

The Dice

By H. F. W. Tatham

The dead man lay in his blood in the highway. So much Coopar could see at a glance, and on stooping down he perceived that he had been stabbed from behind through the heart. Only a quarter of an hour before the man had left the tavern where he and his fellow-soldiers had been drinking, and now he was dead. Coopar remembered, with a feeling of deep regret, the bitter words that had often passed between them, and how that evening the smouldering anger had broken out into a downright quarrel, which would have come to blows had not their comrades kept them apart. Threats had been used on both sides—threats perhaps not really meant—of vengeance to be exacted at an early date. And now the man was dead—and mutual reconciliation and forgiveness were in this world impossible.

Coopar was roused from his regrets by the gleam of a lantern—it was the corporal's guard coming along the road. Then in a moment it flashed into his mind that he might be suspected of the murder, and he did the most foolish thing he could—tried to slip away unseen. But a cry was raised—in a moment he was seized by a man coming the opposite way, and after a few minutes he was marched off between two comrades to the guard-room.

He passed a night of anguish, and the next morning was brought up for examination. Things looked black against him, and it was only his previous good character that kept him from instant condemnation. The report of the quarrel, and the threats used by himself, told heavily against him. Jealousy—for both men loved the same girl—supplied an ample motive, and his conduct before his arrest in trying to fly did not look like that of an innocent man. But, finally, he was remanded for further inquiries to be made into the circumstances.

A day passed miserably. Meanwhile (though Coopar was not yet told of it) it was found that the dead man had been robbed of money that he had shown boastfully in the inn just before leaving it. As no money was found on Coopar, and he could scarcely have had time to rid himself of it before his arrest, this told somewhat in his favour. But still he was kept in prison, and public opinion on the whole was against him.

On the second night after the remand he was sitting miserably in his cell, with the Bible, the only book he was allowed, before him. Suddenly there came into his mind an old superstition, that an omen could be drawn from a Bible suddenly opened, if the verse the eye first fell on were taken as conveying it.

He thought he would try this. Opening the Bible at random, and drawing a pencil he had with him along the page, he looked at the words underlined; they came from the book of Joshua, and they were, 'It was hid in his tent.' This seemed obscure and meaningless, so once more he tried; this time he opened the Bible further on, at the Book of the Acts, and, marking words again, he read, 'And they cast lots.' The third time the Bible opened at a passage in Daniel; and these were the words, 'It brake in pieces.'

He could make nothing of these quotations; but in the morning there came to him the man who was to plead his cause, and he told him about the lost money, and the first quotation seemed to Coopar then as if it might have some bearing on the situation. He begged his advocate to obtain an order from the general to have all the tents in the army searched, and see if money could be found in any of them. The advocate went away to get this accomplished, if it were possible, and Coopar was once more left alone; but he now felt much comforted, and hoped for better things.

With some difficulty the advocate persuaded the general to order the search to be made, and it took place in the evening of the same day, care being taken that the soldiers should get no previous hint of the general's intention. The result was not conclusive in any way; in fact, as the coins that the dead man had had on him were not to be identified by marks or any other peculiarity, it could not well be so; but the fact emerged that the only man in whose tent coins were found really concealed, and that elaborately and carefully, was a certain Lewis, a man whose evidence at the trial, given with apparent reluctance, had done much harm to Coopar; for it had established the fact that a bitter feeling had long existed between the two men, and that the quarrel at the inn was no mere sudden outburst; though as to that quarrel Lewis had not been able to give much evidence, having left the inn some time previous to the departure of the dead man.

