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FAST AS THE WIND: A NOVEL

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
THE BOOM OF A GUN

A small but splendidly built yacht steamed slowly into Torbay, passed Brixham and Paignton, and came to anchor in the outer harbor at Torquay. It was a glorious spring morning, early, and the sun shone on the water with a myriad of dancing reflections; it bathed in light the beautiful town, the scores of villas nestling on the heights surrounding it, the palms on the terrace walk, on the mass of greenery clothing foot to summit, on the inner harbor, and on the rocky coast stretching out towards Anstey's Cove and Babbacombe Beach. It was a magnificent sight, the arts of man and nature mingled together, for once harmonizing, for Torquay has not been spoilt by builders, at least as seen from the bay. Behind, Brixham way, the red sails of the fishing boats flapped lazily in an idle breeze. Four men-of-war lay still in the bay, guardians of the peace, comforting, reassuring, a hint of what lay behind. How peaceful these monsters of the deep looked. Slumbering surely were they. What was that? A puff of white smoke, then a solemn sound, which sped across the bay, and

echoed over the hills. One of the monsters had spoken, just to show it was wide awake.

It had a curious effect on the man leaning over the side of the *Sea-mew*, the yacht that had just come to anchor. It startled him from his reverie, from his contemplation of all that was so beautiful around him.

For a moment he looked across at the warships, and saw the smoke drifting away, then he turned and looked over the town and its heights, and his thoughts went far and landed on Dartmoor.

Another gun boomed out. This time it seemed more natural. Again the echo ran over the hills, and again he turned and looked towards that vast moor which lay behind.

"Supposing it were true," he muttered. "Would to God it were, and that he were safe on board my yacht. All for a woman, and such a woman!"

He clenched his fist and struck the rail.

Picton Woodridge, owner of the *Sea-mew*, was a man of about thirty, tall, good looking, genial, popular, but lonely, if a popular man can be described as lonely, and there are such men. He was rich, a sportsman. His stable at Haverton contained good horses: a Derby winner in prospect, one of the best stayers in England, and above all Tearaway, a black filly, three years old, described by her trainer, Brant Blackett, as "a beauty, a real gem, and fast as the wind."

He ought to have been a happy man. To all outward

appearances he was, but behind a smiling face there is sometimes a heavy heart. It was not exactly so in his case, yet there was something of it. There was one black shadow cast over his gilded path, and the echo of the gun from the man-of-war had deepened it.

"Why the deuce did I come here?" he muttered. "Why did I promise Dick I'd ride for him at Torquay races?"

He sighed; he knew why he had promised Dick Langford to ride for him; he would do a good deal more than this for Dick, for the sake of his sister Rita. He had no other companion on the yacht than Ben Bruce, captain of the *Sea-mew*, who stood towards him in the light of his best friend.

Ben Bruce was a character in his way. He had been in the Navy, on the same ship with Picton's father, and Admiral Woodridge and the young officer had esteem and affection for each other. Lieutenant Bruce often came to Haverton in the Admiral's time and was always a welcome guest. He had known Picton from a boy, and shared the Admiral's fondness for the somewhat lonely child, whose mother died at his birth, and whose elder brother was generally away from home, training for the Army. Bruce remembered the elder boy, Hector, but had not seen so much of him, or become so attached to him as to Picton. Hector was of a different disposition, hasty, headstrong, willful, and yet the brothers were much attached, and when at home together, were seldom apart. There were ten years between them; consequently Hector regarded himself in the light of a protector

to Picton.

The Admiral loved them and endeavored to treat them equally in his affection, but it was not difficult to see the younger had the stronger hold over him. Hector saw it and smiled. He was not at all jealous; he felt if it came to choosing, and one of them had to be relied upon, his father would select him. And such would probably have been the case had occasion occurred, but it did not, and everything went on the even tenor of its way until the fatal day when a terrible thing happened and Hector became, so Picton was positively certain, the victim of a woman's wiles. What this happening was we shall learn. Sufficient to say, it caused the Admiral to retire. He never got over the shock, and died soon after he left the Navy. The bulk of his fortune was left to Picton, who was determined, when the time came, to surrender to Hector his proper share. Captain Ben Bruce left the service soon after the Admiral he had loved and served. He was, so to speak, a poor man, and when he came to Haverton, to his old chief's funeral, Picton begged him to stay with him for a few months to relieve his loneliness. This he readily consented to do. The months extended, and Picton would not let him go; he relied on the stronger man, who had carved his way upward by his own exertions. Ben Bruce protested, all to no purpose.

"I can't do without you," said Picton. "You were my father's friend, he had every confidence in you; you are one of the executors, you are the proper man to remain here and run the show."

Ben Bruce laughed.

"Run the show!" he said. "Not much chance of that even if I wished it. You've a good head on your shoulders, and one quite capable of managing your affairs. If I stay, mind I say *if*, it will not be on that account."

"It doesn't matter to me on what account you stay so long as you consent to remain," said Picton. "There's so much to do here; I am short of a companion – you know I don't take to everyone. There's another thing – although you're a sailor you are fond of horses, and a good rider, and I say, Ben, I've a proposition to make."

Again Ben Bruce laughed.

"You've got a fresh proposition almost every week, and it's nearly always something in my favor."

"This will be to your liking, as well as, if you think so, in your favor."

"What is it?"

"Take charge of the Haverton horses – be my manager."

"What about Blackett?"

"He'll not mind; in fact he'll like it. I put it to him; he seemed rather enamored of the prospect of being closely connected with Captain Bruce, the friend of his adored Admiral. There wasn't a man living Blackett loved more than my father; I think it was the combination of the sea and the stable appealed to him. Blackett always had an idea, so he told me, until he became acquainted with the Admiral, that sailors were duffers where horses were

concerned. 'But I soon found out the difference,' he said; 'the Admiral knew pretty near as much about a horse as I did. Of course I taught him a thing or two, but he was a good judge, he knew the points of a horse pretty near as well as he did the parts of a battleship.' That's Blackett's opinion, and he has an idea Captain Bruce has leanings in the same direction as the Admiral, so you can't raise any objections on that score."

It did not take much persuasion to induce Captain Bruce to consent, and he became manager of Haverton Stables and, as a natural consequence, remained with Picton Woodridge.

At the same time Picton said to him, with a serious face: "There's something else, far more important than anything I have mentioned. You've to help me to clear Hector; you believe him innocent, don't you, Ben, you can't do otherwise?"

Ben Bruce was silent for a moment – Picton watched him anxiously – then said, "Yes, I am sure he is innocent. He couldn't have done that, not to secure any woman for himself; but it's a mystery, Picton, a grave mystery, and it will take a far cleverer man than myself to unravel it. I'll help you, I'll stick at nothing to help you and Hector."

"Thanks, old friend, thanks a thousand times. With your help there is no telling what may be accomplished. There must be some way out of it; such a terrible injustice cannot be allowed to go on for ever," said Picton.

And so Captain Ben, as he was called, became the constant friend and companion of Picton Woodridge. When the *Sea-mew*

was purchased it was Captain Ben who clinched the deal, and was appointed "skipper."

"So I'm your stud manager and captain of your yacht, that's a queer combination," said Ben.

"And you're as good in one capacity as the other," said Picton.

"I think I'm safer on deck than on a horse," said Ben.

It was Captain Ben Bruce who came quietly along the deck of the *Sea-mew* and looked at Picton Woodridge as he gazed over Torquay bay. A kindly look was in his eyes, which were always bright and merry, for he was a cheerful man, not given to look on the dark side of things. His affection for Picton was that of a father for a son, in addition to being a companion and a friend. He noticed the sad far-away look on Picton's face, and wondered what it was that caused the shadow on this beautiful April morning.

