within a month of Hilda's departure, sheltered a dozen refugees.

Great as was the tyranny and absolutism of the Government in dealing with its citizens, only a wretched police system supported it, for the people had been so completely cowed and distrustful of one another that the knowledge of official espionage had been quite sufficient for the restraint of individuals, whereas now there was a spirit of sullenness abroad, and men devoid of any desire to assist in agitation or revolt were nevertheless inclined to shut their eyes and ears and mouths to what took place around them. Consequently, much free speaking went unpunished, and offenders with energy and skill had little difficulty in hiding themselves until they could either reach Melbourne or gain

the mountainous country of Gippsland, where there was a growing band of malcontents in refuge.

The Government was excited and alarmed, well aware that trouble was brewing, and hesitating between the opposite courses of extreme severity in suppressing the slightest murmurs of discontent, and of a convenient blindness and deafness to anything but the most glaring sedition in word or deed.

Wilkes was sorely missed from his post at the head of the great newspaper, where he had a great share in framing the bureaucratic policy to which the press gave utterance. The new editor urged prompt measures against all those who had actually flouted the Government, and suppression of all gatherings in streets or public places of more than half a dozen individuals; but the measures taken were half hearted. Bodies of mounted police, despatched into the mountains, with orders to arrest the outlaws who were known to be there in considerable numbers, failed, either from accident or design, to encounter the men they sought, while the suppression of meetings was practically abandoned when it began to fill the prisons; for everywhere men and women met in groups, almost without design, to discuss the times which they instinctvely felt to be pregnant with fate.

The revolutionary committee during these weeks was unwearied in its activity. The press clattered all day and all night in the cellar of No. 79, and by night leaflets and letters denouncing Socialism, urging and hinting at a great change, were thrust into the hands of men in the streets, slipped under doors of dwelling houses, and even despatched through the post. In the post office several of these missives were opened and confiscated, leading to the arrest of two or three of the addressees well disposed to the revolutionary movement. When the committee discovered this they changed their tactics, and posted seditious literature to men whom they had no reason to regard as friends. Many of these unfortunates were thrown into prison without being heard in their defence, and the committee had the satisfaction of knowing that they not only harassed and mystified the Government, but roused up enemies for it in the person of suspects who knew

themselves innocent and yet were punished. The committee could not afford to consider the hardship inflicted on such, for they cared little who suffered or how, so that their cause was advanced. Still compelled to work in the dark, they were husbanding their strength for open action, and all the while managed their affairs with such secrecy and skill that, in spite of the most strenuous efforts, the Government utterly failed to find the centre of the disaffection which caused it so much alarm.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE GOVERNMENT'S DEMAND UPON GRAINGER.

As the days went by, and the Government found itself forced by bad times to shorten the allowance of food and goods to the people, discontent deepened, and at length found tangible expression.

The first outbreak occurred near the entrance to Port Melbourne, on a stifling evening of January, when crowds were seeking a breath of sea air, and towards dusk a huge wheat-laden train halted, on the way to the pier, where an English bound ship awaited its cargo. No one knew exactly whence the impulse came—probably it was a word from one of the revolutionaries—but all at once a murmur of indignation spread through the crowd at the sight of the mammoth heap of food being taken from them to other lands, when many were beginning to feel the pinch of hunger at home.

"Don't let it go," shouted someone. "No, it's ours. Why should we starve?" echoed another. "Let us rush the train and take it," cried a third; and suddenly a blind rage possessed the people. Those in front, pushed on by those behind, who hurried from the beach scarcely knowing why they came, swarmed upon the trucks and upon the engine, throwing the driver and fireman from their place, but not before they had set the train in motion. A man and his child were crushed beneath the slowly moving trucks, their dying screams of pain filling the rest with horror and fury. Someone turned off steam, but not soon enough to save the unfortunates pinned beneath the wheels. The

engine men were savagely attacked by an angry mob, and only saved from death by police and sailors from the ships, who hurried to the scene of tumult, where men and women, clambering over the grain, were insanely heaving down the bags upon the track, or ripping them open with knives and flinging their contents far and wide. Clubbing the rioters right and left, the officials gradually restored order. Some bones were broken, many arrests were made, the grain bags were replaced, the train went its way, and two mutilated innocent corpses were carried into the railway station. Such was the end of the affair, which achieved nothing but disaster—was scarcely intended to achieve anything—but which, nevertheless, troubled the authorities and excited the revolutionaries, because it showed the tigerish spirit which lurked in the mass of the people, and could still, after many years of domination, be roused to fierceness by deprivation of food. After that the police were armed and their numbers were increased, while guards accompanied provision trains to the port when they entered it at hours when the people were abroad.

On the evening following the riot Meredith and Mary were at the University with Professor Grainger. He knew that Wilkes had been kidnapped, and that Mark was working with others to undermine the Socialist system, but he was cognisant of no details, and had expressly asked Mark not to give him his confidence.

The old man seemed oppressed and weary, and smiled rather sadly when the young people tried to rouse him to cheerfulness. "If I were younger, Mark, I might feel about all this as you do. But I have wasted my life—worse than wasted it—prostituted my talents, such as they are, in fastening the yoke upon the people by corrupting the boys sitting under me. But I showed them the only light permitted here—a wrecker's lights fixed upon a lame donkey's head—that's mine—to lure them on to the rocks of error."

"At any rate," said Mark, "you pulled me off them."

The Professor smiled. "They say the old wreckers sometimes saved and cherished a child they had caused to be cast upon the shore. I may have been equally charitable once or twice. But now, in my old age, I

have to make a final effort to prop a tottering social order, to strengthen a harassed Government."

"What do you mean?" asked Mark and Mary in a breath.

The Professor threw a letter on the table. "Read that," he said. "There are my orders."

Mark read the letter aloud. It came from the President of the Commonwealth, in consultation with the half dozen officials who composed his advisory council, and, after briefly reciting the numerous evidences of an unruly, mad and seditious spirit which was abroad, and of which, said the letter, the Professor would be fully seized, it gave him his directions. As the oldest of the faculty, as the Socialist economist of the greatest renown in the State, as a man who was universally looked up to for his great learning, high character and sound judgment, he was regarded by the President as the fittest man to aid the officials in stemming the rising tide of vicious error in the Commonwealth. From next week he would be given leave of absence from his regular duties, and would be required to deliver a series of public lectures in some of the largest public halls, upon the blessings of Socialism and the criminal folly of opposition to Socialist authority. These lectures would be reported at length in all the newspapers, and the President hoped an immensity of good from their wide dissemination.

"You will never do it, sir," exclaimed Mark, when he had read the letter.

"Yes, I will do it; I must obey my orders, and I fancy I can accomplish a lot of good."

Mark was silent and downcast, overwhelmed with disappointment at the Professor's treachery to the cause of reform, and yet too fully sensible of his personal help and kindness to give expression to his feelings.

"Well, what do you think of me now?" asked the Professor.

Mark shook his head without speaking, but Mary who had been studying the old man's face, detected something enigmatic in his expression, and spoke up boldly:

"I think you have some plan you have not told us. You are not going to lecture just to please the Government, but for some other reason. Do tell us what it is." Mark brightened at the suggestion, far fetched though it seemed. Professor Grainger rose and patted Mary on the shoulder. "You women have wonderful intuition. Yes, my dear, I have a plan in my head, and I do not mean to please the Government, further than by dutifully assenting to their proposal."

"What, then?" asked Mark.

"Then, when I have the greatest audience Melbourne can raise to hear me, I shall tell them exactly what I think of Socialism and the bureaucracy—the system and the men that are ruining and robbing them."

"Splendid, sir!" cried Mark. "Forgive me for anything I thought just now."

"I rather enjoyed your thoughts," said Grainger, smiling. "You need not ask forgiveness. To obey the Government would have been all of a piece with what I have done. But I shall redeem much when I have those thousands before me—give a little push, at any rate, to Freedom's car."

"But aren't you running a great danger?" asked Mary. "The Government will never forgive you for flouting them."

"They can't hang me. They will certainly remove me from my post. But I am old. They may imprison me. I shall risk all that."

"It is splendid of you," sighed Mary.

"The danger I see," said Mark, "is that you will not be heard; they will break up the meeting when they see what you are driving at. And it won't be reported in the newspapers."

"No," said the Professor, "that is the pity of it. But I must either speak the truth, or not at all. And refusal to speak will put me out of this post just as surely as what I propose."

Mark's brows were knitted in thought. "When are you to lecture?" he asked.

"About a week hence I am to give the first of the series, which, of course, will be the last."

"Look here, Professor," cried Mark. Don't let it be the last. I can't explain to you yet, but I think I see

a way to get that lecture printed if you can delay it a little. Give one or two non-committal lectures first, and hold off the real one for a fortnight."

"And suppose I can do that?"

"Then, if you have it written out before you deliver it, I believe the whole thing may appear in the 'Commonwealth Gazette,' and shake the blessed country to its foundations."

"If you make that lecture appear in the 'Gazette' you can work miracles," said Grainger, drily. "I shall postpone my effort for a fortnight, and I shall commit the lecture to paper before delivery. Will that meet your views?"

"Yes, quite; I shall see you again in a few days, and tell you any news that I can."

For some time longer Mark and Mary remained talking with their host of affairs at home, and of their friends abroad. Hilda and Ransome had written to Mark and Mary through the Professor, telling of their happiness, and enthusiastically thanking them for their part in securing it. All Australian ports were left safely behind, and the marriage would take place at Colombo. Ransome notified Mark that he was doing what he could to help him with money he could spare. He had cabled to London for the despatch of rifles and ammunition by the steamer Khartoum. The captain would know whom they were for, and they were consigned to the agency of Ransome's Company in the foreign quarter, whence, when affairs developed, Mark might be able to secure them. Ransome begged that he would not hesitate to accept this aid towards the cause of Australian freedom, which both of them had so much at heart, and Mark was filled with grateful elation at the prospect of thus adding to the revolutionary committee's resources, and strengthening his own already commanding position upon it.

That night he did not see Mary to her home, but, leaving her at the railway station, made his way to No. 79, and there told his friends of the Government's demand on the Professor, propounding at the same time his own plan which arose out of it,

Wilkes was still a prisoner under a conditional promise of freedom when he should have performed all that the committee regarded as essential to proving his good faith, or rather to hopelessly compromising himself with the administration, for in his word they had no faith at all. Already he had been induced to put the committee in the way of securing the money they demanded. Now Mark proposed to subject him to a further test in the writing of letters to the new editor of the "Gazette" and to the head of the police, asking them separately to come for news of him on successive evenings, at hours and localities to be named. Mark's idea was to so frame the letters as to give a plausible reason for these men coming to the rendezvous alone.

With that end in view he roughly drafted something to the following effect:—

"Strictly Private and Confidential.

"Sir,—My disappearance has no doubt caused considerable wonder, and perhaps some little inconvenience, in the State. Where I am supposed to be, whether dead or alive, I cannot guess, but the fact is I am a prisoner in the hands of a revolutionary band, in some locality to which I was brought drugged at night and cannot name. I have made friends with one of the revolutionaries (who reads this and posts it to you). He refuses to divulge to me where I am, but if you will meet him alone on————at————o'clock, at————, he will let you know my position and give information to the President on your introduction and promise of a free pardon, and a reward, as to how this nest of sedition may be raided and I rescued.

"You are known by sight to my ally in the rebel camp. If you come to the rendezvous accompanied by anyone he will not approach you, and this attempt of mine to gain freedom will fail. If, however, you comply with the conditions, which are that you shall meet my man unattended and mention this letter to no one, the chances are that I shall be among you again in a few days. For my own sake I devoutly hope so, and if I get back to my office, be sure you shall not go unrewarded while I have any power in the State. Whether you keep the appointment or not, let me earnestly beg of you not to allow news of this letter to get abroad, as if it came to the ears of my gaolers they would cut my throat without ceremony; and I have reason to know that their informers and spies are everywhere.

"Your obedient servant,

"PETER WILKES."

The others agreed that if Mr. Wilkes would write letters somewhat to this effect they would serve the double purpose of deceiving their recipients and compromising him.

"Yes, I don't think it's a bad draft," said Mark. "It may want touching up here and there to make it more plausible, and then I think we shall be able to get the editor and the head of the police to some convenient place where we can make prisoners of them."

"Or put them out," suggested Burns.

"Yes, if they resist and force us to it. But let us take them alive if we can."

"And the rest of your plan?" asked Conroy. "What is the connection between this and Professor Grainger's lecture?"

"Only this; that if Wilkes writes such letters, and we catch these men, I think we shall be safe in letting him out, on his promise to publish the lecture in the 'Gazette.'"

"There is a lot of risk in it," said Cooper.

"There is, but we must take risks. And I look at it in this way: Wilkes sees as much chance of getting even more rich and powerful when things are turned upside down than when they go in the old ruts. He can scarcely make his peace with the authorities after what he has done—if he does it—and he knows he has to fear us. He does not, and will not, know where he has been imprisoned, and the prospect of a bullet or a knife if he attempts to betray us ought to keep his straight, for a time at least. Soon our movement will have to depend not on secrecy but force. I think it is worth risking."

Mark carried his point as he usually did when his proposals were in question, and after some demur Wilkes agreed to write the letters.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE FATE OF THE POLICE COMMISSIONER.

The trap laid for the new editor of the "Gazette" completely succeeded. He kept the appointment and came unattended to a small park situated about two miles from the West Melbourne lodging-house, where he was engaged in conversation by Cooper, who announced himself as the messenger sent by Wilkes. Cooper expressed a wish to be taken direct to the head of the police, to whom he promised information as to Wilkes's whereabouts and the best means of rescuing him, when he had received an authoritative promise of pardon for his share in the conspiracy. The official said he thought that could be arranged, and, talking with Cooper, unsuspectingly walked past a clump of trees overshadowing the path. Arrived there, Cooper clapped his hands over the victim's mouth. Three other men, springing out from their ambush, assisted in blindfolding and gagging him, and, subdued by threats of immediate death if he struggled or otherwise attracted attention, he was safely conveyed under cover of the darkness to the cellar of No. 79.

On the following night Cooper, Mark, Burns and Conroy, and two others gathered singly at the same rendezvous for the appointment with Gregson, head of the Victorian police, to whom Wilkes's second letter had been despatched.

They were by no means sure that he would come, for the editor's disappearance would by this time be noted, and there was a chance that he might have mentioned his letter from Wilkes, in spite of the warning conveyed in it as to strict secrecy. As a matter of fact he had written upon the matter, but too late for Gregson to take action, as the editor's letter, marked "strictly private and confidential," and asking for urgent reasons that police should be at his disposal in the Egalite Park that night, had not come into Gregson's hands hands until past eleven o'clock p.m.

Wilkes's letter to him, in conjunction with the editor's disappearance, gave Gregson a half clue to the mystery; but he was a man of pluck, and he determined to go himself to the park, hoping to turn the tables

on those who were forging Wilkes's name. He knew that it would be useless to show himself with an escort, for in that case the messenger, referred to in the letter, would certainly be too cunning to approach, and the chance of an enlightening capture would be gone. Accordingly Gregson inspected the park during the day, armed himself, and gave instructions to four of his men, also armed, to secrete themselves early in the evening at stations which he described, and to take careful note of anyone who might enter the park, but not to interfere with them, or to make any movement until he should call.

About ten o'clock the police reached the place, where Meredith and his friends were already in hiding. The police were not in uniform; they came singly, but, as they proceded to ensconce themselves behind trees, two on either side the main path, Meredith and the others suspected that Gregson was on his guard, and held a hurried consultation. Should they abandon their enterprise or trust to their superior numbers and risk it? After a whispered colloquy they decided to see the matter through. Cooper, as the man whose face would be least likely of recognition, was again deputed to meet the visitor on his arrival, and if possible to lead him away from that portion of the park where the police were stationed, towards a thicket in which the others decided to place themselves. The police would probably have orders to remain where they were. If they moved the conspirators determined to be guided by circumstances, not shirking a fight if it were forced upon them; for the centre of the park was some distance from the nearest dwellings, and their inmates were much more likely to lie close than to interfere if they should hear the noise of a scuffle.

Half-past eleven was the hour named for the meeting. At the quarter hour Cooper separated from his comrades, creeping stealthily across the grass until he gained the main path some twenty yards from his party. There he walked up and down, purposely assuming the manner of a man waiting to meet somebody; this for the benefit of the police, who were perhaps fifty yards from his friends, and whom he wished

to lead into the belief that he was alone. He was careful to keep Meredith and the rest between himself and the gate nearest Melbourne, by which he surmised that Gregson would enter the park.

As the half hour struck on a distant clock a quick step sounded on the gravel, and the watchers in either camp roused themselves for action. Cooper appeared unconscious of impending trouble. He unconcernedly walked past the spot where his friends lay hidden, until he almost reached the ambushed police, when he turned again suddenly, as if just aware of the approach of Gregson, who was rapidly overtaking him. Then, walking forward, Cooper, contrived to meet the new comer a little on the Melbourne side of the party from Number 79.

Face to face with the police commissioner, he touched his cap—"You are Mr. Gregson, sir?" he asked.

"Yes," said Gregson, "And who are you?"

"I am Mr. Wilkes's friend—that is, begging your pardon, the man he sent to meet you."

"Ah, that's right. Stroll through the park and tell me what you want."

Gregson moved down the path, and Cooper accompanied him until the two were within touch of the tree which hid the revolutionaries.

There Cooper stopped, saying, "I suppose my pardon is all right, sir."

"Yes, yes—if you give the information you promise. Come on and tell me all about it."

Cooper stopped still. "But this is the wrong way to the police office," he objected.

"It is the way I mean you to go," answered Gregson. Then, whistling for his men, he seized on Cooper to prevent his escape, and a hand to hand struggle began.

Meredith, Conroy and the other inmates of their house tumbled out on to the road and faced the disconcerted constables who were running to their chief's assistance, while Burns hurried to Cooper's side to secure the capture of his opponent. Gregson, being a powerful man, was getting much the better of the encounter. He had succeeded in throwing Cooper heavily upon the gravel, and held him there with a

knee pressed upon his chest, calling loudly to the constables, when Burns came to join in the fray. Thereupon Gregson, springing to his feet, released Cooper, and, drawing a revolver from his pocket, fired point blank at his new assailant, holding the muzzle a few inches from his head. Burns fell in silence, with a ghastly wound in his forehead. Cooper would presently have shared the same fate, but the few seconds which the police officer had devoted to dealing with Burns changed the whole aspect of affairs. With a cry of rage Cooper snatched the pistol from Gregson's hand and fired three shots in succession into his chest. Gregson fell dead across the body of the enemy he had killed, and Cooper discharged the last two chambers of the revolver at the police, who were seeking cover behind trees further down the pathway. His friends were now firing too, the police Commissioner's shot having given the cue for shooting on both sides, and for a minute the crackling of revolvers disturbed the silent night; bullets whistled through the air and little flame flashes among the trees momentarily lit the gloom of the park.

Cooper joined Meredith. "They are both dead," he said, "Burns and the officer. What shall we do? Chase the police and wipe them out?"

"Poor Burns," sighed Mark. "No; I think we'd better let them go and get out of this—most likely they will give us no more trouble," "Conroy," he called, "shall we go?"

Conroy answered from behind a neighbouring tree—"Yes; one of them was winged, and I think they are making off; nothing to be gained by staying."

"All right; tell the others to fire one volley in the direction the last shots came from; then altogether to the park gates, so that none of us can be cut off, then separate and make for home."

Conroy called to his neighbours, half-a-dozen revolvers barked without receiving any answer, and immediately afterwards the revolutionaries gathered in a group together.

Great was their rage on learning that Burns was undoubtedly dead; but at any rate they had life for life.

"We have suffered a heavy loss," said Mark, "but big things will date from to-night. However, we must get away. Just keep me covered while I search Gregson for letters. Perhaps we may find something useful on him."

He hurried from the shadow of the pine by which they stood in the pathway, and, kneeling beside Gregson's body, thrust his hands into the man's pocket, shuddering a little when he felt the warm blood trickling upon his fingers; but his search was rewarded by finding a large pocket book, wet and sticky, in a breast pocket near the place where one of Cooper's bullets had torn its way.

There was no time to examine its contents, so, stowing it away and trying vainly to cleanse his hands with a handkerchief, Mark hurried back to his friends. In a minute they gained the gate, and there separating, struck out by devious routes for the house in West Melbourne.

There were lights in some of the dwellings near the park. Once or twice Mark fancied that he saw faces peering out from open windows and doors, and certainly there was good reason to believe that sleepers must have been roused by the fusillade; but no one addressed him, and the night was too dark for a man to recognise his nearest friend. Rounding a corner once, he saw three men together, some fifty yards distant in a cross street. They started towards him. Mark believed they must belong to the police party, and getting his revolver ready he quickened his pace, but he was not pursued and soon gained his shelter of No. 79, where Conroy was before him, and after a time the others made their appearance one by one.

There he examined the pocket book taken from Gregson's body. Most of the documents it contained meant nothing to him, but he congratulated himself on his forethought, and called his friends to welcome the discovery, when among other things he found Wilkes's letter which had lured the unfortunate man to his death.

