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THE GIPSIES OF GREY CRYPT.



A hand appeared through the aperture caused by the broken glass. The light of the lamp on the table glinted along the barrel of a revolver.

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The Gipsies of Grey Crypt.

By CAPT. ERIC BROWN.

CHAPTER I. THE VISIT OF LAVENGRO.

The gardens of Grey Crypt were one tangle of weed and underwood. Time was when they had been the showplace of the county. But that was before Jasper Gordon had renounced the world, dismissed nearly all his servants, and retired, never to be seen again beyond his own lodge gates.

Why he had done this thing still remains a mystery.

It was near midnight, and pitch-dark. Outside the rain was pouring down, and the wind was blowing fitfully. Only three rooms in that vast old house were used—a sitting-room, where even the food was cooked, and two bedrooms, one for Gordon and the other for his old serving-man, Robert Gittoes.

There were large reception-rooms, long, gloomy passages, and beneath a crypt a set of vaults so large that an army might hide there. But not for years had Gordon or his servant been down there.

Jasper Gordon was thinking about bed. Suddenly a great bell jangled in the hall, setting all the startled echoes of the place flying. Gordon turned pale as death.

"It must have been the wind," he said fearfully.

"Not it!" retorted Gittoes, with all the familiarity of an old servant. "It would take a good strong hand to pull that bell."

Again the bell rang; this time impatiently. Three fierce bloodhounds roamed those desolate gardens every night; all the windows had steel-lined shutters; the big door was similarly treated. For there was a terrible reason why Gordon should keep himself secluded from his fellows.

"Better go and see who is there," Gordon muttered.

Gittoes shuffled away. Gordon's face twitched anxiously. He seemed to have grown old and grey suddenly, though he was a powerful man of fifty. Then Gittoes returned, with a face as pallid as his master's.

"It's Lavengro!" he faltered. "He insists upon seeing you."

A tall, powerful man of about thirty followed. He had dark eyes and hair; his skin was tanned to a deep bronze. There was a look on his face that told of a savage and vindictive nature.

"So I have found you at last!" he said, with a smile of triumph. "You told the world you were going abroad. Your neighbours think that Gittoes is alone here. A very pretty idea, but you were bound to be discovered sooner or later. I have only to send a message to our secret society, the Silent Avengers, at St. Petersburg—"

"And my life would be forfeited," said Gordon. "Well, it would not much matter. It is not worth living anyhow. I left the league because I would not do murder, and I betrayed those who would. They have hunted and followed me all over the world, and I suppose you are to be my executioner?"

Lavengro smiled in sinister fashion.

"No," he said. "I, too, am under the ban of the league. For a large sum of money I acted the traitor, and they found me out. I was forced to return to my gipsy tribe again. I am an old Romany, you know—the head of a band. A little time ago we came to England. But they hunt us from pillar to post here, and we are sorely pressed. The tribe are camped here now. There are no women amongst us, save old Elspeth and an adopted child of one of my band."

"Then what do you want with me?" Gordon asked.

Lavengro turned to Gittoes and bade him away out of earshot. "This," he whispered. "I want a place that we can make our headquarters; a place where the police will not dream of looking for us. Now, in return for keeping your secret, you are going to grant me a favour. You are going to allow my people to use the crypt under the house."

Gordon protested, but in vain. Lavengro met every objection with some argument.

"We shall not interfere with you," he said sternly. "Nobody will be any the wiser. Grant our request, or assuredly your life is forfeited."

"It is certain to be found out!" Gordon muttered. "And I feel equally certain that you want the place for no good."

"We don't want it for a free library," Lavengro sneered.



A shadowy-looking figure
crept in.

"We have suffered at the hands of society, and society is going to pay for it. Come, no nonsense! What do you intend to do?"

Gordon said nothing. He knew that he was bound to obey. He knew Lavengro, and could guess at the nature of his followers; and yet, if he failed to obey, death stared him in the face.

"Speak!" cried Lavengro. "Why do you hesitate, man?"

"I am entirely in your hands," Gordon replied.

A dark triumph flashed in Lavengro's eyes. Then he took up his hat and strode from the room without another word.

CHAPTER II.

THE FIGHT WITH THE KEEPERS.

"Lavengro, why do you do these wicked things?"

The head of the gipsies smiled down into the lovely face of

the speaker. Unlike the rest of the tribe, Aurora had chestnut hair and lovely blue eyes. She was the only woman, save Elspeth, amongst that lawless band, and they treated her like a queen. But the beautiful Aurora, as she was called, was rendered miserable by these desperate deeds. She hated her present life, and despised all around her. Who she was and where she had come from, as to her friends, she knew nothing. That she was not a gipsy was certain, and as to the rest Aurora knew nothing.

Only a fortnight had passed since the midnight interview between Lavengro and Gordon. Since then they had not met. But already the gipsies had taken possession of the crypt, and altered it beyond recognition.

The floors were covered with rare skins and rugs, the walls were hung with tapestry. A score of lamps gave a brilliant light. Articles of beauty and luxury were scattered on all sides. Evidently this band possessed the means of living in a style that the most fastidious might envy.

In so secluded a spot as this they could pursue their nefarious career without the least risk of discovery. Money they appeared to have in plenty. Two or three men were always working in a secret chamber, where Aurora was not allowed to penetrate. Then one of the band would disappear for a few days, only to return with money, with which all that was required was purchased in a distant town.

But further excitement and adventure their fierce natures required.

Lavengro stood up in the centre of the great hall of the crypt, with his swarthy followers all around him. They were all dressed as for the woods, and each man carried a gun, and a game-bag slung over his shoulder.

"You are rash to madness!" Aurora exclaimed.

"Adventure is as the air we breathe," said Lavengro. "Have no fear for our safety, little one. All we require is a little sporting exercise with Sir William Summers's pheasants at Whitacre. They will never take us."

Aurora turned away with a pain at her heart. She longed for some chance to get away from this lawless band. And yet she could go nowhere, for she had no money, and not a single friend in the world.

"We are wasting time here," said Magnam, a swarthy Hungarian, a powerful ruffian, who was second in command; "we must be moving."

Lavengro gave the signal, and the band moved forward. There were ten of them altogether, wiry and muscular and utterly reckless every one of them. They crept out of the vault into the chilly air of the October night, and struck out across the deserted grounds with the instincts of men who know exactly where they are going. A knowledge of woodcraft is born in the true Roman.

Across the fields they went, over hedges and ditches, in silence, until they came to the edge of the thick woods where the baronet's pheasants were in thousands. It was evidently not the first visit of the band there.

"Scatter!" Lavengro commanded. "Go down the sides in parties of three, and if the keepers are about give the signal. After what happened last week, I should not be surprised if they are here."

The band broke up and scattered. There was a faint light in the sky, and upon the dripping branches of the trees the beautiful birds could be seen resting. A reckless courage filled the gipsies. With a laugh, Lavengro levelled his gun, and brought a pheasant to the ground.

Immediately the firing became general. A regular fusillade of shots echoed through the woods. In a little time quite a pile of pheasants lay at the feet of Lavengro and his companions. They began to grow tired of the sport. There was evidently no danger this evening.

Suddenly Lavengro cocked his ears, listening intently. The slightest sound was not lost upon him. His companions watched him.

"Any danger coming?" asked one.

"Men hurrying this way," said Lavengro; "several of them. And they are a great deal nearer than I imagined. Ah, here they are!"

Six keepers burst, with a yell, into the clearing. They were all armed with sticks and bludgeons, but no guns appeared. The head-keeper advanced angrily in the direction of Lavengro's band.

"So we have got you at last, you poaching rascals!" yelled the keeper. "Turn on the lantern, Bill, and let's have a look at 'em."

"The man who touches that lantern dies!" said Lavengro sternly. "Stand aside and let us pass! We are armed, and you are not. If you force us to use our guns, we shall be sure to do so!"

An awkward pause followed. The head-keeper looked angry, yet irresolute. Then he snatched the lantern from Bill's hand.

It was a fatal thing to do. Before the rays of light could be

swung round in the direction of the poachers Lavengro had raised his gun and fired. With a groan, the keeper fell bleeding and helpless on the grass.

But the others were not done with yet. At the sight of the fall of their leaders they rushed forward, exasperated almost to madness. One or two more shots were fired, without doing much damage, then the keepers closed.

The fight looked like being a short one, so far as the poachers were concerned. A big, hulking countryman came at Lavengro, who sent him staggering with a smashing blow on the forehead; but the peasant was as hard as nails.

He came on again, and this time he got a grip on Lavengro. Exert all his strength as he might, the latter could not throw off his antagonist. Slowly yet surely the other forced Lavengro back until he had his shoulders to the ground.

It was no time to waste. Lavengro got his fingers to his lips and gave a long, piercing whistle. By this time most of the gipsies had been overpowered, and their weapons taken possession of, and the keepers were grimly watching over their prisoners, who kept their features obstinately concealed.

"I guess we've got 'im now, lads!" said one triumphantly.

At the same moment the rest of Lavengro's band burst upon the scene. They had heard the signal, and hurried to the spot. Without waiting to argue, they poured a volley of shot into the keepers.

Then followed yells and cries and curses, another fierce struggle, and the man who had got the better of Lavengro fell stunned by a blow from the butt-end of a gun. Lavengro jumped to his feet.

"You did that very well, lads!" he cried. "I don't think those fellows are likely to follow us any further. Come along."

And the gipsies disappeared into the darkness. For the present the keepers deemed discretion to be the better part of valour. The head-keeper had been dangerously wounded, and two others were suffering from loss of blood. Meanwhile, the last sounds of Lavengro's band had passed away.

"Were you hurt?" Magnam demanded.

"A few scratches!" Lavengro laughed. "No more. My watchchain has been broken into pieces. That fellow was too much for me. We shall have to lie low for a bit after this. No more poaching this side of Christmas."

And then the gang marched on in silence.

CHAPTER III.

THE BURGLARY AT WHITACRE.

The whole village was thrilling with excitement over the outrage committed by a daring gang of poachers in Sir William Summers' woods. In vain the police were called in; but they could make nothing of the matter.

Certain well-known poachers in the district easily proved their innocence. All the police could say was that the rascals must have come from a big, distant town.

"There's nobody about here that wears a gold chain, Sir William," said the chief of the police. "Here's the piece that Horrocks found after the fray."

Sir William started as he looked at the curiously formed links. But he made no comment as he asked permission to retain it for a time.

"I'm not going to let this matter drop," he said. "Of course, you will do the best you can; but I shall have a man of my own down from Scotland Yard."

The officer saluted and departed. There was a grave look on Sir William's handsome face as he crossed the great hall in the direction of the drawing-room, where he found Lady Summers over a book. A sweet-faced lady she was, but with the shadow of some trouble in her eyes.

"My dear," she said, "what is the matter?"

"It seems to me that I have made a singular discovery," said Sir William. "One of those poachers was wearing a gold chain, and in the struggle it got broken. Horrocks picked up a fragment of it. I rather fancy that you will say you have seen something very much like it before."

And Sir William handed the gold links to his wife. They were of the most beautiful and ingenious workmanship, something quite unique in their way. Lady Summers handled them with a deep agitation.

"It is the same chain," she said, "the very same that our dear child was wearing at the time she was stolen from us by that vile nurse Gitana, who was never heard of again. See, here is the very broken link so badly mended in Castleford. I would swear to this chain, William."

"I fancied it was the same," Sir William replied. "As the nurse Gitana was a gipsy, so it is pretty certain that this poacher was a gipsy also. If we can find him, we shall get news of our missing girl."

Lady Summers pressed her hands convulsively together.

"Ah, he must be found!" she cried. Spare no expense. I hope - Edith had died than have all this misery and uncertainty."

"I will have the best man that Scotland Yard can find this day," said Sir William. "I will telegraph for him at once."

Sir William Summers stood staring at the detective in amazement. The man was in every respect a gentleman.

"I have seen you before," said Sir William. "Are you not Philip Dalgetty?"

"The same," the handsome young detective replied. "I have taken this kind of thing up out of a sheer love of adventure. Of course, I do not need money, and Sir Malcolm, my father, is very angry with me. Still, I like the life, and Scotland Yard is pleased to think very highly of me. There is one advantage, Sir William—I can be here as your guest, and nobody will be any the wiser."

"Well, I suppose Scotland Yard knows," said Sir William. "And now, if you will sit down, I will tell you everything, and what a curious fact has come to light in connection with this poaching affray."

Philip Dalgetty listened eagerly. He was devoted to the profession which he had taken up, partly from adventure and partly because the study of crime and its solution held a wonderful fascination for him.

"A most remarkable discovery," he said at length. "But tell me, have you seen or heard of any gipsies in the neighbourhood lately?"

"There was a tribe here three weeks ago," Sir William replied; "but they only halted here one night, and by day-break they were on their journey again. So far as the police know, they are not in the county now."