"I'll leave him to his meditations," he thought; "he'll be down for breakfast, and I'll ask him then."

He was about to turn away when Picton looked round and said with a smile: "Something told me you were there."

"Telepathy," said Ben.

"Sympathy," said Picton. "Do you know what I was thinking about?"

"No; I saw you were pensive. I'd have asked you at breakfast, you looked so serious."

"I was serious."

"What caused the passing cloud on such a glorious morning?"

asked Ben.

Picton took him by the arm, his grip tightened; with the other hand he pointed to the battleship.

"The boom of a gun," he said; and Ben Bruce understood.

CHAPTER II
STORY OF AN ESCAPE

ROW me to the *Sea-mew*," said Dick Langford, and old Brackish touched his cap and replied, "Yes, sir; she's a beauty, she is. Hear the news, sir?"

"No; anything startling?"

"Nothin' out o' the common, at least not in these parts, but it's summat different to most."

"You're always long-winded, Brackish – Yorkshireman, I suppose," said Dick impatiently.

Brackish was a Yorkshire boatman, hailing from Scarborough; he came to Torquay because his mother, nearly ninety, could not stand the cold blasts of the North East coast, and the old salt had a heart. "Brack" had a rough red face, eyebrows lapped over a pair of blue eyes; his throat and chest were always bared, tanned the color of leather; black hair covered his chest; his hands were hard, a deeper brown than his chest, the hands of a son of toil, and a boatman. Brack had been popular at Scarborough; he was well known in Torbay as a brave hardy seaman, whom no weather daunted. At first he had joined the Brixham fishing fleet, but soon tired of it, and when he saved enough money he bought a couple of boats, and made a decent living in Torquay harbor.

Brack was fond of gossip, and on this particular morning he

was eager for a talk; it was his intention to have it out with Dick before he put foot in the boat, so he stood looking at the young man, barring his entrance to the craft he was eager to put his foot in. The old boatman was a sturdy figure in his rough seaman's clothes as he eyed Dick Langford, and, although impatient, Dick could not help smiling at him. He liked Brack, and the sailor returned the feeling.

"Let me get in and you can tell me about the news as we row to the yacht," said Dick.

"All right, sir; no hurry, you're here early. It's Mr. Woodridge's yacht, ain't it?"

"Of course it is; you know the *Sea-mew* as well as I do."

"Nice gentleman, Mr. Woodridge," said Brack.

"If you don't let me get into the boat I'll take another," said Dick.

Brack grinned.

"You'll not be doin' that, I'm thinking, after all I've done for yer."

"What have you done?" asked Dick surprised.

Brack looked indignant.

"Yer don't recollect? Well I'm blessed! Fancy forgettin' things like that!"

"Out with it," said Dick.

"I give yer the winner of the Leger three year runnin', and it's forgotten. Lor' bless us, what memories young gents has!" growled Brack.

Dick laughed heartily as he said: "So you did, old man. You're a real good tipster for the Yorkshire race."

"So I ought'er be. Don't I hail from there? I can always scent a Leger winner, smell 'em like I can the salt from the sea, comes natural somehow," said Brack, as he moved away and allowed Dick to step in. He pulled with long steady strokes and was soon out of the inner harbor, making for the yacht.

"By jove, this is a lovely morning!" said Dick, looking at the glorious hills he knew so well.

"Nowt like Yorkshire," growled Brack.

Dick laughed as he said: "You're a lucky man to be at Torquay, all the same; much warmer, fine climate."

"Hot as – ," said Brack with a grunt.

"You haven't told me your news," said Dick.

"It'll keep," said Brack.

"Bet you a shilling you let it out before you reach the *Sea-mew*," said Dick.

"I don't bet," said Brack.

"You mean you dare not in this case, or you would lose."

"Very like I should, because I see yer burstin' to hear it, and I wouldn't like to disappoint yer," said Brack, as he ceased rowing and leaned on his oars.

"Tired?" said Dick.

"With that bit of a pull," said Brack, disgusted; "I should think not!"

"Then what are you resting for?"

"I baint restin', I'm easin' my oars."

"Oh, that's it: the oars are tired," said Dick.

"No more tired than I am, but when I gives 'em a spell for a few minutes they seems to work better," said Brack. "What's more, I talks better when I leans on 'em, sort o' gives me composure, and time to think; I'm a beggar to think."

Dick was amused; he wanted to reach the *Sea-mew*, but on this sunny morning it was good to sit in the boat on the blue smooth water and listen to old Brack for a few minutes.

"You must have done a lot of thinking in your time," said Dick, falling into his humor.

"I'm thinking now," said Brack.

"What about?"

"That poor devil who escaped from Dartmoor five days ago."

Dick smiled.

"Is that your news?"

"Yes."

"There have been several escapes lately."

"But they've all been caught in no time; this chap ain't, and by gum, lad, if he come'd my way I'd help him out. I don't believe they'll get him; at least I hopes not."

"They'll have him right enough," said Dick. "A convict at large is a danger to all on the moor."

"This one ain't," said Brack. "'Sides, he may be innocent."

"Innocent men don't get into Princetown," said Dick.

"That's just where yer wrong," said Brack. "I've a brother in

there now, and he's innocent, I'll swear it."

Dick maintained a diplomatic silence.

"Of course you'll not believe it, but it'll come out some day. He was on a man-o-warsman, and they lagged him for knocking a petty officer overboard; the chap was drowned, but Bill swore he never had a hand in it, and I believes him. At the trial it came out Bill had a down on the man; and no wonder – he was a brute, and a good riddance."

"Do you know who knocked him over?"

"No, but it's my firm belief Bill does, and that he's sufferin' for another, won't give him away."

Dick smiled.

"You don't know Bill; I does," said Brack emphatically.

"But what about this man who escaped? Why do you think he'll get away?"

"'Cause he's a good plucked 'un, a fighter, a brave man," said Brack.

"In what way?"

"They put bloodhounds on his track. One brute got away, they didn't find him for three days, when they did – ," Brack hesitated; he wished to rouse his listener's attention. He succeeded.

"Go on," said Dick eagerly.

"The trackers found the hound dead, and alongside him was a suit of convict clothes – nice well marked suits, ain't they; you can't mistake 'em," said Brack.

"You don't mean to say the fellow killed the hound, and left

his clothes beside it!" exclaimed Dick.

"That's just what I have said, mister. Clever, weren't it? When the other hound found his mate, he found the clothes, and he lost the scent."

"How?"

"'Cause the man must have fled stark naked, and the hound only had the scent of his clothes; must have been that, 'cause he couldn't follow him. He'll get off right enough – you see if he don't. I wish Bill could do the same."

"How did he kill the hound?" asked Dick. "And where did you hear all this?"

"Strangled it. He's a good 'un he is; I'd like to have seen it. As for how I come to know by it, one of the men from the prison was here. He questioned me," said Brack with a grin. "Asked me if I'd seen a man like the one he gave a description of."

"What did you say?" asked Dick.

"Kept him talking for half an hour or more, gave 'im heaps of information. I filled him up, never you fear."

"But you didn't see the man?" said Dick.

"Lor' no! Wish I had, and that he was stowed away somewhere. I told the fellow I'd seen just such a man as he described, with his hands bound up in bandages, and a cloth round his neck. Said he'd a suit of old sailor's togs on, and that he went out in a boat with a lot of rowdy fellers to a 'tramp' in the Bay, and he didn't come back," chuckled Brack.

"And what was the result of your false information?" asked

Dick.

