CHAPTER XXVIII.

LAYING THE COPING STONE.

The last returns had come in, and the opinion of the people been declared overwhelmingly in favour of federation with Undara, and the adoption of its laws and constitutions in its entirety.

General Dero had been declared Military Dictator with absolute powers, till the election of senators to represent Gurla in the Federal Parliament.

One morning General Ance came to me, his face grave and anxious. "I am afraid there will be some demonstration of discontent, Doctor Frank, and that General Dero will crush it with needless severity. Can anything be done to influence him?"

"I do not think you will find him more severe than is absolutely necessary," I replied. "Cannot you influence your party to pacific measures?"

"There are a section of the younger monarchical party who are so utterly discontented as to think anything preferable to the present laws, which give no preference to the son of a king over the son of a beggar, but regard only personal worth."

"What do they urge against this?"

"They say their forefathers founded Gurla, and devoted their lives to its welfare, and so they should have the benefit of it sooner than the son of a man who safely worked at home, or perchance, as robber or thief, worked against its progress. Yet now the son of the greatest rogue, if abler than the son of the greatest statesman, can excel him by his worth, so that the father's noble actions are unavailing for the son."

"The good man's son will get assistance denied to the thief's son, but if he still is outstripped it is better for both, and the State, that each fills a position according to his abilities. It is no more just that a man should be punished for his father's sins, than he should be rewarded for his father's efforts. Justice demands that every man should be punished or rewarded solely in accordance with his own actions."

"All this is just and wise, but these young men and their fathers have been enabled to live solely to gratify themselves, simply through the industry of their forefathers, and cannot now
ungrumblingly fight the battles of life on a level with their fellow-
men."

Long and earnestly Ance argued for clemency for the young and hot-headed section of his party, adducing only in their favour the fact that, being used to privileges which they were brought up to regard as their rights, they could not at once be content with only justice. Eventually we paid a visit to Cula Dero.

"Cula," I said, "General Ance and I have been talking of the hardship the pampered young aristocrats are subjected to, through being deprived of all their privileges at once, and we have come to ask you to be as lenient towards them, notwithstanding their folly, as circumstances will permit."

"I have," said General Dero, "a duty to perform, which I am not at liberty to sacrifice for friend or foe. The masses say that the classes have enjoyed unfair privileges so long that they should have a turn now. Of course I reply, No! a wrong state of legislation has been in force, sweep it away; those who suffer by just laws have only themselves to blame. If they have lived as drones so long that they cannot now act as working bees, so much the worse for them. We are sorry for these people. They shall be well fed and cared for, as others are, if they cannot work. There are some who are trying to foster rebellion, if they succeed it will be my duty to take such measures as will shield the community from their folly, and prevent a repetition of it. Say from me, General Ance"—Dero's strong face was kind, though decided—"that justice is best for all, for though many will be made happy, wrong will be done to none. Let them do their duty, and they will be happier in their new state than they were in the old. My duty I am prepared to do; I am sure you will do your best to make it a pleasant one, for which I thank you, and wish you success."

He held out his hand to us, and we bade him good-bye and left.

A large section of the dissatisfied soldiers were in a barracks on the outskirts of the city. On one side of them were public parks, and on the other dwelling-houses. These barracks had been newly fitted up, and contained a number of stores of different sorts, and the soldiers were better treated than they had ever been before. We had often discussed the wisdom of Dero in putting all the disaffected, and liable to be disaffected, portion of the army together in the one barracks, especially as they much outnumbered that of the Undara contingent, who were only safe in being in accord with the popular voice. Rumours of a rebellion on the part of the deposed monarchical party had been freely circulated, but the hopelessness of any outbreak made them generally discredited.

One afternoon the Gurla soldiers, with music, and flags flying, appeared in the streets armed, and in marching order. The rebellion had commenced. An attempt would be made to establish
the monarchy by force. General Ance, who had lately appeared anxious and worried, appeared at my chambers more excited than I had ever seen him.

His blue eyes, generally so calm, appeared to glisten, his face worked with passion and excitement.

Without a word he commenced, "Those fools have broken out. Dero has conciliated them at my request, till I believe they think he is frightened of them."

He laughed savagely.

"Frightened of them!"

Again he laughed, but scorn, not mirth, was only apparent.

