THIS STORY BEGAN IN NO. 28.

THE MYSTERY —OF— A HANSOM CAE

BY FERGUS W. HUME.

CHAPTER XVIII—*Continued.*

When they entered the squalid, dingy passage that led to Mother Guttersnipe's abode, they saw a faint light streaming down the stair. As they climbed up the shaky stair, they could hear the rancorous voice of the old hag pouring forth alternate blessings and curses on her prodigal offspring, and the low tones of a girl's voice in reply. On entering the room Calton saw that the sick woman who had been lying in the corner on the occasion of his last visit was gone. Mother Guttersnipe was seated in front of the deal table, with a broken cup and her favorite bottle of spirits before her. She was evidently going to have a night of it, in order to celebrate Sal's return, and had commenced early, so as to lose no time. Sal herself was seated on a broken chair, and leaned wearily against the wall. She stood up as Calton and the detective entered, and they saw she was a tall slender woman of about twenty-five, not bad-looking, but with a pallid and haggard face, which showed how ill she had been. She was dressed in a kind of tawdry blue dress, much soiled and torn, and had an old tartan shawl over her shoulders, which she drew tightly across her breast as the strangers entered. Her grandmother, who looked more weird and grotesquely horrible than ever, saluted Calton and the detective on their entrance with a shrill yell, and a volley of choice language.

"Oh, ye've come again, blarst ye" she screeched, raising her skinny arms, "to take my gal away from 'er pore old gran'mother, as nussed 'er, cuss her, when 'er own mother had gone a-gallivantin' with swells. I'll 'ave the lawr of ye both, s'elp G—, I will."

Kilsip paid no attention to this outbreak of the old fury, but turned to the girl.

"This is the gentleman who wants to speak to you," he said, gently, making the girl sit on the chair again, for indeed she looked too ill to stand. "Just tell him what you told me."

"'Bout the 'Queen,' sir?" said Sal, in a low, hoarse voice, fixing her wild eyes on Calton. "If I'd only known as you was a-wantin' me I'd 'ave come afore."

"Where were you?" asked Calton, in a pitying tone.

"Noo South Wales," answered the girl, with a shiver. "The cove as I went with t' Sidney left me—yes, left me to die like a dog in the gutter."

"Blarst 'im!" croaked the old woman in a sympathetic manner, as she took a drink from the broken cup.

"I tooked up with a Chinerman," went on her grand daughter wearily, "an' lived with 'im for a bit—it's orful, ain't it?" she said, with a dreary laugh, as she saw the disgust on the lawyer's face. "But Chinerman ain't bad; they treat a pore girl a dashed sight better nor a white cove does. They don't beat the life out of 'em with their fists, nor drag 'em about the floor by the 'air."

"Cuss 'em!" croaked Mother Guttersnipe, drowsily, "I'll tear their 'earts out."

"I think I must have gone mad, I must," said Sal, pushing her tangled hair off her forehead, "for after I left the Chiner cove, I went on walkin' and walkin' right into the bush, a-tryin' to cool my 'ead, for it felt on fire like. I went into a river an' got wet, an' then I took my 'at and boots orf an' lay down on the grass, an' then the rain comed on, an' I walked to a 'ouse as was near, where they tooked me in. Oh, sich kind people," she sobbed, stretching out her hands, "that didn't badger me 'bout my soul, but gave me good food to eat. I gave 'em a wrong name. I was so 'fraid of that Army a-findin' me. Then I got ill, an' knowed nothin' for weeks. They said I was off my chump. An' then I came back 'ere to see gran'."

"Cuss ye," said the old woman, but in such a tender tone that it sounded like a blessing; then, rather ashamed of the momentary emotion, she hastily wound up, "Go to 'ell."

"And did the people who took you in never tell you anythin' about the murder?" asked Calton.

Sal shook her head.

"No, it were a long way in the country, and never know'd anythin', they didn't."

"Ah! that explains it," muttered Calton to himself. "Come now," he said cheerfully, "tell me all that happened on the night you brought Mr. Fitzgerald to see the 'Queen.'"

"Woo's 'e?" asked Sal, puzzled.

"Mr. Fitzgerald, the gentleman you brought the letter for to the Melbourne Club."

"Oh, 'im!" said Sal, a sudden light breaking over her wan face. "I never know'd his name afore."

Calton nodded, complacently.

