

## CHAPTER XV.

WE posted five-and-thirty miles, then stopped for a couple of hours to rest, and wait for a night coach running northward.

On getting into this vehicle we were fortunate enough to find the fourth inside place not occupied. Mrs. Baggs showed her sense of the freedom from restraint thus obtained by tying a huge red comforter round her head like a turban, and immediately falling fast asleep. This gave Alicia and me full liberty to talk as we pleased. Our conversation was for the most part of that particular kind which is not of the smallest importance to any third person in the whole world. One portion of it, however, was an exception to this general rule. It had a very positive influence on my fortunes, and it is, therefore, I hope, of sufficient importance to bear being communicated to the reader.

We had changed horses for the fourth time, had seated ourselves comfortably in our places, and had heard Mrs. Baggs resume the kindred occupations of sleeping and snoring, when Alicia whispered to me:

"I must have no secrets, now, from you--must I, Frank?"

"You must have anything you like, do anything you like, and say anything you like. You must never ask leave--but only grant it!"

"Shall you always tell me that, Frank?"

I did not answer in words, but the conversation suffered a momentary interruption. Of what nature, susceptible people will easily imagine. As for the hard-hearted I don't write for them.

"My secret need not alarm you," Alicia went on, in tones that began to sound rather sadly; "it is only about a tiny pasteboard box that I can carry in the bosom of my dress. But it has got three diamonds in it, Frank, and one beautiful ruby. Did you ever give me credit for having so much that was valuable about me?--shall I give it you to keep for me?"

I remembered directly Old File's story of Mrs. Dulcifer's elopement, and of the jewels she had taken with her. It was easy to guess, after what I had heard, that the poor woman had secretly preserved some of her little property for the benefit of her child.

"I have no present need of money, darling," I answered; "keep the box in its present enviable position." I stopped there, saying nothing of the thought that was really uppermost in my mind. If any unforeseen accident placed me within the grip of the law, I should not now have the double trial to endure of leaving my wife for a prison, and leaving her helpless.

Morning dawned and found us still awake. The sun rose, Mrs. Baggs left off snoring, and we arrived at the last stage before the coach stopped.

I got out to see about some tea for my traveling companions, and looked up at the outside passengers. One of them seated in the dickey looked down at me. He was a countryman in a smock-frock, with a green patch over one of his eyes. Something in the expression of his uncovered eye made me pause--reflect--turn away uneasily--and then look again at him furtively. A sudden shudder ran through me from top to toe; my heart sank; and my head began to feel giddy. The countryman in the dickey was no other than the Bow Street runner in disguise.

I kept away from the coach till the fresh horses were on the point of starting, for I was afraid to let Alicia see my face, after making that fatal discovery. She noticed how pale I was when I got in. I made the best excuse I could; and gently insisted on her trying to sleep a little after being awake all night. She lay back in her corner; and Mrs. Baggs, comforted with a morning dram in her tea, fell asleep again. I had thus an hour's leisure before me to think what I should do next.

Screw was not in company with the runner this time. He must have managed to identify me somewhere, and the officer doubtless knew my personal appearance well enough now to follow and make sure of me without help. That I was the man whom he was tracking could not be doubted: his disguise and his position on the top of the coach proved it only too plainly.

But why had he not seized me at once? Probably because he had some

ulterior purpose to serve, which would have been thwarted by my immediate apprehension. What that purpose was I did my best to fathom, and, as I thought, succeeded in the attempt. What I was to do when the coach stopped was a more difficult point to settle. To give the runner the slip, with two women to take care of, was simply impossible. To treat him, as I had treated Screw at the red-brick house, was equally out of the question, for he was certain to give me no chance of catching him alone. To keep him in ignorance of the real object of my journey, and thereby to delay his discovering himself and attempting to make me a prisoner, seemed the only plan on the safety of which I could place the smallest reliance. If I had ever had any idea of following the example of other runaway lovers, and going to Gretna Green, I should now have abandoned it. All roads in that direction would betray what the purpose of my journey was if I took them. Some large town in Scotland would be the safest destination that I could publicly advertise myself as bound for. Why not boldly say that I was going with the two ladies to Edinburgh?