"That fixes Wilkes, I think," he said grimly. "He is up to his neck in it now."

"Do you reckon that now it will be safe to let him out?" asked Donovan.

"Yes, I do. There is risk of course, but if he sets himself to undermine the Government he can do an immense deal, and he is of very little use to us here."

"I cannot believe he will go straight," put in Conroy.

"In the sense of trying to alter things for the sake of justice and freedom, it is certain he won't go straight; but he is ambitious, and if his ambition makes him work against the Socialist regime it will suit our purpose. He may hope to make himself dictator. We can see about that later on. If he puts Professor Grainger's speech into the Commonwealth 'Gazette,' that alone will justify all the risk we take."

"Make that a condition of releasing him," said Conroy.

"Certainly. With a threat of what will happen if he does not keep his promise."

Mark's desire for prompt action finally commended itself to the others, and it was agreed to set Wilkes free on the following night, leading him blindfolded to some point far distant from his prison to the whereabouts of which he had no clue. The men talked a little longer of the night's work, grieved and pensive when they thought of the fate of their comrade Burns, and wondered if some day it might be theirs; exultant when they pictured the consternation of the Government on the discovery of Gregson's body, and the mingled fear and hope which would pervade the community when the police told their story of the night. All would see that the secret revolutionary society could do more than issue pamphlets, and was indeed a force to be reckoned with.

Mark visited Wilkes in his prison, and roused him from his bed. "Well," asked the latter sleepily, "have you brought Mr. Gregson home with you?"

"No," said Mark. "We've sent him to his long home."

"Don't talk riddles. What do you mean?"

Mark drew out the letter with its crimson stain. "Look at that," he said. "There is your letter. And

that is Gregson's blood on it. It brought him to his death."

"Do you mean to say you murdered him?"

"He shot one of our party, and he paid for it."

A pretty high price, apparently," yawned Wilkes. "Well, well, it can't be helped—and Gregson was an objectionable fellow."

He had, as a matter of fact, been one of the most able and conscientious officials, and had more than once put obstacles in the way of Wilkes's personal ambition.

"In that case," answered Mark, "you are no doubt glad that you have killed him. At any rate you have earned your liberty. On certain conditions we mean to let you go back to your office to-morrow night."

CHAPTER XIX.

MARY JACKSON'S PROMOTION.

Outside the jam factory Mark waited impatiently for Mary. It was unlike her to linger an unnecessary moment, and yet fully ten minutes ago the bell had rung and the other hands were gone their different ways. At last she came.

"Oh, Mark," she cried, hurrying to meet him, "I am so sorry I kept you waiting, but what do you think? I've done with jam for ever."

"What! Are you going to leave the factory?"

She looked with a sigh of content at the grimy walls within which she had slaved since childhood. "Yes; I have left it for good and all. I shall never see the stick, mushy inside of that old hole again."

"Leaving the factory?" repeated Mark. "What are they doing with you?"

"Wilkes has sent an order for me to go into the 'Gazette' office to-morrow, and become his private secretary. Why, what's the matter? You don't look as if you were pleased at my promotion."

Mark was anything but pleased. He felt overwhelmed with jealousy and foreboding. Why had Wilkes chosen Mary for his secretary? She knew nothing of clerical work. It could only be with some evil intent.

"It is not promotion. It is degradation," he said hotly. "What does he mean by it—except mischief to you and me? I won't let him do it."

Mary slipped her arm through his and spoke soothingly. "Don't be foolish, dear. No mischief will happen to me, and you can't prevent Wilkes doing as he chooses."

Mark realised that this was true. Protests to Wilkes would be futile, unless he backed them by threats, and he felt that it would be unjustifiable to ask his revolutionary friends, who alone could make threats effective, to fight his private battles. Nevertheless his whole being revolted at the prospect of Mary being brought into intimate daily association with this man; and cursing himself for setting him free he walked on in gloomy silence.

Mary roused him from it, but not to cheerfulness.

"After all, I think it is rather a good thing," she said. "Perhaps he will make love to me, and then I shall worm all his secrets out of him."

"If he makes love to you, I'll kill him," he said fiercely. "If you listen to him—if you flirt with him—I'll—I'll——. Oh, for Heaven's sake don't talk like that, Mary. You'll drive me mad. I'd sooner the whole of our plans went smash than you get mixed up with that blackguard. You don't know the man."

Mary comforted him and said she was joking; but she knew the man better than Mark thought. She was certain that Wilkes would make love to her, and, assuring Mark that she would be as cold as marble and not dream of coquetry, she formed her own plans. It was useless to argue with Mark. His ideas were different from hers, for he had been brought up in a different atmosphere. His father was an official, one of the privileged, never forced to cringe, to manoeuvre or to lie in order to make life tolerable. Certainly his independence of spirit had led to ultimate quarrel with his class, but Mark was imbued with his ideas, and had enjoyed his privileges. As for Mary, she was a daughter of the people, obliged from childhood to fight her own way in the world with the weapons native to her, chief among which were wit and cunning, sharpened by daily use. Courage she had in plenty, but,

for any other than the courage of endurance, there was little use in every-day Socialist life, and she had never thought of regarding a serviceable lie as a crime. So, loving Mark dearly, and perfectly ready to sacrifice life for his sake, she felt no scruple in deceiving him, in telling him that she would not think of coquetting with Wilkes, when in fact she had the fixed intention of doing so if it appeared to Mark's advantage and hers.

With feminine tact and tenderness she soothed his anger, and after they had dined togther he was almost in a cheerful frame of mind. Then he left her, taking his way to the University, where he was to get from Professor Grainger the draft of the great speech which would be delivered in a day or two, and which Wilkes had undertaken to publish. It was indeed unlikely that the speech would be heard beyond its few opening sentences, for the officials and the mob who supported them had been roused to vicious anger by late events, and Mark could scarcely doubt that Grainger would be promptly howled down when the drift of his remarks was understood. The newspapers, led by Wilkes in the "Gazette," had already been sneering at his non-committal speeches and calling for more outspoken support of Socialism and the Government.

All this was with the full approval of the conspirators' committee. The death of Gregson had caused immense excitement throughout the country, and, much to the satisfaction of the revolutionaries, had driven the Government into hysterical measures which increased prevailing discontent. Unlicensed gatherings of more than six people for any purpose whatsoever were forbidden everywhere, within doors or without; and the mere proof that a person had formed one of such a gathering sent him to prison, yet meetings increased in number though gaols rapidly filled. Wilkes was playing the game of the revolutionaries in doing everything possible to exasperate the people, and he constantly egged the Government on to more drastic severity. This was all his new allies demanded of him for the time being.

When Grainger's lecture was sent to him for publication would come the real test of his adherence to

their cause, for he could then no longer run with the hare and hunt with the hounds, but would be obliged to make his final choice. Publication of the lecture meant his dismissal and arrest; failure to publish it meant his becoming a marked man to daring and implacable foes.

Concerning his disappearance and return to the light of day Wilkes had told the truth, withholding nothing that he knew except the primary cause of his seizure and Mark's participation in it. He did not, as a matter of fact, know the place of his confinement, or the names and faces of the conspirators other than Mark; for they had been always hidden from him, while his release took place at night, and his eyes were blindfolded until he had been taken far from No. 79 by devious ways.

His choice of Mary as a secretary, vice Hilda, departed, was occasioned by several motives. He knew it would be obnoxious to Mark, whose relation to Mary he shrewdly guessed. Again, Mary had tricked him concerning Hilda, and he was determined to have his revenge. His vanity where women were concerned was immense, and he felt certain she would fall a victim to his charms; secretly believed indeed that he had made an impression already. She was a coquettish little devil, and he would make her pay for it.

In addition to these personal motives were other considerations. He knew that Mary was more or less in the confidence of the conspirators, and it best suited his plans to entrust private dealings with them to a secretary who would not betray him to the Government. If he should find treachery towards his new allies the better game, it would not be hard to get rid of Mary, unless indeed she were devoted to his interests, as he hoped that she would be. The President had raised no objections to his choice of a secretary, and thus Mary was to enter upon her new appointment at a few hours' notice.

Professor Grainger was writing in feverish haste with a heap of manuscript around him, the ink scarcely dry on most of it, and he only looked up for a moment from his work when Mark entered the library.

"Sit down, boy," he said. "Look at a book, and don't interrupt me till I finish."

Mark nodded in silence, but his interest was less on the book, taken at random from the shelves, than on the old man, scribbling fiercely at the long table with the lamp's shaded light falling upon his face. It was a handsome face with good features, thoughtful grey eyes, and a fine forehead surmounted by thick silver hair, but never before had Mark seen in it such power. The lips were firm set, the eyes sparkled with the light of battle; the professor's whole countenance seemed ennobled, and glowed with enthusiasm in his task, so that Mark felt it almost uncanny, and said to himself that his imagination was merely playing tricks in the lamp light which illumined the face he gazed at. But he realised that the spirit within the man was stirred to unusual depths and that it transfigured him.

At last Grainger threw down his pen, and greeted the young man. "Pardon me, Mark. I have finished now. In those sheets I have tried to wipe out a life time's lies and cowardice. I could not cease writing while the unaccustomed fit of courage and truthfulness was upon me. Something within me held the pen and wrote. It was not I at all."

He gathered the sheets together and smiled, looking weary as the tension relaxed. "Well, my boy," he said, "How go your affairs? I can talk to you now."

"I have come for the lecture. We can get it published the morning after you deliver it."

"Take, it Mark. There it lies." He pointed to the manuscript on the table. "If that appears in the Commonwealth 'Gazette' wonders will never cease, and I shall feel that I have not lived in vain."

"I think it will be printed," said Mark. "But may I take this? Is it not your only copy?"

"My only copy, but I shall not need it. All I want to say is here," tapping his forehead, "volumes more than I shall be allowed to say. Get it into cold print if you can, and waste no time about it."

Mark gathered up the manuscript.

"I will do my best. You are quite sure you will not want a copy?"

"Absolutely certain. I shall forget nothing, and in any case, how far do you think I shall get in a speech like this? I am addressing three thousand people—most of them hangers on of the bureaucracy, or whipped up by the officials in the great Socialist Hall:

'Friends and fellow citizens,—To me has fallen the great honour of an invitation from our President, of addressing you upon the burning question of the day, the troubles that beset our State and the means of overcoming them by obedience to great economic laws, and hearty support of a righteous Government (Great cheering there Mark). Twice already I have lectured, and I see in the press, I hear elsewhere, complaints that I have been non-committal, vague, and timid (cries of "So you have!"). I see you support this indictment; I may be guilty. If so, fellow citizens, to-night I shall redeem my error. To-night I shall speak out what is in my heart, and if you hear me to the end, you will know what a life time's study has taught me concerning the ills of the body politic."

"Here there will be enthusiastic cheering. Then I begin to tell them the truth. But why weary you with it? Most of what I can tell you know, and it is all written there. for you at least to read."

"Let me hear a little more from your lips, sir," said Mark, "I want to know how it sounds."

"Very well, if you will have it. Let me see, I was just about to enter on truth, was I not? Somewhat like this:—

'We are suffering here from poverty and unrest. You all know that, you all feel it; despair and discontent with many of you has entered into the very marrow of your bones; and in some quarters it is whispered that there is no hope for Australia until she imitates the individualistic Social system prevailing in the old world. I am here to-night to tell you that that is false—that no hope lies there; that in England, in Germany and America millions are suffering from want, tens of thousands are dying of starvation, because the so-called individualists who rule those countries have allowed private persons to appropriate the sources of wealth which belong of right, not to the individual, but to the whole community. Men, women and little children are robbed of

their birthright in the soil; and so their only choice is to become wage slaves or to starve. Nay, the choice is not always offered to them. To many the boon of working for their masters is denied, and so they find themselves superfluous upon the earth, where they struggle vainly for a foothold till they die!'"

"They will cheer that all right," interposed Mark, with a smile.

"Fools—yes. And this:

"'In Australia at least we have not committed this awful crime of robbing all but a privileged few of rights in the soil upon which all must live. We recognise that the land belongs to the people, and that to give a man lordship of the soil gives him lordship over his fellow men. Therefore, hold fast whatever you do; hold fast through toil and trouble, through change and revolution if it come, to the grand principle we have mastered, that all men who live upon it are born and remain equal owners of our land. We have mastered this great lesson. More or less blindly we have acted upon it, and yet to-day we know that the wolf of hunger is at our doors; that the spirit of death stalks abroad; that the streets are not safe for our great officials; that wild doctrine and threats of revolution fill the air. You all know that these things are so. What, my friends, is the cause? Only bear with me patiently and I will give you the answer to the question I have asked.'"

Here the Professor paused and sank wearily into a chair.

"And the answer?" asked Mark, eagerly.

"Read it, my boy—read it. I am more tired than I thought. And, after all, what is the good of rehearsing words that will be drowned in slavish clamour as soon as a glimmering of their sense penetrates to slavish brains? I shall be allowed to speak something of what I have spoken to you, but twenty sentences further on my speech will end. Its only chance of ever reaching the multitude lies in the newspaper—that is in you."

Much as Mark wished to hear articulate in the Professor the spirit which he had seen to animate him as his pen flew over the last sheets of paper, he refrained from urging the old man to exert himself further, and

rolled up the manuscript in silence. They talked for half an hour on various subjects. Mark confided to Grainger his trouble concerning Mary and Wilkes, and received words of comfort. Grainger believed she had grit and wit enough to keep herself out of his toils, and even believed that in her new position she might find means to substantially help her friends. Mark learnt that the lecture was definitely fixed for Thursday night—three days later—and soon afterwards departed, taking with him the precious manuscript and the Professor's blessing on his efforts.

CHAPTER XX.

A NIGHT AT NUMBER 79.

On the evening after Mark's visit to Grainger the big room of No. 79 was crowded with men, most of whom spent their days and nights between it and the cellar below. A few still worked at their trades in Melbourne, but the majority were refugees who could not venture into the light of day until the Socialist oganisation had received some vital blow. Every night added one or two to their numbers, and the position was becoming intolerable. The air of the underground refuge had grown heavy and foul; upstairs it was little better; and as the proportion of escapees to men still at work increased, the supply of food grew short. Suffocation and starvation stared the conspirators in the face, as well as the more imminent danger of discovery by the officials.

On the night in question there were black looks and sullen tones among them as they discussed the situation, to the accompaniment of snores and mutterings from their companions who slept, or tried to sleep, upon the floor.

"I tell you, Donovan, this can't go on," said one. "It's all very well to say we should sleep downstairs. Just try it. The air is poison—it's bad enough here; and what with guns and ammunition and papers in the cellar, there's barely room for a man to stretch on the stones."

"I know all that," answered Donovan. "But what are we to do? You wouldn't refuse to take a man in

when the police are on his tracks. You must put up with things a few days longer, or a few weeks, unless a burst-up comes before then."

"It must come," growled another. "I'd sooner be shot than starved and poisoned."

To this sentiment there was a chorus of sulky approbation. Then talk was interrupted by the double knock, and Mark was admitted.

"What news from the outer world?" asked Donovan.

Mark looked grave. "Good and bad," he answered. "Five minutes ago I should have said all good. But it's just as well to tell you everything. I believe I have been dogged here. A mile from the house I saw a man eye me suspiciously. I walked in the opposite direction, slipped him, and turned this way by another street. But the fellow must have got wind of something. He appeared again from heaven knows where, and walked close past me as I stopped at the door."

"A good job," muttered someone. "It will put an end to this."

"And put an end to some of us," replied Mark drily. "You men should have more patience. Now there is nothing to be done but keep on your guard, and if any search or arrest is attempted, make a fight for it. It will be unfortunate if it comes so soon, but if it does come we can only hope the fire will spread."

With Mark's arrival most of the sleepers had awakened, and the rumour of danger near at hand dispelled all lethargy from the gathering, replacing it with anxiety, it is true, but anxiety, allied with hope and determination to show their mettle when the blow should fall. There were 30 men in the house of the inner circle; at least 100 or more either in No. 79, or in intimate touch with the conspirators, who might be immediately roused to action against the Government and trusted with weapons from the armoury below, in case of a struggle with the authorities.

"So much for your bad news, Mark," said Donovan presently. "What is the good?"

Mark drew Grainer's manuscript from his pocket. "It is here," he said. "The Professor gives this speech

in the great hall on Thursday, or at least he tries to give it. Wilkes promises that it shall appear in the paper on Friday morning."

"Does it speak out?" asked Conroy. "Will it do anything when it is printed?"

"It will be a spark to a powder magazine," answered Mark, "and the powder's wetter than I think if some of it does not explode."

"Let us hear it," called someone; and a dozen voices echoed in assent.

"Well, some of it," agreed Mark. "Come near; I do not want to talk too loud."

Seating himself on the long table, he faced the eager group, and in a low voice, tense with feeling, read them passages from the speech of which he hoped so much.

There were murmurs of disappointment from his hearers as they heard the opening sentences. With a smile Mark bade them wait, and gradually they caught the drift of Grainger's words, realising that he insisted in the beginning upon common ownership of land, in order to secure the ear and goodwill of the foolish masses, who saw no difference between the land and the wealth made by men's hands. If they but listened to the speech a little longer it was a difference they could not fail to see. But would they listen?

Poverty, corruption, and slavery or discontent, were declared by Grainger to be the fruit which the tree of Socialism must bear in every soil. History showed that, as the State had gradually encroached on individual liberty, so had material wealth and well-being gradually decreased; so had character deteriorated, and ideals been blotted out. Reason showed that when the impetus to individual exertion and development had gone, it could not possibly be otherwise. What man would exert his manifold powers of body and mind to the uttermost, when his reward in all that makes life worth living was no greater than that given to the most idle, worthless weakling who frittered time away by his side? How could it be hoped that the standard of labour would not decline all round, when the proceeds of that labour, for which alone it was put forth, were steadily declining? Poor work, poor pay, had acted and

reacted upon one another, until the people had come to their present miserable plight. How long was it since any new invention, any improvement in machinery, any addition to scientific knowledge, had been made within the Commonwealth? Such things were unknown, and would be unknown until the people broke their fetters. Nobody had the leisure, nobody had the means, nobody had the will so study, to experiment, and to face the failures which the great men of olden times, the great men of other countries in modern times, were facing every day. The bureaucratic authorities seldom and reluctantly adopted the superior methods of production which were proved in Europe; they would not even look at suggested improvements which might find an almost miraculous origin here. The official gained nothing by moving out of the old ruts; he risked the disapproval of his superiors, the ill-will of inferiors driven to unaccustomed tasks, and inevitable condemnation from everybody, if his enterprise should fail. So no new inventions were adopted; work on the old lines was badly done, and all but the crudest manufactures had died out of the State. Drought had fallen upon a people solely dependent on the natural resources of the soil, and the shadow of approaching starvation darkened the land.

These were some of the fruits of Socialism on the material side. If the bureaucracy were honest it would be utterly beyond its power to allot men the tasks to which they were best fitted; to make them work efficiently at those tasks without adequate reward; to foresee the wants of the people, and make provision to satisfy them. But at the same time it was utterly impossible for the bureaucracy to remain honest. Official honesty was a plant which only flourished where public officials were the chosen and honoured servants of free men. It had no chance of life when public officials were the self-chosen and all-powerful masters of a myriad of slaves. To make those slaves do the work of free men was indeed beyond their power, but to appropriate to themselves an ever increasing share of the community's labour was well within it; and everybody knew that the officials fared sumptuously where the masses were lucky if they obtained a bare subsistence. It was not the fault of the officials—or at least their fault was no more than the possession of human nature, which always deteriorated in the man who wielded authority over serfs—which was subject to the universal law that unbridled despotism results from unbridled power.

And not only had the nation become materially enslaved and pauperised. It was enslaved by the most ignoble vices; pauperised of the most manly virtues. Who could afford to cultivate truth and independence, when only lying and subservience could make life tolerable? The official positions were practically hereditary, but sometimes, as they all knew, a citizen who licked the boots of his masters, who served them by drawing the chains tighter round his fellows, was rewarded by elevation to office; more rarely, one whose cunning or strength the officials feared was bribed by admission to the charmed circle as the easiest means of muzzling him. They all knew that the least laborious work went not by merit but by favour; that the lower and easier official positions were deliberately reserved for weakness and incompetence, lest what was learned in these might lead to discontent and revolt. Perhaps, indeed, he was telling them more than they knew; for even a glimpse of the truth was difficult to obtain, when public meetings were forbidden, and the voice of the press was the voice of an arrogant bureaucracy. Never in the world's history had there been a nation where all wells of truth were so completely sealed to the masses of the people.

