

CHAPTER XII.

FOR a couple of hours I walked on briskly, careless in what direction I went, so long as I kept my back turned on Barkingham.

By the time I had put seven miles of ground, according to my calculations, between me and the red-brick house, I began to look upon the doctor's writing-desk rather in the light of an incumbrance, and determined to examine it without further delay. Accordingly I picked up the first large stone I could find in the road, crossed a common, burst through a hedge, and came to a halt, on the other side, in a thick wood. Here, finding myself well screened from public view, I broke open the desk with the help of the stone, and began to look over the contents.

To my unspeakable disappointment I found but few papers of any kind to examine. The desk was beautifully fitted with all the necessary materials for keeping up a large correspondence; but there were not more than half a dozen letters in it altogether. Four were on business matters, and the other two were of a friendly nature, referring to persons and things in which I did not feel the smallest interest. I found besides half a dozen bills receipted (the doctor was a mirror of punctuality in the payment of tradesmen), note and letter-paper of the finest quality, clarified pens, a pretty little pin-cushion, two small account-books filled with the neatest entries, and some leaves of blotting-paper. Nothing else; absolutely nothing else, in the treacherous writing-desk on which I had implicitly relied to guide me to

Alicia's hiding-place.

I groaned in sheer wretchedness over the destruction of all my dearest plans and hopes. If the Bow Street runners had come into the plantation just as I had completed the rifling of the desk I think I should have let them take me without making the slightest effort at escape. As it was, no living soul appeared within sight of me. I must have sat at the foot of a tree for full half an hour, with the doctor's useless bills and letters before me, with my head in my hands, and with all my energies of body and mind utterly crushed by despair.

At the end of the half hour, the natural restlessness of my faculties began to make itself felt.

Whatever may be said about it in books, no emotion in this world ever did, or ever will, last for long together. The strong feeling may return over and over again; but it must have its constant intervals of change or repose. In real life the bitterest grief doggedly takes its rest and dries its eyes; the heaviest despair sinks to a certain level, and stops there to give hope a chance of rising, in spite of us. Even the joy of an unexpected meeting is always an imperfect sensation, for it never lasts long enough to justify our secret anticipations--our happiness dwindles to mere every-day contentment before we have half done with it.

I raised my head, and gathered the bills and letters together, and stood up a man again, wondering at the variableness of my own temper, at the

curious elasticity of that toughest of all the vital substances within us, which we call Hope. "Sitting and sighing at the foot of this tree," I thought, "is not the way to find Alicia, or to secure my own safety. Let me circulate my blood and rouse my ingenuity, by taking to the road again."

Before I forced my way back to the open side of the hedge, I thought it desirable to tear up the bills and letters, for fear of being traced by them if they were found in the plantation. The desk I left where it was, there being no name on it. The note-paper and pens I pocketed--forlorn as my situation was, it did not authorize me to waste stationery. The blotting-paper was the last thing left to dispose of: two neatly-folded sheets, quite clean, except in one place, where the impression of a few lines of writing appeared. I was about to put the blotting-paper into my pocket after the pens, when something in the look of the writing impressed on it, stopped me.

Four blurred lines appeared of not more than two or three words each, running out one beyond another regularly from left to right. Had the doctor been composing poetry and blotting it in a violent hurry? At a first glance, that was more than I could tell. The order of the written letters, whatever they might be, was reversed on the face of the impression taken of them by the blotting-paper. I turned to the other side of the leaf. The order of the letters was now right, but the letters themselves were sometimes too faintly impressed, sometimes too much blurred together to be legible. I held the leaf up to the

light--and there was a complete change: the blurred letters grew clearer, the invisible connecting lines appeared--I could read the words from first to last.

The writing must have been hurried, and it had to all appearance been hurriedly dried toward the corner of a perfectly clean leaf of the blotting-paper. After twice reading, I felt sure that I had made out correctly the following address:

Miss Giles, 2 Zion Place, Crickgelly, N. Wales.

It was hard under the circumstances, to form an opinion as to the handwriting; but I thought I could recognize the character of some of the doctor's letters, even in the blotted impression of them. Supposing I was right, who was Miss Giles?

Some Welsh friend of the doctor's, unknown to me? Probably enough. But why not Alicia herself under an assumed name? Having sent her from home to keep her out of my way, it seemed next to a certainty that her father would take all possible measures to prevent my tracing her, and would, therefore, as a common act of precaution, forbid her to travel under her own name. Crickgelly, North Wales, was assuredly a very remote place to banish her to; but then the doctor was not a man to do things by halves: he knew the lengths to which my cunning and resolution were capable of carrying me; and he would have been innocent indeed if he had hidden his daughter from me in any place within reasonable distance of Barkingham.

