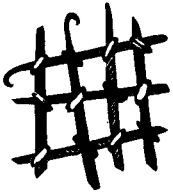


Price Warung

JOHN PRICE'S* BAR OF STEEL



The sea-breeze fanned the symmetrical stems of the giant Araucaria* transplanted by Colonel Foveaux* to the front of Government Cottage, and swept from its fronds a chord or two of the music which the undisturbed centuries had there garnered. The nearer face of Mount Pitt, alpine in its solitude,* was dazzling in the pallor of a South Sea* moon; the blue of the ocean lay intersected with broad, fan-like beams of pearly radiance. It was such a night as poets dream of and delight in, and, in other climes, as the nightingale sings to the listening rose; such a night as, in this newest clime, John Price enjoyed to the utmost.

A born captain of men, and knowing the seamy side of human nature,* as (to the evil Deities' sorrow) few men who have visited these colonies have done, he was so constituted as to intensely enjoy every form of physical beauty. In the midst of any scenic splendour, or in the presence of finely-proportioned man, convicted or not, as beautiful women, he would forget even to fix his eyeglass; and the hard grey of his eyes would lose that dreadful faculty of penetration in which consisted the main source of his power over the convict creature and the newer penal official. And when John Price's face lost the use of the stony stare of the crystal disc, and the metallic keenness of the unveiled eye, then John Price was not himself.

There were frequent moments when he was not himself. Take any of the sparse convict survivors of the Old Regime, or any of the scarcely more numerous representatives of the subordinate Penal Officialdom, and they would deny this. They would assert that John Price was never aught but himself—that is to

say, the sternest of disciplinarians, the most sceptical of moralists, the most saturnine of humorists, and the most exquisite of torturers. That drawing of him is about as true in perspective as that other picture limned by the partial hand of superior officers and of personal friends, in which the figure of the Commandant stands clothed with a majesty of character little short, considering his temptations, of saintliness. John Price was neither a saint, nor yet of that high degree among demons which would entitle him to a shout of "Hail, brother!" from the sovereign and princes of the damned on his entrance into the Nether World. He was, truly, a many-sided man, the majority of whose facets were, unfortunately for himself, shaped by the planing-steel of the System.* The System put under its knife the material which, under other conditions, wielded as a sword against the nation's enemies, would have formed a general of inspired audacity, a leader of dauntless courage, and an administrator of unerring prescience. But—the Fates were just! If there was scarcely a convict whom the System and the Regime did not spoil more or less, neither did they spare the officials. And as John Price, from his varied service in three colonies, was the instrument of contamination to more destinies than was any other administrator, it was only to be expected that the loss he personally suffered should have exceeded that of all other servants of the System. The life which might have ended at the doors of Westminster Abbey* was miserably let out by a felon's hand on Williamstown Pier.* He whom the System created, died by the System. Which was justice according to the System.

On this night, when Despair, throned imperially in her realm of Norfolk Island, decked herself with the effulgence of Heaven in mockery of the twelve hundred kindred mortals who sweated terror-drops* beneath their stamped blankets or in the embrace of fetters which they nursed too deeply at night into the wounds it had punctured during the day; on this night, John Price, Civil Commandant, passed, with a guest, from his dining-room to the verandah, and gazed on the glory.

He thrust the less-known facets of his character into the view of his guest.

"A heavenly evening," he said; "I never saw a finer."*

"Nor I!" was the answer.

They exchanged no other word. Each steeped himself in the rapture of the moment, and forgot his companion. Price gazed in the direction of Phillip Island,* his visitor to the zenith.

Then a child's voice broke the silence. A tiny, white-gowned figure glided out the hall doorway, and called his father.

"Fa'ver!* Where is you, fa'ver?"

"Here, sonnie. But, fie! Not in bed yet?"

The youngster trots on his naked feet half the length of the verandah, and, at his father's side, holds out his hands so that he might be lifted up.

"I t'udn't go to bed, fa'ver, not wi'out saying my new prayer."