Under this awful state of things, the Professor continued, the people suffered not only in material welfare; not only in their relation to their lords and masters; but in their most intimate domestic relations; in the loss of the joys of family life, which had seldom been denied even in dark bygone ages to the African slave. Wife and husband, parent and child, brother and sister, were still words with a meaning in the Commonwealth; but how sordid, poor and shrunken was that meaning compared with the significance of those terms in olden days, when husband worked for wife and child; when she helped him with her love, brightened his home, comforted him in his trouble,

sympathised in his ambitions, educated his children, and was the presiding spirit of the home, the guardian angel of the family. Now there was no home; there was no family; men had no ambitions; the wife worked as hard as the husband; if he or she worked well or ill it was a matter of indifference to either. She was still a mother, for, when she could not help it, she brought children into the world; and, such is the power of motherhood, she sometimes loved them as a tigress loves her cubs, but the tender relation between mother and child were almost unknown in the Socialist community. The mother worked all day and every day for the State; the State took the child into one of its nurseries, and brought it up as a stranger to its parents and parental love.

The result of all this was to atrophy the best in human nature; to rob the people of happiness of which no mere poverty could rob them; and to make parentage a mere physical fact, of no interest to the man, more often shirked than welcomed by the woman, who suffered all the burdens without the joys of maternity.

For an hour Mark read from the speech with no other interruption than low murmurs of applause. When he came to the peroration all his audience rose and drew closer, listening breathless and bright eyed to the bitter words in which Grainger lashed himself for his treachery to truth in a life-time's support of the wrong; and his passionate appeal to the nation to retrace its steps towards freedom, even though blood must flow like water to wash out the sins of the past.

"I would give my life," said Donovan, "for the promise of saying all that, and being heard by three thousand men in Melbourne."

"A dozen lives would not buy such a promise," said Conroy. "The Professor will never be heard, but he has turned hero in his old age, and if his speech is printed we shall make him a statue in the good time coming."

"He deserves it," said Donovan. "And we will have the speech printed, Wilkes or no Wilkes. Can you leave it here for one night, Meredith, and let us get it into type?"

"Yes," answered Mark. "That is a good idea. I hope it will go into the 'Gazette,' but it is well to be on the safe side."

"If it does go in—about which I have my doubts," put in Cooper. "I take it our friend, Mr. Wilkes, will have to make a move, and that it will be time for us to do more than talk."

"There is bound to be a convulsion of some sort," answered Mark, "but we must keep quiet until we see what steps the Government take. The morning the speech appears I must tell Wilkes where he can find us. If the Government wishes to live an hour it must arrest him, and we shall owe him refuge and protection."

"If he goes straight," persisted Cooper. "I don't trust him even now."

"We shall see what's in him in a day or two. In the meantime, remember that all of us have to be ready to fight if this place is raided. I don't think that we can make any plans beyond that, except that if the trouble comes and we beat off the police we must give the spare arms we have to people who will use them. To-night we must distribute all we can. We are not safe for an hour if I am right in thinking that man a spy. You must keep on the alert, and if we are killed or captured I don't think the cause will die with us."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE GREAT SPEECH AND THE MASSACRE.

The great Socialist hall was filled to its utmost capacity, with common people packed like herrings on the floor space and in galleries, while a couple of hundred official guests occupied seats on the platform. Women were present as well as men, and the women workers, clothed in their sombre garb of monotonous blue and grey, gazed enviously at the haughty privileged dames, sparkling with jewels, and marvellously arrayed in rich stuffs and patterns that never found their way into the public stores.

Laughing and talking together, exhaling an atmosphere of luxury and ease, gazing with a languid interest at the rows of dull faces before them, these official

ladies looked like beings from another sphere, too far removed from those below to even excite their envy. To wish herself as one of these would seem almost blasphemy to the working woman, who was constantly adjured by the priests to reverence her superiors, and be content with her lot in life; but among the men the glaring contrast between platform and galleries in this home of brotherhood and freedom, prompted many a bitter thought and muttered curse. They might never have noticed that their own clothes were rough and poor, or compared them with the clothes worn by official men; but those with any spirit left in them deeply felt and resented the gulf between their own women folk, shabby and work worn, and these pink and white shimmering beings who looked down upon them from the place of privilege.

Eight o'clock was near, and the audience waited for Grainger, the vast majority in dour silence, broken only by low murmuring. Not a laugh enlivened it; not a smile rippled on the sea of faces, leaden hued and threatening, as the ocean before a storm.

At length, in company with the Mayor of Melbourne and two or three officials of note, the Professor appeared on the platform, and the party was received with a cheer. Known officers of the bureaucracy were stationed all through the building, unknown spies were everywhere, and each man felt it wise to cheer; but Mark and some of his friends who sat in the front of the hall were the most demonstrative of the audience.

The Mayor wasted few words in introducing the lecturer. Professor Grainger, he said, was present at the desire of the President and Council of the Commonwealth to tell them the truth about Socialism. (Loud applause from a small section of the audience, which quite upset the Mayor, and met with a reproving, "Hush!") He would show them the folly of revolting against economic law, and teach them how they should conduct themselves in order to bring back prosperity. Such teaching from the revered Professor, the greatest historian and social authority in the Commonwealth, could not fail to give comfort and guidance to all classes in these troublous times. He understood, the Mayor concluded, with a meaning

glance at Grainger, that the Professor would on this occasion speak in very strong terms, unsparingly denouncing the evils that afflicted the Commonwealth.

As Professor Grainger rose and slowly came to the front of the platform, he greeted Mark with a smile of recognition. Then surveying the vast audience, and slightly bowing in acknowledgment of the applause, which was led from the platform, and dutifully taken up by the people above and below, he began his lecture in slow and measured tones.

First of all, he said, he must thank his friend the Mayor for the too flattering words he had spoken of his (the Professor's) knowledge and ability; but such as it was, its fruits would be freely offered that night, and the Chairman was not mistaken in believing that, sweet or bitter, none of it would be withheld.

Grainger looked paler than usual; the trembling fingers, betrayed by the sheet of paper which they held, showed that his nerves were strung to the highest pitch, but Mark had never known such a commanding ring in the Professor's tones, such fire in his eyes, such strength in his face, as on this fateful night.

Besides Mark, there were some twenty or thirty of his friends present, all seated more or less near one another on benches not far from the platform, but only Donovan and himself represented the inner circle of the revolutionaries, for the others could not venture into a gathering crowded with police and spies by whom they might be recognised.

For the first half hour every period of the Professor was rounded with applause. He had gripped the attention of his listeners, and the applause they gave him was sincere. References to poverty and distress under the individualism of other lands produced a storm of enthusiasm from the officials, to whom it justified the Socialism upon which they lived, while even the miserable and disaffected found a curious balm to their self-respect and national vanity in words which painted the state of other peoples as black as, or blacker than, their own. When Grainger touched the land question with eloquence and force far exceeding anything Mark had ever heard from his lips, the listeners sat spell-bound with interest, throbbing with emotion. As he

showed them the truth in language white hot with feeling, yet luminously clear, they saw it to be absolutely just and essential that all should be equal owners of the land upon which all must live. Yet in Australia the soil belonged to the people, and they knew themselves wretched and oppressed. Was there then no hope for them? Was poverty the universal doom of the masses of mankind? The exaltation evoked by the Professor's eloquence subsided, leaving the audience sad and wondering, depressed and yet expectant. Had he any message of hope for them? It seemed misery abroad arose from stealing the land; what was stolen from them here? Could they recover it?

Such were the thoughts of the more intelligent. Even they were grossly ignorant of economics; so were the bureaucrats and their toadies. The official crew were delighted at the Professor's vehemence. To them it seemed a justification of Socialism, for they recognised no difference between the goods and the land; and throughout the hall, though some were troubled and despairing, others insolently self satisfied; and though not twenty men besides Mark understood the Professor's meaning, he had nevertheless riveted the attention and secured the goodwill of all.

As a great burst of applause died away he scanned for a moment the upturned faces which were aglow with hope and expectation, emotions utterly strange to nine-tenths of them. The people hung upon his utterance. Now was the psychological moment for speaking words which, in that place, he had not believed it in the power of man to speak. He spoke in a full, slow voice, vibrating with sincerity, that thrilled all ears in the hall.

"Friends and brothers. You have heard me so far. Hear me yet a little longer. I have told you that other people are robbed of their land; you are robbed of your liberty. Poverty dwells with other people; the shadow of starvation is here. There is injustice in other lands; in our land justice has utterly hidden her face for more than fifty years."

A murmur of astonishment, low toned, deep volumed, like the noise of the just troubled sea, rose from the

body of the hall. Men and women turned to one another whispering, scarcely believing that they heard aright; then fastened their eyes once more upon the speaker, half hopeful, half frightened, but all intently eager to hear more. Only from that part of the hall where the revolutionaries sat, and from the platform, was approval, or the opposite, displayed. Mark and his friends applauded vigorously, bringing on themselves head shakings and scowls from officials who moved towards their place, rousing alarm among the timid, who edged away from these bold iconoclasts. On the platform, on the other hand, though the blow was too sudden to be countered, though the blasphemous words had rung sonorously through the hall before gasping astonishment permitted interruption or dissent, it seemed clear that a storm was brewing.

"Shocking!" "Wicked!" "He is a traitor!" "Must be mad!" "The Mayor should stop it!" "Hanging too good for him!"

Such words as these might be distinguished in the buzz of angry whispering that stirred the bureaucratic crowd. One or two of the more distinguished imperiously signalled lower officials to come to the platform for orders; others, foreseeing trouble, left the hall with their womenkind; and meanwhile the Mayor, after taking hurried counsel with a neighbour, rose and laid his hand on the Professor's arm. "This is madness," he said. "I cannot allow the lecture to go on."

"You wish me to cease speaking?" asked Grainger.

"Unless you can explain away your words, and continue in a decent strain. I fear you have already done incalculable harm."

"I have done so. I shall try to retrieve it."

The Mayor looked at him suspiciously. "I have your promise to unsay what you have said, if I permit you to continue?"

Grainger turned on him wrathfully. "I give no promise. I ask no permission. I shall speak on while I am listened to."

Then, stepping away from the astonished official, he once more addressed the people: "Fellow countrymen. Our Mayor bids me to unsay what I have said. I utterly refuse. I tell you again that this country

will sink deeper and deeper into perdition, until you rouse yourselves from slavish submission to tyranny and greed in men; until you realise the truth that man is his own master, and the owner of the work of his hands. Fight the established order peacefully if you can. If your tyrants force strife upon you, do not grudge torrents of your blood to water the tree of liberty. You may live only to see its tender shoots appearing, but your children who sit beneath its shade will bless your names for ever."

So far, above the rising storm, Grainger's voice was heard by all. Then, amid groans and cheers, the old man was roughly seized by officials determined upon silencing him. As they hustled him towards the back of the platform, the erstwhile orderly gathering became a tumultuous crowd, even the most indifferent rising to their feet, eager to lose nothing of this unexampled scene, while the more excitable yelled and shouted, and numbers pressed forward towards a storm centre in the front of the hall. For a little while none knew what it meant, but excitement rose to fever heat as a score of men were seen to force their way through the throng and clamber to the platform. There the utmost confusion already reigned. Most of the officials who had women in their charge were hurrying them away by the private stairs to prevent all chance of injury from the excited mob; other women were fainting or in hysterics, while a few of the more daring pressed about Grainger, determined to see the upshot of affairs.

Then came the sudden rush of invaders from below. Meredith and his friends were followed by a few other men infected with their spirit, though ignorant of their purpose. Here and there they were thrown down from the platform by angry bewildered officials who bestirred themselves too late to meet the attack; but resistance only roused their blood, and, clambering on one another's shoulders, they were soon among the bureaucrats, pitching several of those who opposed them headlong to the floor below. Then they forced their way towards Grainger, and, thrusting aside the officials by whom he was surrounded, they led him to the front again, standing round him as a bodyguard

against attack. Raising his hand in a vain appeal for silence, Mark shouted at the top of his voice. "Fellow citizens; take your seats again. The Professor will continue his lecture."

This announcement met with a wild cheer. But the audience was now a surging mob, crowding forward amid overturned benches to the front of the hall, ignoring or overwhelming the officers who made futile attempts to stay them. It was clear that no more lecturing was possible that night.

Grainger looked at the mob and turned to Mark with a smile. "I can speak no more, Mark. But I think the work is done. The tyrants will never lay the ghost of liberty that we have called up to-night."

The crowd on the platform was increasing, and the little phalanx round Grainger swayed hither and thither, unable to keep its place.

"See," he said, they are bringing police up the platform stairs. You and your friends must leave me now and save yourselves."

"And you?" asked Mark.

"I shall be all right. My age and position will prevent them going to extremes. Escape while you can."

Mark hesitated, and beckoned to Donovan who stood near, thrusting back those who pressed on them. Before he could answer there came a rush from the back of police admitted by the private doors.

The officials made way for them, and they seized on the first of Mark's party whom they encountered, striking savagely with their truncheons at all who resisted. One of the revolutionaries, receiving a blow which cut his face open, caught his assailant by the throat; and Donovan, picking up a chair, shouted to the rest, "Don't let yourselves be arrested, men. Follow me."

The chair descended with a crash on the nearest policeman's head, then upon another's; and all the rioters quickly seized like weapons, making such play with them that they momentarily drove back the police. From the body of the hall new recruits clambered up to join the melee, where the din of blows and curses grew louder every moment.

Then came the crack of a pistol, and all at once revolver barrels gleamed in a score of hands. The police had become desperate, and a moment's awed silence was followed by a murderous fusillade, which strewed the stage with dead and wounded.

Mark stood by the Professor near a wing of the platform, endeavouring to prevent him from being thrown down or otherwise coming to harm. Now his comrades fell back, and he felt that he must join them.

"Let me help you down, Professor," he said. "It is not safe here. Take my hand and drop to the floor. We can't reach the stairs."

"No, leave me, Mark. Join your friends and escape with them before it is too late."

"Yes, yes; in one moment; but come. For my sake get out of this while you can."

Taking the Professor's arm, Mark drew him towards the platform's edge. The crowd surged against them. Mark staggered, but recovered himself, retaining the old man's arm; but all at once it slipped from his, and, with a stifled groan, Professor Grainger sank upon the floor.

Mark knelt beside him, heedless of the swaying fighting crowd which threatened to crush them both. "What is it?" he asked anxiously. "Tell me."

"It is the end, Mark. I am shot, shot through the breast." The Professor spoke with difficulty. "Never mind," he sighed, "it is a good end. Good-bye, Mark; and God bless you."

Then his head fell back. Mark saw that his lips were covered with blood, and knew that he had heard his old friend's last farewell. No more could be done for him; so, smothering thought, gulping down feelings for which this was no time, Meredith joined in the fight. Like all the inner group of revolutionaries, he always carried a revolver, and had refrained from using it, only for fear of drawing fire upon the Professor; but his care had been in vain, and now he fired barrel after barrel as fast as he could, where it was possible to distinguish friend from foe. But, in spite of a stubborn resistance, the revolutionaries were

already beaten. They could not stand against the superior numbers of police who crowded up the platform stairs, and in one overwhelming rush swept their adversaries from the platform. Those who were unhurt rapidly picked themselves up, and some of them resumed the fight, struggling hand to hand with the police, who had been carried over the edge with them, or firing at the main body above. Others sought to hide themselves among the mass of the audience, which was now mad with terror and rage, for bullets fired by the police had struck many men and women down, and they crushed one another in panic at the hopelessly congested doors. When joined by the defeated rioters the misery of the non-combatants was increased ten-fold. Hitherto only chance shots had flown among them, but now the police were seized with that rage for murder, which, in other times and countries, has so often disgraced armed men when dealing with an unarmed mob. They made not even a pretence of picking out the fugitive revolutionaries, which would indeed have been impossible, but, pressing to the front of the platform, poured volley after volley from their revolvers into the dense crowd below. The slaughter was appalling, and Mark groaned with rage as he witnessed it. Thrown from the platform with the others, he regained his feet and fought sturdily till his ammunition was exhausted. Then, grappling with one of the police, who was in a similar plight, he received a blow on the head with a truncheon, which knocked him down. After a few seconds of semi-unconsciousness he opened his eyes and looked around him, and was about to rise, but immediately realised that it would be useless folly. Strewing the floor in every direction were friends and enemies, either wounded or dead; and his first thought was for Donovan, but Donovan was nowhere to be seen. He had then either fallen or had been captured early in the fight, for Mark felt sure he would not endanger the lives of innocent people by trying to hide among them. It was scarcely possible that he had escaped, and for Mark himself there seemed very little hope, though he ardently longed for life and liberty to take part in the drama which was opening on this dreadful night.

For a time he was comparatively safe since he lay close to the platform wall, invisible to those above unless they craned their necks over in deliberate search, which was unlikely. They were still too busy in loading and firing into the huddled wretches in the hall. But they would descend when the survivors had escaped, in order to search the floor for prisoners. Mark had almost resolved to spring on to the platform again in order to at least die fighting, and crawled a little from the stage wall in order to see where his best chance lay, when some yards to his right he spied a small door. Possibly it was unlocked. At least he would ascertain. Creeping cautiously under the lee of the wall, he reached the doorway, a small square aperture in the stage front, and without much hope he pressed his hand upon the painted wood. It gave inwards. Mark's pulse beat faster, and without a second's hesitation he climbed through the hole and pushed the door back into place.

Safe for the moment, Mark struck a match, and looked about him, the faint light showing that he was on a small landing with wooden steps leading down to a large dark room containing chairs, benches and lumber, and occupying the whole of the space beneath the stage. Stairways on either side at the back led upwards towards the platform, and downwards, as Mark guessed, towards smaller exit doors. He determined to try that which descended on the side which he knew lay nearest the main street, and carefully groped his way down the steps in darkness, just relieved by a glimmer of light through the chinks of a door at the foot of the staircase. Then he listened for a little while, wondering what lay the other side, but he heard nothing except the trampling of feet overhead, and the faint sound of shots and cries, showing that the slaughter still continued.

Very cautiously he tried the handle, waiting to ascertain whether the movement attracted attention. It provoked no sound of life, so he boldly tugged at the door which was unlocked, and opened, admitting him to a small room lighted with electricity and having a second door opposite that by which Mark entered. He tried it. It was locked on the other side. That way,

then, lay no escape, and there seemed nothing to do but seek better fortune by another stairway. Meanwhile it might be well, Mark thought, to ascertain what lay in the great cupboard which occupied portion of the room. He opened it, and found three electric switches; a larger one and two smaller, probably controlling the lights for the whole building. Here seemed a possible chance, perhaps of personal escape, at least of checking the murder which was going on upstairs. The police would perhaps cease firing if the hall were plunged in darkness; and at any rate they would be hampered in their cruel work.

Mark turned all the switches, and waited. The lamp in the little room immediately ceased to glow; the cries and trampling above grew louder, but the firing ceased. So far all was well, but Mark knew that before long someone must enter his place of confinement to learn the cause of the sudden darkness. He took the precaution of locking the door through which he had entered, lest one of the officials who knew the building should follow his route from the hall and catch him like a rat in a trap. He had good reason to bless his caution, for in less than half a minute there were steps and voices behind him; he heard the handle tried.

"This was not locked half an hour ago," said one voice. "Some one must have been tampering with the light."

"Let us break in the door," said another voice; and without more words the attempt was begun.

Again and again came the battering. Hinges and locks creaked beneath the weight of strong men's shoulders, but still they held. At last a hinge gave way, and Mark, believing himself lost, sought vainly in the darkness some weapon wherewith to fight for liberty.

Then he heard a sound outside the other door, and a little spark of hope glowed again. He knew the door opened outwards, so he crept softly to it, resting his hand lightly on the panels. Bolts were drawn back, the key was turned; then the handle. Mark's heart beat fast. He gathered himself together, for the decisive moment was at hand. With the first

movement of the door it had come; and then Mark flung himself with all his strength and all his weight against the panels. There was a cry of surprise; the thud of a man's head against the passage wall; the noise of broken glass; cursing and muttering from shapes in the darkness. When Mark hurled the door violently back upon its hinges, the man who unfastened it was utterly taken by surprise, and dropped his lantern on the flagstones as he fell against the wall.

Once at liberty Mark hurried down the dark passage, flinging aside arms hesitatingly put out to detain they knew not what; and he was further favoured by fortune in that a sudden draught, sweeping through the vaults as the doors of the switchroom were opened on either side, extinguished matches and candles which might otherwise have led to his discovery. At the end of the passage another passage crossed it at right angles. He had lost his bearings, but tried one branch in desperation, and his heart leaped with joy as at the end he saw the sky. Hastening on he reached a small wicket gate which stood ajar, and led into a scrap of garden, with the street beyond. Climbing the iron railing, unobserved by any official, he found himself on the outskirts of an immense excited crowd which thronged round the main doors of the hall, blocking the exit of the panic stricken audience. Most of them had by this time struggled somehow out of the inferno, and down the steps, which were lined with a cordon of police, there came a melancholy procession of men carrying in their arms the corpses and the wounded.

CHAPTER. XXII.

THE DEATH OF PETER WILKES.

Seated in the editor's room at the great newspaper office, Mary strove in vain to concentrate attention on her work, and to dismiss the fears she felt concerning Mark and Professor Grainger. What would happen to the old man? Would he be arrested? Would he be attacked by the mob? And a question touching her heart still nearer, what would be Mark's part in the evening's work? Would he be able to restrain himself if harm threatened their kind old friend? Had Mark

been alone her fears for him would have been less acute, for she knew him too level headed and too keen on success for his cause to sacrifice himself in any quixotic attempt at the impossible. But she also knew him to be so generous, sanguine and daring that, accompanied by armed friends, he might undertake some enterprise of terrible danger.

