

## CHAPTER XVI

### FLIGHT

The half-expected had happened; bag and baggage had led his pursuers hither; the fellow could now go back and report. After his bath, before lying down, John Steele had partly dressed in the garments laid out for him; now he threw the dressing-gown from his shoulders and hastily put on the rest of his clothes. He felt now only the need for action--to do what? Impatience was capped by the realization of his own impotence; Rosemary Villa was, no doubt, at that very moment, subjected to a close espionage. He heard the man-servant in the garden, and unable to restrain a growing restlessness to know the worst, Steele mounted the stairs to the attic.

From the high window there he could see, around a curve in the Row, a loitering figure; in the other direction a neighboring house concealed the byway, but he could reasonably conclude that some one also sauntered there, sentinel at that end of the street. Quickly coming down to the second story, he began cautiously to examine from the windows the situation of the house, in relation to adjoining grounds and neighboring dwellings.

To the right, the top of the high wall shone with the customary broken

bits of glass; the rear defenses glistened also in formidable fashion. He noted, however, several places where this safeguard against unwonted invasion showed signs of deterioration; in one or two spots the jagged fragments had been broken, or had fallen off. These slight breaks in the continuity of irregular, menacing glass bits, he fixed in mind by a certain shrub or tree. Against the rear wall, which was of considerable height, leaned his neighbor's low conservatory, almost spanning it from side to side.

"Sure, sir, I don't know whether it's breakfast or supper that's waiting for you." Captain Forsythe's man had reappeared and stood now at the top of the landing looking in at him. "It's a sound sleep you've had."

John Steele glanced at the clock; the afternoon was waning. Why did not his enemies force their way in, surround him at once? Unless--and this might prove a momentary saving clause!--these people without were but an advance guard, an outpost, awaiting orders. In this event Gillett would hastily be sent for; would soon be on his way---

"'Tis a rasher of real Irish bacon that is awaiting your convenience, sir."

The servant was now eying the visitor dubiously; John Steele wheeled, a perfunctory answer on his lips, and going to the dining-room swallowed hastily a few mouthfuls. From where he sat he could command a view of the front gate, and kept glancing toward it when alone. To go now,--or

wait? The daylight did not favor the former course unless his pursuers should suddenly appear before the locked gate, demanding admission.

He made up his mind as to his course then, the last desperate shift. Amid a turmoil of thoughts a certain letter he had had in mind to send to Captain Forsythe occurred to him, and calling for paper and pen, he wrote there, facing the window, feverishly, hastily, several pages; then he gave the letter to the servant for the postman, whose special call at the iron knocker without had just sounded. The letter would have served John Steele ill had it fallen into his enemies' hands, but once in the care of the royal mails it would be safe. If it were, indeed, that person at the gate, and not some one--

"One moment, Dennis!" The man paused. "Of course you will make sure it is the postman--?"

The servant stared at this guest whose demeanor was becoming more and more eccentric. "As if I didn't know his knock!" he said, departing.

The afternoon waned; the shadows began to fall; John Steele's pulses now throbbed expectantly. He called for a key to the gate and moved toward the front door; by this time the darkness had deepened, and, key in hand, he stepped out.

At first he walked toward the front on the gravel that the servant might hear him, but near the entrance he paused, hesitating, to look out. As

he remained thus, some one, who had been standing not far off, drew near. This person stealthily passed; in doing so he glanced around; but John Steele felt uncertain whether the fellow had or had not been able to distinguish him in the gloom. John Steele waited, however, until the other moved a short distance on; then he retraced his own way quietly, keeping to the grass, toward the house; near it he swerved and in the same rapid manner stole around the place until he reached the back wall.

There he examined his position, felt the top, then placed his fingers on the wall. It was about six feet high, but seizing hold, he was about to spring into the air, when behind him, from the direction of the Row, a low metallic sound caught his attention. The front gate to the Forsythe house had suddenly clicked; some one had entered,--not the servant; John Steele had seen him but a few moments before in the kitchen; some one, then, who had quietly picked the lock, as the surest way of getting in.