"I'll tell you what the result will be. It will put 'em off the scent; they'll think he's gone off on the 'tramp' to London, and they'll give him a rest on the moor for a bit," said Brack.

"You think the man is still on the moor?"

"'Course; where else should he be?"

"Then he's sure to be caught."

"Wait a bit – a man who can tackle a bloodhound and choke the life out of him is pretty determined," said Brack.

Dick acknowledged as much and said the circumstances were out of the common. He was interested in the old sailor's tale. He did not know whether to admire what Brack had done or to condemn it; he put himself in his place, wondering how he would have acted under similar circumstances.

Brack watched him, a peculiar smile on his face.

"Goin' to give me away?" he asked.

Dick laughed as he answered: "I was thinking whether you were right or wrong."

"Guessed as much. I was right to give such a man another chance. He's no coward, not he, and guilty men are all cowards," said Brack.

"Who is the man?"

"Don't know; he wouldn't tell me, but he said he was a lifer. He didn't seem very keen about his capture."

"You mean he seemed glad the man had escaped?" said Dick, surprised.

"I guessed as much from his face," said Brack, "and I reckon there's worse judges than me of human nature – that's what makes me think he's innocent – like Bill."

"It's all very interesting, but pull to the *Sea-mew*," said Dick.

"About time," said Brack, as he started rowing again. They were soon alongside the yacht.

Picton had just come on deck again from the saloon. He hailed Dick cheerfully.

"Well, early bird, what's brought you here at this time?" he said, smiling.

"Wished to welcome you, most mighty rider of winners," laughed Dick as he got out of the boat and stood on the steps of the gangway. "Here you are, Brack, and thanks for your story; it was thrilling."

Brack touched his cap as he said: "And it's true, and there's heaps of things thrilling that ain't true," and he pulled away.

"Brack been spinning yarns?" said Picton, who knew the old man.

"A real shocker this time."

"What about?"

"A fellow escaped from Dartmoor the other day. It's worth hearing; I'll tell you all about it later on," said Dick.

Picton Woodridge staggered backwards. At first Dick thought he was about to fall. He looked at him in astonishment.

"What's the matter, Pic?" he asked.

"Curious fit of faintness came over me; I'm all right now," said

Picton, but Dick thought he didn't look it.

CHAPTER III
THE MAN ON THE ROAD

DICK Langford told Brack's story to Picton Woodridge and Captain Ben. Both listened attentively: it was immensely interesting to them. From time to time Ben looked at his friend to see how he took it. Dick, absorbed in his tale, did not notice the look of strained attention on their faces. They were silent when he finished.

"Not bad for Brack, eh?" said Dick.

The simple question made them start.

"You fellows seem all nerves this morning," said Dick. "When I told Pic on deck, he staggered; I thought he was going to faint. You're not afraid the fellow will board the yacht, are you?"

Ben laughed as he said: "No, I don't think we're afraid, not of one man, even if he be an escaped convict."

"You'll want all your nerve to-morrow," said Dick to Picton. "There's three of my horses to ride, and two of 'em are brutes."

"Thanks," said Picton, smiling; "a pleasant prospect. Worth coming all these miles for, isn't it, Ben?"

"Depends upon what Langford calls a brute," replied Ben.

"Pitcher's not so bad; he's what I call a humorous horse, full of pranks and no vice about him. He's number one. Now we come to the first brute, Planet, a gelding with a temper; as likely as not

he'll try and pitch you into the crowd."

"Then he ought to have been named Pitcher," said Picton.

"We don't all get our right names, I mean names that fit; we're saddled with 'em by unthinking parents. Sis has a maid, Evangeline Mamie; now that's what I call a big handicap for the girl," said Dick.

They laughed, and Picton asked him to pass on to number two brute.

"The Rascal," said Dick; "he's a terror. He's lamed a couple of my chaps, and Pete's right when you're in the saddle, but it's a deuce of a job to get there. He rises on his hind legs, and conducts an imaginary band with his fore legs, but he's got a rare turn of speed, and he ought to win the West of England Handicap Steeplechase to-morrow, and the Torbay and South Devon Steeplechase the next day."

"Then you expect to bring off the double with him?" said Picton.

"Yes, and if you do not, Sis says she'll never speak to you again."

"Then I'll do it if I die in the attempt," said Picton.

"Don't be heroic, no one wants you to die. You can kill The Rascal if you like, but promise me to come off unscathed," said Dick, laughing.

"I'll try," said Picton.

"Pitcher ought to win the Maiden Hurdle Race, and Planet the St. Marychurch Hurdle Race. Now you have a nice little program

mapped out for you, and I fancy you'll win the four events. If you do, it will be a day for rejoicing at Torwood, and the wearer of the pink jacket will be an honored guest if he cares to desert the *Sea-mew* for my humble abode."

"Dick, you're incorrigible," said Picton, laughing. "You really expect to win four races?"

"I do; Gordon won the lot at a meeting not far away on one occasion."

"That's quite possible – he's a good rider."

"So are you."

"He is," said Ben; "few better."

"What are you doing to-day?" asked Dick.

"Nothing in particular; basking in the sunshine in your glorious bay."

"Then you like Torquay?" said Dick.

"Who could help liking it? And what a county lies behind it! I envy you the Devonshire lanes, Dick."

"Then come and live among them. I can pick you an ideal spot, and it shall be well within your means, Mr. Millionaire."

Picton laughed.

"No millions here – a few thousands," he said; "just sufficient to keep my head above water."

"And the *Sea-mew* afloat," said Dick.

"I'll manage that," said Ben.

"Will you come ashore and have a look at Pitcher and the two brutes?" said Dick.

"What do you say, Ben? Shall we?" asked Picton.

Ben knew he wished to go – Rita was at Torwood – it was not the horses so much, although they were an attraction.

"Yes," said Ben promptly, and the matter was settled.

They went ashore. Dick Langford's dog-cart was at the Queen's and thither they adjourned. In a quarter of an hour they were going at an easy pace to Torwood, which lay about midway between Torquay and Newton Abbot.

How fresh everything looked! The trees were just budding, tingeing the almost bare branches with tips of green. The air was cool and soft; there were no motors about – only an odd one or two, the tourist season had not commenced – but there would be plenty of people at the races on the following days.

"Wonder what that fellow's up to!" exclaimed Dick, as he saw a man push through the hedge and disappear down the hill and across the meadow.

"Probably belongs to the place," said Picton.

"Then what the deuce did he get through the hedge for? Why didn't he go to the gate?" said Dick.

"Short cut, perhaps," said Picton.

"Wonder if he's that chap from Dartmoor?" laughed Dick, and he felt Picton start.

"The man's got on your nerves," he said. "I'll say no more about him."

Picton was looking at him as he went rapidly across the meadow; something about the figure appeared familiar, so did

the long stride; he wondered if Ben noticed it, but the Captain was otherwise occupied. The incident was forgotten, and when they came in sight of Torwood, Picton became animated. He saw a figure on the lawn, and knew who it was. She recognized them and waved her handkerchief. This met with a quick response.

Torwood was a typical Devonshire home, not large, but a commodious, comfortable, well-appointed house, standing on the hillside; trees at the back, a terrace, then a level stretch of lawn, then a sweep down to the road; a small lodge and gate at the drive entrance; a steep incline to the house. On the right were the stables, half a dozen loose boxes, and a three-stall building. Dick Langford was far from being a rich man, but he was happy and contented, with his sister. He was a partner in a firm of auctioneers at Newton Abbot, and was accounted a ready salesman; there was always laughter in front when he wielded the hammer; quick at repartee, there were many people prompt to draw him out, but he got his prices, and that paid the firm and the customers.

