

Recent Escapes from Gaol.

BY MAJOR ARTHUR GRIFFITHS.



ALL escapes from prison have a family likeness. The breaking out or durance, whether successful or not, is governed by much the same conditions now as in the past. It is only made possible by the neglect of due precautions by warders or the superior intelligence of captives, whose ingenuity in contrivance, promptitude in seizing opportunity, and boldness in facing risk have defeated the combined restrictions of chains and bolts and bars. Certainly escapes are less frequent nowadays; constant watchfulness and close personal supervision are more effective than massive walls; moral has done more than physical restraint. Yet all these are still evaded at times. At the great convict prisons numbers are worked in almost semi-freedom beyond the prison boundaries, and generally quite securely. For instance, at Borstal, near Chatham, they are sent out by rail several miles, in curious special narrow-gauge trains, under escort, locked in, and are employed in building extensive fortifications, coming and going within the circuit of sentries as freely as ordinary navvies. Yet even here they will make a bold bid for liberty; following some sudden uncontrollable impulse, they will run the gauntlet of rifle shots, and occasionally get clear away. Many ingenious devices have been tried at the convict prisons to compass escape. The main object is to secure concealment or disguise. In one case a man, who was employed with others stacking bricks, arranged a hiding place for himself in the middle of the stack. Here, when the officer's eye was off him, he lay down full length, and then each friendly comrade as he

passed laid on him the bricks he was carrying. By this clever device he was quickly buried out of sight, and only his fellows who were still loyal to him had any knowledge of what had become of him. He lay close while the hunt was made and at the narrow risk of suffocation; after night-fall he got away.

In another very similar case at Portland the would-be fugitive allowed himself to be interred in a trench, which was soon lightly covered over with earth. Here, again, all search seemed absolutely fruitless, but the warders, being satisfied that the man could not have left the island, took to prodding the ground near where the escape had occurred with their bayonets, and when one of these pricked the convict below, a howl immediately betrayed him.

Disguises are obviously difficult to obtain by prisoners, but they have been devised out of the most unpromising materials. The "cleaning rags," as they are called—odd pieces of flannel and cloth, only a few inches square, given out to clean tinware—have even been patiently and secretly stitched together into the semblance of a suit of clothes, stained dark by soot or ashes brought in from the works. A suit of this kind was put on next the skin and under the prison clothing, all of which is covered with the tell-tale brand of the Government Broad Arrow, and the convict boldly



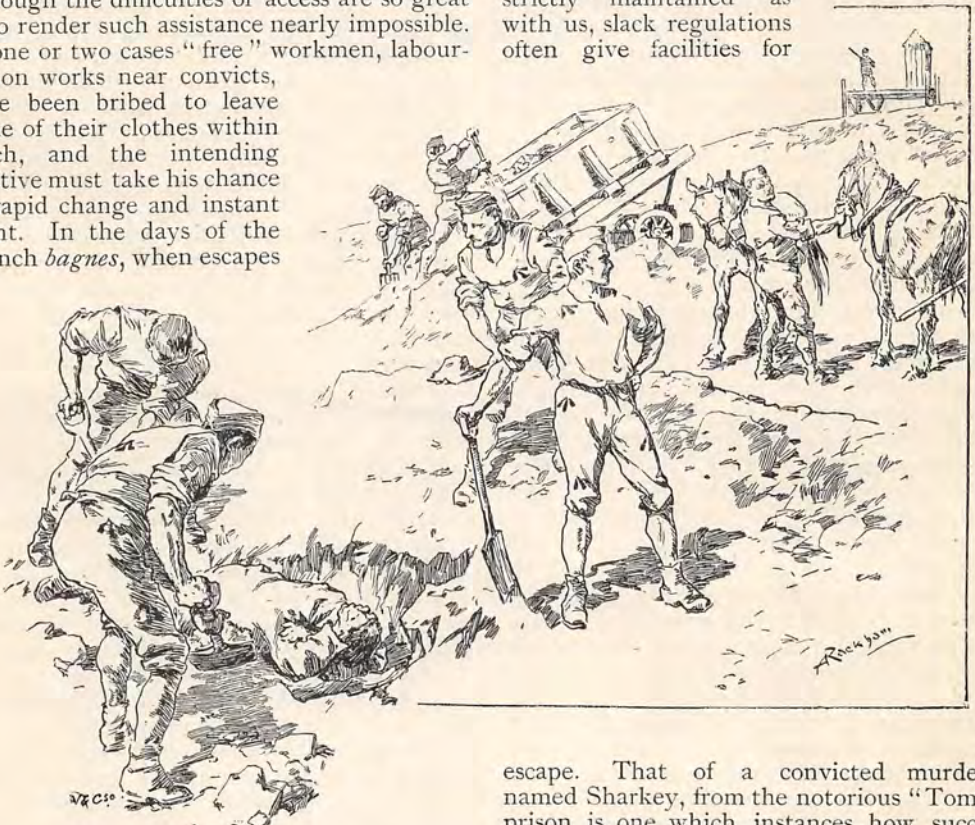
JACKSON'S ESCAPE FROM
WAKEFIELD.

