His Brother's Blood

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CHAPTER VI

The powerful car sped on as though expressly chartered for a guilty flight. The stowaway, curled up and suffocating under the cargo of rugs, even while he shivered with grief and dread, might almost have been at the wheel himself. Sometimes he felt as if he was; so much was told him by an expert ear on edge with desperation. In the prolonged silence of the horn he saw a road empty as a racing-track; saw it far ahead in the unchanging rhythm of the indistinguishable detonations; felt its contour in the song of shaft and joint that rose under his ear with every hill; sniffed the night-air through a sense of the subtle super-power that all petrol-engines develop after dark. Memory doubtless played its part; but, at any moment of the first few minutes, Caleb could have sworn where he was, to a hundred yards; and given a confident account of the topography. What he was unable to guess, discover or imagine, was where the devil he was going! Constituted as he was, however, he found a certain stim-
ulus in this; indeed, it might have kept a less adventurous man from dwelling just then on the irreparable.

His first theory had fallen to the ground; there could be no question of a ball. The car would never have returned to its garage unless the houses had been fairly close together. Now it was shooting through a village he recognised by a steeple tapering against the slating dome of dawn. This was some three miles out; how much further were they going? Caleb, who had uncovered head and shoulders to steal this peep, hid them again with a fatalistic shrug. No use peeping or speculating any more unless or until the car slowed down, there was nothing to be done but prepare some sort of explanation against eventual discovery.

Of course he must sham more or less drunk; but drunk or sober, if they never stopped until their journey’s end, he could only have stowed away before the journey started. The heap of rugs had more than probably been thrown in at the last moment. That alone would tie him down as to time and place. And the time would be well within half-an-hour or so of the “burglary and murder,” and the place was within half-a-mile of its scene! But the chauffeur, having left home in ignorance of the tragedy,
would have no sinister interpretation at his finger-ends; nor was it likely he would make much trouble about this mere escapade of a stolen joy-ride in his car. The trouble was coming when the man got back, and heard the news, or read it in a paper: BURGLARY AND MURDER. Caleb could see the heavy headline—see the words split down a poster in blood-red letters as big as his head!

*Could* a man burgle his own home?... No matter; he could murder his own brother, God forgive him! He could break their old governor’s heart, foul his name, spoil his life—kill him too—bring his grey hairs with sorrow to the grave—if not by the crime alone, then by his conviction and punishment for the crime! One son hanged for the other son’s murder! Greek tragedy, though to Caleb only a newspaper phrase, did not—could not—beat that! But it was not going to happen; he would die by his own hand first!

All this had been behind his mind at every yard of his flight so far; he had perceived it in the background of all his other perceptions, as the raging fire behind the bars; but not as the burning vision the imaginary poster had conjured up. The motor had ceased singing in his ears, the rugs to weigh upon his body: the bars were red-hot as
the thing behind the bars—the thing that was never going to happen....

The way to prevent its happening was not to think about it now; it was the only way; and Caleb took it firmly from this moment. He wiped his forehead and curled closer. The song of the car came back with redoubled sweetness. No sign of its stopping yet; and they must be ten miles out.... Damn their destination!

The first thing was to alter his appearance. So Caleb hastily decided; a cooler head might have put it second. Caleb only saw that the chauffeur, when they came to have it out, would take good stock of him, if he did no more; therefore the description to be furnished by this witness, in the inevitable course of things, must not tally with any other description already in circulation. A craftier fugitive would have seen that the chauffeur’s description must carry most weight; that it might well be the only one obtainable; and therefore that anything in the nature of a disguise would be pointless if effected before they had their interview. Caleb, however, was already tugging at his beard as though he intended to pluck it out straightaway by the roots. Indeed, he wished he could. The very pain that he went so far as to inflict upon himself
was a certain comfort to him. It renewed the pain under his wrist-band, and, by recalling the heroic remedy of the bathing-house, prompted him to another as characteristic in its headlong hardihood.