John Steele looked back; even as he did so, a number of figures abruptly ran forward from the gate. He waited no longer but drew himself up to a level with the top of the wall. The effort made him acutely aware of his wounded shoulder; he winced but set his teeth hard and swung himself over until one foot came in contact with the iron frame of the greenhouse next to the masonry. To crawl to the end of the lean-to, bending to hold to the wall, and then to let himself down, occupied but a brief interval.

As he stood there, trying to make out a path through shrubs and trees,

he heard behind him an imperative knocking at the front door of Captain Forsythe's house; the expostulating tones of the serving-man; the half-indistinct replies that were succeeded by the noise of feet hastening into the house.

For some time nothing save these sounds was wafted to the listener; then a loud disappointed voice, sounding above another voice, came from a half-opened window. John Steele stood still no longer; great hazard, almost certain capture, lay before him in the direction he was going; the street this garden led to would be watched; but he could not remain where he was. Already his enemies were moving about in the neighboring grounds; soon they would flash their lights over the wall, would discover him, unless--He moved quickly forward. As he neared the house, more imposing than Captain Forsythe's, a stream of light poured from a window; through this bright space he darted quickly, catching a fleeting view of people within, several with their faces turned toward him. Close to a side of the square-looking house, he paused, his heart beating fast--not with fear, but with a sudden, fierce anger at the possibility that he would be caught thus; no better than a mere--

But needs must, when the devil drives; the devil was driving him now hard. To attempt to reach the gate, to get out to Surrey Road,--little doubt existed as to what awaited him there; so, crouching low, he forced himself to linger a little longer where he was. As thus he remained motionless, sharp twinges again shot through his shoulder; then, on a sudden, he became unmindful of physical discomfort; a plan of action

that had flashed through his brain, held him oblivious to all else; it offered only the remotest chance of escape--but still a chance, which he weighed, determined to take! It had come to him while listening to the merry voices within the room near him talking of the gay dinner just ended, of the box party at the theater that was to follow.

Already cabs were at the door; the women and the men, several of the latter flushed with wine, were ready to go. A servant walked out and unlocked the gate and with light badinage the company issued forth. As they did so, John Steele, unobserved, stepped forward; in the semi-darkness the party passed through the entrance into the street. Taking his place among the last of the laughing, dimly-seen figures, John Steele walked boldly on and found himself a moment later on the sidewalk of Surrey Road. He was aware that some one, a woman, had touched his arm, as if to take it; of a light feminine voice and an abrupt exclamation of surprise, of the quick drawing back of fluttering skirts. But he did not stop to apologize or to explain; walking swiftly to one of the last cabs he sprang in.

"A little errand first, driver," he called out. "To--" and mentioned a street--"as fast as you can." His tone was sharp, authoritative; it implied the need for instant obedience, rang like a command. The man straightened, touched his horse with his whip, and wheeling quickly they dashed away.

As they did so, John Steele thought he heard exclamations behind;

looking through the cab window he saw, at the gate, the company gazing after him, obviously not yet recovered from their thrill of surprise following his unexpected action. He observed, also, two men on the other side of the street who now ran across and held a brief altercation with one of the cabmen. As they were about to enter the cab several persons in the party apparently intervened, expostulating vigorously. It was not difficult to surmise the resentment of the group at this attempted summary seizure of a second one of their cabs. By the time the men had explained their imperative need, and after further argument were permitted to drive off, John Steele had gained a better start than he had dared to hope. But they would soon be after him, post-haste; yes, already they were dashing hard and furiously behind; he lifted the lid overhead, in his hand a sovereign.

"Those men must not overtake us, cabby. Go where you will! You understand?"