It was quite plain that Dalgetty was puzzled. But this was just the mysterious sort of case that he liked best.

"I must have a good look round," he said. "There are a good many wild spots about here where a lot of people could hide for a time without being discovered. I'll get to the bottom of this mystery yet."

Long after the family had retired to rest the same night did Dalgetty sit up pondering over this problem. One theory after another he abandoned.

"I'll give it up for this evening," he muttered. "I dare say that sooner or later I shall find something tangible to go on. For the present—"

Dalgetty paused. A suspicious sound fell upon his sensitive ear. It seemed as if somebody was stealthily sawing some wood-work away. The noise appeared to come from the direction of the billiard-room.

"Burglars, for a million!" Dalgetty muttered.

Quick as thought he turned down the lights in the dining-room, so that now the whole house was plunged in darkness. The electric light was all over the house, and in case it was wanted, Dalgetty knew where the switches were.

Slipping off his boots, he crept into the billiard-room. The sawing noise still continued. Then it stopped, and a pane of glass was pushed in. A shadowy-looking figure crept in, and fumbled cautiously about. His intention was evidently to open the front door and allow his other comrades to enter that way, for the burglar was a small man, and few could pass through the pane of glass which he had dexterously removed for his own entrance.

The figure passed on until the hall was reached. Dalgetty quietly closed the door of the billiard-room and followed. Then, with a sudden flash and dazzle that seemed to utterly paralyse the burglar, the electric light shot forth.

Like a cat Dalgetty sprang upon his victim, and wrenched his revolver from his hand. He was not surprised to recognise in the features of the intruder the fact that the latter was a gipsy.

"How many more are there of you?" he asked.

"Three!" stammered the gipsy; "they are all outside."

A brilliant idea flashed into Dalgetty's mind. He opened the front door, and pointed out into the darkness of the night.

"Give my compliments to your friends," he said, "and tell them they are wasting their time here. There are too many of us on the alert. Now go!"

The gipsy needed no further bidding. He darted into the darkness with a hazy idea that he had a lunatic to deal with.

But Dalgetty was no lunatic. He dragged on his shoes, and, donning a thick coat over his evening-dress, crept softly through the front door. He had merely thrown out his mackerel to catch his whale. Already he could discern four figures creeping away down the drive. Evidently they had deemed it prudent to give up their attempt for the present, at any rate.

Very cautiously Dalgetty followed them. He knew that he was taking his life in his hands; but he did not mind that. Presently the gipsies passed into the gardens of Grey Crypt, and then vanished in a patch of bushes as if the earth had swallowed them up. For the present they had escaped, but Dalgetty had found what he wanted—he had got the clue.

CHAPTER IV.

"YOU OBEY OR DIE!"

Dalgetty found he had a tangled scheme to unravel. One that

taxed him to the uttermost. He had followed the four men, and tracked them until their disappearance in the copse. He paid frequent visits to the spot, in hope of finding some solution to the mystery which had so completely baffled him.

He was determined, however, not to give up the quest, feeling sure the men were somewhere within reach, and he would find them.

Meanwhile, matters had not stood still at the crypt. Spies were out watching every movement on the part of Sir William and his friends. The gipsies were well aware that detectives were on their track, and that Dalgetty was the moving spirit.

He was very anxious to have the credit of making the discovery, and lost no opportunity of being at the copse, where he would sit for hours in deep cogitation.

"Can there be anything supernatural in this business?" he was asking himself, as he strolled along the edge of the wood.

He had scarcely muttered the words, when a strong hand was laid upon his collar. The grasp almost suffocated him. He turned, as well as he was able, and was confronted by two powerful men wearing black masks, which completely covered their faces.

A damp handkerchief was passed over his lips, which produced immediate unconsciousness.

The men lifted him on their shoulders, and carried him into the copse, and thence to the crypt.

Dalgetty's helpless body was laid upon the floor of the crypt. Spurning it with his foot, Lavengro called out:

"Mother, here's work for you! This busy fool will wake in a few minutes. Look sharp!"

A withered old hag came forward in answer to the summons, and fixed her ghoulish eyes on the face of the prostrate man.

She chuckled and grinned with delight as she knelt over him. Forcing open his clenched teeth, she poured, drop after drop, a thick, strong-smelling liquid into his mouth. "Fifteen, sixteen," she counted in her glee; "seventeen, eight—"

"Stop, mother. No murder. You taught me that twenty kills!" shouted Lavengro, as he snatched the bottle from her grasp.

"Idiot!" snarled the old woman. "Does the cub know more than the she-bear? Listen! You have saved the life of the man who the stars have decreed will take yours!"

Aurora had stood a silent and unobserved spectator of the scene. She now spoke.

"Would you take the life of a defenceless man?" she exclaimed in her anger. "Have you not enough guilt on your soul already?"

"Who dare question me here?" the woman hissed between her snapping teeth.

"I dare to save a life!" said Aurora, her blue eyes flashing from her defiant face.

The hag sprang toward her, lifting her hand to strike. It was arrested in the firm grasp of Lavengro.

"Lay not a hand upon her!" he said firmly. "Remember, I have spoken. Elspeth!"

She quietly submitted. "You are master here," she said, "and must be obeyed."

"I am master here, and will remain so. If a hair of the head of Aurora is injured, the culprit shall feel my vengeance!"—and, looking the woman in the face, he continued significantly—"be it whom it may!"

The crone moved away, mumbling strong language in the Romany tongue, which cannot be mentioned in these pages.

Approaching Aurora, Lavengro said tenderly: "Go to your room, child. Fear no harm. I will protect you!"

"Lavengro," she said, appealingly, "you have always been kind to me, for which I am more than grateful; but tell me who I am, and why I am here? I have been with the tribe as long as I can remember, and though I am with you, I am not of you!"

"Spare me your questions, Aurora," he replied; "the time will perhaps come when you will know all. At present it must remain a mystery to you and to me. I will soon claim a right to protect you."

Without another word she left him, feeling that the secret she was so anxious to discover was yet far out of her reach.

Dalgetty still lay unconscious. At Lavengro's order he was removed to an adjoining apartment, and there placed under a guard, with instructions from Lavengro to inform him as soon as signs of returning animation appeared.

The sudden disappearance of Dalgetty caused great consternation at Whitacre. Sir William Summers left no stone unturned to discover his whereabouts, but without the clue being found.

The forces of Scotland Yard and local police were put in requisition. A small army of neighbours lent their assistance. Every yard of the ground for miles around was diligently searched. No trace of the missing man could be found. Whilst the search was going on above ground the denizens of the crypt were interesting themselves on Dalgetty's account.

The day after his capture he was informed by his guards, who always appeared masked, that he must prepare to appear before the chief.

An hour later he, with arms securely bound, was led along a narrow dark passage, and ushered into a large vaultlike room, with stone walls and high, vaulted, arched roof, supported by strong, carved pillars. The place was dimly lighted by a solitary lamp standing on a strong oak table, behind which sat three figures wrapped in large black robes, and wearing cowls, which hid their faces. The light was just sufficient for him to discern the outlines of the figures.

A profound silence reigned in the apartment until it was broken by the voice of the central figure, who said in solemn tones:

"Philip Dalgetty."

He started on hearing his name was known.

"Philip Dalgetty," the voice continued, "son of Sir Malcolm Dalgetty, of Sarnsfield. Born September 29th, 1831. Mother's name Carli."

Dalgetty could not refrain from an exclamation of astonishment. The solemn voice still went on:

"Your life is in danger, yet it is at present in your own hands. Your mother was one of us, and helped us when sore pressed. We are willing to repay it on her son on one condition, and one only."

Dalgetty remained silent.

"Would you know the condition?" asked the speaker.

"If it pleases you to condescend to inform me," Dalgetty replied defiantly.

Without noticing the tone of Dalgetty's reply the speaker continued:

"That you cease the quest you are now upon, and return to your home, having first left with me a piece of a gold chain you have in your possession."

"By what right do you make such a demand?" Dalgetty haughtily asked.

"By the right that might gives me. Will you accept the terms offered?"

"And if I refuse?"

"There is only one course open. You obey or die. That is your final answer. You will have twelve hours to decide."

Dalgetty was led away in a state of utter bewilderment. The strangeness of his surroundings, the knowledge possessed by his judges of his personal affairs, and the fate by which he was threatened rushed upon him with stunning force, and for the time paralysed his faculties. He had, however, some little time wherein to consider his position.

The chamber to which he was taken was furnished in a manner Oriental. Carpets and rugs there were in abundance. A table, spread with a luxurious meal, stood in the centre of the apartment, of which his guards, with great deference, invited him to partake.

On being left alone, he looked carefully about the room, with a view to some means of escape. His inspection showed him that his prison was a circular room, with strong stone walls and a stout iron door, through which he had entered. From a skylight high above his head came the only light admitted into the place.

He drank a glass of wine, which he poured from a richly chased silver flagon, and tried to eat a morsel of food, of which he stood much in need; but though it had been prepared in a way to tempt an epicure, not a morsel could he swallow.

He aimlessly wandered about the room, in the hope of some inspiration to assist him in his difficulty, which every moment he felt more hopeless.

Flinging himself down on a couch of skins, he sternly determined to face whatever was in store for him.

A slight fluttering sound broke the awful stillness. He leapt from the couch as a small parcel, dropped from the skylight, fell at his feet.

With eagerness he tore the cover from the parcel. Its contents gave him some slight hope. It contained a small silver-mounted pistol, of foreign workmanship, and cartridges. On a piece of paper was written in a large, scrawling hand:

"Your life is in danger. Beware!"

CHAPTER V.

THE STRANGE HAND.

"Where is your master, Gittoes? I must see him without a moment's delay!"

The speaker was Lavengro, who had abruptly entered the house of Jasper Gordon on the night following Dalgetty's capture.

"Impossible!" muttered Gittoes. "Master has gone to his room for the night, and can't be disturbed."

"Don't speak to me of impossibilities, you drivelling hound! Go to your master, and say Lavengro must and will see him!"

"It's more than I dare do!" persisted the old servant. "He has had some terrible news to-day that has completely upset him. Come in the morning."

"I'll see him now!" thundered Lavengro. "Stand aside! If you can't go to him, I will find a way. Show me his room!"

The door was quietly opened, and Gordon entered. A miserable object he presented as he stood trembling in his dressing-gown, his face blanched with fear.

"What is all this tumult?" he asked in a husky voice, as he tottered to a seat.

"We had better settle our business without the assistance of your servant," Lavengro said abruptly.

Gittoes obeyed a look from his master, and quietly left the room.

As soon as he was gone Lavengro walked to the door and turned the key in the lock.

Gordon sat still, his fear increasing as he found himself locked in the room with so desperate a man as Lavengro.

Lavengro was the first to speak.

"I have some news," he said, "of the Silent Avengers. Your whereabouts is known. The decree is issued, and may fall at any moment!"



Six keepers burst, with a yell, into the clearing.

"I am aware of it," stammered Gordon, as he took from the pocket of his dressing-gown a letter printed with white characters on scarlet paper, which he handed to Lavengro.

"Read this," he said.

Lavengro took the paper from Gordon's palsied hand. As he read, a dark frown spread over his bronzed features. With an oath he sprang to his feet.

"My name is written here!" he cried.

Gordon nodded.

"No one but yourself knew where I was hiding. Traitor, this is your work, to save your own miserable carcase! You betrayed the cause, and now you would betray me!"

These taunting words of Lavengro's appeared to put new life and vigour into Gordon.

"Liar!" he exclaimed, as he sprang from his seat in his anger.

All sense of fear had left him. He rushed upon Lavengro, brandishing a dagger he had concealed in his clothing.

Gordon was not the weak man he looked, as Lavengro soon found out. A terrible struggle ensued. With all his giant strength Lavengro could not keep the angry man at bay. He felt the steel pierce his shoulder; his arm lost its grip.

By a supreme effort he wrenched himself free, and seized a bronze figure from the sideboard. In another moment it would have fallen upon the head of Gordon, when a shattering of glass in the window arrested their attention.

A hand appeared through the aperture caused by the broken glass. The light of the lamp on the table glinted along the barrel of a revolver.

Both men stood breathless under cover of the weapon. A deep-toned voice broke the silence. In measured tones it said:

"By the decree of the Silent Avengers your time has come!"

Two shots, fired in quick succession, reverberated through the house. Gittoes rushed into the room. He found his master stretched upon the floor, with blood flowing from a wound in his head.

Lavengro had disappeared, leaving a trail of blood behind him.

Gordon was conveyed to his bed by his faithful attendant Gittoes. To the man's entreaties that medical assistance should be called Gordon strenuously objected.

"No," he said firmly. "I have expected this for a long time. It was sure to fall at last. I will not trouble you long, Gittoes. You know where my papers are. See that they get into the proper quarter. A sealed packet is addressed to Lavengro. Deliver it into his own hands."

As he grew weaker, recollections of former days crowded on his memory. He babbled of his childhood, his school days, and his early life.

