CHAPTER III.

A STRANGE VOICE.

There was no one in the bar of the Joy, but I heard the low murmur of voices in the room beyond; so my courage holding out I went behind the bar counter, and looked in. The shutters were still closed, but by the light that came in through the bar windows I saw Drigo and Putty sitting face to face at the dirty table with pipes in their mouths and a can of drink between them, playing cards. The air was thick with smoke, but it was clear enough that no one, dead or alive, was in the room but those two.

Without looking at me, Putty, sorting his cards, asked me what I wanted embellishing his presence with a few foul words. His calmness astonished me.

"I want to see the fair man," said I suddenly.

"Then you will have to wait till he comes back."

"He ain't gone out, and you know it. I ain't took my eyes off the door since he came in this morning at half-past two."

"Oh, very well. If he isn't gone out you'd better look about here and find him. Two for his bloomin' nob," he added, addressing Drigo as he turned up a card.

On the ground floor there were but those two rooms—the bar and the parlor. To find Taras I must look in the rooms above. My retreat would be cut off if I went upstairs, and I knew the if Taras was murdered and lying there I would never be allowed to tell the tale. But I took Putty at his word without hesitation, and prepared for the worst made my way down the side passage to the stairs, and after assuring myself that the cupboard under the stairs was empty, save for a little coal piled in one corner, and that the passage itself contained nothing, I went up to the story above with a faltering step, quaking under the double terror of finding Taras dead and of hearing the stairs creak behind me under the pursuing steps of his murderers. I passed from room to room, laying my hand against the wall for support, my heart ceasing to beat whenever a rotten board creaked under my feet.

The three rooms that composed the flat were absolutely empty; there was nothing above but the cockloft. To reach this I had to ascend a ladder and creep through a trap-door. But I did it, though I expected never to come down again.

The loft was empty and thick with the unstirred dust of years. I descended the ladder and went down stairs, too bewildered by this mystery to reason upon them. The two men were still playing in the den behind the bar; they had not troubled themselves to follow me.

"Well, ha' you found him?" Putty called, hearing my step.

"He ain't there," I answered stupidly.

"Preaps he's made of glass, as you didn't see him along of his friends and can't see him about the house nowheres."

"I wouldn't give him up, sneered Drigo. "Come sit with us till he comes back."

"Oh, if you're a-goin' to stay you ken give the bar a bit of a clean up. "There is all them"—Putty broke off short as if he had received some silent admonition from Drigo.

I went behind the counter and began to put it in order mechanically, for my thoughts were now occupied in solving the mystery of this disappearance. I asked myself if at any time during my watch I had given away to fatigue and dozed. No; I had sat down only for a few minutes, and certainly I had not lost consciousness then. I felt that it was an impossibility for Taras to have passed me without my perceiving him. Had they thrown his body into the river? No. In the silence of the night I should have heard the door in Ferryboat alley open a second time as I had heard it the first, nor could a heavy body have been carried down the alley without the scuffling of feet being audible. Besides, the risk was one which Putty, I knew, had not the courage to run. And their composure now was not consistent with their having done a dangerous deed though Drigo might very well have counseled Putty to assume indifference in order to avert suspicion which might have led me to communicate with the police.

The most reasonable conjecture I could form was that Taras had actually left the Joy with his friends and had turned down to the water instead of accompanying them into Sweet Apple lane. He might have ordered the waterman to return and so got away. If this were really the case, he might return as Drigo had intended—not that his word was to be taken in earnest; whole tone was ironical and indicative of double meaning. But the hope that Taras still lived and might return put new life into me, and I went about my work behind the bar with such alacrity that I think the men inside conceived I was trying to make amends for my misbehavior. At any rate after a long silence, in which they cast furtive glances at me every now and then, their suspicion relaxed, and they entered heartily into a dispute over some trick which one had played with the cards while the other was not watching, and this led to their devoting more attention to their game.