Last, and not least important, Miss Giles sounded in my ears exactly like an assumed name.

Was there ever any woman absolutely and literally named Miss Giles? However I may have altered my opinion on this point since, my mind was not in a condition at that time to admit the possible existence of any such individual as a maiden Giles. Before, therefore, I had put the precious blotting-paper into my pocket, I had satisfied myself that my first duty, under all the circumstances, was to shape my flight immediately to Crickgelly. I could be certain of nothing--not even of identifying the doctor's handwriting by the impression on the blotting-paper. But provided I kept clear of Barkingham, it was all the same to me what part of the United Kingdom I went to; and, in the absence of any actual clew to her place of residence, there was consolation and encouragement even in following an imaginary trace. My spirits rose to their natural height as I struck into the highroad again, and beheld across the level plain the smoke, chimneys, and church spires of a large manufacturing town. There I saw the welcome promise of a coach--the happy chance of making my journey to Crickgelly easy and rapid from the very outset.

On my way to the town, I was reminded by the staring of all the people I passed on the road, of one important consideration which I had hitherto most unaccountably overlooked--the necessity of making some radical change in my personal appearance.

I had no cause to dread the Bow Street runners, for not one of them had seen me; but I had the strongest possible reasons for distrusting a meeting with my enemy, Screw. He would certainly be made use of by the officers for the purpose of identifying the companions whom he had betrayed; and I had the best reasons in the world to believe that he would rather assist in the taking of me than in the capture of all the rest of the coining gang put together--the doctor himself not excepted. My present costume was of the dandy sort--rather shabby, but gay in color and outrageous in cut. I had not altered it for an artisan's suit in the doctor's house, because I never had any intention of staying there a day longer than I could possibly help. The apron in which I had wrapped the writing-desk was the only approach I had made toward wearing the honorable uniform of the workingman.

Would it be wise now to make my transformation complete, by adding to the apron a velveteen jacket and a sealskin cap? No: my hands were too white, my manners too inveterately gentleman-like, for all artisan disguise. It would be safer to assume a serious character--to shave off my whiskers, crop my hair, buy a modest hat and umbrella, and dress entirely in black. At the first slopshop I encountered in the suburbs of the town, I got a carpet-bag and a clerical-looking suit. At the first easy shaving-shop I passed, I had my hair cropped and my whiskers taken off. After that I retreated again to the country--walked back till I found a convenient hedge down a lane off the highroad--changed my upper garments behind it, and emerged, bashful, black, and reverend, with my cotton umbrella tucked modestly under my arm, my eyes on the ground, my

head in the air, and my hat off my forehead. When I found two laborers touching their caps to me on my way back to the town, I knew that it was all right, and that I might now set the vindictive eyes of Screw himself safely at defiance.

I had not the most distant notion where I was when I reached the High Street, and stopped at The Green Bull Hotel and Coach-office. However, I managed to mention my modest wishes to be conveyed at once in the direction of Wales, with no more than a becoming confusion of manner.

The answer was not so encouraging as I could have wished. The coach to Shrewsbury had left an hour before, and there would be no other public conveyance running in my direction until the next morning. Finding myself thus obliged to yield to adverse circumstances, I submitted resignedly, and booked a place outside by the next day's coach, in the name of the Reverend John Jones. I thought it desirable to be at once unassuming and Welsh in the selection of a traveling name; and therefore considered John Jones calculated to fit me, in my present emergency, to a hair.

After securing a bed at the hotel, and ordering a frugal curate's dinner (bit of fish, two chops, mashed potatoes, semolina pudding, half-pint of sherry), I sallied out to look at the town.

Not knowing the name of it, and not daring to excite surprise by asking, I found the place full of vague yet mysterious interest. Here I was,

somewhere in central England, just as ignorant of localities as if I had been suddenly deposited in Central Africa. My lively fancy revelled in the new sensation. I invented a name for the town, a code of laws for the inhabitants, productions, antiquities, chalybeate springs, population, statistics of crime, and so on, while I walked about the streets, looked in at the shop-windows, and attentively examined the Market-place and Town-hall. Experienced travelers, who have exhausted all novelties, would do well to follow my example; they may be certain, for one day at least, of getting some fresh ideas, and feeling a new sensation.

On returning to dinner in the coffee-room, I found all the London papers on the table.

The Morning Post happened to lie uppermost, so I took it away to my own seat to occupy the time, while my unpretending bit of fish was frying. Glancing lazily at the advertisements on the first page, to begin with, I was astonished by the appearance of the following lines, at the top of a column:

"If F-- --K S--FTL--Y will communicate with his distressed and alarmed relatives, Mr. and Mrs. B--TT--RB--RY, he will hear of something to his advantage, and may be assured that all will be once more forgiven. A--B--LLA entreats him to write."

