



By TUA-O-RANGI.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

IN THE PLACE OF SKULLS—FROM THE OTHER WORLD
—SEEKING EGRESS—A HAPLESS WIGHT.

THREE days had elapsed since the fortuitous event which resulted in the lodgment of the man of many *chances* within the cave by the seashore, and he had not yet recovered consciousness. Nightly had he been visited by his valet, who pillowed his head, covered his limbs with warm rugs, and devoted the long hours of darkness to watching by his side, and administering remedies designed to allay internal pain, and gradually overcome the shock his system must have sustained. Arnaud had made a thorough examination without finding any material fractures save those near the wrists, although both hands were terribly smashed and swollen. The valet, however, seemed to consider them not worth a second thought, merely curling his lip as he took in the fact that the shapeliness on which the owner had prided himself was spoiled for ever.

So far the wretched man had lain as his factotum placed him, an inert mass, too sunk in stupor to make the least movement of body or limbs; but on the third night a restlessness set in, an uneasy writhing of body, a quivering of the heavy limbs, as though he were awaking to pain. He muttered, too, from time to time inarticulately, and again fell into stupor. So on during the early hours of the night. Then he began to dream, horrid dreams to judge by his contortions and incoherent mutterings—not, strange to say, about the dreadful circumstances immediately preceding his present sorry plight, but of events farther gone. He seemed to be going over confusedly the last dreadful scenes of his life with Eleanor Radcliffe, and he who had never known the voice of conscience was evidently now in his helpless misery undergoing its torturing accusations. As the slow minutes passed vision chased vision through his awakening brain, and at last, with a cry of agony, as though Nemesis had laid his heavy hand upon his shoulder, he awoke, and sat bolt upright, staring about and trying with dazed eyes to peer through the sepulchral gloom, at the same time wondering vaguely how he came there. The air was chilly, and an unpleasantly musty odour saluted his nostrils, but the darkness allowed him to distinguish nothing of his surroundings. The endeavour to recollect, to recall something which should explain to himself his position, fatigued him, and mechanically he raised his hand to press his aching brow, but the sudden uplifting of the injured limb sent a thrill of pain shooting through every nerve, just as a rush of recollection brought back the awful sensations which preceded his fall. And now cruel pains began to make themselves felt through his bruised and shaken body, while his fractured arm, and worse still, the stiff and untended hands caused him acutest agony. Where was he? And what ailed him? His physical anguish almost took away the power of thought, but still the questions obtruded themselves. He spoke, and his hollow tones were given back in startling echoes. He stretched out his arms but they came in contact with nothing. He tried to feel the material of the floor beneath him, but his swollen and lacerated fingers had lost all sense of touch. He essayed to rise, but the attempt to aid his enfeebled nether limbs with the superior caused him such horrible pain that he fainted away.

When he came to again, some time subsequently, his lodging was no longer absolutely dark. A pale flickering light threw into relief dark broken walls, and lost itself in inky shadows. Nowhere about him was any object clearly defined, and whether he was in a dungeon, cave, or ruined hall, he could not determine, although he ap-

plied to the question all the wit which awoke with him. A resinous suffocating odour blent with the sickly smell which he had noticed before, but look which way he would he could not discern from whence the faint light proceeded. With difficulty he again sat up, trying hard to make out objects. Presently a creepy feeling came over him. Was it fancy, or were those really death-heads over there in a row grinning at him? He must be dreaming again surely, and he closed his eyes for an instant, opening them wide the next to make sure. Death-heads! unmistakably, death-heads! and beneath them skeletons! one, two, three, four—Good God! there were dozens of them! What was this? Where was he? His brain reeled. The skeletons seemed coming toward him. Certainly they moved, or was it the play of the uncertain light, which wavered strangely? Where were they? Had he been thought dead and placed in a tomb? He had heard of Maori cave tombs, and, as in the midst of his agony past events, remote and near, trooped in mental review, he concluded himself incarcerated in one of these Golgothas. Had he previously taken more pains to be accurately informed, he would have known better, but his knowledge of Maori institutions was limited, and his mental condition hazy.