She sighed and tears came into her eyes, tears not all of sorrow but of pride also, for, much as she longed for happiness with Mark, she loved him so deeply that she could enter into all his great hopes, and she would rather lose him than feel that her selfish fears had hampered him in his work. He was indeed, she thought, a brave lover of whom any girl might feel proud. She left her letter untouched for a time, dreaming of happiness to come, and longing for Mark's safety that night with a fervency almost amounting to prayer.

It was past nine o'clock, and no message had come from the hall where the reporters from the office were present for form's sake, though the lecture in full, from Grainger's manuscript, was already all in type. Wilkes was still absent from the office, and would not return for half an hour. Mary knew that he had gone to sound some high officials as to whether they thought it would pay them to act treasonably to the Government in the event of anything like a popular revolt against authority. To her he used the utmost frankness in speaking of such matters, for he was confident that he ran not the slightest risk of betrayal with regard to any revolutionary move, and he was flattered by her interest, and not altogether disdainful even of her advice. He was making love to Mary in his own way, and while keeping him at arm's length she was deliberately coquetting with him, determined to keep in his good graces, and not without hope that she might win such power over him as to accomplish something for the revolutionary cause. That cause shared her heart with Mark, or rather the cause was embodied in Mark by whom her heart was filled; and her moral sense was not sufficiently developed as to reject any means for gaining an end she regarded as all in all. But tonight, when her hero was risking liberty, perhaps life

itself, in a struggle for better things, she experienced a new disgust at the thought of lowering herself by pretended indifference to him and liking for his bitterest enemy.

She was wrapped in thought when Wilkes entered his room, and she rose up startled, with difficulty suppressing an impulse to shudder.

"I have written two of these letters," she said. "What luck had you to-night?"

"None," he answered moodily. "Neither of those fools Archer nor Wrenfordsley can read the signs of the times. They are afraid, and I must risk everything alone. If it is worth risking after all."

Mary's heart sank. Was he going to desert the cause before he had done his work? The speech was in type but not yet printed.

"Not quite alone," she said with a smile; and, great as was the effort it cost her, she laid a gentle hand on his shoulder.

Wilkes looked up gratified, and clasped the hand, which she drew away from him.

"Well, well. We shall see. It all depends on to-night. What news from the hall?"

"None yet. There is some one now."

The message which he brought was from the lecture. It referred to the first half hour, and told that Grainger's speech was being enthusiastically received.

"Good so far," said Wilkes. He rang a bell and sent orders that the speech should occupy the third and fourth pages, and be sent to press immediately.

When they were alone again, he turned to Mary. "The die is cast, little woman. I risk my neck. What am I going to get out of it?"

"A clever man like you should get almost anything he asks, when the new order comes. Did not you talk of a dictatorship?"

Wilkes laughed. "Maybe I did. That's for the future. But I want something warmer and softer than that—and sooner."

"What?" Mary felt her blood run cold as she glanced at him.

"You."

The room swam round her. She was face to face with her folly, and her courage failed her, but there came a merciful interruption.

"Damn it. What's this?" asked Wilkes.

"More news from the hall, sir?"

This message brought the story up the point when Grainger had thrown his first bomb-shell among the audience, and it strengthened Wilkes in his determination to aid the malcontents.

"I don't know what will happen to the old fool who is performing to-night," he sneered. "There will be enough snap left in the Government to make things very unpleasant for him; but I do believe that after his precious oration appears in print our chance will come."

"What can they do to the Professor?"

"I don't know and don't care," laughed Wilkes. "Hang or shoot him probably. But to return to our own affairs." He locked the door. "These meddling fools shall not interrupt me till I choose."

"Mr. Wilkes," besought Mary. "For God's sake don't think of anything but public affairs now. So much depends on you—on your newspaper. You must think what you are going to do to-morrow."

"I have thought all about that. The paper can take care of itself. It will be printed and distributed, and the speech will appear. To-morrow I shall watch the effect and shape my course accordingly."

"But you must not be arrested. You must hide yourself somewhere in case the Government proves too strong."

Mary was feverishly endeavouring to gain time, to keep the conversation from personal affairs, and to devise some means of leaving the office in order to seek refuge at Number 79. Wilkes watched her curiously.

"I am glad you are so solicitous for my safety," he said, "But where am I to hide?"

"At the revolutionary meeting-place, among your friends."

"But I do not know where it is. Will you tell me?"

Mary's courage and daring returned to her. "I will take you there," she said, with a bright smile. "Finish

your work quickly; leave your orders with the office, and let us go."

Would he consent? If only so, she knew that under Mark's care she would be safe for ever from Wilkes's persecution.

"You want me to accompany you?" he asked.

"Yes, yes; come."

"Will you be kind to me?"

"Yes."

"Give me a kiss to prove that you mean it."

Despising herself, hating him, with a furious blush of shame and anger mantling her cheek, she approached him, and forcing her lips into a smile, just touched his cheek with them

"That is not a kiss," he said hoarsely. "This is what I want," and clasping her to his breast, he roughly pressed his coarse lips on hers.

Mary fell back, white and sick with disgust, as he released her.

"You have had your kiss," she whispered in a voice which he perhaps mistook for that of mere maiden timidity. "Now will you come away with me?"

In her heart she was saying that Mark should kill him when he did.

"I cannot leave the office until late. You must go first; but if you will give me the address I shall follow and find you waiting for me."

"Let me stay," she entreated, fearing treachery, and yet longing with every fibre to be gone.

"I cannot. If you do not tell me the address I shall know you do not trust me."

"Of course I trust you. It is No. 79 Hobson-street, West Melbourne. Come quickly."

Mary knew the conspirators meant to inform Wilkes of the hiding place next day. Surely she had done nothing very wrong in anticipating the disclosure by a few hours, in order to get free. And yet she wished she had bitten her tongue out rather than do so, when she saw his smile.

"Thank you for that information," he said, writing down the address. "And now, my dear girl, be reasonable and let us understand one another. You are a charming little woman, and we get on capitally together. But your suggestion of going to Number 79 is altogether absurd. How could we possibly spend a happy night in that hovel crowded with rough men, not to mention your excitable friend Mark? No, I have a far better plan to propose."

"What?" Mary scarcely knew her voice for her own, but she was resolved not to show what she felt.

"A charming plan. You have heard of Bishop Hatto's castle, the safest place in all Germany? But no, you don't read the ancients. However, on the cliffs near Brighton I have a very safe place. Not a castle exactly, but a large house. Did you think I was such a fool as to run my head into the jaws of the Government lion, trusting to a handful of fanatics who hate me to get them out again? If so, you know very little of Peter Wilkes. Well, in this house which I have lately acquired I have a large store of arms, a large store of provisions, all landed quietly at night by boats from Port Melbourne. You see I had no desire to make unnecessary fuss. I have piles of sand bags, even some modest entrenchments, men I can rely on for payment to stand behind them, and, what concerns us more than all this, a dear little room and a delightful supper for two awaiting us. My motor car is read to whirl us out there at any minute. When I am dictator you shall be dictatress, or shall we say my queen? That sounds better—my queen—at any rate for a time. And as time flies you shall put on your crown to-night. What do you say to it, little one? Have I managed things prettily?"

For the moment Mary could say nothing at all. In the gleam of Wilkes's eye she could see the savage desire that lurked behind his smiling irony, and she guessed he would shrink from nothing to accomplish his design.

"It is very pretty, but wants thought," she answered presently with a ghost-like smile.

"Well, think about it, while I see this fool who has been knocking for the last ten minutes."

He unlocked the door and admitted one of the staff, returned from Grainger's lecture.

"Hullo! what does this mean," he asked, seeing that the man's clothes were torn, and that his face was

bleeding. "Now sit down, control your hysterics, and try to tell me what has happened."

The man was in such a nervous state that he could scarcely tell a connected tale, but he declared that Grainger had begun to preach treason and that he had been arrested and shot. There had been some rioting suppressed by the police. Hundreds of people had been shot. A few madmen who attacked the police were all killed or captured. Everything was quiet again now, and they were carrying away the prisoners. He had been on the platform, and was knocked over and trampled in the fighting, but escaped by the private stairs with many of the officials.

Mary listened to the story without a tear, but feeling as if her heart would break. All killed or captured! And Mark was with them. It could not—could not be true. She had slipped noiselessly to the door, when Wilkes intercepted her.

"Where are you going?"

"To look for Mark."

"Nonsense. You will hear of him to-morrow," Then Wilkes turned to the reporter. "Go now and report to the sub-editor. I may send for you again." After he had gone Wilkes locked the door again.

"Oh, please, please let me go. To-morrow I will do anything you ask. But let me look for him to-night." Mary's self-control had gone, and she burst into passionate tears.

"Absurd," returned Wilkes coldly. "If that young puppy, Meredith, is killed there is no great harm done, but I believe he was born for hanging. If that is his fate you will have plenty of time to say good-bye. But this news of Carter's wants thinking over."

Mary sobbed convulsively, and made no answer.

"Stop that, you little fool," he continued irritably. "My plans concern you, whether you realise it or not."

Mary looked up, fearful wonder struggling with her grief.

"And you have assisted me also, perhaps without knowing it," he sneered. "After this news, which shows the Government won't be trifled with, I am inclined to believe it useless to print that lecture, at any rate yet awhile."

"You don't dare not to," blazed Mary. "If you break your promise you will be killed."

"I might have taken that view half an hour ago, but not now. Meredith and some of his friends are dead or out of mischief, and, though there are doubtless others left in that rat-hole who might shoot or stab me on a dark night, I can provide against that contingency. I shall have Number 79 Hobson-street surrounded with police, and every man in it arrested to-night."

Then Mary realised, with unavailing bitterness, what mischief she had done. Those few short hours between to-day and to-morrow made all the difference.

Frantic with grief, she flung herself upon Wilkes and clutched at his arm. "Don't, don't, don't do that. For pity's sake. Don't have them arrested. I will do anything that you ask."

"Anything? We shall see. Permit me for a moment." He released himself from her feverish clutch and seated himself to write, Mary watching him with hope and dread.

Presently he faced her. "Listen. Here are two written orders, one of which goes to my sub-editor. Which, depends on you. First, 'I am called away on urgent business in connection with to-night's tumult. Print Carter's account of the affair, and also, as instructed, Grainger's lecture which occasioned it.'"

Mary gave an involuntary sigh of relief.

"Do not be in a hurry," he said. "The other instructions read: 'I am obliged to see the police immediately in order to arrange for some important arrests in connection with to-night's outbreak. Print Carter's account, toning down his version of the police conduct. Do not print Grainger's lecture, but break up type.' Now which is it to be? It lies in your hands."

"Tell me what you mean."

"Well I mean this, and you should be immensely flattered at your importance. I believe it a mistake to print that lecture and precipitate matters, but I will do it and take the chances, if you will come home to my house to-night."

"And if I do not."

"Then the second note goes to the printers. Your friends, such of them as are alive, will be arrested

to-night. I fear I shall be obliged to have you arrested too, for complicity, though you are a little devil for whom I confess to having a soft spot. Now be a sensible woman, and look sharp about it. I have no time to waste."

Mary pulled herself together. "May I go with you to-morrow night?" she pleaded.

Wilkes smiled grimly. "No, to-night, or no night at all. I have set my heart on that little supper a deux to-night."

There was no escape. She must undo the wrong she had done. She might fling herself from the motor car. In a dozen other ways death was at the call of those who really sought him. Even if Mark was dead his life's work should live. She turned unshrinkingly to Wilkes and said, "Give me that second letter. I will go with you to-night."

"Suspicious woman," he laughed, handing it to her. She tore it into little pieces, and he rang the bell. "Put on your bonnet, my dear. There is a stormy time coming, but I can face it. I feel like a boy of twenty again."

To the messenger who answered the bell he gave orders that, should he not return, the sub-editor was to rigidly adhere to the instructions in his note. No one was to disturb him for the next quarter of an hour.

"Alone at last," he said, as the boy retired. "Now my charming vixen, we will set out for our burrow. I think we might take a back way I know, just for appearance's sake to spare your blushes, you understand. Follow me."

He led the way through dark passages to an outside staircase, leading to a courtyard where the huge rolls of paper were delivered from the waggons, and hauled up by block and tackle to the great double doors adjacent to the flight of steps. One of the doors was open.

"Look at the silver lining to that cloud, my precious," whispered Wilkes banteringly. "An omen, don't you think, for you and me? Carefully here; I will go first. Stay, just one kiss sweetheart—the last in the old office, in memory of your surrender."

They were standing near the head of the steps, and Wilkes pulled her towards him. She wrenched her wrist away and then—did he overbalance himself? Did she fall against him? Did she deliberately push him from the sill? At the time she gave it no thought; afterwards she could not, did not wish to tell; but somehow Wilkes tumbled from the sill to the cobble stones, forty feet beneath.

Mary's first sensation was cold curiosity. She leaned over, wondering if he were dead, and was just able to distinguish a motionless heap below. Then she felt an acute sense of relief, as if some awful weight had been lifted from her; then wild fear lest she should be discovered. Possibly some one had seen them; perhaps someone had heard him fall; he might be living still, and call for help.

Possessed with only one impulse, to escape, she fled down the stairway, shuddering as she passed by the body at her feet, and yet unable to resist a searching glance to learn what it could tell her. It told her of death, but the horror she felt was mingled, not with pity, but relief.

Small barred and dimly lit windows looked out on the courtyard from the lower stories, and behind them she could see machinists and compositors at work, but none of them had been disturbed. A little gate in the corner was open, and creeping quickly to it Mary passed through and fled into the night.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE ATTACK ON NUMBER 79

For a little while Mary had no thought but to put distance between herself and the place where Wilkes lay with his ghastly face upturned to the stars, and, not caring which way she went, she hurried on, starting with guilty fear when anyone passed, though reason told her there was no need to be afraid. Quite possibly Wilkes's body would lie undiscovered until morning, and, even were it found, there was not of necessity

anything to incriminate her in his death. Nevertheless she was the last person seen in his company. Whatever she did it would not be safe to go home.

And all this time, while she had been thinking of herself, where was Mark? If the "Gazette" reporter could be believed he was either dead, or still worse, in a prison from which he would never come out alive. But her heart refused to believe the worst, and wild imaginings, passionate longings for his safety, at length drove all thought of personal danger from her mind. If he were lost she cared very little what happened to her.

So thinking and feeling, she had wandered far, scarcely noting her direction, when she reached a locality where many people were abroad. They stood in groups, talking earnestly, and some of the women appeared to be weeping. Stray words that caught Mary's ears had reference to the evening's tragedy, and, looking about her, she realised that she had entered a back street, not far from the Town Hall. She longed to ask for news of Mark, but checked herself, knowing it would be unwise, and dreading, too, what she might learn. A big closed waggon rumbled by, escorted by armed police. Mary watched it, fascinated and shivering. Perhaps Mark or Mark's body was within.

Then, with a resolute effort, she roused herself to action. She would go to the house in West Melbourne, and learn the best or worst. She had never been there yet, but she thought she could find the place, and Mark had taught her the signal which would secure admittance.

Leaving the more frequented thoroughfare, she turned into a lane, which led in the direction she required, and presently she passed a man crouching in a dark door way. Fearing somewhat, she hurried past, and her heart sank at the thought of the long, weary road before her, for though robbery was a crime which the common folk had little reason to dread in the Socialist State, worse dangers threatened unprotected women in lonely places, and troublous times are evil doers' opportunity.

Walking fast, Mary had left the doorway forty yards behind when she heard footsteps following her, and quickened her pace. So did her pursuer. She fancied that he called; terror seized her, and she began to run at the top of her speed, vainly seeking some open house into which to fly. But it was of no use. All the buildings were closed and silent. The man ran faster than she did; her strength was failing; a firm hand gripped her shoulder, and dragged her backwards, panting and almost swooning with terror.

"Mary! Mary!" whispered a beloved voice, and, looking up, she saw from whom she had fled.

Wrapped in his arms, she found her voice at last, in hysterical sobs and laughter.

"Mark, and alive—not a prisoner! Oh, tell me you are really Mark. Have I found you at last?"

"I should rather say that I have found you," he answered smiling. "You did your very best to escape me. But I am really Mark—alive, and without a scratch. Now tell me what you are doing here?"

The question brought her back to earth and its grim realities.

"Wilkes is dead."

"Dead? When did he die?"

"About half an hour ago."

"Good heavens. Then the lecture won't be printed."

"Yes, yes, Mark, it will. It has gone to press, and he gave orders in writing that it must be published, just before he died."

"Well, we are well rid of him. But are you sure he is dead? What happened to him?"

"I killed him."

"You! Impossible! For God's sake tell me what you mean!"

Mary clung to him and hid her head on his shoulder.

"Don't shrink from me, Mark. He said brutal things to me. He swore that, unless I went to his house at Brighton with him to-night, he would have Number 79 surrounded, and every one in it arrested. Then, near an open door over the courtyard, he tried to kiss me; we struggled, and he fell. Truly, I don't know whether I tried to kill him or not."

"The cowardly brute. I hope you did," answered Mark fiercely. "My poor little girl. What an awful time you have had. But tell me, how did he know anything of Number 79? Did that man who followed me last night report to him?

"Oh, Mark," sobbed Mary. "I told him. I was nearly the cause of having you all arrested or killed. But listen, you must listen. I want to show you that I was only foolish, and not a traitor."

Mark pressed her to him. "I won't listen while you show me that," he said, "because I know it without being told. But I do want to hear how it all happened. Let us get in the shadow in an alley. The police will very likely patrol this lane, and might recognise us."

"Why, what are you going to do to-night?" she asked. "I thought if you were not captured you would go back to Number 79; and I was going there to look for you."

"I was going. We will go together presently, but we must let the streets get quieter first. I risked something hanging about the crowd to look for others, but I am afraid they are all done for. I did not see one alive. Now let us sit here for a little, while you tell me your story."

On a dark door step, with Mark's arm about her, Mary related all that had happened.

"Say you don't hate me, Mark. That you love me just the same. I tried to do my best."

"Hate you," he said passionately. "I love you with my whole soul. You are the dearest, pluckiest girl on earth—and I believe you are the best man of us all."

"I hope I didn't push Wilkes on purpose," sighed Mary.

"Of course you didn't. It was a Heaven sent accident."

Mary squeezed his hand gratefully, and Mark continued: "We have lost the poor old Professor, Mary; he died a hero, and Donovan and other good men. It makes me miserable to think of it," he sighed. "But it's no use thinking. At any rate none of their lives are wasted. This has been a wonderful night. Anything may happen now."

"I don't care what happens, so long as I have you. I did not know I could love anyone so much."

"You don't know what you can do till you try," smiled Mark. "Only don't try to love me as much as I love you. That would be impossible and absurd. Now let us go; I think it will be pretty safe by this time."

Mary clinging to his arm, they wended their way through the silent streets, for though lights burned in many windows, showing that the inhabitants were aware of the night's tragic doings and disinclined for sleep, few people were now abroad except in the immediate neighbourhood of the Town Hall, where awe struck folk still lingered, asking one another what it meant and what the day would bring forth.

Mark and Mary, with the egotism of love and youth, almost forgot the troubled world about them in the wonder and happiness of being thus together, and they agreed that henceforth they could never be parted. Mary was cut off for ever from her old life, Mark from his. Until events developed further Number 79 must be their home.

"It is a wretched home to take you to, dear," said Mark, "but I have no other, and I don't know how long I shall have even that."

"How can any place be wretched where you are? Home, heaven, and all those nice words only mean for me your arms, whether there is a roof over us or not. What a wonderful thing life is when you are loved."

"Isn't it? I hate to think how short it may be."

"Don't think of it." She clung tighter to his arm. "Let us make the most of what we have, and hope for the best. I want you to take care of yourself because you belong to me, and not to run any unnecessary risks; but you know I am as anxious for you to do fine things as you can be, don't you Mark?" I have never asked you to keep out of danger when you thought you ought to face it—have I, Mark?"

"No, dearest, no. You have been a marvel of courage, and helped me no end."

"I love to hear you say that," she sighed, "and you won't run into any danger that you don't absolutely—absolutely—think you ought to. Will you, Mark?"

"No."

"Not one?"

"Not one."

"You promise?"

"Yes, I promise."

"That's a dear boy. I am afraid I am a coward, but I want to be good. How far are we from the lodging-house?"

"About half a mile. If all is quiet there, you shall go to bed at once, and get a good night's rest. There will be many rooms to spare to-night, worse luck."

"Will there be any other women there?"

"Not until to-morrow. Then perhaps half a dozen wives and sisters of our people, who mean to throw in their lot with us. But you needn't be frightened, dear. I shall not be far away."

"When can we be married, Mark?" Mary spoke timidly, and blessed the darkness that hid her blushes. "Don't think me bold. I am afraid, afraid to be alone. My thoughts terrify me. And I cannot bear to be away from you, sleeping or waking, one moment that I may be by your side. Don't think me too much of a coward. I have gone through such a lot to-night."