"I fought in Spain as a soldier of fortune. There I found Marie, my wife. She was lost to me. My son, my boy gone. I was robbed by a treacherous friend, and left in despair."

Thus his mind wandered. His incoherent words conveyed no meaning except to his own disordered imagination.

The end was near; his voice grew weaker, and became indistinct. His closing eyes followed Gittoes as he moved about the room and his master's bed in a state of great agitation.

By an effort Gordon motioned his servant towards him.

Gittoes placed his ear to catch the weak, whispering words.

"The packet for Lavengro?" was all he said.

They were his last words.

Dalgetty had not been left alone in his prison.

He had examined the weapon so mysteriously supplied, and had found the cartridges, the bullets of which were of polished silver, to suit the barrel. He proceeded carefully to load the pistol, determined, if danger should arise, he would be prepared to meet it with all his strength.

He had scarcely completed this, when he heard a step outside the door. A key was inserted in the lock, and the door was thrown open.

Dalgetty placed himself in a position of defence, with his back to the wall, which he had no sooner done than a mocking laugh fell upon his ear. Elspeth entered, carefully locking the door behind her.

"No, my bantam," the woman sneered, "you wouldn't fire upon a lady. You were a gentleman once, you know, until you turned 'tec. Put that plaything away; you might hurt yourself."

He lowered the weapon. As he did so, Elspeth's eyes rested upon it.

"Where," she shrieked, with uplifted hands, "did you get that pistol? Lower it, I say—lower it, the muzzle to the floor!"

"It was a gift from the gods," Dalgetty said, "dropped from the clouds into my hands."

"There's murder in it!" she said, as she pointed her long, scraggy finger to the weapon Dalgetty held in his tight grip.

"Possibly," he replied; "but through no fault of mine. If I am driven to use it, I shall do it effectively."

The crone considered a moment, and then commenced in a whining tone:

"Give it to me, dearie, and I'll give you this one"—at the same time producing a large horse-pistol from her voluminous garments.

"No, thanks, granny," he replied. "I will keep the one I have."

And, making a sudden dash, he wrested the pistol she held from her grasp.

"Prevention is better than cure," he said to himself.

Elspeth fell upon her knees before him, and in imploring tones said:

"Don't use the weapon you hold. It has never been fired without someone near and dear to me meeting his death. It is fatal to my tribe, and I know who will be the next!"

"Where are your tribe now? Where am I? And why am I kept a prisoner?" inquired Dalgetty.

"Give me the pistol, and I will tell you, and let you go free. You refuse? Then you are doomed! Slow starvation will perhaps bring you to your senses!"

Dalgetty, thinking he had in the weapon, to which some superstition was evidently attached, a talisman that would open his prison doors, steadily refused to let it go out of his possession.

"Take your fate, obstinate fool!" cried Elspeth, as she turned the key to open the door.

One bound, and Dalgetty's hand was on the woman's throat, another carried him through the open door.

He found himself in total darkness. A mocking laugh from Elspeth told him of the hopelessness of his position, and the clang of an iron door reverberating along the dark corridor shattered his new-built-up hope of escape.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SILVER PISTOL.

Lavengro dragged himself from Gordon's house with a bullet in his side, blood streaming from the wound. Faint and sick he entered the crypt, and flung himself on a seat, groaning heavily.

"Curse the hand that pulled the trigger!" he cried, "and my wretched fate which has brought this to pass, just when all my strength was required. The foul fiend himself could not have done me a baser turn. To be in this hole, and die like a dog! It is horrible!"

"Who talks of dying?" asked a croaking voice at his elbow. "You are not dead yet, nor dying. What scratch have you got now that has shaken your manhood out of you?"

"An ounce of lead in my side is the little scratch you scoff at, Elspeth. Not pleasant, is it?" he replied bitterly. And he continued:

"Don't stand there croaking. You have dressed wounds before, try your skill on me."

"Was it a pistol-shot?" she inquired with an anxious face.

"What else do you think it was?" he snapped.

"So soon! So soon!"

"What are you growling now?" he asked in anger.

"It's useless, Lavengro; no skill will avail you. I have seen the hand that fired the shot, and know the weapon he used. Your fate is sealed!"

"What weapon are you prating about now, Elspeth?"

"The Scourge, I mean. It was a black day when Abrazi cursed the thing, and made it a heirloom of the tribe."

In spite of his wound, Lavengro leapt from his seat.

"The Scourge!" he cried; "you are mad! It has been safely kept, and only you and myself know its hiding-place. What treachery is at work now?"

"It is not in its hiding-place now," the woman began. "What did Abrazi say? 'Fire shall not destroy it. Earth or water shall not hold it or hide it, when the head of the tribe of the Lavengroes shall seek a wife amongst the house-dwellers of the earth.' The hiding-place hath given up its charge. I have seen it."

"Where?" Lavengro groaned in agony, as he fell back upon his seat, with great drops of perspiration rolling down his face.

"In the hands of Philip Dalgetty, my son. Had I my will, I would have saved you this when you brought him here. I went to-day to him, taking with me the trusty tool that has often rid me of those who stood in my way. I would have killed him to save you, but the stars willed it otherwise."

"Then I am doomed, indeed; and the last of the brave Lavengroes dies like a caged wolf. The Scourge has escaped us; the curse is fulfilled. The powers of evil are against us!"

"Some power higher than ours is against us," Elspeth said. "Dalgetty told me the weapon was a gift from the gods, and that it fell into his hands from the clouds."

Lavengro lay back with a heavy groan, his lips moving; but no sound escaped them. He was carried to a couch, and laid down to await the end.

The crypt was now silent as a tomb, says for the fitful wailings of Elspeth, lamenting the fate which had overtaken Lavengro. For days his death was hourly expected, yet it came not. His pain had ceased; he was growing stronger, yet he doubted not that he was a doomed man. He cursed the day on which he decided to make Aurora his wife.

Dalgetty had been kept a closely-confined prisoner in the chamber he had re-entered, after his fruitless attempt to escape. The threat of Elspeth that starvation might do its work was being carried out. For two days no food or drink had been supplied, and but for the remainder of his earlier repast, he would have been reduced to sad straits.

Elspeth dared not enter his presence again so long as the Scourge was in his possession. That it had been supplied to him by some supernatural power she never doubted. In fact, the whole inhabitants of the crypt, save one, went about in deadly fear.

Aurora, who had attended to the wants of Lavengro, as he lay upon his couch of sickness, was quite unmoved by the superstition that had so shaken the nerves of desperate and fearless men.

She had in her childhood heard the legend of the mysterious Scourge, and had often seen Elspeth and Lavengro cleaning and polishing its silver ornaments, and returning it to its hiding-place.

The attempt made by Elspeth on the life of Dalgetty the day he was brought to the crypt had aroused her anger. She followed the men as they carried him to his place of confinement. Knowing his danger, she considered how to render him assistance.

The mysterious weapon she had seen flashed upon her mind. Knowing its hiding-place, she quickly possessed herself of it. Mounting a broken wall, which led to the top of the turret which formed Dalgetty's chamber, she found her way to the skylight, and dropped the pistol at his feet. By this means she supplied Dalgetty day by day with food and necessities.

As she entered Lavengro's room after one of her excursions to the tower, she was surprised to see him sitting on the side of his couch. He held a small object which he was carefully inspecting. As he caught sight of the girl, he closed his hand upon the article in which he seemed so interested.

Beckoning her to his side, he said:

"Will you go to Elspeth and ask her to come to me. Say, come immediately!"

Aurora obeyed, and in a short time returned with Elspeth, who expressed her joy at seeing Lavengro standing in the room.

"Has the curse failed, my son?" she asked.

"So far as I am concerned, yes—if it was the curse that struck me, which I doubt." And handing her the object Aurora had seen, he said: "Look at that!"

"What is it?" she inquired, after turning it over in her claw-like fingers. "A piece of lead?"

"It's the bullet that entered my side," he said. "It must have glanced off one of my ribs. I found it just under the skin and cut it out."

Elspeth again carefully examined the article, and, looking inquiringly into his face, said:

"This is not a silver bullet, Lavengro?"

"A common bit of lead!" he replied, with a light laugh.

"Then it could not have been fired from the Scourge!" she cried, "the bullets of which are silver."

"And the head of the Lavengroes dies not yet," he said.

The discovery just made had banished his superstitious fears.

He was Lavengro again; but with the dread of the Secret Avengers hanging heavily upon him. The one attempt had failed; he knew it would not be the last.

He beckoned to Elspeth, who followed him from the room.

"We will find the Scourge," he said, "and remove all doubt."

Entering a room adjoining his own, he proceeded to unlock an iron box, the key of which he took from a secret place in the wall. From the box he lifted an ebony casket, heavily mounted in silver. This, with some trepidation, he unlocked.

An exclamation suddenly broke from the lips of the pair.

The casket was empty. The Scourge had left its hiding-place.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SCOURGE AGAIN IN ITS PLACE.

The question now to be solved by Lavengro and Elspeth was how to regain the lost weapon. Elspeth had seen it in the hands of Dalgetty, and he was their prisoner. The matter seemed to Lavengro to be a simple one.

"I will make short work of this," he said, as he strode towards the door.

"Stop!" Elspeth cried, "would you rush to certain destruction? Know you not you are the next victim of the Scourge? Will you court death by standing before it, in the hand of an enemy? And hath not Abrasi said:

"Keep this as you value your life. Should it pass from the hand of a Lavengro, by it he shall die! The stars in their wisdom have thus spoken!"

"Cease your worthless cant!" he exclaimed, his anger getting the better of his fears as he went on.

"If the thing remains out of my keeping, I die, so says the sage. If I attempt to recover it, I die, so says Elspeth the witch. I prefer to fight for it, and die as a man should."

"Run no risk," she answered him quickly. "You are irritable, caused by your wound. Put the power in my hands, the silver bullet is not for me. I am not a Lavengro born."

The exertion had caused his wound to bleed afresh. Leaning against the wall for support, he said:

"Take your own course, Elspeth, but no bloodshed. I will have none of it here. Something tells me that Philip Dalgetty and myself shall meet again."

Elspeth moved away, saying: "I never shed blood when other means answer my purpose."

The sinister smile on her withered countenance boded no good for Dalgetty.

Lavengro returned to his room, anxiously waiting the result of Elspeth's mission in search of the missing weapon.

She lost no time in using the power given to her. Although she was in fear of the Scourge, she braved it to obtain its possession.

Hastily summoning two stalwart ruffians, she imparted to them her object.

"Something," she said, "had been stolen, and must be recovered. It was the chief's orders. She would point out the thief, and give them assistance."

Aurora heard this conversation, and, divining its meaning, scrawled a note to Dalgetty, putting him on his guard. This she conveyed to him by means of the skylight of the tower.

Elspeth laughed—a malicious grin—as she led the way to the place where Dalgetty was secured.

"I have you now, my young cockscorb," she said to herself. "You don't get out of my hands this time."

Her confederates rubbed their hands in their glee. Some rascality was at hand, and they were eager to be at work.

A silent figure followed them along the corridor. It was Aurora.

The iron door of the apartment was slowly opened. As the men entered they saw Dalgetty standing in front of them, prepared for defence.

Without ceremony one of the men said:

"Put down those barkers, and throw up your hands. We are too many for you, and you will get hurt."

"Not without a fight," Dalgetty said, as he levelled the Scourge at the head of the man. "Move but an eyelid, and your life is not worth a straw."

Regardless of danger, the man moved forward, raising a dagger he held in his hand.

Dalgetty caught the glint of the metal. Stepping a pace backward, with a steady aim he fired. The bullet struck the dagger the would-be assassin carried, splitting it to fragments.

With a fierce oath he sprang upon Dalgetty. Another shot sent him reeling backwards. He was wounded, but not beaten.

The attack had been so sudden that the other ruffian had taken no part in the fray.

"Don't stand gaping there!" cried Elspeth. "Did you come here to see a play acted? Get to work, fellow!"

He needed no further orders. Both men now closed with Dalgetty. It was a fight at close quarters, Elspeth urging on the men. Further shots were fired, with more or less effect.

Dalgetty's strength for a time served him to keep the men at bay. With two he found more than his match, yet he still fought on until his strength failed. He must yield.

With an effort he freed himself, and with all his strength hurled the pistol at the head of the man in front of him. It missed its aim, and flew like lightning through the open door.

Another struggle, when Dalgetty, completely exhausted, fell heavily to the floor.

"Now," shouted Elspeth, "is your time!"

He showed no sign of life. The men looked complacently at their handiwork.

Elspeth pounced upon him and commenced a rigid search, the men, bleeding and bruised, watching her movements.

Her search was vain. Turning to the men, she said:

"Finish your work. The weapon he used is gone—vanished. Finish your work!"

Both men rushed upon Dalgetty, with murder in their eyes.

Elspeth clapped her hands in delight at their fiendish determination.

