

CHAPTER XI.

ONE morning I was engaged in the principal workroom with my employer. We

were alone. Old File and his son were occupied in the garrets. Screw had been sent to Barkingham, accompanied, on the usual precautionary plan, by Mill. They had been gone nearly an hour when the doctor sent me into the next room to moisten and knead up some plaster of Paris. While I was engaged in this occupation, I suddenly heard strange voices in the large workroom. My curiosity was instantly excited. I drew back the little shutter from the peephole in the wall, and looked through it.

I saw first my old enemy, Screw, with his villainous face much paler than usual; next, two respectably-dressed strangers whom he appeared to have brought into the room; and next to them Young File, addressing himself to the doctor.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said my friend, the workman-like footman; "but before these gentlemen say anything for themselves, I wish to explain, as they seem strangers to you, that I only let them in after I had heard them give the password. My instructions are to let anybody in on our side of the door if they can give the password. No offense, sir, but I want it to be understood that I have done my duty."

"Quite right, my man," said the doctor, in his blandest manner. "You may go back to your work."

Young File left the room, with a scrutinizing look for the two strangers and a suspicious frown for Screw.

"Allow us to introduce ourselves," began the elder of the two strangers.

"Pardon me for a moment," interposed the doctor. "Where is Mill?" he added, turning to Screw.

"Doing our errands at Barkingham," answered Screw, turning paler than ever.

"We happened to meet your two men, and to ask them the way to your house," said the stranger who had just spoken. "This man, with a caution that does him infinite credit, required to know our business before he told us. We managed to introduce the password--'Happy-go-lucky'--into our answer. This of course quieted suspicion; and he, at our request, guided us here, leaving his fellow-workman, as he has just told you, to do all errands at Barkingham."

While these words were being spoken, I saw Screw's eyes wandering discontentedly and amazedly round the room. He had left me in it with the doctor before he went out: was he disappointed at not finding me in it on his return?

While this thought was passing through my mind, the stranger resumed his

explanations.

"We are here," he said, "as agents appointed to transact private business, out of London, for Mr. Manasseh, with whom you have dealings, I think?"

"Certainly," said the doctor, with a smile.

"And who owes you a little account, which we are appointed to settle."

"Just so!" remarked the doctor, pleasantly rubbing his hands one over the other. "My good friend, Mr. Manasseh, does not like to trust the post, I suppose? Very glad to make your acquaintance, gentlemen. Have you got the little memorandum about you?"

"Yes; but we think there is a slight inaccuracy in it. Have you any objection to let us refer to your ledger?"

"Not the least in the world. Screw, go down into my private laboratory, open the table-drawer nearest the window, and bring up a locked book, with a parchment cover, which you will find in it."

As Screw obeyed I saw a look pass between him and the two strangers which made me begin to feel a little uneasy. I thought the doctor noticed it too; but he preserved his countenance, as usual, in a state of the most unruffled composure.

"What a time that fellow is gone!" he exclaimed gayly. "Perhaps I had better go and get the book myself."

The two strangers had been gradually lessening the distance between the doctor and themselves, ever since Screw had left the room. The last words were barely out of his mouth, before they both sprang upon him, and pinioned his arms with their hands.

"Steady, my fine fellow," said Mr. Manasseh's head agent. "It's no go. We are Bow Street runners, and we've got you for coining."

"Not a doubt of it," said the doctor, with the most superb coolness. "You needn't hold me. I'm not fool enough to resist when I'm fairly caught."

"Wait till we've searched you; and then we'll talk about that," said the runner.*

The doctor submitted to the searching with the patience of a martyr. No offensive weapon being found in his pockets, they allowed him to sit down unmolested in the nearest chair.

"Screw, I suppose?" said the doctor, looking inquiringly at the officers.

"Exactly," said the principal man of the two. "We have been secretly corresponding with him for weeks past. We have nabbed the man who went out with him, and got him safe at Barkingham. Don't expect Screw back with the ledger. As soon as he has made sure that the rest of you are in the house, he is to fetch another man or two of our Bow Street lot, who are waiting outside till they hear from us. We only want an old man and a young one, and a third pal of yours who is a gentleman born, to make a regular clearance in the house. When we have once got you all, it will be the prettiest capture that's ever been made since I was in the force."

What the doctor answered to this I cannot say. Just as the officer had done speaking, I heard footsteps approaching the room in which I was listening. Was Screw looking for me? I instantly closed the peephole and got behind the door. It opened back upon me, and, sure enough, Screw entered cautiously.