"That man is as hard as adamant, and fierce as hell. I believe he will annihilate those damned fools, as he did the army."

Ance stopped, overcome with rage and grief.

"Speak to them as you now speak, and if they go back to their duty General Dero will, I feel certain, pardon them, even now."

Ance considered for a moment.

"Come with me to Dero, and I will then go to Prince Arthur and the restless fools who are with him, and point out their folly as forcibly as possible."

On calling on General Dero we learnt that he was in council with several officers, and, after waiting for some time, we were shown into his room.

"This is a serious state of things, Ance," he said, severely.

"If these men are not careful I shall have to make an example of them."

"If they unconditionally surrender, will you overlook their folly?" pleaded Ance.

"I can make no terms with them. If they do not send in their submission at once I shall act."

His face was quietly severe. I thought of his words before the battle of Dravena, and shuddered.

"I have sent for them, and they replied that if I would undertake that they should go free after the interview they would come."

"And you replied?" asked Ance.

"I told them to come and receive my orders, after which they could go. I expect them here shortly," said Dero, curtly.

"May I receive them first?" asked Ance.

"Yes!"

"Will you come with me, Doctor Fairleigh?"

"Certainly, if you wish it," and so we went to waylay the foolish rebels, and try and bring them to reason.

When they came he found they were represented by Prince Arthur and two young soldier aristocrats.

Ance motioned them to be seated.

"Gentlemen," he said, deeply agitated, "your present conduct,
if persisted in, will bring death on yourselves. This you may not fear, but it will do more, it will bring destruction on your followers. Surely this prospect will make you hesitate."

The prince pulled up his collar and adjusted his cuffs, "We must assert ourselves. We—ah, we—ah."

A powerful dark man spoke up for the prince, who had become overcome with his oratorical effort. "General Ance, you should be of our party. Why are you not? We ask only for our rights, and that the privileges our fathers fought for should be accorded us. We have lived happily without these invaders, and we will force them to leave us to ourselves, or die in the attempt. There must always be ruled and rulers, and who are so fit to lead a people as their natural leaders?"

The prince pulled down his cuffs, and moved his neck into better adjustment with his collar. Once princes were rulers, but these princes were incapable of anything but badly delivering speeches written for them, and acting as cat's-paws.

"You have the privilege to work and earn as your father did, and the influence of their name," said Ance, sternly. "You are entitled to no more. The people have overwhelmingly declared for a change, you can lead them still, if you have the ability. You could not influence their vote. You have not the power to oppose them, though you may be crushed beneath their advance, if you try to force them to suffer under the laws that were passed to regulate a community, half of whom were ignorant as the animals, and half badly educated. Now all are enlightened and must have equal rights."

"Sir! You preach treason to the throne and to your order," said the first speaker, excitedly.

"You have been misinformed, sir," said the prince, with nervous trepidation.

A knock came at the door. "General Dero was ready to receive Prince Arthur."

"Remember," said Ance, "you do not represent the people, but only yourselves. That you are in a hopeless minority, have reason against you, and can only bring destruction on yourself and your followers."

Without another word we went into Dero, whom we found surrounded by his officers.

"Sit down, General Ance. Be seated, Doctor Fairleigh."

The prince and the others were left standing. General Dero turned to them and said, "I have sent for you to tell you that you have forgotten your duty, and to instruct you to surrender for trial forthwith."

"And if we refuse to obey you?" asked the dark man who spoke before.

"I shall act as I think necessary," replied Dero, with a sternness that made me tremble.
“Do you forget, General Dero, that we have command of two soldiers to your one, and that you are in our power?”

“I forget nothing. Do you represent all the soldiers in your barracks?”

“The prince does.”

Dero turned to an officer near him, “When is the moon brightest?”

“At twenty-two to-night.”

He looked at the prince, “If you and all the rebels do not surrender before that hour, I will act.” Deo pointed to the door, which an attendant opened, and through which the prince and his party trooped crestfallen.

When they had gone, Ance turned to Dero. “You must be nauseated with slaughter, General Dero. As you are strong, be merciful,” he said, his beautiful voice thrilling with emotion.

“I have a duty to perform,” replied Dero, kindly, but firmly. “No portion of the community must act to the detriment of any other. I must be just. I would prefer to be generous.”

As we left, Ance said, “Those fools will be punished unmercifully. How, I do not know. They are unable to capture the Undara camp, but still less is Dero able to capture, or even assail them. What he will do, I cannot even conjecture.”