On their knees before the prostrate man they fell. The blade of a knife flashed over him. Another instant he would have been a dead man, when Lavengro, in a state of high excitement, burst into the room. Springing towards the would-be assassins, he seized one in each of his hands and flung them right and left across the room.

"Cowardly, murderous hounds!" he hissed between his

clenched teeth, as he stooped over the body of Dalgetty.

"Craven curs, to fall upon a helpless man!"

Raising himself, he faced the ruffians, and with anger shouted:

"Drop the weapons you carry, and get out of my sight! You shall reckon with me for this work."

The men shrunk away, angered at being deprived of what they considered their legitimate prey.

"Said I not," cried Lavengro, as he faced Elspeth, "that no blood should be shed? Why are my orders disobeyed?"

"You did!" she shrieked. "But I would have killed him a thousand times to obtain possession of the 'Scourge'!"

The name of the Scourge arrested Lavengro's fury. In his anger he had forgotten the cause of Elspeth's visit to Dalgetty. In an altered tone he asked:

"You have got it! But the price is a high one; Philip Dalgetty is dead!"

"I hope he is!" she replied doggedly.

"And the Scourge?" he inquired.

"Has gone with that man's departing spirit, as far as I know. It cannot be found."

Every nook and cranny was carefully searched, without success. The pistol had vanished.

"What is to be done with this carrion?" inquired Elspeth, pointing to Dalgetty's prostrate form.

"Leave it where it is, mother," Lavengro remarked in deep thought. "Under cover of the night it shall be carried far away, and we shall be clear of suspicion."

As they left the scene the mysterious disappearance of the weapon was discussed between them. Their superstitious fears were again in the ascendant.

"I will look up the cabinet," Lavengro said. "We can only now await the fate hanging over us!" And he added: "Come with me. I have something more to say that requires earnest consideration."

They went to the place where the casket lay. The box was open, and lying in its own resting-place was the Scourge.

They were dumbfounded. With fear and trembling the casket was again consigned by them to its hiding-place, and, with bowed heads, they silently left the place.

In the silence and darkness of the night Dalgetty was moved from his prison, and laid among the heather many miles away from Grey Crypt.

A deep sigh escaped from him as he was moved by the men.

"He still lives," whispered one to his companion. "Shall we put him out of his misery?"

"Remember the anger of the chief," replied the other. "We have done our part; come away. We have a long journey before daylight."

Dalgetty was left alone, his pale face towards the stars, his life, which was hanging by a single thread, quietly passing away.

CHAPTER VIII.

A MESSAGE FROM THE KING.

The murder of Jasper Gordon, and the mysterious manner in which it occurred, caused great consternation in the vicinity of Grey Crypt. He had lived a quiet life, taking no part in the business of the place or neighbourhood. Visitors or friends he had none. He simply lived his quiet, retired life unknown to most of the inhabitants of the locality.

His old servant Gittoes at the inquest explained Gordon's mode of life.

He had been, he said, in his master's service over thirty years, and had never known him unfriendly with any person. In fact, he had no acquaintances, and never left the house or grounds. On the night of the murder his master was visited by a man who, without invitation, had walked into the house, and insisted upon seeing Mr. Gordon. That he (Gittoes) had declined to disturb his master. The high tone of the man's voice had alarmed Mr. Gordon, who came into the room to inquire the cause of the noise he had heard.

That the stranger had requested that he (witness) should leave the apartment, which at his master's order he did. The visitor locked the door as soon as he had left the room. That he had lingered in the corridor on hearing high words between his master and his visitor, followed by a sound of two pistol-shots, fired in rapid succession. He had hastened to the room, and found his master bleeding on the floor, but the visitor was gone.

That he had removed Mr. Gordon to his room. His wish that he should have medical assistance his master steadfastly refused, and died in two hours after the wound was inflicted.

"Have you any knowledge of the man who visited Mr. Gordon?" the coroner inquired.

"None whatever," Gittoes replied. "I never saw him before."

"What sort of man was he? Can you describe him?"

"He was a short man, with grey hair, and walked a little lame on his left leg."

"How was he dressed?"

"In a light-grey suit, and he carried a small handbag."

"Was any robbery committed?"

"Nothing whatever was stolen, though many valuables were lying about."

"Should you know the man again if you saw him, do you think?"

"Could pick him out of a thousand," was Gittoes' laconic reply.

"Have you any further information you can give to the jury?"

"I found this nailed to the broken window," Gittoes said, as he handed in a piece of scarlet paper, on which were printed white letters.

The coroner took the paper and read aloud:

"The arm of the Secret Avengers is long. The doom of traitors is death!"

The jury looked at each other in amazement. They had heard of the Secret Avengers, and their work in other lands. To find them at their own door was startling.

The medical evidence was to the effect that Gordon died from a gunshot wound in the head, which had injured the base of the brain.

A verdict of wilful murder against some person or persons unknown was returned, and the jury departed discussing the extraordinary story they had heard.

Notwithstanding the lying evidence Gittoes had given, he knew that Lavengro had not killed his master, but for various reasons he decided to keep his own counsel for the present.

Elspeth and Lavengro, on looking up the Scourge, and placing it in its hiding-place, went to Lavengro's room to discuss the communication he had to make.

"I have an order from King Pedro Diego," he began. "He is coming to the camp on Dummore Downs. He commands our presence there without delay."

"The order must be obeyed, my son."

"Must be obeyed, you say? Who dare say that a Lavengro must obey?"

"Your King, to whom you owe allegiance, which you have sworn."

"I owe no allegiance to him as Gipsy King, nor have I ever acknowledged him as such."

Elspeth rose, and, looking carefully round, whispered:

"You swore obedience to him as one of the council of the Secret Avengers, and you must obey."

"Are you not aware that I am under the ban, and do you advise me to put my head into the mouth of the wolf?"

The old woman laughed as she said:

"I, too, have a message from the King. Here," she continued, holding up a piece of scarlet paper, "is a removal of the ban on one condition. It ought to be an easy one for you."

"Name it," he said, with evident anxiety.

"That Aurora is delivered into the hands of the King for the purpose of becoming his wife. It will be a good thing for her, and remove a great danger from you. Remember the Scourge!"

"Will you hand over the child to such a fate? She knows she does not belong to us. Will you never relent?"

"Never," she said, in a waspish tone—"never! Her father brought my man to the gallows, and deprived me of the joy of my life. I robbed him of the joy of his!"

"Why punish the child for the actions of the parent?" Lavengro asked.

"I care nothing for that; my revenge is very sweet, Lavengro."

"Tell me, then, whose child she is. A time may come when she can go away without interfering with your vengeance."

"I am not going to die yet, my son, and you have enough on your hands at present."

Lavengro pondered deeply. Aurora as a child had, by her winning ways, crept into his affections. He had acted the part of a father to her, and looked upon her almost as his own, and she, in her misery, had returned his affection, making him the confidant of her troubles, and profiting by his soothing advice.

The thought of parting with her, and for such a purpose as the bride of the King, was a bitter draught for him to swallow.

Elspeth had carefully watched his countenance as he turned the matter over in his mind, and calmly awaited his decision.

"Give me the paper," he said suddenly; "I consent!"

The old woman handed it to him—his pardon. The fear of the Secret Avengers was gone. A smile crossed his face as he carefully put the paper in his pouch.

"I'll save you yet, my child," he said to himself, "if I die for it!"

"I will now," Elspeth said, "prepare Aurora for her journey. You have acted wisely, my son!"

Dark, heavy, rain-laden clouds drifted swiftly across the sky, obscuring the new moon, which showed palely behind them. A strong north wind swept the scudding rain before it as it howled and rushed in its fury over hill and dale. Swaying trunks of stalwart trees, swinging, tossing, and cracking their strong-limbed branches, coupled with the roar of the mighty blast among the quivering, trembling leaves, heralded a gathering storm. Incessant flashes of lightning, momentarily lighting up the sky, only served to increase the surrounding darkness.

The Lavengro caravan, on its way to Dunmore Downs, had been overtaken by the storm, and had wandered out of the beaten track. They were sheltering themselves and their half-starved animals under the bluff side of a rocky hill on the common.

Attached to the caravan was a vehicle more commodious than the rest. It was in charge of Elspeth, and was an object of solicitude to Lavengro. It was covered with a white awning, and so carefully closed that a glimpse of the interior was impossible.

"We shall never reach the camp to-night!" Lavengro shouted, his voice rising above the roar of the wind and rain, as it whirled in its violence across the plain.

"Don't croak, Lavengro, over a puff like this," replied his companion Carl; "many a wilder storm we have weathered, and by—"

A brilliant flash of lightning checked the oath on his lips. Covering his face with his hands, he shrieked in agony: "Blind! blind! blind!"

The cries of the injured man caused Elspeth to look out from under the white covering of the vehicle. In angry tones she cried:

"What fooling is going on now? Are you become helpless? or will you risk your lives by being late?"

"No man can move in this darkness on unknown ground in the face of such a storm!" Lavengro sternly replied.

"Don't talk to me of storms!" the hag screamed. "Were you not born in a storm, and have faced thousands, and defied them without a blink of your eye? Shall I send a woman to lead you?"

Going close to Elspeth, and pointing inside the awning, Lavengro said quietly but firmly:

"Cease your raving. You will frighten and disturb her."

The old woman laughed as she said:

"Never fear; Elspeth's potions have been tried too often to fail on a fragile thing like her!"

"Keep her from harm, mother!" he said pleadingly. He turned away, leaving Aurora peacefully sleeping under a powerful narcotic administered by Elspeth as a precautionary measure whilst on the journey.

"Ah, ah!" chuckled the old woman, grinning. "She is a dainty beauty, fit for a king. Her father will be a proud man to have a king for a son-in-law. And I'll be the first to let him have the joyful news." Shaking her clenched hand at an imaginary person, she said bitterly: "We shall be quits now, and my man will be avenged!"

Lavengro found Carl lying senseless on the ground. The lightning had done its work thoroughly. A slight breathing only showed that a little life remained. His face was disfigured beyond recognition.

He had not intended to tell Elspeth what had happened to Carl until they reached the camp. The state in which he found the injured man compelled him to seek her assistance.

Elspeth was loud in her lamentations. Her wailings could be heard for some distance now the storm had abated. She cursed the bolt that had struck her youngest born, and vowed vengeance on heaven itself in her frantic grief and rage.

"Take me to him!" she screamed. "Your fear to move has brought this about. Get out of my sight! There is no grit in you! Your father, if living, would curse you for a mean-spirited hound!"

As she sprang from the cart, Lavengro reminded her of her charge who lay sleeping there.

"Curse the blue-eyed witch!" she cried. "Take me to my

boy!" And she sneeringly continued: "You won't mind taking care of her!"

No effort of his mother could restore Carl to consciousness. Endearments, caresses, and curses were alike ineffectual. Returning to Lavengro, she said:

"Stay here; on no account move. I'll go and prepare a litter for Carl in one of the vans, and we will take him on, dead or alive."

Lavengro's heart bounded as he listened to Elspeth's retreating footsteps. He was alone with the girl he had promised to protect. It was a bold stroke he had contemplated, and it seemed as if the gods had furnished him with his opportunity.

He hurriedly sprang to where Carl was lying. Lifting him in his strong arms, he carried him to the side of the van where the girl slept.

Without a moment's hesitation he raised the awning, and



The King strode menacingly towards Jose, with uplifted staff.

entered the vehicle, immediately reappearing with the sleeping girl in his arms.

Laying her in the place where Carl had fallen, he hastened again to the van, into which he raised Carl, and carefully covered him with the sheet under which Aurora had lain.

He was only just in time. Elspeth returned at the moment he had descended from the van.

"We had better move on now," he said. "I will place Carl in the litter, and then give orders for the march. In the meantime you had better get some sleep."

Elspeth closed the awning, and in a few minutes the caravan was again on the move towards Dunmore Downs.

CHAPTER IX.

MUTINY!

Dunmore Downs presented a strange but interesting sight. A scene that would linger in the memory of an onlooker long after

the personages concerned in it and their surroundings had drifted their various ways to the farther ends of the earth.

For was not the occasion of the gathering the marriage of the gipsy king, Pedro Diego, who had succeeded a long line of ancestors, who for many scores of years had occupied the position he had been called upon to fill?

For a long time he had been proof against the wiles and coquettings of the dusky damsels of his own people, and had seemed in no hurry to take upon himself the burdens of matrimony. The younger women had waited and hoped. The older people anxiously discussed the King's probable successor, in case no son was born to follow him when the reins fell from his hands.

"The Lavengroes have in such case the right to choose a king," remarked José Morda, a venerable man of four-score years. "It was granted to them by King Ranguardo, and confirmed by the sage Abazi on the death of Miguel, a thousand years ago."

"The Lavengroes have Royal Romany blood in their veins, and if might was right, Rollo Lavergro would be our king," said another of the elders of the tribe.