"A new prayer!"

A stern Commandant stoops and gathers the little one within his arms. The guest thinks if he were the father he would have echoed the words ashamedly, for there is something discrepant between the position of an absolute ruler of twelve hundred slaves and the function of a father listening to the lisping of an infant's benison. Not so, thinks John Price. With all his faults, he did not fear God, man, nor devil, and it is only the coward who insincerely gives heed to another's opinions. The whole world might have stood by, and John Price would have done just the same.

"Ees, a new prayer, fa'ver! Danny teached it me, an' I isn't to tell on'y you,* fa'ver."

"All right, little man, go on."

The child slipped from the strong grasp, and knelt on the bare verandah boards.

"You believe in training up a child in the way he should go, even if it isn't your way, eh Price?" chuckled the guest.

The Civil Commandant, though Dr. Hampton was his official superior for the time being (inasmuch as that Lesser Providence to forty thousand souls, the Governor of Van Demonion,* had entrusted to the ex-convict-ship-surgeon the potential duty of reporting on the "moral state of Norfolk Island"), imperiously hushed him into silence.

"I believe in religion," he said, "for children and transports."

And the Doctor good-humouredly—for Price was a useful official—accepted the snub, with a rejoinder—

"Who, after all, are only children of a larger growth. They've to be fed, and put to bed, and whipped and locked up like children. But I'm interrupting—go on, my little boy!"

"I's not you's little boy—I's fa'ver's—isn't I, fa'ver?"

"Yes, yes! But say your prayers, sonnie! You'll get cold here. Hadn't you better say them to mamma or nurse, inside?"

"No, fa'ver, for Danny tol me to say my new pwayer to you wery ownself, fa'ver."

"Well, well, go on!"

The child whispered the Lord's Prayer. His little head, curl-crowned, was reverently bent above his pressed palms.

After the one prayer, which has been the voice of all men in all ages of Christendom, he whispered his—

"Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,

Look 'pon 'ittle chil"

and thereafter, his piping struggling with drowsiness, his—

"God b'ess fa'ver, mu'ver, 'ittle sister, Sir John Fwan-in, where's he ever is, and Lady Fwan-in, an' all—dear fr'ens...." The curls, burdened by sleep, fell upon the loosened hands, and the childish accents dropped.

The father stooped to lift the boy, when Hampton, curious, said loudly—

"You haven't said your new prayer, my little man!"

The child, aroused, rubbed his knuckles into his eyes, and murmured a response.

"Oh, no—I's forgettin'. I'll say it now, fa'ver!"

He slipped again to the floor, and, putting himself once more into the posture of prayer, breathed, with a palpable reverence which made the words doubly terrible—

"God, p'ease damn John Price!"

It's a toss-up who developed a more refined capacity for cruelty—John Price or some of the transports whom John Price trained.

When Dr. Hampton was Governor of Western Australia* he was accustomed to remark that never had he known or heard of John Price flinching, except on two occasions. The first was on a certain day in Tasmania,* whose history we have yet to tell. The second was on this night.

The father shrank visibly as the child's voice breathed its innocent malediction. The pallor of his face was not that of the moonlight alone.

"Danny—taught—you—to say that?" he questioned the laddie.

But the child's head pressed against his knees in slumber. The father gathered the boy into his arms, and carried him into the house. As he placed the little fellow in his cot he paused, battled with himself for a moment as to whether he could touch those lips which had emitted so poignant a sting, and then, stooping, kissed the rich redness of their curves and dimples.

The child, semi-roused, stirred, and murmured caressingly, "Fa'ver!"

"What are you going to do with the pris'ner who has put him up to saying that?" questioned Hampton, as the Commandant came forth again to the verandah.

"Wait!"

"Why?"

"Because I can't punish the scoundrel now without confronting him with the child. Doing that would fix the—the—thing in the little cove's mind, and would help him to remember it. The words will slip away from his recollection if I do nothing to impress them upon him. Besides...."

"What?"

