

**Half A Chance**

**By**

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## PART ONE

### CHAPTER I

#### MR. GILLETT'S CHARGE

"By all means, m'deah, let's go down between decks and have a look at them."

"Of course, if you wish, Sir Charles, although--Do you think we shall be edified, Mr. Gillett?"

"That depends, m'lady,"--and the speaker, a man with official manners and ferret-like eyes, shifted from one foot to another,--"on what degree, or particular class of criminal your ladyship would be interested in," he added. "If in the ordinary category of skittle sharper or thimblerrigger," with a suspicion of mild scorn, "then I do not imagine your ladyship would find much attraction in the present cargo. But, on the other hand," in a livelier tone, "if your ladyship has any curiosity, or shall we say, a psychological bent, regarding the real out-and-outer, the excursion should be to your liking. For," rubbing his hands, "a properer lot of cutthroats and bad magmen, it has never been my privilege to escort across the equator; and this is my sixth trip to Australia!"

"How interesting! How very interesting!" The lady's voice floated languidly. "Sir Charles is quite right. We must really go down. At any rate, it will be a change, after having been shut up so long in that terrible state-room."

"One moment, m'lady! There's a little formality that must be observed first."

"Formality?" And the lady, who was of portly appearance and uncertain age, gazed from the speaker standing deferentially before her, to a man of size, weight and importance seated in a comfortable chair at her side. "What does he mean, Sir Charles?"

"Regulations, m'lady--m'lord!" was the answer. "No one allowed on the prisoners' deck without the captain's permission. There he is now."

"Then be good enough to beckon to him!" said the lady.

But this Mr. Gillett, agent of the police, discreetly declined to do; Captain Macpherson was a man not to be beckoned to by any one; much less by him. As he stood squarely in the center of the ship, he looked like a mariner capable of commanding his boat and all the people aboard; indeed, some of the characteristics of his vessel seemed to have entered into his own make-up; the man matched the craft. Broad-nosed, wide of beam, big, massive, obstinate-looking, the Lord Nelson plowed aggressively through the seas. With every square sail tugging hard at

her sturdy masts, she smote and over-rode the waves, and, beating them down, maintained an unvarying, stubborn poise. But although she refused to vacillate or shuffle to the wooing efforts of the uneasy waters, she progressed not without noise and pother; foamed and fumed mightily at the bow and left behind her a wake, receding almost as far as the eyes might reach. Captain Macpherson looked after the bubbles, cast his glance aloft at the bulging patches of white, and then condescended to observe the agent of the police who had silently approached.

"Sir Charles and lady, and Sir Charles' party have expressed, Captain Macpherson, the desire to obtain permission to visit the prisoners' deck."

Captain Macpherson looked toward Sir Charles and his lady, the other passengers lounging around them, a little girl, at the rail, her hair, blown windward, a splash of gold against the blue sky. "What for?" said the skipper brusquely.

"To have a look at the convicts, I suppose."

"What good'll that do them?" growled the commander. "Idle curiosity, that's what I call it. Well, go along. Only, I'll hold you accountable, and bear this in your mind, no tracts!"

"I don't think," replied Mr. Gillett with some asperity, "you need be apprehensive on that score, Captain Macpherson. Sir Charles and m'lady

are not that sort."

"Well, keep them away from the bars. The weather has nae improved the tempers of a few of the rascallions, and they'd like naught better than a chance for their claws."

"Thanks for the permission, and," a little stiffly, "the admonition, which latter," turning away, "a man whose lifelong profession has been dealing with convicts is most likely to stand in need of and heed."

Captain Macpherson frowned, stumped the other way, then looked once more aloft, and, by the exercise of that ingenuity peculiarly his own, found new tasks for the sailors. Aboard any ship, especially a ship of this character, it was his theory and practice that discipline could not be too strictly maintained and the men on the Lord Nelson knew no idle moments.

"May I go, too?"

The child with the golden hair desisted in her occupation of watching the flying-fish and other real-winged creatures, and, leaving the rail, walked toward the group that was about to follow Mr. Gillett. She was a very beautiful girl of ten or eleven; slim, delicately fashioned, of a definite proud type. But although she held herself erect, in an unconscious patrician sort of way, there was, also, about her something wayward and different from the conventional, aristocratic set. The

disordered golden hair proclaimed it, while in the depths of the fine, blue eyes manifold changing lights told of a capriciousness out of the pale of a stiffly decorous and well-contained caste.

"May I go, too, aunt?" she repeated.

"Why, of course!" interposed a blasé, cynical-appearing young man who had just emerged from the cabin. "Don't know where she wants to go, or what she wants to do; but don't say she can't; really you mustn't, now."

"Well, since you insist on spoiling her, Lord Ronsdale--"

He twisted a blond mustache which adorned a handsome face that bore many marks of what is called experience of the world. "Couldn't do that! Besides, Jocelyn and I are great chums, don't you know. We're going to be married some day when she grows up."