Rita Langford was like her brother, of a bright and cheerful disposition, was popular in the neighborhood, and Torwood was a favorite house.

"So glad to see you, Mr. Woodridge, and you too, Captain Bruce. When did you arrive in the bay?"

"In the morning, yesterday; it was beautiful. How grand the country looks, and Torwood even prettier than ever!" said Picton.

"I induced him to leave his floating palace, and visit our

humble abode, by asking him to inspect the horses he is to ride," said Dick with a wink at Ben.

"That is so, but there was a far greater inducement," said Picton, looking at Rita.

"Must I take that to mean me?" she said, laughing.

"Please," said Picton, thinking how charming she was.

They had a quiet luncheon, then went to the stables. Dick engaged no regular trainer, but he had a man named Arnold Brent, who was a first-rate hand with horses, and at the same time an expert gardener; the combination was fortunate for the owner of Torwood. The horses were trained in the neighborhood, where Dick had the privilege of using some good galloping land, with natural fences – an up and down country, but excellent for the purpose. He had two lads who rode most of the work; sometimes he had a mount, and occasionally Brent. Altogether they did very well, and the Torwood horses generally secured a win or two at the local meetings. Dick Langford's favorite battle-grounds were Torquay and Newton Abbot. At the show at the latter place he often took prizes for dogs, poultry and garden produce; the money generally went into Brent's pocket. Brent knew both Picton and the Captain, and admired the former because he knew he was a first-class gentleman rider, although he had not seen him in the saddle. It was Brent who suggested to his master that Mr. Woodridge should ride at the local meeting for them.

"Not a big enough thing for him," said Dick doubtfully. "He

rides at some of the swell meetings."

"You try him, sir," said Brent, adding, as he caught sight of Rita, "I'll bet he accepts."

"I hear a terrible account of these horses I am to ride," said Picton, smiling.

Brent smiled.

"I expect Mr. Langford's been pulling your leg, sir," he said.

"Isn't The Rascal a brute, isn't Planet[1] another; and Pitcher was described as harmless, I think?" said Picton.

"The Rascal's all right if you humor him," said Brent. "He's bitten a lad, and crushed another against the wall, but he's not half a bad sort, and he'll win the double easily enough in your hands, sir."

"If I can mount him," laughed Picton.

"I'll see to that; he'll stand steady enough with me at his head. That's him – the chestnut with the white face."

Picton looked the horse over.

"Bring him out," he said, and The Rascal was led out of his box. As Picton went up to him he laid back his ears, and showed the whites of his eyes; it was a false alarm, he let him pat his neck and pass his hand over him.

"I like him," said Picton; "he looks a good sort."

"He is, sir," said Brent.

"Your favorite?" laughed Picton.

"Yes, sir."

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[1] "Plant" amended to "Planet".

Planet and Pitcher were both browns, handy sorts, and Picton thought it highly probable the three would win the races selected for them. He expressed this opinion, at which Dick and his sister were delighted.

"It is very good of you to come and ride for my brother," she said to him.

"It is always a pleasure to me to do anything to please you and Dick," he replied.

They chatted for some time; then she said: "I had an adventure not long before you arrived."

"Your country has always been full of adventures," he said, smiling.

"And adventurers, but the man who came here to-day was not an adventurer, poor fellow," she said.

He looked at her quickly and she went on.

"I was at the bottom of the garden, near that thick-set hedge, when I heard some one groan. It startled me; some tramp, I thought, and went to the gate. I saw a man sitting by the roadside. He looked up when he saw me, and I shall never forget the suffering in his face, the hunted look in it. I shivered, but I was quite sure he was harmless. I beckoned him; he came, turning his head from time to time in a frightened manner. He said he had tramped many miles, that he was hungry, footsore, weary to death. I took him to the back of the house, gave him something to eat, and offered him money. He refused the money at first, but I insisted and he took it. I gave him one of Dick's old top coats;

when he put it on he seemed a different man. I hunted out a pair of old boots – he was very grateful for them. I am sure he was a gentleman; he spoke like one, he expressed himself as such when he left, there was a natural pride about him. He walked in the direction of Torquay; I wonder if you met him on the road."

Picton Woodridge greatly astonished her by asking her the following questions:

"Have you told your brother about this?"

"No."

"Did any one see him?"

"I don't think so. I am almost sure they did not."

"Will you do me a favor?"

"Willingly."

"Then do not mention this to a soul," said Picton earnestly.

CHAPTER IV
THE WOMAN AT THE TABLE

SHE promised readily, not asking questions, for which he was grateful. She knew there was something she could not penetrate, some mystery; her curiosity was aroused but she restrained it.

"Thank you," he said. "I have good reasons for asking you to remain silent; some day I will tell you them, whether my conjectures prove right or wrong."

"I shall not ask your confidence," she said.

"I will give it to you. I would give it to you now if I thought it would be of any use."

"I am sure you would."

"Rita – "

"Hallo, where are you, Picton?" shouted Dick.

"Here!" he called. "On the seat near the hedge."

"Oh, down there. Is Rita with you?"

"Yes."

"Sorry I shouted; hope I didn't disturb you," sang out Dick.

"Not in the least," said Picton; "we were just coming up."

"I wonder what he was going to tell me when he said 'Rita,'" she thought as they walked up the hilly garden path.

Picton said he would rather return to the yacht for the night; he loved being on the water, it always had a soothing effect and

he was not a good sleeper.

"I must be in tip-top condition for to-morrow – so much depends upon it," he said, smiling.

Rita thought a good deal about her conversation with him when he left, tried to puzzle out the mystery, but failed.

"I'll wait until he tells me," she said. "I wish Dick hadn't shouted when he said 'Rita'; it interrupted a pleasant sentence. I wonder how it would have finished?" and she smiled quietly to herself.

Dick drove them to Torquay, then returned home. Brack rowed them out to the *Sea-mew*. He was loquacious as usual.

"Nice night, gents," he said.

"Beautiful, Brack. Isn't it rather dark though?" said Ben.

Picton seemed moody.

"Yes, there's no moon to speak of; it's darker than I've known it at this time o' year."

The old fellow chatted until they came alongside.

Picton paid him and said good-night. Brack thanked him and said: "Goin' to ride any winners to-morrow, sir?"

This roused him and he told Brack the names of the horses and the races they were going for.

"You back The Rascal for the double if you can find any one to lay it to you," said Picton.

"We've a bookie among us," said Brack. "He's a young 'un and as good a sailor as the best of us, but he's artful, very artful, and he's had many a bob out'er me, and the rest. I'd like to take

him down, and I will. The Rascal for the double, you said?"

"Yes, and here's half a sovereign to put on him," said Picton.

Brack gave an audible chuckle as he said: "Lor' love us, that'll just about bust him if it comes off."

They laughed as he rowed away, whistling softly to himself.

"I'll turn in early," said Picton.

"The best thing you can do," said the Captain. "You seem a bit out of sorts to-day."

"I am; I can't get the sound of the gun out of my ears."

Ben looked at him sympathetically.

"I knew what you meant, felt what you felt, when you spoke about it," he said.

"Strange some one should have escaped from Dartmoor a day or two before," said Picton.

"Escapes are often occurring," said Ben.

"What did you think about that man on the road, who pushed through the hedge to avoid us?" asked Picton.

"Didn't give it more than a passing thought," said Ben.

"What was the passing thought?"

"I said to myself, 'I wonder if that's the man who escaped?'"

"Good-night," said Picton; "I'll turn in."

"Good-night," said Ben, as he sat on a deck chair.