issued forth, hoping to pass the ordeal of "searching," which is strictly performed on all prisoners going out to work or returning therefrom. One whole party is, however, detailed daily to be sent to the bath-house to be stripped completely, and, as ill luck would have it, that of the convict with his flannel disguise was chosen on the very day he had decided to wear it and risk a bolt. Of course the attempt was frustrated. A great difficulty with escaping convicts is their boots; there is no changing them, no mistaking them or the footprint they make, for the nails in the soles are arranged in the form of a Broad Arrow, and every tread on dust or mud leaves the Government mark behind.

Disguises have been supplied by friends, although the difficulties of access are so great as to render such assistance nearly impossible. In one or two cases "free" workmen, labouring on works near convicts, have been bribed to leave some of their clothes within reach, and the intending fugitive must take his chance of rapid change and instant flight. In the days of the French *bagnes*, when escapes

New Caledonia, and there is a steady stream of fugitives homeward from Cayenne, who travel across the Atlantic as openly as ordinary passengers. An authentic story is told of a French convict in Cayenne, who was determined to see the French Exhibition of 1889, and escaped on purpose. He was present at the grand opening, and stood at no great distance from the President, very busily and profitably employed in his professional business of picking pockets. When he was, in due course, re-arrested on some offence and sentenced afresh to transportation, he proudly declared that half, at least, of his travelling expenses had been defrayed by the public.

In the United States, where prison discipline is not always so strictly maintained as with us, slack regulations often give facilities for



THE TRENCH AT PORTLAND.

were of constant occurrence, false beards have been furnished with the clothes; a hat to replace the *bonnet vert*, or green cap, which in France was the distinctive badge of the convict; a file and cold chisel to rid the runaway of his inevitable chains. Escapes nowadays in the French penal settlements abroad are also very frequent; whole boatloads get away from

escape. That of a convicted murderer, named Sharkey, from the notorious "Tombs" prison is one which instances how successful is craft joined to effrontery. Sharkey awaited execution, as the American manner is, for more than a year. During all that time he was regularly visited by his sweetheart, Maggie Jourdan, who was permitted to sit with him at his cell gate for hours and hours together. One day she came with a friend, another woman, who passed on to an upper floor, while Jourdan went as usual to sit with Sharkey. About one o'clock—very early for her—in the day she left the prison.

