BEYOND RECALL.

—Published by special arrangement from advance sheets of *Chambers' Journal*.

CHAPTER XXI.

ALL UP WITH ME!

The men continued to work upon the heap; as the new pile grew the rubbish spread wider, and the weight on my body increased, threatening to bury me afresh. But I could use my limbs now without fear of discovery, wriggling myself towards the edge. Now and then I heard the workers' voices. Once I thought I distinguished the governor giving directions; but I was too deeply smothered for their words to be made out. At length all sounds ceased, the earth ceased to fall, and I concluded that the heap was wholly displaced, and search in that part abandoned. I dared not venture out, however; for though it seemed that I had been underground many hours, I could not be sure that the sun had yet set, or that the searchers, suspecting that I was hidden in the earth thereabouts, were not keeping still with the object of leading me to quit my hidingplace.

The enforced rest did me good. I recovered from the first terrible effects of inhumation, and got strength. Yet I was not idle; inch by inch I pushed myself outward, until, at length, feeling nothing but light litter over my head, I put out my hand and cautiously made an opening through the haulm. To my intense delight I perceived a star standing out bright and clear in the dark sky.

I pushed my way out yet a little further, but with such slow and steady movements that no sound was audible to my own ear; and then, getting a fair view over the flat ground, I saw the light in the prison beyond the fire; and nothing breaking the line of the low stone wall that bounded the plantation on the other side, it stood out straight and black against the lighter sky to the north.

It was not that way I had to go. Princestown lay to the west, and the run of the single street was south. Because no patrol was in sight, there was greater reason to suppose that one was to be encountered in the direction I must take. He might be stationed on the other side of the heap from which I was emerging. There was no better spot for observation than in the deep shadow of this mound. Suddenly a short, dry cough convinced me that a man was on guard in the very place I had suspected. I waited five minutes, not stirring a muscle. The man cleared his throat again, then I heard his steps, and the next moment caught sight of his figure, a rifle in the hollow of his arm, in black silhouette against the grey smoke that had driven him from his former position. He strolled three or four paces out, and after standing there a minute, as if looking about, he returned to the heap, and came round towards the fire, passing so close to me that I could, by stretching out my hand, have laid hold of his ankle. A wild idea of tripping him up and bolting for it passed through my mind, but I thought better of it and let him pass. He went as far as the fire, kicked a smouldering ember, and returned, again passing within a foot of the litter in which I was hid; then a little further on he seated himself on the heap, his head and the barrel of his rifle just cropping up above the outline of the rubbish. Clearly he was posted there for the night. How was I to pass him?

I looked about me. To the north and west there was not a vestige of smoke; it must be rolling away to the south-east. If I could get into it I might follow its course in comparative safety. No guard would be likely to stand in the cooking fumes, and they would help to conceal me. But I had to draw myself out of the heap on which the guard was sitting, not more than two or three yards away. Could I do this without making a sound to attract his attention? The crackling and spluttering of earth in the fire were sufficient, I believed, to mask the noise I might make. It was my last chance, and the attempt must be made.

Silence was not the only necessity. The thing must be done quickly, for a casual glance to the right would reveal me to the guard. I enlarged the hole before me through which I had to creep, at the same time working my body and legs to give them freer passage. When these preparations were made, and I felt that the moment was come for the attempt, I glanced to the left. The head and the rifle barrel were no longer in sight. Stretching forward I perceived the guard's head leaning back, the peak of his cap tilted upwards. The possibility that he had fallen asleep encouraged me. Putting out my hands and digging my fingers in the earth, I drew myself out free of the litter; then on my knees I crawled away, keeping close beside the heap till I had the fire full on my left hand, the diameter of the heap between me and the guard, and the column of smoke rolling steadily over the ground before me. I got on my feet, made a step forward, took a hurried glance to the right, drew a deep breath of air, and noiselessly plunged into the smoke. On I went as fast as I could run on the loose earth till I came to a stone wall. Putting my hands on top I vaulted over, prepared for a fall in the deep ditch which I knew lay beyond. In the ditch I stayed to get breath and look about me for a minute or two. Two or three scattered lights to the right marked the houses in the village. I could see nothing else but the wall I had leaped, the starry sky, and the scrubby moorland. The greatest difficulty was overcome. If I could find the stream and follow it up to the cottage where Tilly's wife would give me refuge, I should be out of danger.