"To reveal to the pris'ner that he has...."

He paused again.

"Hurt you?" suggested Hampton, with that delicate malevolence, like a feline claw-scratch, which was one of his characteristics. "If you like—sir!" Price was compelled to remind himself the doctor was not only his superior, but his guest. "To let him know that he has hurt me—as you say—would be to incite every servant I have to play me the same trick. Don't you know, Doctor, with all your experience of pris'ners, that the way to break 'em of a trick or practice not expressly prohibited by regulation is to say nothing about it? And that if you punish 'em for it, you'll give it an increased importance in their eyes?"

As an administrator in a large way, and truly meriting Mr. Gladstone's* encomium that "he was thoroughly qualified for the most responsible offices in connection with convict discipline," Hampton was accustomed to consider himself John Price's superior, but he deferred to the Civil Commandant in all matters of precise knowledge. He said so now, and not so much fearful that Price would be excited to an unusual exercise of magnanimity, as curious as to the way he should punish the convict who had invented this newest devil's trick, asked the Commandant, "Was he prepared to overlook the matter?"

"I said I would wait," replied Price.

All things come to the man who waits.

Daniel Duncan, lifer, per *Westmoreland*,* was one of the four men allowed by Grace of the Authorities to the Commandant for domestic service. He had been selected by the previous Commandant, and Price had retained him in the *entourage* of Government Cottage* till he had seen whether he could be replaced by a more deserving man—that is to say, in the

language of the System, a man likely to be more useful in the house.

Unfortunately for Danny, such a man was not long in presenting himself to the Commandant's august notice. Somebody or other, who was so contemptible a creature in the keen eyes of the Lords of Evil as to be awarded by them a mere trifle of seven years' confinement amid the beauties of the island, was discovered to possess a pretty faculty for artistic gardening. He had suggested one or two striking means of improving the view from the Cottage, and, as the System was always anxious to improve upon Nature, he was to be granted a chance of gilding refined gold,* by being told off to reduce the tangled exquisiteness of the pine-glades, and the honeyed sweetness of the spice-land, to the order so beloved of Penal Officialdom.

Now, Order is a very fine thing, and, as a vile body* on which the Regime had performed countless experiments, with the object of instilling a sense of orderliness into his soul, Daniel Duncan should have been appreciative of Mr. Price's motive in superseding him by the other prisoner. But even so admirably-devised a plan of morality, as was comprised in the Transportation System, could not eradicate from Duncan's nature that tendency towards selfishness which the less pious surroundings of his youth had encouraged. Instead of meeting Mr. Price half-way, so to speak, and welcoming his relegation to the gaol-cell as an opportunity for enjoying that self-communion which is so essential to the culture of good character, he resented his removal. And, resenting it, had directed the innocence of the Commandant's little child into the channel of cursing. Of course it was not prudent of Danny to act in this fashion, but wherever, since the epoch of Eden did splenetic man act prudently?

He knew it was imprudent, and he knew, moreover, that it was damnable to teach child lips to syllable imprecations. And with all his knowledge, he risked the consequences of the imprudence for the sake of the damnableness. Which was a corollary of the System.

He knew it was the beginning of the consequences when, standing on the verandah steps, the morning after the night, the Commandant said smilingly: "Make the most of your last day, Duncan! You go into the gaol-gang to-morrow."

The prisoner looked defiantly into the disc of unrimmed glass—and trembled as he saluted.

"Yes, sir!"

"And, Duncan—"

"Sir!"

"You are fond of children, Duncan?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then, as you have, I believe, served the Cottage pretty well, you shall have one indulgence, Duncan—the youngsters shall come over sometimes. But no more prayers, Duncan; no more prayers."

Duncan, though the world was singing in its warm bath of sunlight, shivered again, and bowed his head over the mattock. He regretted his imprudence now.

Three days later the main guard—the gaol—turned out as Dr. Hampton and the Commandant arrived to inspect.