Mark pressed her hand till she almost cried with the pain, and rejoiced in it.

"Darling," he whispered. "I understand, I feel just as you do. We are husband and wife now. We do not need any priest to bless us. Until there is a new law there is no law for us either; so our marriage ceremony shall be to-morrow, when we tell our brothers in the fight for freedom that I am yours and you are mine."

"Mark!" She said no more, but his name as she spoke it was more full of sweet meaning to him than poetry or vows, and they walked for a little in happy silence, Mary's eyes bedimmed with tears.

"We are almost there," said Mark presently; and Mary, rousing herself from a day dream, gave a little start. "We turn that corner ahead of us, then another one, and a few hundred yards down the street is our house. What shall we find there, I wonder?"

"I wonder. Do you know, I fancied I heard shooting just now. And look, Mark, what is that smoke?"

"Where? Great Heavens, I believe it comes from Number 79. That is about where it lies. Come quickly."

They hurried forward, almost abandoning hope as the smoke thickened, and there began to dart through it long tongues of flame. When they turned the second corner they found themselves in a street rapidly filling with people who issued, wide-eyed with wonder, from the big dwelling houses on either side. They had been long awake, listening fearfully to the struggle waged so near them, but of which Mark was yet ignorant, and only now, when all seemed quiet again, were they venturing forth, their curiosity conquering their fear.

Mark was bewildered as to the meaning of it all until he nearly stumbled on a wounded man lying on the footpath. Another, apparently dead, lay on the road some fifty yards from the conspirators' door.

"Then you did hear shots," muttered Mark. "They have been fighting here. Oh, why was I not sooner!"

"Thank heaven, you were not," sighed Mary, in spite of herself. Then she clung to Mark. "Find out what has happened before you go any further. Perhaps the police have captured the house. Don't throw yourself into their arms."

Mark hesitated, sorely troubled. He could not desert Mary. He could not turn his back on the burning house without learning the fate of his comrades within. The gesticulating throng in the street evidently knew little or nothing more than he. Then flames burst from the upper windows, and in their light he saw a sight that lifted him to hope again from the depths of despair. Cooper stood on the footway warning off the bystanders, and directing men—men that Mark knew—in carrying out goods from the burning house.

"If there has been a fight, at any rate we have won," he cried excitedly. "Come on, Mary; let us go to our friends."

Cooper greeted them warmly. "Right glad to see you, Captain and Miss," he said. "I feared you was done for, but reckoned we had better save what we could."

"Quite right," answered Mark. "Tell me quickly what has happened."

"Someone must have split on our hiding place. Most likely the man that followed you. Anyhow, twenty

or more police attacked us half an hour ago. Someone let 'em into the house; but we were on the look-out, as you told us. Most of them are done for, inside. One or two dropped in the road. I doubt if any got away. Somehow the house caught fire in the scuffle. Couldn't put it out, and here we are, what's left of us."

"Did anyone come back from the meeeting?"

"Not a soul but yourself."

"And how many have you lost?"

"Conroy and four more—others hurt, but good for work."

"Conroy, too. We couldn't spare him." For a moment Mark's voice shook and his eyes filled with tears, as he thought of so many friends and companions lost in these first few hours of the struggle, but Cooper recalled him from vain regrets.

"Got to," he said, laconically. "What's the next move? Burnt out here—nowhere to go. Fire brigade down on us directly, and like as not more police. Things look blue."

Things did indeed look blue; but while their leaders held hurried conversation the men were wasting no time. They entered and left the house in two steady streams, carrying out and piling rifles, revolvers and boxes of ammunition on the roadway. Except the printing press, which could not be carried off, there was nothing else in the house worth saving. But, for sentiment's sake, they did not forget their fallen friends.

No time could be lost. Whatever was to be done must be done quickly. Mary stood beside Mark in silence, even then, in her trouble, feeling proud to see how all these men looked up to him as their leader. The flames were in possession of the building now, and wiping the sweat and smoke from their brows the little band stood patiently beside the salvaged goods, waiting for directions.

Mark was wrapped in thought, each second of inaction misery to him, aware that an immense burden of responsibility lay upon his shoulders, and for a moment seized with an agonising dread lest he should fail those who trusted him to bear it. What should they do? Where should they go? To remain gaping at the burning house meant destruction.

Mary pressed his hand in mute sympathy. He turned to her with a sad smile, and suddenly an inspiration came to him.

"Mary," he burst out triumphantly, "you are our good genius. The house—Wilkes's house! You shall go there to-night, after all, but not with Wilkes, with all of us."

Then, turning to Cooper, who stood stolid and unmoved: "Cooper, tell all our men to scatter and meet outside the big store in Maloney-street. There are horses and waggons there. Take them, break in the store, and load up with all the provisions you can lay hands on—flour, biscuits, bacon—anything. Then wait for me. Don't let any outsiders know where you are going, in case the police should come down on you."

"All right, Captain. And what about yourself?"

"I am going to risk five minutes' talk to these people here. Some of them are our sort and might join us. I will follow you to the store."

"Don't risk waiting here too long. Things will go wrong if you are caught."

"I won't get caught. Take the others away, and if any of them know houses near, where friends live, let them rouse them up and say we have arms and a safe place for men who will join us."

"And the lady!"

"I stay here," answered Mary, promptly.

"I want you to go and show them where to make for," said Mark.

"No, no," she pleaded. "Let me stay. Mr. Cooper can find it."

"I might if you tell me where it is," answered Cooper, with a grin. "But there is no time to waste."

Mark had not the heart to send Mary from him, and to her rapid directions for finding Wilkes's house, he added, "Take the Brighton road, Cooper. We shall catch you up, and in case of accident don't wait. Seize the house with everything in it, and sit fast till you see how things are going."

Cooper nodded and joined the others from the house, whose numbers had been by this time considerably augmented by fellow workmen from the workshops and sympathisers from the neighbouring dwellings.

Rumours of the massacre at the City Hall had spread throughout the town, and roused the anger of the people; the victory of the revolutionaries over the police and the sight of their arms and ammunition was an incentive to rebellion, with the result that a large body of men agreed to meet Cooper at the rendezvous. Among them they carried away all the rifles and cartridges, and as they departed, followed by portion of the throng, Mark mounted an empty case in the glare of the burning house, and, with Mary standing at his side, addressed those who remained, his audience being continually swelled by new arrivals. Above the crackling and roar of the flames he made his voice heard in a stirring appeal to all those with a spark of manhood in them to rise against the bureaucrats who had robbed the people until they murmured, and then punished that crime by murder. Next day, he said, all Australia would have its eyes opened to official iniquity. If they struck hard they could wipe it out and establish a new era. If they remained inert the yoke would be made heavier. He could not tell them where he and his friends were going, but all who followed him then and now would be welcomed into the ranks of freedom; they would be fed and armed; they needed only to be brave to triumph over tyranny. Those who hesitated that night would be received on the morrow, or at any time when they screwed up courage to the sticking point, if only they could reach the rebel camp. It would be quickly heard of. But they must remember that on the morrow police and soldiers would fill the streets; every man would be spied upon. He urged them to join the army of freedom that night, while authority was paralysed by defeat from armed men, and drunken with the slaughter of the helpless.

His time was up. He was an outlaw, and the police would muster courage to arrest him if they came upon him alone. He bade his friends who stayed behind adieu, and invited all those who would do and dare for better things, to gird up their loins and follow him to the place where he would lead them.

Mark's speech, youthful, turgid and bombastic as it was, created a deep impression on his hearers because of its whole-souled sincerity. The whisper went round

that he planned all the daring deeds of late times, abandoning ease to risk death and brave authority; while the boy and girl, on their improvised platform, against a background of smoke and flame, had pathetic picturesqueness reinforcing the fervent words.

Hundreds crowded about the pair when they descended to the road, and though many turned back again to watch a belated fire engine which rattled up to the doomed building, many men, and even a few women, followed Mark and Mary as they took their way towards the appointed meeting place. Some quickly fell back, ashamed or afraid of the passing emotion that led them they knew not whither, save that it was dangerwards, and yet there was left a band of recruits, determined to abandon their old life and cast in their lot with the self-appointed leader, who so confidently promised a new era of freedom.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE REBELS' MARCH TO THE SEA.

In the small hours of the morning a strange procession wended its way along the roads of the coastal suburbs towards the beach at Brighton, where Mark had so suddenly determined to raise the flag of revolt. There were carts piled high with merchandise, accompanied by crowds of men and women on foot, all marching blindly forward under an impulse which they scarcely understood. They were wretched and hopeless; life offered them nothing in the future, and was becoming even narrower than in the past; and thus, when the band of revolutionary enthusiasts roused the sleeping streets, calling on all free men to join them, there was a marvellous response. No family ties, no ambitions, no treasured household goods, bound the Socialist people to their daily toil. The most it could offer was food and shelter. These confident disturbers of the midnight promised as much. On the side of deafness to their call were the habit of obedience and the fear of authority; impelling response to it were latent love of liberty, and some almost hysterical emotion sweeping cautious fears away. Not one of the motley throng, with the exception of Mark, Mary, and

Cooper, knew the destination of their pilgrimage, which the leaders kept secret for fear that traitors might be among them, or that officials dogging their footsteps might report to authority whither they were bound. In that case Wilkes's house would be seized before they could enter it, for the railway was at the officials' command, and without the supplies and shelter on which he counted, Mark's position at the head of the little army would be desperate indeed. He blessed the traitorous cunning and forethought of Wilkes in secretly preparing for himself this tower of refuge, which fate had given into his enemies' hands.

With his present successs and the promise of what lay beyond Mark felt a wild elation which he could scarcely control. Young ambition and swelling pride at the position of authority into which he had vaulted so suddenly, mingled with his high-souled fervent desire to raise the lives and better the conditions of his fellow countrymen, but he struggled manfully to suppress all pettier feeling, with the one object of proving himself worthy in thought and deed of the great trust reposed in him.

With the growth of the following, which gathered volume like a snowball as it rolled through the streets, so grew Mark's plans in scope and boldness. At first he had aimed at nothing more than gaining the seaside with a few men and the provisions looted under Cooper's directions from the West Melbourne depot; but now he had gone far beyond this, and when the revolutionaries not only met with no opposition on commandeering the horses and carts, but were even assisted by men on the premises in finding the goods they sought, he immediately decided to strike hard while the iron was hot. Several of the storemen showed willingness to join his band, and welcoming the adhesion, he urged them in their turn to seek out any comrades who dwelt near, and sent some of his own friends with the new recruits to assist in persuading others. His personality inspired such confidence and compelled such obedience that soon he had agents scouring the neighbourhood, rousing the sleepers so effectually that the streets filled with curious sightseers, and his train continually increased.

There was nothing now to fear from the police, who would scarcely venture upon indiscriminate massacre, even if they came upon the scene; while he had sufficient armed men surrounding the booty to beat off any probable attack. None, indeed, was probable; he judged it almost certain that the bewildered authorities, even if they heard that suburban streets were turning midnight into day, would wait for the morrow to learn what it meant, and to take measures accordingly.

Marching steadily forward, he told off men now and then to seize other vehicles, and loaded them up with plunder from other stores which they passed. Cooper wished to fire the looted buildings in order to strike panic into the officials, but, though sorely tempted to show his power, Mark refrained, foreseeing misery to helpless people in the destruction of food and shelter, with danger to life itself should the conflagration spread.

But another daring thought took shape in his brain, and he determined to execute it. Half a mile inland from the road they followed lay an armoury, and his new recruits were becoming so numerous that weapons were not available for half of them. They had journeyed for an hour and a half since leaving West Melbourne, and now Mark was mounted on a horse taken from the stables looted on the route. He had ridden in his boyhood when his father was a favoured official and he felt at home in the saddle. Riding backwards and forwards along the flanks of the procession, giving directions, hastening stragglers, encouraging waverers, with a cheery word for all, he felt exceedingly proud of himself, thrilled with the joy of leadership, to which the fact that Mary was near to see and sympathise gave an added zest. She rode upon one of the baggage waggons, accompanied by several other women, among them Cooper's sister, a motherly woman of fifty, with whom Mary immediately made friends. She lived near the store in Maloney-street, and had always sniffed disapproval of Cooper's revolutionary views, holding it foolishness to get hanged for creatures who wouldn't say "Thank you;" but when she learnt the events of the night, she told Mary, she had reckoned that if Providence gave her a mad brother it was for some wise

purpose, and it was not for her to fly in its face by deserting him. So there she was; if you had asked her yesterday she wouldn't have believed she was such an old fool.

Mark rode up to the waggon and paced beside it, while he confided his design to Mary and to Cooper. The latter would not ride, but went on foot with the others, for he said he had never had a horse between his legs yet, and he guessed the animal would rub more skin off his legs than he could spare. He immediately fell in with Mark's plan, on one condition, that he, and not Mark, should lead the raid on the armoury. Mark protested, essayed even to command, but in this matter Cooper calmly refused obedience.

"You are our captain, Mr. Meredith, I allow, and as a general rule, there's a deal to be said against mutiny. But I'm an old man and you're a young one. If you do suffer a bit from swelled head to-night it's no wonder. Your head's a good one, and we can't afford to risk it, and my old head knows enough not to let you do anything so foolish."

"You will do as I order," said Mark, reddening.

"Damned if I do, not about this. No, no, Mr. Meredith. Let alone possible risks in getting the guns, if you leave this crowd for half an hour, as like as not it will start on looting and go to pieces. Ride round. Let 'em see you. Keep them moving. You've bewitched them, and where you go they'll follow. It's because you are commander you've got to command, not to go fooling away after trifles."

Mark felt rebuked, but his common sense told him Cooper was right. If only Mary had not been there to witness his discomfiture! And Mary, secretly filled with happiness that he was not to leave her side on another hazardous enterprise, could have fallen upon Cooper's neck and kissed him for his contumacy. He showed a keenness for his self-imposed task which no one could have bettered, and insisted that it was needless to take away any horses or waggons from the main body. To call a halt would cause questioning and doubt, and with twenty good men he knew where to help himself to all the transport they could need for a heap of rifles and cartridges; so he would quietly give the word to the men he required to drop out one by one, and if all went well he would pick up his friends on the road again, perhaps an hour hence.

So it was arranged, and, enviously watching his lieutenant depart, Mark set himself to making the march of his column appeal as vividly as possible to the imagination of the citizens. Men knocked on the doors of houses as they passed, and sometimes the inmates came out to learn what the procession meant; sometimes contented themselves with staring in sleepy wonder from the windows. But Mark wished to appeal to their ears as well as to their eyes. "If only we had a band," he sighed to Mary, "and there is not even a trumpet among us."

"Make the men sing," she suggested.

"They can't sing, and they know nothing."

"Well, let us give them a lead in that old war song, 'Marching through Georgia,' that the Professor taught us. I love it, and it seems somehow appropriate to the night. They will soon pick up the tune."

"The very thing," cried Mark.

Then he called to those near him: "Here's a march for you, boys. Listen to us, and join in when you catch it."

He and Mary raised their fresh young voices in the stirring old song of freedom, and it went to the hearts of their listeners. They had never heard it, they had seldom heard songs of any kind except the church psalms and hymns, for Socialism did not foster the bards of mirth or war or sadness; but now, urged on by Mark, they raised their voices in an attempt at the tune, and a great volume of martial sound rolled into the air. Someone improvised a drum from an empty tin, and beat the march time upon it. Then there was no need to knock upon doors. Heralded by music, enveloped in a great dust cloud, the rebel column awoke every street it traversed, meeting with scowls from the mansions in the richer localities, and gaining recruits from the big tenements in the poorer ones. And as the newcomers learned what manner of men they were joining, and what was their purpose, Mark and his old revolutionary comrades had difficulty in preventing deeds of murder and pillage when hated bureaucrats

appeared at the doors of the fine houses along the route. Mark shuddered at the thought of the awful reckoning for the gently nurtured tyrants if ever they were at the mercy of a mob whose only God was fear, and who awoke to the fact that their God was dead. There had been no excess so far, because the handful of revolutionaries were the best of the community, men of ideals, even where their knowledge was small; men who hated injustice, even more than they hated its agents, and who truly desired to bring about peace and goodwill, though they would not shrink from striking down all who stood in their path. Later on, unless the ruling classes recovered their waning power, it would pass to the soulless downtrodden masses; and the tyranny of centuries, the massacre of that night, would be a hundred times horribly revenged.

So far all was going well; they had travelled for a couple of hours without molestation, and it was nearly two o'clock. They were on the beach now, where houses were few, and away to the right gleamed the sea in the moonlight, but there were still some five miles to travel before they would arrive at the end of their journey. Then a little sleep for some of them—no sleep for Mark—and soon the dawn of a new day, big with fate, which might give birth to liberty, and might allow it to perish stillborn amid a people's lamentations. Torn by a hundred hopes and fears, weary but alert in every fibre of body and mind, Mark kept his charges together and gave instructions to the men he could trust, beginning, when more than an hour had gone, to feel anxious about the fate of Cooper and his squad. Before now he had expected them to return.

Meanwhile, Mary talked with Cooper's sister, Mrs. Grant, and the other women who shared with them the waggon seats. Mrs. Grant was a widow with one son, who was working somewhere in the Western mines. Some of the others were the lowest class of factory girls, while the rest had brothers, sons or husbands, either with the column or among those who had fallen in fighting the police. Their one idea was revenge; they did not know the meaning of any better life; but the bureaucrats or their creatures had treated them badly, killed their kinsfolk, or inflicted personal hard-

ship or pain, and Mary shuddered at the way they gloated over thoughts of blood. They were confident that Mark would somehow lead the masses to victory; and he was a hero in their eyes because they believed that he had killed the chief of the police and many other officials, while they seemed to think that victory meant turning Melbourne into a shambles.

Mary attempted to argue with one of them, a girl from a cheap clothing factory. "Good Heavens, we don't want to kill everybody," she exclaimed angrily, "That isn't Mr. Meredith's idea. He wants to make better laws and let everyone be free to work at what suits him."

"May be you know a lot about Mr. Meredith's ideas," sneered the girl, "but the more throats he cuts the better I like him. I want none of your wishy-washy freedom. I want to get square."

"Yes," "That's right," "She's talking straight." "Down with the tyrants I say."

Such comments showed that the girl was not alone in her sentiments.

"Why, what have they done that you'd murder them for?" asked Mary. "What good would it do you?"

"What have they done?" echoed one woman scornfully. "Where have you been living? Why, this very night they shot my husband, before my eyes, when he was standing peaceable in the Socialist Hall. They poured bullets on us like hail; and you talk milk and water about letting them be and asking for freedom."

"Pretty freedom we'll get until we're quit of them," put in the factory girl. "They murdered my baby by taking it from me when it was a week old, and when I stayed off work because it was sick and I was sick myself, they locked me up on bread and water till I nearly died of a fever, and ain't had a day of health nor strength since; but I guess I've got just about strength enough to squeeze the life out of the bureaucrats if all their rotten necks was rolled into one."

"Don't argue with them," whispered Mrs. Grant to Mary, who was about to reply. Then addressing the others: "Look here, my good women. I reckon you will want all your attention to save your own necks and blood in the time that's coming, and that it's a bit

soon to make so free with other people's. You have joined Mr. Meredith's army, and you'll have to obey Mr. Meredith's orders."

"Who is talkin' about disobeying them?" asked one of the women tartly.

"I don't know yet. I'm just giving you a friendly warning that tastes differ. Yours runs to murder, but his doesn't; and don't you forget that, if you or your men ever get the chance, and fancy a little killing on your own account, Mr. Meredith will string you all up as quick as any Government. Enough said about that. Talk of something different."

Silenced for the moment by Mrs. Grant's lecture, the fierce women were gathering breath for reply when a new distraction put an end to all bickering. A cloud of dust appeared in a cross road running inland; the rumble of wheels and clatter of hoofs came wafted on the breeze, and Mark quickly disposed all armed men in the column to resist attack. Nearer came the strangers, and, as the moon shone out from a cloud, Mark saw with dismay that they were accompanied by guns. Then the officials had moved with more alacrity than he gave them credit for; had called out the troops and were endeavouring to cut him off from his objective. How had they discovered it? But such questions were bootless. He could only do his best, and sorely grudging the loss of Cooper and his men, Mark had the order to fire upon his lips when a yell from the advancing body arrested him. "Don't fire on us. It is I, Cooper, with arms and volunteers."

Astonished and delighted, Mark galloped forward and greeted Cooper warmly.

"Splendid, old man! Magnificent. But how did you do it? You went away twenty, and come back fifty, and with guns."

"Only two," said Cooper deprecatingly. "Don't know as they are much use, but we can try. The men are all right, better stuff than a lot of the riff-raff we picked up down yonder."

"Let them fall in behind," answered Mark, "and get on again. Then tell me all about it."

There was great elation in the main force as a number of waggons, heavily loaded with rifles and ammunition, and the two field pieces, horsed with four horses each, issued from the cross road and joined the rear of the column which proceeded on its way.