"Oh, I shall escape!" said I to myself, with exultation, as I scrambled up from the ditch into the heather. "No power on earth can make me prisoner again."

An intoxicating sense of triumph was all I felt in this assurance of escape. The fierce passion of a brute was not softened by a single humanising hope. The sole object before me was to kill my wife and put an end to my own life as soon as possible.

I singled out a star in the direction I had to take, and, keeping my eyes on it, made my way forward in as straight a line as I could keep: tearing my way through the heather and scrub, leaping from block to block of granite, reckless alike of pain and and danger. In this way I got down into the valley, never stopping till I found myself on soft ground. There I stopped to listen, standing ankle deep in the ooze. I heard the rushing of water, and confident that I was now near the stream I strode on again. Presently I saw the stream before me, its broken waters glittering under the stars; I turned to the left, as Tilly had directed. There was no sign of dawn in the east yet awhile: that was good.

The course of the stream was difficult to follow. At one time a marsh in which I sank up to my knees, obliged me to wade through the stream. In recrossing it I slipped on a slimy boulder, and was carried down by the current a hundred yards; at another time I lost the stream in making a detour about a mass of scattered rocks too great to scramble over. These obstructions I should have avoided had I followed the rough path, distinct enough to my sight when my eyes had grown accustomed to the obscurity; but I dared not go from the stream, for fear of missing the bridge I had to find. As time went on, and a little greyness marked the horizon to the east, a dull forboding crept into my mind that I had not kept a straight line in descending the valley, and by going too far east had struck the stream above the bridge when I turned to the left instead of below it. This fear increased as the sky grew lighter. I might have to go back again; but where should I turn—at which point give up advance as hopeless? It would take hours to retrace my steps; yet my only chance of escape lay in reaching the cottage before daylight. When the sun rose the whole moor would be scoured, and how could I then escape? I said to myself that as soon as a certain star, that already twinkled feebly in the east, should be extinct, I would turn about. The fear that I might do this at the moment when the cottage might be but a stone's throw beyond the range of sight urged me on with redoubled energy.

For hours I had heard no sound but the rushing of the stream; now a strange cry brought me suddenly to a stand amongst the boulders in which I was stumbling along.

"Peewit!" It was not the cry of any bird or animal I knew; nor was it human; yet it might be made by a man. I scanned the way before me with terrible anxiety. Something stood out against the pale green horizon, which might well be the head and body of a man. It moved; whether it approached or receded I could not tell at that distance.

"Peewit!" Again that strange cry. Was it a signal from a man before to one behind me? I glanced over my shoulder. A block of stone, the same color as my drab blouse, rose higher than my head. It was improbable that I had been seen. The object in front moved again. A streak of pale yellow crossed the green sky; the star was gone. Should I go back? If this thing was a man lying in wait for me, it was probable that the bridge by which one might escape from the moor was not far off. Still watching intently, it seemed to me that the head growing every minute clearer against the brighter sky was round, and not angular as it would appear in the well-known warder's cap. Then an explanation flashed upon me—it was the scout of some poachers drawing their night line. The cry, when I heard it again, sounded like a boy's voice. Yet I dared not let myself be seen by him; though an escaped convict had little to fear from poachers. The streak had widened; the horizon was yellow now. It was too late to go back; madness to stand still.

Crouching down I crept out into the moor, intending to make a detour and get back to the stream at a safe distance above the boy. With something like despair I noticed that the yellow bar in the sky was flushed above with pink. Just then I struck a path running at right angles with my course. This must surely lead to the bridge," thought I. Without a moment's hesitation I turned down towards the stream following the path, bending as low as I could to be sheltered by the scrubby growth on each side. Presently I again heard the running water. Then I stopped, and, raising my head cautiously, looked all round me; there was no sign of living creature. I crept on more stealthily than before, and in a few minutes made out a rough bridge before me. On my hands and knees I crept on to the bridge, and again paused to look around. Once more I fancied I heard the strange cry "Peewit!"

