

PITCHERY-BIDGERY.

The Turning of the Long, Long Lane.

BY MONSIEUR DEMOULIN.

CHAPTER II.

Not a word of a gasp escaped Brandon during the pursuit, but after he had finished he read the whole through twice, then laying it down, he paced up and down the room. His olive skin had become of a sickly tawny hue, his eyes glowing with intense lustre, and his brow covered with those gloomy Napoleonic clouds, but not a nerve was shaken by the sick of this dread intelligence.

Evening came and night, and the night passed, and morning came, but it found him still there pacing the room.

Earlier than usual next morning he was at the office and waited for some time before the senior partner made his appearance. When he came to it was with a smile on his face, and a general air of congratulation to all the world.

"Well, Brandon," said he, cordially, "that last shipment has turned out finely. More than a thousand pounds. And it's all your doing. I object to your being right. Let me congratulate you."

Something in Brandon's face seemed to surprise the old gentleman, and he passed for a moment. "Why, what's the matter, my boy?" he said, in a paternal voice. "You have not heard any bad news, I hope, in that letter—I hope it's nothing serious?"

Brandon gave a faint smile. "Serious enough," said he, looking away with an abstracted gaze, "to put a sudden end to my Australian career."

"Oh no—oh no," said the other, earnestly, "not so bad as that. I hope, in that letter—I hope it's nothing serious?"

"Oh, well, that may be, but you will be back again. Take a leave of absence for five years if you wish, but don't quit for good. I'll keep your place comfortable for you till you return."

Brandon's stern face softened as he looked at the old man, whose features were filled with the kindest expression, and whose tone showed the affectionate interest which he felt.

"Your kindness to me, Mr. Compton," said he, very slowly, and with deep feeling, "has been beyond all words. Ever since I first came to this country you have been the truest and best of all friends. I hope you know me well enough to know that I can never forget it. But now all this is at an end, and all the bright prospects which I had here, in that letter which I received last night there came a summons home which I can not neglect, and my whole life hereafter must be directed toward the fulfilment of that summons."

From mid-day yesterday until dawn this morning I passed my time incessantly, day by day, thinking of the future thus suddenly thrust upon me, and though I have not been able to decide upon anything definite, yet I see plainly that nothing less than a life will enable me to accomplish my duty. The first thing for me to do is to acquaint you with this and to give up my part in the business."

Mr. Compton placed his elbow on the table near which he had seated himself, leaned his head upon his hand, and looked at the floor. From Brandon's tone he perceived that this resolution was irrevocable, and the decision which he felt could not be concealed. He was silent for a long time.

"God knows," said he, at last, "that I would rather have failed in business than this should have happened."

Brandon looked away and said nothing. "It comes upon me so suddenly," he continued, "I do not know what to think. And how can I manage these vast affairs without your assistance? For you were the one who did our business. I know that well. I had no head for it."

"You can reduce it to smaller proportions," said Brandon; "that can easily be done."

"After all," he continued, "it is not the business. It's losing you that I think of, dear boy. I am not thinking of the business at all. My grief is altogether about your departure. I grieve, too, at the loss which must have fallen on you to make this necessary."

"The blow is a heavy one," said Brandon; "so heavy that everything else in life must be forgotten except the one thought—how to recover from it; and perhaps, also," he added, in a lower voice, "how to return it."

Mr. Compton was silent for a long time, and with every minute the deep dejection of his face and manner increased. He folded his arms and shut his eyes in deep thought.

"My boy," said he at last, in the same paternal tone which he had used before, and in a calm voice, "I suppose this thing can not be helped, and all that is left for me to do is to bear it as best I may. I will not indulge in any selfish sorrow in the presence of the greater trouble. I will rather do all in my power to coincide with your wishes. I see now that you must have a good reason for your decision, although I do not seek to look into that reason."

"Believe me," said Brandon, "I would show you the letter at once, but it is so terrible that I would rather that you should not know. It is worse than death, and I do not even yet begin to know the worst. I have not even yet signed, and looked at him with deep commiseration."

"If our separation must indeed be final," said he, at last, "I will take care that you shall suffer no loss. You shall have your full share of the capital."

"Leave that entirely to you," said Brandon. "Fortunately our business is not much scattered. A settlement can easily be made, and I will arrange it so that you shall not have any loss. Our balance sheet was made out only last month, and it showed our firm to be worth thirty thousand pounds. Half of this is yours, and—"

"Half!" interrupted the other. "My dear friend, you mean a quarter."