Opinions were sharply divided in the army as to the likelihood of the guilt of one or other of the two men. Coopar was the more popular, but on the other hand the evidence, though very far from conclusive, was the stronger against him; and many people thought when the trial was resumed that he would be found guilty. The general conducted the investigation entirely as he chose to arrange it; and there was no one at that date (it was over two hundred years ago) or in that country to dispute the arrangements; so that both men were called up at the adjourned investigation and successively questioned. Both showed firmness, and looked their questioners in the face in an unmoved manner but it is always difficult to distinguish the strength of conscious innocence from the brazen assurance of hardened guilt, and the investigation seemed likely to throw little further light on the subject. Then suddenly an inspiration came to Coopar. He thought of the second quotation, 'And they cast lots.' It never struck him that the appeal to lots would be presumptuous, and might turn out in such a way as to condemn the innocent—for the ways of Providence in this world are inscrutable, and sometimes no man can see where its justice lies. He appealed to the general.

At that date and in that country such an appeal was not without precedent. The time of ordeals was not long past, and men had plenty of examples to quote, apart from their knowledge of how lots were cast in the Bible. Moreover, the other prisoner made no objection; to do so would probably in the eyes of those present have been to own his guilt. So after the general had consulted for a time with the officers who were there, leave to use the lots was given. The only question was what exact form the appeal to the arbitration of chance was to take. It was determined, after some consultation, that the prisoners were to throw with dice—the thrower of the higher number to be held innocent. Accordingly a dice-box and dice were produced, and it was decided that as Coopar had, so to speak, been the challenger in the matter, Lewis should throw first. They were to throw three times, in case the two first throws did not decide in favour of the same person. Lewis took the box in his hand. He looked pale, but his hand was firm, and he shook the dice gently and let them roll out. Five and four dots appeared on each of the uppermost sides respectively. A good throw; but not impossible to beat.

The dice were put in the box, and Coopar took it and, with a silent prayer, shook it and threw. Five appeared on each die; he had won the first throw.

It was now his turn to throw first in the second attempt. He scarcely shook the box, and let the dice fall. His spirits rose when he looked at them, and saw the numbers were six and four. Lewis plucked at his moustache, but he assumed a jaunty smile as once more he took the box in his hand. Carelessly he shook it, and the dice fell out. The spectators looked eagerly at them, and Coopar's heart stood still. The numbers were six and five.

The throws were even, the numbers on the dice were even. All hung on the last throw. There was a silence in which a pin might have been heard to drop, as Lewis once more advanced to the table.

Coopar shut his eyes as he heard the dice rattle in the box. Visions passed before his mind; on one side life and liberty, on the other side condemnation and a shameful death. He heard the dice fall, and a gasp of surprise from the onlookers. Slowly he turned his gaze on the table. There were the dice, with their serried rows of black spots; double sixes.

Everything turned black before his eyes; he saw the gallows loom near, he heard the execrations of the crowd, he almost fancied he could feel the executioner's fingers at his neck. Then he felt the dice-box thrust into his hand; and he realised that he yet had a chance; and as he realised this, and once more prayed, the third quotation came into his mind. Scarcely realising why, he grasped the box tightly, and flung the dice hard out of its mouth.

One struck the table and lay there; the other fell with a crashing sound on the stone floor. Coopar, with haggard eyes, saw that the six was uppermost on the die that lay on the table; but what of the other? Hardly daring to look, he cast his eyes upon the ground. The die was in two halves, and each half lay on its broken side. On the nearer half he could see one mark; on the other—what was there? He could hardly believe his eyes when he saw that it was a six.

The general started forward. 'It is the finger of God,' he cried. 'He has thrown thirteen!'

There was a moment's silence; then Lewis, who had stared at the broken pieces with a look of the intensest fear and horror, fell upon his knees, and in a broken voice sobbed out the confession of his crime. No need to tell how by his cowardly murder he had hoped to destroy his principal creditor and enrich himself besides; and how he had not scrupled to allow another man to risk condemnation for it. But the fatality of the broken die was too much for his nature, superstitious though unbelieving as it was and his confession left Coopar acquitted in the eyes of all those who might not have believed that the fall of the dice was providential, as well as of the majority who only saw in the event the direct interposition of Heaven.