"I knew you didn't," he said, "that's why you didn't ask for him at the Club."

"She never told me 'is name," said Sal, jerking her head in the direction of the bed.

"Then who did she ask you to bring to her?" asked Calton, eagerly.

"No one," replied the girl. "This was the way of it. On that night she was orful ill an' I sat beside 'er while gran' was asleep."

"I was drunk, blarst ye," broke in gran', fiercely, "none of yer d———d lies: I was blazin' drunk, glory hallelujah."

"An' ses she to me, she ses," went on the girl, indifferent to her grandmother's interruption, "Get me some paper an' a pencil, an' I'll write a note to 'im, I will. So I goes an' gits 'er what she arsks fur out of gran's box."

"Stole it, blarst ye," shrieked the old hag, shaking her fist.

"Hold your tongue," said Kilsip, in a peremptory tone.

Mother Guttersnipe burst into a volley of oaths, and having run rapidly through all she knew, subsided into a sulky silence.

"She wrote on it," went on Sal, "and then arsked me to take it to the Melbourne Club 'an' give it to 'im. Ses I: 'Who's 'im?' Ses she: 'It's on the letter; don't you ask no 'questions an' you won't 'ear no lies, but give it to 'im at the Club, an' wait for 'im at the corner of Bourke Street and Russell Street.' So out I goes, and gives it to a cove at the Club, an' then 'e comes along and ses 'e 'Take me to 'er,' and I tooked 'im.

"And what like was the gentleman?"

"Oh, werry good lookin'," said Sal. "Werry tall, with yeller 'air an' mustache. He 'ad party clothes on, an' a masher coat, an' a soft 'at."

"That's Fitzgerald right enough," muttered Calton. "And what did he do when he came?"

"He goes right up to 'er, and she ses, 'Are you 'e?' and 'e ses, 'I am.' Then ses she, 'Do you know what I'm a-goin' to tell you?' an' 'e says, 'No.' Then she ses, 'Its about 'er;' an' ses 'e, looking very white, 'Ow dare you 'ave 'er name on your vile lips?' an' she gits up an' screeches, 'Turn that gal out, an' I'll tell you;' an' 'e takes me by the arm, an' ses, 'e, 'Eere, git out, an' I gits out, an' that's all I knows."

"And how long was he with her?" asked Calton, who had been listening attentively.

"'Bout arf-a-hour," answered Sal. "I takes 'im back to Russell Street about twenty-five minutes to two, 'cause I looked at the clock on the post-office, an' 'e gives me a sov., an' then he goes a-tearin' up the street like anything."

"Take him about twenty minutes to walk to East Melbourne," said Calton to himself. "So he must have got in at the time Mrs. Sampson said. He was in with the 'Queen' the whole time, I suppose?" he asked, looking keenly at Sal.

"I was at the door," said Sal, pointing to it, "an' 'e couldn't 'ave got out unless I'd seen 'im."

"Oh, it's all right," said Calton, nodding to Kilsip, "there won't be any difficulty in proving an alibi. But I say," he added, turning to Sal, "what were they talking about?"

"I dunno," answered Sal. "I was at the door, an' they talks that quiet I couldn't 'ear 'em. Then he sings out, 'My G—, it's too horrible!' an' I 'ear a larfin' like to bust, an' then 'e comes to me, and ses, quite wild like, 'Take me out of this 'ell!' an' I tooked 'im.

"And when you came back?"

"She was dead."

"Dead?"

"As a blessed door-nail," said Sal, cheerfully.

"An' I never know'd I was in the room with a blarsted corpse," wailed Mother Guttersnipe, waking up. "Cuss 'er, she was allays a-doin' contrary things."

"How do you know?" said Calton, sharply, as he rose to go.

"I know'd 'er longer nor you, cuss ye," croaked the old woman, fixing one evil eye on the lawyer; "an' I know what you'd like to know; but ye shan't, ye shan't."

Calton turned from her with a shrug of his shoulders.

"You will come to the court to-morrow with Mr. Kilsip," he said to Sal, "and tell what you have just now told me."

"It's all true, s'elp me," said Sal, eagerly; 'e was 'ere all the time."

Calton stepped towards the door, followed by the detective, when Mother Guttersnipe arose.

"Where's the money for finin' 'er?" she screeched, pointing one skinny finger at Sal.

"Well, considering the girl found herself," said Calton, dryly, "the money is in the bank, and will remain there."