"\_Are\_ we?" said the child. "The man I marry must be very big and strong, and must not have light hair."

Lord Ronsdale laughed tolerantly.

"Plenty of time for you to change your mind, don't you know. Meanwhile, I'll not despair. Faint heart, and so on. But," turning to Sir Charles, "where is it she 'wants to go?'"

"To see the convicts."

"Convicts? Ah!" He spoke rather more quickly than usual, with accent sharper.

"You didn't know who your neighbors were going to be when you decided so suddenly to accompany us?"

"No." His voice had a metallic sound.

Sir Charles addressed Mr. Gillett. "Tell us something more definite about your charges whom we are going to inspect. Meant to have found out earlier in the voyage, but been so jolly seasick, what with one gale after another, I for one, until now, haven't much cared whether we had Claude Duval and Dick Turpin themselves for neighbors, or whether we all went straight to Davy Jones' locker together. A bad lot, you have already informed us! But how bad?"

"Well, we haven't exactly M. Duval or Mr. Turpin in the pen, but we've one or two others almost as celebrated in their way. There's Billy Burke, as desperate a cracksman as the country can produce, with," complacently, "a record second to none in his class. He"--and Mr. Gillett, with considerable zest entered into the details of Mr. Burke's eventful and rapacious career. "Then there's the 'Frisco Pet,' or the 'Pride of Golden Gate,' as some of the sporting papers call him."

"The 'Frisco Pet!" Lord Ronsdale started; his color slightly changed; his lashes drooped over his cold eyes. "He is on board this vessel?"

"Yes; you remember him, my Lord, I dare say?"

"In common with many others," shortly.

"Many of the gentry and titled classes did honor him with their attention, I believe."

"Why," asked Jocelyn, whose blue eyes were fastened very intently on the face of the police agent, "did they call him such a funny name, the 'Frisco Pet?"

"Because he's a yankee bruiser, prize-fighter, or was, before the drink got him," explained Mr. Gillett. "And originally, I believe, he hailed from the land of the free. Some one brought him to London, found out about his 'talents' and put him in training. He was a low, ignorant sailor; could scarcely write his own name; but he had biceps and a thick head. Didn't know when he was whipped. I can see him yet, as he used to look, with his giant shoulders and his swagger as he stepped into the ring. There was no nonsense about him--or his fist; could break a board with that. And how the shouts used to go up; 'the pet!' 'a quid on the pet!' 'ten bob on the stars and stripes!' meaning the costume he wore. Oh, he was a favorite in Camden Town! But one night he failed them; met some friends from the forecastle of a Yankee trader that had dropped

down the Thames. Went into the ring with a stagger added to the swagger. Well, they took him out unconscious; never was a man worse punished. He never got back to the sawdust, and the sporting gentlemen lost a bright and shining light."

"Broke his heart, I suppose," observed Sir Charles.

"How could that break his heart?" asked the child wonderingly. "I thought when people had their hearts broken--"

"Jocelyn, don't interrupt!" said the wife of Sir Charles. "Although," to her husband, in a lower tone, "I must confess these details a little tiresome!"

"Not a bit!" Sir Charles' voice rose in lively protest. "I remember out in Australia reading about the fellow in the sporting papers from home, and wondering what had become of him. So that was it? Go on, Mr. Gillett! With your permission, m'love!"

The police agent proceeded. "After that it was a case of the rum and the toss-pots, and when he was three sheets in the wind, look out for squalls! He got put in quad, broke out, overpowered and nearly killed two guards. Took to various means of livelihood, until they got him again. Trouble in prison; transferred to the solitary with a little punishment thrown in for a reminder. When he got out of limbo again, he lived in bad company, in one of the tunnels near the Adelphi; hard place

for the police to rout a cove from. Then followed a series of rough bungling jobs he was supposed to have been mixed up in. At any rate, he got the credit. More hazards than loot! He had too heavy fingers for anything fine; but he made it quite interesting for the police, quite interesting! So much so, he attracted \_me\_, and I concluded to take a hand, to direct the campaign against him, as it were."

Mr. Gillett paused; obviously in his case egotism allied to enthusiasm made his duties a pleasure; he seemed now briefly commending himself in his own mind. "Up to this time," he resumed, "our friend, the ex-pugilist, had never actually killed any one, but soon after I engaged myself to look after him, word was brought to the department that a poor woman had been murdered, a cheap music-hall dancer. She had seen better days, however."

Lord Ronsdale, who had been looking away, yawned, as if finding the police agent "wordy," then strolled to the rail.