Then Cooper found time to tell Mark of his doings. There had been no difficulty at all. Only a guard of ten men at the armoury. The man on sentry go was half asleep, and did not wake until he was knocked unconscious with a rifle butt. The others surrendered without firing a shot. After the place was in his hands he had foraged for horses and carts, picked up the new recruits—good men—at the same time.

"And what did you do with the prisoners?" asked Mark. "I hope you didn't hurt them."

"Oh, no, locked them in the cellar of a store. They'll stay there till morning."

"Good enough. And was there plenty of stuff in the armoury?"

"Plenty. It made me sick to leave it, but we took all we could carry; might have took another gun or two, but had my doubts if we could use them. However, just to make a clean job of it and kind of waste nothing, I set the place alight before I come away."

"Cooper, you are a jewel."

"I had no orders, but it somehow seemed the right thing to do," said Cooper complacently. "I reckon the folk about that neighbourhood are having some first-class crackers and fireworks to keep 'em lively by this time. You can see a bit of glare in the sky over there now."

"I should think you could. Hullo, what's that?"

A mass of flame burst cloudward through the smoke, and Cooper seeing it, answered laconically, "Explosion. Listen."

A second later the sound came to them, terrific even there.

Cooper commented once again: "I didn't know there was that much powder in Melbourne. Serves them right for keeping it in such a fool place."

Mark felt anxious for the houses round the armoury, but their inmates had been given fair warning, and he could not blame Cooper for dealing the Government such a blow.

CHAPTER XXV.

GOVERNMENT COUNCILS—THEIR TRAGIC END.

Great was the confusion in official circles when the news arrived that Grainger had turned against the Government, and that his lecture had ended in riot and bloodshed. The President, who had long been suffering from the strain of office under the growing discontent, a strain aggravated by the knowledge that there were cabals against him among the high officials, was at first utterly broken down when informed of the disastrous end to his plan of exhorting the masses. He pulled himself together with an effort, and immediately summoned his Executive Council to discuss the situation and devise measures to meet it, summoning also the chief of the police and the officers commanding the handful of troops in the State. The full strength of the Australian army amounted to only five thousand, for shortly after adopting Socialism, and severing connection with the British Empire, the Commonwealth had been neutralised by treaty between the great States of the world, which all desired to maintain trading privileges in the Australian market, and therefore combined in securing Australian independence and territorial integrity. Feeble for self-defence when it left the Mother Country's wing, the Commonwealth rapidly became still feebler. The masses had long entertained an hysterical hostility to militarism; their leaders hated the sound of drums, the sight of bayonets, and complacently accepted the security, contemptuously afforded to their infant nation, as a triumph of peace principles and a great moral example to all the earth.

When democratic Socialism decayed and the bureaucrats usurped all authority, the latter, though indifferent to peace principles, found solid profit in reducing the army to a skeleton and practically abolishing the volunteer force which had lingered on from individualist days. They distrusted the old volunteers, saw no advantage in putting arms into the hands of a force with democratic traditions when democracy was dead and they desired it to remain decently buried. For the maintenance of domestic peace they relied on

a large police force, assisted by numerous overseers who were all, in fact, Government spies, with a handful of regular soldiers and an untrained militia corps composed solely of officials. A quarrel with Japan concerning the Northern Territory, which threatened danger in spite of foreign patronage whiningly appealed to, had forced the Government for form's sake to send every available man to the tropics, where they would be a mere mouthful to the Japanese, if a shot were fired. That was unlikely, for the European concert was inclined to sympathise with Japan, and unsupported by Europe, resistance would be mere folly; but the question was then in abeyance, and troops which might have been effective against the rabble were two thousand miles away.

After the successful shooting and dispersal of Grainger's audience, the police commissioner reported that he believed all quiet. The mob had received a salutary lesson, and he expected no more trouble.

From a spy who had dogged young Meredith news was just to hand, disclosing the whereabouts of the house where disaffection bred, and he thought it well to surround it and arrest the occupants that night. But otherwise he advised allowing things to take their course until the morrow, and then he pledged his reputation that everything would be quiet.

Would he like the assistance of troops, the President asked, in making the arrests he spoke of?

No, certainly not. It was a trifle. The soldiers would merely excite the people. Everything might be safely left to him.

This was reassuring. The colonel concurred with the commissioner in poohpoohing all thought of danger. He would recall his men from Gippsland if that was the Government's orders, but he thought them much better employed where they were. As for sending a few dozen soldiers to arrest boys in West Melbourne, the idea was farcical, and would bring him into ridicule. If a demonstration of any kind were desirable he would get a regiment of the militia under arms next day.

This course was approved, and the heads of the forces withdrew, leaving the council greatly reassured. Most of those present held that the outbreak was merely

sporadic; that a sudden derangement of the Professor's brain had unfortunately occurred at a moment calculated to inflame the ignorant, and that the opportunity had been immediately seized on by a handful of malcontents, whose extermination was a public blessing.

"In my opinion this thunderstorm has cleared the air and done incalculable good," said the Chief Justice sententiously. "The rabble have learnt an invaluable lesson. They will henceforth beware of agitators and hate the fire-brands who brought this chastisement upon them. The prisoners should be tried and hanged without delay to drive the lesson home."

"Would you recommend a special tribunal?" asked the Bishop of the Metropolitan See.

"No; I think not. The affair will be more impressive and less open to cavil if justice takes its ordinary course. Let the men come before me, and the law will be upheld."

"Quite so, quite so," agreed the Bishop. "There should be no suspicion of prejudging the case. We should abstain from all appearance of evil."

The President listened smiling. He was an elderly man of clear intellect, but given to hesitation which impaired the confidence of his great subordinates, and he was suspected of a mawkish regard for the masses, which incurred official dislike. The Vice-president, Phillips, had scoffed at his idea of persuading the people through Professor Grainger, and the President knew from the attitude of the Council that they blamed him for the disaster.

"Of course the prisoners must be hanged," he said with a sigh, "but I do not share your optimism with regard to the effect of to-night's doings on the people. They may regard the police, and not the agitators, as the authors of their misfortune. Instead of cursing the agitators they may curse us."

"Let them curse," said the Vice-president contemptuously. "Of course they hate us, but what matter so long as we keep a tight rein? All this comes of undue leniency. We should have flogged everyone found with seditious literature in his possession. We should have enforced the law against unauthorised gatherings to the letter. I beg the President to use the iron hand. The volunteers should be embodied. I would have them and the police parade the city, and if half a dozen of the rabble gather anywhere and do not disperse on the word of command, instead of arresting them I would shoot them like dogs. If my advice is followed there will be peace in the land."

This speech was greeted with a murmur of applause, and councillors whispered among themselves. This was the man wanted at the head of affairs.

The President felt the significance of the reception given to the Vice-president's speech, and deeply resented the insolence of its tone, though it was couched in respectful words. He frowned and reddened, but controlled himself and spoke courteously. The Vice-President's advice would have his earnest attention. The Council would meet again at nine in the morning. For the present it was dismissed, and he would take such immediate action as might be necessary on the police commissioner's report of the West Melbourne arrests.

It was long after midnight when the report was made. The President ceased wearily from dictating letters and telegrams to his secretaries, for dispatch throughout the Commonwealth, and turned to the Commissioner, who awaited audience.

"You have made the arrests? Is all well?"

"No, sir. The vermin were armed and waiting for us, and I regret to say that none are captured. Some of them were shot, but the police were annihiliated. Only one constable, and he wounded, has returned to the barracks. The building, however, has been fired, so the conspirators are driven out of their lair."

"And what do you recommend? Is it possible to capture the men who escaped to-night?"

"We can identify none of them except this young Meredith. He must have escaped from the hall, but was not seen at the house."

"He should be taken if possible. He is dangerous."

"We are doing our best. I have sent another squad to West Melbourne, and other men to search his lodgings, also those of the girl Jackson, whom he is often seen with, and the house of the late Professor Grainger. I know nowhere else he can harbour; and

if he is skulking about the streets he will be discovered in the daylight."

With this the President was forced to be content. He thought of summoning his councillors again, but what was the use? They could do nothing; and he shrank from their scowls; from the knowledge that all would blame him for the disaster to the police. He blamed the Commissioner. Why did he not take some men? And yet in his heart he knew that the fault was partly his own. He had asked nothing and directed nothing, when he should have insisted on overwhelming force.

While the Police Commissioner lingered, a servant brought word that a constable from the head station begged to see his chief immediately. It was something urgent.

"Let him come in," said the President. "I will see him too."

Presently the constable entered, white-faced, with his news. The dead body of Mr. Wilkes had been discovered in the courtyard of the Commonwealth "Gazette" office. Apparently he had fallen from the second floor on to the flagstones. The body was so much battered by the fall that it was not possible to say whether Mr. Wilkes had been injured before it happened, but he had been last seen in company with his secretary, the girl Mary Jackson, who was known to be a friend of the rebel Meredith.

The Commissioner listened in silence, and glanced enquiringly at the President, who clasped his hands to his head in bewilderment and despair. Just then a fierce glare lit the windows of the chamber and was followed by a terrific explosion, which, distant as it was, made the whole building tremble.

"What was that?" asked the President, after an expectant silence.

"It can be nothing but the explosion of the magazine in Coventry-street," answered the Commissioner. "The glare came from that direction, and nowhere else in Melbourne is there enough powder stored to cause such a crash. What are your Excellency's orders?"

The President paced the room for twice its length without a word, and then spoke calmly to his officer.

"If you are right it is clear that to-night's affair at the hall, the fight at West Melbourne, and this, are not isolated acts of desperation. They are part of a great plan, and mean an uprising of the people."

"It may be so, your Excellency. And my orders?"

"The Council must be summoned again immediately." He called a secretary and directed him to set the telephone at work. "As for you, report here as soon as you can on that catastrophe, and send messages to all officers of militia ordering them on my authority to call out the men. Give all the assistance that is in your power. Colonel Vincent will see me, and will then confer with you concerning the summoning of the troops. Now leave me."

When the Commissioner had departed the President spoke once more to his secretaries, dictating messages of heavy import to be flashed across the wires to other States, and then dismissing everyone, he went to his desk and wrote. Presently there was a knock, and without awaiting permission his wife entered, robed in a rich dressing gown. The President looked up angrily, but seeing who it was, smiled and ceased writing. He slipped the paper hurriedly into a drawer in his desk.

"They refused to let me come to you," she said, "but I insisted. I felt frightened, and could not sleep. What is happening?"

"God knows, Alice. I am glad you have come. The city is aflame with rebellion. Things are getting too hard for me to bear. I have summoned another Council meeting. It will begin in a quarter of an hour."

"I would summon no meeting," said his wife impatiently tossing her mass of auburn hair back from her brows. "I would act myself. You are too easily swayed —too timid."

He gazed at her admiringly. She was twenty years younger than he, beautiful still, and he adored her. He knew, too, that, but for her strength of will, continually urging him on, he would not stand where he did.

"You are not timid," he smiled sadly, "and I am going to be brave; but it is absolutely necessary for me to summon the Council. If I flouted it I should be deposed."

She smiled scornfully. "No, you would not. There is more danger in giving in to them. Will that hateful Phillips be there?"

"Naturally, the Vice-president will attend. He urges very drastic measures."

"Don't let him urge anything to you," she cried passionately. "Take drastic measures yourself, and beware of that man. He hates you, and is aiming at your place."

The President drew his wife to him and took her hand. "Trust me," he said; "while I am alive he shall not have my place. Now take me to the children and let me kiss them. I don't know when I shall see them again in these troublous times."

A minute later he stood by the cot where lay his twelve year old girl. He kissed her softly, and whispered a silent farewell in her ear without waking her, passing from her room to that of his little son who awoke.

"Are you going away, daddy?"

"Perhaps, my boy. I may have to go—to go to the barracks to see the soldiers."

The President's wife glanced at her husband with a strange startled expression. There was a question on her lips, but she checked it, and closed them firmly. It was his affair whether he would go away or not. She left the room with him in silence, and stopped at the door of her richly furnished boudoir, replete with every article of taste and luxury.

"Come to me here," she said, "when your Council is over. I shall not sleep. And be brave; do not give way to anybody. Remember that I would rather see you dead than ousted by that upstart, Phillips."

"I shall remember," he sighed. He stooped and kissed her on the forehead. "And as for you, wake the servants at once. Have all your jewels and valuables packed, ready to depart from this place at a moment's notice for our country house. No one can tell what will happen in Melbourne; and I want to see you and the children out of it. Farewell, dearest; I must leave you now."

He took his way to the official apartments, but noting that his wife's door was closed, tip-toed stealthily back,

and with tears in his eyes softly kissed his dear children once more.

Meanwhile his wife stood leaning her arms on a cushioned chair back, with her face tightly clasped in her palms, thinking, thinking. She guessed what it meant. A word from her would change his intention. Should she speak it? He adored her. She was fond of him, but with a pitying, half contemptuous fondness; and she was ambitious. She had reached the highest summit she could reach with him, forcing him herself indeed up to that height; and she was still young and beautiful. He was not equal to the stress of the times; he must go under; whereas she felt that in the upheaval she divined was coming, magnificent possibilities lay open to the man with strength and will to grasp them. No, she would not interfere. She would let things take their course. But she could not bear to remain in that room, so near her husband's study. She hurried away to the other end of the mansion, to the quarters of the servant controlling the household, instead of calling him to her. There she directed him concerning the packing of her goods. And all the time she listened.

No sound reached her ears, however, and she had just returned to her boudoir, when she heard confused voices from the official rooms; then doors opened; there was a knock upon her own, and a trembling messenger begged her to come instantly to His Excellency's study. Instinctively she knew what she should find there. She followed the messenger with a firm step, and majestically acknowledged the grave bows of some of the councillors, who hushed their voices in the hall through which she passed, but when she reached the study the woman and wife triumphed for the moment over the creature of ambition, and she burst into a torrent of passionate tears.

Her husband, with white face and closed eyes, lay back in his chair, his life ebbing rapidly away. A servant vainly tried to staunch the blood which flowed from a wound near the heart. The tiny pistol which inflicted it was lying on the floor, and the Bishop, just arrived to attend the Council meeting, knelt beside her

husband, holding his hand and murmuring words of consolation and prayer.

"Leave him," she cried. "I want to be with him alone."

The Bishop demurred, saying something of his duty as a Christian to a brother whose soul was departing, but the wife's vehemence overcame him, and he stiffly left the room, the servant following him. She took up the vain task of the latter in trying to staunch the wound, and at the same time pressing her lips to the cold cheek on which her tears were falling, she murmured, "Forgive me. Forgive me."

He opened his eyes for a moment, whispering with difficulty, "There is nothing to forgive. The letter ——" Then his voice failed him; his eyes closed again, and before the doctor arrived one minute later the President was dead. His wife was kneeling beside him sobbing with remorse, his letter of farewell clasped to her heart.

CHAPTER XXVI.

PREPARATIONS FOR ATTACK.

The morning after its midnight march saw Meredith's little band established in Wilkes's house, and gradually it extended its occupation to houses and land in the vicinity. Having posted men to guard against surprise, Mark had left the camp in Cooper's charge, and snatched a couple of hours' rest, being astir at dawn again to relieve his lieutenant in ordering affairs.

Every hour brought more adherents to the rebel camp, the great majority of them men, but numerous women also, for the news of the successful revolt had spread like wild fire from the line of route which the rebels traversed; and with early morning the newspaper containing Grainger's astonishing attack on the Government and its system had set the hearts of thousands of citizens aflame. Meredith and Cooper were astounded at their instantaneous success in drawing recruits to their banner; but the trouble which faced them was how to secure food and arms enough to enable them to stand a siege.

At any moment they expected to be attacked, but the hours went by, and long after midday they were still undisturbed. Those hours were not wasted. Foraging parties went out looting the stores in the vicinity of all the provisions and fuel which they contained, some of the more daring spirits venturing miles from the camp in the direction of the metropolis. The only indication Meredith had that the authorities knew anything of his movement was the fact that no trains that morning came down the Brighton railway line. After a time, indeed, they could not have done so, for one of the rebels' first precautions was to tear up a long length of the rails a mile from the Brighton station; while the station itself Mark occupied, being determined to secure its water tanks and its stores of wood and coal. As more and more malcontents flocked into his camp, the late comers bringing confused rumours of slaughter in the city by soldiers and police, Mark gradually extended the line of his defence, fixing it finally between two points, one half a mile north, and the other half a mile south-west of a headland near the Brighton station, which was the apex of an angle, something greater than a right angle, formed by the beach line running in the directions before mentioned.

The sea thus guarded the camp on two sides, and along the exposed front of a mile or more, which crossed the Melbourne railway, Mark set hundreds of men to work in digging entrenchments, and loop-holing houses, posting his two guns so as to command the two main roads from Melbourne.

Cooper seconded him ably in all his work, and the few other men personally known to them he appointed to subordinate positions of command, which were recognised without question by the men who joined his company. Some of them indeed skulked and idled when set to solid work with the spade, and showed a tendency to indulge in mere looting and destruction when sent in search of provisions; but they did not openly dispute the authority of Mark or his lieutenants, and never ventured to disobey any distinct command.

By half past one in the afternoon there were nearly three thousand men and some four hundred women

within the rebel entrenchments, supplied with food enough to last them, with care, for a fortnight; and of the men about half were armed.

Five hundred rifles and a large store of ammunition had been collected by Wilkes in his destined stronghold; the rest Mark's people had brought with them on their waggons; but it was not enough, and Mark sighed for the consignment which Ransome had promised to send him, and which he knew was on board a liner due from England almost immediately. She would arrive that day or the next. A daring thought occurred to him, but for the time he dismissed it with regret. Other things demanded his attention.

At two o'clock Mary joined him at the entrenchments where he was directing affairs with a number of newly appointed officers, bringing with her some food and a bottle of wine. She persuaded him to take a few minutes' rest, and they lunched together beneath a pine tree in a garden near at hand. He was jubliant at their success, though anxious for the future, and she, gazing at him with eyes full of loving pride, told him he had done wonders—positive wonders. "But, Mark," she said, "you can't trust these people. They are bad, most of them, rotten all through. They are fighting over the food now at the camp, and talking in a way that would make you shudder."

Mark said that up to now he had found the revolutionaries splendid fellows, who would stick to their principles and one another through thick and thin.

"Ah," she sighed, "but the men you knew are nearly all dead. They were the exceptions. They had principles and ideals, and they thought. That was why you could trust them. But these others! You don't know the people, Mark, like I do. I belong to them, you know. The bureaucrats—you are a bureaucrat at heart and in mind—thank God for it—are men at least. They had a chance to be."

The others will have a chance now."

"But they are not fit to use it yet. They are half children and half savages. Perhaps they will fight all right. But if they win. Ugh! I hate to think of it. And if they lose, you would be safer in the Governemnt's hands than in theirs."

Mark grew grave. "I believe you are partly right, Mary. But we must hope for the best. And anyhow it had to be. I would rather we had 200 men such as those we have lost than 3000 like those who have come to us. But we can't turn them away. You'll see me President yet, in a reformed State, so cheer up," he added, smiling.

"You deserve it, at any rate," she said, suddenly kissing his hand.

"I say, don't do that. I'm not going to be a king, you know. I really must get back to work. Why are we let alone so long, I wonder?"

As Mark spoke the sound of half a dozen rifle shots fell on their ears, and Mark sprang to his feet. "Hullo! They are coming at last," he cried, excitedly. "One kiss, sweetheart, there's no one to see."

She clung to him passionately, and he gently released himself. "Go back to the camp, Mary. I will be there when it's over. Yes, yes, I will take care of myself."

He left her in the garden sobbing, and ran forward to the entrenchments, where the men were laying down their spades and seizing rifles, some of them already firing, though no foe was to be seen."

Nevertheless, there could be no doubt that some hostile movement was on foot. Shots had come from the Melbourne side of his defence, and as Mark walked along the lines, urging the excited rebels not to waste one of the cartridges which they could so ill spare, there was heavy firing from the enemy who were still invisible, and two of the rebels who incautiously exposed themselves were hit. Immediately afterwards three shells in quick succession whizzed overhead and burst in the space behind them.

The attack had then begun in earnest, and in spite of all the cooler hands could do to restrain them, the men behind the trenches blazed away furiously, without even catching a glimpse of the enemy. Most of them had never handled a rifle in their lives, and were unlikely to hit anything they aimed at unless they had masses of men for a target; but Mark comforted himself with the reflection that on the other side all

but very few of the regulars were almost equally untrained. Nevertheless, they could waste ammunition with impunity, whereas it might be fatal for his own men to do so.

The firing grew more furious on the other side, and here and there in the distance men began to show themselves on the main road, running thence to the shelter of the neighbouring houses. His own people needed action of some kind. In their present mood they were quite ready for deeds which would expose them to danger, but he feared they might turn and run after they had fired away their ammunition and were asked to remain passive under a fusillade.

Within in his own camp there was much open land—the foreshore of the bay, houses deserted by the richer class and surrounded by gardens, a church within its grounds, the railway station, and some park reserves. A little beyond the entrenchment was a thickly populated district, and as the sound of the enemies' fire grew louder Meredith judged that they must be creeping closer and shooting from the housetops.

