The Tragedy of Thomas Hearne

"No, not likely to in this weather." He had got his breath by this time and stood leaning on his rifle, looking vaguely about him.

"You are right, sir. We stand a far better chance of being ourselves than of finding him in a fog like this. But one thing is equally certain—he can't get far, either."

It was while he spoke that I heard it—the clink of a boot striking a stone, and that not a score of yards away.

"I'm afraid you are only wasting time," I said, as carelessly as I was able. "A needle in a haystack is easy compared to a convict in a fog."

"I think I must take your advice, sir," he laughed.

We wished each other good afternoon, and he trotted away as a man might slide behind a curtain. His footsteps died out down the road by which he had come as I moved forward.

"That was a near thing, Kingsley," said a voice in the shadows, and I humbly thanked my luck that Hearne stepped out upon the road.

"I've no excuse," I began. "It was all my fault, and—"

"Hush! keep quiet."

He stood for a moment listening like a dog at a door.

"If that fool of a warder had not gone back we were done," he whispered. "The guards cleared as right into the ruins. While they searched them we slipped down the track. Come along, Craig, all's well."

The convict came from the heather, where he had lain, and stumbled toward us. He was shaking like a man with the ague, and the sweat was running off his forehead and down his cheeks in narrow streaks.

"Am I safe?" he stuttered, grabbing my arm. "I've money, many money. You shall have it all!" But I won't go back there—not alive!"

"Come, pull yourself together," said Hearne, with a hand on his shoulder. "We have no time to waste, remember."

We wrapped the long coat over his yellow clothes, stuck the wig over his cropped head, and helped him to the front seat. I took my place beside him, Hearne clambered up behind, and our journey began.

The horse was of the old moor breed. He could have headed us along at a good ten miles an hour if the fog had allowed it, but as it was we rarely exceeded half that speed. It was a miserable time. Craig sat huddled by my side, now cursing me for the delay, now peering forward along the road, while he muttered to us to tell him if it were galloping hoofs that he heard. He was an impatient, petulant man, and I did not waste either politeness or sympathy upon him. It was not until we had passed over some miles of rolling uplands and dropped down a steep descent to a moss-grown bridge, that the fog showed signs of breaking. As we strained up the opposite hill it began to lift away in flying wisps like the smoke of great guns, giving us glimpses of a narrow slope of turf, ending in a cliff, at the foot of which an unseen river hissed and chuckled.

"I helped you loyally—you have no complaint against me?" asked Hearne, tapping me suddenly on the shoulder.

"I might never wish a better comrade," I told him.

"That is how I hope you will always think of me."

He was not a kind of man to talk sentiment, and I glanced back in surprise. There was an expression of peace upon him, such as I have never seen in a human countenance, either before or since. He smiled, and reaching over gave my hand a squeeze.

"You have the making of a good fellow in you," he said. "May the fates forget your follies."

We drove on in silence for awhile, and then the old man rose, kneeling upon the cushions of the back seat.

"Here comes the sun, Julius Craig," he said. "The mists are scattering, and the world comes peeping through to welcome you back to freedom. Women and wine and cards—does the old spirit stir within you?"

"And who the devil may you be?" asked the convict, turning upon him.

"Have five years changed me so much? Perhaps my beard is whiter than it was the night you fled with her to the yacht in Cadiz bay."

The convict gave a mingled cry, like a beast in pain, shrinking back, with his face one gray mask of fear.

"Not Mortimer!" he whispered. "It can't be Mortimer. He died."

"You are quite mistaken," said Hearne quietly.

It all happened very swiftly—in one long breath or so, it seemed to me. Craig sprang from his seat and ran wildly down the slope, but the old man was not five yards behind him. I believe that the convict had the pace of him, but the cliff turned Craig to the right, and the next moment they had slowed, and hung, swaying upon the edge.

The flicker of a knife, a shrill, piping cry, and they were gone.

I was alone in the great silence, save for the faint murmurs of the stream as it fought the rocks below.

It took me ten minutes and more to reach them, for I had to skirt the cliff until a slide of granite boulders gave me a path to the bottom. Craig was dead, the knife had done its work, but the old man was alive. Though his grave blue eyes were glazing fast, He recognized me, and smiled very, very faintly. I raised his head upon my arm, and wiped his wrinkled face with my handkerchief.

"Is he dead?"

"Yes," I told him.

"I was—manager of a mine in Spain," he whispered. "My daughter—he took her to his yacht—scoundrel was married already—she died in London."

There was no veneration in his face now, he faltered on as simply as a little child.

"Long search—found he was in prison—came to kill him. I met you—to help him escape—seemed a better way. Then he would know why he had to die—if I had shot him over fudge he would never have understood—sorry for you—had to do my duty—he him."

His head fell back with a long sigh, so that I thought all was over, but presently he rallied again, in the last God's effort at life which even a man with a broken back will make.

"Not a sin, Mary dear," he called. "How can they tell you it was murder when they know?"

He finished his explanation in another world.

That is about all I need tell you. I found the horse grazing by the roadside and drove to Ashburton with no great care whether they caught me or not. Yet I was back in London before they found the bodies.

* * *

So ended the story of John Henderson, as Inspector Peare told it to me.

"And you?" I asked.

"I suspected that 'Kingsley' had helped in the escape, but I never identified him with Jack Henderson. Who Thomas Hearne might be or why he killed the convict I could never find out. So I called, but I don't know that I am ashamed of it—all things considered."

"Did Henderson die in the hospital?"

"No; they rallied him round. Some old friends found him a place in some racing stables. He is there now."

"He had broken several sorts of laws," I suggested. "When he recovered didn't you—"

"No, I didn't," said the inspector, firmly. "I let him go free—and without straining my conscience, either."

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