Such was the plan of action which I now adopted.

To give any idea of the distracted condition of my mind at the time when I was forming it, is simply impossible. As for doubting whether I ought to marry at all under these dangerous circumstances, I must frankly own that I was too selfishly and violently in love to look the question fairly in the face at first. When I subsequently forced myself to consider it, the most distinct project I could frame for overcoming all

difficulty was, to marry myself (the phrase is strictly descriptive of the Scotch ceremony) at the first inn we came to, over the Border; to hire a chaise, or take places in a public conveyance to Edinburgh, as a blind; to let Alicia and Mrs. Baggs occupy those places; to remain behind myself; and to trust to my audacity and cunning, when left alone, to give the runner the slip. Writing of it now, in cool blood, this seems as wild and hopeless a plan as ever was imagined. But, in the confused and distracted state of all my faculties at that period, it seemed quite easy to execute, and not in the least doubtful as to any one of its probable results.

On reaching the town at which the coach stopped, we found ourselves obliged to hire another chaise for a short distance, in order to get to the starting-point of a second coach. Again we took inside places, and again, at the first stages when I got down to look at the outside passengers, there was the countryman with the green shade over his eye. Whatever conveyance we traveled by on our northward road, we never escaped him. He never attempted to speak to me, never seemed to notice me, and never lost sight of me. On and on we went, over roads that seemed interminable, and still the dreadful sword of justice hung always, by its single hair, over my head. My haggard face, my feverish hands, my confused manner, my inexpressible impatience, all belied the excuses with which I desperately continued to ward off Alicia's growing fears, and Mrs. Baggs's indignant suspicions. "Oh! Frank, something has happened! For God's sake, tell me what!"--"Mr. Softly, I can see through a deal board as far as most people. You are following the doctor's

wicked example, and showing a want of confidence in me." These were the remonstrances of Alicia and the housekeeper.

At last we got out of England, and I was still a free man. The chaise (we were posting again) brought us into a dirty town, and drew up at the door of a shabby inn. A shock-headed girl received us.

"Are we in Scotland?" I asked.

"Mon! whar' else should ye be?" The accent relieved me of all doubt.

"A private room--something to eat, ready in an hour's time--chaise afterward to the nearest place from which a coach runs to Edinburgh." Giving these orders rapidly, I followed the girl with my traveling companions into a stuffy little room. As soon as our attendant had left us, I locked the door, put the key in my pocket, and took Alicia by the hand.

"Now, Mrs. Baggs," said I, "bear witness--"

"You're not going to marry her now!" interposed Mrs. Baggs, indignantly.

"Bear witness, indeed! I won't bear witness till I've taken off my bonnet, and put my hair tidy!"

"The ceremony won't take a minute," I answered; "and I'll give you your five-pound note and open the door the moment it's over. Bear witness,"

I went on, drowning Mrs. Baggs's expostulations with the all-important marriage-words, "that I take this woman, Alicia Dulcifer for my lawful wedded wife."

"In sickness and in health, in poverty and wealth," broke in Mrs. Baggs, determining to represent the clergyman as well as to be the witness.

"Alicia, dear," I said, interrupting in my turn, "repeat my words. Say 'I take this man, Francis Softly, for my lawful wedded husband.'"

She repeated the sentence, with her face very pale, with her dear hand cold and trembling in mine.

"For better for worse," continued the indomitable Mrs. Baggs. "Little enough of the Better, I'm afraid, and Lord knows how much of the Worse."

I stopped her again with the promised five-pound note, and opened the room door. "Now, ma'am," I said, "go to your room; take off your bonnet, and put your hair as tidy as you please."

Mrs. Baggs raised her eyes and hands to heaven, exclaimed "Disgraceful!" and flounced out of the room in a passion. Such was my Scotch marriage--as lawful a ceremony, remember, as the finest family wedding at the largest parish church in all England.