What, in the name of all that is most mysterious, does this mean! was my first thought after reading the advertisement. Can Lady Malkinshaw have taken a fresh lease of that impregnable vital tenement, at the door of which Death has been knocking vainly for so many years past? (Nothing more likely.) Was my felonious connection with Doctor Dulcifer suspected? (It seemed improbable.) One thing, however, was certain: I was missed, and the Batterburys were naturally anxious about me--anxious enough to advertise in the public papers.

I debated with myself whether I should answer their pathetic appeal or not. I had all my money about me (having never let it out of my own possession during my stay in the red-brick house), and there was plenty of it for the present; so I thought it best to leave the alarm and distress of my anxious relatives unrelieved for a little while longer, and to return quietly to the perusal of the *Morning Post*.

Five minutes of desultory reading brought me unexpectedly to an explanation of the advertisement, in the shape of the following paragraph:

"ALARMING ILLNESS OF LADY MALKINSHAW.--We regret to announce that this

venerable lady was seized with an alarming illness on Saturday last, at her mansion in town. The attack took the character of a fit--of what precise nature we have not been able to learn. Her ladyship's medical attendant and near relative, Doctor Softly, was immediately called in, and predicted the most fatal results. Fresh medical attendance was secured, and her ladyship's nearest surviving relatives, Mrs. Softly, and Mr. and Mrs. Batterbury, of Duskydale Park, were summoned. At the time of their arrival her ladyship's condition was comatose, her breathing being highly stertorous. If we are rightly informed, Doctor Softly and the other medical gentlemen present gave it as their opinion that if the pulse of the venerable sufferer did not rally in the course of a quarter of an hour at most, very lamentable results might be anticipated. For fourteen minutes, as our reporter was informed, no change took place; but, strange to relate, immediately afterward her ladyship's pulse rallied suddenly in the most extraordinary manner. She was observed to open her eyes very wide, and was heard, to the surprise and delight of all surrounding the couch, to ask why her ladyship's usual lunch of chicken-broth with a glass of Amontillado sherry was not placed on the table as usual. These refreshments having been produced, under the sanction of the medical gentlemen, the aged patient partook of them with an appearance of the utmost relish. Since this happy alteration for the better, her ladyship's health has, we rejoice to say, rapidly improved; and the answer now given to all friendly and fashionable inquirers is, in the venerable lady's own humorous

phraseology, 'Much better than could be expected.'"

Well done, my excellent grandmother! my firm, my unwearied, my undying friend! Never can I say that my case is desperate while you can swallow your chicken-broth and sip your Amontillado sherry. The moment I want money, I will write to Mr. Batterbury, and cut another little golden slice out of that possible three-thousand-pound-cake, for which he has already suffered and sacrificed so much. In the meantime, O venerable protectress of the wandering Rogue! let me gratefully drink your health in the nastiest and smallest half-pint of sherry this palate ever tasted, or these eyes ever beheld!

I went to bed that night in great spirits. My luck seemed to be returning to me; and I began to feel more than hopeful of really discovering my beloved Alicia at Crickgelly, under the alias of Miss Giles.

The next morning the Rev. John Jones descended to breakfast so rosy, bland, and smiling, that the chambermaids simpered as he tripped by them in the passage, and the landlady bowed graciously as he passed her parlor door. The coach drove up, and the reverend gentleman (after waiting characteristically for the woman's ladder) mounted to his place on the roof, behind the coachman. One man sat there who had got up before him--and who should that man be, but the chief of the Bow Street runners, who had rashly tried to take Doctor Dulcifer into custody!

There could not be the least doubt of his identity; I should have known his face again among a hundred. He looked at me as I took my place by his side, with one sharp searching glance--then turned his head away toward the road. Knowing that he had never set eyes on my face (thanks to the convenient peephole at the red-brick house), I thought my meeting with him was likely to be rather advantageous than otherwise. I had now an opportunity of watching the proceedings of one of our pursuers, at any rate--and surely this was something gained.

"Fine morning, sir," I said politely.

"Yes," he replied in the gruffest of monosyllables.

I was not offended: I could make allowance for the feelings of a man who had been locked up by his own prisoner.

"Very fine morning, indeed," I repeated, soothingly and cheerfully.

The runner only grunted this time. Well, well! we all have our little infirmities. I don't think the worse of the man now, for having been rude to me, that morning, on the top of the Shrewsbury coach.

The next passenger who got up and placed himself by my side was a florid, excitable, confused-looking gentleman, excessively talkative and familiar. He was followed by a sulky agricultural youth in

top-boots--and then, the complement of passengers on our seat behind the coachman was complete.

"Heard the news, sir?" said the florid man, turning to me.

"Not that I am aware of," I answered.