A feeling of dread and uncertainty pervaded all classes. General Dero’s power in destroying the splendid army of Gurla and Roda had inspired the people with an endless belief in his power, but still . . .

The soldiers under the prince were more than twice as numerous as those under Dero, and being in their native town, would receive at least passive assistance from many of the townspeople, while their opponents would be hampered in every way.

General Dero’s stern treatment of the prince and his fellow-rebels had spread terror everywhere. Would aerial vessels appear at the appointed time? Was an auxiliary force on the way? What would happen? Meanwhile the prince was not idle. All the houses facing the barracks had been seized and fortified. Cannon were in position, and every preparation made. Slowly the time passed.

The new laws, by causing active preparations to be made for the banking of the river, and other large public works, had caused universal prosperity and content. Only the king and nobles were dissatisfied. They had lived so long on the toil of others, that they were unable to do anything adequate for themselves.

As the appointed hour approached, the barracks were surrounded by Undara soldiers. Hardly enough to stop a mob of unarmed men. What did it mean? Ance and I were watching in the outskirts of the park. Anxiously, from time to time, he scanned the skies. No aerial vessel appeared. It was the custom of the
clocks to peal before the hour, and strike one or more times, as necessary, up to ten, after which it struck the double numbers separately, as two, then an interval, and one, for twenty-one; or one, then an interval, and three, for thirteen. As the time of striking the hour approached, Ance grasped my arm. I could feel him tremble. The suspense was intense. The uncertainty. What would happen? The chimes commenced. Two struck solemnly, and then a long wait, during which, I heard my heart beat loud as a drum. I was sensible of Ance's fingers grasping my arm with a grip of steel. I thought the flesh would be crushed, but still, I only watched, it didn't seem to concern me. The sound of the first of the concluding two strokes of the clock, rang through the air, then the second, and with the sound the middle barrack rose high in the air, dividing as it went, and fell with a crash that shook the earth. A gust of wind from the explosion staggered us. A second and a third explosion, and the three barracks were heaps of ruins. Lumps of stone and masses of timber fell on all sides amidst a cloud of dust. The houses opposite the ruined barracks were shattered and broken in all directions, but as they were held by the rebel soldiers, no civilian suffered. The wind gently blew the dust away, and a heap of ruined walls and shattered timber alone marked the site of the great barracks lately held by the last handful of soldiers who fought for the obsolete government of an hereditary oligarchy.

Ance stood like a man paralyzed. I shook him by the arm.

"All right," he said. "He has annihilated the last of them. "I tried to persuade them to reason, but the young asses, brave in their ignorance, would have their own way."

"How did it happen?" I asked, bewildered.

"Dynamite. I saw it go in, and thought I saw it go out, and so did others, but we must have been mistaken. He is a wonderful man. I believe he would blow up the whole town without compunction, if he believed it to be his duty."

"He is a man who spares neither man nor multitude, yet he is as kind and gentle as a woman on ordinary occasions."

Afterwards, we found that Dero, when the barracks were being renovated, had built a mass of explosives in the middle of each building, filling up the dynamite boxes with the earth taken from the excavation and removing them when the buildings had been given up, thus leading the Gurlas to believe that it was all taken away, and causing them to be completely under his power if they rebelled. Hardly had we recovered from our consternation when we saw a double line of soldiers close round the ruins. With an effort, we gathered our wits together, and following the soldiers, approached as near the ruins as they would let us. They had told off a rescuing squad, who brought from the débris all the wounded they could find. All through the night they worked, bringing from the ruined pile the wounded, the dead, and the
dying. Early in the evening, a soldier, pulling from a heap of bricks a rifle by the muzzle, caused it somehow to go off, and fell dead with a bullet through his chest. Under ordinary circumstances, the incident would have created horror, but one, more or less, to the great heap of killed mattered very little. As the morning broke, cold and grey, the stream of litter bearers still straggled to and from the hospital. The great ruin continued to give up the dying or dead, the workers were changed, but the work went on. Midday came, but still the excavators worked on, though the crowd had dispersed and the workers went on their way. "The soldiers courted their doom," they said, "let them bear it the best they can."

