"SHREWSBURY"

By STANLEY J. WEYMAN.

CHAPTER XXXVI.—Continued.

In fine I was so far from being persuaded that Smith had expected company that I gravely suspected that he had made quite other arrangements of the most perfidious character. And as the horses' hoofs rang monotonously on the hard road, and we rose and fell in the saddle and I peered forward into the gloom, fearing all things and doubting all things, for certain I feared and doubted nothing so much as I did the dark and secret man beside me, whose scheming brain, spinning plot within plot, each darker and more involved than the other, kept all my ingenuity at a stretch to overtake the final end and purpose he had at heart.

Indeed, I despair of conveying to others how gravely this somber companionship and more than somber uncertainty aggravated the terrors of a journey that at the best of times must have been little to my taste. To the common risks of the road, deserted at that hour by all save cut-purses and rogues, was added a suspicion, as much more harassing than these as unseen dangers ever surpass the known. It was in vain that I strove to divert my mind from the figure by my side; neither the bleak heath above Greenwich—whence we looked back at the reddish haze that canopied London, and forward to where the Thames marshes stretched eastward under night—nor the gibbet on Dartford Brent, where a body hung in chains, poisoning the air, nor the light that shone dim and solitary far to the left across the river, and puzzled me until he told me that it was Tilbury—neither of these things, I say, though they occupied my thoughts by turns and for a moment had power to drive him from my mind, or divert my fears to dangers more apparent. And in this mood, now glancing askance at him, and now moving uneasily under his gaze, I might have ridden to Rochester if my ear had not caught—I think when we were two or three miles short of the city—the sound of a horse trotting fast on the road behind us.

At first it followed so faintly on the breeze that I doubted, thinking it might be either the echo of our hoofs, or a pulse beating in my ears. Then on a hard piece of ground it declared itself unmistakably; and again as suddenly it died away.

At that I spoke involuntarily. "He has stopped," I said.

Smith laughed in his teeth. "He is crossing the wet bottom, fool, by the creek," he said.

And before I could answer him the dull sound of a horse galloping fast—but moving on the turf that ran alongside the road—proved him to be right. "Draw up!" he whispered, in something of a hurry, and then as I hesitated, "Do you hear?" he continued, sharply seizing my rein. "What do you fear? Do you think that night birds prey on night birds?"

Whatever I feared, I feared him more, and turning my horse I sat shivering. For notwithstanding his confident words I saw that he was handling his holster; and I knew that he was drawing a pistol; and it was well that the suspense was short. Before I had time for many qualms, the horseman, a dark figure, lurched on us through the gloom, pulled his horse on to its haunches, and with raised hand cried to us to deliver.

"And no nonsense!" he added sharply. "Or a brace of balls will soon—"

Smith laughed. "Box it about!" he cried.

"Halloo!" the stranger answered, taking a lower tone; and he peered at us, bending down over his horse's neck. "Who are you, in fly by night?"

"A box-it-about!" my companion answered with tartness. "That is enough for you. So good night. And I wish you better luck next time."

"But—"

"Sh!" Smith answered, cutting him short.

THE SOUND OF A HORSE TROTTING FAST BEHIND ME.

"I am going to my father and the less said about it the better."

"So?" Well, give him my love, then." And backing his horse the stranger bade us good night, and with a curse on his bad fortune, turned and rode off. Smith saw him go, and then wheeling we took the road again.

Safely, however, as we had emerged from this encounter, and far as it went toward proving that we bore a talisman against the ordinary perils of travelers, it was not of a kind to reassure a law-abiding man. To be hung as the accomplice of footpads and highwaymen was a scarcely better fate than to be robbed and wounded by them; and I was heartily glad when we found ourselves in the outskirts of Rochester, and stopping at a house of call outside the sleeping city, roused a drowsy hostler, and late as the hour was, gained entrance and a welcome.