His own men were in occupation of some of the larger of the outlying houses, but, a strong south wind favouring the plan, he determined to vacate them, and to set fire to every house near the lines. When the order was passed along the trenches the rebels obeyed it with alacrity, leaping over the embankment and rushing forward regardless of danger. Two of them were killed and half a dozen wounded, the latter being carried or assisted back to camp; but the mob worked with a will. Columns of smoke and tongues of flame ascended from a hundred houses at once; and soon before the rising wind a mighty moving wall of fire swept forward towards the city. Many of the houses were already deserted, and their former inmates in Meredith's camp; more had come in when the conflict began, and now a few others fled thither for safety, though the majority were driven by the advancing flames to fly in the other direction towards the Government forces.

For the time all fighting was at an end, and the incendiaries on their return remained undisturbed behind the terrific conflagration which bore down upon the

enemy. They were necessarily for the time being in retreat, but a heavy curtain of smoke hid their movements.

From the latest comers who had been in touch with the soldiers Meredith heard rumours of doings in the city. The President was dead, and all was confusion. No work had been done in store or factory that day. The Vice-President, Phillips, had been given supreme authority. The prisoners taken the night before had been publicly hanged without trial in Watson Square, and all the volunteers had been called to arms. It was said that hundreds of people had been shot down for merely gathering in the streets, and that several of the ruling class—men, women and children—had been murdered in their houses, and the houses fired by enraged and panic-stricken bands of fugitives.

Mark shuddered at the tale. The passions of the people were at last stirred to their depths, and all the devils of hell seemed to have broken loose from them. He was triumphant at the magnitude of the revolt in which his part had been so great, horror-stricken at its hideous developments; but he was beginning to have immense faith in his own personality and influence. Intoxicating dreams came to him of ruling the storm of passion he had helped to evoke, and bringing freedom and order out of chaos.

The fire had put an end to all chance of attack for some hours at least, and even if advance should be possible through the smouldering ruins Mark had little fear of any attempt being made upon his camp during the night. The Government forces were not of the stuff to risk such an enterprise. Therefore, leaving a small guard in the trenches, he withdrew the men who had been working hard with pick and shovel, and sent others under Cooper's direction to take their place.

He and Cooper had decided to make Wilkes's house their citadel, in case they should be beaten back from their extended line of defence, and round it they had already thrown up a strong earthen wall with a deep ditch in front of it. Behind this wall, which enclosed an area of nearly four acres adjacent to the building, were stored most of the provisions and all the ammunition. Meredith and Cooper occupied the house, to-

gether with some of the associates they could thoroughly trust, keeping Mary, Cooper's sister, and two or three young girls who had wandered into the camp under their charge.

A pier, with a small fleet of fishing boats anchored beside it, adjoined the house, and the landward approach to the pier was within the defensive wall. Some three dozen fishermen who had joined the rebels were the best of all the recruits. Their calling, with its constant demand upon skill and courage, had preserved to them a large measure of the manly inividuality crushed out of other workers by Socialism; and, sending some of them to command squads at the outer trenches, Mark had kept the remainder in the camp to act as a reserve in case of need. When Meredith returned they were engaged under Cooper's directions in assigning quarters to the thousands who composed the garrison, and in arranging for the distribution of rations.

By the time that darkness came on there was some kind of order in the camp. Groups of men squatted round fires in the open, resting and cooking their food; all the empty houses were occupied; to every man and woman quarters were assigned; sentries paced up and down the beach, and the outer ramparts were lined with defenders. A glare in the sky towards Melbourne showed that the conflagration was still raging, though the wind had dropped, while isolated splashes of fire in the far distance told that incendiaries were at work in other parts of the city.

Everything was quiet; everything looked fair, and Mark felt that he was justified in taking leisure to spend half an hour with Mary. From the beach they walked on to the pier hand in hand, talking little, happy in each other's society, enjoying the peacefulness of the moonlit night. Everything was still and strife seemed far away; only the lapping of the water on the beach and the tramp of sentries on the pier broke the silence. Presently one of the latter called to Mark: "There's something out there that looks like a little boat, and it's coming closer. What shall I do?"

He pointed out the object and Mark told him to wait. It was a boat; and as soon as the moonlight

fell upon it they could see that one man was at the oars while another sat in the stern.

"Let it come close," said Mark. "Most likely they are friends, and if they are enemies two of them cannot do much harm."

Soon the boat was only fifty yards from the pier, and Mark told the sentry to hail it.

"We are friends," cried a clear voice. "My name is John Conroy. If Mark Meredith is here take me to him. He will know who I am."

Mary clasped Mark's hand in delight. She knew his deep regard for Conroy, and the depth of his sorrow at losing him. "Splendid, dear, is it not?" Mark said, excitedly; then to the sentry, "Tell them to row up to the boat slip. We will meet them there."

When Conroy climbed out of the boat, Mark and Mary stepped from the darkness and confronted him. Each of them took one of his hands and overwhelmed him with warm welcome. Mary had not seen him since their casual meeting on the Dandenong Dairy Farm months before, but all Mark's friends were her friends, and this one had returned from the grave.

"Wonderful, old man. This is splendid of you," cried Mark. "I had given you up for lost, and here you are when most wanted. Come and tell me all about it."

"Yes, I have a lot to tell," said Conroy, "and so has my friend here, Wallace. If it were not for him I should not be alive."

"I am glad to see him too," answered Meredith. "Come with us both of you to my quarters and let us hear the news."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE CAPTURE OF THE POLICE BOAT.

Conroy's story was soon told. Left for dead on the previous night outside No. 79 Hobson-street, he had been discovered by the second squad of police, which arrived on the scene just as he was recovering consciousness, and he had been promptly thrown into gaol. His wound from a bullet which passed through a por-

tion of his neck had caused great loss of blood, and the fainting fit, which his comrades mistook for death, but, though weak, he was not seriously injured.

Wallace was the warder placed in charge of him, all but one other official and himself being drafted away from the local gaol to assist in maintaining order, and he and Conroy had much talk together. From time to time Wallace obtained news through the telephone of crowds being dispersed with bloodshed in all parts of the city, rumours of Meredith's march to Brighton, and of the preparations made by Phillips to attack him. Then, about eleven o'clock, had come an order to have Conroy ready to be hanged, in company with a number of other prisoners, in the public square at noon. The prison van which was collecting the victims from various places of confinement was to call for him in less than a quarter of an hour. Wallace had conveyed this cheering information to Conroy in the presence of the junior warder, and, handcuffing the prisoner, had ordered him to leave the cell for the gaol office, there to await the fatal conveyance. But outside the door he had requested his fellow warder to go back to the cell for papers he had left in it, and as soon as his colleague was safely inside, Wallace had quietly shut the door and turned the key. Conroy had been overcome with astonishment, but wasted no time in obeying the comands of his gaoler, who had determined to save him. He slipped on the police jacket and cap which Wallace found for him, and, supported by Wallace, painfully made his way down the lane at the back of the lock-up, just as the prison van was drawing up at the front. Five minutes were gained while the other warder was endeavouring to explain what had happened, through a thick locked door; and in those five minutes the escapee and his rescuer had hidden themselves away in the first empty house which they reached. A systematic search would have been fatal, but fortune favoured them in no systematic search being made. They had discovered other clothes in the house, and, venturing out at sundown, had seized the small boat in which, owing to the calmness of the bay, they had been enabled to make their way to Brighton.

While the newcomers devoured the food which Mary brought for them, Mark plied them with questions as to what was going on in the world outside. Wallace had heard it said that the regular troops were ordered back from Queensland, and two or three hundred were already returning from Gippsland, abandoning their pursuit of the refugees in the forests; but, though no official news was published, someone in the police force had told him by telephone that the Government feared an outbreak in other centres besides Melbourne. He believed that the troops could do nothing; that anarchy would prevail in a week or two, and that, if Mark could beat off attack for that time, and drill his men, he would be the most powerful leader in the Commonwealth. Mark felt his pulse beat faster and his forehead tingled at the thought of it. Here were two more lieutenants whom he could trust to help him in his great scheme, for Wallace was evidently a man of ability, and he had given conclusive proof of his devotion to the revolutionary cause.

He asked news of the steamer "Khartoum," which was bringing his consignment of arms from Ransome, and both Wallace and Conroy believed she had just arrived. Some large steamer was casting anchor off Port Melbourne as they rowed past, and they thought it was she. There were no berths vacant just then in the docks or at the piers.

Here Mark saw his opportunity for a great stroke if it could be carried out that night, while the "Khartoum" was isolated from other ships and distant from the shore, and the presence of the two men who told him of the opportunity left him free to grasp it. Conroy needed rest after his wound, but, with him and Wallace in the house, he felt assured that the women would be safe from insult, the stores and provisions safe from plunder, if he left it for a time, and withdrew some of the most reliable men; while the outer defences were for that night in Cooper's trustworthy hands.

Mark was weary, and he slept for a long time in the boat, which, a couple of hours after Conroy's arrival, put off from the pier and headed across the bay towards Port Melbourne. Three other boats followed his, and in them were altogether fifty armed

men. Not a breath of wind stirred the water, but the boats went smartly forward, with Meredith's sailor recruits at the oars. In spite of the fact that their leader slept, a sharp look-out was kept for possible danger—danger not greatly to be feared, for not a single armed vessel was at the disposal of the Government in Melbourne; but there was just a chance that the departure of the little flotilla might have been observed, and that other craft might put out to question it. Nothing happened, however. The coxswain of Mark's boat knew whither they were bound, and he did not arouse the young leader until they were a few yards astern of the "Khartoum," which swung at her anchors to the tide.

Mark awoke with a start when the sailor touched him on the shoulder. "Wake up, sir. There's the steamer right ahead of us."

Greatly astonished, and refreshed also, Mark gave the word to row on, and the boats were alongside the vessel before a quartermaster hailed them from the deck.

"Tell the Captain Mark Meredith wants to come on board," answered Mark. "He will know my name, and he has a message for me from Mr. Ransome."

The sailor hesitated a moment. He knew already that affairs were disturbed in the city, and he could see rifle barrels gleaming in the moonlight, but the mention of Ransome's name—a name of vast weight in their service—impresed him, and he civilly asked Mark to wait at the foot of the gangway.

He went away, and presently the Captain, with several of his officers and men, appeared on deck.

"Where is Mr. Meredith?" called the Captain from above.

"Here, sir," answered Mark, standing up.

"Well, Mr. Meredith, if you come on board alone I shall be glad to speak to you; but you must tell those boats to stand off a little. I don't like the look of them."

The men pushed off from the side at a word from Mark, as he stepped on the ladder, and, ascending it to the deck, he was subjected to curious scrutiny from

many pairs of eyes, for the rumour of his daring deeds had come on board. Two minutes later he was closeted with the Captain in his cabin.

The latter, a kindly eyed, shrewd, old Scotchman, listened with attention to Mark's request. Yes, he had the cases of arms on board. They were marked as mining tools, and they were not hard to get at. But he did not know whether he was justified in handing them over to rebels with arms in their hands. Mr. Ransome had wired him all about it. But his orders were to land the goods in the Company's stores—not to take any risks.

Mark pointed out to the Captain that he was threatened by an armed force that made resistance hopeless, and that this would be a complete answer for his action if the Government got wind of it.

Captain Ballantyne smiled. "I am no so sure of the hopelessness of resistance," he said; "but you're a bold young man. I like ye, and ye're Mr. Ransome's friend. Ye shall have your guns, and if I'm questioned I will say that James Ballantyne gave them up in fear of his life—the biggest lie that in that life he's ever told."

The tackle was quickly got to work; the boats were recalled to the ship's side, and in less than an hour's time cases containing a thousand rifles and a quantity of cartridges were distributed among them.

Mark conversed with the Captain while the loading was going on, learning from him the latest news of Ransome and his wife, whom Ballantyne had met during his call at Colombo. They were not going home yet awhile. Ballantyne praised Hilda with a fervour most gratifying to Mark, and told him she was so delighted with the newness and strangeness of everything in the East that Ransome had decided they should tour there for a month or two before going to England. It so happened that an old friend of Ransome's was shortly due in Ceylon with his fast electric yacht, and Ransome had cabled to him asking him to take Hilda and himself for a little cruise. In the meantime they were going to spend a few days in Southern India, returning afterwards to await the yacht's coming in the coolness of the Ceylon mountains.

Ballantyne did not question Mark about his own plans, but warned him that he was engaged in a desperate enterprise, saying that nothing would give him greater pleasure than to see him safe out of Australia with his sister. Mark smiled and thanked him for his goodwill, no less than for the prompt help he had given with regard to the arms; and when the last case was in the boats they parted with mutual hopes of meeting again in happier times.

The flotilla rowed silently away, two boats side by side in front, two, in one of which was Mark, behind; and the captain of the "Khartoum," going to his cabin, straightway wrote a long telegram for despatch to Mr. Ransome, which he knew would be forwarded from the Company's office at Colombo.

While he was below a motor launch ranged up alongside the "Khartoum." The noise of the donkey engine and the movement of lights had been observed from the shore, wherefore an officer of the water police had come to make enquiries. The ship's officer who received him created as much delay as possible, having recognised that there was some tie of friendship between their late visitor and the Captain, but, while the water police impatiently awaited Ballantyne's appearance, one of the constables caught a glimpse of the four boats in the distance as the moon escaped from a cloud. The reticence of the ship's people in such disturbed times awoke the suspicion of the police officer, and he determined to overhaul the boats, proposing to return later to enquire into doings on the "Khartoum."

Meredith and his convoy had not left the ship a mile behind when they heard the puffing of the launch in the distance, and as it gradually grew nearer they realised that they were being pursued. The men strained valiantly at their oars, but the boats were all very heavily laden, and in any case oars were no match for engines.

Soon a voice hailed them out of the night: "Boats ahoy there. What are you?"

"St. Kilda fishing boats," bawled Mark's coxswain in reply.

"Heave to, then. I want to inspect."

"Go on rowing," said Mark quietly. "And you other men get your rifles ready."

"Ship your oars at once," came the voice from the launch again. "Cease rowing, or I shall fire on you."

Still the boats laboured forward. There was a crackle of rifles from the launch, now scarcely fifty yards behind, and bullets spattered on the water around them.

"Stop rowing," cried Mark, "and fire."

From two dozen rifles in the rearward boats shot after shot was fired at the launch, and a second later one of those in front, steering clear of the others which masked it, also opened fire. Even at such close range, only one or two men on the police boat were hit, Meredith's followers being no marksmen; but the commander of the launch immediately saw that he had caught a Tartar. It was clear that he was greatly outnumbered by desperate men. Nevertheless, he had courage, and his blood was up. Calling for full speed ahead, he himself took the helm, and, ordering his men to lie down behind the bulwarks, he steered straight at the boat nearest to him. The crew saw the danger coming. Some seized the oars and made a desperate effort to cross the bows of the launch, which was met with a salvo of rifle bullets from every boat of the four, but nothing availed. The stem of strong steel crashed into the wooden fishing boat, whose gunwale was only a few inches from the water, and it sank immediately amid the groans and curses of its crew. Some of them went down; others who could swim struck out for Mark's boat, which lay close by; but it also was doomed. The commander of the launch hurled defiance at his enemies; backed the engines, and, swinging round his helm, bore down on the second boat just as the survivors of the first collision were endeavouring to struggle on board. Mark's craft shared the fate of its consort; for, though there was little way on the launch after it turned, its weight and momentum were nevertheless sufficient to capsize the fishing boat when its bows struck the latter's side.

A yell of triumph rose from the police boat's deck, and the captain called to his victims: "Drown like rats there. You'll soon have more company."

Once more the launch swung round to steam on another errand of destruction; but the commander had spoken too soon, and his craft got under way too late. Over her side were hanging rope fenders, intended to ease the contact with ships and piers, and, while their boat was slowly sinking, Mark and half a dozen of his men gripped these ropes and clambered on to the launch. The surprise was complete, because all the crew, with the exception of the engineman and the commander, were crouching beneath the bulwarks to avoid the other boats' fire. The captain, indeed, saw a head appear over the side, and shouted a warning, but too late. Mark was upon him, and he fell, shot through the head, before he could release the tiller and use his own revolver in defence. Then Meredith sprang down the steps to the engine room and commanded the astonished engineer to stop the launch, which done, he hastened on deck again, having seen that the man was unarmed. But on deck nothing remained to do. The crew numbered only six in addition to the officer and the engineer, and of these one was incapacitated by wounds. Surprised by the infuriated fishermen, they stood no chance; and, after a sharp and bloody struggle, some of them dead, some wounded, they were all thrown over the bulwarks into the sea. Mark endeavoured to save the wretch first hit, who lay groaning on the deck, but he had shared the fate of the others before the rebels seemed to hear Meredith's voice. There was murder in their hearts; they were making for the engine room steps, bent on killing any man who might remain on board, and there were ugly scowls and mutterings when Mark barred the way. However, he stood firm, and spoke sharply: "That is enough, men. We have our revenge. Only one man, and he unarmed, is left alive; and he is the engineer who must bring our prize to Brighton. Now, take the helm, someone who can steer, and let us see if we can save any of our friends."

To the other boats, which had ceased firing when they heard sounds of the struggle on the launch, Meredith shouted orders to return and help in the rescue, with the result that the boats and the captured vessel

between them picked up five of their comrades alive. A little apart from the others, a man of one boat's crew caught a glimpse of a dark object in the moonlight, and his hail was answered by a faint cry. The poor fellow's strength was almost gone, and willing arms tugged at the oars, striving to reach him before he sank. They were just in time. Feeble hands clasped the blade of the oar held out to them, and it was slowly drawn in board, one of the crew with a boat hook standing up to make the rescue sure. Then his eyes fell upon the appealing face upturned to him.

"Why, mates," he cried, "blowed if it ain't a blasted policeman—not one of our lot at all. Trouble wasted, but here goes."

He lifted the boat hook and heavily struck the wretched man's head with the iron. There was a cry of fear, a ghastly thud, a groan; and then the water gurgled as it swallowed the murdered man; but all other sounds were drowned in a coarse laugh that went up from the boat's crew. Mark heard it. From the launch's deck he had been a sickened but helpless spectator of the tragedy, and Mary's warning words came back to him: "I know the people better than you, Mark—and if they win!!"

His heart was heavy after his victory. To attempt punishment of the murderer now would result in mutiny and disaster; but, resolved on doing his best to establish discipline on shore, he transferred crews and cargoes from the boats to the launch, and, cutting the latter adrift, made all speed for his camp, with a sailor at the wheel, and his own eye on the prisoner who controlled the engines. Other steamboats were putting off from the shore, and he dared not try to save his craft at the expense of encountering more enemies that night.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MUTINY AND ANARCHY.

A distant clamour of angry voices fell on the ears of the adventurers as the launch drew up to the pier, and, wondering anxiously what it meant, Mark leapt

ashore, almost into the arms of Mary Jackson, who was awaiting his return in company with Cooper's sister.

"Thank God, you have come at last," she cried, clasping his hand. "Something dreadful is happening in the camp."

"Have you been attacked?" asked Meredith.

"No, no; not by soldiers or police, but our own people have gone mad. They tried to rush the food and drink in the house, and Mr. Conroy had to shoot one of them; and now I don't know what they are doing."

"Nothing good, I'll be bound," commented Mrs. Grant, grimly. "They're murderous devils when they're roused—the women as bad as any of them—and I know I wish my poor brother was safe in the house."

The clamour grew louder and nearer, and Mark dared not linger. He must find out what it meant, so he left half a dozen men to guard the launch and called on the others to follow him, also taking with him the prisoner, who was the only man possessing sufficient knowledge of the engines to take the captured craft away.

Arrived at the house he found that men were under arms at the encircling ramparts, and that Conroy, in spite of his wound, was helping to direct them. After the briefest of colloquies, the two friends parted, Conroy going back to comparative rest in the house with Mary and Mrs. Grant under his charge, for all the other women had joined the crowd in the outer camp, and Mark, at the head of a score of good men, hastened to the scene of the disturbance. Very soon he reached the outskirts of an excited mob of men and women, who recognised him and made way for him. Some of them had guns, others carried picks and axes, or improvised pikes made from knives bound to the ends of poles; while numbers were without arms of any kind. It seemed to Mark that there were strangers among them, but he could learn nothing except that half an hour ago reinforcements had arrived in the camp bringing official prisoners with them, and that the crowd wanted them put to death immediately to avenge the massacres perpetrated by the police. Mark made no comment, but clenched his teeth and forced his way

through the throng with all possible speed. Presently he met a small body of armed men struggling towards the beach, and escorting in their midst a little cowering group upon whom the rabble were showering fierce threats and imprecations.

With the new force added to Cooper's, for immensely to Meredith's relief he found Cooper alive and in command, it was possible to put a stronger cordon round the fugitives; and great was Mark's astonishment to recognise among them the widow of the President. pale and wild eyed, like a hunted creature at bay, shuddering with dread, and tightly clasping the hands of her two little children, who clung to her crying.

"What does it mean?" asked Meredith, astonished.