While he glared, with starting eyeballs and twitching muscles, at the fleshless forms paraded in front of him, the light became fainter, the heavy shadows grew blacker yet, and scarce by straining his eyes to the utmost could he perceive his skeleton companions. Terror thrilled him. The light was fading out. Great beads of perspiration broke out on his forehead. It was bad enough to find the dead-bearing him company, but to be alone with them in the dark—Horror! His nerves had been terribly shaken, and doubtless he missed his cognac, for his ordinary stoicism, his scoffing courage, had vanished completely. He had quite forgotten it, and beside himself with affright, he again attempted to rise. But at the moment his attention was caught by a faint distant gleam of bluish light, opposite to him, but at a considerable distance, in the heart of a desert of blackness. The light was curious, and it instantly rivetted his gaze, so that he forgot his intention, his neighbours, and indeed all save itself. It was not the small flame of lamp or candle, but a luminous cloud, as it were, in the midst of the thick darkness; and as he gazed, it slowly advanced towards him, not lighting up the darkness, but gleaming through it, plainly enough, but cold and pale. And now he could have sworn its form was changing. It seemed to lengthen and grow slither, and still, with an almost imperceptible motion, it drew near, and ever nearer. Surely it was a female form, tall and ghostly, with trailing robes of woven light. What could it be? On, on it came, straight towards him, but lingeringly, as a summer cloud floats through the languid air of noon. All around was blackness. Even the grinning skulls and erected skeletons were invisible, but it seemed to grow whiter as it came, not with the cleery light which, shedding its rays abroad, brightens surrounding objects, but with a cold, opalescent gleam which accentuated the darkness; and as with stiffening hair and starting eyes the unhappy man awaited its closer proximity he recognized it—not a flame, nor a nebulous cloud, nor a will-o'-the-wisp, nor any of the fantastic suggestions of his brain—but his wife, the murdered Eleanor! In soft flowing draperies such as she wore when last he saw her, only gleaming now as with a phosphorescent light, gliding like a phantom, towering above him like the queen of a ghostly realm. Yes, it was she. She halted within half-a-dozen paces of him. He could see her clearly—her robes of snowy white, her falling tresses of raven blackness, her glittering eyes, and regal aspect. But her

face was sternly set, and her eyes like those of a basilisk. She compelled his gaze; her look appalled him, and yet he could neither faint nor flee, but cowering there in physical anguish and mental prostration, he knew himself at her mercy. He would fain have covered his face to shut her out from his sight, but she held his eyes pitilessly. From the other world she had come, he felt—the other world in which he had never believed, at which he had scoffed profanely. He had left her dead, he was sure of that, yet here she was confronting him, but like no creature of flesh and blood. Slenderer, more ethereal than Eleanor Radcliffe had ever been, she appeared preternaturally tall, and her translucent robes were gleaming with unearthly lustre. Here, too, in this abode of the dead, of all places! All this and more passed swiftly through his distempered brain, as his strained eyes answered her piercing gaze. His head was in a whirl, and his blood seemed to turn to lead, but his eyelids dared not fall. Not a sound, not the faintest rustle had so far broken the awful stillness. In silence befitting the tomb, like a dumbly accusing spirit she stood over him, pitiless and cold as one who dwelt among shadows.

But suddenly a sound fell on his ear, the sound of weird laughter. Ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha! The effect was appalling, for instantly from every recess and gallery came back the hollow echoes, until his reeling brain was convinced that his unwelcome presence had interrupted a ghostly carnival, for surely a legion of spirits would be needed to keep up that uncanny merriment, cruel, cold, mocking, unearthly. The sounds grew fainter presently, and even more ghostly, until at length they died whisperingly away in the gloomy distance. His blanched cheek had become ashen, his muscles twitched convulsively, but she, whose eyes had never wavered, still held his enchained. And now she spoke in sepulchral tones, attenuated (if the phrase may pass) as her *spirituelle* form.