I confess that, safe in these comfortable quarters, on a sanded hearth before a rekindled fire, with lights and food and ale at my elbow, and a bed in prospect, I found my apprehensions and misgivings less hard to bear than on the dark road above Tilbury flats. I began to think less of the body creaking in its irons on the gibbet above Dartford, and more of the chance of ultimate safety. And Smith, growing civil, if not genial, I went on to count the hours that must elapse before our miserable mission accomplished, I should see London again. After all, why should I not see London again? What was to prevent me, where lay the hindrance? In three days, in three days we should be back. So I told myself; and looking up quickly met Smith's eyes brooding gloomily on me.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

Such a night ride as I have described would have been impossible, or at least outrageously dangerous a year or two later, when a horde of disbanded soldiers, dismissed from the colors by the peace of Ryswick, took to the roads for a subsistence, and for a period, until they perished miserably, made even the purlieus of Kensington unsafe.

At the time of which I write we ran risk enough, as has been demonstrated; but the reasons which induced Smith to leave London at that hour and under cover of darkness may be conceived! Apparently they did not extend to the rest of the journey; for, after lying late at Rochester, we rode on by Sittingbourne to Feversham, and thence, after a comfortable dinner, turned south by Badlesmere and so toward Ashford, where we arrived a few minutes after nightfall.

Those who are acquainted with the old inn at the entrance into Ashford will remember that the yard and stables are as conspicuous for size and commodiousness as the house, a black and white building, a little withdrawn from the street, is strikingly marked by the lack of those advantages. I believe that the huge concourse thither of cattle drovers at the season of the great fairs is the cause of this; those persons lying close themselves, but needing space for their beasts. And at such times I can imagine that the roomy enceinte, and those long lines of buildings, may be cheerful enough.

But seen, as we saw them when we rode in, by the last cold light of a dull evening, with nothing clear or plain save the roof ridge, and that black against a pale sky, they and the place looked infinitely dismal. Nor did any warmth of welcome, or cheerful greeting, such as even poor inns afford to all and sundry, amend the first impression of gloom and decay, which the house and its surroundings conveyed to the mind. On the contrary, not a soul was to be seen, and we had ridden half way across the yard, and Smith had twice called "House! house!" before any one was aroused.

Then the upper half of a stable door creaked open, and a man holding up a great horn lanthorn peered out at us.

"Are you all asleep?" cried my companion. And when the man made no answer but still continued to look at us, "What is in the house," he added, angrily, "that you stick out your death's head, to frighten company? Is it lace or old Nantz? Or French goods? Anyway, box it about and be done with it, and attend to us."

"Right, master, right, I am coming," the man answered, suddenly rousing himself; and opening the lower half of the door, he came heavily out. "At your service," he said. "But we have little company."

"The times are bad?"

"Ay, they looked a bit better, six months back."

"But nothing came of it?"

"No, worse luck."

"And all that is called for now is common hollands, I suppose?"

The fellow grinned. "Right," he said. "You have the hang of it, master."

My companion slid to the ground, and began to remove his pistols and saddlebag. "Still you have some guests, I suppose?" he said.

"Aye, one," the man answered slowly, and, I thought, reluctantly.

"Is he, by any chance, a man of the name of—but never mind his name," Smith said. "Is he a surgeon."

The hostler or host, for he had the air of playing both parts, a big, clumsy fellow, with immobile features and small eyes, looked at us thoughtfully, and chewed a straw. "Well, may be," he said at last. "I never asked him." And without more he took Smith's horse by the rein and lurched through the door into the stable; the lanthorn swinging in his hand as he did so, and faintly disclosing a long vista of empty stalls and darkling roof. As I followed, leading in my sorry mare, a horse in a distant stall whinnied loudly.

"That is his hack, I suppose?" said Smith; and coolly taking up the lanthorn, which the other had that moment set down, he moved through the stable in the direction whence the sound had come.

The man of the house uttered something between an oath and a grunt of surprise, and, letting fall the flap of the saddle, which he had just raised that he might slacken the girths, he went after him. "Softly, master," he said, "every man to his—"

But Smith was already standing with the lanthorn held high, gazing at a handsomely shaped chestnut horse that, pricking its ears, turned a gentle eye on us and whinnied again. "Umph, not so bad," my companion said. "His horse, I suppose?"