I had a row of washed glasses on the bar and was standing in front of the parlor door wiping them when my sense of hearing gradually took recognition of a sound which did not come from the men at my back. The silence of my occupation allowed me to listen and yet continue working. The sound was very faint. Its regularity attracted my attention. One does not notice the single chirp of a sparrow, but if the chirping is continued persistently for any length of time it never fails to excite attention. It was just the same with this sound, which I noticed after awhile occurred in this way, with regular intervals between:

"Tap, tap, tap—tap, tap—tap, tap—tap, tap—tap, tap—tap," over and over again.

I looked around the bar for an explanation. I saw no vibrating bottle on the shelves such as the sound seemed to indicate. There was no wind to shake the yellow curtain against the front window. It seemed to come from the old disused beer engine before me, and I touched one of the handles to see if it was loose. The rattle it made under my hand was answered almost immediately by a similar rattle, and the engine itself seemed to whispering with a human voice.

The glass nearly slipped from my hand, but I recovered my presence of mind in an instant and went on polishing the glasses till a new dispute arose within over a false cut. Then I touched the handle again, and again the rattle was echoed by another, and as I strained my ears I heard the whispering sound once more. The engine was articulating words, but so faintly that I caught only the last three, and they were:

——"for God's sake!"

My hair seemed to crisp up on my head as I listened. The voice was awful to my ignorant, superstitious mind. I thought the dead was speaking to me. Then on a sudden my reason suggested a natural explanation of the mystery—the voice came through the pipes from the cellar.

I had not thought of the cellar for the simple reason that I had forgotten its existence. Five years before it had been closed, for a motive which I shall presently explain, and since that time no one had opened it. The beer was no longer drawn from the cellar, but from the casks set up behind the bar, and the trap between the entrance and the bar, through which the casks used to be let down into the cellar, had been screwed down and formed part of the floor over which we walked.

Now I recollected that the carpenter had been in the Joy the day before and had doubtless withdrawn the screws and made the trap practicable for descent. Even now, as I glanced at the floor, I failed to see any difference in its appearance or any sign of the trap having been moved. The sand with which the floor was strewn had been carefully rubbed into the cracks, so as to completely conceal the opening. But Taras was down there, I felt sure of that and as if to confirm it the tapping recommenced.

"Tap, tap, tap—tap, tap—tap—tap—tap, tap."

But now the sounds seemed to my excited imagination terribly loud, causing every muscle in my body to contract with the dread of being heard by Putty or the quicker witted Drigo. What signal could I make to let Taras know that I had heard him and that he was to cease tapping the pipe? It occurred to me that if I could hear his voice through the pipe he could hear mine, but I dare not approach my lips to the engine, and still less answer the whisper, for the machine was in full view of the men in the parlor. The tapping continued, still more audibly it seemed to me. I must stop it, even if it killed every hope I had raised. Going close to the engine and taking hold of the handle to pull it down and open the valves if it would, I said in a loud voice:

"I'm done now, bloke, and I'm goin'. Will you give me something for a bite of grub? I ain't had nothin' to eat to-day."

He had some coppers on the table that were won from Drigo and he threw them on the floor with some brutal words. I picked them up without a reply, but as I turned to go I had the gumption to say in a moody tone:

"I'll come after dinner and see if he's back—the fellow with the beard. He's took my fancy awful."

I went out with the fierce determination to keep the spirit of that promise. I would see Taras, but by means they little dreamed of for all their villainous craft.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ESCAPE.

I knew more about the Mariner's Joy than was known to Putty. Years before he took the house I earned my living there, doing a drudge's work and running on errands when I was a mere child. Fly Jigger had it then; that was before improvements ruined the neighborhood. The houses in Sweet Apple lane, now mostly untenanted, were crowded with tenants, and the Joy was a favorite "house of call" for all sorts of bad characters who lived there, and for the men employed in Baxter's wharf, which was then one of the busiest stores for dry salting on this side of the river.

