

# Old Manson's Sin

by **Joseph Alexander Altsheler, 1862-1919**

**Published: 1903**

in »The Olympian« magazine, Nashville, Tennessee

**Re-published: 2016**

Richard M. Woodward



They were giving a grand ball in the Carton house at Waikiki, just at the end of the town, where the smooth sandy beach ceases and the cliffs begin to heave up again—it is pleasant to stand there on the piazza of this splendid island home, and look down at the sea, breaking in foam on the rocks twenty feet below.

The Carton family were great people in Hawaii. Old Tom Carton came out to Honolulu in '21, and was such a discreet and energetic man that he amassed a great fortune, and was able at the same time to retain the friendship of all his neighbors, both white and Hawaiian, a characteristic which he transmitted to his descendants, with such good results that both the Carton fortune and the Carton popularity have increased even to the present day.

Everybody in Honolulu with social claims was present, and this included several Hawaiians of the native stock, with clear brown faces, two Japanese gentlemen with their wives, a Chinese ditto with his, and American naval officers with their wives, sisters and sweethearts in profusion. The band from the American warship was playing in the alcove, just off the great drawing-room, and the Admiral, his thin face colored the tint of a ripe cocoanut shell, by many winds of many seas was talking with Henry Carton, the present head of the family, a man of sixty years and of gigantic stature.

It was a strange gathering, one that could not fail to arouse the keenest interest in any student of his race. Honolulu, of which Waikiki is the suburb and watering-place, enjoys the unique advantage of being just on the line where the civilized world of America meets the wild, uncivilized world of the South Seas with its strange, mysterious and often uncanny charm. What you see depends upon which way you look.

Most of the men present had seen life in various phases, and knew society alike in the evening dress of America or the fig leaf of the further islands. Many were of remarkable appearance, with keen Greek faces that bore the stamp of many trials, and perhaps the one who attracted the most attention was William Manson, a man of forty almost as large as his host, his deeply lined face, surrounded by a circle of magnificent gray hair.

Carton and the Admiral were talking of Manson, when they left the drawing-room and passed through the open window into the narrow piazza which looks down on the rocks and the sea.

It was the perfection of a tropic night, and there is none more glorious. The flame of the moon came softly through a faint silver mist. The wind sighed gently among the palm trees, like the last note of a dying song, and the heave of the ocean was but a murmur.

„We were speaking of Manson,“ said the Admiral, in his short, choppy manner; „a man of most marked appearance; sure to be gazed at anywhere; must be a story about him; looks as if he had lived one; I see it on his face.“

„No, no story at all,“ replied Carton, „unless it’s a continued one, continued through all the forty years that Manson has lived. He was born in California, of good Virginia stock, and was left an orphan at sixteen, with an infant brother only three years old. Well, he has taken care of the baby and himself, too. Became a trader among the islands, and led a rough-and-tumble life. He has been in the wild places of the earth, and he has lived. Cannibals in the Solomon Islands had him tied to the stake once, and were just getting ready to roast him for dinner when he was rescued by a boat’s crew from an English man-of-war. Wrecked another time off the coast of Tutuila, and blown on the shore, apparently dead, but the natives revived him. Such a touch-and-go life as that puts the lines in a man’s face and bleaches his hair.“

„Yes, I know,“ said the Admiral, „I’ve seen ‘em before.“

„But Manson’s been a success, a big success. He’s rich now, has his own trading company, copra, pearls, fruit and such things, with a head office in San Francisco and a sub-office here. There’s the baby brother, too. The tall young man dancing with the beautiful girl with the blonde hair. See how dangerously near to his shoulder she leans her head!“

The Admiral laughed. „They don't lean their heads so close to our shoulders, Carton, but we both wish we were back where they would. You know it, you dog.“

Carton laughed, too, and replied:

„We won't discuss it, Admiral, but she has a right to lean her head that way, because she's to be married to young Manson next week, and he's a splendid young fellow. We call 'em Young Manson and Old Manson to tell 'em apart.“

„A fine pair,“ said the Admiral, looking at them critically. „Ah, Carton, the poet man was true when he said that love's young dream beat anything else.“

„Yes,“ replied Carton, „and this happiness seems such a repayment. There's a story to this engagement, Admiral.“

„Oh, I see!“ said the Admiral, „I can guess it all at once. Old Manson loves her too, was engaged to her, then she saw Young Manson, similarity of age and tastes, gradually loved Young Manson, Old Manson saw it, sacrificed himself for little brother whom he had reared, makes 'em think he doesn't care.“

Carton laughed with hearty enjoyment.