The man with the straw looked the animal over reflectively. At length, with something between a grunt and a sigh, "He came on it," he said.

"He won't go on it in a hurry."

"Why not?" said the man, more quickly than he had yet spoken, and then looked from the horse to my companion with a hint of hostility.

"Have you no eyes?" Smith answered roughly. "The off-fore has filled; the horse is as lame as a mumper!"

"Gammon!" cried the other, evidently stung. And then, "You know a deal about horses in London! And never saw one or a blade of green grass, maybe, until you came Kent way!"

"As you please," Smith said indifferently. "But my business is not with the horse, but the master. So take us in, my good friend, and give us supper, for I am famished. And afterward, if you please, we will see him."

"That is as he pleases," the fellow answered sulkily. But he raised no second objection; and when he had littered down the horses he led the way into the house by a back door and so along a passage and down a step or two, which lands us in a room with a sanded floor, a fire and a show of warmth and comfort, as welcome as it was unexpected. Here he left us to remove our cloaks, and we presently heard him giving orders and bustling the kitchen.

The floor of the room in which he had left us sunk a little below the level of the road outside, and the ceiling being low and the window of greater width than height, and the mantel shelf having for ornament a row of clean delft and pewter, I thought that no place had ever looked more snug and cozy. But whatever comfort I looked to derive from surroundings, so much better than I had expected, was dashed by Smith's first words, who, as soon as we were alone, came close to me, under the pretense of unclasping my cloak, and in a low, guarded tone and with a look of the grimmest, warned me to play my part.

"We go upstairs after supper, and in five minutes it will be done," he muttered. "Go through with it boldly, and in twenty-four hours you may be back in London. But fail, or play me false, Mr. Price, and, by heaven, I put a ball through your head first and my own afterward. Do you mark me? Do you mark me, man?"

I whispered in abject nervousness—seeing that he was indeed in earnest—that I would do my best; and he handed me a ring, which was doubtless the same that the countess had given to her woman. It had a great dog cut cameowise on the stone, which I think was an opal; and it fitted my finger not ill. But I had no more than time to glance at it before the host and his wife, a pale, scared-looking woman, came in with some bacon and eggs and ale; and as one or other of them stayed with us while we ate and watched us closely, nothing was passed, Smith talking indifferently to them sometimes about the fruit harvest, and sometimes in cant phrases about the late plot, the arrest of Hunt at Dymchurch (who had been used to harbor people until they crossed), how often Gill's ship came over, Mr. Birkenhead's many escapes, and the like. Probably the man and the woman were testing Smith, but if so he satisfied them, for when we had finished our meal and he asked openly if Sir John would see us they raised no objection, but the man, taking a light from the woman's hand, led the way up a low-browed staircase to a room over that in which we had supped. Here he knocked, and a voice bidding us enter, Smith went in, and I after him, my heart beating furiously.

The room, which resembled the one beneath it in being low in the ceiling, looked the lower for the gaunt height of its one occupant, who had risen and stood in the middle of the floor to receive us. Thin and spare by nature, the meager and rather poor looking dress which he wore added to the singularity of his aspect. With a dry-as-dust complexion and a three-days' old beard, he had eyes light-colored, quick-glancing and sanguine, and, notwithstanding the danger and uncertainty of his position, a fugitive in this wayside house, with a thousand guineas on his head, for I never doubted I was looking on Sir John Fenwick, his manner was at one moment arrogant and boastful and at another dreamy. He had something of the air of a visionary, nor could any one be long in his company without discerning that here was the very man for our purpose, one to whom all his geese were swans, and a clasp of the hand. If it marched with his hopes and wishes, of as much value as a pledge signed and sealed.

All this taken for granted, it is to be confessed that at first sight of us his face fell, and his chagrin was unmistakable. "It is you, Smith, is it?" he said with a sigh. "Well, well, and I thought it was Birkenhead. Brown said it was not, but I thought that it must be. It is not every one knows Birkenhead when he sees him."

"No, Sir John, that is true."