Fly Jigger did well by legitimate trade but he made still more money by plundering Baxter's wharf. For this purpose he and his crew had made a passage under the foreshore, opening at one end into the cellar of the Joy, and at the other end into the cellar of the wharf. This passage was called the tub run because, to prevent the sides falling in, was lined with casks with their heads removed and set end to end. As soon as the house was closed at night Fly Jigger and his men would set to work going through the tub run into Baxter's wharf and returning with goods from the storerooms. I have seen them bring out as many as 50 hams in a night.

The secret was never found out, but when the trade went from Baxter's and the wharf was cleared out and closed, the run was no longer of any service. The wharf watchman who had been a party to these robberies, took care to close and conceal the opening on his side with a flagstone and a barrow-load of rubbish, which, trodden down, presented no difference from the rest of the unpaved floor. Previous to that, to keep the brewers out of the cellar, he had removed the beer barrels, which thenceforth he kept set up behind the bar, saying that it was more fair and square-like for the customers to see their beer drawn from the wood than through the engine from the deuce knows where.

The closing of Baxter's wharf was a sad blow to him, but a worse came soon after, for being of a too active disposition he took to smuggling tobacco and rum from incoming ships, and being discovered by the excise was sent to prison, and the Joy lost its license. The brewers obtained a fresh license to sell beer and put Putty in to manage the house. When he came the spring tides had flooded the cellar and seeing that it was of no use he had the trap screwed down to save the expense of putting new hinges on it. Since then, as I have said, no one had gone down into the cellar.

With these recollections crowding my mind and the means they suggested of rescuing Taras filling my heart with a wild delight, I hurried down Ferryboat alley, and after looking about carefully to make sure that no one was observing me I wedged myself through the ventilating hole and dropped into the wharf cellar. I knew exactly where the opening existed, having taken part myself in some of the old marauding expeditions, and dropping down upon my hands and knees I brushed the dirt away from the stone that covered the hole. There was not enough light to see it, but I could trace the outline plainly enough with my fingers.

But how was I to raise the heavy flag? There was no ring or anything to catch hold of, and I knew that if I worked away the rubbish sufficiently to get my hands under it I should still be unable to lift it. I must have something to pry it up with. A bar of iron would do. It struck me that I might find what I needed among the old iron in Johnson's yard. If I had thought of that beforehand, I might have brought it in with me, but I was too impatient of delay to waste time in regrets.

Clambering up to the ventilator I looked out. Some boys were playing on the shore. I dared not show myself while they were there. It seemed to me that they would never weary of throwing stones into the water, but at length they gave it up and went away. Then I slipped out, and pretending to be looking for odds and ends on the shore, made my way up to Johnson's yard and got in through a gap in the paling. It didn't take long to find what I wanted—a broken stoking iron looked to me just the thing. Asking myself if there was anything else I should need, it occurred to me that a candle would be necessary, the cellar of the Joy being even darker than the wharf cellar. The gates of the yard opened into Sweet Apple lane, and as they closed imperfectly I was just able to squeeze through—thanks to being a kipper.

When I had bought a half-penny candle and a box of matches out of the money given me by Putty, the trembling of my knees and a feeling of faintness reminded me that I had eaten nothing all day, so I bought a small loaf and some cold fish and treated myself to a cup of coffee with my last halfpenny. The hot coffee set me up wonderfully, and with revived energy I returned to the yard and hiding the bar under my dress sneaked back to the stairs. Then after another cautious look around, finding the coast clear, I slipped the stoking iron through the ventilator and following it almost as swiftly.

It was a harder job than I expected to move the flagstone and get it out of the way. But I stuck to it, with the perspiration running down my face, until, the sensation of sickness seizing me again, I had to give over for a time till I had eaten my loaf and regained my strength. At length, having worked the stone aside, about a foot out of its place, I knelt down to feel if the opening was large enough for me to pass through, (for I had not lit the candle to do this work) and then to my dismay I discovered that the too careful watchman had filled the hole with rubbish. Sinking down on the ground I could have cried with the mingled feelings of rage and disappointment, but thinking of Taras desperation overcame these sentiments, and springing up on my knees I tore at the rubbish with my hands vehemently, like a dog in a warren, determined to reach Taras, though I had to dig my way to him through solid earth.