"An' I'm to be done out of my 'ard earned tin, s'elp me?" howled the old fury. "Cuss ye, I'll 'ave the lawr of ye, and get you put in quod."

"You'll go there yourself if you don't take care," said Kilsip, in his soft, purring tones.

"Yah!" shrieked Mother Guttersnipe, snapping her fingers at him. "What do I care about yer d———d quod? Ain't I bin in Pentrig', an' it ain't 'urt me, it ain't? I'm as lively as a gal, blarst ye, and cuss ye."

And the old fury, to prove the truth of her words, danced a kind of war dance in front of Mr. Calton, snapping her fingers and yelling out curses, as an accompaniment of her ballet. Her luxurious white hair got loose, and streamed out during her gyrations, and what with her grotesque looks and the faint light of the candle, she looded a gruesome spectacle. Calton, remembering the tales he had heard of the women of Paris, at the revolution, and the way they danced "La Carmagnole," thought that Mother Guttersnipe would have been in her element in that sea of blood and turbulence. He, however, merely shrugged his shoulders, and walked out of the room, as with a final curse, delivered in a hoarse voice, Mother Guttersnipe sank exhausted on the floor, and yelled for gin.

CHAPTER XIX.

It was needless to say that the court next morning was crowded, and numbers were unable to gain admission. The news that Sal Rawlins, who alone could prove the innocence of the prisoner, had been found and would appear in court that morning had spread like wildfire, and the acquittal of the prisoner was confidently expected by a large number of sympathizing friends, who seemed to have sprung up on all sides, like mushrooms, in a single night. There were, of course, plenty of cautious people left who waited to hear the verdict of the jury before giving their opinion, and who still believed him guilty. But the unexpected appearance of Sal Rawlins had turned the great tide of public feeling in favor of the prisoner, and many who had been loudest in their denunciations of Fitzgerald were now more than half convinced of his innocence. Pious clergymen talked in an incoherent way about the finger of God and the innocent not suffering unjustly, which was a case of counting unhatched chickens, as the verdict had yet to be given.

Felix Rolleston awoke, and found himself famous in a small way. Out of good-natured sympathy, and a spice of contrariness, he had declared his belief in Brian's innocence and now, to his astonishment, found that his view of the matter was likely to be a correct one. He had received so much praise from all sides for his presumed cleverness, that he soon began to think that he had believed in Fitzgerald's innocence by a calm course of reasoning, and not because of a desire to differ from everyone else in their opinion of the case. After all, Felix Rolleston is not the only man who has been astonished to find greatness thurst upon him, and come to believe himself worthy of it. He was a wise man, however, and while in the full tide of prosperity seized the flying moment and proposed to Miss Featherweight, who, after some hesitation, agreed to endow him with herself and her thousands. She decided that her future husband was a man of no common intellect, seeing that he had long ago arrived at a conclusion which the rest of Melbourne were only beginning to discover now, so she determined that, as soon as she assumed marital authority, Felix, like Strenephon in "Iolanthe," should go into Parliament, and with her money and his brains she might some day be the wife of a premier. Mr. Rolleston had no idea of the political honors which his future spouse intended he should have, and was seated in his old place in the court, talking about the case.

"Knew he was innocent, don't you know," he said with a complacent smile. "Fitzgerald's too jolly good-looking a fellow, and all that sort of thing, to commit murder."

Whereupon a clergyman, happening to overhear the lively Felix make this flippant remark, disagreed with it entirely, and preached a sermon to prove that good looks and crime were closely connected, and that both Judas Iscariot and Nero were beauty men.

"Ah," said Calton, when he heard the sermon, "if this unique theory is a true one what a truly pious man that clergyman must be!" which allusion to the looks of the reverend gentleman was rather unkind, as he was by no means bad looking. But then Calton was one of those witty men who would rather lose a friend than suppress an epigram.

When the prisoner was brought in a murmer of sympathy ran through the crowded court, so ill and worn-out he looked; but Calton was puzzled to account for the expression of his face, so different from that of a man whose life had been saved, or, rather, was going to be saved, for in truth it was a foregone conclusion.

"You know who stole those papers," he thought, as he looked at Fitzgerald keenly, "and the man who did so is the murderer of Whyte."

The judge having entered, and the court being opened, Calton arose to make his speech, and stated in a few words the line of defence he intended to take.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)