

CHAPTER IX

WHO FIGHTS AND RUNS

As Mr. Heatherbloom prepared to issue from his neighbor's gate opening on the side street, the feminine voice of one of the servants in the rear of the corner house called out in alarm at sight of the strange figure speeding across their metropolitan imitation of a back yard. If anything were needed to stimulate the fugitive's footsteps, it was the sound of that voice. He stayed not on the order of his going, but pushing back the heavy bolt--fortunately his egress was not barred by a locked door--he tore open the gate and sprang to the sidewalk. Then without stopping, he ran on, away from the fashionable avenue. The street he traversed like many thoroughfares of its kind was comparatively deserted most of the time; nobody impeded his progress, though one or two people gazed after him from their windows.

He had gone about three-quarters of a block when the window spectators discerned a heavier built figure come lumbering around the corner, apparently in hot pursuit. Mr. Heatherbloom, glancing over his shoulder, also observed this person; his capture and subsequent incarceration seemed inevitable. Already the fugitive was drawing near to busier Fourth Avenue; there he would be obliged to relax his pace; he could not sprint down that thoroughfare without attracting undue attention. Behind, the pursuer called out; he was, however, too short of breath for

compelling vocal effect.

Mr. Heatherbloom, on the contrary, had good control of his breathing and was, moreover, yet fresh and physically capable. Which fact made it the more difficult for him to settle down to a forced, albeit sharp walk as he approached the corner, when his gait suddenly accelerated once more.

A street-car had just started not very far from him and Mr. Heatherbloom ran after it. A fine pretext for speed was offered him; as he "let himself go" in the way he had once gone somewhere in the past in a hundred-yards' dash, he felt joyously conscious both of covering space quickly and that he did so without making himself particularly prominent. Fools who ran after street-cars were born every moment; he was happy to be relegated to that idiotic class by any onlookers. He caught the car while it was going; he didn't want it to stop for him.

Neither did it stop to pick up any one else for several blocks; there was a space before it unobstructed by traffic. The motorman turned on more power and Mr. Heatherbloom listened gratefully to the humming wheels. At the same time he looked back; at the corner where he had turned into Fourth avenue he fancied a number of people were gathering. He could surmise the cause; the stockily-built man--his pursuer--was asking questions; he had learned what had become of the fugitive and was presumably looking around for a "taxi." In vain. At least, Mr. Heatherbloom so concluded, because one did not appear in hot chase behind them.

The motorman still gave "rapid service"; the conductor looked at his watch, by which Mr. Heatherbloom imagined they had time to make up. He hoped so, then resented a pause at a corner for an old lady. How he wished she had not been afflicted with rheumatism, and could have got on without help! But at length the light-weight conductor did manage to pull the heavy-weight passenger aboard. Time lost, thirty seconds! The motorman manipulated the lever more deliberately now and they gathered headway slowly. Mr. Heatherbloom dared not remain longer where he was; as the car approached a corner near an elevated station, he got off. He was obliged to walk now a short distance but he did so hastily. Drawing near the iron steps, leading upward, he once more looked back; a "taxi" was whirling after him and he had no doubt as to its occupant. The street-car could easily have been kept in sight and his leaving it been noted.

Mr. Heatherbloom now threw discretion to the winds; dashing toward the stairway he ran up. Just as he reached the ticket window, the pursuing vehicle stopped below. Some one sprang out, did not pause to pay the chauffeur, but calling out to him his name, started after Mr. Heatherbloom. That gentleman had by this time boarded the train waiting above; he stood on the rear platform. Any moment the pursuer would appear. He did appear as the gates of the train were closed and the cars had started on their way.

Yet he did not give up for running alongside the last car he called out

to the guard:

"Fugitive from justice! Criminal--on this train! Open the gate for me!"

An instant the guard hesitated; rules, however, were rules.

"Five hundred dollars if you let me on!" the voice panted.

The guard in his own mind decided he would let the other on--too late; the last car dashed past the end of the platform. A faint sigh of relief from Mr. Heatherbloom was drowned in the tumult of the wheels; then he endeavored to appear indifferent, apathetic. It was not easy to do so; the secret-service agent had been heard by many others.

A "fugitive from justice" on the train! Mr. Heatherbloom tried to look as little the part as possible, to simulate by his expression a preoccupied young business man of heavy responsibilities. Fortunately the train was crowded; nevertheless he fancied people glanced especially at him. He wished now he were better dressed; good clothes may cover a multitude of sins. Still there was no reason why he should be suspected more than sundry other indifferently-dressed people. He would dismiss the thought, tell himself he was going down town on some little errand; he even devised what that errand should be--to procure theater tickets. But his brain did not seem quite capable of concentrating itself solely on desirable orchestra chairs; it constantly and perversely reverted to that other disagreeable subject--a "fugitive from--"

Whoever could the fellow be? He endeavored by a mental process to eliminate himself and see but a mythical some one else in a mythical background. A short person; a tall one? What kind of person would the imaginary individual be, anyhow? And what had he done, what crime committed? Mr. Heatherbloom tried to think with the minds of all these other people on the train, to put himself figuratively in their shoes.

One young sprig of a girl, about fourteen, with sallow complexion and bead-like black eyes, kept regarding him. He conceived a profound dislike for her, shifted a foot; then straightened and banished her peremptorily from his environment. His principal interest lay now in casual glimpses of windows and speculation as to what was behind them. He varied this employment in a passing endeavor to decipher sundry signs that obtruded incidentally within range of vision.

He had made out only a few when the, train slackened and came to a standstill. Mr. Heatherbloom told himself he would get off as quickly as possible; then changed his mind and remained. People would, of course, argue that, under the circumstances, the unknown criminal would be among those to leave the train at the first opportunity.

