

On the Toss of a Penny

By Cecil de Thierry

HE leant back among the fern, tired out with his day's tramp. Beside him rested his swag, too small and light for prosperity, and behind him his battered wideawake hat, which had fallen off when he threw himself down. All about him lay the mellow radiance of the setting sun.

He should have been pushing on to the township, whose square outlines peeped out from the trees in the hollow; but the rest was a luxury too tempting to be resisted. For the moment the drowsy silence of late afternoon, so soothing after the heat and dust of the many miles he had walked since early morning, lulled to sleep his most crying necessities. The spring of the fern, too, was as grateful to his tired limbs as the finest upholstered couch; and its scent he would not have exchanged for the most costly perfume in the world.

But presently the gnawing sensation of hunger began to assert itself again, and he slowly drew himself into a sitting position. Hard experience told him that, to get a meal, he must reach some habitation before nightfall. Later on he would be regarded with suspicion, and warned off as a thier.

But still he lingered. Perhaps it was the characteristic weakness of the man, or it may have been he was loth to cut short his dreams

dreams in the open to face the realities of the settlement. Rebuffs were as familiar to him as the sunshine. The prosperous farmer in the country and the sleek tradesman in the town, alike, showed him contempt. *They* had got on in the world, and so, if they were only honest and industrious, could any one else, he as much as read in their looks and words. *He* had not got on in the world, therefore it was impossible that he should be either.

A few paces from where he sat the road forked. One branch ended in the settlement, the other continued in a straight line to the gum field, for which he was bound. Indeed it was his uncertainty as to whether he should go on, or seek food and shelter for the night, that had induced him to halt.

With a curious expression of countenance and the movement of a child about to produce a treasure, secretly regarded with superstitious affection or awe, he drew from his breast a penny, very much dented, and with a hole in it, through which had been run a blue ribbon, now faded and creased almost beyond recognition. It was the only coin he possessed, and had it not been refused by every storekeeper in the district, would have been parted with long before.

"Which o' them shall it be?" he said aloud; and then a trifle bitterly, "so far as comfort goes, either. But let the copper say: the open, heads; yonder, tails."

Then, with the ease of practice, he spun it round and tossed, catching it deftly in his palm.

"Heads," he murmured, sighing; "I might 'a known it."

Twice he repeated the process, and each time the result was the same.

But he made no attempt to go. For another hour he sat in the sunshine, toying idly with the penny and whistling snatches of a bush ballad. Then he lumbered to his feet as if crippled by age
or

or rheumatism, put on his battered hat and, shouldering his swag, set briskly forward.

But, as he had done all his life, he took the easiest road. The omens had been in favour of the other, but indecision will learn neither from misfortune nor experience. However clearly destiny or duty indicated the path for him to follow, his weakness led him in a direction entirely opposite.

He had hardly proceeded a dozen yards when he was startled by hearing the loud report of a pistol and a smothered cry, sounds on the quiet afternoon air distinct to painfulness. Afraid without knowing why, he stood still and listened. But, before he could ascertain from whence they proceeded, a man sprang into the road in front of him and disappeared in the scrub.

Hastening his steps the swagger reached a ti-tree gate, from which a narrow path, bordered by rose-bushes and tall white lilies, led to a cottage embosomed in greenery. There he paused, overcome by a curious sense of loneliness he had never felt, even in the heart of the wilderness. But, in spite of a strong desire to flee from the spot, a stronger drew him towards the wide-open door, on the threshold of which he could see the outline of a man's form.

It was evidently the owner of the house. He lay on his back, clutching in one hand a white rose, which he must have caught when he fell. From a deep wound in his temple blood was still slowly trickling, and from his fixed and staring eyes horror and dread looked forth. At his feet lay a pistol, as if the murderer had flung it down in a hurry at the sound of an approaching footstep, and on the ground a well-filled purse, fastened by an elastic band. Beyond these details the swagger's gaze, now feverishly bright, saw nothing.