"Hush, Masai, not so loud, speak low, man! We all know what you say is correct. We can bide our time!" whispered José.

"No time so good as the present," Masai replied, "and no cry better than Diego has placed in our hands. Know ye not that the woman he intends for our queen is a daughter of the housedweller? Will you submit to such an insult?"

"Say you so, Masai?" several of the men cried in astonishment.

"What I say I swear by the oath of my tribe is true. Wait and judge for yourselves. When you see the 'blue eye,' you will agree with me. Elspeth, of the Lavengroes, knows the secret of the maid being with us."

"And is it this outrage we have travelled over land and sea to witness and assist at? I will have no part in such a humiliation," José said.

José's exclamation was echoed by all the men present, who agreed upon absolute secrecy. They parted with stern determination that no such marriage should take place.

The camp on the following morning showed a large increase of numbers, various tribes having arrived during the night. Some were busy fixing their tents, others preparing their morning meal, consisting chiefly of various viands procured in mysterious manners from doubtful sources, the savoury odour of which proved that good living, and dirt and squalor, went hand in hand in such quarters.

Scores of bare-legged children, unkempt and uncombed, with their scanty ragged clothing hanging upon their brown, wiry limbs, the tatters blowing about in the wind, enlivened the scene by their childish gambols and laughter.

Men moved moodily about, exchanging coarse jokes with tawdry women aquatting about the tents, imbibing filthy tobacco smoke from black pipes that had seen long service.

"Are you waiting for the new Queen, Semida?" asked one of the men of a handsome, bronzed-face girl, whose gaudy attire and long rows of bright-coloured beads showed her to be of a class above the common herd.

"Queen!" snapped the girl, as her eye flashed and her lips curled with scorn. "You, a Romany, to speak of an alien as our Queen!"

"Alien?" he repeated; "what mean you, Semida?"

She pointed to José, who was with others holding an animated conversation a little distance away.

"There is your place!" she cried, "if you value the honour of the tribe."

"No one shall use the 'if' to me in such a matter, Semida; but you know your power!" he said sternly. "You have promised to be my wife, don't tempt me too far."

The girl had won her point. Placing her hand on his, she said:



They bowed low before him.

"I will be your wife, Patio. "Go and join José, and be a man-to-day."

Thus the mutiny against the King was spread through the camp. The women showed more violence than the men, who appeared cool and collected, yet determined to prevent the outrage.

They looked to José as their leader, and waited for his decision. He gave it in solemn, measured tones.

"It is our duty," he said—"our sworn duty to obey our King, and not resent his will. It is also our duty to preserve the oracles of our order untarnished. Which of the two think you stand first. The King's will is that of a mortal. The oracles speak from a higher source. The King defies the laws of our forefathers. Shall we be parties to his crime?"

"Never!" cried Masai. "Our duty is obedience only when it is within our laws."

"The oracles say," continued José, "if a man raises his hand against the King, he shall die the death!"

"I'll take that risk," said Patio, in his zeal to follow Semida's advice. "The King is only a man."

"The King is the King, Patio," José replied; "his person is sacred. We will to him, and try what reasoning can do. If it fails, then we must try other measures."

Each approved of José's advice, every man's hand went to his belt, where a knife is usually carried.

José, noticing the motion, said: "No violence. Not a drop of the King's blood must be shed. We are on a peaceful mission."

"That depends upon the result!" Patio said doggedly.

The arrival of the King with a strong body of his followers put an end to the mutinous conference.

"Every man to his tent," said José hurriedly. "At the pavilion of the King we meet in an hour."

The King, mounted on a mule, caparisoned in the brilliant fiery of flaming colours, so dear to the heart of the gipsy, rode down the line of tents to one specially prepared for his reception.

"The King!—the King!" shouted the men in his train. "Welcome the King!"

Not a man was to be seen, all was silent as the grave. José's instructions were obeyed, every one remained in his tent.

The King rode in silent anger. He was prepared for a hearty reception. The brooding silence filled him with great alarm.

He summoned his own men to his tent. Stamping his feet in his passion, he hissed:

"Is this the reception due to a King from his subjects? What meaneth it? The rascals shall pay with their heads for this! Summon the heads of the tribes to my presence, that I may hear what the insolent varlets offer as an excuse for their disloyalty. Let my commands be given at once, and woe to the man who dares disobey!"

King Pedro Diego waited impatiently for an answer to his summons. He paced his tent with a heavy frown upon his stern countenance, a feature which boded no good for his rebellious subjects. Born of a race accustomed to power, whose word was law, and whose fiat was obeyed without demur by their own people in their own land, he could brook no delay.

The tribes of the Carpathian Mountains, the Romanys from Galicia, Hungary, Moravia, and the surrounding countries, all received and bowed to laws and decrees issued from Dubora Volaska, the home of the race of Diego, their acknowledged chieftains.

The King had lashed himself into a perfect fury, when he was interrupted by the return of his messenger. As he caught sight of the man he exclaimed:

"Is my summons obeyed? Are the scared hounds prepared for submission and chastisement?"

"They will wait upon your Majesty in an hour," the man said, bowing low.

"Wait upon me in their own time, eh?" shouted the King, now in a towering rage.

"I will drag them from their dens by their ears! Call my guard together, and follow me!"

The King issued from his tent in the full panoply of a gipsy potentate. He had donned his Royal costume. Upon his head he wore a high-crowned hat of black straw, in which gleamed numerous glass ornaments and metallic sequins. A velvet cloak was thrown over his shoulders, reaching down to his knees, beneath which appeared a pair of high boots of rough leather, such as are worn by Moravian peasants. In his hand he carried an ebony staff, mounted with a massive silver ornament.

His attendants, who were picked men who formed his body-guard on State occasions, and had accompanied him to England on the important occasion of his marriage, were certainly a stalwart body of men, and, dressed in their native costume, they made an imposing appearance as they marched behind their infuriated King.

As the King approached the tents the occupants left them, and walked leisurely to the rendezvous appointed by José. Their scowling faces showed no signs of yielding, and the arms they carried proclaimed their determination to enforce their demand if necessary.

The King and his attendants stood face to face with his discontented subjects. Each scanned and mentally calculated the others' strength.

The silence was broken by the King.

"Lay down your arms, rebels and traitors!" he cried.

"Dare you appear armed in the presence of your King?"

"You are not our King!" shouted Masai.

"You are not our King!" was repeated by some of the younger men.

"Your King stands before you, and he will be obeyed!" was his reply, as he pointed to his bodyguard.

"Ho, ho!" said Masai, as he placed his gun in a more handy position for use, a precaution followed by those around him.

Matters had thus assumed a dangerous look, when José stepped in front of the men and stood before the King.

His four score years had stamped their impress upon him. His long white hair, straying over his broad shoulders, and his deeply wrinkled face, half covered by his snow-coloured beard, reaching to his waist, truly pronounced him to be a patriarch of the tribe.

Holding up his hand to restrain the men, he advanced towards the King, and made a low obeisance.

"A leader of rebels!" the King sneered. "Come you to make their submission?"

"No," replied José in a firm voice. "Men do not submit when they have arms in their hands and their cause is just! I speak for them."

"I will hear nothing without submission and the arms laid down."

"That cannot be done. We are willing to discuss the matter, but we are men, and can fight for our own good cause!"

"Do you defy your King? Know you not the punishment for such as you? You are a renegade, and have broken your tribal oath!"

"I know the punishment. We are upholding our oath now with arms, and to prevent your Majesty outraging the oath you solemnly swore at your coronation."

"What mean you, scoundrel?" the King cried, as he strode

menacingly towards José with uplifted staff. "What mean you?" he repeated.

The clicking of the locks of the guns carried by the men warned the King of danger.

"Perhaps you will explain, José?" he said more kindly.

"I will, your Majesty, since you now speak as a king should."

"I am listening," was the haughty reply.

"Rumour hath it in the camp," began José, "that your Majesty is about taking to yourself a queen."

"That is the purport of my visit here. Proceed!"

"It is also said," continued José, "that your Majesty proposes to take a queen who is not a Romanys."

"Well?"

"It is a violation of your coronation oath, which we will not permit."

"How will you prevent it?" demanded the King.

José pointed to the scowling men behind him, but made no reply.

The King called José's attention to his retainers.

"We accept the issue," said José, as he turned away.

At this moment a cry ran through the camp.

"The Lavengroes have arrived! Make way for the King's bride!"

The cry was raised by the women of the King's train, who had gone out to meet the bride. As they marched by the litter, dressed in their steel-extended petticoats of bright colours, starched ruffs, smart gauzelike aprons, and dainty corsets (the ambition of every Moravian woman), singing their bridal-songs to their native music, they formed an interesting procession.

The bride's arrival put an end to the discussion between the King and José; but a new cause of antagonism had arrived; the moment for action had come.

The antagonists moved away in separate bodies, both intent upon reaching the same goal. Their objective point was the litter of the intended bride, to which they ran with all possible speed.

Each party was bent upon gaining possession of the person of Aurora, and a terrible struggle ensued.

"For Diego!" shouted one of the King's attendants.

"Lavengro and the laws!" cried Masai, as he felled the man to the ground by a blow with the barrel of his gun.

The fight now became fast and furious. Shots were fired, and death-dealing blows fell thick and fast. Men who should have been friends clutched each other's throats in their wild struggle. Prostrate figures rolled and writhed in their death-agony, trampled underfoot by friends and foes. Women encouraged men by words and actions, and participated in the mêlée.

"Diego!" "Lavengro!" the battle-cries of the respective combatants, rang loud and clear over the clash of the fight.

The attenuated ranks on both sides began to show evident signs of the ferocity of the struggle. They had suffered severely, and were on the point of exhaustion, but neither would yield.

At the first onslaught José had placed himself in front of the King, who was an eye-witness of the fight. He now, in loud, commanding tones, cried:

"Hold your murderous hands!"

The effect was electrical. They lowered their weapons, and retired a pace or two, angrily facing each other.

"A word from your Majesty will stop this slaughter," José said.

"I have spoken, and will be obeyed!" was the King's haughty reply.

This further exasperated José's followers. Rushing from among his fellows, Masai sprang towards the King in a threatening attitude.

José calmly raised his hand, in which he held a pistol, till it was within a few inches of the head of Masai.

"Move another step, and it will be your last!" he sternly said. "Your cause now is just. Will you dishonour yourself by raising your hand against your King?"

Elspeth, who had charge of the litter, had watched the fight with every sign of satisfaction. She had passed her life amid strife and turmoil. She loved it for its own sake.

"You are bonny men," she cried, "and have fought well! What do you say to a woman deciding between you?"

"Elspeth shall decide!" shouted men on both sides.

The King and José nodded agreement.

"Let Elspeth award the victory!"

The old crone grinned, showing her yellow teeth.

"I named a woman," she said, "but not myself. The intended bride shall speak for herself."

This was received with acclamation. The late combatants mingled as friends again, and pressed round the litter to hear Aurora's decision.

The litter was opened by Elspeth.

"Come, dearie," she said; "the King awaits his bride."

A moment later she emerged, showing a horror-stricken face. Not a word could she utter.

With a hasty motion she tore off the covering, and dislosed to their astonished gaze the lightning-blasted features of her son Carl.

CHAPTER X.

THE COMING OF THE SEER.

Words cannot describe the intensity of feeling caused by the discovery just made. The people had been waiting and expecting a glimpse of the intended bride, the cause of all the strife. Men looked at each other in terror and dismay; women screamed, and fell fainting to the ground. The King's face blanched with fear, as he leaned on José for support.

"Our gods are against us!" he cried. "This is a sign of their displeasure. How will they be appeased?"

José made no reply. He, too, had his superstitious fears. Certain he was that the King had spoken truly.

"Come with me to my tent, José. We must consult Balsamo the seer, who accompanied me from Dubora Volaska at his own request, the stars having forewarned him of danger from an unknown source."

Thus the King, with trembling lips, spoke, as he pressed with all haste to his tent.

The enmity between the King and José had vanished under the cloud that had so suddenly fallen upon them. Summoning an attendant, the King said:

"Go to the seer Balsamo, and say the King would see him immediately."

The servant hesitated, and looked from his master to José in perplexity.

"The seer," he said, "is with the stars, and cannot be disturbed. Such were his own words."

"We must wait for the end of his reading of our destiny," the King said, as he seated himself by the side of José, where they sat in deep meditation.

They were aroused by the entry of the King's attendant, who said:

"Elspeth of the Lavengroes desires to speak to your Majesty." Elspeth had followed the servant into the King's apartment, and stood defiantly facing him and José.

"You grieve at losing the Blue Eye," she said to the King. "Would the witch had never been born. She has been the cause of the death of my only son, and there is no sympathy for me. You will not find her without trouble, and with her you will find the man who has stolen her from you."

The King looked with a vacant stare at the angry woman, who returned his gaze unflinchingly.