Happily the rubbish was loose and yielded readily to my hands, and still more happily, there were not above four or five feet of it, or I might never have got down to the tub run, with all my determination. An empty box thrown down had got jammed in the hole about a third of the way down, and below that the space was empty. Nevertheless, it took me many hours to dig it out, having nothing but my hands to dig with and nothing but my apron to carry it up in when I got down a certain distance, and then the box, which at first sight seemed to have been set there by the hand of Providence, appeared after awhile to have been placed there by my worst enemy, for it defied all my efforts to loosen it, until my patience and strength were well nigh exhausted, and then I had to get to the top and drag it out, which was even more difficult. Ten o'clock struck before this task was accomplished.

I had been compelled to light the candle to get the box out, and there was not now more than an inch of it left.

I blew out the light and put the end in my pocket. I could feel my way along the tub run and the light would be needful when I got into the cellar of the Joy. There were iron staples in the sides of the shaft placed at intervals to serve as steps. The descent was easy enough, but at the bottom a fresh obstacle presented itself. I was standing in water. If the tide was up it would be impossible to get through the run, that part of the shore being completely under water at the flood.

Dropping on my knees I crawled forward, entering the first cask. The ooze was high over my wrists, but still if they were all fairly on the same level, the passage was yet sufficiently open. The ooze might simply be the earth that had sifted through in the course of years left in its present condition by a receding tide.

But what if it was wet with the rising tide? This question caused me to pause despite my impatient desire to go on. If the tide rose before I could get Taras out of the cellar all escape would be impossible, and hemmed in, we should both be at the mercy of Drigo and Putty. On the other hand, if I waited until the tide had risen and fallen again it might be too late to save Taras.

I backed out of the run, clambered into the cellar and raising myself into the casement of the ventilator looked out. The water was certainly high, but whether it was rising or falling I could not tell. As I looked out a clock chimed the half-hour past ten. At eleven the Joy would be closed. Then anything might happen to Taras. One thing was tolerably evident—the two men would go down into the cellar, if only to see if Taras was still alive. But they might have, and probably had, made arrangements with the other man to take him away from the Joy, in which case if I waited till the tide had risen and fallen, I should find the cellar empty.

This reflection and a belief that the tide was yet some distance below high water mark decided me to make the attempt at once and run the risk of being imprisoned by the tide.

"At any rate," I thought, "I shall be a prisoner with him."

Without another moment's hesitation I dropped down into the run, put my matches and candle end in a part of my dress where they were least likely to get wetted, and then crawled along the run through the slush, which, to my satisfaction, I found came nowhere above my elbows. When I reached the farther end, and finding the irons in the wall, mounted up by them until my head struck the flagstone above, and here, knowing that I should need all my strength, I paused for a minute to get my breath. Then, bending my head, I rose another step and setting my shoulders against the flag strained every muscle to straighten my body and push up the stone.

For some time it resisted all my efforts, but at length the matted earth above giving way it yielded slowly, and I pushed it up sufficiently far to get my head and shoulders through the opening. But being now stretched to my full height, and finding no iron to set my foot on and get fresh purchase, I could go no further and stopped there, unable to get either up or down, the heavy flagstone pressing cruelly upon my shoulders, scarcely able to breathe and feeling as if my poor chest bones would be crushed in.

I dared not cry for help lest my voice should be heard by the men above, and I could only hang there gasping for breath and despairing of release. Indeed I think I must soon have fainted under the dreadful pressure, but that Taras, having listened to these inexplicable sounds in the ground in passive perplexity for some, hearing the faint moan, that escaped me when I felt that all that all was over with me, groped forward, and finding the opening set his foot under the stone and thrust it right back with one strong effort.

