

CHAPTER XII

ON THE ROAD

Gone! It was the only word he, could think of. Every thought, every emotion centered around it. He could not reason or argue. No plan occurred to him now. He continued to sit still, seeing but one picture--a boat vanishing. Night had begun to fall as they returned to the city. Its lights played mockingly in the darkness. Mr. Heatherbloom viewed them with apathetic gaze. The secret-service man, the chief of police and his assistants were on shore somewhere waiting to capture him, but he did not care. Let them take him now! What did it matter?

When the boat reached land he got out like an automaton. Perhaps he made answer to the darky's last cheerful good night, but if so he spoke without knowing it. The boatman let him go, willingly; Mr. Heatherbloom hadn't asked for his last bill back again and the other overlooked reminding him of his remissness. The greenback was considerably more than the fare.

Indifferent to his fate, Mr. Heatherbloom moved on; no one molested him. He walked along dark highways, not through fear of being apprehended, but because his mood was dark. He did not even notice where he went; he just kept going. He forgot he was hungry, but at length, as in a dream, he began to realize a physical weariness. Overwrought nature asserted

itself; he was not made of iron; his muscles responded reluctantly. Without observing his surroundings, he sank listlessly to the earth; the cool grass received his exhausted frame. Beyond, some distance away, the lights of the city threw now a sullen glow on the sky. All was comparatively still about him; the noise of the city was replaced by the lighter sound of vehicles on the well kept, almost non-resounding country road. It seemed to be a main thoroughfare, but with little life and animation about it at that evening hour. A buggy did go by occasionally, however, and, not far from Mr. Heatherbloom, at a curb, stood a motor-car.

He had suffered himself to relax on the ground in front of a small house set well back among spectral-looking trees and surrounded by a stone wall overgrown with foliage. Mr. Heatherbloom remained unmindful of his surroundings. The lamps of the car near by were not lighted; a single figure on the front seat was barely distinguishable. Now this person got down and lighted a cigarette; he seemed restless, walked to and fro, and glanced once or twice at the house. From a single window a faint light gleamed; then it vanished, only to reappear a few moments later at another window. Among the masses of foliage fireflies glistened; a tree-toad began to make a sound but almost immediately stopped. The front door had apparently opened and some person or persons came out. The faint crunchings on the gravel indicated more than one person. Now they stepped on the grass, for there were no audible indications of their approach. The man near the machine threw quickly away his cigarette and opened the door of the car. Several people, issuing from

the gate, crossed the sidewalk and got in. Mr. Heatherbloom was hardly aware of the fact; they seemed but unmeaning shadows.

The driver bent over and lighted one of his lamps. As he did so, the flare revealed for an instant his face--square, rather handsome and bearded. A faint flicker of interest, for some reason undefinable to himself at the moment, swept over Mr. Heatherbloom. He had been lying where the grass was tall and now raised himself on his elbow, the better to peer over the waving tops. The car had gathered headway and swung out into the road, when suddenly some one in it laughed and uttered an exclamation in a foreign tongue. That musical note--a word he did not understand--was wafted to Mr. Heatherbloom. It acted upon him like a galvanic shock; he sprang to his feet and, bewildered, stared after the machine. What had happened; was he dreaming? He could hardly at first believe the evidence of his senses, for the laugh, coming back to him in the night, was that of the woman for whom he had procured employment at Miss Van Rolsen's. He could have sworn to the fact now. And the man whose countenance he had so briefly seen was, no doubt, of her own nationality--a Russian!

Involuntarily, without realizing what he did, Mr. Heatherbloom started to run in the direction the car had gone, but he soon stopped. What madness!--to attempt to catch a sixty-horse-power machine! Why, it was nearly a mile away already. The young man stood stock-still while a cogent reaction swept over him. The woman had passed within fifty feet of where he had lain, head near the earth, moping. A mocking desire to

atone for a great remissness found him impotent. There seemed nothing for him to do now but to reconcile himself to the irreconcilable, to stay here, while every desire urged him to follow her, to learn why this woman was in the car and who was with her. Naturally, he had expected she would be on the yacht now steaming away out to sea, and here she was. A new enigma confronted him.

Mr. Heatherbloom continued to stand in the center of the road. His head whirled; he panted hard, out of breath from his recent dash. A loud honk! honk! from another machine coming unexpectedly up behind, caused him to leap aside just in time. The second car whizzed by, although obeying an impulse born on the instant, he called out wildly, waving his arms to bring it to a halt. If they saw his strange motions--which was unlikely, the night being dark--they did not heed them. Soon the second machine was some distance away; then its rear light gleamed like a vanishing coal and suddenly disappeared altogether around a bend of the road.

He looked back; no other vehicle of any description was in sight now. But it profited nothing to continue passive, immovable. He had to act, to walk on, no matter how slowly; his face, at least, was set in the direction the woman had gone. How long it took him to reach the turn of the thoroughfare he could not tell, but at length there, he came again to an abrupt stop. Some distance ahead in the road appeared a machine, motionless--waiting, or broken down.