In a dim sort of way he understood that he and the dead were alone.

alone. But it stirred him less than the sight of the purse; so that his ideas were clear, though confined to the necessities of the moment. The young farmer, whose thrift had filled it, the shot of a murderer had sent beyond the need of it. But to him, hungry and penniless, the possession of it meant life itself. Not to take advantage of such a godsend was to deserve starvation or the worst treatment he might expect in the township. Robbery? Surely there could be no robbery in taking what was less than nothing to the dead! Like a true son of the wilderness he argued from the standpoint of his extremity, not from the higher ground or sentiment.

With a furtive glance on either side of him, he stooped down and stretched out his hand. But, before he could grasp the prize, the door of the house creaked on its hinges and closed with a bang. As if the trumpet of judgment had sounded in his ears, the man sprang to his feet, and, in a fit of guilty dread, rushed to the gate. But, in his eagerness, he fumbled at the latch without unfastening it. The check, slight as it was, sufficed to disarm his fears. But it was not until he stood in the open roadway, that he paused to reconnoitre. The wind, indeed, swept through the trees, but there was nothing else to alarm him. The silence of the hour, intensified by the silence of death, held the little garden.

Muttering a curse at his folly the swagger slowly retraced his steps to the body, whose eyes now looked up at him stonily. As if afraid delay might weaken his purpose, he stooped down for the second time, and, with averted head, hastily picked up the purse. But, in doing it, he exposed to view the underside, until then hidden. On it were three dark stains, which could only have been made by bloody fingers. From the light brown surface of the leather they stood out with that cruel insistence the imagination has grown to associate with human blood. As his eyes fell
on

on them, the swagger made a movement expressive of the most intense loathing, and the purse dropped to the ground with a thud and a clink. The body of the murdered man had only suggested to him a way of satisfying his hunger ; the discovery of a ghastly bit or evidence in connection with it filled him with horror. Situated as he was, perhaps, this was natural. The one he could leave behind and forget ; the other was a permanent record of the dead.

The sudden descent of the purse loosened its elastic band, which had only been tied in a knot, and part of its contents streamed out on the path. The sight of it quickened the swagger's faculties, if it did not entirely overcome his disgust. With a curious guttural exclamation of joy he gathered up all the silver, which had fallen out, and put it in his pocket. Then he stood still for a moment or two considering as to the wisdom of taking the purse also. But constitutional timidity rather than experience warned him of the danger he would run, and he, reluctantly, decided to leave it behind.

Foresight was a stranger to this man, whose vagrant blood had driven him as far as might be from the haunts of his kind, but, as he turned away, he was suddenly struck with an idea which closely resembled it. Reason and fastidiousness, too thoroughly ingrained to be lost by a rude contact with life, alike forbade him to take the purse just then. But what was to prevent him from putting it in a safe place so that it would be ready to serve his necessities on some future occasion ? The prospect stimulated him to energy ; but, though he traversed the garden from end to end, he could find no hiding-place both weather-proof and certain to elude the trained observation of the police. And then, as he was about to give up the search in despair, his eye fell on the wall, which ran parallel with the road. It was built of irregularly shaped

shaped stones, dug out of the volcanic soil of the farm, and piled one on top of the other without any cement. Near the gate they were small, except the two lower rows, which were unusually large. After carefully removing one of them, without disturbing those immediately above it, the swagger dug a hole with his fingers in the ground where it had lain. This done he went for the purse, shuddering at the blood stains as he picked it up, and dropped it in the hollow he had prepared for it; afterwards putting the stone back in its place, and marking the spot with a stick.

Then, panic-stricken, he darted out of the gate, never once slackening his pace until he had put a good quarter of a mile between himself and the dead.

As he neared the town, houses became more and more frequent. He heard the laughter and shouts of merry children, and fragments of the conversation carried on at open windows, or on the creeper-entwined verandahs of the houses. But, like one half-asleep, he heard them as it were afar off. Tired and hungry he had but one thought—to satisfy his craving for food; with a full pocket, a matter so simple that his face flushed and his blood flowed faster in his veins at the very thought.

