

I

- An unpretentious building of rough-hewn stone standing in the middle of a small, stockaded enclosure. A doorway in the wall of the building facing the entrance-gate to the yard. To the left of the doorway, a glazed window of the ordinary size. To its right a paneless aperture, so low and narrow that were the four upright and two transverse bars which grate it doubled in thickness no interstice would be left for the admission of light or air to the interior. Behind the bars – a face.
- Sixteen hours hence that face will look its last upon the world which has stricken it countless cruel blows. In a corner of the enclosure the executioner's hand is even now busy stitching into a shapeless cap, a square of grey serge. Tomorrow the same hand will use the cap to hood the face, as one of the few simple preliminaries to swinging the carcase to which the face is attached from the rude platform now in course of erection against the stockade fence and barely 20 yards in front of the stone building.
- The building is the gaol – locally known as the “cage” – of Oatlands, a small township in the midlands of Van Diemen's Land, which has gradually grown up round a convict “muster-station”, established by Governor Davey. The time is five o'clock on a September evening, 55 years ago. At nine o'clock on the following morning, Convict Glancy, No. 17,927, transportee ex ship Pestonjee Bomanjee (second trip), originally under sentence for seven years for the theft of a silk handkerchief from a London “swell”, will suffer the extreme penalty of the law for having, in an intemperate moment, objected to the mild discipline with which a genial and loving motherland had sought to correct his criminal tendencies. In other words, Convict Glancy, metaphorically goaded by the wordy insults and literally by the bayonet-tip of one of his motherland's reformatory agents – to wit, Road-gang Overseer James Jones – had scattered JJ's brains over a good six square yards of metalled roadway. The deed has been rapturously applauded by Glancy's fellow-gangers, all of whom had the inclination, but lacked the courage, to wield the crowbar that has been the means of erasing this particular tyrant's name from the pay-sheets of His Britannic Majesty's Colonial Penal Establishment. Nevertheless and notwithstanding such tribute of appreciation, H.B.M.'s colonial representatives, police, judicial and gubernatorial, have thought it rather one to be censured and have, accordingly, left Convict Glancy for execution.
- This decision of the duly-constituted authorities Convict Glancy has somewhere irrelevantly (as it will seem to us at this enlightened day) acknowledged by a fervent “Thank God!” – an ejaculation rendered the more remarkable by the fact that never

before in his convict history had he linked the name of the Deity with any expression of gratitude for the many blessings enjoyed by him in that state of penal servitude to which it had pleased the same Deity to call him. On the contrary, he had constantly indulged in maledictions on his fate and on his Maker. He had resolutely cursed the
5 benignant forces with which the System and the King's Regulations had surrounded him, and he had failed to reverence as he ought the triangles, the gang-chains, the hominy, the prodding bayonet, and the other things which would have conduced to his reformation had he but manifested a more humble and obedient spirit. No wonder, therefore, as Chaplain Ford said, that it has come about that he has qualified
10 for the capital doom.

Upon this doom, in so far as it could be represented by the gallows, Convict Glancy was now gazing with an unflinching eye. On this September evening he stands at his cell-window looking on half-a-dozen brown-clothed figures handling saw, and square, and hammer, as they fix in the earth two sturdy uprights, and to those a
15 projecting cross-beam; as they bind the two with a solid tie-piece of knotless hardwood; as they build a narrow platform of planks around the gallows-tree; as they fasten a rope to the notched end of the cross-beam; and as they slope to the edge of the planks, ten feet from the ground, a rude ladder. All the drowsy afternoon he had watched the working party, though Chaplain Ford had stood by his side droning of
20 the grace which had been withheld from him in life, but might still be his in death. He had felt interested, had Convict Glancy, in these preparations for the event in which he was to act such a prominent part on the morrow. He had even laughed at the grim humour of one of the brown-garbed workers who, when the warder's eye was off him, had gone through the pantomime of noosing the rope-end round his own neck –
25 a little joke which contributed much to the (necessarily noiseless) delight of the rest of the gang.

Altogether, Convict Glancy reflected as dusk fell, and the working party gathered up their tools, and the setting sun tipped the bayonets of the guard with a diamond iridescence, that he had spent many a duller afternoon. If the Chaplain had only held
30 his tongue, so the time would have passed with real pleasantness. He said as much to the good man as the latter remarked to the warder on duty in the cell that he would look in again after supper.

"You may save yourself the trouble, sir," quoth, respectfully enough, Convict Glancy. "You have spoilt my last afternoon. Don't spoil my last night!"

35 Chaplain Ford winced at the words. He was still comparatively new to the work of spiritually superintending a hundred or so monsters who looked upon the orthodox hell as a place where residence would be pleasantly recreative after Port Arthur Settlement and Norfolk Island; and the time lay still in the future when, being

completely embruted, he would come to regard it as a very curious circumstance indeed that Christ had omitted eulogistic reference to the System from the Sermon on the Mount. Consequently he winced and sighed, not so much – to do him justice – at the utter depravity of Convict Glancy as at his own inability to reach the reprobate’s heart. But he took the hint; he mournfully said he would not return that evening, but would be with the prisoner by half-past 5 o’clock in the morning.