"However, I shall see him in the morning. I go on board at New Romney at 4, and doubtless he will be with Gill. When we come back—"

"Ah, Sir John, times will be changed then!" Smith said.

"They will, sir, with this Dutch crew and their low beast of a master swept into the sea! And gentlemen in their homes again! I have been amusing myself even now," he continued, his eyes wandering to the table on which lay a litter of papers, an inkhorn and two snuffy candles, "with plans for a new wing at Fenwick hall, in the old style, I think, or possibly on the lines of the other house at Hexham. I am divided between the two. The hall is the more commodious, the old abbey has greater stateliness. However, I must put up my scripts now, for I must be in the saddle in an hour. Have you commands for the other side of the water, Mr. Smith? If so, I am at your service."

Smith answered with a little hesitation, "Certainly, my business has to do with that, Sir John." And he was proceeding to explain, when the baronet, rubbing his hands in glee, cut him short.

"Ha! I thought so," he cried, beaming with satisfaction. "Faith it is so with every one. They are all of a tale. My service and my respects and my duty all to go you know where, and it is 'make it straight for me, Sir John,' and 'you will tell the king, Sir John" and 'answer for me as for yourself, Sir John!' all day long when they can come at me. Why man, you know something, but you would be surprised what messages I am carrying over. And when people have not spoken they have told me as much by a look, and those the least likely! Men who ten years ago were as black exclusionists as old Noll himself!"

"I can believe it, Sir John" said Smith, with gravity; while I who knew how the late conspiracy had united the whole country in King William's defense—so that the man who refused to sign the Commons' association to that end went in peril of violence—listened with as much bewilderment as I had felt three minutes before, on hearing how this same man, a fugitive and an outlaw, bound beyond seas, had been employing his time!

However, he was as far from guessing what was in my mind as he was from doubting Smith's sincerity, and, encouraged by the latter's assent, he continued: "It is oarious strange to me, Mr. Smith, how the drunken Dutch boor stands a day! Strange and passing strange! But it cannot last. It will not last out the year. These executions have opened men's eyes finely? And by Christmas we shall be back."

"A merry Christmas it will be," said Smith. "Heaven grant it. But you have not asked, Sir John, who it is I have with me."

At that and at a sign he made me, I let fall the collar of the cloak I was wearing, which, in obedience to his directions I had hitherto kept high about my chin. Sir John, his eyes drawn to me, as much by my action as by Smith's words, stared at me a moment before his mouth opened wide in recognition and surprise. Then, "I am surely not mistaken!" he cried, advancing a step, while the color rose in his sallow face. "It is—it certainly is—"

"Sir John," Smith cried in haste—and he, too, advanced a step and raised a hand in warning—"this is Colonel Talbot! Colonel Talbot, mark you, sir! I am sure you understand me, and the reasons which make it impossible for any but Colonel Talbot to visit you here. He has done me the honor to accompany me. But perhaps," he continued, checking himself with an air of deference, "it were more fitting I left you now."

"No," I said hurriedly, repeating the lesson I had learned by note, and in which Smith had not failed to practice me a dozen times that day. "I am here to one end only—to ask Sir John Fenwick to do Colonel Talbot a kindness, to take this ring and convey it with my service and duty—whither he is going."

"O, but this is extraordinary!" Sir John cried, lifting his hands and eyes in a kind of ecstacy. "This is a dispensation! A providence! But, my lord," he continued with rapture, "there is one more step you may take, one more effort you may make. Be the restorer, the monk of the generation! So ripe is the pear that were you to ride through the city tomorrow and proclaim our rightful sovereign, not a citizen but would bless you, not a soldier but would throw down his pike! The blues are with us to a man, and enraged besides at Keyes' execution. And the rest of the army—do you dream that they see Dutch colonels promoted and Dutch soldiers overpaid and do not resent it? I tell you, my lord—your grace, I should say, for doubtless the king will confirm it."

"Sir John," I said hastily, assuming an anger I did not feel, "you mistake me. I am Colonel Talbot and no other. And I am here, not to listen to plans or make suggestions, but to request a favor at your hands. Be good enough to convey that ring with my service whither you are going."

