

For the Term of His Natural Life, by Marcus Clarke

CHAPTER XV.

ONE HUNDRED LASHES.

The morning sun, bright and fierce, looked down upon a curious sight. In a stone-yard was a little group of persons — Troke, Burgess, Macklewain, Kirkland, and Rufus Dawes.

Three wooden staves, seven feet high, were fastened together in the form of a triangle. The structure looked not unlike that made by gipsies to boil their kettles. To this structure Kirkland was bound. His feet were fastened with thongs to the base of the triangle; his wrists, bound above his head, at the apex. His body was then extended to its fullest length, and his white back shone in the sunlight. During his tying up he had said nothing — only when Troke pulled off his shirt he shivered.

“Now, prisoner,” said Troke to Dawes, “do your duty.”

Rufus Dawes looked from the three stern faces to Kirkland’s white back, and his face grew purple. In all his experience he had never been asked to flog before. He had been flogged often enough.

“You don’t want me to flog him, sir?” he said to the Commandant.

“Pick up the cat, sir!” said Burgess, astonished; “what is the meaning of this?” Rufus Dawes picked up the heavy cat, and drew its knotted lashes between his fingers.

“Go on, Dawes,” whispered Kirkland, without turning his head. “You are no more than another man.”

“What does he say?” asked Burgess.

“Telling him to cut light, sir,” said Troke, eagerly lying; “they all do it.” “Cut light, eh! We’ll see about that. Get on, my man, and look sharp, or I’ll tie you up and give you fifty for yourself, as sure as God made little apples.”

“Go on, Dawes,” whispered Kirkland again. “I don’t mind.”

Rufus Dawes lifted the cat, swung it round his head, and brought its knotted cords down upon the white back.

“Wonn!” cried Troke.

The white back was instantly striped with six crimson bars. Kirkland stifled a cry. It seemed to him that he had been cut in half.

“Now then, you scoundrel!” roared Burgess; “separate your cats! What do you mean by flogging a man that fashion?”

Rufus Dawes drew his crooked fingers through the entangled cords, and struck again. This time the blow was more effective, and the blood beaded on the skin.

The boy did not cry; but Macklewain saw his hands clutch the staves tightly, and the muscles of his naked arms quiver.

“Tew!”

“That’s better,” said Burgess.

The third blow sounded as though it had been struck upon a piece of raw beef, and the crimson turned purple.

“My God!” said Kirkland, faintly, and bit his lips.

The flogging proceeded in silence for ten strikes, and then Kirkland gave a screech like a wounded horse.

“Oh! . . . Captain Burgess! . . . Dawes! . . . Mr. Troke! . . . Oh, my God! . . . Oh! oh! . . . Mercy! . . . Oh, Doctor! . . . Mr. North! . . . Oh! Oh! Oh!”

“Ten!” cried Troke, impassively counting to the end of the first twenty.

The lad’s back, swollen into a lump, now presented the appearance of a ripe peach which a wilful child had scored with a pin. Dawes, turning away from his bloody handiwork, drew the cats through his fingers twice. They were beginning to get clogged a little.

“Go on,” said Burgess, with a nod; and Troke cried “Wonn!” again.

Roused by the morning sun streaming in upon him, Mr. North opened his bloodshot eyes, rubbed his forehead with hands that trembled, and suddenly awakening to a consciousness of his promised errand, rolled off the bed and rose to his feet. He saw the empty brandy bottle on his wooden dressing-table, and remembered what had passed. With shaking hands he dashed water over his aching head, and smoothed his garments. The debauch of the previous night had left the usual effects behind it. His brain seemed on fire, his hands were hot and dry, his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. He shuddered as he viewed his pale face and red eyes in the little looking-glass, and hastily tried the door. He had retained sufficient sense in his madness to lock it, and his condition had been unobserved. Stealing into the sitting-room, he saw

that the clock pointed to half-past six. The flogging was to have taken place at half-past five. Unless accident had favoured him he was already too late. Fevered with remorse and anxiety, he hurried past the room where Meekin yet slumbered, and made his way to the prison. As he entered the yard, Troke called "Ten!" Kirkland had just got his fiftieth lash.

"Stop!" cried North. "Captain Burgess, I call upon you to stop."

"You're rather late, Mr. North," retorted Burgess. "The punishment is nearly over."

"Wonn!" cried Troke again; and North stood by, biting his nails and grinding his teeth, during six more lashes.

Kirkland ceased to yell now, and merely moaned. His back was like a bloody sponge, while in the interval between lashes the swollen flesh twitched like that of a new-killed bullock. Suddenly, Macklewain saw his head droop on his shoulder. "Throw him off! Throw him off!" he cried, and Troke hurried to loosen the thongs.

"Fling some water over him!" said Burgess; "he's shamming."

A bucket of water made Kirkland open his eyes. "I thought so," said Burgess. "Tie him up again."

"No. Not if you are Christians!" cried North.

He met with an ally where he least expected one. Rufus Dawes flung down the dripping cat. "I'll flog no more," said he.

"What?" roared Burgess, furious at this gross insolence.

"I'll flog no more. Get someone else to do your blood work for you. I won't."

"Tie him up!" cried Burgess, foaming. "Tie him up. Here, constable, fetch a man here with a fresh cat. I'll give you that beggar's fifty, and fifty more on the top of 'em; and he shall look on while his back cools."

