CHAPTER XVI.

VERNON IS WOUNDED.

My duties took me to inspect the prisoners who were to be sent to Pentona, and assist in bringing in force the new regulation which made prisoners' sentences consist of days' work instead of days in prison, thus enabling them, by working overtime, to shorten their term of imprisonment one-fifth, and by being industrious and well-behaved to have everything they could desire but freedom, or causing them if they were lazy, or ill-behaved, to lengthen their sentences indefinitely, and render their lot a miserable one, consisting of solitary confinement, and wholesome but unsavoury food, as follows: porridge for breakfast, brown bread alternating with meat or pea-soup, for dinner, and porridge again for supper. This distinction was so great, and the rewards or punishments so wise, as to cause the prisoners to at once become industrious and happy, and acquire habits that would make them valuable citizens. Some of them would refuse to work at first, and so lengthen their terms, and cause their period of industry to be extended.

With the exception of one man, who was executed, all the prisoners behaved fairly well. This man was a coarse, brainless brute, who had twice received the lash. At the age of eighteen he and his father received sentences of four and ten years respectively, for burglary with violence. At the expiration of his term he was turned into the streets a lazy, thriftless, human animal, without a friend, and having a contempt for honest work, and an admiration for all lawless bravery. He got money by various undetected larcenies, married, and before the birth of his first child, received another sentence of six years for burglary. This human brute was nearly fifty years of age when sent to Pentona; he first was pleased with the novelty of everything, and behaved himself well, till one day, being accused by a companion of cheating at cards, he violently assaulted him, and received a week's solitary confinement. On getting out, he tried to murder the same man, and brought his term up to nine years, and so caused himself to be placed in the condemned cell. Even this did not quiet him, and he continued his assaults till his execution. I inquired about
the wife who had been deprived of her husband shortly after her marriage, and found her case illustrated the barbarity of the laws of Ura; first she went to a hospital which she left with a baby in her arms. She was now in her nineteenth year, separated from her husband, from whom she could not free herself by divorce or other legal means, therefore she had to work alone for herself and her baby, and refuse the help that men might have given her had she been free to become their wife. Sometimes we can bear the sorrow of the present, supported by the hope of the future, but she had no such hope. Poor woman, she knew very well that the freedom of her husband meant to her only some kisses, a flogging or two, and a further period of lonely toil in the future burdened by another baby. Suppose by chance—an unlikely supposition—she had got herself a home, her husband would pawn or sell it when he came out, and leave her again destitute. I found such cases were not uncommon, and that these unhappy, hopeless women were supposed to lead virtuous lives, though they would soon learn that the only help they could get was from men who would leave them directly they found the woman would not break her marriage vows. These laws were made for the good of the people, and claimed respect. Verily this and many other of the laws of Ura were the essence of stupidity, and received no one's respect, as they only tended to create wickedness and sorrow. In Zara if a man was imprisoned for three years, or brought his term up to that period, by laziness or bad conduct, his wife could get a divorce on the proof of the imprisonment alone, and, if she had any children, would receive a small allowance from the State for their support, which the man had to pay with his labour. Divorces, however, were very seldom asked for, as women in Zara, or elsewhere, only love the deeper, or rather show their love the more freely, the more their husband by sickness or trouble is in need of it. The prisons were crowded with the scum of humanity, every sin had sent her votaries, though of them all laziness sent more than every other of the crimes put together. Grey-haired old reprobates, and callow youth; men who knew no more of their father than the wolves in the snow, and regarded their mother with a lupine love; men who cursed their parents, forgetting that they were befouling their own origin; and men who were delicately nurtured, with a father's care and a mother's love, while they were taught everything but self-control and industry, and so fitted only for a prison life. Yonder grey-haired old man grew up in the vagabonds' quarters at Ura, he had heard of his mother, but knew nothing about any of his other relations. Truth, honour, and industry he regards as only fit for fools, he never worked, and periodically came to jail to regain health and be confirmed in laziness. That tall, handsome prisoner to your right boasts of his father, who was a doctor, and inherited money which he spent like a pig, came
to penury, and married a clever girl who had established herself in a milliner's shop. He married her as a means of support, taught her children—that is, those he could—to look down on her, till at last she died of a broken heart. I should say he is like his father, for whom the devil should find a very hot place. That wistful-looking man with a retreating chin is the son of a celebrated judge. He was left fatherless in his twelfth year. His mother and sisters made him think that he had only to ask for what he wanted and get it. He kept on asking till his mother refused to give, and then he forged her name and was sent to prison. These histories would stretch out to the crack of doom.