"And that is all?" he cried reproachfully. "You will say no more?"

"That is all, sir," I answered, and then, catching Smith's eye, I added, "save this. You may add that, when the time comes, I shall know what to do, and I shall do it."

This time, sobered by my words and manner, he took in silence the ring I proffered; but, having glanced at it, gave way to a second burst of rapture and jubilation, more selfish and personal than the first, but not less hearty. "This will be the best news Lord Middleton has had for a twelvemonth," he cried gleefully. "And that I should succeed where I am told that he failed. Gad! I am the proudest man in England, your grace—Colonel Talbot, I mean. We will pound Melfort and that faction with this. We will pound them to powder. He has wasted half a million and not got such an adherent. Good lord, I shall not rest now until I am across with the news."

"Nor I, until Colonel Talbot is on the road again," said Smith, intervening deftly. "At the best this is no very safe place for him."

"That is true," said Sir John, with ready consideration. "And I should be riding within the half hour. But to Romney. You, I suppose, return to London?"

"To London," I said, mechanically.

"Direct?" said he, with deference.

"As directly as we dare," Smith answered, and with the word moved to the door and opened it. On which I bowed, and was for going out, perhaps with a little awkwardness. But Sir John, too deeply impressed by the honor I had done him to let me retire so lamely, started forward, and, snatching up a candle, would hold the door and light me, bending his long back and calling to Brown to look to us—to look to us! Nor was this all, for when I halted halfway down the stairs, and turned, feeling that such courtesy demanded some acknowledgment, or at least a word of thanks, he took the word out of my mouth.

"Hist! Colonel Talbot!" he cried, in a loud whisper, and, leaning far over the stairs, he held the light with one hand and shaded his eyes with the other. "You know that we have the tower?"

"The tower?" I muttered, not understanding him.

"To be sue. Allesbury has it in his hand. It will declare for us whenever he gets the word. But—you know it from him, I suppose?"

"From Lord Allesbury?" I exclaimed, in sheer surprise. "But he is a prisoner!"

Sir John winked. "Prisoner and master!" he muttered, nodding vigorously. "But there, I must not keep you. Good luck and bon voyage. M le due."

Which was the last I saw of him for that time. Nor did I ever see him again save on one occasion. That he was a violent and fractious man, and a foe to the Protestant succession, I do not deny; nor that some passages in his life do him little credit, and the most bruited the least. But, for all this, and though I was then and ever a stranger to him, I am fain to confess that, as I stumbled down the stairs and left the poor, misguided gentleman alone in his mean room to pack up those plans—for the extension of the old house that would never again own a Fenwick for its master—and so to set out on his dark journey, I felt as much pity for him as loathing of the trickster who employed me. And so far as this carried, and so much influence had it with me, that when we reached the room below, and, the landlord having left us to see to his horses, Smith, in his joy at our success, clapped me on the shoulder, I shrank from his hand as if it burned me; shrank, and burst into childish tears of rage.

Naturally Smith, unable to comprehend, stared at me in astonishment. "Why, man," he cried, "what is the matter? What ails you?"

"You!" I said, "You, curse you!"

AND PLUNGED THROUGH THE SAND TOWARD THEM.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

And doubtless it was this outbreak, or rather the suspicion of me which it sowed in Smith's mind, that occasioned the sequel of our adventure, for when he had cursed me for a fool and had put on his cloak, being now ready to go out, he seemed to be in two minds about it, as if he dared neither leave me where I was, lest I should communicate with Sir John, nor take me with him on his immediate errand. More than once he went to the door, and eyeing me askance and sourly, came back, but in the end, and after standing a while irresolute, biting his nails, he made up his mind, and curtly bade me follow him.

"Do you think that I am to saddle for you, you whelp?" he cried. "Be stirring! And have a care, or I shall bore that hole in you yet. Take that bag and go before me. By G—, I wish you were at the bottom of the nearest horse pond!"

