

A COOL HAND.

[CONTINUED.]

"To where I—I found you? But that is Miles Cregan's," said I.

"You know as well as I do that it is the Earl of Hexham's," said she.

"Do you mean to tell me they've made Miles Cregan an earl? No, I can't believe that anyhow, though there's nothing else on earth you can tell me that I'll not believe—no, not even if you tell me I'm not dreaming."

"Will you stop the carriage or will you not," asked she.

I just looked at her face. There was no answering that, anyhow, but in one way.

"I will," said I; "and Heaven forgive me if I've given you one minute's distress; for Heaven only knows how it's been done." I stretched myself out of the window, and caught hold of the driver's near arm. "Stop, you thief," I hollered, "if you don't want to be pitched over!"

"All right, sir, I know!" and he made the horses gallop again.

I was throwing the door on my side open, in order to swing myself round to the box and seize the reins, when the girl laid her hand on my arm.

"Heaven help us all! The man won't stop for you—no, nor for me!"

"Won't he though! We'll see that, anyhow. I'll take the reins myself, and drive you back to the Earl of Cregan's faster than we came—on my honor I will. Can I do nothing to make you unaccount me? It's some awful mistake; but how it began—"

"And—where are we now?"

I looked out; we were racing past trees and hedgerows. There was just light enough to see so much by. But for the rest, we might be at the sources of the Nile for aught I knew to the contrary. And I told her so.

"I must get on the box, and make this deaf fool of a coachman drive us back himself; for I'm lost in the bush myself," said I.

"It would be mad. The house would be closed. I—I am a governess there. We are on the road to Walthamstow. Do me one favor, sir; leave the carriage yourself and let me drive on. Whatever the mistake is, whoever you have taken me for, a night's walk will not harm you much and I shall thank you to my dying day. But O!" she cried out, as all her calmness broke down into a storm of tears—"O Tom, my brother, what will you do—where are you! Too late—always, always!"

My head wasn't of much use just then for want of knowledge; but my heart was just breaking to help her, if I could in any way.

She was right enough in one thing; it wouldn't do for anybody's governess, lord's or no lord's, to be caught or found out eloping with a young man. The world would hardly be so green as to believe that they didn't even know one another's names. The world's too clever by half; and that's why it's so often taken in.

As for how Miles Cregan could have turned into an earl, that question didn't trouble my wits just then. If I could only help the governess, he might be a duke if he pleased, and I wouldn't bother my brains about the matter.

"I'll do just what you ask me," said I. "I'll even let you go to your journey's end all alone, if that's the only way I can help you. I believe that confounded Irish flunkey mistook me for somebody else after all. I suppose your brother's in some sort of trouble, and for your sake I'd like to help him. Mayn't I even know your name?"

"Grace Brand. I mean—"

I remember her words that night a long way better than I do my own; and I remember how quickly she told me her name without thinking, and how hurt I was by her trying to untell it again.

"It's safe with me," said I, keeping the widest space I could between myself and her. "If I ever breathe a word of it I'll give your brother Tom the satisfaction of a gentleman. Is there nothing I can do for you, but to say good-bye?"

"Nothing," she said, in the saddest voice I ever heard. "You have done a cruel thing, but I think—I'm sure you never meant it—and so—good-bye."

She held out her hand to me, and I just touched it, for all my heart was gone after my wits, and that was out of me, and was going to swing myself out into the road, when all of a sudden the horses came to a dead stand as if of their own accord.

But my foot was hardly on the ground when I found out why. We'd been pulled up by four constables—one was on the box by the driver, one was at the horses, one was turning a bull's-eye on us all, and the fourth had a hand on my shoulder. I looked for a minute at Grace; she sat as quiet as death, and as dumb.

Well, they could do nothing with me. But there was Grace—and whatever the matter was, there must never be a shadow of a guess, if it could be helped by a legion of lies, that a girl, whose character's her bread and her life, had been caught at midnight running away with a man. The stars be praised that she'd told me her name! The way I'd get her out of the scrape I'd got her into came to me like an inspiration.

"What is it?" said I, as coolly as if I'd

been cool, instead of being bewildered out of my seven senses.