He could not hope to shave himself in the dark with his clasp-knife; but he could burn off his beard with the matches which had done the other trick. At first he feared that he had left them behind; on finding them in another pocket, he made a light-weight head of the heaviest, fur-lined ring, and went bull-headedly to work.

The first little flare scorched both his cheek and his hand as he put it out. A smell of burnt fur warned Caleb that the rug too was singed; he was more careful with succeeding matches, charier of disfiguring himself—content with sporadic fires as against the more tempting decisive conflagration—pausing after each to note the unchecked tempo of the running car. Nevertheless, in a few minutes his skin was merely stubbly from ear to ear, and not too tender to the touch. A barber could do the rest without suspecting the nature of the preliminary operation.

Caleb stretched himself and closed his eyes. Cheek and chin tickled just enough to keep his mind on the surface of his dire slumbers. There was much in itself of the pres-
ent phase that powerfully appealed to him; he had some cause for momentary satisfaction. In the chill of early morning the load of rugs was not unwelcome; and the car ran on and on with the monotonous murmur of a swollen brook. Worn out as he was with excitement, he had never thought of sleep when he woke with a start in broad daylight.

He was bathed in perspiration; the recollections of the night soon iced the bath. Stiff as a corpse he could not move, nor as much as tremble when another fact came home. Sunlight touched the mouth of his cave beneath the rugs; he saw some of the matches he had used sticking in the fur; but it was what he heard that filled his mind. The sounds were the sounds of traffic in town: the clip-clop of horses, the drone of a tram, distant hootings, voices near by—everything but the intimate murmur to which he had fallen asleep!

The car had stopped. Where? Caleb could only listen to the voices.

"Over a hundred miles non-stop!" one boasted grimly. "Give me a couple more cans."

Caleb heard an empty can ring upon the road, and was now aware that he had been listening to a certain gurgle
besides all else. Steps retreated and returned; the gurgle began again, and a new voice observed to its accompaniment, “You’ll be wanting a fill-up yourself, I reckon?”

“You’re right,” replied the one now preoccupied behind. “But I doubt I’ve got the time.”

“Going further, are you?”

“Nearly as far again. Got to be there by ten o’clock, an’ it’s gone seven! Can’t keep it up by day like you can on an empty road at night.”

“You’ll do it if you’ve done what you say. But I wouldn’t try it on an empty stomach, if I was you.”

The gurgling sound was at an end. The chauffeur seemed as if considering the other’s suggestion. Caleb sweated again in his suspense. If the men turned their backs it would be his chance to escape unobserved.

“Bring me a snack out here,” said the chauffeur at length. “A glass a’ beer an’ a bite o’ bread an’cheese’ll do. I must have a look at my engine now.”

Five minutes later they were under way again. For the best part of an hour the noises of the town accompanied them; then the last tram was left droning behind, hoofs and voices dropped off like noisy passengers, the horn
blew and was answered at longer and longer intervals, and the inner band of muted instruments settled down once more to the soft allegro of the night. It was a long movement, only deepening in the hills, or when rounding bends in the road or threading village streets. Once Caleb sat up by inches and used the corners of his eyes. The morning sun flooded the back seat, slanting though the off window and through the glass that framed the driver’s back; his shadow retained a reassuring rigidity. Out of window was a broad valley, nobly timbered, which Caleb knew later for the Weald of Kent. Queer, triangular, isolated roofs, more like great chimneys, puzzled him as a stranger to the country; and the Kentish carters took an angry solo on the horn to shift them.

He lay down again, and before very long was making himself smaller and hotter than ever in the crackling outskirts of another town. The heart of this one was soon reached; by the staccato threats of their horns Caleb conjectured they had run it fine. Steam trumpetings seemed to answer from afar. A fresh, salt smell piqued the nostrils. The limousine made heavy weather on a choppy surface, then crept quaking on to something smoother and more resilient than a road. Shouts of voices were acknowledged by the chauffeur in sardonic asides. The en-
engine stopped. The man descended, confidentially invoking the Deity. And Caleb concluded, with an unpleasant premonition of the audience awaiting him, that his last moment as a stowaway was at hand.