"Suspicion pointed strongly in his direction; and we got him after a struggle. It was a hard fight, without a referee, and maybe we used him a little rough, but we had to. Then Dandy Joe was brought in. Joe's a plain, mean little gambler and race-track follower, with courage not big enough for broad operations. But he had a wide knowledge of what we term the thieves' catacombs, and, well, he 'peached' on the big fellow. Gave testimony that was of great service to the prosecution. The case seemed clear enough; there was some sort of contrary evidence put in, but it

didn't amount to anything. His record was against him and he got a heavy sentence, with death as a penalty, if he ever sets foot in England again."

"What," asked Mr. Gillett's youngest listener, "is 'peached'?"

"In school-girl parlance, it is, I believe, to 'tell on' some one."

"You mean a tattle-tale?" scornfully. "I hate them."

"They have their uses," he answered softly. "And I'm rather partial to them, myself. But if you are ready, m'lord--m'lady--"

"Quite! Egad! I'm curious to have a look at the fellow. Used to like to see a good honest set-to myself occasionally, before I became--ahem!--governor!" And rising with alacrity, Sir Charles assisted his lady from her chair. "Coming, Ronsdale?"

"Believe I won't go down," drawled the nobleman at the rail. "Air better up here," he explained.

Sir Charles laughed, got together the other members of his party and all followed Mr. Gillett to a narrow companion way. There a strong iron door stopped their progress, but, taking a key from his pocket the police agent thrust it into a great padlock, gave it a turn, and swung back the barrier. Before them stretched a long aisle; at each end stood a

soldier, with musket; on one side were the cells, small, heavily-barred. The closeness of the air was particularly and disagreeably noticeable; here sunlight never entered, and the sullen beating of the waves against the wooden shell was the only sound that disturbed the tomb-like stillness of the place.

One or two of the party looked soberer; the child's eyes were large with awe and wonder; she regarded, not without dread, something moving, a shape, a human form in each terrible little coop. But Mr. Gillett's face shone with livelier emotions; he peered into the cells at his charges with a keen bright gaze that had in it something of the animal tamer's zest for his part.

"Well, how are we all to-day?" he observed in his most animated manner to the guard. "All doing well?"

"Number Six complained of being ill, but I say it's only the dumps. Number Fourteen's been garrulous."

"Garrulous, eh? Not a little flighty?" The guard nodded; Mr. Gillett whispered a few instructions, asked a number of other questions. Meanwhile the child had paused before one of the cells and, fascinated, was gazing within. What was it that held her? the pity of the spectacle? the terror of it? Her blue eyes continued to rest on the convict, a young fellow of no more than one-and-twenty, of magnificent proportions, but with face sodden and brutish. For his part he looked at her,

open-mouthed, with an expression of stupid surprise at the sight of the figure so daintily and slenderly fashioned, at the tangles of bright golden hair that seemed to have imprisoned some of the sunshine from above.

"Well, I'm blown!" he muttered hoarsely. "Where'd you come from? Looks like one o' them bally Christmas dolls had dropped off'n some counter in Fleet Street and got in here by mistake!"

A mist sprang to the blue eyes; she held her white, pretty fingers tight against her breast. "It must be terrible--here"--she said falteringly.

The convict laughed harshly. "Hell!" he said laconically.

The child trembled. "I'm sorry," she managed to say.

The fierce dark eyes stared at her. "What for?"

"Because--you have to stay here--"

"Well, I'm--" But this time he apparently found no adequate adjective.

"If this ain't the rummiest Christmas doll!"

She put out her hand. "Here's something for you, poor man," she said, as steadily as she could. "It's my King George gold piece, date 1762, and belonged to my father who wore it on his watch chain and who is dead.

Perhaps they'll let you buy something with it."

He looked at the hand. "If she ain't stickin' out her duke to me, right through the bars. Blamed if she ain't! Looks like a lily! A bally white lily!" he repeated wonderingly. "One of them kind we wonst run acrost when the Cap. turned us adrift on an island, jest to waller in green grass!"

"Don't you want it?" said the child.

He extended a great, coarse hand hesitatingly, as if half-minded to and half-minded not to touch the white finger-tips.

"You ain't afraid?"

The golden head shook ever so slightly; again the big hand went toward the small one, then suddenly dropped.

"Right this way m'lord--m'lady!" The face of the convict abruptly changed; fury, hatred, a blind instinct to kill were unmistakably revealed in his countenance as he heard the bland voice of the police agent. From the child's hand the gold disk fell and rolled under the wooden slab that served as a couch in the cell.

"Jocelyn!" The expostulating tones of the governor's wife preceded the approach of the party. "What are you doing, child, so near the bars?"

"Good heavens!" Mr. Gillett seized the girl's arm and abruptly drew her away. "My dear little lady!" he said. "Really you don't know the danger you run. And near that cell of all of them!"

"That cell?" observed Sir Charles. "Then that is--"

"The convict I was telling you about! The 'Pet of 'Frisco.' The 'Pride of Golden Gate.'"

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