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CHAPTER XXV.

JAMES MULLEN AND I MEET AT LAST. As the cab which I had chartered...

I was not in the general way given to presentiments, but on this occasion I felt almost childishly confident about the result of my operations.

Cautiously enough, presentment was for once justified by her assurance and at the expense of philosophy, for as the clocks were chiming 8 and evening was beginning to close in whom should I see step out upon the platform from a Remond train but my gentleman of the red beard and brown bag!

He gave up his ticket and walked out of the station into Liverpool street, crossed the road and went up New Broad street, and so to the bank.

When I saw the man with the red beard and brown bag turn down Foster lane, which, as every Londoner knows, is a narrow side street at the back of the general postoffice, I felt that it was indeed a happy thought which had prevented me from changing my shoes in the morning.

Had I been thus shod, could not have failed to reach the ear of the man I was shadowing. To have followed him boldly would have aroused his suspicions, whereas if I remained far enough behind to avoid running this risk, I incurred the greater risk of losing sight of him altogether.

But for the purposes of shadowing nothing could be better than the cat's-paw solad shoes which I was wearing, and by keeping well in the shadow and only flitting from doorway to doorway at such times as I judged it safe to make a move I hoped to keep an eye upon red beard unseen.

The result justified my anticipations, for when he reached the back of the general postoffice he stopped and looked hastily up and down the street, as if to make sure that he was unobserved. Not a soul was in sight, and I need scarcely say that I made of myself a very wafery and was clinging like a postage stamp to the door against which I had squared myself.

Evidently reassured, he put down his bag, opened it and lifted out something that from the stiff movement of his arms appeared to be heavy. This he placed upon the ground, and so gingerly that I distinctly heard him sigh as he drew his hands away.

I saw an answering spark shine out, flicker for a moment and die away and heard red beard mutter "Damnation, hell!" through his teeth. The next instant I heard the spurt that told of the striking of a lucifer match and saw him stoop again over the thing on the ground. A little point of light, which grew in size and brightness, shone out as I stood looking on, half paralyzed with horror.

"Was there much of it?" "Damnation! I had a notion of it, but I had no doubt, and for one moment my limbs absolutely refused to move. I tried to call out, but gave utterance only to a silly inarticulate noise that was more like a bleat than a cry and was formed neither by my lips nor tongue, but seemed to come from the back of my throat.

And then the night stillness was broken by the most terrible cry I have ever heard—a cry so terrible and unearthly that it seemed to make the blood in my veins run cold, although I knew that it was from my own lips and no other that the cry had fallen.

That cry broke the spell that bound me. Even while it was ringing in my ears I leaped out like a tiger athirst for blood, and, heedless of the hissing fumes, which burned the faster and brighter for the wind which I made as I rushed by it, I was after him, every drop of blood in my body boiling with fury, every muscle and tendon of my fingers twitching to grip the miscreant's throat.

Had he been as fleet of foot as a greyhound he should not have escaped me then, and though he had thrown the bag away and was now running for dear life I was upon him before he was half way down Noble street. When he heard my steps, he stopped and faced round suddenly, and as he did so I struck him with my clenched fist full under the jaw and with all my strength.

My powers of recuperation are great, and a few days saw me comparatively well in mind, though by no means easy in mind. Up to this point my search for Captain Shannon...

of Captain Shannon's... a somewhat public spirited and deserving citizen. To bring such a scoundrel to justice would be doing a service to the country and to humanity, and in the wild scene of excitement which I knew would follow the news of his arrest I liked to picture myself as receiving the thanks of the community, and in fact being regarded very much as the hero of the hour.

But when I had been lying in my room, idle in body, but abnormally active in brain, the matter had presented itself to me in a very different light, and I was by no means sure that were the facts made public I should not be looked upon as a knave rather than as a hero.

It was quite possible that had I gone to the authorities before the event and informed them of my unsupported suspicion I should have been laughed at for my pains. But were I to come forward after the event and admit that before the outrage occurred and while yet there was time to prevent it had suspected the man with the brown bag to be James Mullen and yet had withheld my suspicions from the police I might be looked upon as less of a fool than a scoundrel.

My motives for leaving kept silent would be open to the worst interpretation, and I should be everywhere denounced as an enemy of society, whose criminal vanity had made him think himself capable of capturing single handed with the greatest art in crime of the century and whose yet more criminal greed and anxiety to secure the entire reward for himself had led him to withhold from the proper authorities information by means of which the capture of the arch-murderer might have been effected and the last dreadful outrage prevented.

Knowing, as I did, how uncontrollable was the feeling of the populace in regard to the outrage, I could not disguise from myself that a man who made such a confession as I had to make would, should he be recognized in the streets, run a very good chance of being mobbed, if not lynched.

An infuriated mob is not given to make nice distinctions, and so long as it has a scapegoat on which to wreak vengeance it does not wait to inquire particularly into the question of the scapegoat's innocence or guilt.

Let the object of its wrath be forthcoming, and let some evil or foolish person raise the cry that this or that luckless passer-by is the offender's relative or friend, or even that he has been seen coming from the offender's house or is of the same nationality, and in nine cases out of ten the mob will "go" for the luckless wight on masse.

I had made a study of that wild beast which we call "a mob"—the one wild beast which civilization has given us in exchange for the many she has driven away—and, knowing something of the creature and its habits, I must confess that I would rather fall into the jaws of the wild beast of the jungle than into the clutches of the wilder beast of the city and the slum.

One day—and not very distant day—that wild beast will turn and rend its keepers, and when once the thing has tasted human blood it will not be beaten back into its lair with its thirst for blood unquenched.

To be mobbed or lynched in a noble cause and in support of a great principle is not without its compensations, but there is no glory in being subjected to physical violence and personal insult as a scoundrel and a knave.

Worse, however, than the possibility of being mobbed was the certainty of being held up in many quarters as an object for public odium and private scorn, and the mere I thought about it the less inclined did I feel to face the consequences of confessing the part which I had played in the recent tragedy. It was upon my own responsibility, I argued, that I had entered upon the enterprise, and so long as I kept within the law it was to myself only that I was responsible for the way in which the enterprise was carried on.

That I had failed meant nothing more than that what had happened to these whose business and whose duty it was to have succeeded had happened also to me, and, after all, I left things no worse than they were when I took the matter up.

Had it been my intention to abandon my quest I should have no choice but to acquaint New Scotland Yard with what I had come to my knowledge. But as a matter of fact I was more than ever set on bringing the miscreant, Captain Shannon, to justice, and this not merely for the sake of reward or because of the craving for adventure which had first urged me to the enterprise, but because of the feeling which I entertained for the monster whom I had with my own eyes seen at his hellish work.

How I was justified, I told myself, in keeping my information to myself, and the more so for the fact that were I to say all I knew the parties would not be made public, and in this way reach the ears of Captain Shannon, thus defeating the very end for which I had made my confession.

Into the questions whether the decision to which I came was right or wrong and whether the arguments with which I sought to square my decision with my conscience and my sense of duty were founded on self interest and inclination rather than on reason will not here enter.

When that decision was once made, I gave no further thought to the rights or wrongs of the matter, but, dismissing every such consideration from my mind, concentrated all my energies upon the task of finding Captain Shannon.

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