II

When Chaplain Ford entered the enclosure immediately before the hour he had named, he at once understood, from the excitement manifested by a group assembled in front of the “cage”, that something was amiss. Voices were uttering fearful words, impetuously, almost shriekingly, and hands swung lanterns – the grey dawn had not yet driven the darkness from the stockade – and brandished muskets furiously. A very brief space of time served to inform the reverend functionary what had gone wrong.

Convict Glancy had made his escape, having previously murdered, with the victim’s own bayonet, the warder who had been told-off to watch him during the night. This latter circumstance was, of course, unfortunate, but alone it would not have created the excitement, for the murder of prison-officials was a common enough occurrence. It was the other thing that galled the gesticulating and blaspheming group. That a prisoner, fettered with ten-pound irons, should have broken out of gaol on the very eve of his execution – why, it was calculated to shake the confidence of the Comptroller-General himself in the infallibility and perfect righteousness of the System. And, popular and authoritative belief in the System once shattered, where would they be?

The murdered man had gone on duty at 10 o’clock, and very shortly afterwards he must have met with his fate. How Glancy had obtained possession of the bayonet could only be conjectured. As was the custom during the day or two preceding a convict’s execution, he had been left unmanacled, and ironed with double leg-chains only. Thus his hands were free to perpetrate the deed once he grasped the weapon. Glancy, on his escape, had taken the instrument with him, but there was no doubt that he had inflicted death with it, the wound in the dead man’s breast being obviously caused by the regulation bayonet. Possibly the sentinel had nodded, and then a violent wrench of the prisoner’s wrist and a sudden stab had extended his momentary slumber into an eternal sleep. The bayonet had been used by Glancy to prise up a flooring-flag, and to scoop out an aperture under the wall, the base-stones of which, following the slipshod architecture of the time, rested on the surface and were not sunk into the ground.

The work of excavation must have taken the convict several hours, and must have been conducted as noiselessly as the manner of committing the crime itself. A solitary warder occupied the outer guardroom, but he asserted that he had heard no sound except the exchange of whistle-signals between the dormitory guard at the convict-barracks (a quarter-of-mile away at the rear of the gaol-stockade) and the military patrol. The night routine of the “cage” did not insist upon the whistle-signal between the men on duty, but they passed a simple “All’s well” every hour. And this the guard-room-warder maintained he had done with the officer inside the condemned cell, the response being given in a low tone, from consideration, so the former thought, for the sleeping convict so soon to die. Of course, if this man was to be believed, Glancy must have uttered the words. It was not the first time the signal which should have been given by a prison officer had been made by his convict murderer.

The murder was discovered on the arrival of the relief watch at five o’clock. The last “All’s well” was exchanged at four. Consequently the escapee had less than an hour’s start. The scaling of the stockade would not be difficult even for a man in irons, and once in the bush an experienced hand would soon find a method of fracturing the links.

It must be admitted that this contumacious proceeding of Convict Glancy was most vexatious. Under-Sheriff Ropewell, now soundly reposing at the township inn, would be forthcoming at 9 o’clock with his Excellency’s warrant in his hand to demand from Muster-Master Stoneman the body of one James Glancy, and Muster-Master Stoneman would have to apologise for his inability to produce the said body. The difficulty was quite unprecedented, and Stoneman, as he stood in the midst of his minions, groaned audibly at the prospect of having to do the thing most abhorrent to the official mind – establish a precedent.

“Such a thing was never heard of!” he cried. “A man to bolt just when he was to be turned off? And the d-d hypocrite tried to make his Honor and all of us think that he was only too happy to be scragged. It’s too d-d bad!”

It certainly did seem peculiar that Glancy, who had apparently much rejoiced at the contemplation of his early decease, should give leg-bail just when he was to realise his wishes. He had told the judges that “he was glad they were going to kill him right off instead of by inches”, and yet he had voluntarily thrown off the noose when it was virtually round his neck. Was it the mere contrariness of the convict nature that prompted the escape? Or, was it the innate love of life that becomes stronger as the benefits of living become fewer and fewer? Had the craving for existence and for freedom surged over his despair and recklessness at the eleventh hour?

Such were the enquiries which Chaplain Ford put to himself as, horrified, he took in the particulars of No. 17,927's crowning enormities from the hubbub of the group.

5 "Damn it!" said the Muster-Master at last, "we are losing time. The devil can't have gone far with those ten-pounders on him. We'll have to put the regulars on the track as well as our own men. Warder Briggs, report to Captain White at the barracks, and-"

Muster-Master Stoneman stopped short. Through the foggy air there came the familiar sound as of a convict dragging his irons. What could it be? No prisoners had been as yet loosed from the dormitory. Whence could the noise proceed?

10 Clink – clank – s-sh – dr-g-g – clink – clank – dr-g-g. The sound drew nearer, and Convict Glancy turned in at the enclosure gateway – unescorted. He had severed the leg-chain at the link which connected with the basil of the left anklet, but had not taken the trouble to remove the other part of the chain. Thus, while he could take his natural pace with his left foot, he dragged the fetters behind his right leg.