"I said half, and I mean half. I will never consent."

"Never."

"You shall, why, think of the petty business that I was doing when you came here. I was worth about four thousand. You have built up the business to its present dimensions. Do you suppose that I don't know?"

"I cannot tell you to make such a sacrifice," said Brandon. "I have not said all. I attach a condition to this which I implore you not to refuse. Listen to me, and you will then be able to see."

Mr. Compton rose and looked carefully out into the street. There was no one near. He then returned, looked the door, and drawing his chair close to Brandon, began, in a low voice:

"You have your secrets and I have mine. I don't wish to know yours, but my own I am going to tell to you, not merely for the sake of sympathy, but rather for the sake of your assistance. I am going to tell you who I am, and why I came here."

"My name is not Compton. It is Henry Lawson. All my early life was passed at York. There I married, had a son and lived happily years—in fact, during the childhood of my boy."

"It was that boy of mine, Edgar, that led me to all my troubles. I suppose we indulged him too much. It was natural. He was our only child, and so we ruined him. He got beyond our control at last, and used to run wild about the streets of York. I did what I could to save him, but it was too late."

"He went on from bad to worse, until at last he got in with a set of miscreants who were among the worst in the country. My God! to think how my boy, once a sweet child, could have fallen so low. But he was weak, and easily led, and so he went on from bad to worse."

"I cannot bear to go into particulars," said the old man, after a long pause. "I will come at once to the point. My poor, wretched

boy got in with these miscreants, as I was telling you, and I did not see him from one month to another. As for the other, my glary took place. Three were arrested. Among these two were old offenders, hardened in vice, the one named Briggs, and the other Crocker; the third was my unhappy boy."

"The old man was silent for some time. He did not think after all that he was guilty; but Briggs turned King's evidence, and Crocker and my son were condemned to transportation. There was no help."

"I sold out all I had in the world, and in compliance with the entreaties of my poor wife, who would not mad with grief, I came out here. I changed my name to Compton. My boy's term was for three years. I began a business out here, and as my boy behaved well he was able to get permission to hire out as a servant. I took him nominally as my servant, for no one knew that he was my son, and so we had him with us again."

"I hoped that the bitter lesson which he had learned would prove beneficial, but I did not know the strength of evil inclinations. As long as his term of imprisonment lasted he was content and behaved well; but at last, when the three years were up, he began to grow restless. I changed my name to Compton, and my boy fell again under his evil influence. This lasted for about a year, when, at last, one morning a letter was brought me from him stating that he had gone to India."

"My poor wife was again nearly distracted. She thought of nothing but her boy. She made me take her and go in search of him again. So we went to India. After a long search I found him there, as I had feared, in connection with his old, vicious associates. True, they had changed their names, and were trying to pass for honest men. Crocker called himself Clark, and Briggs called himself Potts."

"Potts?" cried Brandon. "Yes," said the other, who was too absorbed in his own thoughts to notice the euphemistic. "It was in the employ of Colonel Despard, at Calcutta, and enjoyed much of his confidence."

"What year was this?" asked Brandon. "1825," replied Mr. Compton, "Crocker," he continued, "was acting as a sort of shipping agent, and my son was his clerk. Of course my first efforts were directed toward detaching my son from those scoundrels. I did all that I could. I offered him half of my property, and finally all, if he would only leave them forever and come back. The wretched boy refused. He did not appear to be altogether bad, but he had a weak nature, and he did not get rid of the influence of those two men."

"I staid in India a year and a half, until I found at last that there was no hope. I could find nothing to do there, and if I remained I would have to starve or go out to service. My first thought of doing so. I prepared to come back. But my wife refused to leave her son. She was resolved, she said, to stay by him till the last. I tried to dissuade her, but could not move her. I told her that I could not be a domestic. She said that she could do even that for the sake of my son, and she would work off at much as a situation as nurse with the same Colonel Despard with whom Briggs, or, as he called himself, Potts, was staying."

"What was the Christian name of this Potts?" asked Brandon, calmly. "Brandon said nothing further, and Compton resumed."