An empty old wardrobe stood opposite the door. Evidently suspecting that I might have taken the alarm and concealed myself inside it, he approached it on tiptoe. On tiptoe also I followed him; and, just as his hands were on the wardrobe door, my hands were on his throat. He was a little man, and no match for me. I easily and gently laid him on his back, in a voiceless and half-suffocated state--throwing myself right over him, to keep his legs quiet. When I saw his face getting black, and his small eyes growing largely globular, I let go with one hand, crammed my empty plaster of Paris bag, which lay close by, into his mouth,

tied it fast, secured his hands and feet, and then left him perfectly harmless, while I took counsel with myself how best to secure my own safety.

I should have made my escape at once; but for what I heard the officer say about the men who were waiting outside. Were they waiting near or at a distance? Were they on the watch at the front or the back of the house? I thought it highly desirable to give myself a chance of ascertaining their whereabouts from the talk of the officers in the next room, before I risked the possibility of running right into their clutches on the outer side of the door.

I cautiously opened the peephole once more.

The doctor appeared to be still on the most friendly terms with his vigilant guardians from Bow Street.

"Have you any objection to my ringing for some lunch, before we are all taken off to London together?" I heard him ask in his most cheerful tones. "A glass of wine and a bit of bread and cheese won't do you any harm, gentlemen, if you are as hungry as I am."

"If you want to eat and drink, order the victuals at once," replied one of the runners, sulkily. "We don't happen to want anything ourselves."

"Sorry for it," said the doctor. "I have some of the best old Madeira in

England."

"Like enough," retorted the officer sarcastically. "But you see we are not quite such fools as we look; and we have heard of such a thing, in our time, as hocused wine."

"O fie! fie!" exclaimed the doctor merrily. "Remember how well I am behaving myself, and don't wound my feelings by suspecting me of such shocking treachery as that!"

He moved to a corner of the room behind him, and touched a knob in the wall which I had never before observed. A bell rang directly, which had a new tone in it to my ears.

"Too bad," said the doctor, turning round again to the runners; "really too bad, gentlemen, to suspect me of that!"

Shaking his head deprecatingly, he moved back to the corner, pulled aside something in the wall, disclosed the mouth of a pipe which was a perfect novelty to me, and called down it.

"Moses!"

It was the first time I had heard that name in the house.

"Who is Moses?" inquired the officers both together, advancing on him

suspiciously.

"Only my servant," answered the doctor. He turned once more to the pipe, and called down it:

"Bring up the Stilton Cheese, and a bottle of the Old Madeira."

The cheese we had in use at that time was of purely Dutch extraction. I remembered Port, Sherry, and Claret in my palmy dinner-days at the doctor's family-table; but certainly not Old Madeira. Perhaps he selfishly kept his best wine and his choicest cheese for his own consumption.

"Sam," said one of the runners to the other, "you look to our civil friend here, and I'll grab Moses when he brings up the lunch."

"Would you like to see what the operation of coining is, while my man is getting the lunch ready?" said the doctor. "It may be of use to me at the trial, if you can testify that I afforded you every facility for finding out anything you might want to know. Only mention my polite anxiety to make things easy and instructive from the very first, and I may get recommended to mercy. See here--this queer-looking machine, gentlemen (from which two of my men derive their nicknames), is what we call a Mill-and-Screw."

He began to explain the machine with the manner and tone of a lecturer

at a scientific institution. In spite of themselves, the officers burst out laughing. I looked round at Screw as the doctor got deeper into his explanations. The traitor was rolling his wicked eyes horribly at me. They presented so shocking a sight, that I looked away again. What was I to do next? The minutes were getting on, and I had not heard a word yet, through the peephole, on the subject of the reserve of Bow Street runners outside. Would it not be best to risk everything, and get away at once by the back of the house?

Just as I had resolved on venturing the worst, and making my escape forthwith, I heard the officers interrupt the doctor's lecture.

"Your lunch is a long time coming," said one of them.

"Moses is lazy," answered the doctor; "and the Madeira is in a remote part of the cellar. Shall I ring again?"

"Hang your ringing again!" growled the runner, impatiently. "I don't understand why our reserve men are not here yet. Suppose you go and give them a whistle, Sam."

"I don't half like leaving you," returned Sam. "This learned gentleman here is rather a shifty sort of chap; and it strikes me that two of us isn't a bit too much to watch him."

"What's that?" exclaimed Sam's comrade, suspiciously.

A crash of broken crockery in the lower part of the house had followed that last word of the cautious officer's speech. Naturally, I could draw no special inference from the sound; but, for all that, it filled me with a breathless interest and suspicion, which held me irresistibly at the peephole--though the moment before I had made up my mind to fly from the house.