15 A moment of hushed surprise, and then three or four men rushed towards him. The first who touched him he felled with a blow. "Not yet," said he, grimly. "I give myself up, Mr Stoneman – you don't take me! I give myself up – you ain't going to get ten quid for taking me." And then Convict Glancy laughed, and held out his hands for the handcuffs. He laughed more heartily as the subordinate hirelings of the System threw
20 themselves upon him like hounds on their prey.

"No need to turn out the sodgers now, Muster-Master – not till nine o'clock." Once more his hideous laugh rang through the yards. "You had an easier job than you expected, hadn't you, Stoneman, old cove?"

25 Muster-Master Stoneman had been surprised into silence and into an unusual abstinence from blasphemy by the re-appearance – quite unprecedented under the circumstances! – of the doomed wretch. But the desperado's jeering tones whipped him into speech.

"Curse you!" he yelled. "I'll teach you to laugh on the other side of your mouth presently. You'd better have kept away." He literally foamed in his mad anger.

30 "Do you think I couldn't have stopped away if I'd wanted to, having got clear?" A lofty scorn rang out in the words. "But do you think I was going to run away when I was so near Freedom as that?" And the wretch jerked his manacled hands in the direction of the gallows. "You d-d fool!"

No one spoke for a full half-minute. Then: "Why did you break gaol then?" asked the Muster-Master.

"Because I wanted to spit on Jones' grave!" was the reply.

III

- 5 Muster-Master Stoneman was as good as his word. Death couldn't drive the smile from Glancy's face. That could only be done by one thing – the lash.

When next the Muster-Master spoke it was to order the prisoner a double ration of cocoa and bread. And, "Briggs," he continued, "while he is getting it, see that the triangles are rigged."

- 10 "The triangles, sir!" exclaimed Officer Briggs and Convict Glancy together.

"I said the triangles, and I mean the triangles. No. 17,927 has broken gaol, and as Muster-Master of this station, and governor of this gaol, and as a magistrate of the territory, I can give him 750 lashes for escaping. But as he has to go through another little ceremony this morning I'll let him off with a 'canary' – a hundred lashes.

- 15 "You surely cannot mean it, sir!" exclaimed Parson Ford.

- "Mean it, sir! By G-, I'll show you I mean it," replied the M.M., whose blaspheming no presence restrained save that of his official superiors. "Give him the cocoa. Warder Tuff, give the doctor my compliments, and tell him his attendance is required here. Tell him he'd better bring his smelling-salts – they may be wanted," he sneered
20 in conclusion.

"You devil!" cried Glancy. The reckless grin passed away, and his face faded to the pallor of the death he was so soon to die.

As Master-Muster Stoneman turned on his heel to prepare the warrant for the flogging, he looked at his watch. It was half-past six.

- 25 At seven o'clock the first lash from the cat-o'-nine-tails fell upon Convict Glancy's back.

At 7.30 his groaning and bleeding body, which had received the full hundred of flaying stripes, lay on the pallet of the cell where he had murdered the night-guard but a few hours before.

At eight o'clock Executioner Johnson entered the cell. "I've brought yer sumthink to 'arden yer, Glancy, ol' man. I'll rub it in, an' it'll help yer to keep up." So tender a sympathy inspired Mr Johnson's words that anyone not knowing him would have thought he was the bearer of some priceless balsam. But Convict Glancy knew him;
5 and, maddened by pain though he was, had still sensibility enough left to make a shuddering resistance to the hangman as he proceeded to rub into the gashed flesh a handful of coarse salt. "By the Muster-Master's orders, sonny," soothingly remarked Johnson. "To 'arden yer."

At 8.45 Under-Sheriff Ropewell, who had been apprised while at breakfast of the murder and escape, appeared on the scene escorted by his javelin-men. This
10 gentleman, too, had been greatly perplexed by Convict Glancy's proceedings. "Really it was most inconsiderate of the man," he said to the Muster-Master. "I do not know whether I ought to proceed to execution, pending his trial for this second murder."

"Oh," said the latter functionary – flicking with his handkerchief from his coat-sleeve as he spoke a drop of Convict Glancy's blood that had fallen there from a reflex swirl of the lash, "I think your duty is clear. You must hang him at nine o'clock, and try him afterwards for the last crime."

And as Convict Glancy, per Pestonjee Bomanjee (second), No. 17,927, was punctually
20 hanged at 9.5, it is to be presumed that the Under-Sheriff had accepted this solution of the difficulty.

At 10.15 a mass of carrion having been huddled into a shell, and certain formalities, which in the estimation of the System served as efficiently as a coroner's inquest, having been duly attended to, Muster-Master Stoneman bethought himself that he had not breakfasted.

"I'll see you later, Mr Ropewell," he said, as the latter was endorsing the Governor's warrant with the sham verdict: "I'm going to breakfast. I think I've earned it this morning."