His Brother's Blood

Hornung, E. W., Rowland, Peter

Published by ELT Press

Hornung, E. W. and Peter Rowland.  
His Brother's Blood: The Last (Unfinished) Novel.  
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/41551.

⇒ For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/41551
CHAPTER III

A generation back the landscape garden had been a field or two of heavy clay, but to Caleb its origin was prehistoric. He remembered the digging of the pond by hordes of navvies, the building of the wall that just took in the famous oak. But the memory was like a dream; all his waking life the garden had been what it was to him, “a lovesome thing” indeed, dear of late years as Eden to the primal outcast. This August night it was the young man’s Gethsemane.

A terrace lying parallel with the greenhouses led by a bent walk to the shamrock-shaped pond, narrower at this end than at the other two, crossed by commodious stepping-stones, and finished by a waterfall turned on by a tap. The miniature scene just needed the glimmer cast by summer stars, and it was Caleb who looked unreal and Brobdinagian as he blundered surefootedly across the stones. No need to see where he was going; his feet, remembering every inch, chose the way for him, took invis-
ible turnings, kept him on a path over the rhododendron bank, and at last landed him without his own conscious permission in the place where he could most safely hide his head.

It was the bathing-machine side of a tiny boat-house, and a magazine of memories, but Caleb’s were now confined to the last hour and subversive of mere thought. His mind was in eruption, but it erupted broken images and echoes rather than thoughts. Caleb had never indeed been a thoughtful man; he was a man of action, however spasmodic and ill-considered; and a vision of immediate proceedings was now looming uppermost. He saw himself tramping into St Alban about dawn. That would be a bit too early, since the pawn-shops would not be open, and money he must have or starve—he was hungry enough as it was. Before breakfast, at all events, he saw himself pawning his watch—though that seemed a pity too. He had one or two other things about him that might raise the wind for a meal; and with luck he would not have to pay for two. After all he could work his way out to Australia, for he had worked his way home. At St Alban docks there were always vessels needing hands; the thing would be to sign or stowaway aboard the very
first to sail, and then tranship if necessary at the next port. But Australia for him! The bush for ever and ever!

“Prefer me dead, do you? I’ll be as dead as mutton to you, don’t you worry! Dead and buried in the bush!”

And in the haunts of other days, now unremembered, he sobbed out a string of oaths that left him silent and ashamed, yet more himself and more calmly set upon his course.

Thereafter a grim, ingenious, and painful preliminary presented itself to his mind and was adopted with unflinching alacrity. He had taken from his jacket pockets the two convertible assets that he possessed in addition to his incongruous but cherished watch and chain. These were the articles he had already offered in vain at the London booking-office; but booking-clerks were not pawnbrokers, and these things would fetch some shillings. One was a cheap pin-fire revolver, the other an electric torch; by the light of this last he examined them both and also looked at the time. It was after midnight; but it was not this fact that kept watch and torch in Caleb’s hand, nor was it to the watch that he now held the light. The tattooed name upon his wrist had caught his eye, as it had caught that of the shipping-clerk in Sydney, and as
it might catch any other eye the world over. At sea he had worn a bandage round it; after tonight that would not be enough. After tonight he would be as dead to them as they liked, those fond, forgiving, tender-hearted folk of his! And no fear of another resurrection!

No risk, rather; and here was one unless he changed his skin! Even that should be done, and here on the spot; the pistol in his hand supplied the means. Quicker than thought, as was his way, he trained the barrel across his wrist, pressed the lower rim of the muzzle into the tattooed flesh and watched the hammer rise. But it was also Caleb’s way to change his mind at the last moment, and he changed it now on account of the certain noise and the uncertain result; at the same time a surer and safer method occurred to him. A pinfire cartridge is the easiest kind from which to extract the bullet with the fingers and the teeth: in these minutes Caleb had pulled as many cartridges asunder with his teeth, and, moistening the place with his tongue, had covered the whole tell-tale disc with a layer of gunpowder. A match lit the darkness instead of the torch, was gingerly applied to the layer at its thinnest extremity, and went out in the blue flare and fire that followed. A smell of burnt flesh mingled with the smell
of powder; and Caleb was hardly in pain as he used the torch once more to inspect his heroic handiwork.

The charred disc was indeed too tender for searching examination; but the real pain came presently and by torturing degrees. Caleb sat on the bather’s bench and bore it with a daredevil grin. Later he leant over the bathing-steps and made it worse by plunging the fevered forearm into burning cold water, but relief in the form of a cold compress eventually brought succour, and Caleb grinned again as he heard his father’s story of the Sydney clerk.

It was his first hark-back to the evening for over half-an-hour; he might have been grateful to the clerical busy-body on more grounds than one.