The man did; his fingers closed quickly on the generous tip and once more he lashed his horse. For some time they continued at a rapid pace, now skirting the confines of the park, now plunging into a puzzling tangle of streets; but wherever they went, the other cab managed always to keep them in sight. It even began to creep up, nearer. From his pocket John Steele drew a weapon; his eyes gleamed ominously. The pursuing hansom drew closer; casting a hurried glance over his shoulder, he again called up to the driver.

"It's no use, gov'ner," came back the reply. "This 'oss 'as been out longer than 'is."

"Then turn the first dark corner and slow up a bit,--for only a second; afterward, go on your very best as long as you can."

Another sovereign changed hands and shortly afterward the vehicle dashed into a side street. It appeared as likely a place as any for his purpose; John Steele, hardly waiting for the man to draw rein, leaped out as far as he might. He landed without mishap, heard a whip snap furiously, and darted back into a doorway. He had just reached it when the other cab drew near; for an instant he felt certain that he had been seen; but the pursuers' eyes were bent eagerly ahead.

"This'll mean a fiver for you, my man," he heard one of them shout to the driver. "We've got him, by--" A harsh, jubilant cry cut the air; then they were gone.

John Steele did not wait; replacing the weapon in his pocket he started quickly around the corner; his cabman could not lead them far; they would soon return. As fast as possible, without attracting undue attention, he retraced his way; passed in and out of tortuous thoroughfares; by shops from whence came the smell of frying fish; down alleys where squalor lurked. Although he had by this time, perhaps, eluded the occupants of the cab, he knew there were others keenly alert for his capture whom he might at any moment encounter. To his fancy



every corner teemed with peril; he did not underestimate the resources of those who sought him or the cunning of him who was the chief among his enemies.

Which way should he move? At that moment the city's multitudinous blocks seemed like the many squares of an oriental checker-board; the problem he put to himself was how to cross the city and reach the vicinity of the river; there to make a final effort to look for--What? A hopeless quest!

His face burned with fever; he did not heed it. A long, broad thoroughfare, as he walked on, had suddenly unfolded itself to his gaze; one side of this highway shone resplendent with the flaring lights of numerous stands and stalls displaying vegetables and miscellaneous articles. A hubbub assailed the ear, the voices of hucksters and hawkers, vying with one another to dispose of their wares; like ants, people thronged the sidewalk and pavement near these temporary booths.

About to turn back from this animated scene, John Steele hesitated; the road ran straight and sure toward the destination he wished to reach, while on either hand lay a network of devious ways. Amid these labyrinths, even one familiar with the city's maze might go astray, and again he glanced down the single main road, cutting squarely through all intricacies; noted that although, on one side, the lamps and the torches flared high, revealing every detail of merchandise, and, incidentally, the faces of all who passed, the other side of the thoroughfare seemed

the more murky and shadowy by comparison.

He decided, crossed the street; lights gleamed in his face. He pushed his way through the people unmolested and strode on, followed only by the noise of passing vehicles and carts; then found himself walking on the other side, apart from the headlong busy stream. A suspicion of mist hung over the city; through it, people afar assumed shapes unreal; above the jagged sky-line of housetops the heavens had taken on that sickly hue, the high dome's jaundiced aspect for London in autumn.

On!--on! John Steele moved; on!--on!--the traffic pounded, for the most part in the opposite direction; a vast, never-ending source of sound, it seemed to soothe momentarily his sense of insecurity. Time passed; he had, apparently, evaded his pursuers; he told himself he might, after all, meet the problem confronting him; meet and conquer. It would be a hard battle; but once in that part of the city he was striving to reach, he might find those willing to offer him shelter--low-born, miserable wretches he had helped. He would not disdain their succor; the end justified the way. In their midst, if anywhere in London, was the one man in the world who could throw a true light on the events of the past; enable him to---

Behind him some one followed; some one who drew ever nearer, with soft, skulking steps which now he heard--

"Mr. Steele!" Even as he wheeled, his name was called out.