All was perfectly still save the monotonous rippling of the stream. Just beyond the bridge stood the cottage I sought—a little two-roomed house. No light was visible; but the grey light of morning was sufficiently strong now for such a guide to be unnecessary. I stole up to the door, and after a moment's hesitation rapped softly with my knuckles. After waiting a minute for response I rapped again louder.

"Nail him, Dick!" cried a voice from the other side of the road, and before I could move a step from the door a man burst from the bush beyond the house, and another leaped over the opposite hedge. I recognized them both at a glance; they were gang warders!

I struggled to free myself from the vigorous hands that grasped me by the arms and throat; but I was thrown down, my arms twisted behind me, and in a moment the handcuffs, were snapped upon my wrists.

While I still lay gasping on the ground, and the men quietly linked a chain on to the handcuffs, a woman's shriek rose from the bridge.

"Oh, Jack, Jack!" she cried, rushing down towards us; "don't let them take you."

"It ain't your Jack, Mrs. Tilly," said the warder standing before me; "your husband's safe enough in Dartmoor. If it had been Jack, he'd a taken that warning of yours: "peewit" would have spoilt us."

Then, too late, I perceived who it was that had stood in the path, and why that warning cry had been given.

It was nearly mid-day when my captors led me into the prison yard. As the great iron gates swung to behind me, I felt that my last hope of escape was gone.

CHAPTER XXII.

SIX YEARS ON THE PUNISHMENT LIST.

The chaplain came into the punishment cell where I was waiting to be taken before the governor. I had not seen him for a fortnight. His last visit was made before I heard of my wife's infidelity from Beeton. He came then to bid me "good-bye," and told me he was going to Norfolk for a month's shooting. His wife telegraphed to him when she heard of my escape, knowing that he was deeply interested in me.

I rose instinctively as he entered; but the affection I had begun to feel for this man was wholly gone. I had nothing to hope for from him now. Without some such sentiment, gratitude is impossible, even to a philosopher.

Nothing to hope for, nothing to cherish. What had I ever received that I wished to retain? All that I had might be taken from me and leave me none the poorer. My very life was a useless burden, to be given up thankfully.

There is but one step from indifference to hatred; that step I had already trodden. Could I but hate the society that prolonged my existence only to add to my sum of misery, the power that had given me life and endowed my being with senses to feel who had inspired me with hope to torture me with despair?

Sensible of my degradation, conscious that no man living was more injured or forlorn than myself, I regarded with rancorous envy all who had escaped my fate. As I looked under my lowered brows at the chaplain, broad-shouldered, robust, with the breezy freshness of moorland freedom in his open face, I asked myself what he had done to enjoy all the blessings of life, what I had done to be denied the lot of a dog.

"I knew I should find you here," said the chaplain unbuttoning his ulster; "no man could hope to escape except by a miracle."

"I thought you believed in miracles," said I, sullenly.

"What has that to do with it?" he cried, pausing with his finger on a button, and casting a sharp glance at me as I sank down on the plank bed.

"A good deal," I replied; "you led me to believe in them; that's why I tried to escape."

"Your failure need not shake your faith in miracles—if by miracle you mean Divine interposition in your behalf. Would your escape have made you happier or better? I doubt it. Was not your capture the very interposition you prayed for—providing your escape from something worse than imprisonment? I believe it. Who are you that you should set yourself up as a judge of the righteousness of the Almighty?"

He spoke with unusual sternness, but his voice sank to its customary tenderness, as, sitting beside me on the bed and laying his hand on my arm, he said, "Believe me, the day will come when you will thank Heaven on your knees that the end was not as you willed it. I am no prophet. A fool could prognosticate as much, knowing what I know. I have had time to learn what has taken place since I went away. Renshaw offered to send a cheque for a certain sum to anyone you named. You promised to furnish him with an address. You did not know where your wife was. You received a communication from Beeton that threw you into a terrible state of doubt. You sent for a friend who confirmed your suspicion; that suspicion concerned your wife, for you did not send her address to Renshaw—forgot that he existed, I darcsay. Upon the evidence of two witnesses—one a notorious rascal—you condemn your wife, and make a desperate attempt to escape, with the object of inflicting punishment upon her. Is it not so?"

He waited for my reply. I made no sign.