When soon after this he stole back into the garden, his plans were as cut-and-dried as Caleb’s ever were. They began with departure by way of the oak-tree and a right turn on the Sailor’s Trod, but before even that stage had been reached the programme reviewed itself, under the influence of those wayward yet headlong feet which remembered every inch of all these acres, and insisted on a sentimental exploration in defiance of the man’s set mood.
Or so it seemed; so, in fact, in the beginning it really was. The dew stood thick upon the grass, like the nap on a hat; there was a sense of brushing it the wrong way, of leaving his mark for that night at least, which Caleb enjoyed together with the soft music of his progress. Not a soul could hear him, but he would hear himself treading the farewell measure to his life’s end. Here was the kitchen-garden with the water-taps in posts which he had once misused as targets for his first continental saloon-pistol; he remembered puncturing one of the leaden pipes and plugging it up with clay, and all the row about it, and many another row. Here were the raspberry bushes he had always raided at this time of year; he raided one now, and was immediately aware that his stomach had been empty for at least twelve hours. A stand-up snack at Paddington had been his last; and the taste of the fruit turned him faint with hunger, the more ravenous because unfelt hitherto. Fruit was no use to him; it was like the moisture in a blade of grass to a man dying of thirst. He could not trek twenty miles into St Alban and hang about the docks till all hours on raspberries and gooseberries, cholera take him if he could! At least he wasn’t going to try; yet what else was to be done?
He thought of the cool larder with the marble slabs, out of bounds in his boyhood, out of reach in his adult extremity. He remembered where the window opened, with an inaccessible tunnel behind the conservatory. It could be open now because nobody could get at it. If only he could! If he could get in somehow—anyhow—and find something—anything—to eat! It would make a new man of him, if not a merry man once more; his sense of humorous adventure, always ticklish, gave him a positive chuckle in advance, though certainly a grim one. The idea intrigued him; it was a glorious idea, poetically and yet quite prosaically just. Even his step-mother could not deny his right to a meal in his own father’s house!... And as to the larder window, it was not the only one after all.

Now, it would not have been Caleb if he had stood afar off to think all this out before advancing in the flesh; thus it happened that his mental reflection upon the larder window was contemporaneous with his physical reflection in the dining-room window, which was the first he reached. They were in darkness like all the rest, securely hasped, with Venetian blinds like horizontal organ-pipes duly drawn to the last lath. So much Caleb saw as a background to his own transparent spectre at one brief but rash sweep with his electric torch. The morning-room
windows were broad sheets of plate-glass, neither mul-
lioned nor bayed, and would take some raising even if
they had not been fastened.

The drawing-room, on the other hand, with its two
bay-windows, looking south and west, was immediately
under the parental chamber, the windows of which were
open to the top. Caleb accordingly, having taken off his
boots to cross the front-door steps, was carrying them
round to the more secluded office, at the other side of the
house, when the dining-room windows seemed worth a
 glance.

They were indeed; the narrow north light of the rectan-
gular bay was unfastened to the world! An upward pres-
sure of the finger-tips at the top of the sash, till there was
room to insert them at the bottom, and the deed was so
far done.

It was a terribly familiar room in which Caleb stood
upright next minute. The old handsome clock spoke from
the mantel-piece as though he had never been away, as
deliberately as ever, though scarcely louder than of
old; its miraculous glass case, all in one piece, was even
more miraculously intact; and on either side still stood
Thorvaldsen’s Evangelists, one of them with a white-
washed wooden staff, because Caleb himself had broken the marble original when he could just reach that height. He had to go round the room with his torch, even if he came to life for it!

The four walls were crowded as ever with oil-paintings good and bad; but Caleb even now felt that he had never seen their match in all his wanderings. The fjords and mountains of his father’s favourite Norwegian artist were still a cool grey joy; the modern Italian hybrid, of Guido painting Beatrice Cenci in the condemned cell, still heavily appealed to Caleb’s sense of adventure and romance. Only one newcomer could his torch detect—but it pinned him to the floor as though a pillar. It was the portrait of a little rosy girl in a huge white grandmother’s bonnet. A straight brown fringe overhung the straight brown eyes; the little nose turned up adorably; brown curls leapt in torrents over the sturdy shoulders in their grandmother’s shawl. It was Davia Carey, adorned with a small necklace, as she must have been a year or two after Caleb had seen her first and last as a splendid child.

On the sideboard was a silver biscuit-box that he remembered as far back as memory went: so by the sideboard he stood mechanically munching cracknels and
macaroons. Somewhere, perhaps, supper might have been set aside for Pelham, but these biscuits now sufficed; excitement was his solid meal, and drink as strong as he required. Unfortunately, however, though there were spirits also on the sideboard; they were in a tantalus, and the tantalus was duly locked. Trust Lady York! But Caleb, on his side, could be trusted to respond to such a challenge. After all, it was his father’s whisky; and besides, since he was bound to leave some traces of his intrusion, it was really necessary that regular thieves should get the credit. With much satisfaction he recalled Davia’s mention of recent burglaries in the district; and forced the little lock without a qualm.

It was not much he drank, but the little fired him to further devilment, besides sharpening his wits. It now struck him that the house must be full of things that were actually his and might be turned into better money than could ever be raised on a pin-fire revolver and a common electric torch. Money! There ought to be hard cash of his very own somewhere! Caleb thought he knew where, too, and justly felt that he was never likely to need it more than he did that night.