Instead, a different kind of engine took up a different kind of tone; an overhead chain rattled taut; and in a twinkling the car was swinging clear of the ground. In mid-air it swung with sickening lurches. Masts and warehouses flew past the windows. The chain ran out with grinding deliberation, and Caleb’s stomach was in his mouth when the platform under him plumped down upon a deck. He was burrowing under the rugs for the last time as the chauffeur returned to his wheel, and as the car slid clear into the gangway a steam-whistle split the air.

The passage was mercifully rough. Peeping out when he dared, Caleb discovered that there were few passengers on the upper deck and those either in unobservant distress or intent on seaward things; of the chauffeur there was no sign at all. Stretching his cramped limbs first, Caleb emerged from the car as though it belonged to him, and, after a wash and brush-up in the lavatory, and a hearty meal, asked his way to the purser’s cabin. That officer stared at his chin.
“I’m afraid I’ve lost my ticket,” said Caleb, unblushingly. “Lost everything, in fact!”

And he felt his bristles with a shameless chuckle.

“You look as if you had,” dryly rejoined the purser, a brisk man with a beard of his own. “Where were you for?”

“Paris,” Caleb answered—and held his breath. He had omitted to ascertain the port for which the boat was bound. But in the absence of immediate comment he made haste to add, “How much?”

“Five shillings, first class; but I can only book you to Boulogne.”

Caleb felt among the silver in his pocket for a sovereign, and ostentatiously omitted to count the change.

The rest of the voyage he spent on deck, as far forward as he could get, preoccupied primarily in deciding whether he would really go on to Paris. Capitals were said to be the safest place for wanted men; but he had momentarily forgotten his lack of fluency in the Gallic tongue. Paris was surely not a foreign capital for a man who could not speak the language. Paris, moreover, was hardly the way to Australia; it was certainly not a way within his means;
and on Australia his heart was set more firmly than before. Some very lonely lodge in the wilderness, such as more than one in which he had already languished in picturesque ignominy—his old idea of ignominy!—that was the ideal haven for him henceforth and forever. The first ship for Sydney or for Melbourne, or Adelaide or Brisbane for that matter, and the nearest port whence such ships sailed, these were his immediate needs. Since he was being spirited to France in this fateful fashion, a French port let it be by all means. French policemen would be the last upon his tracks; he could talk freely in his sleep in a French forecastle! Providence had got him outside the Channel, and Providence knew its business sometimes. But Boulogne would not do. He thought of Havre. He remembered a French barque at Williamstown with “Havre” after her unmemorable name. Havre, therefore, was the next step towards that bush hut.

There would be trains from Boulogne to Havre. He would take the first…. But when the time came, as it did before his mind was well made up, he could not take that train, or face the station with his empty hands and his English tongue, or continue in the stream of English travellers one yard beyond the quay! They had that morning’s English papers in their hands! Could it be in al-
ready? Hardly! But their company stifled him; his own language frightened him. If Providence knew its job, and was doing it for once … it might be suicide to mix with his own people one superfluous minute!

He struck straight into the town and walked as fast as though he knew his way. A barber’s pole called, the first halt; he wheeled right in, and presently emerged all furtive smiles. He could hardly keep his hands off his polished chin. He stopped to gloat upon it in shop windows. One of the shops was a stationer’s; he went in and bought two maps—one of the town, the other of Northern France. A few doors farther on was a café; in he went again, and, seated at an inner table, with his back to the street, studied both maps over a cup of lukewarm coffee, dashed with potato brandy. He was going to walk to Havre! Why not?