"He's in a curious mood to-night," he thought. "I'm sorry for him. We ought not to have come here, it brings up painful recollections, the vicinity of Dartmoor; and yet it has its compensations – there's Miss Langford, lovely girl, and as nice

as she looks. I hope he'll win to-morrow, it will cheer him up."

Ben's mind went back to the time when Picton and Hector were lads together, and the Admiral was alive. His heart was sore for Hector, although he was half inclined to believe him guilty, but tried to convince himself to the contrary by expressing his firm belief in his innocence, in order to be of the same mind as Picton.

One thing Captain Ben had long determined upon: if ever he got a chance, he would help Hector, no matter at what risk or cost. He was a man who had run into many dangers, not useless dangers, necessary perils, with his eyes open, knowing the consequences of failure, therefore he was a brave man. Blindfolded, impetuous, blundering rushes against great odds excite the admiration of the crowd, but it is the Captain Bens who are to be relied upon in times of emergency.

The air became cooler. Ben rose from his chair and went to his cabin; looking into Picton's as he passed, he was glad to see him asleep.

The *Sea-mew* swung round with the tide, quietly, without a sound; it was very still and calm; she looked like a dull white bird on the water. So thought a man who crept stealthily along the wall toward the inner harbor.

"I wish I were on her and out at sea," he muttered. He could just discern her outline, the white hull and the lights.

He heard footsteps, a measured beat, a policeman, he knew by the tread. He put his hand on the wall to steady himself, shivered,

then groaned. There was no getting out of it, he must face the man, and it was late. He staggered forward with a drunken reel, but not too unsteady on his legs. He lurched, just avoiding the constable, who merely said: "Now, my man, get off home, and mind you keep quiet."

"All right, sir, I'm a'goin'," was the reply.

The constable moved on, blissfully ignorant that he had probably missed a chance of promotion. The man walked past the pier, past the Torbay Hotel, where there were lights in one of the rooms on the ground floor, evidently a late supper party, at least so thought the man outside. Do what he would, he could not resist the temptation to cross the road and see what was going on. There was a chink in the blind. At first he saw little, his eyes were curiously dim and heavy from lack of sleep, gradually the mist in them lifted. He saw four people seated at a table, brilliantly lighted, a dainty supper spread. It was long since he had seen such things, but he had been used to them. Naturally, being hungry, he looked at the well-laden table; then his eyes went to the people sitting there, two men and two women. He saw the men first, then one woman, then the other woman, and his eyes started, his hands clenched, his face went livid, his teeth met with a snap; for a moment he stood thus, regarding the woman with a fixed stare of horror. She was a beautiful woman, voluptuous, with a luring face, and eyes which knew every language in every tongue of unspoken love. She was smiling into the eyes of the man at her side as she toyed with a dainty morsel on a silver dessert fork.

She was dressed with excellent taste, expensively, not lavishly. She was a woman who knew overdressing spells disaster. Her white teeth gleamed as she smiled; the man at her side was lost in admiration – it was not difficult to see that.

The man looking outside raised his clenched fists and said: "Is there no God, no justice anywhere?"

As he spoke the woman dropped her fork and started, a shiver passed over her. The man at her side hastily got up, brought her a wrap and placed it on her shoulders. The man outside saw the fork fall, he saw the wrap, and he muttered again: "There is a God, there is justice; her conscience imprisons her as surely as – "

"Move on there! What are you lurking about here for?"

"All right, goin' 'ome, just met yer brother along there."

"He's not my brother," said the constable gruffly.

"Thought yer were all brothers, members of the same cloth, anyhow yer all good sorts. Good-night."

"Be off home," said the constable, as he went on his way; and a second man lost a chance of promotion that night.

"I must not run any more risks," thought the man, "but I'm glad I crossed the road and looked in at that window. She suffers, she could not have heard my voice, perhaps an internal justice carried it to her and my words were whispered in her ears – such things have been known. There she sits, feasting, surrounded by every comfort, but she's not happy, she never will be, such women never are. God, to think what I have gone through for her, what I have suffered! I have lived in hell, in purgatory, and I ought to

be on my way to heavenly peace. God, give me a chance; I am an innocent man and You know it."

"Hallo, mate, where goin'? Yer a late bird," said Brack, as he knocked against the man walking in a curiously wild way in the middle of the road.

"Goin' 'ome," said the man.

"That'll not get over me; yer puttin' it on. I'm fra Yorkshire, and a bit too cute for that."

"What d'yer mean?"

"That I've heard gents speak in my time, and I reckon you're one."

The man started; at first he was inclined to bolt; then as the light of a lamp shone on Brack's face he saw it was honest, kindly, full of charity, and through it he knew there was a big heart inside the rough body.

"You are right," he said. "I was a gentleman, I hope I am one still, although I have lived such a life that the wonder is I am not a beast."

Brack looked hard at him; from his face his gaze wandered over his body, then he looked at his hands; one was bound up, the other had marks on it, deep marks, like the marks of teeth. Brack made up his mind.

"Don't move," he said, "when I tell you something. I'm a man, not a fiend, and I've an innocent brother over there," and he jerked his hand in the direction of the moor far away. "Maybe you've seen him."

The man gasped – this old sailor knew! Should he – no, the face was honest, he would trust him.

"Perhaps I have," he said.

"Are you the man that throttled that bloodhound?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because if you are I'd like to clasp yer hand and say I think yer brave."

The man held out his bandaged hand; the old sailor took it in his big, horny palm tenderly, pressing it gently.

"The other one," he said.

The man held out his other hand.

"I'm glad I've held 'em both, the hands that strangled that cursed hound. Come along with me. I'll see yer safe, never fear. There's not a man jack of 'em in Torquay or Princetown, or anywhere, would ever suspect old Brack of harboring a – gentleman."

Without a word the man went with him. As he walked at the honest Brack's side he thought: "My prayer has been answered."

CHAPTER V
PICTON'S WINNING MOUNTS

IT was Easter Monday, and a holiday crowd gathered on the slopes of Petitor racecourse at St. Mary Church. More than usual interest was shown in the meeting owing to the presence of Picton Woodridge, whose fame as a gentleman rider was well-known. Dick Langford was popular and the success of the pink jacket eagerly anticipated.

Petitor is not an ideal course; it is on the slope of a hill, and a queer country to get over, but some interesting sport is seen and the local people take a pride in it; as a golf links it is admirable.

Picton had not seen the course before, at least only from the road, and as he looked at it he smiled.

"I may lose my way," he said to Rita; "go the wrong course."

"You will find it easy enough, and you are not likely to make mistakes. Look," and she pointed out the track to him, and the various obstacles.

There were bookmakers there – where are they not when races are on, no matter how small the fields, or the crowd?

Picton wore the pink jacket, ready to ride Pitcher in the Maiden Hurdle Race, the opening event. There were only three runners, and yet the books accepted six to four on Dick's horse; there was a strong run on Frisco; and Fraud was nibbled at.

"Come along," said Dick; "time to mount."

"Good luck!" said Rita with a smile. "You'll find Pitcher easy to ride. I've been on him several times."

"He'll find me rather a different burden," said Picton.

The three runners came out, and Picton received a hearty welcome, which he acknowledged.

"Sits his horse well," said one.

"A good rider, anybody can see that."

"Here, I'll take seven to four and it's picking up money!" shouted a bookmaker; and so thought the backers as they hurried up with their money, and Pitcher quickly became a two to one on chance.

The distance was two miles. Picton indulged Frisco with the lead until half a mile from home, when he sent Pitcher forward, had a slight tussle with Frisco, then forged ahead and landed the odds by ten lengths amidst great cheering.

"Win number one," said Dick triumphantly; "when the meeting is over they'll bar you from riding here again."