"Can't a gentleman drive with his own sister to Walthamstow in the early morning without being stopped by a parcel of constables as if they were highwaymen?"

"Come, Mr. Brand, you know what we're after, and of course we're sorry as you can be. There's no need to talk before the young lady; and there's no need to detain her. If you hadn't tried to give us the slip by getting out of the carriage you might have gone on quietly to Walthamstow; and there'd have been all this bother saved. We've got a trap just behind, and the young lady"—he touched his hat to Grace—"may go on."

"If I did know what you're after," said I, "perhaps I'd agree with you."

"Which case? Why it's diamonds this time—Lady Horchester's—and I'm afraid, sir, we must ask you to let the young lady go on at once, and let us search you here. Diamonds are things that can be made away with any minute, you know."

"You may search and welcome," said I. "And if I've got the ghost of a diamond about me, my name's not Thomas Brand. There—I'll search myself, if you please."

I'd got two reputations to take care of—the brother's for the sister's sake, and the sister's for her own. In a minute I turned out all my pockets before they could interfere, just as I'd done at the jeweler's. Something or other fell out of one; and the policeman with the bull's-eye made a dart at it as soon as it touched the road.

"That won't do, sir!" said he, giving it to the sergeant. "And by the Lord Harry," he cries out, "if here isn't the very identical stone that Graves of Cheap-side was in Scotland Yard about on Saturday afternoon—gold setting, green leather case, and all! Fifty pounds reward! It's not my fault, sir," he said to me.

"Duty's duty, and—" he said, measuring my six feet of height and forty inches of chest with his eye—"you'll excuse me;" and I was pretty soon in another sort of carriage, with handcuffs on my wrists, and in my mind, for a last memory of Grace, an odd look I hadn't the heart to think could be meant for a smile. But it looked bitterly like one all the same—after my trying to help her.

Of course, I'd shifted the case into my new dress-coat when I went to the opera, and of course, when I put on my shooting-coat next morning, I never thought of its being anywhere but where it had been ever since I left Cape Town. It had just gone where the lost letters go.

But that didn't keep my situation from being an unpleasant one. The handcuffs weren't comfortable, and it was difficult to form any sort of a plan in the position where I found myself without knowing the bearing of everything. Only one thing was quite clear, as I hope every gentleman will admit, that I was bound to brazen things out, and, having done another man the honor of taking the responsibility of his behavior on my own shoulders, to do as I'd be done by; for if anybody, under press of circumstances, felt obliged to call himself Thomas Connor, I'd like him to do credit to the name.

And as for Grace, the fact that a woman doesn't treat a man well doesn't make him the less bound to take care of her good name at any cost to his own; it makes him all the more bound, it seems to me. And as that was the one clear thing I had before me, I held my tongue, for fear of letting the constables get an inkling that they'd got hold of the wrong man again.

I slept the rest of that night in a cell at a police station, for the first time since I'd been run in at Dublin for having been accidentally present at a row; and I slept very well, for I was dead tired. Early the next morning I was told that there was a solicitor who wanted to see me.

"Is his name Cregan?" asked I; for if it had been I wouldn't have seen him, for then the murder would have been out that it wasn't her brother with whom Grace had been caught running away. But it wasn't Miles; it was quite a young man, dressed to the nines, of the name of Fry. As I'd never heard of the man, I had no objection to see him.

He shook hands with me in the most cordial manner; but I was on my guard against pumping, and put a stand-off sort of way, waiting to get the pumping on my own side.

"My name's Albert Fry," said he. "I suppose you expected to see my father; but he's too old now to attend to business much, and I'm just as much in his lordship's confidence as he used to be. I saw his lordship this morning. In fact I've just come from him."

"I'm much obliged to you for coming. And what does his lordship say?" asked I. "Excuse me for saying so, Mr. Brand, but you are a cool hand!"

"Pretty well for that," said I; and I was, if a fever's cool. "The hotter things are, Mr. Fry, the more one's bound to keep cool."

"It's a bad business this time—a very bad business indeed. I don't know what's to be done. You were asking me what his lordship said. It's no good mincing matters."

"Not a bit of it," said I.