My sense of relief was indescribable. In a moment I had scrambled onto the floor of the cellar. I struck a match, and raising it my eager eyes fell upon the great figure and noble face of Taras. He did not recognize me at first and the look of astonishment on his countenance was curious to see. And no wonder. From head to foot I was drabbled and daubed with black ooze and dirt. I could have looked like like nothing human rising out of the earth and so disfigured. But he knew me by the time I had lit the candle. He murmured some unintelligible words of gratitude, and his eyes were suffused with the tears that sprang from his sensitive heart.

"No time for jawing about that," I said, interrupting him. "Wev'e got to get out of this afore Putty comes down and the tide comes up."

He turned around and I saw that his hands were tied behind him. The hemp was black with dried blood from his wrists. The sight of it filled me with rage against the villains who had used him so barbrrously.

"There's a knife in my waistcoat pocket," he said.

I found it and cut the knotted rope, but it was some time before he could use his numbed hands. At length life returned to them. All the time we stood there I knew that the water might be rising in the run to prevent our escape, yet I was unconscious of alarm or fear or even of impatience. I was with him.

"I am ready now. Are we to go down there?" he asked.

I nodded assent and led the way by dropping to the bottom of the shaft. I stood aside, and he dropped down also. Then I dived into the run, holding the light up to the top that he might see. The ooze was no higher and we get through just as the candle gave out, but he had to squeeze to get his broad shoulders through the ends of the casks. I sprang up the hole by the irons at the top and struck matches while he mounted.

We were safe, but to guard against pursuit I dropped the box down and Taras replaced the stone, moving it as if it were no more than a piece of board. Then I led him by the arm to the casement, and striking another match showed him the hole by which we were to get out, telling him he must pull out the remaining bars.

"Dear little friend," said he, passing his hand round the cement, with a laugh. "I doubt if I could get my big head through there."

This was true, and the unforeseen difficulty dismayed me for a time. All the doors opening on to Sweet apple lane were padlocked on the outside. We were prisoners. Suddenly the means of escape came into my mind, and again taking his arm I led him through the empty storerooms into the one at the very top, where I lodged. The door there was only bolted on the inside. I opened it, still holding his arm, for if, in the dark, he had taken a step forward it would have been his last.

"What is in there?" he asked, looking into the obscurity, as I pushed the door back.

"Nothing is out there 'cept the open air and the river down below."

"Do you expect me to dive from here?" he asked in a tone of amusement.

"No. Do you think I want you to kill yourself? I ain't a fool. Wait a bit," said I striking my last match. I held it up when it flamed and showed him the crane fitted in the doorway, the windlass inside and the chain hooked against the wall, telling him how I had seen great bales raised from below by this apparatus.

"If you can hold onto the chain, I'll lower you down," said I. "You can put your feet on them hook things."

"But how will you get out?" he asked.

"By the hole in the cellar. It ain't too narrer for me."

He agreed to this, saying he would wait for me below, and then, as noiselessly as we could, we pushed out the the crane, got the chain down and made arrangements for the descent, his eyes becoming used to the darkness which was at first impenetrable to them. I could still see more clearly, being used to the place and its darkness, and his silhouette stood out distinctly against the gray sky as I held on tight to the winch. I could see him quite plainly when he said, "Now little friend," and swung himself out from the loft door on the chain.

I was more careful than if my own life had depended on the descent, and I turned the handle steadily and yet as quickly as I dared. I felt at ease until his head and shoulders disappeared, but then a horrible fear that he might slip from the chan possessed me as I thought of him swinging out of sight a hundred feet and more above the stone quay below, and fervent gratitude filled my heart when there ceased to be any pressure on the handle and a low whistle from below reached my ears.

And now, not waiting to wind up the chain or even to close the loft door, I sped down to the cellar that I might rejoin him.