"It must be so," he said. "You would deny it if you had a spark of affection for her; and what could have extinguished your love for her but the belief that she is no longer worthy of it? Come, Wyndham, tell me your trouble. Let me know what this charge is that has been brought against your wife. Let me try and find some explanation of it. You may be sure I shall not pronounce judgment till I have found out the whole truth."

"I had enough of the judgment of others," I said, fiercely.

"You have no right to complain of that judgment," said he calmly. I looked up furiously at him. "No right to complain of the judgment that made me, an innocent man, a slave!"

"No," he repeated, fearlessly meeting my wild look with his calm, soft eyes; "you have no right to complain of that judgment; for, upon slighter evidence than that which convicted you in the mind of an impartial judge, you, biassed by passion, condemn the woman whose defence is unheard."

"I will believe no evidence but that of my own senses. She shall defend herself when the time comes."

"When the time comes; and, meanwhile what are you going to do?"

"Nothing," I replied doggedly.

He argued with me for a long while, trying every means that a keen and noble mind could conceive to make me hear reason, to incline me to merciful action. I made no reply, but sat there in obstinate silence. At length he rose with a sigh, and after taking a turn up the cell came back, and standing before me, put his hands on my shoulders, and said—

"No man can do nothing, Wyndham. We must keep moving until the end—onwards or backwards, upwards or downwards—there's no standing still."

He was right, I went from that day backwards and downwards at the same time. Under the chaplain's influence it might have been otherwise, but it was my misfortune never to see him again. The day before he was to have returned to Dartmoor he was thrown from his horse and killed. The governor himself, with tears in his eyes, told me the news.

"He took a deep interest in you," said he, "and thought of you at the last. 'Tell poor Wyndham,' he said, 'that I meant to bring him back into the right road again. He must find his way alone or through the guidance of others now.' And now, my man, if you have any love for that kindest and best of friends, any respect for his memory, you will endeavor to fulfil his last wish. He desired you should have this book for a keepsake," he added, laying down a volume on my shelf; and then he went out quite overcome by the memory of the friend and fellow worker he had lost for ever.

I took up the book. It was Darwin's "Origin of Species." I never read a page of it, and it was removed by the next chaplain as unfit for me to read.

I was shocked by this sudden loss, and touched by the message to me. While the impression lasted, I wavered in the sullen resolution I had taken to abandon myself to the course of events and the prompting of my senses. I even considered how I might begin a new departure; but when I had listened to the cold and meaningless phrases of the new chaplain, and the book was taken out of my sight, I looked upon the loss of my friend as another blow of that power which had doomed me to destruction.

There was nothing in my life that tended to raise me from the moral lassitude into which I had sunk—much to turn what energy that remained into bad channels. Leniently as the governor was disposed to deal with me for the attempted escape, he was compelled to inflict punishment upon me in order to maintain prison discipline, and discourage others from a similar offence. I was degraded to the third class. My blue-and-drab dress was changed for yellow and grey; gruel was given me in place of tea; I no longer took exercise with the good-conduct men, but marched in single file with the worst. In addition to this I was put to work in the quarries, where, with four other wretches harnessed like beasts to the stone truck, I dragged the blocks from the cutting to the depot. The work was brutalizing and exhaustive to one not yet up to the regular hand's dodge of doing little and feigning much. When I got into my cell in the evening I was done up. I began to nod as soon as I had devoured my gruel. I was unfit for any intellectual exercise, and I certainly had no inclination that way. I never asked for a book; never touched my slate. "What's the good?" I asked myself. When I woke with a shiver from my doze I would turn into bed and sleep like a log. Relatively this condition was good.

After a time I grew more cunning, and did no more work than my fellows. You have only to hold your breath, and lay your body against the harness when the warder is looking, to make him believe you are straining every muscle. Then going back from the quarries no more fatigued than if I had done a day's work in the fields, my mind was active enough to need occupation in the evening. My inventive faculty turned now to elaborating schemes of escape and devising means for the purpose. Night after night, week after week, month after month, I toiled at this pursuit, and at length, having hit upon a design that promised success, I put it in execution at the end of a year. It failed, and I again wore yellow and grey for three months.

Not discouraged by this reverse, I once more attempted to get away fifteen months later—that being the third attempt in three years. But this time I knocked down a warder, and was only captured after a desperate struggle with two others; and so I got a dress of black and drab, with the addition of fetters and chains, which I wore night and day for three months. But before the rivets were filed off, I was again at work upon a plan of escape.