"You must be up and doing quickly," she said, "if you would catch the bird that has flown."

"What mean you?" José said, who now spoke for the first time since he entered the tent. "Would you have the King fly in the face of the gods?"

"Fudge!" the old woman cried. "Only cravens shield themselves behind such excuses."

"It is forbidden by the oracles that the King should take the woman for his wife!"

"Is it forbidden by the oracles that a Romany, and more especially a King, shall be robbed and not take vengeance on the thief?" she sneered.

"Who is the thief?" demanded the King, now quite himself again. The news she had brought quieted his superstitious fears.

"Rollo Lavengro," she answered, "is the man who stole your intended bride."

"Is he still living?" asked the King in surprise. "Did he not fall under the ban of the Secret Avengers? José, you had the decree."

"Which I delivered to your Majesty at your request as one of the council of the order."

"I remember," the King replied.

"Yes," said Elspeth; "and perhaps you also remember that you pardoned Rollo and removed the ban as the price to be paid for Blue Eye."

Elspeth told the King and José of their being overtaken by the storm. That Carl had been killed by lightning. That Lavengro, when she was absent, had taken Aurora from her litter, and placed in it the dead body of Carl. That they recommenced their march, and Lavengro found an excuse, went back, and had not returned, and that he and Aurora could not be more than a day's march from the camp.

The King had listened impatiently to Elspeth's recital. The supernatural had given place to reality. He was King again.

"Summon my men!" he shouted; "the arch-traitor shall suffer for this speedily."

"Now, you speak and act like a King," Elspeth said. "I will raise the Lavengroes, and head their march."

"Stay!" said a solemn voice: "would you further strive against your destiny? Has not the lesson been sufficient, and is it so soon forgotten?"

It was the voice of the seer Balsamo, who had unobserved entered the tent.

The King and José rose and made low salutations. Elspeth stood perfectly unmoved, with a light sneer on her face, as she looked at Balsamo.

Without appearing to notice either of the persons present, Balsamo continued:

"In the dead of the night I was summoned away. In my vision I saw a Romany camp overtaken by a storm, sent by the stars in their anger. I saw a lightning flash strike down a blasphemer with the oath on his lips. I saw in my vision your Majesty anxiously awaiting a bride of an alien race. Azeal's wings fluttered near you. A bolt slowly descended from the stars and hovered over you. You stood before the angry, scowling faces of your people determined on the sacrilege. The bolt guided by Azeal approached nearer. Suddenly your intended bride crumbled to dust, and a hideous, disfigured form stood in her place, from which you sprang in disgust. I saw another figure stand at your side—a true Romany. Your people cheered, you made her your wife, and you were saved. Azeal spread his wings and soared aloft. The bolt disappeared. I saw a retreating figure of a man," continued Balsamo, "in the far distance carrying away your intended alien bride. He had Romany blood in his veins, but was not a true Romany."

"How know you that?" interrupted Elspeth savagely.

"Silence, woman!" cried Balsamo, without deigning a look. And he went on: "I saw the man with his burden hastening to his natural home, and there he was lost to my sight amid a clash of strife. I have told your Majesty the vision; you must read and decide for yourself."

"Tell me more," said the trembling King. "Who was the woman I made my wife?"

"She was closely veiled; I saw not her face. It is for your Majesty to lift the veil, and discover the bride. I have spoken."

With these words Balsamo left the presence of the King.

"Heard you the words of the seer?" the King said, as he looked from José to Elspeth.

"Your Majesty's duty is now clear as daylight," José said. "The stars have saved you from certain destruction."

"What say you, Elspeth?" asked the King. "Our folk-lore is well known to you. How do you interpret the riddle the seer has placed before us?"

"As gibberish to frighten fools with," she said. "Send for Balsamo, strip him of the black robe he wears. Give him the lash, as you would another knave, and exercise your kingly rights. The days of the sages are gone, the present race are lying impostures."

The King and José looked on in alarm at this outburst, the former motioning with his hand that Elspeth should leave the tent.

The silent command was obeyed. A moment later she re-entered. Addressing José, she said:

"Did I hear aright? Did Balsamo say Rollo Lavengro was hastening to his natural home?"

"He did not mention Lavengro," José replied. "He said a man was hastening to his natural home. Do you know the man or his home, Elspeth?"

"I know nothing of his home," said she evasively. But as she passed out she muttered:

"I'll be at his home, too, and be even with him and the Blue Eye. They have not done with Elspeth yet."

The King and José put upon the seer's vision a different interpretation to Elspeth's. It was to them a solemn warning that evil would befall if the King married any woman but a Romany. They were convinced that a miracle had been performed on their behalf, and that the King and the race had been saved from annihilation.

Long and earnestly they discussed the knotty question, always arriving at their starting-point—namely, that the King must marry a woman of pure Romany blood, without coming to any decision as to the lucky damsel on whom the choice should fall.

"Send for Elspeth," José suggested. "She knows where the purest blood in the tribe lies. She has witnessed marriages and births for more than three generations."

The name of Elspeth rang through the camp. The King is waiting for Elspeth, of the Lavengroes, others shouted. But Elspeth was not to be found. She had left the camp on coming from the King's tent two hours before.

The ultimate decision was that Semida of the Bohemians should be the future Queen. That the King on the morrow should make a public announcement of the fact of his intention of making her his Queen, the matter to be kept secret, and to come from the King's own lips, as a glad surprise for the people. The stars would be appeased, and the people contented and happy.

Only one person was admitted into the bond of secrecy, that was Semida, the intended bride. The King's intention was conveyed to her, with instructions to prepare for the ceremony. Rich robes and jewels accompanied the announcement of the happy future opening up before her.

She received the news of the intended honour with a coldness that surprised José, who was her informant.

"Do you object to the King as your husband, Semida?" he asked.

"I have not objected," she replied. "Only give me time to consider the King's offer. I am not entirely free."

"You have a whole day for that," the old man said. And he continued, smilingly: "I do not doubt your decision, Semida."

As soon as José had left her, Semida hastened to prepare for going out. Nodding here and there to her many friends, she walked through the camp.

Turning to the left, she came upon two men busily employed in making such articles as are usually sold by gipsies in their wanderings.

Beckoning to one of the men, she turned away. He left his work and followed her.

She awaited his coming. As he caught sight of her pale, troubled face, he said:

"Semida, what has brought you here? What is your trouble?"

"I have come to ask you a serious question, Patio."

"Yes," he said, as he took her hand in his.

"I promised to marry you," she said. "Will you take me now, or leave me altogether?"

He could not understand; her usual vivacity was gone.

"Do you want to withdraw your promise?" he asked, with much misgiving.

"I do not!" she said. "Romany maidens never break their word. I want you to assist me in its fulfilment. If I have a husband, it will be yourself. Take me now, and spare me further misery."

He was somewhat perplexed; but the now weeping girl strengthened him to adopt her suggestion, and the prize he had long coveted would be his own.

He left his work, and, calling the heads of his tribe together, told them of his intention of making Semida his wife. The rites attending a gipsy marriage were speedily performed, and Semida became the happy wife of Patio.

It was long before Patio knew the sacrifice Semida had made for him.

The escape the King believed he had experienced by the intervention of the stars, had made so deep an impression upon him that the information that his second intended wife was beyond his reach rather pleased him than otherwise. He was now certain that the particular deity that attended at his birth and had cared for him through life was still watching over him, and had again interfered on his special behalf. He left the matter of finding him a wife in the hands of the chiefs of the tribes, feeling confident he was under special protection.

A consultation was held amid much angry discussion, each chief being anxious to secure a choice from his own particular tribe. A compromise was effected. A dusky beauty of one of the smaller tribes was the chosen Queen.

The stars did not interfere on this occasion. Their anger was appeased, and Petro Diego's troubles in search of a wife were over. He once more breathed freely.

The camp was broken up. The respective tribes returned to their own countries. Each tribe went quietly on its own way, as their avocations or inclinations led them.

CHAPTER XI.

THE END.

When the storm which had fallen so suddenly on the Lavengro tribe had abated, Lavengro gave orders for a forward movement. By the fitful light of the moon they found the beaten track, and started on their way to the camp of the King.

They had not proceeded far when Lavengro called aside one of the men.

"Sampson," he said, "I must go back to the crypt. I have left something important there, which I must obtain for the King. I hope to be with you again soon. Say I will follow on as soon as possible."

He strode rapidly away, and reached the spot where he had placed Aurora.

She was still peacefully sleeping under the narcotic administered by Elspeth.

Lavengro carefully lifted her from the ground in his strong arms, and stood for a moment hesitating as to what route he should take.

He struck across the common, not knowing to where it would lead him. Miles he covered in his eagerness to leave the gipsy camp behind him. The length of his journey, coupled with the weight he carried, began to show their effect upon him. He gently laid the girl down to obtain a little much-needed rest.

Aurora had begun to show signs of returning consciousness. She opened her eyes, and in a bewildered manner:

"How very cold it is," she murmured.

Lavengro produced from his pocket a flask containing brandy. He poured a few drops into her mouth, which appeared to revive her. Bending over her, he anxiously watched the signs of returning animation. Little by little her limbs moved; a cold shudder passed over her, as she said in an incoherent voice:

"Where am I now, Elspeth?"

"You are not with that woman," Lavengro said quietly. "Don't excite yourself; you are out of her hands at last, and safe with me."

"Has Elspeth left the crypt?" she inquired. "How quiet the place is, Lavengro."

She had recognised him; her senses had returned. The mention by her of the crypt decided him. He would go back there for the present.

By easy stages, to suit Aurora's strength, they reached the crypt, and found a secure resting-place.

Lavengro found Gittoes the sole occupant of the crypt. He had kept possession since the death of Jasper Gordon; no one had come forward to claim a right to the inheritance.

The last few days had made a considerable change in the old servant. His hair had bleached, his hitherto upright figure was bent, and signs of mental trouble were clearly written on his unwashed and unshaven face.

"I wanted to see you," Gittoes said, as he tottered towards Lavengro. "I have something the master gave me when he died, with positive instructions to place it in your hands."

"What is it?" Lavengro asked.

"I will get it if you will wait," Gittoes said, as he walked slowly out of the room. On his return, he carried the parcel left by Gordon for Lavengro. Placing it in his hands, he said: "Later on, I have another commission with you, Lavengro."

He carried the parcel to the crypt, wondering what Jasper Gordon had placed in his charge.

He hurriedly broke the seal, and found the parcel contained three sheets of notepaper and other documents, filled with writing in a crabbed hand. The heading on the first sheet caught his attention. In large characters were written the words:

"A short history of my life.—JASPER GORDON."

"What is all this nonsense to me?" Lavengro remarked. He was soon to be more interested. It read:

"I, Jasper Gordon, of Grey Crypt, a soldier of fortune, was a younger son of an impoverished family. Having my own way to make in the world, I went as a free-lance, and offered my services to the Spanish King, who was then at war with the Moors. I soon rose to distinction, with a command in the Spanish Army. My comrade and fellow-soldier was Malcolm Dalgetty, a native of Ireland. We fought shoulder to shoulder, and would have died for each other, so great was our friendship, until Marie Carini, in all her Spanish gipsy beauty, burst upon us. A fierce rivalry ensued; we became sworn foes."

"I was the favoured suitor, and Marie became my wife. A son was born to us, whom we named Rollo. Our happiness was broken by a sudden attack of the Moors. My regiment was ordered out. In battle I was wounded and taken prisoner, and languished for some years in a Moorish prison without news of wife or child. In course of time I was reported dead. I eventually obtained my release, and, broken in health, I hurried to Madrid. There I obtained the heartbreaking information that my wife, thinking me dead, had married Malcolm Dalgetty, and had gone with him to Ireland. I wandered there, only to find that Marie was dead, leaving a son of Malcolm Dalgetty."

"On the death of Marie, Dalgetty treated my son with great harshness, and eventually drove him, young as he was, from his home, and handed him, with a sum of money, to a woman of the Lavengro tribe of gipsies called Elspeth. The woman had been Marie's nurse in Spain when my son was born, and came with her to Ireland, and was one of the household of Malcolm Dalgetty on the birth of his son Philip. The woman went away, taking Rollo with her to join her own people. He was brought up as a son of Elspeth, and all trace of him was lost until I discovered him in St. Petersburg, an active member of the Secret Avengers. He was sent away on active service of the league, and I again failed to obtain any trace of him. I taxed Elspeth, to whom and her tribe I had always shown friendship, with duplicity in telling me the boy was dead, when she confessed he was still living, and was with the Lavengro tribe."

"Some months ago the tribe came to the crypt, and I then by bribes and promises found out that Rollo was among them. Elspeth knew I was condemned by the Secret Avengers, and threatened to expose my hiding if I took Rollo from her. I also knew that he was under the ban, and to save his life I kept the secret. Gittoes can verify this statement. He was with me when my son was born. Enclosed are certificates of my marriage with Marie, and of my son's birth. You will also find my last will, by which I give everything I possess to my only child, Rollo Gordon, now called Rollo Lavengro, of the gipsy tribe of that name."