Rita was delighted, her face all smiles; she was proud of the good-looking man who had carried her brother's colors to victory.

Picton, as he walked about with Rita, Dick, Captain Ben and a host of friends, was the cynosure of all eyes; but he was accustomed to being stared at.

"Now comes the tug-of-war," said Dick. "There's The Rascal. See how he's lashing out, scattering the crowd. I believe he's in

a nasty temper, confound him."

There were five runners in the Steeplechase, and although The Rascal had Picton up, the favorite was Anstey, who had Hordern in the saddle. The Tor, Moorland, and Stream, were the other runners, but wagering was confined to the favorite and The Rascal.

Picton walked up to his mount; The Rascal switched round, despite Brent's efforts, and refused to be mounted. His rider watched him with an amused smile; Dick and his sister looked anxious, while a crowd gathered round at a respectful distance.

Picton bided his time, then, when The Rascal had his attention attracted by Brent, slipped up to him, took the reins and swung into the saddle, and before the astonished horse recovered from his surprise he had him well under control. The spectators cheered; it was a clever piece of work, deserving of recognition. Once mounted, The Rascal seemed tractable enough; but Picton knew the horse was not in the best temper, and required humoring.

"You've not got a very nice mount," said Hordern as they rode together.

"I'm told he's queer-tempered," said Picton; and as he looked at Anstey he thought: "Your mount will take a bit of beating."

They were soon on their journey. At first The Rascal made a deliberate attempt to bolt; he discovered he had a rider who refused to put up with his inclinations in this direction. Finding bolting stopped, he tried to swerve at the first fence; this object

was also frustrated and he received a few stinging cuts from the whip, wielded by a strong arm. These vagaries allowed Anstey and the others to forge ahead, and The Rascal was in the rear.

Dick looked glum, but Brent said: "There's plenty of time. He's a rare turn of speed – and a grand rider up."

At the end of the first mile The Rascal was still last. He began to improve his position; quickly passed Stream, and Moorland, then the Tor; but Anstey was a dozen lengths ahead, fencing well. Two more obstacles then the run home. Picton rode The Rascal hard to find if he would respond to his call. Whatever else he was, the horse was game, he did not flinch, and Picton was surprised how easily he went ahead. Anstey blundered at the next fence, Hordern making a fine recovery; this cost the favorite several lengths. At the last fence The Rascal was only three or four lengths behind. Anstey cleared it well, The Rascal struck it, stumbled, threw Picton on his neck, struggled up again; and Picton was back in the saddle and riding hard before the crowd realized what had happened. Then a great cheer broke out, for a splendid bit of jockeyship.

"Not one man in a hundred could have done that," said Brent enthusiastically.

Hordern thought he had the race won. The Rascal on his knees, with Picton on his neck, was good enough for him. He took a pull at Anstey; he intended winning the double, and did not wish to press him too hard. It was a blunder; he found it out when he heard the cheering and cries of, "Well done, Picton!"

"Rascal's catching him!" The stumble seemed to put new life into The Rascal, for once again he showed what a rare turn of speed he possessed.

Picton rode his best.

"Rita expects me to win – I will," he thought; and something told The Rascal it would be bad for him if he failed to do his best.

Two hundred yards from the winning post Anstey led, but it had taken Hordern a few moments to get him going again when he realized the situation. It was dangerous to play these games with Picton. The Rascal came along, moving splendidly; he gained on Anstey, drew level, held him, then got his head in front. Hordern rode well, but he had met his match. The Rascal drew ahead and won by a length amidst tremendous cheering – Picton Woodridge was the hero of the day. Rita was proud of him and told him so at Torwood the same night. The Rascal had been backed to win the double with every man who had a book on the races, so next day the excitement rose to fever heat when the Torbay Steeplechase came on for decision.

The Rascal was in the best of tempers, he actually allowed Picton to stroke his face, pat his neck, and pay him sundry attentions; Rita gave him lumps of sugar, and said he was the dearest and best of Rascals.

"You will win the double," she said to Picton. "I am sure of it."

"And I'll try to win a far richer prize before long," he said, looking at her in a way that caused the red blood to mount to her cheeks.

Anstey ran again, but the main opposition was expected to come from Sandy, a Newton Abbot horse. Dick's horse had to give him a stone, which was a tall order, but Brent said he could do it, unless Sandy had improved out of all knowledge.

"I'd take The Rascal to the front this time," said Brent to Picton; "he's in a good temper and when that is the case he likes to make the pace, and he jumps freer."

"If he'll do it, I'll let him," said Picton. "Will he stay there? Remember he's giving lumps of weight away."

"He can do it," was the confident reply.

Six runners went out, a field above the average at Petitor.

Most people thought some of the runners would have been better out of it, they would only be in the way, a danger to the others at the fences; a blunderer is often a veritable death trap.

It astonished Leek, who was on Sandy, to see Picton take The Rascal to the front. He smiled as he thought, "He's making a mistake this time."

Evidently the others thought the same, for they patiently waited for the leader to come back to them.

Arnold Brent smiled.

"I gave him good advice. They're doing exactly what I thought they would, waiting. Let 'em wait."

The distance was two miles and a half. The Rascal held a big lead at the end of a mile and a half. Leek on Sandy thought it was about time he came back to him, but The Rascal showed no sign of this; on the contrary, he gained ground. To go after

him was the best thing and Leek tried. Much to his astonishment, he discovered the pace was much faster than he thought; Sandy made very little headway. At first Picton's policy of making the running was considered a mistaken one; this opinion changed as the race progressed; and when they saw Leek hard at work on Sandy in second place and making hardly any headway, The Rascal's numerous backers were jubilant. The cheering commenced, it became deafening as Picton drew near to the winning post. It was an extraordinary race. The Rascal, the top weight, made all the running and won by twenty lengths; more than that, he was not in the least distressed.

Picton was congratulated on all sides. Turning to Dick and Rita he said: "He's one of the best horses I have ever ridden over fences; there's a National in him."

Dick shook his head.

"You're too enthusiastic. Wait until you've cooled down," he said.

"I shall not alter my opinion," said Picton. "Where's Planet?"

"Over there," said Dick, and they walked across.

The next race was the Marychurch Hurdle Plate, and Picton rode Planet. The race needs little description; there were three runners, and Dick's horse won comfortably.

At Torwood that evening there were great rejoicings; but as Picton wished to sleep on the *Sea-mew* he and Ben were driven to Torquay.

Before he left, Picton said to Rita: "Next time I am here I have

a very important question to ask you."

"Have you?" she said. "I wonder what it is."

"Cannot you guess?"

"I'll try," she answered, smiling happily.

"It's too important to put in a hurry," laughed Picton, "and I haven't the courage to do it now."

"Not after four victories," she answered, laughing.

He shook his head, as he got up beside her brother in the trap.

"If you won't sell The Rascal, send him to Haverton," said Picton as they bade Dick good-night.

"All right, I will, and you can do what you like with him," said Dick cheerily.

"Brack's not here; that's strange. We shall have to get some one else," said Ben.

They hired a younger man. He happened to be the boatmen's bookie.

"Where's Brack?" asked Ben.

"He backed the double with me for half a sov.," said the man. "He's about broke me, sir, but I don't begrudge it him; he's a real good sort. I expect he's celebrating it in town."

Brack was not celebrating it; he was biding his time, and opportunity.

CHAPTER VI
IN BRACK'S COTTAGE

BRACK'S was a humble abode not far from the inner harbor. He lived there with his mother. The old woman idolized him; he was a very good son. She attended to their small wants and kept the house scrupulously clean.

"I've brought a mate, mother," said Brack as he entered with his companion.