"Oh, I shall get away sooner or later," said I to myself, as I nursed my chains; "there are certain things a man can foresee as clearly as death. The luck must turn. It's a game of chance after all—if it's nothing more. Say that one in a hundred attempts is successful, the man who passes the limit succeeds. But there's skill in the game, and that counts for something. I won't be in a hurry about this next one. There's plenty of time. Three months or three years makes no difference to me. I'm getting patient. Nine years of it, grinding every day like a mill horse, makes a fellow pretty callous about to-morrow or the day after. I won't be satisfied with the first plan that looks all right. I'll lay by half a dozen to choose from. Lots of time. That was a fool's game I played last turn—shamming reform and getting back into the Agricultural Gang. I won't do it again. Stick to my quarry pals. We're all villains alike. I'll stick to this line: kick up a row, break the rules, keep on the punishment list, tire the whole lot out with watching me, lead them along one false scent after the other, till at last the real attempt shall seem nothing but a feint, and they let me slip under their very noses. I shall get it pretty hot, that's certain. The warders have almost forgotten that they liked me once; they'll turn spiteful before long. No more tea—well, gruel's as good when you're used to it. All privileges knocked off—a precious difference that'll make to me! Do I want to have a visit from her and her husband? Curse them both! Do I want to write to them, or hear from them? Do I want to know whether she is alive or dead? No, not before I am free! Then—I can't think of that and my schemes clearly at the same time. Where was I? I know what I may expect. Punishment cell and plank bed, crank and irons—ah! they're the worst to bear. Never mind, there's not a hour's pain, not a lingering torture, no privation, no indignity that I have suffered all these years that shall not be repaid. What I have received through her, she shall have back from me. All that I have endured she shall endure. The stone she has thrown shall fall back upon herself. I have a good memory. I have kept an account of all I owe. I have it here in my head. Not a single item shall be forgotten when the time comes to settle up between us. If she have a spark of feeling, I will trample on it; if she retain her high spirit, I will break it down. I see things clearer now than I did. Killing is too good for her; it is not enough for me. She shall live and suffer for herself the remorse she could not feel for me. I will keep her alive as I have been kept alive. I will debase her as she has debased me. She shall lose her womanhood as I have lost my manhood, and become the savage brute I am. We will never part again. We are fettered for life, the one to the other, and when we do it shall be in a fiendish struggle, and bound together our ruined souls shall be delivered to everlasting fury!"

It was thus my plans of escape mingled ever with a project of revenge that became every day more diabolical as I yielded to the brutalising influences about me. To gloat upon a new form of vengeance was the sole indulgence offered to my passions: means of accomplishing it the only employment for my intellectual faculties. As my passion grew, my mental power contracted. It was with difficulty I fixed my mind upon the practical purpose before me. My thoughts wandered away to the contemplation of my victim writhing under punishment. More and more often the slate on which I drew diagrams of the prison, the quarry, and their surroundings, with the signs by which I marked the methods of evasion, would slip unnoticed from my knees, and I lost myself in brooding on the shame and suffering in store for my wife. And yet I had sufficient reason left to see the fatal tendency of this self-indulgence. I was conscious that in time I should become the slave of my passions, incapable of any mental effort—a raving maniac, and nothing more.

But I stuck obstinately to my idea of tiring the warders out; and with some sort of success. I feigned evasion so frequently that they grew careless and negligent. The warders had just enough pride to make them fear ridicule. To be misled by a prisoner, and then laughed at by their comrades, was intolerable. They retaliated by attributing offences to me of which I was innocent. For five years I was continually on the punishment list. "I won't run after you next time," said a warder, savagely, one day, giving my wrist a screw with a steel cuff called a "persuader"; "next time I'll fetch you down with a bullet." The governor himself began to lose patience.

"I don't know what to do with you," said he, when I was taken before him for for the second time in a week. "For five years you were the best man in the place, and for nearly six you have been the worst. I have treated you with the utmost leniency your misconduct permitted. That has failed. You force me to try the effect of severity, and I warn you that I shall bring you before the Visiting Committee for the next offence, and advise flogging.