His words had the effect he intended, of bringing me to my senses; but they went farther. For in proportion as they cooled my temper they awakened my fears, and though I obeyed him abjectly, took up my bag and followed him, it was with a sudden and horrible distrust of his purpose. I saw that I had not only ceased to be of use to him, but was now in his way, and might be a danger to him, and the night—which enveloped us the moment we crossed the threshold and seemed the more dreary and forbidding for the ruddy light and comfort we had left behind us—reminding me of the long, dark miles I must ride by his side, each mile a terror to one end an opportunity to the other, I had much ado not to give way to instant panic, there and then. However, for the time I controlled myself, and stumbling across the gloomy yard to the spot where a faint gleam of light indicated the door of the stables, I went in.

The landlord was saddling our horses; and a little cheered by the warmth of his lanthern, I went to help him. Smith turned aside; as I thought into the next stall. But Brown was sharper or more suspicious, and in a twinkling called to him hastily, to know what he was doing. Getting no answer, "Divil take him," the landlord cried. "He cann't keep from that horse! Here, you! What are you doing, there?"

"Coming!" Smith answered; but even as he spoke I caught the smart click of iron falling on iron, and the horse in the distant stall moved sharply with a hurried clatter of hoofs on the stones. "Coming!" Smith repeated. "What is the matter with you, man?"

"You had better come," the landlord answered savagely. "Or I shall fetch you. Here, you!" this to me, "lead yours out, will you. I want to see your backs, and be quit of you!"

I took my horse by the bridle, and led it out of the stable, while Brown went to bit the other. And so, being alone outside, and the moon rising at the moment over the roof of the house and showing me the open gates at the end of the yard, the impulse to escape from Smith while I had the opportunity came on me with overpowering force. Better acquainted than the landlord with the villain's plans I had not a doubt that at that very moment he was laming Sir John's horse for the purpose of detaining him; and the cold-blooded treachery of this act, filling me with as much terror on my own account—who might be the next victim—as hatred of the perpetrator, I climbed softly to my saddle, and began to walk my horse toward the gates. Doubtless Smith was too busy cloaking his own movements to be observant of mine. I reached the gates unnoticed, and turning instinctively from London—in which direction I fancied that he would be sure to pursue me—I kicked my mare first into a quick walk, then into a cautious trot, finally into a canter. The beast, though far from speedy, was fresh from its corn; it took hold of the bit, shied at a chance light in a cotter's window, and went faster and faster, its ears pricked forward. In a minute we had left Ashford behind us, and were clattering through the moonlight. With one hand on the pommel and the other holding the shortened reins I urged the mare on with all the pressure of my legs; and albeit I trembled, now at some late-seen obstacle, which proved to be only the shadow of a tree, thrown across the road, and now at the steepness of a descent that appeared suddenly before me, I never faltered, but uphill and downhill drove in my heels and, with fear behind me, rode in the night as I had never before dared to ride in the daylight.

I had known nothing like it since the summer day twelve years before, when I had fled across the Hertfordshire meadows on my feet. The sweat ran down me, I stooped in the saddle out of pure weakness. If the horse pricked its ears forward I spread mine backward, listening for sounds of pursuit. But such a speed could not be long maintained, and when we had gone, as I judged, two miles, the mare began to flag, and the canter became a trot. Still for another mile I urged her on, until, feeling her labor under me and foreseeing that I must ride far, I had the thought to turn into the first lane to which I came and there wait in the shadow of a tree until Smith, if he followed, should pass.

I did this, sprang down, and, standing by my panting horse in a marshy hollow some 200 paces from the road, listened intently. For twenty minutes, it may be, for they seemed to be hours to me. After the life I had been leading in London this loneliness in the night in a strange and wild place, and with a relentless enemy on my track, appalled my very soul. I was hot, and yet I shivered and started at the least sound. The scream of a curlew daunted me, the rustling of the rushes and sedge shook me; when a sad wail, as of a multitude of lost souls passed overhead, I cowed almost to my knees. Yet, inasmuch as these sounds, doleful and dreary as they were, were all I heard, and the night air brought no trampling of distant hoofs to my ears, I had reason to be thankful, and more than thankful; and my mare, having by this time got her wind again, I led her back to the road, climbed into the saddle and plodded on steadily, deriving a wonderful relief and confidence from the thought that Smith had followed me Londonward.