"It's the most tremendous thing that has happened these fifty years," said the florid man. "A gang of coiners, sir, discovered at Barkingham--in a house they used to call the Grange. All the dreadful lot of bad silver that's been about, they're at the bottom of. And the head of the gang not taken!--escaped, sir, like a ghost on the stage, through a trap-door, after actually locking the runners into his workshop. The blacksmiths from Barkingham had to break them out; the whole house was found full of iron doors, back staircases, and all that sort of thing, just like the Inquisition. A most respectable man, the original proprietor! Think what a misfortune to have let his house to a scoundrel who has turned the whole inside into traps, furnaces, and iron doors. The fellow's reference, sir, was actually at a London bank, where he kept a first-rate account. What is to become of society? where is our protection? Where are our characters, when we are left at the mercy of scoundrels? The times are awful--upon my soul, the times we live in are perfectly awful!"

"Pray, sir, is there any chance of catching this coiner?" I inquired innocently.

"I hope so, sir; for the sake of outraged society, I hope so," said the excitable man. "They've printed handbills at Barkingham, offering a reward for taking him. I was with my friend the mayor, early this morning, and saw them issued. 'Mr. Mayor,' says I, 'I'm going West--give me a few copies--let me help to circulate them--for the sake of outraged society, let me help to circulate them. Here they are--take a few, sir, for distribution. You'll see these are three other fellows to be caught besides the principal rascal--one of them a scamp belonging to a respectable family. Oh! what times! Take three copies, and pray circulate them in three influential quarters. Perhaps that gentleman next you would like a few. Will you take three, sir?"

"No, I won't," said the Bow Street runner doggedly. "Nor yet one of 'em--and it's my opinion that the coining-gang would be nabbed all the sooner, if you was to give over helping the law to catch them."

This answer produced a vehement expostulation from my excitable neighbor, to which I paid little attention, being better engaged in reading the handbill.

It described the doctor's personal appearance with remarkable accuracy, and cautioned persons in seaport towns to be on the lookout for him. Old File, Young File, and myself were all dishonorably mentioned together in a second paragraph, as runaways of inferior importance. Not a word was said in the handbill to show that the authorities at Barkingham even so

much as suspected the direction in which any one of us had escaped. This would have been very encouraging, but for the presence of the runner by my side, which looked as if Bow Street had its suspicions, however innocent Barkingham might be.

Could the doctor have directed his flight toward Crickgelly? I trembled internally as the question suggested itself to me. Surely he would prefer writing to Miss Giles to join him when he got to a safe place of refuge, rather than encumber himself with the young lady before he was well out of reach of the far-stretching arm of the law. This seemed infinitely the most natural course of conduct. Still, there was the runner traveling toward Wales--and not certainly without a special motive. I put the handbills in my pocket, and listened for any hints which might creep out in his talk; but he perversely kept silent. The more my excitable neighbor tried to dispute with him, the more contemptuously he refused to break silence. I began to feel vehemently impatient for our arrival at Shrewsbury; for there only could I hope to discover something more of my formidable fellow-traveler's plans.

The coach stopped for dinner; and some of our passengers left us, the excitable man with the handbills among the number. I got down, and stood on the doorstep of the inn, pretending to be looking about me, but in reality watching the movements of the runner.

Rather to my surprise, I saw him go to the door of the coach and speak to one of the inside passengers. After a short conversation, of which I

could not hear one word, the runner left the coach door and entered the inn, called for a glass of brandy and water, and took it out to his friend, who had not left the vehicle. The friend bent forward to receive it at the window. I caught a glimpse of his face, and felt my knees tremble under me--it was Screw himself!

Screw, pale and haggard-looking, evidently not yet recovered from the effect of my grip on his throat! Screw, in attendance on the runner, traveling inside the coach in the character of an invalid. He must be going this journey to help the Bow Street officers to identify some one of our scattered gang of whom they were in pursuit. It could not be the doctor--the runner could discover him without assistance from anybody. Why might it not be me?

I began to think whether it would be best to trust boldly in my disguise, and my lucky position outside the coach, or whether I should abandon my fellow-passengers immediately. It was not easy to settle at once which course was the safest--so I tried the effect of looking at my two alternatives from another point of view. Should I risk everything, and go on resolutely to Crickgelly, on the chance of discovering that Alicia and Miss Giles were one and the same person--or should I give up on the spot the only prospect of finding my lost mistress, and direct my attention entirely to the business of looking after my own safety?

As the latter alternative practically resolved itself into the simple question of whether I should act like a man who was in love, or like a

man who was not, my natural instincts settled the difficulty in no time. I boldly imitated the example of my fellow-passengers, and went in to dinner, determined to go on afterward to Crickgelly, though all Bow Street should be following at my heels.