'So, Jacques le Blanc, we have met again.'

Like the touch of icy steel her tones chilled his blood and he shivered.

'Thou tremblest, unworthy wretch!' she went on, 'but fear me not yet. Thy race is not quite run. Thou shalt drain the cup of earthly anguish, and then, when thou callest upon death to deliver thee, then, blood-stained soul shall thy punishment begin. In life thou hast called evil good and good evil, but after death will come retribution, and vainly then shalt thou plead for pity—thou who hast shewn none—and in thy anguish call upon the rocks to hide thee from infinite wrath, for thou art already condemned, and those who shall gather round thee in the spirit world whether thou hastest, will laugh at thy calamity, and mock at thy fears.'

She ceased, and once again, but louder, shriller, more fiendishly derisive, rang out that awful laughter, Ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha! and as peal after peal reverberated through the sombre galleries, the guilty sufferer sank back heavily in a deathlike swoon.

Hours might have passed; it seemed to himself that ages had done so ere consciousness returned to the wretched man. Wearily, languidly, he awoke, remembering nothing at first, but presently recalling all the horrors of his recent experiences and present position. The cave was once more in total darkness, and its faint cold odours chilled and sickened him. One thought above the dreadful sensations evoked by memory possessed him. It was how to find a way out of the charnel house. To seek it might involve terrible perils, but remain stationary he could not. No possible horrors could exceed those he had passed through, and death, ay, hell itself were preferable to waiting quietly there for *Aer* re-appearances. Painfully he raised himself once again into a sitting posture. Blindness might have overtaken him for all he could see, and his arms were worse than useless; in their present disabled condition they were actual encumbrances. But after a bit he got on his knees, and in this way, with variations, shuffled some distance, but his progress was necessarily slow in the extreme, and he was tortured by the ever present fear that in the darkness he might be turning his back on the entrance, and thus literally leaving salvation behind him. The darkness continued, but after some time he was conscious of a change in the atmosphere. It was colder, and certainly purer. Surely then he must be nearing the entrance. He trembled with hope and again shuffled on. Once or twice he managed to stand for a moment, but weakness soon brought him to his knees again, and feverishly he strove to hasten on. At last he halted and tried to think calmly. The fresher air was undoubtedly coming from above, and yet he could detect no opening, not a chink through which it could come. Better perhaps to wait awhile. Possibly it was night in the outer world. If so light might reach him in time. If not, better here, though it was very cold, than breathing the offensive air of his former resting place, where horrible skeletons grinned at him in the awful darkness.

But as he crouched, fearfully waiting for signs of the dawn, he thought he detected the sound of water—of water breaking against rocks, breaking gently, lapping with a soft monotonous flow. He raised his head, listening intently. Yes, there was no doubt of it. The sound was muffled, but it was unmistakably the wash of the tide. He must still be by the sea shore then. But now a new dread assailed him. He had no idea either as to how he had been brought to the cave, nor what time had elapsed since his capture at Motu Arohia, and fancying that this might be the first tide since, he wondered nervously how high it would rise, and whether the cave were beyond inundation. Truly life did not offer him much just now, and yet he shrank appalled at the thought of dying. He waited, listening, with impatient eyes turned upwards towards the fresh incoming air. By and by over his head a faint band of dull grey light appeared, and as he rose eagerly to his feet in his joy at the sight, a streak of golden sunshine shot athwart the rocky roof above him and vanished, its evanescent gleam making the darkness seem deeper than before. His dazed eyes closed despairingly, and he sank down disheartened, but finding after a time that still a little dim light was struggling in, he plucked up heart, and essayed to clamber over the rough rock masses which interposed between