Moreover, I had conceived a sort of horror of the loneliness of the waste country side, and to keep the highway was willing to run some risk. I took it that the road I was traveling must bring me to Romney, and for a good hour and a half I jogged with a loose rein through the gloom, the way becoming even flatter and wetter, the wind more chill and salt, and the night darker, the moon being constantly overcast by clouds. In that marshy district are few hamlets or farms, and those of the smallest and very sparsely scattered. Once or twice I heard the bark of a distant sheep dog, and once far to the left I saw a tiny light, and had the idea of making for it. But the reflection that a dozen great ditches, each wide enough and deep enough to smother my horse, might lie between me and the house, availed to keep me in the road; the more as I now felt sure from the saltiness of the night air that Romney and the sea were at no great distance in front of me. Presently, indeed, I made out in front of me two moving lights, which I took to be those of ships riding at anchor, and my weary mare quickened her pace as if she smelled the stable and the hayrack.

For five minutes after that I plodded on in the happy belief that my journey was as good as over and I was saved, and I let my mind dwell on shelter and safety, and a bed and food and the like, all awaiting me, as I fancied, in the patch of low gloom before me, where my fancied pictured the sleeping town. Then, on a sudden, my ear caught the dull beat of a horse's hoofs on the road behind me, and my heart standing still with terror, I plucked at my reins and stood to listen. Aye, and it was no fancy; a moment satisfied me of that. Thud, thud, thud-thud, and then squash, squash, squish-squish! A horse was coming up behind me, and not only behind me, but hard upon me—within less than 100 paces of me. The soft wet road had smothered the sound up to the last moment.

The rider was so close to me indeed and I was so much taken by surprise that the moon, sailing at that instant into a clear sky, showed me to him before I could set my horse going; and as I started, whipping and spurring desperately, I heard the man shout. That was enough for me; plunging recklessly forward along the wet, boggy road, I flogged my horse into a jaded canter, and leaning low in the saddle in mortal fear of a bullet, closed my eyes to the danger that lay ahead, and thought only of escape from that which followed on my heels.

Suddenly, and while I was still kicking and urging on my horse, before the first flush of fear had left me, I heard a crash and a cry behind me; but I did not dare at that moment to look back. I only leaned the lower, and clung the more tightly to my horse's mane, and still pressed on. By and by, however, hearing nothing, it flashed on me that I was riding alone, that I was no longer pursued; and a little later, taking courage to draw rein and look back warily, I found that I could see nothing, nor hear any sound save the heavy panting of my own horse.

I had escaped. I had escaped and was alone on the marsh. But as I soon satisfied myself, I was no longer on the causeway along which I had been traveling when the man surprised me. The wind which had then met me was not on my right cheek; the lights for which I had been heading were no longer visible. The track, too, when I moved cautiously forward seemed more wet and rough; after that it needed little to convince me that I had strayed from the highway, probably at the point where my pursuer had fallen.

This, since I dared not return by the way I had come, terribly perplexed me. I dismounted, and wet with shivering stood by my horse, which hung its head, and restlessly lifted its feet by turns as if it already felt the engulfing power of the mess. Peering out every way I saw nothing but gloom and mist, the dark waste and unknown depths of the marsh. It was a situation to try the stoutest, nor did it need the mournful sough of the wind as it swept the flats or the strange gurgling noises that from time to time rose from the sloughs about me to add the last touch of fear and melancholy to the scene.