On their holidays and on Christmas Day it had been Mr York’s immemorial custom to put half-a-sovereign
into the boys’ money-boxes. These money-boxes their fa-
ther had kept under lock and key in his drawing-room, 
ceremoniously producing them at those intervals from a 
drawer which Caleb could still have found in the desk. 
But would the money-boxes still be there? Not Pelham’s, 
certainly, since it had always been understood that the 
hoards would be at their respective owners’ disposal 
on their coming of age. Caleb, however, had left home 
on the last occasion at nineteen, and he had gone with-
out the contents of his money-box. What had become of 
the money? It must have amounted to fifteen or sixteen 
pounds at least. Had it found its way into other pockets? 
Or was it still in his money-box, and the money-box in its 
old drawer, out of sight and mind like himself?

The drop of drink that was now in Caleb, and the dash 
of devildom which was a permanent part of him, between 
them simply forced him to find out. He was on the stairs 
in his irreparable socks before he so much as thought of 
turning back, and then the thought was ignominiously 
dismissed. Yet on the landing were more pictures that 
might have warned him off, family portraits that should 
have shaken their heads at him, a model ship with a 
whole cargo of special messages had his eye and his heart 
been what they were when he entered the house. As it
was, a creaking stair was his one concern and he climbed close to the wall, foot over foot as up a ladder.

The dressing-room door opened without a sound. The inner door, into the bedroom, looked as fast as the tomb; but through the key-hole came a contralto trumpeting which Caleb hailed with ungallant joy. To that incidental music he could act his best, with the least fear of a fiasco, but for safety’s sake he very gingerly turned the key in the intervening lock.

The mahogany chest was in its ancient place; the drawer of drawers was located as of old. Caleb looked all over for the parental keys; they were not with the other contents of those velvet pockets, not in either of the pairs of trousers in current use. The unaccompanied snore from the other room bade him pursue his search.

Meanwhile he had just thought of a secret drawer which Pelham, who was extremely sharp, had once pointed out to him. It had neither handle nor key-hole, and its edges were only to be picked out of a kind of frieze of marquetry by slanting an eye along the front of the chest. The boys had not known how the secret drawer was opened. Caleb found out by taking out the top-right collar drawer and exploring with his finger-tips. Suddenly the secret
drawer opened automatically as many inches as were necessary; for lying in the forefront of its green baize lining was a solitary key on a ring by itself.

The tireless recital in the next room was now like the sound of silver clarions....

His money-box was there! It had his name written underneath, in a hand now powerless to spoil his triumph. But the money-box had not the drawer to itself; a shallow, oval, purple-velvet case was there as well. Caleb opened this first, and a consecration as of Lilliputian lamps dimmed the light of his electric torch. He was looking on the necklace worn by his stepmother on grand occasions; he remembered Pelham telling him how it had cost a thousand pounds.

Caleb looked round and listened. It was still going on! What he saw gave more food for thought; this room was in an upset; just as a real burglar would have left it. But would a real burglar take a money-box with a few pounds in it and leave behind him a diamond necklace worth a thousand? Who but Caleb himself, to whom the money-box legally and morally belonged, would do a thing like that? They might think him dead. But this might well
water those seeds of doubt which Davia had sown in his hearing that very night!

Well, he could not take the necklace ... but he could hide the thing! He looked round the dressing-room for a place. There was a picture of a ship over the door. He had hidden cigarettes behind pictures in his day; he hid the necklace in its case behind this one in less time than it takes to state.

Then he took up his money-box—like a hot brick—it jingled so! Great heavens—the noise had stopped next door! Caleb stood stock-still, watching the locked door. He was sorry he had locked it. His father had thought his money-box worth keeping with all the money in it. He had kept it safeguarded with his wife’s diamonds in the old locked drawer. He had not had the heart even to give that money away! The governor, after all ... the poor old governor ... was under the thumb of the soloist in the next room! She had begun again as though he had encored her, and Caleb ran out and down the stairs with his booty jingling at every step.

Not till he reached the hall did he realise his temerity, and stand still as before, holding his breath not as he had held it in the dressing-room, but in passionate dread and
terror of discovery. No door opened, however, and no foot fell upon the floor above. He breathed again, wiped his forehead with his sleeve, and wondered where he could break open the money-box with the least risk of being heard.

Under the stairs was a small room that had been a kind of cloak-room in old days; the thought of wraps as soundmufflers was what drew him to this room now. On opening the door he saw at a glance that it was not just a cloak-room any more. The pegs had been replaced by a fixed inner cupboard; a little table and a chair stood against the wall; on the table was a telephone, telephone directory, a pad and pencil for taking down messages. More modern improvements! Pelham again!

Caleb switched on the electric light, the cloak-room being windowless, and placed his torch and his money-box on the table. As he did so the receiver attracted his attention; it had a glass mouthpiece, and the glass looked frosted, almost like ground-glass; yet this appearance was passing off before his eyes!

He wiped the mouthpiece with his finger; the fingermark was clear glass. He seized the mouthpiece and put
it to his ear; the ring of vulcanite was warm to his skin. Somebody had been telephoning that very minute!

He took out his revolver, cocked it, strode over to the cupboard and opened the door upon Davia Carey standing within.