When the evening came the scene was quiet. Groups of people gathered to gaze at the ruins and the shattered houses, Moran amongst them. "They have disregarded the voice of the people," he said, "and have suffered justly. Undara is strong to strike as to shelter. All must work that none may starve. Progress has now no opponents. Men shall neither be born to rule nor to slave. There is lots for all if it is fairly shared, as in future it will be."

Some, discontented, grumbled against the nation that brought death to their fellows, but they were soon silenced. The crowd were content. Those who would not go with it must leave it. The women wept in the hospital, or sorrowing, sat by their dead. Mothers, sisters, wives. What did the cause matter to them? Their men were killed; that alone mattered. Women can never look beyond their home, and can only help progress by elevating the ideas of the men who love them, in all else they are hinderers of progress.

Dero's strategy was the subject of universal wonder. Some held that he had enticed the rebels to their death, and was to blame; others, that he had treated them well, and, as he only upheld the wish of the people, was justified in his punishment of those who opposed it by force.

Shortly after, I learnt that when the hour of surrender approached, General Dero sat with his officers waiting the appointed time. On the table, in front of him, stood a mechanism with three wooden buttons and four wires attached. Three of the wires led to the mines, the fourth to a battery; as the buttons were pressed the mines exploded. Only Dero himself knew of the mines. His officers, approving his system of secrecy, waited till he would reveal his plans. When the two hands covered each other on the face of the clock, he discovered his plans, which were unanimously approved. As the hour sounded he touched the buttons at intervals of a few seconds, and the enemies of Undara were destroyed.

"It is better," he said to me, "to strike seldom and strike hard, than to keep a nation in a state of constant ferment, by using
weak remedies for great evils. Henceforth there will be no
trouble with Gurla. Twice have they rebelled, and twice have
they suffered. A short war leaves no evil in its train. Long
wars are followed by famine, pestilence, and all disorders."

The melancholy procession of funerals now commenced to take
place. Those who applied for their dead received them to inter
as they wished, while the unclaimed were buried far out in the
country in shallow graves, earth to earth, so that in a few years
no remnant of them remained. Amongst those who were in the
fortified houses at the other side of the street, and were made
prisoners, was Prince Arthur, who, with his fellow-captives,
was tried before a court martial consisting of four officers,
presided over by General Cula.

The Court sat in the large room at the head barracks, and first
tried the officers in a batch. As they came in, their sunken eyes
and pallid cheeks showed the acuteness of their suffering. The
prince, who was not quite spoiled by the deteriorating surround­
ings of his position, now that he was not overcome by the due adjust­
ment of his linen, appeared a fine manly young fellow, of whom
any woman might be proud as a son or a husband. He and the
other officers were defended by General Ance and a celebrated
lawyer named James Williams.

Williams was a man of great ability, with peculiar head and
face; the former very large, with the forehead quite overhanging
the latter, which was burlesqued with an ugly nose of so irregular
an outline as to appear broken, and adorned by vivacious, but
small, black eyes, and a ripe-lipped mouth.

When the charge had been read out to the prisoners, and they
were asked to plead, Williams rose, and addressing the Court,
said, "May it please you, gentlemen, I object to the jurisdiction
of the Court, the Constitution of Undara is not yet in force in
Gurla, and the prisoners, if guilty of any crime—which I deny—
are only answerable to a tribunal of their own country."

Here Cula stopped him. "At the request of the king's repre­
sentatives, and also of a representative of the people, who asked
that the laws of Undara should be enforced under the monarchy
and without change, respectively; a vote of the people was taken,
which declared overwhelmingly in favour of the latter. Such
being the case, the laws of Undara are now supreme in Gurla.
Under these laws I am appointed Military Dictator, and have
therefore full power in this and every other case. The prisoners
must each plead for themselves."

Williams bowed and sat down.

The prince first rose. "I was ready to fight for my rights, and
my country, and am so still. We—my officers and I—are the
natural and proper leaders of the people. For my slaughtered
soldiers I am sorry—I wish I had died with them—for myself, I
will be leader, as is my right, or die."
Few as his words were, they powerfully excited the sympathy of his audience, and subsequently that of everyone. All the world over, pluck and good feeling, in victory or defeat, beget regard and admiration. The prince's fellow-prisoners pleaded in a few words a confirmation of his. The prosecuting officer simply stated the acts of rebellion, the messages that had passed between the general and the prisoners, and their subsequent apprehension, after which Ance rose.