Rufus Dawes, with a glance at North, pulled off his shirt without a word, and stretched himself at the triangles. His back was not white and smooth, like Kirkland's had been, but hard and seamed. He had been flogged before. Troke appeared with Gabbett — grinning. Gabbett liked flogging. It was his boast that he could flog a man to death on a place no bigger than the palm of his hand. He could use his left hand equally with his right, and if he got hold of a "favourite", would "cross the cuts".

Rufus Dawes planted his feet firmly on the ground, took fierce grasp on the staves, and drew in his breath. Macklewain spread the garments of the two men upon the ground, and, placing Kirkland upon them, turned to watch this new phase in the

morning's amusement. He grumbled a little below his breath, for he wanted his breakfast, and when the Commandant once began to flog there was no telling where he would stop. Rufus Dawes took five-and-twenty lashes without a murmur, and then Gabbett "crossed the cuts". This went on up to fifty lashes, and North felt himself stricken with admiration at the courage of the man. "If it had not been for that cursed brandy," thought he, with bitterness of self-reproach, "I might have saved all this." At the hundredth lash, the giant paused, expecting the order to throw off, but Burgess was determined to "break the man's spirit".

"I'll make you speak, you dog, if I cut your heart out!" he cried. "Go on, prisoner."

For twenty lashes more Dawes was mute, and then the agony forced from his labouring breast a hideous cry. But it was not a cry for mercy, as that of Kirkland's had been. Having found his tongue, the wretched man gave vent to his boiling passion in a torrent of curses. He shrieked imprecation upon Burgess, Troke, and North. He cursed all soldiers for tyrants, all parsons for hypocrites. He blasphemed his God and his Saviour. With a frightful outpouring of obscenity and blasphemy, he called on the earth to gape and swallow his persecutors, for Heaven to open and rain fire upon them, for hell to yawn and engulf them quick. It was as though each blow of the cat forced out of him a fresh burst of beast-like rage. He seemed to have abandoned his humanity. He foamed, he raved, he tugged at his bonds until the strong staves shook again; he writhed himself round upon the triangles and spat impotently at Burgess, who jeered at his torments. North, with his hands to his ears, crouched against the corner of the wall, palsied with horror. It seemed to him that the passions of hell raged around him. He would fain have fled, but a horrible fascination held him back.

In the midst of this — when the cat was hissing its loudest — Burgess laughing his hardest, and the wretch on the triangles filling the air with his cries, North saw Kirkland look at him with what he thought a smile. Was it a smile? He leapt forward, and uttered a cry of dismay so loud that all turned.

"Hullo!" says Troke, running to the heap of clothes, "the young 'un's slipped his wind!"

Kirkland was dead.

"Throw him off!" says Burgess, aghast at the unfortunate accident; and Gabbett reluctantly untied the thongs that bound Rufus Dawes. Two constables were

alongside him in an instant, for sometimes newly tortured men grew desperate. This one, however, was silent with the last lash; only in taking his shirt from under the body of the boy, he muttered, "Dead!" and in his tone there seemed to be a touch of envy. Then, flinging his shirt over his bleeding shoulders, he walked out — defiant to the last.

"Game, ain't he?" said one constable to the other, as they pushed him, not ungently, into an empty cell, there to wait for the hospital guard. The body of Kirkland was taken away in silence, and Burgess turned rather pale when he saw North's threatening face.

"It isn't my fault, Mr. North," he said. "I didn't know that the lad was chicken-hearted." But North turned away in disgust, and Macklewain and Burgess pursued their homeward route together.

"Strange that he should drop like that," said the Commandant.

"Yes, unless he had any internal disease," said the surgeon.

"Disease of the heart, for instance," said Burgess.

"I'll post-mortem him and see."

"Come in and have a nip, Macklewain. I feel quite qualmish," said Burgess. And the two went into the house amid respectful salutes from either side. Mr. North, in agony of mind at what he considered the consequence of his neglect, slowly, and with head bowed down, as one bent on a painful errand, went to see the prisoner who had survived. He found him kneeling on the ground, prostrated. "Rufus Dawes."

At the low tone Rufus Dawes looked up, and, seeing who it was, waved him off.

"Don't speak to me," he said, with an imprecation that made North's flesh creep. "I've told you what I think of you — a hypocrite, who stands by while a man is cut to pieces, and then comes and whines religion to him."

North stood in the centre of the cell, with his arms hanging down, and his head bent.

"You are right," he said, in a low tone. "I must seem to you a hypocrite. I a servant of Christ? A besotted beast rather! I am not come to whine religion to you. I am come to — to ask your pardon. I might have saved you from punishment — saved that poor boy from death. I wanted to save him, God knows! But I have a vice; I am a drunkard. I yielded to my temptation, and — I was too late. I come to you as one sinful man to another, to ask you to forgive me." And North suddenly flung himself down beside the

convict, and, catching his blood-bespotted hands in his own, cried, “Forgive me, brother!”

Rufus Dawes, too much astonished to speak, bent his black eyes upon the man who crouched at his feet, and a ray of divine pity penetrated his gloomy soul. He seemed to catch a glimpse of misery more profound than his own, and his stubborn heart felt human sympathy with this erring brother. “Then in this hell there is yet a man,” said he; and a hand-grasp passed between these two unhappy beings. North arose, and, with averted face, passed quickly from the cell. Rufus Dawes looked at his hand which his strange visitor had taken, and something glittered there. It was a tear. He broke down at the sight of it, and when the guard came to fetch the tameless convict, they found him on his knees in a corner, sobbing like a child.

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