Soon afterwards another woman came downstairs, a woman of peculiar appearance, in a heavy woollen dress, who had broad shoulders covered by a black cloak, and was closely veiled. As she produced a ticket of admission granted to all visitors, there was no idea of detaining her; but by-and-by, when Maggie Jourdan's female friend came down, she was found to have lost her card. She had, in fact, given it to the murderer Sharkey, to whom a disguise had been brought, and with it, of course, a skeleton key to pass him through his cell door. There were the prison clothes in his cell when entered, and on a shelf the remains of his moustache, still covered with the lather of recent shaving. Both the women were arrested, and charged with complicity in this escape, but nothing was proved against them. Sharkey, evading all efforts to recapture him, eventually made his way to Cuba, where the Spanish authorities employed him as a spy upon the patriots, and he came in due course to a bad end.

A still more recent escape was made only the other day from the old Sing Sing Prison, on the River Hudson, which well illustrates the danger of combination. In this, one man got out of his cell by stratagem at the dead of night, overpowered his warder and forced him into the cell he had just vacated, locking him in, after taking possession of his keys; with these he was able to release a friend, and the two together then attacked and overpowered the second night watchman. Then three more prisoners were set free, but they refused the liberty thus unexpectedly brought to them. So the two first men climbed up into the skylight in the roof, and thence dropped down on the boundary wall. Sing Sing stands at the water's edge, the river flows close up under the walls, and anyone who reaches that can secure a boat. By the time the escape was discovered and pursuit organised, the fugitives had crossed the river and had got far away.

Ingenuity in seizing disguise has never been better displayed than in the escape of a female from Millbank only a few years ago. It must be premised that women seldom break prison; they are handicapped, obviously, in every way—costume, want of strength, and freedom of movement. But Eve's daughters make up for such drawbacks in artfulness. This woman was of exemplary character. Her offence had been a series of hotel robberies; and as she was somewhat superior to the ordinary run, quiet, moreover, and civil spoken, she was chosen as "cleaner"—a personal attendant of the matron of the prison. As such, she had constant access to the matron's quarters, and this, contrary to

regulation, at a time when she was only beginning her sentence. She made herself so useful, and was always so industrious and obliging, that she went in and out as she liked, while neither drawers nor cupboards were locked against her. One day the matron, when she came off duty, found no "cleaner" in her quarters. Some of her best clothes had also disappeared. The prisoner had taken advantage of the scant supervision she endured, had disguised herself from head to foot, even to her shoes, in articles of the matron's wardrobe, and then, with consummate hardihood, had presented herself at the main gates to be "let out." She was a private friend of the matron's, spending a few days with her, and was now on her way to do some shopping in town. The gate-keeper had no sort of suspicion that this neatly-dressed person was other than the matron's guest, and opened the gates to her without further question. However, she did not remain long at large. She was traced to a house in Chelsea, where she was recaptured, concealed under a bed. The matron's clothes were lying about in the same house; the fugitive's prison clothing, over which she had thrown her disguise, she had destroyed. This woman told her captors that her escape was not premeditated, the sudden temptation had overpowered her irresistibly when she saw the facilities offered for escape.

Impulse goes for much in these attempts, following tempting opportunities unexpectedly offered. Jackson, who murdered a warder at Manchester and escaped, could hardly have carried out his fell purpose had he not seen the sudden chance when closeted with the warder alone in an isolated house. Jackson was a clever plumber, and he was working at his trade when he saw the hammer handy and the officer off his guard. This Jackson was at the time "wanted" for a previous escape. He had got out of durance at Wakefield, not long before, by his daring adaptation of favourable circumstances. He was employed as an assistant in the reception ward, being a smart, active man, and while there the authorities had discovered a weak spot in the roof. The building was ventilated by a circular, hitherto unclosed, aperture, which it was thought safer to close by an iron grating. Before the grating was firmly fixed, Jackson found that he could not only move it up or down by the lever and string, but that there was just room for him to squeeze through it. The height was barely eight feet, as the building was all on the ground-floor. One day, when unobserved, he climbed up into the ventilator and put it to the test; but it was so tight a fit that he had to

strip his clothes off and draw them after him. There was a little loft above the ventilator, where he lay *perdu* for a time; then, removing a few slates in the roof, he emerged into daylight, and dropped down outside into the high road. There was a hue and cry after Jackson, but he managed to elude all pursuit, and probably would never have been arrested after the first escape had he not got away again with the brand of Cain upon him.