A number got out; Mr. Heatherbloom noted the passengers who remained aboard and watched closely the departing ones. A few of the latter seemed slightly self-conscious, notably, an elderly spinster who, having never done anything wrong, was possessed of an unusual sensitiveness.

"See that slouchy chap--By jove, I believe--"

"Does look like a tough customer--"

"On the contrary, he just looks poor." Mr. Heatherbloom turned upon the two speakers warmly.

Why could he not have kept silent; why was he obliged to obtrude his opinion into their conversation?

They stared and he half turned as the train banged itself along once more. Where should he go? Reaching for a paper that some one had discarded, he sank into a vacant seat and opened the sheet with misgiving.

What would the big types say? Nothing! Miss Van Rolsen had managed to keep the strange affair of her niece's disappearance out of the columns of the papers. They knew nothing about it as yet--Only a single little item in the shipping news, in fine print, which suddenly caught his gaze bore in any way, and that a remote one, upon her niece and her affairs. Mr. Heatherbloom regarded it with dull glance. The few lines meant nothing to him--then; later he had cause to turn to them with abrupt wondering avidity. Now his eyes swept with simulated interest the general news of the day; he professed to read cable dispatches.

But an odd reaction seemed to have settled on him; the excitement of the chase became, for the moment, forgotten. The scope of his mental visuality no longer included the figure of the agent from the private detective bureau. An anxiety more poignant moved him; his thoughts centered on that other matter--the cause of Miss Van Rolsen's apprehensions--the while those emotions that had held him a listener behind the curtain in her library again stirred in his breast. He had not played the eavesdropper for any selfish purpose or through a sense of personal apprehension. The sudden realization of his own danger, had, perforce, awakened in him the need for quick action if he would save himself.

If? What chance had he? But for one compelling reason, one consuming purpose, he would not have fled at all; he would have faced them, instead! But he had work to do--he! A fugitive, a logical candidate for the prison cell! Ironical situation! Even now he heard a voice at his elbow.

"Mr. Heatherbloom!" Some one spoke suddenly to him and he wheeled with abrupt swift fierceness.

"Well, are you going to eat me up?" the voice laughed.

He looked into the pert face of Jane--the maid with the provoking nose--who had been at Miss Van Rolsen's. She had got on at the other end of the car at the last station, and after waiting a few moments for him

to see her, had moved toward him, or a seat at his side just then vacated by some one preparing to leave. Mr. Heatherbloom's face cleared; he banished the belligerent expression.

"You look edible enough!" he said with forced jocularly.

"Indeed?" she retorted, surprised at such gallantry from one who had heretofore not deigned to pay her compliments. "I'll have to tell my husband about you." Playfully. "But how are things at Miss Van Rolsen's? Anything new?"

Mr. Heatherbloom murmured something about the customary routine; then, even as he spoke, became conscious of a sudden new disconcerting circumstance. The tracks for the up and the down trains on the elevated had widely separated and ran now on the extreme sides of the broad thoroughfare. From his side of the car the young man was afforded a view of the pavement below, between the two sustaining iron structures. A chill shot through him and his smile became set. Gazing down he discerned, on the street beneath and a little to one side of them, a motor-car, speeding fast, apparently bent on keeping up with them.

"How--how's your husband?" he said irrelevantly. The car was keeping up with them.

"Very well, thank you." (Would it reach the next station before them?)

"You--you have a pleasant home?" he asked. (A slight blockade below impeded, momentarily, the "taxi". Mr. Heatherbloom raised his handkerchief to his moist brow.)

"Lovely," she answered. "Are you going far?"

"Brooklyn," he said at random. What were they talking about? (The car was once more under way; fortunately their progress overhead would not be impeded by a press of vehicles.)

"That's where we live--Brooklyn," she said.

"Is it? Got a nice house?" He had practically asked this question before; but he hardly knew what he was saying. A policeman had stopped the "taxi" and was shaking his head, as at a rather "fishy" story. Mr. Heatherbloom by a species of telepathy, seemed to overhear the excited talk waging below.

"Oh, yes; lovely!" Jane's accents were but parenthetical to something else. The "taxi" had been allowed to proceed, in spite of the detaining thought-waves Mr. Heatherbloom had launched toward the officer of the law. The occupant had probably showed a badge; Mr. Heatherbloom stretched his neck out of the window.

"You can come around and see, sometime, if you want to." Pride in her voice. "And meet my husband." Husband was a very substantial baker.

"Charmed, I'm sure! Ha! ha!" He suddenly laughed.

"What is it?" She looked startled.

"Funniest accident!" He waved his hat, as at some one, out of the window. "See that taxi! Bumped into a dray. Ha! ha!"

"I don't see anything so funny in that." Straightening.

"No? You should have seen the expression on his face--"

"His? Whose?"

"The--ah, drayman's, of course! He--looked so mad."

"I should have thought," she observed, "the man in the car would have been the maddest It couldn't have hurt the dray much."

"No? Perhaps that's what made it seem so funny to me."

"Well," she said, "I never noticed before that you had a great sense of humor."

"You never knew me." Jauntily.

They got off at Brooklyn Bridge together. As they made their way through the crowd, Mr. Heatherbloom appeared most care-free and very sedulous of his companion's welfare, especially when they passed one or two loiterers who seemed eying the passengers rather closely.

"Two for Brooklyn." Mr. Heatherbloom laid down a dime at the ticket office.

Soon, unmolested, he sped on once more; but as they crossed the busy river all his light-heartedness seemed suddenly to desert him; the questions he had been vainly asking himself earlier that day were reiterated in his brain. Where was she? What had become of her? His hands clasped closely. A red spot burned on his cheek.