At the foot of the cellar steps my foot struck against something, which, by the sound it made, I knew to be the box I had thrown down the shaft before we went up to the loft.

{To be continued.]

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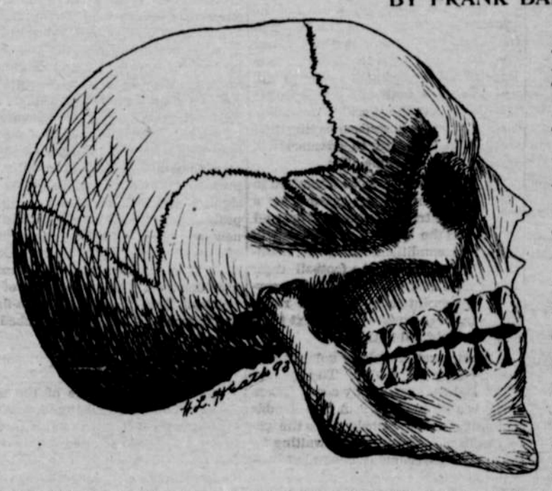

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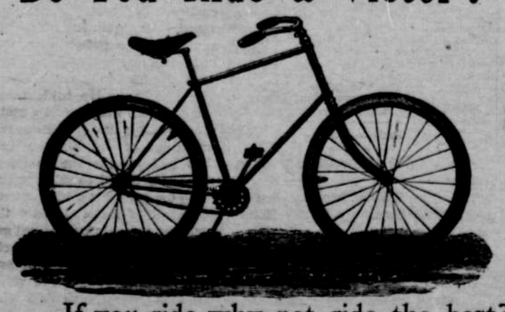

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RHEUMATISM AND LAMENESS CURED.

Portland, Oregon, April 18 1892. Dr. A. T. Sanden, Dear Sir—I got one of your belts two weeks ago for rheumatism, from which I suffered for several years. For the past six months I had not been able to walk. Your belt has placed me in almost perfect health in the two weeks I have used it. I can walk comfortably and feel like a new man generally. M. E. HUGHES, Proprietor International Hotel.

NERVOUS DEBILITY AND LOSS OF VIGOR CURED.

Tacoma, Wash., October 24, 1892. Dr. A. T. Sanden, Dear Sir—I have been using your Electric belt for general nervous debility, and to-day feel better than I have for five years. I have gained in vigor daily, and am strong in every part. Yours gratefully, CHAS. LOFTKA.

Dr. Sanden's Electric Belt with Improved Electric Suspensory is the greatest boon ever given to we and we warrant it to cure any of the above weaknesses, and to enlarge shrunken limbs or parts, or Money Refunded. They are the strength to meet all stages of weakness in young, middle-aged or old men, and will cure the worst cases in two or three months. our book at once, sent sealed, free. Address:

LAME BACK AND RHEUMATISM CURED.

Portland Oregon, Septem Dr. A. T. Sanden, Dear Sir—Years of exposure and hard work, coupled with the strain coming from the jar of an engine, gave me a severe case of lame back from which I suffered for seven years. I was so bad that I could not bend to tie my shoes, and I continued to wear it for four months, being perfectly cured. I was two years ago, and I am as well to-day as I ever was in my life. I believe my belt will do all it is claimed for it, and I know of people who have been cured by it. Many of them are in the employ of the Oregon Railroad and Navigation Co. in the north. I am located here permanently, and will be glad to tell any one who wants to inquire about me. ROBERT BURRIL, Engineer Hotel

LOST VITALITY AND STRENGTH CURED.

Everett, Wash., Ju Dr. A. T. Sanden, Dear Sir—Since wearing your belt I have been a new man. I feel my old energy fast returning, and after a month's use I find myself twice as vigorous as before. My memory is now nearly perfect, each day shows for the better. I feel so much stronger than before using your belt. Yours truly, HENRY

SANDEN ELECTRIC CO., 172 First Street, PORTLAND, OREGO