Rollo had scarcely finished reading before Gittoes again appeared. The old man crept into the room in a state of terrible excitement. Approaching Rollo, he cried: "Riga 719!"

Rollo sprang from his seat in dismay as he said:

"You, too, are of the Silent Avengers?"

Gittoes bared his arm, showing a small, blue tattoo mark on his wrist. "To my sorrow, I am," he said; "but with you my troubles will end."

"What mean you?" Rollo asked.

"You are under the ban. I am the instrument. You must prepare to die before I leave you. Would the task had fallen on other shoulders; my hands are stained enough already!"

"Do you mean to take my life, Gittoes?"

"I have no alternative. You know the obligation. I did not spare my master. You must follow!"

"You shot Gordon, my father, say you?"

"He was your father; he fell at my hands. You were also an intended victim. Now your time has come, and I shall be free."

"Hold!" cried Rollo in haste. "I have a pardon granted by Pedro Diego of the Council."

"I hope it is true; produce it quickly."

Rollo had carried the pardon ever since it came into his possession. He now handed it to Gittoes. After carefully reading it, the old man fell upon his knees; with hands uplifted he fervently thanked Heaven that another life had not been placed to his account.

Rollo, as we will now call him, quietly took possession of his inheritance. His great anxiety now was Aurora, and what course was best to adopt to restore her to her home and friends. Although Gittoes knew Rollo's history, he was quite in the dark about Aurora.

She was now enjoying a freedom to which she had hitherto been a stranger. Her rambles about the old house and grounds were a source of great delight. She even grew bold enough to venture into the fields and lanes.

In one of these excursions, as she was returning to the crypt, she met a gentleman going towards Whitacre. As he passed her, she noticed he was walking very lame, and with the aid of a stick.

Her brown skin attracted his attention; he looked curiously at her, a compliment she in her unsophistication returned, and exclaimed: "Mr. Dalgetty!"

Philip Dalgetty it was. He told her how he had escaped with his life from the crypt, and had been found in a dying condition miles away.

She informed him without reserve that herself and Rollo were at the crypt, "Would he come there with her?"

He accepted the invitation. They were met by Gittoes, and Dalgetty soon found himself in the presence of Rollo.

It was an awkward moment; but Rollo, now he had attained his independence and freedom, made a full confession of the part he had played in Dalgetty's capture.

Dalgetty listened with surprise to Rollo's recital of the communication he had received from Jasper Gordon. When he had finished, Dalgetty rose, and, extending his hand, said:

"We are brothers, indeed; in memory of our mother let the past be forgotten."

A hearty handshake, and the two men became sworn friends. The following day the carriage from Whitacre rolled up to the door of Gray Crypt, which so surprised Gittoes that he nearly lost the little wit he had left.

The occasion was a visit from Sir William and Lady Summers to Rollo.

"We have called," said Lady Summers, "to welcome you, Mr. Gordon, to your new home, and hope we shall be friends."

Rollo re-echoed the hope.

"No wife?" said Sir William. "Mr. Gordon, we must try and find you one."

"Philip tells me," Lady Summers said, "that there is a lady here, an adopted child of Mr. Gordon's?"

Just then Aurora's voice was heard in the hall. She was singing a wild gipsy song.

"What a lovely voice your ward has, Mr. Gordon. Shall we have an introduction to her?" Lady Summers was saying.

The answer was cut short by Aurora, who rushed into the room, with her head decked with wild flowers she had gathered in the woods.

Lady Summers was struck by the wild beauty of the girl, as she kissed her affectionately.

As they rose to depart, Sir William suggested that Aurora should drive with them for an hour and see the surrounding country.

The girl danced with joy at the prospect. She had never, she said, ridden in a real carriage.

The drive over, they returned to Whitacre. On entering the hall door, Aurora stopped, looking curiously round. She raised her hand to her head in deep thought. In a moment it was gone.

Lady Summers took her over the house, Aurora appearing to take little interest, though she occasionally took up or laid her hand upon some article, and for a few seconds regarded it attentively, and then moved away with a heavy sigh.

In Lady Summers' boudoir, Aurora found many nicknacks and ornaments that pleased her greatly. Seating herself beside Lady Summers, she opened an album containing portraits of the Summers' family. She turned over the pages, making her comments on the various pictures, much to her ladyship's amusement.

Her laughter stopped as she gazed upon a portrait she had caught sight of in the book.

She scanned it deeply. The perplexed look she had shown on entering the house again appeared on her face.

Rising from her seat, still holding the book in her hand, and gazing at the picture, she seemed in despair for some aid to memory.

Lady Summers watched her attentively, and, looking at the book, saw that the portrait that had so agitated Aurora, was one of herself taken when a younger woman. She waited the result.

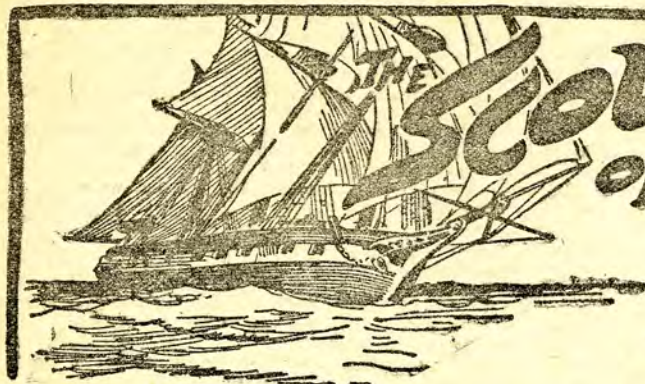
It came at last. With a wild cry the words: "Mother! mother!" burst from Aurora's lips.

Lady Summers caught the girl to her heart. She had found her long lost child.

THE END.

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By HENRY ST. JOHN,

Author of "The Days of Dashing Drake," "A Middy of Nelson's Day," "Clive Hardacre," &c., &c.

"You offer no quarter," retorted one of the Frenchmen in good English, "so that you may have the pleasure of hanging us. My comrades and I prefer another death."

"I offer you life," replied the captain. "Surrender, and you shall live; but refuse, and I will not leave one among you alive!"

"Then you will not hang us? On the honour of a gentleman, we shall be treated as prisoners of war?"

"If there is an officer living among you, I will hang him, for he is a false-hearted traitor; but with you men it is different. You broke no promise, for you gave none, so your lives are not forfeited. Quick, make up your minds!"

The man turned to his comrades and interpreted the captain's words.

"He will not hang us? Good! Then we surrender!" cried the Frenchmen.

And with a clatter their arms fell to the deck.

And it was thus that Captain Featherstone lost and regained his vessel in one night.

DAWN—THE PRISONERS—THE TRIAL.

Dawn revealed a ghastly spectacle on the deck of the "Resolute," and proved how severe had been the struggle that had taken place during the hours of darkness.

Immediately after the surrender of the survivors of the French, search had been made for the wounded, and friends and foes alike were immediately placed in the hands of the surgeon and his assistants.

But the dead far outnumbered the wounded, and a shocking sight it was when the first gleam of sunlight shot across the heavens. Those gashed and scarred bodies, lying with blue, up-turned faces, staring with glazed, unseeing eyes at the radiant dawn that would never break again for them.

The havoc among the French had been terrible; but, thanks to the discipline maintained by the English, their loss, though great, was not to be compared with the loss sustained by their foes.

Of the French, scarcely fifty remained alive, and the English were reduced to about the same number.

Among the French prisoners were two officers—one a grizzled veteran, the other only a lad. The former had been the second lieutenant of the "Vipère," and the latter a midshipman.

These two had both given their parole of honour to Captain Featherstone, when he had first taken them prisoners from the "Vipère," both had broken the solemn pledge they had made, and both were to pay the penalty of their treachery with their lives.

An overwhelming pity for the younger of the two came into Frank's heart when he thought of the shameful death which awaited him, yet he felt that Captain Featherstone was just, and that the punishment to be allotted was deserved.

"Pity!" said Cuttlestone, to whom Frank had laid bare his feelings; "not I! He deserves death; but for him, and for those like him, we should have Seymour alive with us at this moment, and Joyson and Maxwell!"

"Joyson and Maxwell!" cried Frank. "They are not dead?"

Cuttlestone nodded his head sadly.

"Maxwell was found on the quarterdeck with a murdering Frenchman's knife in his heart. Poor Joyson died ten minutes ago on the table in the cockpit."

Frank shuddered. Death, always terrible, is never more so than when it is so sudden and unexpected. A few hours ago these two were as full of life, of hope, as he himself, and now—

"The captain will hold a court-martial over these two this afternoon," said Cuttlestone. "He has invited the masters of the merchantmen to attend. Poor Fitz, by the way, is in a

terrible mess. He's got the dence of a leg, I can tell you. A slit six inches long in the middle of the calf. It'll spoil his dancing for a year or two.

Cuttlestone talked of death and disaster in a calm, matter-of-fact way, that might have been expected of one three or four times his age, and yet it was scarcely more than a year ago that the sight of a cut-finger would have made him feel sick. It is thus that familiarity breeds contempt, even for death.

To say that the masters of the merchantmen were surprised when they learned how very nearly they had been in altering their course for France instead of for England, but feebly expressed the state of their minds when they received intelligence of what had occurred from Captain Featherstone.

Captain Featherstone had supplemented his information with a request for the loan of a dozen men from each vessel, and that the request was, of course, granted, goes without saying.

These men were then set to work to get the "Resolute" shipshape, while the frigate's own crew took a well-earned rest.

The bodies of the dead were consigned to the deep, and the dark-brown stains on the white decks were holystoned almost out of sight, so that when the masters of the merchantmen stepped on board the "Resolute" shortly after midday, the general aspect was very different to what it had been at sunrise.

Captain Featherstone received the solemn-faced merchant captains as they came up over the side, and conducted them himself to his cabin.

Here, on the table, were laid the bodies of Lieutenant Seymour and the two midshipmen, already sewn in their shrouds of sailcloth, and covered by the British flag.

They uncovered their heads as they entered, and in solemn silence took the places allotted to them.

Mr. Clutterbuck, followed by the surgeon, Frank, and Cuttlestone then entered, and lastly came Lord Eustace, hobbling along painfully with the aid of a stick.

"Gentlemen," said the captain, rising, and speaking in a low voice, yet clear and distinct enough to be heard by all, "the duty that calls us together is a very painful one. I need not enter into the details at length. The crime of both of the prisoners now to be brought before you is only too painfully familiar with us all. It is to their treachery and broken faith that we owe the loss of many of our gallant lads, of an officer whose noble qualities had won for him all our respect and affection, and of two others whose young lives their country could ill have spared.

"One of the prisoners is scarcely more than a child, and it is mainly because of his youth that I have asked you to meet here, and judge whether or not one so young as he could understand and respect the sanctity of promise given?"

"If you feel that he was misled by others, or that he broke his word, scarcely comprehending the wrong he did, I pray you to say so, and save him from the shameful death that awaits him. Woshem, pass the word for the prisoners and the interpreter."

Bill, who had taken his stand behind the captain's chair, saluted; then, going to the cabin-door, gave the order.

A few moments later, the prisoners, guarded by four of the "Resolute's" men, entered, followed by the French sailor, who had interpreted Captain Featherstone's offer to his comrades in arms.

Both prisoners were pale, both calm and both defiant in their attitude.

"Jules Veremont!"

The French sailor stepped forward.

"We have had you brought here so that we may avail ourselves of your knowledge of our language and your own. You will interpret to the prisoners all the questions addressed to them, and their replies. Swear that you will interpret faithfully, concealing nothing or making statements of your own!"

"I swear!" replied the man.

"And beware, sir," said Captain Featherstone severely, "that you keep your oath! Any prevarication, and you shall swing from the yardarm!"

"The charge against the prisoners is, that they, after having given their solemn word of honour to attempt no escape, nor to further any such attempt on the part of others, they did, in defiance of that solemn promise, treacherously connive to release the crew of the French frigate 'Vipère,' for the purpose of gaining possession of this vessel, his Majesty's frigate 'Resolute.'"

The interpreter repeated the charge to the prisoners, the younger of whom stood calm and impassive during the recital, while the elder shrugged his shoulder with an air of disdain.

"We will hear what the elder prisoner, Lieutenant Gaston la Fournier, has to say in his defence," said Captain Featherstone.

"I have nothing to say. I hate the English! They are tyrants. I would do again what I have already done. If our plan had succeeded, success would have vindicated my honour. As it is—it is idle talking!"

This was the purport of the lieutenant's answer, given with an air of bravado and a contempt of consequences.

"Gentlemen, this, as far as the elder prisoner is concerned, is the charge, and his reply to it. You have only now to pass your verdict," said the captain.

THE VOTE FOR LIFE—FOR THE SAKE OF HIS YOUTH—SAFE!