"Thus my wife actually left me. I could not stay and be a slave. So I made her promise to write to me, and told her that I would send her as much money as I could. She had broken her heart, and she left her. Our parting was a bitter one—bitter enough; but I would rather break my heart with grief than to be a servant. Besides, she knew that whenever she came back my heart was open to receive her."

"I came back to my lonely life out here and I nearly died nearly two years. At last, in September 1828, a mail arrived from India bringing a letter from my wife, and Indian papers. The news which they brought well-nigh drove me mad."

Compton buried his face in his hands and wept for nearly two years. "You couldn't have been more than a child at that time, but perhaps you may have heard of the mysterious murder of Colonel Despard?"

He looked inquiringly at Brandon, but the latter gave no sign. "You were too young, of course. Well, it was in the Vishnu, a brig in which the Colonel had embarked for Manila. The brig was laden with hogheads staves and box stooks, and the Colonel went there partly for his health, partly for business, taking with him his valet Potts."

"What became of his family?" interrupted Brandon. "He had a son in England at school. His wife had died not long before this at one of the hill stations, where she had gone for her health. Grief may have had something to do with the Colonel's voyage, for he was very much attached to his wife."

"Mails used only to come at long intervals in those days, and this one brought the account not only of the Colonel's fate, but of the trial at Manila and the execution of the man that was condemned."

"It was a very mysterious case. In the month of March, 1828, the brig, the Vishnu, which carried the crew and passengers from the great Vishnu. One of the men, a Malay named Uraeo, was in iron, and he was immediately given up to the authorities."

"Who were the others?" "Potts," he called himself, and the Captain, an Italian named Cigole. Information was at once laid against the Malay. Potts was at once released. He said that he slept in the cabin while the Colonel slept in an inner state room; that one morning early he was roused by a loud shriek and saw Uraeo rushing from the Colonel's state room. He sprang up, chased him, and caught him just as he was about to leap overboard. His creese covered with blood was in his hand. The Colonel, when they went to look at him, had his throat cut from ear to ear. Clark swore that he had seen the vessel and saw Potts catch Uraeo, and helped to hold him. The Captain, Cigole, swore that he was waked by the noise, and rushed into time to see this. Clark had gone as mate of the vessel. Of the Lascares, two had been down below, but one was on deck and swore to have seen the same. On this testimony Uraeo was condemned and executed."

"How did they happen to leave the brig?" "They said that a great storm came up about three days' sail from Manila, the vessel sprang a leak, and they had to take to the boat. The storm was very cruel indeed, and there were no crew traditions; but in spite of all this it was felt to be a very mysterious case, and even the exhibition of the Malay creese, carefully covered with the stains of blood, did not altogether dispel this feeling."

"Have you got any papers yet, or are there any in Sydney that contain an account of this affair?" "I have kept them all. You may read the whole case if you care about it."

"I should like to see them," said Brandon. "When I heard of this before the mail was opened I felt an agony of fear lest my miserable boy might be implicated in some way. To my immense relief his name did not occur at all."

"You got a letter from your wife?" said Brandon, interrogatively. "Yes," said the old man with a sigh. "The last I ever received from her. Here it is. And, saying this, he opened his pocket book and took out a letter, worn and faded, and blackened by frequent readings."

Brandon took it respectfully and read the following:—"CALCUTTA, August 15, 1828."

"MY DEAREST HENRY,—By the papers that I send you, you will see that has occurred our dear Edgar is well, indeed better than

usual, and I would feel much cheered if it were not for the sad fate of the Colonel. This is the last letter that you will ever receive from me, and I leave the country never to return, and do not know where I go. Wherever I go I will be with my darling Edgar. Do not worry about me or about him. It will be better for you to forget all about us, since we are from this time the dead. My best love to your mother, and my dearest husband; it shall be my daily prayer that God may bless you."

"Your affectionate wife, MARY." Brandon read this in silence, and handed it back. "A strange letter," said Compton, mournfully. "At first it gave a bitter pang to think of my dear Mary thus giving me up forever, so coldly, and for no reason; but afterwards I began to understand why she wrote it. My belief is, that these villains kept my son in their clutches for some good reason, or for some purpose. There's some mystery about it. I don't know what it is, but I don't know too much about the Colonel's affairs to be allowed to go free. They might have detained her by working upon her love for her son, or simply by terrifying her. She was always a timid soul, poor Mary. That letter is not her composition; there is not a word of it in her handwriting, and I don't doubt but what she wrote, or wrote out something, and made her copy of it."

