

CHAPTER XIII.

SECURE as I tried to feel in my change of costume, my cropped hair, and my whiskerless cheeks, I kept well away from the coach-window, when the dinner at the inn was over and the passengers were called to take their places again. Thus far--thanks to the strength of my grasp on his neck, which had left him too weak to be an outside passenger--Screw had certainly not seen me; and, if I played my cards properly, there was no reason why he should see me before we got to our destination.

Throughout the rest of the journey I observed the strictest caution, and fortune seconded my efforts. It was dark when we got to Shrewsbury. On leaving the coach I was enabled, under cover of the night, to keep a sharp watch on the proceedings of Screw and his Bow Street ally. They did not put up at the hotel, but walked away to a public house. There, my clerical character obliged me to leave them at the door.

I returned to the hotel, to make inquiries about conveyances.

The answers informed me that Crickgelly was a little fishing-village, and that there was no coach direct to it, but that two coaches running to two small Welsh towns situated at nearly equal distances from my destination, on either side of it, would pass through Shrewsbury the next morning. The waiter added, that I could book a place--conditionally--by either of these vehicles; and that, as they were always well-filled, I had better be quick in making my choice

between them. Matters had now arrived at such a pass, that nothing was left for me but to trust to chance. If I waited till the morning to see whether Screw and the Bow Street runner traveled in my direction, and to find out, in case they did, which coach they took, I should be running the risk of losing a place for myself, and so delaying my journey for another day. This was not to be thought of. I told the waiter to book me a place in which coach he pleased. The two were called respectively The Humming Bee, and The Red Cross Knight. The waiter chose the latter.

Sleep was not much in my way that night. I rose almost as early as Boots himself--breakfasted--then sat at the coffee-room window looking out anxiously for the two coaches.

Nobody seemed to agree which would pass first. Each of the inn servants of whom I inquired made it a matter of partisanship, and backed his favorite coach with the most consummate assurance. At last, I heard the guard's horn and the clatter of the horses' hoofs. Up drove a coach--I looked out cautiously--it was the Humming Bee. Three outside places were vacant; one behind the coachman; two on the dickey. The first was taken immediately by a farmer, the second---to my unspeakable disgust and terror--was secured by the inevitable Bow Street runner; who, as soon as he was up, helped the weakly Screw into the third place, by his side. They were going to Crickgelly; not a doubt of it, now.

I grew mad with impatience for the arrival of the Red Cross Knight. Half-an-hour passed--forty minutes--and then I heard another horn and

another clatter--and the Red Cross Knight rattled up to the hotel door at full speed. What if there should be no vacant place for me! I ran to the door with a sinking heart. Outside, the coach was declared to be full.

"There is one inside place," said the waiter, "if you don't mind paying the--"

Before he could say the rest, I was occupying that one inside place. I remember nothing of the journey from the time we left the hotel door, except that it was fearfully long. At some hour of the day with which I was not acquainted (for my watch had stopped for want of winding up), I was set down in a clean little street of a prim little town (the name of which I never thought of asking), and was told that the coach never went any further.

No post-chaise was to be had. With incredible difficulty I got first a gig, then a man to drive it; and, last, a pony to draw it. We hobbled away crazily from the inn door. I thought of Screw and the Bow Street runner approaching Crickgelly, from their point of the compass, perhaps at the full speed of a good post-chaise--I thought of that, and would have given all the money in my pocket for two hours' use of a fast road-hack.

Judging by the time we occupied in making the journey, and a little also by my own impatience, I should say that Crickgelly must have been at

least twenty miles distant from the town where I took the gig. The sun was setting, when we first heard, through the evening stillness, the sound of the surf on the seashore. The twilight was falling as we entered the little fishing village, and let our unfortunate pony stop, for the last time, at a small inn door.

The first question I asked of the landlord was, whether two gentlemen (friends of mine, of course, whom I expected to meet) had driven into Crickgelly, a little while before me. The reply was in the negative; and the sense of relief it produced seemed to rest me at once, body and mind, after my long and anxious journey. Either I had beaten the spies on the road, or they were not bound to Crickgelly. Any way, I had first possession of the field of action. I paid the man who had driven me, and asked my way to Zion Place. My directions were simple--I had only to go through the village, and I should find Zion Place at the other end of it.

The village had a very strong smell, and a curious habit of building boats in the street between intervals of detached cottages; a helpless, muddy, fishy little place. I walked through it rapidly; turned inland a few hundred yards; ascended some rising ground; and discerned, in the dim twilight, four small lonesome villas standing in pairs, with a shed and a saw-pit on one side, and a few shells of unfinished houses on the other. Some madly speculative builder was evidently trying to turn Crickgelly into a watering-place.

I made out Number Two, and discovered the bell-handle with difficulty, it was growing so dark. A servant-maid--corporeally enormous; but, as I soon found, in a totally undeveloped state, mentally--opened the door.

"Does Miss Giles live here?" I asked.

"Don't see no visitors," answered the large maiden. "'T'other one tried it and had to go away. You go, too."

"'T'other one?" I repeated. "Another visitor? And when did he call?"