Which car was it? The one containing the woman, or the other that came after? If the former--He pressed on eagerly, yet keeping to the shadows, alive once more to the need of caution. His heart pounded hard; he could see a form passing in front of the machine; the light of the lamp enabled him now to make out the other occupants--three men. No woman was with them. This became poignantly, irrefutably evident as he drew nearer. He could see plainly the empty car and the trio of figures; he could hear them talking but was not yet able to distinguish what they said. These were the people whose attention he had tried to attract back there in the road. His purpose then, occurring to him in a flash, renewed itself strongly now. He would ask their aid; circumstances might enable him to do so now with better grace. He had had a good deal of experience with cars of divers kinds and makes at different times in the past. Why not proffer these strangers his fairly expert services? He felt sure he could soon learn, and repair, what was wrong with the machine. Having made himself useful, he could then intimate that a "lift" down the road would be acceptable. And he would probably get it.

But he did not carry out his intention. Something he heard as he came closer to them caused him to hesitate and reconsider. Mixed with anathemas directed against the car, of rather a cheap type, were words that had for him more than passing significance. These men were after some one, and that the some one was none other than himself, Mr. Heatherbloom soon became fully convinced. Fate had been kinder to him than he knew when he had endeavored, and failed, to win their notice. He crouched back now against a rail fence; their low disgruntled tones were

still borne to him. For some moments they continued to work over the machine without apparently being able to set it to rights.

"If this goes on much longer," said one of them, "he'll get away from Brownville."

"Providin' he's there!" grumbled another. "People are always seeing an escaped criminal in a dozen different localities at the same time."

Brownville! The listener soon divined, from a sentence dropped here and there, that the place was a little fishing village a short distance down the coast. He surmised, also, that they had by this time the main harbor of the city fairly watched as far as outgoing vessels were concerned, and were reaching out to prevent a possible exit from the smaller community. Fishing craft leaving from there could easily take out a fugitive and thus enable him to escape. This contingency the authorities were now endeavoring to avert; that they also had some kind of a clue, pointing to their present destination and inciting them to make haste thither, was evident from the skeptical remark Mr. Heatherbloom had overheard.

A series of explosions, as sudden as spasmodic, broke in on the listener's thoughts. "Hurray!" said one. "We're off!"

And they were, quickly. Mr. Heatherbloom also moved with extreme abruptness and expedition. Waiting in the shadow until they had all

sprung into the car and the machine had fairly started, he then darted forward, seized a strap and clinging as best he might, hoisted himself to the place in the rear designed for a trunk. One desire only, in resorting to this expedient, moved him--to get in touch as soon as possible, if possible, with the other car. This machine, of inferior build, suggested, it is true, a dubious way to that end but it was the best that offered.

He did not see the incongruity of his position, of being a passenger, though secretly and surreptitiously, of the car containing those embarked on a mission so closely concerning himself. Instead of fleeing from them he was actually courting their company, pursuing himself, as it were! At another time he might have smiled; now the situation had for him nothing of the comic; it was tragically grim, also decidedly unpleasant. A strong odor of gasoline permeated his nostrils until he was nearly suffocated by it and all the dust, stirred by their flight, swirled up on him, making it difficult to refrain from coughing. Fortunately the machine had a monopoly on noises, and any sound from him would have passed unnoticed. He had ridden the "bumpers" not so long ago on freights, and, perforce, indulged in kindred uncomfortable methods of free transportation in the course of his recent career, but he had never experienced anything quite so little to be desired as this.

The driver had begun to speed; as if to make up for lost time, he was forcing the engine to its limit. The machine, of light construction, shook violently, negotiated the steep places with jumps and slid down on

the other side with breakneck velocity. The dust thickened about Mr. Heatherbloom's head so that he could scarcely see. His arms ached and every bump nearly tore him loose. He wound the strap around his wrist and strove to ensconce himself deeper in a place not large enough for him. He was on an edge all the time, and felt as if he were falling over every moment; the edge, too, was sharp and dug into him.

Mr. Heatherbloom, however, had little thought of bodily discomfort; he was more concerned in making progress and the difficulty of maintaining his position. His only fear was that he would be compelled to abandon his place because his physical energy might not be equal to the demands put upon it. He set his teeth now and began to count the seconds. The faster they went, the better was his purpose served; he strove to find encouragement in the thought. The other car could make a superior showing in the way of speed, but it might stop voluntarily somewhere after a while, or something might happen to arrest its progress. The race did not always belong to the swift. He endeavored to formulate some plan as to just what he would do if he did finally manage to overtake the woman and her party, but at length ceased trying. Sufficient unto the moment were the problems thereof; he could but strive in the present. He dispelled the fear that he could not hold on much longer, and filled himself with new determination not to yield. But even as he did so, a bigger bump than any they had yet encountered jerked him abruptly from his place.

When finally he managed to collect himself and his senses and sit up

uncertainly in the road, the car was far away. The snap of exploding gasoline grew faint--fainter--then ceased altogether.