„You're a bad guesser, to-night, Admiral,“ he said, „you're not anywhere near the real story. Old Manson's not in love with Mary Warren—that's the girl's name—or any other woman, nor will he ever be. He's cut out for a bachelor, and he'll pass all his life roaming about the South Seas. But he's tickled to death with this coming marriage of Mary Warren and his brother. Thinks she's just the woman for Young Manson, and she is. Why he takes as much delight in it as a mother does in the happy marriage of her oldest daughter.“

The soft measure of an Austrian waltz came through the window to them, and the swell of the sea and the sigh of the wind seemed to melt and flow into it. The heavenly intoxication of the night crept even into the bones of the old Admiral.

„The story part of it,“ resumed Carton, sinking his voice a little, „is about Mary Warren's husband. Yes, she's a widow, young as she looks—she's only twenty-two—and has been for two years. She was married in Los Angeles, when she was only a slip of a girl of sixteen, to Tom Warren; she was an orphan, and her relatives made her do it. But the Lord never let a more thorough scoundrel than Tom Warren live on this earth. A woman is always in the power of her husband, and the life that he led her had as much of Hades crowded into it as four years can hold. He brought her down here at last, and he was soon mixed up in all sorts of scrapes. San Quentin was waiting for him, and he was just about to slip out for the further islands, but he was drowned in crossing from Maui.“

„What an escape,“ said the Admiral.

The two dancers passed the window just then, and the pure face of the woman looked up into the strong face of him she loved. The Admiral thought of his own young daughter in San Francisco, married to a good man.

Carton followed his look and he understood.

„That is one of the reasons why the match appeals so strongly to Old Manson,“ he continued. „He thinks as you and I do that God is making reparation to Mary Warren. You see Old Manson enjoyed the honor of Tom Warren's acquaintance, and he knows what a complete scoundrel he was. He'll watch over Young Manson and his wife as if they were two children of his, and so they are.“

„I hope you'll introduce me to her later,“ said the Admiral. „Come, let's go back, I don't want to monopolize our host.“

They returned to the drawing-room, and presently Old Manson and the Admiral, seated on a sofa in a corner, were comparing notes of their roughest experiences at sea. While they talked Old Manson glanced occasionally at his brother and Mary Warren, and the Admiral noticed how strong and protecting his look was.

„It's a rough school, this of the sea, among the wild islands,“ said the Admiral.

„So it is,“ replied Old Manson, „and it breeds a stern code like that of all border life.“

They parted presently, and Old Manson walked alone upon the piazza, looking out upon the sea with eyes that saw not. On the contrary, he was thinking, and his thoughts were full of content. He stood well in the world now, and he had plenty of its goods. His dearly-loved brother was about to be married to the very woman whom he would have chosen for him. In his old age he would sit by their fireside and spoil their children.

He opened his watch, and then closed it with a sigh of regret. That appointment with the Samoan trader in the little hotel down at the other end of Waikiki must be kept. The man had to sail in the morning, and a promise was a promise. But he did not want to go. He was enjoying himself. Such evenings as this did not come often into his life. He liked to see the young people with their music and dancing. Every corner in his rugged nature was touched.

He looked down at the sea, and then bethought himself of the boat-landing there. A straight cut across the bay would save time. He threw a light overcoat over his evening dress, slipped from the house unnoticed, and went to the landing.

A boat, rowed by a single man, was lingering there, drawn by the lights, the music and the chance of passengers. He engaged it, and shot out into the bay. Looking back he could see distinctly the house, its lights and the faces of the dancers as they passed the open windows. Twice he recognized Mary and Young Manson dancing together again, and the sight pleased him.

„The children shall be happy,“ he said to himself. „They deserve it.“

He lighted a cigar and smoked with deep content. Neither he nor the rower spoke, but in a quarter of an hour he was landed on the other side of the little bay. „Wait here for me,“ he said to the rower, „I'll be back in a half hour.“

The Samoan trader was an easy man with whom to do business, and Old Manson returned in less than the appointed time.

„Now take me back to Mr. Carton's as quick as you can,“ he said to the rower, „and there's an extra half in it for you.“

The rower again said nothing, but bowed and pulled out into the bay. There he let his speed diminish.

Old Manson was a stern man, used to command and the rough ways of the wild islands.

„Say, you!“ he exclaimed, „what's the matter with you? Why, we are hardly moving!“

The man did not answer, but let the oars rest on the thwarts. The boat swung idly in the swell of the sea.

Old Manson uttered an angry exclamation.

Illustration:  
In the boat

The silent oarsman raised his dark face. „Don't you know me, Will Manson?“ he said.

It was an evil face, scarred by deep passions and bad living. There were hideous purple blotches on it, too, but Old Manson knew it.