"And so I'm bound to tell you that his lordship has determined as he puts it, to wash his hands of you once and for all. And so he has instructed me to say—"

"Then tell his lordship if he wants to

wash his hands he had better go to Bath," said I; for such a message as that made me feel warm.

"Pardon me, Mr. Brand, but this is no joking matter. Such a family scandal as this would be fatal. He refuses to see you or to communicate with you; and, under the circumstances, that is natural; indeed it is unavoidable. But for the sake of the family, on my earnest representations, he has consented to make you a proposition. Or rather two propositions; for they are alternative."

"There is no harm in hearing what they are, anyhow," said I.

"The first is that you should obtain bail, to be repaid by his lordship for your flight," said he. "He is willing to pay as much as two thousand pounds for the family honor."

"And it's kind of him; and I'm glad to know the exact price of the family honor," said I, "in case I'm inclined to bid for it some day. And what's number two?"

"The second alternative is that you should plead guilty under an alias," said he, "so that the family name mayn't suffer; and when you've served your time, his lordship will allow you three hundred a year, paid quarterly, so long as you're never heard of again; for if you are he'll let you go to the devil, were his lordship's very words."

"Guilty to what?" asked I.

"Come, Mr. Brand, I am your legal adviser as well as my lord's; you must have no secrets from me. But perhaps you mean to which of the cases? I don't mean Lady Horchester's jewels. There would be no fear of a hostile prosecution in that quarter if that was the only matter. But it is this new business—there's where the trouble comes."

"But why not plead guilty to everything?"

"Think of the evidence, Mr. Brand."

"I'd rather you'd tell me the evidence yourself, if you please."

"The police have been on the traces of Lady Horchester's jewels for a year. They have reason, they're not bound to say how or why to suspect you. You leave the country suddenly; they trace you to Africa. Can you prove that you did not leave the country suddenly, and have not been in South Africa?"

"Faith, I can't do that," said I.

"But—"

"Very well. With the help of the authorities at the Cape, they find you at last farming ostriches up the country, in company with a person named Connor. You were on the point of being arrested, when, as if you had some suspicions of the intentions of the police, you suddenly went away; and were lost until you were traced to the diamond fields, still in partnership with Connor, whom the police at first suspected of being your accomplice, but whom they now believe to have been your tool—that is of course how they put it, not I. Once more you disappeared when on the point of arrest—"

"For God's sake, don't tell me you're talking of Paul Andrews!" I said, for he had been my friend, and I'd believed in him.

"You see," said he, quietly, "what would happen if you plead not guilty. I hadn't mentioned the name you went by, and you blurt it out in a way that would make the jury find you guilty without turning round. That was the name. And then they lost the track altogether for a time, when they heard of you in London, living as if the whole thing had blown over; but meanwhile they had got their whole case together, and were going to take you into custody on your way home last night from Lord Hexham's, when you almost gave them the slip again. It is a thousand pities, Mr. Brand, that you were taken in the act of trying to escape from the carriage when it was going at full speed, and that you tried to get rid of what you had in your pockets before you were searched officially. You will be tried for stealing, not Lady Horchester's jewels, but Mr. Connor's. Your knowledge of his possession of it beyond legal question, for you were in his company the very day when it was found. You and he were at the opera on the same evening. You have had financial dealings with his brother-in-law, Cregan—who, between ourselves, is the most outrageous old Shylock that ever made a hundred pounds by lending ten. The diamond was lost strangely and mysteriously. Information of the loss was at once given to the police by Mr. Graves, the jeweler; and four days afterwards it was found upon you. Believe me, Mr. Brand, you must have a very strong story indeed to account for the lawful possession of that stone—and then, how will Lord Horchester himself be able to keep back the rest of the scandal? Of what nature would your defense be?"

I was thinking of Grace, and Paul, and I was wondering.

"My defense? Pooh! I'll call Mr. Connor himself," said I. "He'll make it as clear as day to you. You'll find him at once, if you go to his lodging in Norfolk street, Strand. And he'll tell you—"

What was I saying? I stopped short, flushing up to my hair—the truth is, there was such a case against me that I'd clean forgotten for the minute whether I was myself or no.

"What will he tell me?" said the lawyer.

"I'm thinking that perhaps you won't

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