Without any hesitation the verdict was delivered:

"Guilty!"

"Gaston la Fournier," said Captain Featherstone, rising, and addressing the elder prisoner, "you stand confessed by your own words a black-hearted villain! What fate is such a wretch as yourself deserving of?"

He stopped, looking sternly at the prisoner, who evidently comprehended what the captain said to him, for he shrugged his shoulders with a gesture of contempt, and then, turning to the sailor who acted as interpreter, said something quickly in an undertone.

"My lieutenant," said the man, "bids me tell you that what he has done he had done, and nothing can alter it. He has no regret, only sorrow that he was not successful. Whatever fate you may decide upon for him, he is ready to submit; but, as a sailor and an officer, he hopes that you will accord him at least a gentleman's death. He wishes to be shot."

"Had your lieutenant proved himself a gentleman I would have acceded to his wish," said Captain Featherstone sternly; "but his actions have proved him to be a contemptible and dishonourable scoundrel who deserves but one death—a death as inglorious and disgraceful as any man could die! The verdict of this Court is that Lieutenant la Fournier, late of the French frigate the 'Vipère,' be hanged by the neck until he is dead!"

There was a breathless silence, broken only by the murmuring voice of the interpreter, as he repeated to the doomed man Captain Featherstone's awful words.

Save for a sudden paleness and tightening in of the lips, the prisoner showed no sign of fear or repulsion.

Then, when the sailor had finished all, even to the last word, the lieutenant turned and bowed gravely to his judges.

"Messieurs," he said, "I accept your judgment. I am powerless in your hands. But one day"—here his voice rang out loud and triumphantly—"one day, messieurs, France will avenge me!"

At a commanding gesture from Captain Featherstone the two sailors who guarded the condemned man conducted him from the room.

The other prisoner alone remained. He was calm, but white, even to the very lips, and leaned slightly for support against the shoulder of one of his guards.

"Messieurs," he said, speaking so slowly that his words were translated as they were uttered, "I can save you much of your valuable time, and myself much suffering, if you will allow me to plead guilty of the conspiracy to capture your vessel. At the time it did not seem to me a dishonourable thing, for I have been taught that all in war is fair. I see now, too late, that the action of my officers and myself was a despicable and dishonourable one, which now causes me shame. I am guilty, and I deserve my fate. Will monsieur the English captain pass judgment on me, and let me go?"

The words were uttered without any attempt at bravado. The speaker uttered them in the honest conviction that by pleading guilty at once he would be instantly sentenced to death, and so be spared the wretchedness and misery of the trial.

"I—in the whole course of my long and varied career," stammered Mr. Clutterbuck, "I never saw better spirit displayed by a lad of his years!"

"He's a plucky chap, that animal of a Frenchman!" muttered Fitzhurse.

Captain Featherstone sat silently for a moment, while the other captains murmured among themselves.

"Gentlemen," said the captain at last, rising, and turning to the merchant masters and his officers, "you have heard what this lad has said. It rests with you what the sentence upon him is. He—*he* is very young, only a boy. That he was led away by his elders is probable. Bear these things in mind, and if, in justice to the flag that flies above us, you think that his young life might be spared, temper your justies with mercy, and spare him. In five minutes I shall ask you for your decision."

Never, thought Frank, had the minutes ever seemed so long to him as did those that followed—minutes that were fraught with life and death.

The boy himself seemed the least concerned of all in the room. He still stood leaning slightly on Jim Bradwardine's shoulder, but with a far-away expression on his face that clearly indicated that, in spite of the momentous question that was being decided, his thoughts were not there, but far away, probably in the land of his birth and childhood.

At last the minutes had passed, the suspense was over, and Captain Featherstone rose to his feet.

"Gentlemen, your decision, if you please. Those for an acquittal will rise; those for a sentence of death will remain seated."

With a rustle every man in the cabin rose to his feet, every man but one—Lieutenant Lord Fitzhurse.

"Excuse me, sir!" cried Fitzhurse; "I—I can't get up—bad leg, you know—but let the animal off!"

A hearty outburst of laughter greeted the lieutenant's explanation. The relief to everyone's mind was so great that if they had not laughed, some of them might have wept, Frank among them.

The laughter aroused the French boy, who started violently, and glanced rapidly round at the upstanding figures. What was it—was it the smile on their beaming features?—that told its tale of hope and life?

In an instant the boy had realised all. Before Captain Featherstone had opened his mouth he knew that he was saved, and, flinging himself on to his knees, he hid his face in his hands and burst into a torrent of tears.

There was a scuffle at the door. Someone was pushing his way into the crowded cabin.

It was Monsieur Durand, his face red, and his eyes filled with tears. He pushed his way forward to where Featherstone stood, and held out both hands.

"Heaven will reward you for your mercy on this lad!" he cried; "and France will not forget!"

"I never," muttered Mr. Clutterbuck, blowing his nose violently, "had such an experience as this in the whole course of my long and varied career!"

THE MORN OF THE EXECUTION—THE SURPRISE—TOO LATE—FOR VENGEANCE.

It was daybreak. Heavy, murky clouds were sweeping across the sky. The sea had risen from its tranquillity, and broke in white feather-crested waves over the stern of the brave old "Resolute."

As though in accord with the elements, the faces of the crew of the frigate looked gloomy and overshadowed.

"It ain't the killin' part as I objects to so much," muttered Jim Bradwardine to his chum, "cause killin' is our perfeshun. You and me, Joe, ha' killed many a Frenchman in our time, and ha' runned our risks o' bein' killed likewise. It's all this blooming preparation and suspense—the rignin' o' the yardarm, the beatin' o' the drums, and all the rest of it. Give me, Joe, says I, ten rattling hot hand-to-hand, stand-up-and-fight engagements rather than one execution!"

And this was every man's feeling.

To kill a man in battle, hand to hand and steel to steel, that was fair and natural enough; but to kill a man in cold blood, to the beat of the muffled drum, and with the prayers of the chaplain ringing in their ears, was another matter, and the honest fellows looked on it as a species of cold-blooded murder.

The morning wore slowly on. At two bells the execution was to take place, and although it was not yet eight o'clock, all was in readiness.

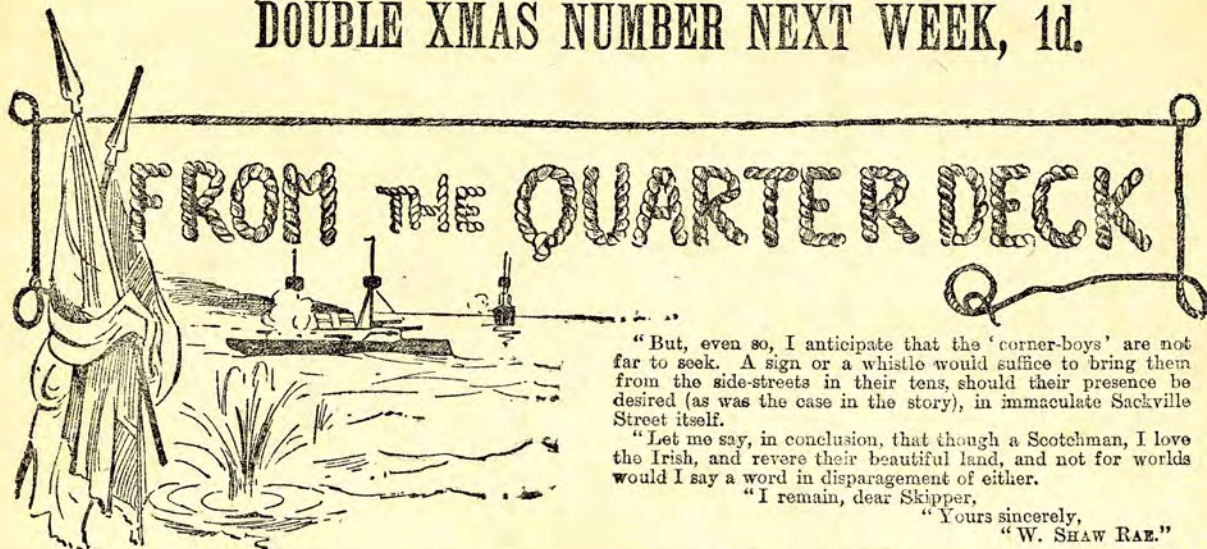
On the quarter-deck were four coffins, three nailed down and covered with the British flag, the fourth open, and as yet untenanted.

Squire, the carpenter, had knocked the four coffins together during the night. Mr. Seymour and the two middies lay, with heavy shot at their feet, in three of them, the fourth was waiting for a still living man.

One bell after eight sounded, and Captain Featherstone came on to the deck. He was dressed in full uniform, and looked pale, but resolute.

(To be continued in next Friday's UNION JACK.)

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One of my authors has been caught napping, and by an Irish reader with a Scotch name—McLean. I sent Mr. Rae my reader's letter, and here give his reply.

"23rd November, 1897.

"My Dear Skipper,—I have perused, with much interest, the letter of Mr. George McLean, on the subject of the latest Sexton Blake story, 'Under the Smuggler's Flag,' and find that your correspondent, in his criticism, takes exception to two points, and two only, in my description of the city of Dublin.

"1st.—The topography.

"2nd.—The presence of 'corner-boys' in Sackville Street.

"Now, I used to know Dublin pretty thoroughly. Several years ago I had to make a regular quarterly visit to the Emerald Isle, always passing through the capital on these occasions, and generally making a stay of a day or two in the city, going or returning.

"Since then, however, I have been far afield—far beyond the limits of Europe, indeed; and possibly my recollections of the lay of the Dublin streets have become a trifle obscured by fresh scenes in many lands.

"Dealing with Mr. McLean's first objection. Let me place side by side his description of the route from the Castle to Sackville Street with that given in the story:

"Under the Smuggler's Flag."

"Slowly Blake passed down Dame Street, and paced along Sackville Street."

"Mr. McLean wrote:

"When he left the Castle he would traverse Dame Street, College Green, Westmoreland Street, &c., into Sackville Street."

"I do not see much difference there, save that your critic's description is the fuller of the two.

"On the subject of the bridge, however, I acknowledge my fault, and throw myself upon his mercy.

"Mr. McLean is quite correct; the bridge is placed out of position.

"Mea culpa! Humbly I doff my hat, and respectfully apologise for daring, even inadvertently, to move the site of Carlisle Bridge a bit along the street.

"With regard to the second objection, I have seen 'corner-boys' and loafers in Sackville Street; but no doubt that noble thoroughfare has been improved in many respects during recent years, and I am glad to learn that such unsightly and unsavoury blurs are no longer permitted to mar the attractiveness of 'one of the finest streets in the three kingdoms.'

"But, even so, I anticipate that the 'corner-boys' are not far to seek. A sign or a whistle would suffice to bring them from the side-streets in their tens, should their presence be desired (as was the case in the story), in immaculate Sackville Street itself.

"Let me say, in conclusion, that though a Scotchman, I love the Irish, and revere their beautiful land, and not for worlds would I say a word in disparagement of either.

"I remain, dear Skipper,

"Yours sincerely,
"W. SHAW RAE."

A mining centre is thus formed in Western Australia, "M." Someone applies to the registrar of the nearest township, who, on his paying a pound, gives him a miner's right. Then he begins prospecting. If he comes upon a likely spot, he commences "dollying"—that is, he breaks up the quartz with a sort of pestle and mortar, and washes away the stone and earth. If the find seems likely to be a profitable one, the miner pegs out his claim of so many acres, and applies to the warden for his certificate, paying at the same time his year's rent of one pound per acre, and a survey fee of one pound per acre. In some districts as many as 1,500 to 2,000 claims have been registered in three weeks. Well, if the claim is a good one—and on the slightest rumour he is carefully watched—hundreds follow him. The method of pegging-out is simplicity itself. When you find the supposed payable reef, you cut down a tree, and make a long peg and stick it in the ground. Then you cut an L-trench and pace off the distance to the next angle of your claim, and stick in another peg, completing in the same way the parallelogram of land you desire to acquire. Labour is exceedingly expensive. The average pay is 24 a week, with an allowance of two gallons of water per day. And the worst of it is that the supply of labour is rather intermittent. In many cases, directly a man makes £30 or £40, off he goes prospecting "on his own." Then the labour conditions are very stringent and severe. Every three acres must be worked by at least one man, and should, through dearth of labour or otherwise, a claim be neglected for two days, it may be "jumped"—that is, a claim may be lodged against the owner for breach of the labour laws, and work will then have to be suspended till the case is heard. If the case is proved, the complainant acquires the plot. Some persons make quite a harvest out of watching such opportunities, and so exacting blackmail. Of course no registrar would listen to a claim against one of the big mines unless the applicant were a man of substance. Work is carried on night and day all the week round by three shifts of men.

*Yours sincerely,
The Skipper*

All letters for the Editor should be addressed to 123, Temple Chambers, London, E.C.

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