For a while he did not say a word, but looked in agony at that house across the bay. At last he exclaimed: „You were dead! Why didn't you stay dead?“

The man laughed in a smooth, cruel way. „That's what he will say and she will say when they hear,“ he replied. „Oh, I know it all! I've seen them billing and cooing, and I'm only a humble boatman so scarred and sun blackened that you are the first to recognize me!“

Old Manson tossed his lighted cigar into the water. A rising breeze swept in from the outer sea and felt cool on his hot face. Then he gazed at the evil thing before him and shuddered.

The man laughed again. Clearly this was a moment of happiness to him.

„What are you going to do?“ asked Old Manson, at last.

But the man did not answer at once. Instead he picked up his oars and rowed toward the Carton house, until they could distinctly hear the music again, and see once more the dancing forms as they passed the open windows. Then he replied:

„I don't know. I haven't made up my mind yet. But be sure I'm planning a proper revenge. You see that wife of mine is too happy. She doesn't mourn enough over the loss of her accomplished and brilliant husband, which is me. Now, haven't I a right to feel harsh toward her, and come back as a sort of Nemesis?“

Old Manson did not reply. The mellow notes of the music floated over the bay. The heads of the cocoanut palms bent lower to the rising breeze. This, he thought was fortune's most cruel stroke. He saw the happiness of Mary and his brother ruined, and this villain gloating in his wretched triumph.

„Sometimes,“ continued the man, „I've thought it would be a fine revenge for me to let 'em get married, and have a honeymoon of a week or so. Then I'd bob up serenely like the fellow in the comic opera.“

„You unutterable scoundrel!“ said Old Manson.

The man grinned. „Oh, I don't mind names,“ he said. „They don't amount to anything. It's acts that count, and I've got the whip hand here, Bill Manson. You know that as well as I do. How that sweet and lovely wife of mine will be surprised when she beholds my smiling face again! Oh, I saw her there in the ball-room to-night with her head on his shoulder, when it should have been on the shoulder of her true and lawful husband, the gentleman who sits here before you in the boat.“

Old Manson scarcely heard him now. He was thinking of the lost happiness, of the reparation that was not to be made to Mary Warren. The wind whistled in from the sea, and the surf began to boom on the shore. The boat drifted toward the landing. They heard the music more clearly than ever. They recognized the faces as they passed the open windows, and once more Old Manson saw Young Manson and Mary still dancing together, the same look of happiness on her pure face as she gazed up at the face above her.

„Now wouldn't that stir you?“ said the man with a wicked grin. „Here am I, just risen from the dead, pining to return to the arms of my true and loving wife, and I see her looking at another man like that!“

„Why on earth did you come back?“ exclaimed Old Manson aimlessly.

„What a question to ask a man? Did you stay dead when you were swept up on the Tutuila beach? Not a bit of it, and you needn't expect me to do so either until I'm really dead. Time enough then. I want to see my beautiful wife again. By Jove she is beautiful! I looked at her through the window there, and I don't blame that little brother of yours for loving her. Only she's not for him; she's for me.“

The man raised himself in the boat with a gesture of triumph, and all his evil face now came into the light. Old Manson had seen the tattooed faces of savages, but none was more hideous than this with its scars and its blotches and its malice. He still took no notice of the wind which was rising higher and higher, nor of the heavy boom of the surf. The boat rocked in the swell, but drifted on toward the landing-place.

„Yes, I've come back! I've come back!“ repeated the man in triumph.

A high wave swept in from the outer sea, caught the boat on its crest and tossed it over. Old Manson went far under the water, but he came up again and swam with strong arms toward the rock which projects above the water near the landing-place. He reached up, grasped it with his right hand, and knew that he was safe. Just as he did so he felt something cold and wet lay hold of his other hand, and he saw the face of the man wild with terror, and more hideous than ever rise above the waves.

„Oh save me, Bill Manson!“ he cried.

Then Old Manson saw that the wretch was exhausted. Only his hand, the hand of Old Manson to which Tom Warren clung, stood between him and death.

The waves rolled in again, and the wind moaned among the cocoanut palms. But in the house above they took no notice. The music, the soft flow of a waltz came to Old Manson's ears, and the lights that shone so brightly through the open windows fell in streaks of alternate silver and gold across the troubled sea.

„Save me! Save me! Bill Manson!“ repeated the man in abject terror.

Old Manson prepared to draw him to the rock, but at that moment he looked up. Two faces passed the lighted window. They were Young Manson and Mary still dancing together, and, as before, her eyes looked up and into his with supreme content.

Another wave rolled in the next moment, and when it rolled back only Old Manson was left on the rock.

God will judge.