A reason presented itself in the first kilometre of the two hundred and thirty that Caleb was hot-headedly prepared to trudge. A bicycle shop in the Rue Nationale showed him his folly at a glance; it had never occurred to him to bicycle, much less to buy a bicycle for the jaunt, on the excellent chance of selling it again at Havre! Yet so
this plan matured between one pavement and the emporium that had caught his eye across the road.\textsuperscript{4}

The bicycles stood handle-bar to handle-bar in dense array. There were all sorts and prices, from a secondhand ruin at francs forty to the last excess in motor-bicycles. Caleb pounced upon a light roadster with the dust of its last trip still thick upon its wooden rims, and a railway label stuck across two spokes. This ran away with £5 of his English money, which he took the opportunity of changing into French. Another 15 fr. 50 went on lamps and oil; these wants he made known in sullen pantomime, his only mutterings being a husky “\textit{Combien?”} and “\textit{Changez, s’il-vous-plait!”}”

In less time than his shave had taken he was ricocheting over the pavé on the right machine. Gear and frame were high enough even for him, and though the handle-bars were abominably low, in the circumstances there was something to be said for having to ride face-downwards, masked by a flapping wideawake. So Caleb pedalled the livelong afternoon with few halts but some narrow squeaks owing to unfamiliarity with the road ahead.

It was his intention to provision himself in the towns and make his meals and his bed in wayside woods. Ham,
rolls, a pint of wine and a cork-screw, were accordingly procured at Abbeville, together with a box of matches, one that he had carried for some years having vanished, to his great vexation. It was the gift of an old bush mate, and Caleb regretted its loss on that account far more than for any clue it was likely to establish if, as he supposed, he had left it behind him in the limousine. Fear of pursuit was not indeed an immediate issue in his mind; matters had gone too well with him, and he flattered himself that he had made the most of his luck. It was not to save his skin that he rode on and on with his shirt sticking to his drawers and his hat swimming on his head. His real pursuers were his guilty thoughts and haunting visions—the striped form of his father, dazed with sleep and horror, his white hair literally on end; the prostrate form of his brother, the dark blood bubbling from his wound like wine.

And Davia? He was done with Davia; had she not utterly, inevitably, emphatically done with him? Or done for him, a pitiful pinch of wit suggested! No; he did not believe she had given him away; no, no, he knew she hadn’t, knew as well as though he had never fled the house. But all the worse for her! All the more terrible for her to be keeping his awful secret, to have to keep it or make bad
worse immeasurably! All the more horrible to feel that she had taken his accursed hand, and actually kissed him in the very hour of what must ever seem to her his cold-blooded crime! He had robbed her of the man she loved, yet even vengeance would be denied to her!

So Caleb to himself, when Davia at last fought her way into his mind. It was in the wood after his food and wine; the night was scented, murmurous, glittering with stars; his peace of body, all grateful aches and pains appeased, had never been so profound as when this particular hell broke loose in his mind. He started up, stiff and staggering; here was a pursuer to flee as he would no other. Davia hating and yet saving him! Davia loyal but loathing! With trembling hands, he lit his lamps; pushed the bicycle out of the wood, and up a hill faster than he could have ridden it, panting to ascend and fly from Davia like the wind. The front lamp threw a beam like a policeman’s bull’s-eye; the red lamp dropped a patch like a moving pool of blood; and the railway label on the spokes might have been a death-moth circling round and round his bleeding heart....

How sparkling cold was the rush of air down the hill beyond, and yet how little it cooled the fever in his veins!
It was not enough to sit still and gulp it down in endless draughts; his feet must go round and round upon the pedals, though they met with no resistance. The trees were like hordes of huge black demons, or feathered savages, rushing upon him in their thousands, to leap apart at the last moment, with shouts of demonic laughter, leaving him to descend the quicker to his own damnation. Roars of laughter right and left! Trumpetings of haste behind!

Literal trumpetings, by Jove.... Caleb had come back to earth; he was not for hell just yet! Something was overtaking him; some damned motor, and he in the middle of the road! With a touch he turned his handle-bars to the left, was shot into the air that instant, and heard his bike crushed to atoms as he hit the ground.
Last Page of the Manuscript

And the very last page of fiction that Hornung ever wrote.