That night I went to sleep in the ferocious contemplation of flogging my wife to death. Before the end of the week I was again reported. To my astonishment I was sent out to the quarries the next morning without being taken before the governor. The only explanation I could think of was that my case had been reserved for the Visiting Committee. I foresaw that the flogging I had so long escaped was in store for me. But on Sunday there was matter for fresh surprise. After taking my turn in the exercise yard, instead of going back to the punishment cell, I was led into block No. 4, and lodged with the first class men. The first thing I did was to unroll the hammock and lie down. It was an age since I had had stretched myself out on anything softer than a plank bed. Then I lay wondering what had happened. I found that out in the afternoon.

My innocence had been proved!

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

THE KOOLAK A RUSSIAN VAMPIRE.

He Plunders the Peasants of Their Last Kopeck by Usury.

I have frequently called attention to the deplorable condition of the Russian peasantry under the tyranny of the village usurers says a St. Petersburg correspondent to the London Telegraph. The Societe Economique has now published a calculation that the rural population is paying 200,000,000 per annum interest to the koolaks. This is about equivalent to the interest annually paid on the national debt. In fact, the usurers have discounted the state revenues and gradually sucked the peasantry so dry that they are now refusing to have anything more to do with them.

Hitherto when a commune could not pay his taxes the koolak paid and took the crops of the population for several years in advance as repayment. Now, however, by a long process of this exhaustive drain upon them, the peasantry have been reduced to such utter ruin that even the koolaks will no longer lend. The result, of course, will be that none of the enormous arrears will be paid, nor will it be possible to collect taxes until the peasants have recovered somewhat. And, unless a check is put on the koolaks, this recovery can never take place, for as soon as it begins the koolak will recommence his operations.

A few examples will show what has been and still is going on. I take them from a small local paper, the Priazovski Krau.

Two years ago a peasant in the district of Rostoff borrowed 100 rubles at 5 per cent. per month, giving a bill for 200. Not being able to pay his 160 at the end of the first year he renewed, giving this time a bill for 320. He then had 96 interest, making a total of 256 rubles; at the end of the second year he had a good crop, which brought him 200, all of which he had to pay, and remained still a debtor for 56 rubles.

In 1891 the peasants of the village of Karlovna borrowed from the koolak Antoinsheff 3,000 poods of rye against 500 desiatines of their best land for nine years. This year they are buying back their land at 17 rubles a desiatine. In another village the peasants sold their barley crop in advance to a koolak for 35 kopecks a pood, and are now delivering it to him, though the market price today is from 85 to 90 kopecks. Comment on these examples is quite superfluous.

Didn't Mean to be Imposed Upon.

She was an independent sort of a girl, recently in possession of quite a fortune, and she concluded a horse was a necessity in her new establishment, so she sent for a dealer and had a talk with him. What she didn't know about horses would fill a livery stable, but she tried to make the dealer believe she was a judge and told him to bring her something to look at. The dealer came, and she went out to pass judgement. She walked all around the animal critically, as professionals do.

"Is he well-trained?" she inquired with the air of a jockey.

"Certainly, miss," replied the dealer. "She is well gaited and fine in harness."

"Um—um," said the girl; "is she all right in the botis?"

"Yes, miss," gasped the dealer, "but you see I've only got shoes on her fore-feet."

He said that because, really, he didn't know what else to say.

The girl laughed merrily.

"I noticed that, but you couldn't very well have them on her five feet, could you?" she gurgled.

"I mean, miss," stammered the dealer, "that she is shod only on the fore-feet."

"I understand," she said, seriously, "but that can be cured without any difficulty, can't it?"

"Very easily, indeed, miss," assented the dealer, with a great sense of relief.

"She seems to be all right in the fore shoulders, but her hind shoulders don't seem to be quite right," suggested the girl.

"There's nothing the matter with her there," asserted the dealer. "She is perfectly sound."

"There's no danger of her withers being spavined, is there?" she enquired carefully. "I've seen horses like that, and they always made me nervous.

"No danger in the world, miss," the dealer assured her.

"How old is she?" enquired the girl.

By this time the dealer knew his man, and was confident.

"Being a lady, miss," he smiled, "I'd rather not tell her age."

"How considerate of you," she said earnestly, "I'll take her," and the dealer sent in a bill for $250, representing a net profit to him of $100.