

CHAPTER VI.

In which Fix, the Detective, betrays some not unnatural Impatience.

The circumstances under which the foregoing telegram had been despatched were as follows:

On Wednesday, the 29th of October, the Peninsular and Oriental Company's steamer Mongolia was being anxiously expected at Suez. This vessel made the passage between Brindisi and Bombay through the Suez Canal. She is one of the swiftest of the Company's vessels, and her usual speed is ten knots an hour between Brindisi and Suez, and nine and a half between Suez and Bombay, and sometimes even more.

Pending the arrival of the Mongolia, two men were walking together up and down the quay in the midst of the crowd of natives and visitors who thronged the little town, which, thanks to the enterprise of M. de Lesseps, was becoming a considerable place. One of these men was the British Consular Agent at Suez, who, in spite of the prophecies of the English Government, and the unfavourable opinion of Stephenson the engineer, beheld daily English ships passing through the canal, thus shortening by one-half the old route to India round the Cape.

The other was a small thin man with a nervous intelligent face.

Beneath his long eyelashes his eyes sparkled brightly, and at that moment he was displaying unquestionable signs of impatience, moving hither and thither, quite unable to keep still for one moment.

This man was Fix, the English detective, who had been sent out in consequence of the bank robbery. He carefully scrutinised every traveller, and if one of them bore any resemblance to the culprit he would be arrested. Two days previously, Fix had received from London the description of the criminal. It was that of the well-dressed person who had been observed in the bank.

The detective was evidently inspired by the hope of obtaining the large reward offered, and was awaiting the arrival of the Mongolia with much impatience accordingly.

"So you say that the steamer is never behind its time," remarked Mr. Fix to the Consul.

"No," replied the other. "She was signalled off Port Said yesterday, and the length of the Canal is nothing to such a vessel as she is. I repeat that the Mongolia has always gained the twenty-five pounds allowance granted by the Government for every advance of twenty-four hours on the regulation time."

"Does she come from Brindisi direct?" asked Fix.

"Yes, direct. She takes the Indian mails on board there. She left on Saturday afternoon at five o'clock. So be patient She will not be late. But I really do not see how you will be able to recognise your man from the description you have, even Supposing he be on board."

"One knows him by instinct more than by feature," replied Fix; "by scent, as it were, more than sight. I have had to do with more than one of these gentlemen in my time, and if the thief be on board I guarantee he will not slip through my fingers."

"I hope you will catch him--it is a big robbery."

"First-rate," replied Fix enthusiastically; "fifty-five thousand pounds. We don't often have such a windfall as that. These sort of fellows are becoming scarce. The family of Jack Sheppard has died out--people get 'lagged' now for a few shillings."

"You speak like an enthusiast, Mr. Fix," replied the Agent, "and I hope you will succeed, but I fear under the circumstances you will find it very difficult. Besides, after all, the description you have received might be that of a very honest man."

"Great criminals always do resemble honest men," replied the detective dogmatically. "You must understand that ruffianly-looking fellows would not have a chance. They must remain honest or they would be arrested at once. It is the honest appearance that we are obliged to

unmask; it is a difficult thing, I confess, and one that really is an art."

It was evident that Mr. Fix thought a good deal of his profession.

Meanwhile the bustle on the quay increased. Sailors of all nations, merchants, porters, and fellahs were crowding together. The steamer was evidently expected shortly.

It was a beautiful day and the east wind cooled the air. The rays of the sun lighted up the distant minarets of the town. Towards the south the long jetty extended into the roadstead. A crowd of fishing-boats dotted the waters of the Red Sea, and amongst them one could perceive some ships of the ancient build of galleys.

Fix kept moving about amongst the crowd, scrutinising professionally the countenances of its component members.

It was half-past ten o'clock.

"This steamer is not coming," he said, as he heard the clock strike.

"It can't be far off," said the Consul.

"How long will she stop at Suez?" said Fix.

"Four hours, to take her coal on board. From Suez to Aden it is thirteen hundred and ten miles, so she is to take in a good supply."

"And from Suez the boat goes directly to Bombay?" asked Fix.

"Direct, without breaking bulk."

"Well," said Fix, "if the thief has taken this route, and by this steamer, it will no doubt be his little game to land at Suez, so as to reach the Dutch or French possessions in Asia by some other route. He must know very well that he would not be safe in India, which is British territory."

"I don't think he can be a very sharp fellow," replied the Consul, "for London is the best place to hide in, after all."

The Consul having thus given the detective something to think about, went away to his office close by. The detective, now alone, became more and more impatient, as he had some peculiar presentiment that the robber was on board the Mongolia; and if he had left England with the intention to gain the new world, the route via India, being less open to observation, or more difficult to watch than the Atlantic route, would naturally be the one chosen.

The detective was not left long to his reflections. A succession of shrill whistles denoted the approach of the steamer. The whole crowd

of porters and fellahs hurried towards the quay in a manner somewhat distressing for the limbs and clothes of the lookers-on. A number of boats also put off to meet the Mongolia.

Her immense hull was soon perceived passing between the banks of the Canal, and as eleven o'clock was striking she came to an anchor in the roadstead, while a cloud of steam was blown off from her safety-valves.

There were a great number of passengers on board. Some of them remained upon the bridge, admiring the view, but the greater number came ashore in the boats, which had put off to meet the vessel.

Fix carefully examined each one as they landed. As he was thus employed, one of the passengers approached him, and vigorously pushing aside the fellahs who surrounded him, inquired of the detective the way to the British Consul's office; at the same time, the passenger produced his passport, upon which he desired, no doubt, to have the British visa.

Fix mechanically took the passport, and mastered its contents at a glance. His hand shook involuntarily. The description on the passport agreed exactly with the description of the thief.

"This passport does not belong to you?" he said to the passenger.

"No," replied the man addressed; "it is my master's."

"And where is your master?"

"He is on board."

"But," replied the detective, "he must come himself to the Consul's office to establish his identity."

"Oh, is that necessary?"

"Quite indispensable."

"Where is the office?"

"In the corner of the square yonder," replied the detective, indicating a house about two hundred paces off.

"Well then, I will go and fetch my master; but I can tell you he won't thank you for disturbing him."

So saying, the passenger saluted Fix, and returned on board the steamer.