The prison I found was a great hotbed of crime, where men were robbed of their self-respect and made lazy. Their hair was cut, they were jail-birds. They were pestered by a parson till they hated religion, and looked on it only as a cloak for roguery. They were kept confined till their muscles grew so flabby that work was a martyrdom to them, and by these means they were expected to grow good. The people of Ura were fools. At Zara a prisoner was forced to be industrious, so that industry became a habit. In his trade, or vocation, he was made more expert, and his industry rewarded by healthy pleasures. He was made to think he had been foolish, and to see the wisdom of good behaviour, so that when he was released he at once turned to work, which he found only exercise after the long hours of prison toil. As Mary said, the law that could not recognize the strength of a government under which rewards were worth trying for, and punishments worth avoiding, was only equal in stupidity to the law that tried to improve men by humiliating them in laziness. The management of the women and children was just as bad. Hundreds of women were housed together without books, papers, music, or any other innocent pleasure, and expected to become good. I know you will hardly believe these things, but they are perfectly true. For every shilling the authorities had laid out in books or papers they would have saved at least five in the cost of management. However, all this is past and done with, and I feel that my indignation against it is not sufficient excuse for my enlarging on it. We commenced by sending prisoners to Ura in batches of twenty-five every day, till we had disposed of three hundred of the men. To my surprise only three warders escorted each gang which they were enabled to keep in order by a very simple expedient. The prisoners were all handcuffed together, by chains so long as not to inconvenience them in any way. These chains were connected with a powerful electric battery, which would send the current through them all, either sufficient to keep them awake, or kill them as required, or any intermediate strength. By this means the prisoners were forced to be a guard on each other, as if one man rebelled they would all suffer.

We now brought from Pentona fifty prisoners, who volunteered
to act as warders at Ura. These prisoners were brought down on patrol like a lot of soldiers under care of only one warder; with them came a prison band, so that they marched up to the jail like a triumphal procession. Hardly had they been installed in their new position when nearly every prisoner asked to be sent to Pentona, which was at once made a reward for good conduct. At first the hours of labour were very trying to the prisoners, many of whom had never done a day's work in their lives. Encouraged by the hope of Pentona, and supported by the many new pleasures, they worked with a will. In the evening, directly after supper they would most of them fall asleep. The women were treated on the same principle as the men, and only behaved differently in trying to shirk their work by pretending to be ill; when, however, they found that illness meant being kept in bed, in a solitary room, only periodically visited by a nurse, to administer medicine, they soon gave up this pretence. The female prisoners we had to keep at Ura, as the women of Zara would not allow them to be sent to Pentona on any terms, not that they feared their influence on the community, but they declined to depart from the established rule of keeping temptations out of the way. By the time the operation of the law for the arrest of vagabonds and destitute people had come into force, we had sent nearly all the male prisoners to Pentona, and got the jails into a fit condition to receive the new occupants that we knew would be numerous. The first morning the rush of hopeless miserable to give themselves up was so great that the police received instructions not to rigorously enforce the new law. Passing through the Court House on my way to my office, I was stopped by the sobbing of a child, and turned to find an ill-clad, dirty woman nursing a baby, beside whom was a little child weeping. The sight was a piteous one.

"What is the child crying for?" I asked.

"If you please, sir, she is hungry. She is a good child, and only cries when the hunger hurts her," said the poor creature piteously.

"Why have you come here?"

"To be sent to prison, sir," she said weeping, "my husband drinks, and I have to stay at home to look after the babies, so we have nearly starved."

"Why did you not complain to the police?"

"It would be useless, sir, there is no law to prevent a man getting drunk at home and leaving his wife and children to starve."