When he had eaten he was another being. He was no longer a miserable creature, shrinking from observation like a whipped cur, but a man even as others are. He sat back in his chair at the public-house as if he had a spine—and what was more a spine in good order. He even tried to look the world about him in the face, but that was beyond his powers, so he gave it up. To exert himself, physically or mentally, just then was impossible. He was, so to speak, pervaded by a glow, though his sensations were those of an old gentleman after his second glass of port rather than those of a swagger, who has just eaten his first square meal for a week

week. His brain moved sluggishly, his life in the open took shape as a vague memory.

Thus when he was arrested on the charge of murder, he showed so little surprise as to give an unfavourable impression to the police from the start. It was true he looked slightly bewildered, but no more than if he had been mistaken for an acquaintance by a stranger in the street. The peculiar sleepy sense of satisfaction, known only in its fulness to those whose meals are not so regular as they might be, dulled the force of the blow even more effectually than entire ignorance would have done. It was the animal, not the man, which was uppermost.

The police were perplexed. As a rule, criminals might be classed under either of two headings—the coarse and callous, or the refined and crushed. But this man belonged to neither. He would have embodied the popular idea of a mild country curate, but of a murderer, never. The worst that could be said of him related to his ragged, unkempt appearance. Of evil his countenance showed not a trace. Weak it was without a doubt, but weak with the weakness of childhood or age, rather than of youth or manhood. Therefore it was without a suspicion of craft, a confused pain looked out from the sunken blue eyes, and that was all.

During the succeeding weeks he awakened to a fuller sense of the gravity of his situation, but either he was indifferent to his own fate, or incapable of understanding that innocence might suffer for guilt; for of all those concerned in the case he was the least anxious as to its progress. Lawyers argued and pleaded, remand after remand was asked for and obtained; witnesses were examined and re-examined, but his demeanour never altered. He was more like a man in a trance than a man on trial for his life, and this the crowd, whose feelings had at first been excited
against

against him, at last came to see. The resentment, which had been expressed by fierce mutterings and black looks, died away ashamed before the forlornness of its object in the dock. Moreover the evidence was as far from solving the problem of his guilt at the end as it was in the beginning. He was a swagger, and had in his possession ten shillings in silver for which he could not, or would not account; beyond these two facts nothing could be proved against him. On the disappearance of the purse he could not be induced to say a word. The story he had told the evening of his arrest was never shaken in any one particular. Only that it had been found impossible to fasten the murder on any one else, the authorities would have been only too glad to let him go.

But at length a clue to the ownership of the pistol, thrown into the bushes under the window of the house, was discovered, and, as it could by no chance have come into the swagger's hands, there was no longer any reasonable excuse for detaining him a prisoner. He was, therefore, acquitted with the usual forms, a piece of good fortune it took him some time to realise thoroughly.

When he did at last grasp the fact, he was alone on the verandah of the court-house. But this was to him no source of anger and bitterness. He accepted it as he accepted every other ill of his lot—as a matter of course. Nothing else was to be expected when a swagger was under consideration. Besides, for the sake of appearances, none of the townspeople would care to be seen talking to one who had not been entirely cleared of the charge of murder. That it was less than their Christian profession demanded, they chose to forget: that it was more than convention could bear they had no difficulty in remembering.

Stay, there was an exception. As the swagger slouched up the
deserted

deserted street from the court-house he met a man—tall, loosely knit, and dressed in moleskin trousers and a striped shirt—who was lounging in the doorway of a public-house at the corner.

“Looky here,” he said, in a hoarse whisper, “you’d better git out o’ this.”

“Yes,” said the swagger, halting; “I was thinking about it.”

The other made an impatient movement at this tame reply.

“Because that kind o’ thing sticks to a bloomin’ cuss as long as he lives—ye-es,” he continued, and his heavy brows met in a fierce scowl. “I’ve bin there, an’ I know. Now you git into shelter before night. See.”

With that he flung a five-shilling piece into the road, and awkwardly retreated into the house.