"Better than an hour ago."

"Was there nobody with him?"

"No. Don't see no visitors. He went. You go, too."

Just as she repeated that exasperating formula of words, a door opened at the end of the passage. My voice had evidently reached the ears of somebody in the back parlor. Who the person was I could not see, but I heard the rustle of a woman's dress. My situation was growing desperate, my suspicions were aroused--I determined to risk everything--and I called softly in the direction of the open door, "Alicia!"

A voice answered, "Good heavens! Frank?" It was her voice. She had recognized mine. I pushed past the big servant; in two steps I was at

the end of the passage; in one more I was in the back parlor.

She was there, standing alone by the side of a table. Seeing my changed costume and altered face, she turned deadly pale, and stretched her hand behind her mechanically, as if to take hold of a chair. I caught her in my arms; but I was afraid to kiss her--she trembled so when I only touched her.

"Frank!" she said, drawing her head back. "What is it? How did you find out? For mercy's sake what does it mean?"

"It means, love, that I've come to take care of you for the rest of your life and mine, if you will only let me. Don't tremble--there's nothing to be afraid of! Only compose yourself, and I'll tell you why I am here in this strange disguise. Come, come, Alicia!--don't look like that at me. You called me Frank just now, for the first time. Would you have done that, if you had disliked me or forgotten me?"

I saw her color beginning to come back--the old bright glow returning to the dear dusky cheeks. If I had not seen them so near me, I might have exercised some self-control--as it was, I lost my presence of mind entirely, and kissed her.

She drew herself away half-frightened, half-confused--certainly not offended, and, apparently, not very likely to faint--which was more than I could have said of her when I first entered the room. Before she had

time to reflect on the peril and awkwardness of our position, I pressed the first necessary questions on her rapidly, one after the other.

"Where is Mrs. Baggs?" I asked first.

Mrs. Baggs was the housekeeper.

Alicia pointed to the closed folding-doors. "In the front parlor; asleep on the sofa."

"Have you any suspicion who the stranger was who called more than an hour ago?"

"None. The servant told him we saw no visitors, and he went away, without leaving his name."

"Have you heard from your father?"

She began to turn pale again, but controlled herself bravely, and answered in a whisper:

"Mrs. Baggs had a short note from him this morning. It was not dated; and it only said circumstances had happened which obliged him to leave home suddenly, and that we were to wait here till he wrote again, most likely in a few days."

"Now, Alicia," I said, as lightly as I could, "I have the highest possible opinion of your courage, good-sense, and self-control; and I shall expect you to keep up your reputation in my eyes, while you are listening to what I have to tell you."

Saying these words, I took her by the hand and made her sit close by me; then, breaking it to her as gently and gradually as possible, I told her all that had happened at the red-brick house since the evening when she left the dinner-table, and we exchanged our parting look at the dining-room door.

It was almost as great a trial to me to speak as it was to her to hear. She suffered so violently, felt such evident misery of shame and terror, while I was relating the strange events which had occurred in her absence, that I once or twice stopped in alarm, and almost repented my boldness in telling her the truth. However, fair-dealing with her, cruel as it might seem at the time, was the best and safest course for the future. How could I expect her to put all her trust in me if I began by deceiving her--if I fell into prevarications and excuses at the very outset of our renewal of intercourse? I went on desperately to the end, taking a hopeful view of the most hopeless circumstances, and making my narrative as mercifully short as possible.

When I had done, the poor girl, in the extremity of her forlornness and distress, forgot all the little maidenly conventionalities and young-lady-like restraints of everyday life--and, in a burst of natural

grief and honest confiding helplessness, hid her face on my bosom, and cried there as if she were a child again, and I was the mother to whom she had been used to look for comfort.

I made no attempt to stop her tears--they were the safest and best vent for the violent agitation under which she was suffering. I said nothing; words, at such a time as that, would only have aggravated her distress. All the questions I had to ask; all the proposals I had to make, must, I felt, be put off--no matter at what risk--until some later and calmer hour. There we sat together, with one long unsnuffed candle lighting us smokily; with the discordantly-grotesque sound of the housekeeper's snoring in the front room, mingling with the sobs of the weeping girl on my bosom. No other noise, great or small, inside the house or out of it, was audible. The summer night looked black and cloudy through the little back window.

I was not much easier in my mind, now that the trial of breaking my bad news to Alicia was over. That stranger who had called at the house an hour before me, weighed on my spirits. It could not have been Doctor Dulcifer. He would have gained admission. Could it be the Bow Street runner, or Screw? I had lost sight of them, it is true; but had they lost sight of me?

Alicia's grief gradually exhausted itself. She feebly raised her head, and, turning it away from me, hid her face. I saw that she was not fit for talking yet, and begged her to go upstairs to the drawing-room and

lie down a little. She looked apprehensively toward the folding-doors that shut us off from the front parlor.

"Leave Mrs. Baggs to me," I said. "I want to have a few words with her; and, as soon as you are gone, I'll make noise enough here to wake her."

Alicia looked at me inquiringly and amazedly. I did not speak again. Time was now of terrible importance to us--I gently led her to the door.