That had been so, but now the State recognized the wisdom of making a man treat his wife and children as well as he did his horse or his dog, neither of whom he was allowed to starve. Men, women, and children came in a filthy crowd, anxious for anything to escape the cold and hunger of their wretched existence. They
were washed, reclothed and fed; next day they were sent to work, and then the trouble commenced. Poor miserable beings, they had neither strength nor stamina, and most of them were utterly incapable of hard work; little by little, however, they became stronger, and gradually we got them all to suitable employment. In the evening, like the other prisoners, they would fall asleep directly after their supper, but gradually nature, properly nourished, enabled them to do their day's work, which was often of a very light kind. While I had been working at the prisons, Mary's secretarial duties had kept her busy with Duke Mura, who was the president of the committee that were to draw up the phonetic dictionary. At their first meeting I was present. After the election of president the duke delivered an address, pointing out that as the forefathers of the people of Undara and Gurla had left Zara to form different cities and settlements in various parts of Fregida their pronunciation, affected by their various surroundings, had become noticeably different, and that this difference tended to make them regard each other as strangers, as it enabled them to tell a man from another State by his talk. This was undesirable, as the people should, for their mutual protection, be brought closer, instead of being allowed to drift apart. He also pointed out the incalculable time lost to the community by every person having to learn to spell words, frequently in a different manner to that in which they were pronounced. With a phonetic dictionary issued by the Government every branch of this kindred people would express themselves in the same pronunciation, and the amount of time devoted by young people to learning to spell would be reduced by about three-fourths. An established dictionary was taken as a foundation, and the work proceeded. Before I had finished my prison work, the committee went to Zara, so for the first time since we met I was parted from Mary. After she went, Cora and I became great friends. One evening we stood in the upper veranda chatting. The sun had just sunk below the horizon, and the quiet of the twilight was only occasionally broken by the sound of some bird warbling in the trees. Vernon, who had been working in the garden, we saw going down one of the most distant paddocks to bring up the horses. He was followed by two of his dogs. Everything was quiet, even the birds had gone to sleep. Suddenly a man stepped from behind a bush quite close to Vernon, and we saw a flash. The report of a pistol echoed in the air. Vernon staggered, but only for an instant, and then rushed at his assailant. Almost before we heard the report the dogs sprang at the stranger, who fired two more shots killing one and wounding the other. Vernon now closed with him and they fell struggling on the ground. All this had hardly taken ten seconds. I had heard Cora scream, when I turned she had disappeared. I rushed to help Vernon. As I passed through the yard Cora was unchain-
ing the dogs, who, when free, leaped the fences and rushed to Vernon's assistance. Putting my hands on the fence I vaulted over, before the first dog was unchained, and ran towards the men who were struggling on the ground. A second after a dog passed me like a flash. The men were rolling over each other. Another dog passed me. One man was now on top of the other, and evidently trying to choke him. The front dog caught the top man by the back of the neck and pulled him off. In as many seconds three dogs were worrying one man, while the other lay still and seemingly dead. When I got up I found it was Vernon. The blood was flowing from a wound on his left temple; I lifted his head and found that he breathed. Cora was beside me.

"Is he dead, Frank?" she gasped, her face ghastly with horror.

"No, he is breathing. Take the dogs off that man, they are killing him," I said hurriedly.

"So much the better," replied Cora with a savage cruelty that made me shudder.

The rising moon shone on a revolver in the grass.

"Pass me that revolver, Cora."

She gave it to me; I unloaded it and threw it down. Some of the servants had come up and dragged the hounds off the wretched man, who sat on the grass trembling. It was now nearly dark, but by the glimmer of the moon I could see his teeth gleaming through his torn cheek. A bullet had gone through Vernon's shoulder, and he was insensible from the scalp wound; but otherwise he had escaped. I took him up in my arms to carry him in. The dead and dying dogs were being attended to. One of the housemaids had picked up the pistol, and stood beside the man, who was on his legs.

"Bring that man to the house and guard him," I said to her.

"Come on, you fiend!" she said, savagely.

He staggered, and deliberately she pointed the revolver and snapped it in his face.

"Stop! for God's sake! Would you kill the man?" I cried out in alarm.

The woman was gasping, almost in hysterics. The dogs and women had become fiends; only Cora had remained quiet, gazing on Vernon, oblivious of all else.

"Come on, you fool!" I said to the man.

Again he staggered.

"I will make him move," said the woman, brutally; and striking him on the forehead with the barrel of the revolver, felled him to the ground.

In despair, I gave Vernon to Cora, who took him in her arms
and carried him to the house, while I followed with the unfortunate assassin, whom I left in charge of some neighbours that Gea had summoned. I now took Vernon from Cora and carried him upstairs. How she had managed to carry him was a mystery; it showed, however, how any great terror will double a person's strength. I found the bullet had gone right through Vernon's left shoulder, and that his scalp had been cut open by a stick or stone. We attended to his wounds, and gave him some brandy. Presently he opened his eyes, and gradually realized everything.