The swagger picked it up with more alacrity than he commonly showed. But the acutest observation would have failed to discover in him the smallest sign of gratitude. Either he had lost the power to distinguish properly between kindness or unkindness, or he had got into the habit of meeting both with the same apathy of mien. Possibly, also, he was conscious that, under like circumstances, he would have done the same.

From habit he walked on without looking back, or he would have seen that he was followed by a man—a swagger like himself, but of evil countenance and rough appearance. As long as they were in the township, it was not noticeable, but, the further they left it behind, the more striking it became. The Shadow, however, instead of keeping to the road, hugged the hedges of the farms and the ti-tree of the open.

Instinctively the other proceeded in a direction opposite to that by which he had entered the town a month before. Lonely under the summer sun, it was desolate beyond description at this hour of the evening, and almost impassable, owing to the heavy

rain

rain of the previous few days ; yet to him, after his narrow quarters in the prison, it was pleasant. Because of the personal discomfort he noticed the pools of water, into which he plunged, now and again, with a loud splash, and the heavy clay soil, in which he sank with a sucking sound at every step. But of the finer features of the landscape he saw nothing in detail. The sweet perfume of the ti-tree ; the ominous sighing of the wind ; the gray expanse of sky, over which dark masses of ragged-edged clouds were flying—these were not distinct parts of a magnificent picture, but a perfect whole, whose beauty he felt without attempting to analyse—perhaps the truest homage it is possible to pay.

When he reached a point in the road where it branched, still unconscious of the Shadow, he sat down. In front of him the ti-tree had been cleared, but already a new growth, two feet high, had sprung up in prodigal profusion, hiding the yellow earth beneath with a mantle of green. Across it a band of deep orange, left by the sun in the west, cast a weird shaft of light.

Suddenly, with the curious sound in his throat a horse makes when it is pleased, the swagger sank face downwards to the ground. Overcome by the necessity for expression, he hugged tufts of greenery passionately to his heart, and as heedless of the damp and spiky shoots as he was ignorant of the two evil blue eyes, curiously regarding him from an opening in the scrub, buried his head among it like a child on its mother's breast. When he lifted it again his eyes were full of tears.

Then, as if tired, he sat up again, and drew from his pocket the penny, tied with faded blue ribbon, with which he had tempted fate weeks before. Twirling it slowly between his thumbs, he fell to reasoning aloud.

"It's not much good," he said, "but better than nothing. Heads this way ; tails that way."

So saying he tossed. But the result was unsatisfactory. Twice tails were uppermost : once heads. To any one else the former would have decided the point, but to him, being the man he was, it was the latter.

Rising to his feet in the laboured fashion peculiar to his kind, he shouldered his swag, and at once struck into the road directly facing him—as before, followed by the Shadow. It was time, as he could see by the wrathful sky above him, and heard by the sighing of the ti-tree on either side. To increase the gloom rain began to fall, and, before he had gone a quarter of a mile, the short twilight of semi-tropical regions faded, and night fell.

Difficult as it was to proceed, he walked a mile before he paused to rest. Then, soaked to the skin and exhausted, he sought the shelter of a group of trees, standing near the edge of a field, and glanced about him to discover where he was, the Shadow halting not six paces distant. So far as he could judge he was no nearer a settlement than when he started, and could only suppose that, in the darkness, he had turned off the main road without being aware of it. What to do under the circumstances he had no idea. His long inactivity in the prison had enervated him to such an extent, that he was as unfitted for continuous walking as he was to stand the hardships of a night in the open. To go on was, therefore, out of the question ; to stay where he was not less so. Hence he was forced to think of finding shelter, however scanty.

To seek it at any of the farmhouses, whose lights twinkled here and there through the murky atmosphere, was out of the question. His appearance was now so well known in the district that the mere sight of him would not only chill sympathy in the kindest, but be the signal for an instant order to be off, or for
shutting

shutting the door in his face. Necessity is, however, seldom at a loss. He decided to continue on his way until he came to a homestead, built near the road, when he would try and creep into one of the outbuildings, and there lie down.