In our prisons of to-day, so well watched and guarded, stratagem still prevails, and the captive, whose mind is concentrated on one object, will sometimes beat the closest vigilance, the best precautions. One of the most remarkable of modern prison-breakers was a youth—he was little more—who escaped from Wakefield prison under very singular circumstances. This man, H., although young, was of much experience, and he was gifted with very quick perception and great powers of observation. H. was by trade a shoemaker, prison taught, and as such he was engaged almost from the time of his arrival in mending and cobbling shoes. This gave him the command of tools during a great part of the day, and access to certain material, a very necessary, even indispensable, aid to successful escape. At this prison in those days further assistance was unwittingly offered to would-be fugitives by the existence of often imperfectly secured traps in the cell doors. The "traps" or flap-openings were at one time used to give in the food rations and the supplies of material for daily handiwork. But latterly they had been abolished and bolted up, but the process had not been perfectly effective in every case.

H. was a convict undergoing his "separates," or first period of nine months' cellular confinement, and as such he did not leave his cell, except for chapel or exercise. Going and returning at those times, he stood facing his cell door, either till he got the order to march off or until a warder arrived with the key to let him in. H., during these long waits, had abundant leisure to notice that the small trap-door did not fasten securely, and more, that with a little humouring he could always open it from inside. This was a first great point gained. When a prisoner can get at the far side of his door to tamper with the cell lock, he is on the way to better things, for he can tamper with the key-hole which is only on the outside. H. found, when he had let down his trap, he could, by stretching his arm out through the opening, work easily at the key-hole.

His next business was to make some sort of skeleton key. Among the articles left in his cell was a small iron-bound tub for soaking

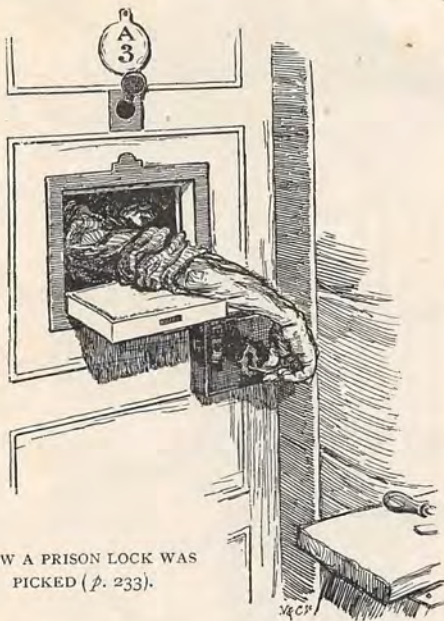
leather in. With his cobbler's rasp he filed off a long narrow strip of iron, which he fashioned with infinite pains and ingenuity into a pick-lock. The key had only one ward at right angles to the handle, and this handle was only a large loop of the metal bound round strongly with waxed thread. It was no doubt a long job, making and fitting this key; the work must be done in the night time when the watchman was at a distance, yet with extreme caution, for in the death-like stillness of the prison halls the slightest noise is heard. But the key was fitted in due course and used, for one night H. walked out of his cell. He now found more implements right under his hand. It was the custom at Wakefield to leave the shoemaker's bench and tools just outside the cell door, and here he picked up a mallet, a cobbler's knife, and a heavy file.