An hour passed; and I had not yet summoned the cruel courage to

communicate my real situation to Alicia. The entry of the shock-headed servant-girl to lay the cloth, followed by Mrs. Baggs, who was never out of the way where eating and drinking appeared in prospect, helped me to rouse myself. I resolved to go out for a few minutes to reconnoiter, and make myself acquainted with any facilities for flight or hiding which the situation of the house might present. No doubt the Bow Street runner was lurking somewhere; but he must, as a matter of course, have heard, or informed himself, of the orders I had given relating to our conveyance on to Edinburgh; and, in that case, I was still no more in danger of his avowing himself and capturing me, than I had been at any previous period of our journey.

"I am going out for a moment, love, to see about the chaise," I said to Alicia. She suddenly looked up at me with an anxious searching expression. Was my face betraying anything of my real purpose? I hurried to the door before she could ask me a single question.

The front of the inn stood nearly in the middle of the principal street of the town. No chance of giving any one the slip in that direction; and no sign, either, of the Bow Street runner. I sauntered round, with the most unconcerned manner I could assume, to the back of the house, by the inn yard. A door in one part of it stood half-open. Inside was a bit of kitchen-garden, bounded by a paling; beyond that some backs of detached houses; beyond them, again, a plot of weedy ground, a few wretched cottages, and the open, heathery moor. Good enough for running away, but terribly bad for hiding.

I returned disconsolately to the inn. Walking along the passage toward the staircase, I suddenly heard footsteps behind me--turned round, and saw the Bow Street runner (clothed again in his ordinary costume, and accompanied by two strange men) standing between me and the door.

"Sorry to stop you from going to Edinburgh, Mr. Softly," he said. "But you're wanted back at Barkingham. I've just found out what you have been traveling all the way to Scotland for; and I take you prisoner, as one of the coining gang. Take it easy, sir. I've got help, you see; and you can't throttle three men, whatever you may have done at Barkingham with one."

He handcuffed me as he spoke. Resistance was hopeless. I could only make an appeal to his mercy, on Alicia's account.

"Give me ten minutes," I said, "to break what has happened to my wife. We were only married an hour ago. If she knows this suddenly, it may be the death of her."

"You've led me a nice dance on a wrong scent," answered the runner, sulkily. "But I never was a hard man where women are concerned. Go upstairs, and leave the door open, so that I can see in through it if I like. Hold your hat over your wrists, if you don't want her to see the handcuffs."

I ascended the first flight of stairs, and my heart gave a sudden bound as if it would burst. I stopped, speechless and helpless, at the sight of Alicia, standing alone on the landing. My first look at her face told me she had heard all that had passed in the passage. She passionately struck the hat with which I had been trying to hide the handcuffs out of my fingers, and clasped me in her arms with such sudden and desperate energy that she absolutely hurt me.

"I was afraid of something, Frank," she whispered. "I followed you a little way. I stopped here; I have heard everything. Don't let us be parted! I am stronger than you think me. I won't be frightened. I won't cry. I won't trouble anybody, if that man will only take me with you!"

It is best for my sake, if not for the reader's, to hurry over the scene that followed.

It ended with as little additional wretchedness as could be expected. The runner was resolute about keeping me handcuffed, and taking me back, without a moment's unnecessary waste of time to Barkingham; but he relented on other points.

Where he was obliged to order a private conveyance, there was no objection to Alicia and Mrs. Baggs following it. Where we got into a coach, there was no harm in their hiring two inside places. I gave my watch, rings, and last guinea to Alicia, enjoining her, on no account, to let her box of jewels see the light until we could get proper advice

on the best means of turning them to account. She listened to these and other directions with a calmness that astonished me.

"You shan't say, my dear, that your wife has helped to make you uneasy by so much as a word or a look," she whispered to me as we left the inn.

And she kept the hard promise implied in that one short sentence throughout the journey. Once only did I see her lose her self-possession. At starting on our way south, Mrs. Baggs--taking the same incomprehensible personal offense at my misfortune which she had previously taken at the doctor's--upbraided me with my want of confidence in her, and declared that it was the main cause of all my present trouble. Alicia turned on her as she was uttering the words, with a look and a warning that silenced her in an instant:

"If you say another syllable that isn't kind to him, you shall find your way back by yourself!"

The words may not seem of much importance to others; but I thought, as I overheard them, that they justified every sacrifice I had made for my wife's sake.