"Muster!" ordered the Civil Commandant, speaking to Assistant-Superintendent Tuff.

The occupants of the gaol, saving those waiting trial, who were doubly-ironed in the cells, were ranged in the corridor.

The authorities intended to "re-form the gangs" that day, and "out" labour had ceased for the time being, a circumstance which was unpalatable to Tuff and disastrous to Danny Duncan. For the gaol-men were usually mustered by their gangs, and Tuff's special lot for muster could be comprehended by a glance, and he could rattle off the names from the muster-book as though he were reading them. Read them he could not, unless they were written in text-hand. With forty men, however, to call over, this mechanical process was impossible, and he could not read the names from the roll, because the entries were made in a running hand.

"Muster!" repeated the Civil Commandant.

Tuff, saluting in deprecatory tones, informed their Honours that the names "wasn't large 'nuff for his weak eyes to see, yer Honours."

"Weak eyes!" echoes the Commandant. "I didn't know you had weak eyes."

"Yes, sir! But they're jest come on, sir! They'll be better shortly, sir!" And Tuff vowed to himself that he would give some of the hospital rations of rum and tobacco to some convict to coach him in reading "small-hand." "Be better shortly, sir. An' shall one of the men read over, sir?"

The Commandant took no notice of the question, but pursued his motive of inquiry.

"Just come on, has the weakness! Now, how weak are they? Look at Duncan there, Duncan 41-392. Duncan of the *Westmoreland*. Can you see that bar of steel—a dangerous weapon specially prohibited by regulation to be in the possession of pris'ners—which he has?"

Tuff looks stupidly at Duncan; Duncan regards himself as stupidly; there is a forward craning of necks down the line, as crows ranged on a rock might protrude their beaks to watch the turning of a living substance into carrion.

For a second there is nothing to be seen by any one; Duncan's hands are, as per regulation, clapped at his sides. Where, what, can be the bar of steel?

The Civil Commandant, John Price, steps forward, pauses an instant to adjust his eyeglass, and with his index-finger touched the fatal object.

"Present this pris'ner after muster for having in his possession a dangerous weapon, and report yourself to the Doctor forthwith, Mr. Tuff, in order to have that weakness remedied. It's time something was done to correct your sight when you allow pris'ners—and gaol-gangers above all others—to carry bars of steel on their persons. Give me the book!"

The muster began, proceeded, ended. And then Duncan, Daniel, No.41-392, per *Westmoreland*, was presented at Court. Assistant-Superintendent Tuff presented and Civil Commandant John Price, acting as magistrate, presided. And Dr. Hampton, as an interested spectator, was accommodated with a seat.

"Defence, pris'ner?" demanded the Court. "What d'ye say?"

"Only that your boy brought it me. I was a-making him sails for his toy-boat when you transferred me, sir, and the little chap, when he see me yesterday, brought it me, sir, to finish 'em. From his mammy, he said, sir."

"You admit another offence as well? Holding communication with free person's children is illegal, and you know it. But we'll leave that to another day. No other defence?"

The prisoner held his breath. So did all the Court, save the Commandant and Dr. Hampton. They breathed easily enough, you may depend. Only a Secretary of State could affect their respiration.

"Then fifty lashes—and the wet quarry¹ for six months—and the article to be forfeited. May I ask your opinion, sir?"

"A very proper sentence in my judgement," approved the inspecting officer. "Very!"

¹ "Wet Quarry": The work in the quarry was so destructive to the gangers' clothes that, in the mercy of the System, they were permitted a second or working suit made of condemned blankets! The comfort and protection afforded by clothes composed of materials too rotten to be served out to a Norfolk Island dormitory may be inferred, but not valued! (P.W.)

And he gazed steadily into the eyeglass, and saw in the steely eyes an interpretation of the sentence which expressed his own mind. John Price had waited only three days.

Fame is a product of accident. So is infamy.

But it is questionable whether it was altogether by accident that Danny Duncan, per *Westmoreland*, became possessed of that common sewing-needle—size No.2.