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The Bride's Name;

Or, The Adventures of Captain Fraser

CHAPTER XV.—(Cont'd.)

The wood was very still, and the shade grateful after the heat of the sun. Just beyond, the fields were shimmering with the heat, and he pricked up his ears as the unmistakable sound of wheels and hoofs came across the silent fields. He looked round wildly, and seeing a tiny cottage standing in a bit of a clearing, made towards it.

A little old man twisted with rheumatism rose as he stood at the open door and regarded him with a pair of bloodshot, but sharp, old eyes, while an old woman sitting in a Windsor chair looked up anxiously.

"Can I come in?" asked Flower. "Aye," said the old man, standing aside to let him pass.

"Hot day," said the skipper, taking a seat.

"No, 'tain't," said the old man.

"Not so hot as yesterday," said Flower, with a conciliatory smile.

"It's 'otter than it was yesterday," said the old man. "What ha' you done to your face?"

"I was climbing a tree," said Flower, with a laugh, "and I fell down; I've hurt my foot, too."

"Served you right if you'd broke your neck," said his amiable host, "climbing trees at your time o' life."

"Nice cottage you've got here," said the persistent Flower.

"I wish you 'ad to live in it," said the old man.

He took a proffered cigar, and after eyeing it for some time, like a young carver with a new joint, took out a huge clasp-knife and slowly sawed the end off.

"Can I sleep here for the night?" asked Flower, at length.

"No, you can't," said the old man, drawing at his cigar.

He smoked on, with the air of a man who has just given a very clever answer to a very difficult question.

"We ain't only got one room besides this," said the old woman, solemnly. "Years ago we used to have four and a wash-place."

"Oh, I could sleep on the floor

here," said Flower, lightly. "I'll pay you five shillings."

"Let's see your money," said the old man, leaning forward.

Flower put the sum in his hand. "I'll pay now," he said, heartily.

"The floor won't run away," said the other, pulling out an old leather purse, "and you can sleep on any part of it you like."

Flower thanked him effusively. He was listening intently for any sounds outside. If the Tippings and the man in the gig met they would scour the countryside, and almost certainly pay the cottage a visit.

"If you let me go upstairs and lie down for an hour or two," he said, turning to the old man, "I'll give you another half-crown."

The old man said nothing, but held out his hand, and after receiving the sum got up slowly, and opening a door by the fire-place revealed a few broken stairs, which he slowly ascended, after beckoning his guest to follow.

"It's a small place," he said, tersely, "but I dare say you've often slept in a worse."

Flower made no reply. He was looking from the tiny casement. Through an opening in the trees he saw a couple of figures crossing the field towards the wood.

"If anybody asks you whether you've seen me, say no," he said, rapidly, to the old man. "I've got into a bit of a mess, and if you hide me here until it has blown over I'll make it worth while."

"How much?" said the old man.

Flower hesitated. "Five pounds for certain," he said, hastily, "and more if you're put to much trouble. Run down and stop your wife's mouth quietly."

"Don't order me about," said the old man, slowly; "I ain't said I'll do it yet."

"They're coming now," said Flower, impatiently; "mind, if they catch me you lose your five pounds."

"All right," said the other. "I'm doing it for the five pounds, mind, not for you," added this excellent man.

He went grunting and groaning down the narrow stairs, and the skipper, closing the door, went and crouched down by the open casement. A few indistinct words were borne in on the still air, and voices came gradually closer, until foot-steps, which had been deadened by the grass, became suddenly audible on the stones outside the cottage.

Flower held his breath with anxiety; then he smiled softly and peacefully as he listened to the terms in which his somewhat difficult host was addressed.

"Now, gaffer," said the man of the gig, roughly.

"Wake up, grandpa," said Dick Tipping; "have you seen a man go by here?—blue serge suit, moustache, face and head knocked about?"

"No, I ain't seen 'im," was the reply. "What's he done?"

Tipping told him briefly. "We'll have him," he said, savagely. "We've got a mounted policeman on the job, besides others. If you can catch him it's worth half a sov. to you."