H. knew his way about the prison, for he had often been an inmate, and he went



"THE GATE-KEEPER HAD NO SORT OF SUSPICION THAT THIS NEATLY-DRESSED PERSON WAS OTHER THAN THE MATRON'S GUEST."

straight to what he remembered as a weak point—a cell on the top storey, connected by a ladder with the heating, or, rather, ventilating, apparatus in the roof. H. used his false key to enter this cell, found the ladder, went up it, drew it after him, closed the trap-door, and was so far out of reach. He had worked noiselessly hitherto, but now, having to get through the roof, he began to hammer at the wooden beams and knock about the slates. These sounds, more or less regular or continuous, betrayed him. The night patrols heard, and, fearing there was something wrong in the gaol, gave the alarm. Reserve warders were roused, the governor called up, and a number of officials ran in the direction of the noise. They traced it to above the closed trap-door, but were unable for a long time to penetrate to the upper level. When at last they broke through and clambered up, it was only to see the hole in the roof. Unfortunately no one thought of taking post in the yard or garden below, and it was by this route that H. made his escape. With great daring he committed himself to a water-pipe, which ran from the roof to the ground,



HOW A PRISON LOCK WAS
PICKED (p. 233).

and slid down it. He had the start after crossing the yard, and fortune still favoured him, for he found an empty house abutting on the boundary wall. By breaking a window on the ground floor he entered this house, ran upstairs and out on to the roof, whence he dropped into the fields outside. He was now absolutely free.

So far he had been greatly helped by his

luck no less than by his quick wits. After that, as we shall see, the tables were turned on him. Although he had left behind him an impudent message, written on his cell slate, to the effect that he had only escaped because he wished to develop an invention that was "to bring him many thousands and benefit the whole world," he went back to his old business—that of burglary. A first *coup* gave him the means to get to the south, and there he seized a good opportunity to break into a large shop or emporium, where he fitted himself out from head to foot in new clothes, and filled a sack with various valuable items, which he took to the nearest railway station, hoping to move on beyond the radius of immediate pursuit. His appearance, however, in good clothes carrying a heavy bag just about day-dawn, brought him under the eye of a suspicious policeman, and he was then and there "run in."

Committal to the borough gaol promptly followed, and he was soon put back for trial at the next assize. All this time there was no notion that he was the H. of the Police "Hue and Cry," the fugitive from Wakefield, and he seems to have been subjected to no especial watch as a prison breaker. Once more he set his wits to work, and quickly saw a new opening for escape. The cell he occupied was, strange luck, old-fashioned and insecure, at least for such a truant spirit. He began to pick at the walls with his tin dinner knife, and soon found by scratching at it that the mortar had rotted, and that he could dislodge the bricks around the air grating which communicated with the outside. After a night or two of unremitting toil, he was able to remove the grating bodily, thus opening an aperture wide enough to allow him to pass through. While he had been thus busily employed, he had been careful to keep appearances, and, although the bricks were loose and easily removable, he kept them in their places until the last moment, using paper chewed into a thick paste instead of the mortar.

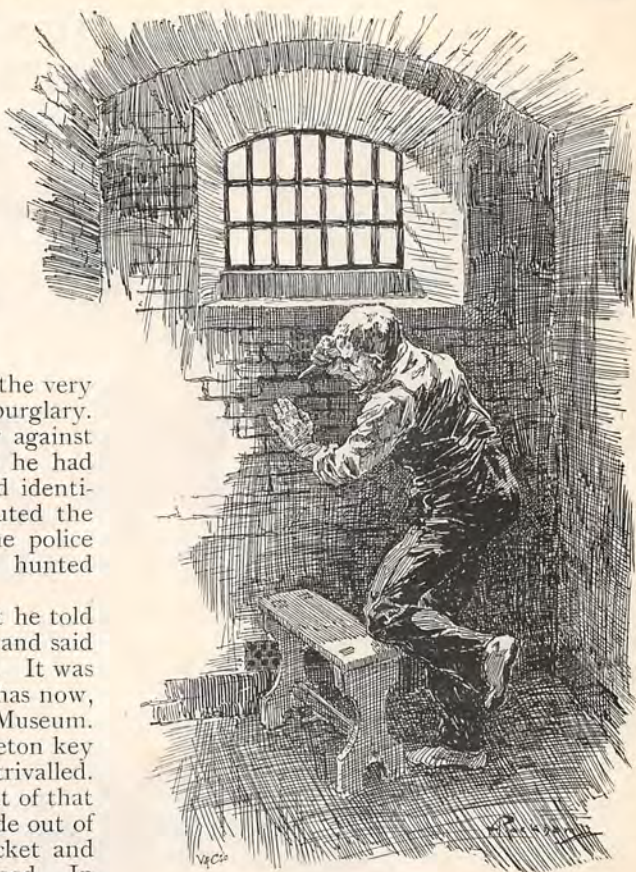
The night he chose for evasion was dark and stormy with heavy showers, circumstances that must help him greatly. When he crept through the wall into the yard beyond, he was able to elude the observation of the night-watchman who patrolled the precincts, although, as H. lay close, watching his next chance, the officer passed within a few inches of where he was hiding. After that he made use of a convenient plank, noticed by him during the day when at exercise, placed it sloping against the boundary wall, then ran up the inclined plane. By the same process he got down on the far side, and he was free.