Fortified by this resolution he splashed forward with a trifle more energy, and had hardly proceeded a hundred yards when he was rewarded by hearing the swinging of a gate on its hinges. In another second a great shadow loomed up among the trees, in whose outlines he recognised the home of a settler. But there was no light in the windows, and, by the fitful gleams of a moon struggling with the inky blackness of the clouds hurrying across it, he saw that it was unoccupied. This was not a new experience, as, in the more lonely parts of the country, deserted homesteads are not unknown, so that he had no misgivings in taking possession of it for the night.

The house consisted of two rooms and a lean-to ; but, as he soon discovered by feeling along the walls with his hands, it was empty of furniture. He could, therefore, do nothing better than lie down in a corner furthest removed from the draught of the front door, which would not close, and get as much rest as he could before morning. At any rate the floor was dry, and there was a roof between him and the pitiless storm outside.

But sleep refused to come. In a vain endeavour to find ease for his tired body, he tossed from side to side, or shifted his position entirely, until even hunger and cold were forgotten in a sense of utter prostration. And then, in the subtle way peculiar to such things, he began to fancy he was not alone—to be aware of another presence beside his own in the house. Instantly he was sitting bolt upright, every nerve on the stretch, and the very flesh creeping on his bones. What was it? He could see nothing ; could hear no sound other than the howling of the
wind,

wind, the sobbing of the rain, and the swish, swish of a branch as it was swept backward and forward against the roof.

At that instant the door swung forward with a bang, and the swagger, his hair almost on end, and perspiration dropping from every pore, sprang up with a loud shriek.

He knew where he was !

In that strange illumination of the mind, which neither depends on reason nor imagination, he remembered when he had last heard those same sounds, and the whole scene rushed before him with a vividness intensified by the hour and the place. Yet fascinated by the invisible, he stayed where he was, cowering in his corner like a wild beast in its lair. If he had only known it, within three paces of him stood the man who had followed him from the township !

For some minutes—which seemed to him hours, so full were they of a nameless dread—he gazed straight in front of him, when all at once a stream of moonlight struck obliquely across the room, taking shape to his excited fancy as a white-robed figure of giant proportions and unearthly form. But it disappeared almost directly, and all was in gloom again.

Half paralysed with fear, the swagger dragged himself along the floor to the door, which a gust of wind opened wide. He was thus able to crawl out into the air, and collect his scattered faculties. But the garden was as full of dread for him as the house. The rain had ceased, but the sobbing of the earth and the rush of the wind were, in his state of mind, fearsome things endowed with life. The moon, too, added to his terrors by casting strange and shifting shadows on the path, and investing the bushes and trees with terrible shapes. An equinoctial gale was blowing, and the place was alive with supernatural beings, yet the swagger was oppressed by its loneliness and silence.

In a panic he resolved to recover the purse he had hidden, and put as great a distance between himself and this accursed spot as it was possible to do before morning. He found the stick he had thrust into the ground to mark where it lay, and, as carefully as his terror would let him, drew out the stone. Had he turned round just then he would have seen the Shadow standing immediately behind him. But he was too absorbed in his task, and too much afraid to think of such a precaution. Hence the glittering eyes watched his every movement undisturbed. The moment he stood up, however, the Shadow shrank back into the yielding greenery of a passion-flower, which had taken possession of a young pine-tree. For a moment there was an awful pause. Then the swagger, forgetting his fears in a triumphant sense of his own foresight, held up the purse to the moonlight to be certain that he had it. Instantly the Shadow stretched forth a bony hand, and seized it, the three fingers of the right hand exactly fitting the three bloodstains on the leather. With a shriek, which echoed sadly through the garden, the swagger started back, and rushed blindly up the path to the house, falling across the threshold with a heavy thud.

And that was how the man, who had been accused of murdering the young farmer, came to be found in the self-same position on the doorstep as his supposed victim. A judgment said the settlers, but the doctor said it was heart-disease.