His face was pale and grief-stricken, and his whole attitude sorrow-stricken: "May it please you, gentlemen, in this case there is at once more to be said in urging the prosecution, and in mitigation of punishment, than in any case that has ever been tried, or is likely to be tried in Fregida. In urging the prosecution, it will be remembered that the prisoners took up arms in defiance of an authority elected indirectly at the desire of a majority of their country—this is a great crime—but every excuse for it can be brought forward on behalf of the prisoners. Firstly, they have been the rulers of the country, and so still—erroneously I admit—regard themselves. They believe that the vote given was recorded in a time of excitement, consequent on a great national calamity, and not, nor will it ever be, the real heartfelt opinion of the country. Under these circumstances they made a demonstration, hoping to frighten the Undara force to retreat. They made no attack, nor did they contemplate one. What they would have done had they been attacked does not concern us, as we are not here to try what might have been, but only what has taken place. The prisoners are foolish and inexperienced. They have ruined their own future. They are crushed with hopeless grief. The clemency of the Court will be extended to them, I feel certain, to the fullest extent. Death were a relief to them; life can give no worse sorrow."

Ance sat down, overcome with his own feelings. Williams, in answer to Dero, closed the defence.

Dero spoke: "The prisoners armed themselves and those under their control, against constituted authority. This, under the late army regulations of Gurla, is death. Their conduct has caused the death of almost all those associated with, or under, their command. There is no excuse for their not more carefully considering the lives of those under them. They are now under the merciful policy of Undara, hence their sentences, instead of death, will be five years' work in the State prisons."

The sentence was recorded, and a man who on account of his birth, and in spite of any personal unfitness he might show, would be elevated to the highest position in the State, was to be punished for a crime like any ordinary person. Such is the change that can be constitutionally and wisely effected in a few weeks.

The soldiers who were next tried pleaded that they only
obeyed their officers, as in duty bound, and were each sentenced to a year's work.

A numerous body of prisoners came from Pentona, officered by their fellow-prisoners, and fully armed. That such a body of men should be allowed fully to control themselves was almost a miracle to the people of Gurla, who forgot that wickedness is only folly or misapplied energy, and that there are numbers of irresolute men who are always almost useful and happy when under control. The military prisoners were, irrespective of their late rank, formed into unarmed, but unmanacled parties, and marched, on parole, under armed escorts of Pentona prisoners. With the first party I travelled to Pentona on my way home. We started with music, for it was always held at Undara that what was passed should be regarded as a guide for our future conduct but never as a subject of grief; as the best and bravest way to atone for a past folly was to manfully and cheerfully strive in the present to retrieve the past.

At the close of day we came on a camp formed by the waggonsthat had preceded us; a square of tents, which were enclosed by a fence of two simple wires, with tall metal posts at regular intervals. At a distance stood the electric baggage waggon. Lighting a huge fire in the middle of the tent ground, the prisoners had their supper and went to bed. On the top of each post an electric light showed surrounding objects plainly by its pale rays. Everything was quiet, and I chatted to the sentries long after the others had gone to bed. Nature, always at her quietest at night, seemed now doubly quiet. The lights, like demons' eyes, seemed to be watching the sleeping scene. Even the wind was at rest. I was tired of thinking of the many changes that, with a fabulous rapidity, had so lately taken place. Just as I had made up my mind to go to bed the lights all went out. I sprang to my feet. They were bright again as ever. Had I dreamed, or had they really ceased their power for a few seconds? The sentry, whose watch had taken him away from me, now approached.

"Did the lights go out?" I asked.
"Yes," he replied, laconically.
"What was the reason?"
"The electric current has been diverted by the wires being touched."
"What can have done it?"
"Perhaps an animal. A cat could do it. Perhaps a prisoner. If anything with life did it they are now dead."
A creepy feeling of horror came over me, the man was looking keenly around.
"Come," he said, and he continued his round.
As we reached a turning-point, he stopped and pointed. "Do you see?"
In the direction of his finger I saw what looked like two sticks leaning on the lower wire. Something was behind them. We approached. A prisoner was lying on his face, his two hands clasping the wire, which was about eighteen inches from the ground. He had, by pressing the wire, turned on the full force of the current, and in a second been killed by its force.

In three more days we had reached Pentona without other unusual incident.