H. was still in the clothes he had stolen—not in the prison dress—and so was more or less safe from immediate detection. Now he made his way across country to the nearest port, and managed to hide upon a craft just clearing out to sea. The ship was well down Channel before the stowaway was discovered, but then he got short shrift and was at once put back on shore. Once more he took to the road, wandering on in ignorance of his whereabouts, until his star, no longer in the ascendant, led him to the very town in which he had committed the burglary. Still worse, his luck, now altogether against him, took him past the very shop he had ransacked. The proprietor, who had identified his stolen goods and had prosecuted the thief, immediately recognised H. The police were promptly informed, H. was hunted down and recaptured.

It was after his recommitment that he told the whole story of his first escape, and said where the false key was to be found. It was for some time in my possession, but has now, I think, been deposited in the Black Museum.

H.'s clever manufacture of a skeleton key has often been equalled—indeed, outrivalled. Another prisoner, at Holloway, got out of that splendid building by using a key made out of scraps of iron fitted into a quill socket and provided with a cross handle of wood. In this particular escape, consummate artfulness, as well as great ingenuity, was displayed. The man was supposed to be ailing from some serious internal complaint and actually unable to walk. The treatment he received in hospital was said to be greatly benefiting him, and just before he recovered the use of his limbs he managed to run away. He let himself out of the hospital with his skeleton keys, and used them everywhere with success. In the yard he found a ladder or plank, and completed his escape in the most approved fashion by scaling the boundary wall. He was not long at large, but on his recapture he was not again dealt with as an invalid. The keys above mentioned were supposed to have been made surreptitiously in the prison workshop, although how the pattern was exactly obtained never appeared. But in this the extraordinary readiness of prisoners has often been shown. False keys that worked perfectly were once made, it is said, by a man who had merely watched intently the shape of the keys as they were carried by the chaplain when talking to him.

I have already, when speaking of Jackson,



"HE BEGAN TO PICK AT THE WALLS WITH HIS TIN DINNER KNIFE."

referred to the acute physical discomfort that prisoners will endure when bent upon escape. To this may be added the case of a man who was employed with others in beating carpets, and who one day most mysteriously disappeared. It is now nearly certain that he got himself rolled up in one of the carpets, and was passed out of the prison gates thus packed up at the bottom of a loaded cart. There was a remarkable escape from Millbank some years ago, when a prisoner, Punch Howard by name, worked himself through the narrow space of his cell ventilator—about 12 inches by 14. An American prisoner, Schrader, also got out of the Tombs prison in New York through an aperture in the wall 29 inches long by 6½ inches wide. In order to facilitate his squeeze he soaped himself entirely from head to foot. He slipped his head through first, and then dragged his body by twisting and contorting it, using one of his hands braced against the inner side of the wall.