"He's welcome, my boy." She always called him her boy, and somehow it did not sound strange.

"Come in, don't be afraid," said Brack.

The man stepped into the small room, looking round suspiciously. Why had Brack brought him here, had he any particular reasons for doing so, reasons that would benefit himself?

Brack gathered something of what was passing in his mind and whispered, "You'll be quite safe here, sit down."

They had a fish supper; to the stranger it was the most wonderful meal he had partaken of for some years. He ate greedily, he could not help it, but Brack, watching him, knew he was a well-bred man.

The old lady asked no questions, she never questioned what her son did; she bade them good-night and went to her room. It

was then Brack learned something of the man he had brought to his home; and the tale harrowed his feelings, froze the marrow in his bones, horrified him; he shuddered as he imagined what this highly cultured man must have suffered.

They talked until the small hours of the morning, Brack considering what he should do, how to get his companion away from Torquay?

Suddenly he said, "Do yer mind telling me yer name? I'd like to know it in case I hear of yer in the world sometimes. You'll be far away from here, but I'd like to have something to remember yer by and I reckon yer name's the best thing."

The man was startled; again the suspicious look came into his eyes. Would it ever be entirely absent, that haunted gaze; it was pitiable.

"I don't want it if you don't care to give it to me."

"I beg your pardon. You deserve my entire confidence. You are running grave risk for my sake, an unknown man, a stranger, worse – an escaped prisoner from Dartmoor."

"Never mind the risk; we'll not trouble about that," said Brack.

"Do you know what the consequences would be if it were known you had hidden me?"

"I don't know and I don't care," said Brack.

"Think of your mother."

Brack laughed as he said: "She'll glory in what I've done when I tell her; she's Bill out there."

"I forgot; that makes all the difference. And he's innocent."

"Like you."

"How do you know I am innocent?"

"Yer face tells me. I'd trust a man like you anywhere and anyhow."

"If ever I come into my own again, if ever my innocence is proved, I'll see to you and your mother for life, and I'll promise to do all I can for Bill, your brother."

Brack's face glowed.

"Damn me but you're a man!" he said and seized his hand. "I forgot, I'm a fool," he added, as the man winced. The pain from Brack's honest grip was intense.

"I will tell you my name. You may have heard it before – we receive news sometimes – my brother is a famous rider. You are a bit of a sportsman?"

"I am," said Brack. "I've had a tip for the races here, for the double, and I've got ten bob to put on; the gentleman who's goin' to ride gave it me. He says to me as I left the yacht – I'd rowed him out there – he says, 'Here, Brack, there's half a sov. for you. Back The Rascal for the double.' And I mean to."

"The Rascal?"

"That's the name of the horse – funny, isn't it?"

"Who was the gentleman?"

"The owner of the *Sea-mew*, the yacht lying at anchor in the bay."

"The yacht with such beautiful lines, painted white? I just saw her as I came along by the wall before I met you, my good friend."

"That's her. She's not big but she's a gem. She's been here several times."

"And who is the owner?"

"The same as rides Mr. Langford's horses at the races."

"But you have not told me who he is."

"Ain't I? No more I have! It's Mr. Picton Woodridge."

The man stared at Brack; he seemed on the point of falling off his chair.

"Picton Woodridge," he said in a hoarse voice.

"Yes; have you met him in days gone by?" asked Brack.

"He is my younger brother," said the man. "I am Hector Woodridge."

It was Brack's turn to stare now. This man he had brought to his home Picton Woodridge's brother? Was it possible? This was indeed a strange chance! He peered into his companion's face, trying to trace a resemblance, and found one.

"Yes," he said, "you're like him, or you were once."

Hector Woodridge sighed.

"Once," he said; "it all seems such a long while ago."

"I remember, I recollect now," said Brack. "I wonder it did not strike me afore. Yer a Yorkshire family. I know, at Haverton. I was a boatman at Scarborough when it happened. I always said you were innocent; I call to mind the trial well. Yer Mr. Hector Woodridge, thank God for that; I see a way out of it all. You must bide here and I'll pick the night when I can get you away."

"Get me away!" exclaimed Hector. "How, where shall I go?"

"Leave that to me. There's a man on the watch here. His name's Carl Hackler. He's from Dartmoor, and he's prowling around here on the lookout – has been for a week or more."

"I don't remember his name," said Hector.

"Likely enough not; there's plenty of 'em there as you'd never see, but he's seen you, and he'd recognize you. I've fooled him once and I think he knows it; I'll have a stiff job to do it again; but I will do it, and you'll get clear away."

"What is your plan?"

Brack hesitated; he wondered if Hector Woodridge would care to go on board the *Sea-mew*, whether he would be afraid to implicate his brother. He decided it would be better for his purpose not to say what his plan was until he had his man safe in his boat on the way to the yacht.

"I'll tell you that when the time's ripe. You'd best turn in and have some sleep; you look as though you could do with it."

"I can. Where shall I go?"

"In there," said Brack, pointing to a small room.

"It is your room."

"Never mind me. Go in and rest."

Hector was dead beat. He opened the door, he was so exhausted he fell fast asleep before he had time to undress.

Brack sat ruminating until an early hour. This discovery that his guest was Hector Woodridge stunned him, he could not comprehend it. He recollected all about the celebrated trial which resulted in Hector Woodridge being condemned to death

for the murder of the husband of the woman he had become entangled with. All Yorkshire signed the petition for a reprieve and the sentence was commuted to penal servitude for life. He remembered how the shock killed Admiral Woodridge, Hector's father.

Brack went to the old black horse-hair sofa and lay down. He was soon asleep, dreaming in a few minutes, strange dreams in which convicts, Dartmoor, the *Sea-mew*, The Rascal, Carl Hackler, and divers and other persons and places were mixed up in the most extraordinary manner.

A knocking at the door roused Brack.

Sitting up, he rubbed his eyes, yawned, struggled to his feet. He had his sailor clothes on.

Another knock.

"Comin'. Don't be in such a hurry. Leave the milk can, yer fool."

Another knock.

"Must be deaf. Drat the lad, what's he wakin' an honest man up at this hour for?"

He went to the door, unlocked it, pulled back the bolt, opened it, and found Carl Hackler standing before him.

As Brack said afterward: "I wish I could 'ave pushed him into the harbor, me a'top of him."

"'Morning, Brack. I want a boat; can you come quick?" said Carl.

Brack's relief was so great that he gave a loud, startling laugh.

"What the deuce is the matter with you? Have you suddenly gone mad?"

"Sane as you are, Mister Hackler," said Brack. "Maybe a bit saner at times."

"I believe you fooled me about that man being rowed out to the tramp. Anyhow the tramp's here, put back for something I suppose, and I'm going to board her before she leaves again, and question the skipper. I particularly want you to row me out because I mean to tell him who gave me the information while you are alongside," said Hackler.

"Now I call that nice of you," said Brack. "Here I gives you the best tip I can and you want to get me into trouble if it's correct. I did my best for yer, Mr. Hackler, on my honor."

"Will you row me out?" said Hackler impatiently.

"What's it worth?"

"Five shillings."

"I'll be with you in a minute," said Brack. "I'll just tell mother."

"Let her know her little boy is going out in good company," said Hackler.

"I'll tell her who I'm goin' with, then she can judge for herself, whether the company's good or bad," replied Brack.

Hackler laughed as he said: "You're a smart chap, Brack."

"Am I? Then perhaps you can find me a job out your way."

"Better where you are," said Hackler, with what sounded very much like a sigh.

Brack went into his mother's room. She was awake.

"What is it, lad?" she asked.