"And now," said Compton, after another long pause, "I have got to the end of my story. I know nothing more about them. I have lived here ever since, at first despairing, but of late more resigned to my lot. Yet still if I have one desire in life it is to get some trace of these dear ones whom I still love as tenderly as ever. You, my dear boy, with your ability may conjecture some way. Besides, you will perhaps be traveling more or less, and may be able to hear of their fate. This is the condition that I make. I implore you by your pity for a heart-broken father to do as I say and help me. Half! why, I would give all that I have if I could get them back again."

Brandon looked perceptibly at the words "heart-broken father," but he quickly recovered himself. He took Compton's hand and pressed it warmly. "Dear friend, I will make no objection to anything, and I promise you that all my best efforts shall be directed toward finding them out."

"Tell them to come to me, that I am rich, and can make them happy."

"I'll make them go to you if they are alive," said Brandon. "God bless you!" ejaculated the old man, fervently.

Brandon spent the greater part of that day in making business arrangements, and in reading the papers which Compton had preserved containing an account of the Despard murder.

"It was late at night before he returned to his home. He went into the hall he saw a stranger sitting there in a lounging attitude reading the Sydney News."

He was a thin, small-sized man, with a foreign air, and quick, restless manner. His features were small, a heavy beard and moustache covered his face, his brow was low, and his eyes bright and penetrating. He was in the glance which he gave at Brandon attracted the attention of the latter, for there was something in the glance that meant more than idle curiosity."

Even in the midst of his cares Brandon could not but be struck by the man's air of assumed indifference to the duties as though looking for the key of his room. Glancing at the hotel book he saw ranged down the column of names till it rested on the last one."

"Cigole Cigole." The name brought singular associations. Had this man still any connection with Potts? The words of his father's letter rushed into his mind—"His arm may reach even to the antipodes to strike you. Be on your guard against every one. He has some dark plans against you."

With these thoughts in his mind Brandon went up to his room.

CHAPTER III. "A MAN OVERBOARD!"

In so small a town as Sydney then was, Brandon could hope to learn all that could be learned about Cigole. By casual inquiries he learned that the Italian had come out in the Rival, and had given out that he was agent for a London house in the wool business. He had bought up a considerable quantity which he was preparing to ship."

Brandon could not help feeling that there was some ruse about this. Yet he thought, on the other hand, why should he flout his name so boldly before the world? If he is in reality a man of business, why should he drop his name? But, then, again, why should he? Perhaps he thinks that I can not possibly know anything about his name. Why should I? I was a mere child when Despard was murdered. It may be merely a similarity of names."

Brandon from time to time had opportunities of hearing more about Cigole, yet always the man seemed absorbed in business. He wondered to himself whether he had better confide his suspicions to Mr. Compton or not. Yet why should he? The old man would not be likely to believe anything which would hope about discovering his life and son. Could it be possible that the Italian after so many years could now afford any clue whatever? Certainly it was not very probable."

On the whole Brandon thought that this man, whoever he was or whatever his purpose might be, was not to be trusted. He would not see him until he was sure of his own self singly. If Mr. Compton took part he would at once awaken Cigole's fears by his clumsiness."

Brandon felt quite certain that Mr. Compton would not know anything about Cigole's presence in Sydney, unless he himself told him. He thought that whichever way he turned, trouble at the loss of his partner that he could think of nothing else, and all his thoughts were taken up with closing up the concern so as to send forward remittances of money to London as soon as possible. Mr. Compton had arranged for him to draw £3000 on his arrival at London, and three months afterwards £3000—£10,000 would be remitted during the following year."

Brandon had come to the conclusion to tell Mr. Compton about Cigole before he left, so that if the man remained in the country he might be bribed or otherwise induced to tell him what he knew; yet thinking it possible that Cigole had designed to return in the same ship with him, he waited to see how things would turn out. As he could not help associating Cigole in his mind with Potts, so he thought that whichever way he turned this man would try to follow him. His anticipations proved correct. He had taken passage in the ship Java, and two days before the vessel left he learned that Cigole had taken his passage in her also, having put on board a considerable quantity of wool. On the whole Brandon felt gratified to hear this, for the close association of a long sea voyage would give him opportunities to test this man, and probas him to the bottom. The thought of danger arising to himself did not enter his mind. 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