"It means more murder if we don't get quickly to the camp," answered Cooper. "You might try a word with the crowd. They won't listen to me, but your voice may cow them. We are not worse off if it don't."

Postponing his curiosity as to the presence of the prisoners, Mark called a halt and addressed himself to the situation, urging the crowd in ringing tones to act like men, and not to terrify women and children.

"They're bureaucrats!" shouted fierce voices. "Hang them! Serve them like they served us! Down with the tyrants!" And in shrill women's tones the President's wife was cursed with horrible vehemence, and her death demanded because she was the proudest, cruellest woman in the land.

Mark sternly rebuked the clamour. He promised that the prisoners should be tried when they reached the camp and punished if any guilt were proved against them, whereat for a moment the tumult subsided; but presently it rose again louder than ever, drowning Mark's voice.

"It is no use talking to them," said Cooper in his ear. "Let us push on."

The word was given to march again, and the bodyguard, augmented by a few of the saner spirits, but more hustled than ever by the furious throng who struggled to lay hands on the prisoners, fought its way step by step towards the inner camp. There the little garrison was ready to receive them, lining the trenches on either side of the planks which crossed the ditch at

Mark suggested that they should sail to the country at the head of the bay, and there remain with him, or make their way cityward as they chose. The idea had flashed across him that, doing thus, he would at least save Mary and the children from contact with the deviltry with which the city was possessed. The men, however, would not listen to this proposal. They had friends in the town, they said, and they were going to be in the fun, and on the right side of it.

"Very well, then," said Mark, shortly, "go and leave me here. Go at once, and go quietly, without waking those who are asleep. My friends might not consent to the taking of the launch, and in any case there would not be room for all."

The men agreed. The engineer was quietly called without waking the men near him, and eighty deserters crowded on to the launch, which immediately cast off from the pier. Mark had firmly refused to give the deserters any food, or any ammunition but what they carried on their persons, saying that he needed it all himself; and though there were threatening words and gestures, the men gave way. They stood in some awe of Mark, and had no stomach for more fighting.

For five minutes he watched the departing boat with a very heavy heart. Then he pulled himself together, and went into the house to wake Cooper and Conroy. They heard what he had done, and approved of it. If he had not acted promptly, but had sought their advice, the sleepers might have awakened with the delay, and there would have been either bloody strife, or the whole of the garrison would have joined the deserters. Now, there was nothing for it but to make the best of misfortune, and keep a tight rein on the forty men who were left.

After this remnant of the garrison had risen and fed, hard work put an end to all discussion; and, abandoning his second line of defence as he had abandoned his first, Mark devoted all attention to making the house and grounds secure, being reluctantly forced to exclude the approach to the pier from his citadel. The house was two storied and square, strongly built of brick. On two sides were verandahs and balconies,

which the garrison lined breast high with sand bags, all the windows being similarly treated, while a strong wall of earth was thrown up round the small garden and yard, at an average distance of twenty yards from the house. There were abundant supplies of food for the paltry number of defenders, and the cellars were crammed with rifles and ammunition. The tanks were full of rain water; and if the men stood firm they might hope to sustain a siege for a long time, against even a large force, provided it had no artillery. The mob retained the two guns which Cooper had taken from the arsenal, but possessed scarcely any shell and no knowledge of gunnery.

The morning was far advanced when, from a crowd which was stirring in the distance, three men advanced, bearing a white flag. A few yards from the garden wall they halted and called for Meredith, who went forward to speak to them. They bore a message from their friends, they said, asking him to give them twenty bags of flour and a few cases of cartridges, in return for which they solemnly undertook to go away and leave the people in the house unmolested.

Mark replied that he could not think of doing so. Then they asked for food alone. He had claimed to be the champion of the poor, and they were in danger of starving. Everything had been burnt for miles around.

Meredith smiled grimly at this appeal, saying that he was not the friend of murderers and traitors. If they were hungry, why did they not go and join the rioters in the city? His friends wanted all their food for themselves.

The envoys said it was no use going to the city. Things were as bad there, for stores had been burnt, and there were robbers everywhere, and scarcely anything to eat. All they asked was a little food and some ammunition, so that they could defend themselves from the people who were flocking down from the city, and would steal what they had got. They spoke for 500 good men, who would come back to Mr. Meredith's camp and faithfully obey orders if only he would take them in and feed them.

Again Mark coldly refused their proposal, and the men withdrew, cursing him and threatening dire vengeance. They would come and take the food, they said, and he would rue the day when he had treated starving men like dogs.

After this episode there was a period of repose, a sharp look-out being kept all the time, but, until four o'clock in the afternoon, no danger threatened. Mark was with Mary and the President's children; he, with the little chap on his knee, trying to comfort him and parry questions concerning his parents, Mary telling the little girl how important and useful she could be in helping with household tasks. Then all at once shots began to fall about the house; and, grimly determined, every man went to his prearranged post, each with a dozen loaded magazine rifles beside him, for wholesale desertions had at least left them with a great wealth of ammunition and arms.

Until dusk they were subjected to a galling fire, first from the houses and plantations near, and afterwards from their own late entrenchments, which the enemy occupied and used, though many of them bit the dust in gaining their shelter. Finally, as darkness fell, there was a fierce rush upon the house from all sides at once. The defenders fought hard for their lives, picking up rifle after rifle and firing incessantly, but, in spite of a hail of lead, the enemy scaled the wall again and again, and finally the garrison were driven from it into the house, losing half a dozen men in the retreat. There was a short, sharp struggle at the breastworks of the verandahs, and all round the building the night was lit with a wreath of flame from the gun muzzles, while the yells of rage and pain made it hideous; but at last the attack was abandoned, and the defenders breathed again. It grieved Conroy and Meredith deeply that their new but well-tried friend, Wallace, was among the slain.

Next morning came the dreary task of burying the dead, and no enemy appeared. There followed many anxious wearing days, scarcely one of which passed without some demonstration, though the garrison was never again subjected to a hand-to-hand assault.

Harder to bear than anything was the total ignorance of the outer world; the utter uncertainty as to what shape events were taking, and as to whether any glimmer of order had begun to show itself in chaos. Day by day the little band could see ships steaming out of the port, and sometimes they tried to signal them, in the vain hope of being observed and rescued; but those hastening away from the stricken city had no time or thought for the handful of unfortunates whose longing eyes scanned the sea. The enemy had gone from their immediate neighbourhood, and occasionally parties from the house ventured a little afield; but sometimes they were fired at and had to beat a hasty retreat, and they never encountered a friendly soul to give them news of the world. Not ten miles from the heart of a great city, they were as much cut off from man as though in the centre of a wilderness, except that now and again implacable enemies advanced against them across the burnt and wasted land around the camp.

It was the thirteenth day since they had marched with such high hopes to the seaside, at the head of the wretched creatures who had turned on them. The rain was pouring down in torrents from a leaden sky, and the garrison were lounging in the house for shelter, their spirits at the lowest ebb. There were even murmurings about marching with a flag of truce towards Melbourne, and giving themselves up to any authority that might exist; and for the moment Meredith was too wretchedly depressed himself to care. He would have even welcomed another attack, and would have rejoiced to die fighting had it not been for Mary. She comforted him always, always encouraging him, and every day he loved her more dearly. Now she stood on a chair by the window, looking out over the wall of sand bags into the pelting rain.

"Well, we have one comfort at least," she said, cheerily, "it's too wet for fighting. Why, there's a flash of lightning. Fancy lightning on a day like this."

The words were scarcely out of her mouth when a booming noise startled everyone in the house.

the entrance. Portion of the convoy had filed through and the prisoners were at the threshold when the crowd surged down upon the escort with overwhelming force, some of them inflamed with drink even firing at their late comrades, and howling imprecations on them as friends of the tyrants.

Mark and Cooper, who stood by the President's wife and her children, were swept past the gap in the trenches by the weight of the crowd; and before he could guess her design, a lean, fierce woman thrown against them drew a knife from her bosom and plunged it into the heart of the lady under Mark's horror-stricken eyes. Then she turned on the children with a cruel laugh, but before she could injure them Cooper calmly levelled his revolver and shot her through the head. Her body fell beside that of her victim, and the fair hair of the most beautiful and ambitious woman in the State was trampled in the mud, soiled with the blood of the wretched hag who had murdered her.

All chance of controlling the mob was gone, and Mark shouted to his men within the camp to fire. The crowd swayed hither and thither, and Mark and Cooper, each taking one of the children in his arms, managed to gain the entrance to the fort with a hail of bullets whistling over their heads; but the two other prisoners, a man servant and a maid servant of the murdered woman, were lost to sight and probably killed in the melee.

Their friends once within, the garrison threw down the planks across the ditch, piling sand bags behind it; and every man fought desperately for his life against a wild onslaught of the people without. Their long pent-up passions had broken forth and flooded their whole being, drowning all reason and leaving only the rage to kill, to burn, to destroy. Strangers coming to the camp had told how Government authority was utterly overthrown in Melbourne. The indiscriminate shooting ordered by Phillips had been the last straw; his force was not equal to the bloody task imposed upon it; the people had risen in their hideous might, and everywhere officials were defending themselves in their houses, or fleeing to the ships or to the country. Melbourne was an awful red with flames and blood.

It mattered nothing to the mob that Meredith had overthrown the Government and championed their liberty. To them he represented authority; he had opposed their will; and, released at last from the weight which had oppressed them, their one consuming passion was to crumble all authority to dust.

For an hour the fight in the camp raged without intermission, the rabble showing astonishing recklessness in flinging themselves upon the ramparts until the bottom of the ditch was strewn with dead and wounded, while many succeeded in climbing the earthen wall only to be shot or clubbed within. The little garrison, which numbered not 150 in the beginning, suffered terrible loss in the struggle. Cooper and Mark were both wounded, but dared not leave the trenches; and Mark was beginning to despair, when the shouting was heard of more people entering the camp, and the foe drew off to welcome them. After that the defenders were subjected to a desultory fire, but they were spared the hand to hand onslaughts under which they were well nigh exhausted, being therefore enabled to rest from the miserable work of killing, and to breathe again in comparative hope. The first use Mark made of the respite was to narrow his defences, leaving a few men to hold the outer works, while others toiled in digging trenches and building ramparts immediately round the house.

At length the din among the defeated enemy subsided, as sleep overcame them, and Meredith and his friends had leisure to take a little food and talk over their affairs. Nothing, it seemed, could be done but defend themselves to the last gasp if they were attacked again, and to hope that sanity would come to the people on the morrow. Meredith was too much dazed to yet realise the utter shattering of his great ideas. He asked how the President's wife and children came into the camp, and learned that on her carriage leaving the official residence its road to the country had been barred in every direction by threatening mobs, so that the lady had ordered her coachman to drive to the soldiers' lines before Mark's camp; and finally, finding they were broken up, had in desperation resolved on seeking the protection of Mark himself, knowing him

to be a man of authority among the revolutionaries. Mark felt a pang of regret that his arm had not been strong enough to save her; but at least the children were safe and had long since sobbed themselves to sleep in an adjoining room under Mrs. Grant's motherly care. He gave orders that the arms and ammunition should be brought up from the launch to the building; and then, succumbing to unconquerable weariness of mind and body, he fell asleep where he sat beside Mary, who spoke to the others with sympathetic tears in her eyes: "Poor fellow, he has gone through so much. I know that you have done so, too, but let him rest for a little. I will wake him soon."

CHAPTER XXIX.

DESPAIR AND RESCUE.

The night pased quietly, and when the dawn broke crisp and clear a new hope dawned with it in Mark's heart. He was refreshed by several hours' sleep, and the comrades whom he trusted were sleeping in their turn. Silence reigned in the enemy's camp where no one was yet astir, as Mark made the rounds of his narrow circle of defence, encouraging the men on guard, who stared sullenly out into desolation, with no human thing in view but the bodies of those who had fallen in the previous night's encounter, which lay still unburied, dotting the plain. The wounded of his own people were cared for in the house within, where Mary and Mrs. Grant had done all that uninstructed women's tenderness could do, until weariness overcame them and they were forced to sleep.

There was nothing very encouraging in the immediate outlook, but Mark's boyish imagination was at work again, painting roseate pictures of the future. The Socialist despotism had fallen to pieces like a house of cards, at the first breath of rebellion, never to be rebuilt; and surely, as time went on, with 100 staunch followers behind him, he would be able to draw to his side the stronger, saner elements of the community, in order to begin building anew upon a surer basis. Until events developed, and the wild beast humour of

the populace had changed, as it must change when their lust for blood and vengeance should be satiated, it was wisest to remain where he was, holding his entrenchments against all comers. He believed that he could hold them, seeing that the mob must leave the neighbourhood in search of food, even though they might otherwise be still mad enough to attack his camp, with the desperate fury displayed on the previous night.

So musing, he walked round the entrenchments, noting where they might be strengthened after the sleeping garrison had risen from their rest; when all at once he became aware that they were rising unbidden, and joining those on guard. There was whispering as he passed; and after circling the line and pausing a little to look seaward, he found the trenches deserted when he resumed his round. Soon he arrived at the pier, and his heart sank within him on seeing four-fifths of his party gathered there, and evidently awaiting him.

"What does this mean?" he asked, sternly.

No one answered at first, but presently a big hulking fellow was pushed forward to act as spokesman.

"Look here, Captain," he said, doggedly. "This is the long and the short of it. Me and my mates are not going to stay here and get our throats cut. We're going to take that launch and get out of it."

Mark's impulse was to give way to furious anger. He was tempted to flatly forbid the removal of the launch, to order the men back to the trenches, and to shoot the spokesman on the spot in case of refusal. But he could read the temper of the men in their faces, and bitterly realised that his authority over them was gone. If he tried to insist on it now, other lives would be imperilled besides his own.

"Where do you want to go?" he asked, controlling himself.

The man answered, in more friendly manner, that they would land somewhere in the city, away from the crowd they had been fighting; and they wanted the Captain and his friends to come, too.

Mark sprang to the window. "That is not thunder," he cried. "It is a gun."

If there had been any doubt, it was quickly silenced, when several reports followed in quick succession, and the shells flew screaming overhead. Everyone was immediately on the alert, all listlessness gone, and the men hurried to Mark for orders. Before he could speak there was an awful crash; the whole house shook; the air was filled with suffocating smoke, and piteous cries of pain came from the hall, where a dozen men lay dead or dying. The shell had burst among them as they mustered there from the other rooms.

Heart-stricken by the awful catastrophe, the survivors hastened to guard against its repetition. Now that the gunners had picked up the range the house was nothing but a death trap, and all moved out to seek shelter behind the thick earthen wall in the garden.

To this shelter even three wounded men were carried in their beds, for it was better that they should be exposed to the driving rain than lie in the house in danger of being burnt to death or blown to pieces. At any moment a shell might set the building alight and explode the ammunition stored in the cellar. A council of war was held by the party who crouched in the ditch, while the bombardment continued. Several guns were evidently in action, and all felt sure that they were handled by soldiers. Portion of the army must have returned from Queensland, and, if so, resistance was hopeless. The men urged going towards the enemies' lines with a flag of truce and surrendering themselves as prisoners. Whatever happened, it would be better than being burnt to death, or shot like dogs. It was impossible to meet another attack. Mark felt the truth of all this, but his soul was in uncontrollable revolt against the idea of surrender—surrender to a remnant of the authority which he had involved in such a cataclysm. He told those who chose to go to take the children with them, and save their lives. For himself he would remain in shelter till evening, and then try to make his way along the coast to the country during the night. The men urged that this was folly; that he would either be murdered or captured immediately, but Mark was determined; and, besides Mary, Conroy, Cooper, and Mrs. Grant resolved to throw in their lot with his. The children wept so piteously, clinging fast to those they knew as friends, and the men showed such unwillingness to be burdened with them, that Mark and Mary at length decided to keep them and do their best.

Half an hour after the first shell fell among them all the garrison, with the exception of the little knot of friends, moved silently away towards Melbourne, having first, at Mark's urgent request, assisted in removing the invalids to the beach, for another shell had struck the house, and there was no safety so close to it.

While the women and children remained in the shelter of a sand hummock, the three men ventured back to the building to secure some food and cartridges before it was too late. Just as they were leaving the back entrance flames broke out of one of the lower windows, and they made all haste to seek cover before the final catastrophe, when the flames should reach the magazine. The wounded men were fairly safe where they lay; at any rate nothing more could be done for them: and the rest were of Cooper's opinion that it would be well to begin their flight along the sand at once, without waiting for nightfall. If they pushed on as long as their strength lasted they might be far away when the enemy appeared on the scene. So, making their late comrades as comfortable as possible, the other five, with the two children, bade a sad farewell to the scene of their alternate victory and disaster, to trudge away along the shore, from known dangers into the unknown.

Smoke was pouring now from the roof of the building, and a tongue of flame now and then darted through the blackness. The cannonade presently ceased, the gunners being no doubt content with their work. Not a human soul was in sight as the fugitives pressed on between the lonely grey land and the grey deserted sea. The flames roared louder and louder. Mark paused to look back; the others did likewise, and as they looked there was a mighty roar. The flames had at

last reached the powder in the cellars, and blown the burning house to atoms. Fragments of brick and stone fell on the beach behind them, and the sea by the pier was all a-foam, from a hail of debris mingling with the rain drops. Scarcely one stone of their late citadel was left upon another.

"And this is the end of everything," said Mark, sadly, when the noise of the explosion had died away.

"No! No! not the end," cried Mary. "This is only the beginning. Things will come right yet—and there is a good omen for us. Look at that light on the sea."

The rain had momentarily ceased, and a beam of sunlight that found a chink in the black clouds seemd to spread itself into a sheaf of humid rays, its base resting on and silvering the sea. It brought with it answering rays of hope to the fugitives whose eyes were turned to the water.

"Yes, it is good to catch a glimpse of the sun again," said Conroy, "and look! look! There is a vessel making straight for the pier."

Presently they all saw it; a small, trim craft, rapidly nearing the shore. What were they to do? Did it contain enemies or friends? The enemy had no ships as far as they knew, but then they had no friends. They waited with their eyes fixed on the vessel, trying to make up their minds whether to go on, or whether to run the risk of finding themselves prisoners at once, for the chance of being rescued from future dangers.

As the steamer reached the pier the flag at her gaff fluttered in a breeze from the land. "She is flying the Union Jack," cried Cooper. "What the deuce can she be doing here?"

"I don't know," answered Mark, "but my voice is for going to find out. A British ship will never give us up, and at least we can trust her people to save the children."

With quick steps they retraced the way they had trodden so wearily, and presently they saw men on the deck waving them to advance.

Their hearts beat faster, but what could it mean? Until they had reached the pier and gained the berth where the vessel lay, there was nothing to throw the faintest glimmer of light on the mystery. Then to two of the party came sudden light, so dazzling and overwhelming that all question vanished for the moment in joy.

"Mark!" "Mary!"

They looked up in bewilderment at the sound of the familiar voices that called them, and, before they could answer Gerald and Hilda Ransome had raced down the gangway to the pier.

* * * * * *

Late that night beneath a clear serene sky Gerald Ransome paced the deck of his friend's yacht with Meredith, the past talked out, striving to dip into the future. Hilda and Mary, hand in hand, lay wrapped in rugs, cramped, but happy to the verge of tears, both squeezed into one great lounge chair. The remainder of the refugees, including the two wounded men of Mark's following, were all comfortably at rest.

The past, so far as Ransome could tell it, was clear to Mark now. At Singapore Captain Ballantyne's cable had caught Ransome and roused his anxiety, which the owner of the yacht had consented to allay, by sailing forthwith for Australia at full speed. They knew where to find Mark, and arrived only just in time. As to the state of Australia generally, the yacht's people had learned little more than that there had been revolt and bloodshed in every city; that Phillips was killed; the old order absolutely destroyed, and that in various quarters rival leaders, supported each by an armed following, were fighting among themselves and striving to gain power. The attack upon Mark was the work of a colonel in the army who had gathered some of the military faction under him, and was for the moment in the ascendant. Probably he considered that his position could not be advanced or secured as long as the man who stood for liberty, and whose efforts had overthrown the old regime, remained at the head of even a handful of his countrymen. While this internecine

strife raged more or less fiercely in all the great cities, organised work had ceased throughout the country, and tens of thousands of people were starving. The latest news was that Europe and Japan had determined to restore order, and that ships and troops were already on the sea, bound for the island continent.

"And I," laughed Mark, bitterly—"I, who thought I was going to do something great for my country, am leaving it a fugitive, after bathing it in blood, to see it ground down under a foreign yoke."

"Nonsense, man. Don't take it so hard," answered Ransome, encouragingly. "You have done great things. You did your best bravely. It was the material that failed—not you. I begin to understand now that Australia was not yet fit for freedom, and that we were dreaming dreams. It is very hard, I know. But cheer up. All this had to be. The old chains that bound your people are shattered for ever, and you will live to help build up a new Australia on the ruins of the old."

Mary glided from her chair in the darkness and slipped her hand into Mark's. "Dear boy," she whispered lovingly, "don't be too sad to-night. I have you, and you have me. I know that you have not failed, and in time all the world will understand it too."

The End.

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