Though, for my own part, I sank in no farther than my ankles, the horse by its restlessness evinced a strong sense of danger and I dared not stand still. But as clouds had again obscured the moon and the darkness was absolute, to advance seemed as dangerous as to remain. However, in fear that the horse, if I stood where I was, would break loose from me, I led it forward cautiously, and then the track growing no worse but rather better, and the beast seeming to gain confidence as it proceeded, I presently took courage to remount again, and, dropping the reins, allowed it to carry me whither it would. This it did slowly and with infinite caution, smelling rather than feeling the way, and often stopping to try a doubtful spot. Observing how wonderfully the instinct of the beast aided it, and remembering that I had once been told that horses feared nothing so much as to be smoored (as the fenmen call it) and would not willingly run that risk, I gained confidence myself; which the event justified, for by and by I caught the dull sound of sea waves booming on a beach, and a few minutes afterwards discerned in the sky before me the first faint streaks of dawn.

Heaven knows how welcome it was to me. I was wet, weary and shivering with cold, and with the aguish air of that dreary place, which is so unwholesome that I am told the natives take drugs to stave off the fever, as others do ale and wine. But at the sight I pricked up, and the horse, too; and we moved on briskly, and presently by the help of the growing light, and through a gray mist which trebled the size of all objects, I saw a huge wall or bank loom across my path. I was close to it when I discerned it, and I had no more than time to despair of surmounting it before the horse was already clambering up it. Scrambling and slipping among the stones in a minute or so, and with a great clatter, we gained the summit, and saw below and before us the smooth milky surface of the sea, lifting lazily under the fog.

So seen it had a strangely weird and pallid aspect, as of a dead sea, viewed in dreams; and I stood a moment to breathe my horse and admire the spectacle; nor did I fail to thank God that I was out of that dreary and treacherous place. Then, considering my future movements and not knowing which way I ought to take—to right or left along the beach—to gain the more quickly help and shelter, I was reining my mare down the seaside of the bank when a welcome sound caught my ear. It was a man's voice giving an order. I halted and peered through the sea haze, and by and by I made out a boat lying beached at the edge of the tide, some 150 yards to my left. There were men standing in it. I could not see how many; and more were in the act of pushing it off the strand. Their voices came to me with singular clearness, but the words were unintelligible.

The sight made me pause, and for a moment I stood reconnoitering the men. To advance or not was the question, and I was still debating it, and striving to deduce something from the men's appearance, when something, I never knew what—perhaps some noise, ill-apprehended—led me to turn aside my head. Whatever the cause of the movement, it apprised me of something little suspected. Not fifty paces behind me I saw the figure of a giant horseman looming out of the mist. He was advancing along the summit of the sea wall below which I stood; hence I saw him before he made me out, and this gave me the start and the advantage. I had time to take in the thing and seize my horse by the head and move eight or ten paces toward the boat before he took the cue. Then on neither side was there any concealment. With a cry, a yell rather, the mere sound of which flung me into a panic, the man urged his horse down the bank, shouting fiercely to me to stand; I, in utter terror, spurred mine across the beach toward the men I had seen.

I have said that I had some sixty yards of start, and 200 or so to cross to reach the boat, but the horses were scarcely able to trot; a yard was a furlong; and, the sand swallowing up the sound of hoofs, it was a veritable race of ghosts, of phantoms, laboring through the mist across the flat, with the oily Stygian sea lapping the shore beside us. He cried out in the most violent fashion, now bidding me stay and now bidding the men stop me. And for all I knew they might be in his pay, or at best be some of the reckless desperadoes who on that coast live by owling and worse practices. But they were my only hope, and I, too, cried to them, and with joy I saw them put in again—they had before set afloat. Believing Smith to be gaining, I cried pitifully to them to save me, and then, my horse stumbling, I flung myself from the saddle and plunged through the sand toward them. At that two sprang out to meet me and caught me under my arms, and in a moment, amid a jargon of cries in a foreign tongue, whipped me over the side into the boat. Then they pushed it off and leaped in themselves, wet to the thighs; and as my pursuer came lurching down the beach, a pistol drawn in his hand, a couple of powerful strokes drove the boat through the light surf. Waving frantically, he yelled to the men to wait and rode to his boot soles into the water, but with a jeering laugh and a volley of foreign words the sailors pulled the faster and the faster, and the mist lying thick on the water, and the boat sitting low, in half a minute we lost the last glimpse of him and his passion, and rode outward on a gray, boundless sea.

(To be Continued.)

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