"Hush, mother! I'm goin' out with Hackler in my boat. He's the man from Dartmoor, on the lookout for the escaped prisoner. I'm rowin' him out to the tramp; she's put back again."

She smiled; she knew all about it.

"Tell him not to stir out of that room until I comes home. He'll sleep a good while. He must not come out, not even in here – you understand, mother?"

"Yes, but who is he?"

"He's the man Hackler's after; the man who strangled the bloodhound. He knows our Bill. He's a gentleman; he'll do what he can for him when he's proved his innocence. He is – "

"Come on, Brack; don't be all day," called Hackler.

"I'll see to him, lad, never fear; he's safe with me," said his mother.

"Comin'," said Brack as he went out and joined him.

CHAPTER VII
A CRITICAL MOMENT

BRACK, as I remarked before, you are a smart fellow. Were you putting me off the scent when you said the man I am looking for went off in the tramp?" said Hackler.

"I never said he were the man; I said there were a man went off with the boat's crew to the tramp."

"I gave a description of him."

"It seemed like him to me," said Brack.

They reached the harbor; Brack pulled in his boat; Hackler stepped in and was rowed toward the tramp. The dirty looking steamer was farther out than anticipated, and Brack took his time; his practiced eyes discerned something invisible to Hackler.

"Steam up," said Carl.

"Most likely she'll be going in an hour or two."

"I wonder what she put back for?" said Hackler half to himself.

"Short o' coal," grinned Brack.

"Shut up and don't be a fool," growled Carl.

Brack could see the steamer as he looked sideways over his shoulder. A humorous smile stole over his face.

"She's movin'," he thought.

There was a stir at the stern of the tramp, the screw revolved, she was steaming away, and Carl Hackler was too late. When he recognized this he lost his temper; he had taken his journey for nothing. Catching sight of Brack's face, he fancied he detected laughter there; this did not improve matters.

"Confound you, I believe you knew she was going!" he said angrily.

"Not until the screw turned," said Brack.

Hackler stood up in the boat and waved; some one on the tramp answered the signal but she continued on her way.

"D – n the fellow, why doesn't he stop!" raged Carl.

"Looks suspicious, but he doesn't know who you are. If he did he'd be sure to slow down," said Brack.

Carl turned round quickly; he had an idea he was being chaffed and didn't like it. He stumbled, barked his leg on the seat, fell forward, and sprawled in the bottom of the boat. He did not know a sudden spurt by Brack caused this.

He floundered about, smothered his rage as best he could, then ordered Brack to row him back.

"Hope yer not hurt," said Brack sympathetically.

No answer was vouchsafed to this polite inquiry.

"Looks as though he might be aboard that tramp," said Brack. "They got off pretty sudden; perhaps you were recognized."

"Who'd have recognized me?" asked Carl.

"Him as yer looking for."

Carl laughed.

"Not likely; I don't think he ever saw me."

"But you've seen him?"

"Scores of times."

"You'd know him again?"

"Of course; he's easy to recognize. But they've probably got him by now."

"Poor chap."

"Call him that, do you? You'd not do it if you knew what he was there for."

"Tell me."

"He shot a man whose wife he had been carrying on with. It was a brutal, cold-blooded murder. The husband found them together; they were fairly trapped, so the fellow shot him."

"Funny he should carry a revolver about with him," said Brack.

"It wasn't his revolver, it was the husband's; that's why he was reprieved. It was argued that the weapon was in the room, that on the spur of the moment he picked it up and shot him."

"Oh," said Brack meditatively. "I suppose it never occurred to you, or the larned judge, or the blessed jury, that some one else might have shot him."

Carl laughed.

"Who else could have shot him?"

"It's not for me to say; I'm not clever enough. She might 'a' done it."

"Who?"

"The wife."

"What nonsense! He confessed he did it."

"Eh!" exclaimed Brack.

"I say he confessed he fired the shot."

"And he says he's innocent," said Brack.

Carl stared at him.

"Says he's innocent!" he exclaimed. "How do you know?"

Brack saw his mistake and quickly covered it.

"I lived in Yorkshire at the time. I know all about the trial; I read it."

"Oh," said Carl. "If you read it you know more about it than I do."

"Very likely," said Brack as the boat went alongside the steps.

Carl landed; he gave Brack half a crown.

"Five bob," said Brack.

"But you didn't go to the tramp."

"I couldn't; she was away."

"Then you can't claim the lot," said Carl, who was annoyed at missing the steamer.

"I suppose not exactly," drawled Brack, "but betwixt gents, I should say it holds good."

Despite his annoyance, Carl could not help laughing.

"I suppose you must have it," he said, and handed him another half-crown.

"Goin' home to-day?" asked Brack.

"Home!"

"To Dartmoor."

"That's not my home."

"It's where yer located, at any rate."

"I don't know. There's no trace of the man. It's queer where he's got to; I fancy he's dead – fallen down a mine, or been starved out."

"That's about it," said Brack. "Fancy looking for him round here! Seems a bit soft to me."

"You take a lot of interest in this man," said Carl eying him closely.

"No more than I do in any man who makes a fight for liberty."

"Would you let 'em all loose on Dartmoor?" sneered Carl.

"I'd chance it if there were any innocent men among 'em."

"There are none."

"There's one I know of."

"Who?"

"My brother Bill."

Carl laughed as he said: "Your brother Bill was lucky not to be hanged," and walked away.

Brack scowled after him and muttered: "And you'll be lucky not to be drowned if yer not careful."

When Brack arrived home he told Hector Woodridge what happened.

"By gad, he gave me a shock when he came to the door this morning," said Brack. "You must wait for to-night; I'll come and fetch you if the coast is clear. You'll have to trust me, leave it

all to me."

"I will," said Hector. "I can do nothing for myself."

"You can do a lot. If there's danger keep cool and don't betray any alarm – face it out."

"I place myself entirely in your hands," said Hector.

There was no chance that night. Brack stayed about the harbor until ten o'clock. Just as he thought the opportunity favorable Carl Hackler turned up, and Brack made for home, thinking he had not been seen. He was mistaken.

"Something mysterious about the old fellow lately," thought Carl. "He can't know anything; it's absurd, of course; but I'll swear he put me off the scent about that tramp. Confound him, he's a shrewd 'un, he is. It's my belief No. 832 is in Torquay somewhere. There'll be a shindy if he gets away, because he's got a lot of rich relations I believe; somebody's sure to say it's a put up job. There wasn't any put up business about strangling that dog; I can't help admiring the fellow for that. He bore a good name in the prison too."

"No go to-night," said Brack as he came in, "but I've got a bit of news."

"What is it?" asked Hector.

"I've won the first part of my bet with The Rascal."

Hector could not help smiling; it seemed a curious piece of news under the circumstances. He said: "I hope you'll win the double."

"It'll mean a fiver to me," said Brack, "and that's a lot to a

poor man."

"You shall have a pocket full of fivers when I prove my innocence," said Hector.

"I'd not take 'em," said Brack. "I'd be satisfied to know I'd done you a good turn, that I would," and he meant it.

Next evening Brack was very well pleased with himself when The Rascal won the double. He proceeded to draw his money and enlighten the youthful bookie on the follies of gambling; he also exhibited some liberality in the matter of drinks to several mates.

He saw nothing of Carl Hackler, although he walked about the streets and loitered near the water.

"I'll try it to-night," he thought. "The races are over and maybe the *Sea-mew* will sail before morning. There's no telling, and it's the best chance there is; it can't be missed; it's too good, even if we run some risk. If I only knew where that Dartmoor chap was. I'd give half my winnings to know – I'd give the whole blessed lot to get him safe on that yacht."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.