"Moses is awkward as well as lazy," said the doctor. "He has dropped the tray! Oh, dear, dear me! he has certainly dropped the tray."

"Let's take our learned friend downstairs between us," suggested Sam. "I shan't be easy till we've got him out of the house."

"And I shan't be easy if we don't handcuff him before we leave the room," returned the other.

"Rude conduct, gentlemen--after all that has passed, remarkably rude conduct," said the doctor. "May I, at least, get my hat while my hands are at liberty? It hangs on that peg opposite to us." He moved toward it a few steps into the middle of the room while he spoke.

"Stop!" said Sam; "I'll get your hat for you. We'll see if there's anything inside it or not, before you put it on."

The doctor stood stockstill, like a soldier at the word, Halt.

"And I'll get the handcuffs," said the other runner, searching his coat-pockets.

The doctor bowed to him assentingly and forgivingly.

"Only oblige me with my hat, and I shall be quite ready for you," he said--paused for one moment, then repeated the words, "Quite ready," in a louder tone--and instantly disappeared through the floor!

I saw the two officers rush from opposite ends of the room to a great opening in the middle of it. The trap-door on which the doctor had been standing, and on which he had descended, closed up with a bang at the same moment; and a friendly voice from the lower regions called out gayly, "Good-by!"

The officers next made for the door of the room. It had been locked from the other side. As they tore furiously at the handle, the roll of the wheels of the doctor's gig sounded on the drive in front of the house; and the friendly voice called out once more, "Good-by!"

I waited just long enough to see the baffled officers unbarring the window shutters for the purpose of giving the alarm, before I closed the peephole, and with a farewell look at the distorted face of my prostrate enemy, Screw, left the room.

The doctor's study-door was open as I passed it on my way downstairs. The locked writing-desk, which probably contained the only clew to Alicia's retreat that I was likely to find, was in its usual place on the table. There was no time to break it open on the spot. I rolled it up in my apron, took it off bodily under my arm, and descended to the iron door on the staircase. Just as I was within sight of it, it was opened from the landing on the other side. I turned to run upstairs again, when a familiar voice cried, "Stop!" and looking round, I beheld Young File.

"All right!" he said. "Father's off with the governor in the gig, and the runners in hiding outside are in full cry after them. If Bow Street can get within pistol-shot of the blood mare, all I can say is, I give Bow Street full leave to fire away with both barrels! Where's Screw?"

"Gagged by me in the casting-room."

"Well done, you! Got all your things, I see, under your arm? Wait two seconds while I grab my money. Never mind the rumpus upstairs--there's nobody outside to help them; and the gate's locked, if there was."

He darted past me up the stairs. I could hear the imprisoned officers shouting for help from the top windows. Their reserve men must have been far away, by this time, in pursuit of the gig; and there was not much chance of their getting useful help from any stray countryman who might be passing along the road, except in the way of sending a message to

Barkingham. Anyhow we were sure of a half hour to escape in, at the very least.

"Now then," said Young File, rejoining me; "let's be off by the back way through the plantations. How came you to lay your lucky hands on Screw?" he continued, when we had passed through the iron door, and had closed it after us.

"Tell me first how the doctor managed to make a hole in the floor just in the nick of time."

"What! did you see the trap sprung?"

"I saw everything."

"The devil you did! Had you any notion that signals were going on, all the while you were on the watch? We have a regular set of them in case of accidents. It's a rule that father, and me, and the doctor are never to be in the workroom together--so as to keep one of us always at liberty to act on the signals.--Where are you going to?"

"Only to get the gardener's ladder to help us over the wall. Go on."

"The first signal is a private bell--that means, Listen at the pipe. The next is a call down the pipe for 'Moses'--that means, Danger! Lock the door. 'Stilton Cheese' means, Put the Mare to; and 'Old Madeira'

Stand by the trap. The trap works in that locked-up room you never got into; and when our hands are on the machinery, we are awkward enough to have a little accident with the luncheon tray. 'Quite Ready' is the signal to lower the trap, which we do in the regular theater-fashion. We lowered the doctor smartly enough, as you saw, and got out by the back staircase. Father went in the gig, and I let them out and locked the gates after them. Now you know as much as I've got breath to tell you."

We scaled the wall easily by the help of the ladder. When we were down on the other side, Young File suggested that the safest course for us was to separate, and for each to take his own way. We shook hands and parted. He went southward, toward London, and I went westward, toward the sea-coast, with Doctor Dulcifer's precious writing-desk safe under my arm.

* The "Bow Street runners" of those days were the predecessors of the detective police of the present time.