"Frank," he whispered, for he was very weak, "have you attended to the dogs?"

"No, Vernon; they will be all right."

"Go and see to them now, please; Cora will nurse me," he said, with an effort.

I found one of the dogs dead and cold, and the other with a bullet through his left shoulder. This surprised me, till I discovered that the man, Ben Ava, who had tried to murder Vernon though a first-rate shot, fired generally to the left, as indeed, do most pistol shots.

I found a neighbouring doctor had attended to this wretched man, who was rapidly dying. One of his cheeks had been torn off down to the jaw; his neck was fearfully lacerated; one arm was broken; and he was badly bitten all over. The two great hounds, assisted by an Esquimaux dog, had done their work well. Ben Ava, who was evidently a very strong man, had been able to make but a futile attempt at defence; certainly one of the strongest hounds had caught him by the neck at the commencement of the struggle, and so secured a great advantage.

I returned to Vernon, who insisted on having all the dogs brought up to his room. The dead dog we laid on a table and covered with a great coat of Vernon's, as he said the dog liked anything he wore. We made a special couch for the wounded animal, and the others crowded about Vernon, licking his face and baying with rage and sorrow. The great brutes, with their backs bristling, looked like furies wild with the rage of battle, though even in their excitement they were gentle to their master. Now that Vernon realized that all his dogs were properly attended to, he allowed them to be taken to their kennels, with the exception of the ones that were dead and wounded. He then asked after his assailant, who, we told him, was badly hurt.

"The man must be mad; I never, to my knowledge, met him before, and certainly have done him no harm."

I gave Vernon a narcotic, which soon put him to sleep, as he was very weak from the loss of so much blood. Cora sat beside his bed. Her face was ghastly white, and her eyes still wild with
horror. Little more than an hour earlier we were chatting in the twilight, soothed with the quiet of the coming night, and happy in the leisure of the closing day. What had happened seemed a dream. The report of the pistol, the rush of the hounds, their fierce attack on the madman—for I could not believe he was sane—my friend lying ghastly, done nearly to death. A sad ending to a happy day. And had Cora not released the dogs, it would have been sadder; for I should have arrived too late to save Vernon's life. It was past midnight, yet no one had gone to bed, and the servants whispered in white-faced groups. I went to Ben Ava, who lay seemingly lifeless, watched by the doctor.

"How is he?" I whispered.

"Dying," the doctor answered, in awe-stricken tones. "He cannot last much longer. Those brutes of dogs have torn him from head to foot."

"Surely three dogs could not wound him fatally in so short a time?"

"They have, though; the windpipe is punctured with their teeth."

The wretched man seemed not to breathe, and died at break of day. I went back to Vernon's room, where I found Cora on her knees beside the bed, trying to stifle her sobs in the counterpane.

"Don't touch me, Frank," she said, weeping, "I won't disturb him; I shall be better soon."

Poor girl! she had given her love to a man who was utterly oblivious of the gift, and was now suffering the penalty of her folly. I mixed her some brandy and water.

"Take this, Cora."

She drank it.

"I knelt down to pray," she said, between her sobs, "to thank God—for saving him—and then—I cried—I couldn't help it."

She got up and dried her eyes.

"He is not much hurt, Frank, is he? he will soon get well?" she asked, with piteous grief.

"Yes; in a few weeks he will be as well as ever. He is not seriously hurt."

She sighed, but her tear-stained face was quite calm, for the sobbing had done her good. He slept quiet as a child. If we could only keep him from getting feverish, he would soon be none the worse for this murderous assault. Cora insisted on watching, so I instructed her to call me at four o'clock, and went to bed.

She was a guardian angel to the wounded man, and would have given him the only thing his life lacked—a good woman's love, without which no man's life is complete—had he only asked for it. He, engrossed with his work, gave to his dogs and horses
the love that flowed from his heart—a love which must be bestowed, however humble its object. When, sometimes, his loneliness saddened his mind, he would only sigh and think the void in his life but a part of the sorrow that comes to the happiest lot; and all the time the void was for man’s comforter, who waited at hand.

In due time I was called. When Cora left I looked at Vernon. Her tear-stains were on his face; she had carefully tried to remove them, but they still showed. For the first time I realized the reason of Mary’s anger against Vernon. He had, unwittingly, gained the love of Cora Novel.