He went off hurriedly with the other man, and their voices died away in the distance. Flower sat in his place on the floor for some time, and then, seeing from the window that the coast was clear, went downstairs again.

The old woman made him up a bed on the floor after supper, although both he and the old man assured her that it was unnecessary, and then, taking the lamp, bade him good-night, and went upstairs.

Flower left to himself, rolled exultingly on his poor couch, and for the first time in a fortnight breathed freely.

"If I do get into trouble," he murmured, complacently, "I generally manage to get out of it. It wants a good head in the first place, and a cool one in the second."

CHAPTER XVI.

He was awake early in the morning, and, opening the door, stood delighted

ly breathing the fresh, pine-scented air.

The atmosphere of the "Blue Posts" was already half forgotten, and he stood looking dreamily forward to the time when he might reasonably return to life and Poppy. He took a few steps into the wood, and, after feeling for his pipe before he remembered that Miss Tipping was probably keeping it as a souvenir, sat on a freshly cut log and fell into a sentimental reverie, until the appearance of a restless old man at the door of the cottage took him back to breakfast.

"I thought you'd run off," said his host, tartly.

"You thought wrong, then," said Flower, sharply, as he took out his purse. "Here are two of the five pounds I promised you; I'll give you the rest when I go."

The old man took the money and closed his small, hard mouth until the lips almost disappeared. "More money than sense," he remarked, cordially, as the skipper repaid his purse.

Flower made no reply. Some slices of fat bacon were sizzling in a pan over the wood fire, and the pungent smell of the woods, mixed with the sharpness of the morning air, gave him an appetite to which, since his enforced idleness, he had been a stranger. He drew his chair up to the rickety little table with its covering of frayed oil-cloth, and, breaking a couple of eggs over his bacon, set to eagerly.

"Don't get eggs like these in London," he said to the old woman.

The old woman leaned over, and, inspecting the shells, paid a tribute to the hens who were responsible for them, and traced back a genealogy which would have baffled the entire College of Heralds—a genealogy hotly contested by the old man, who claimed a bar sinister through three eggs bought at the village show some generations before.

"You've got a nice little place here," said Flower, by way of changing the conversation, which was well on the way to becoming personal; "but don't you find it rather dull sometimes?"

"Well, I don't know," said the old woman. "I finds plenty to do and 'e potters about like. 'E don't do much, but it pleases 'im, and it don't hurt me."

The object of these compliments took them as a matter of course, and after hunting up the stump of last night's cigar, and shredding it with his knife, crammed it into a clay pipe and smoked tranquilly. Flower found a solitary cigar, one of the "Blue Post's" best, and with a gaze which wandered idly from the chest of drawers on one side of the room to the old china dogs on the little mantel-shelf on the other, smoked in silence.

The old man brought in news at dinner-time. The village was ringing with the news of yesterday's affair, and a rigorous search, fanned into excitement by an offer of two pounds reward, was taking the place of the more prosaic labors of the countryside.

"If it wasn't for me," said the old man, in an excess of self-laudation, "you'd be put in the gaol—where you ought to be; but I wouldn't do it if it wasn't for the five pounds. You'd better keep close in the house. There's some more of 'em in the wood looking for you."

Captain Flower took this advice, and for the next two days became a voluntary prisoner. On the third day the old man reported that public excitement about him was dying out, owing partly to the fact that it was thought the villain must have made his escape good, and partly to the fact that the landlord of the "Wheat-sheaf" had been sitting at his front door shooting at snakes on the King's Highway invisible to ordinary folk.

The skipper resolved to make a start on the following evening, walking the first night so as to get out of the dangerous zone, and then training to London. At prospect his spirits rose, and in a convivial mood he purchased a bottle of red currant wine from the old woman at supper, and handed it round.

He was still cheerful next morning as he arose and began to dress. Then he paused, and in a somewhat anxious fashion patted his trousers pockets. Minute and painful investigation revealed a bunch of keys and a clasp-knife.

He tried his other pockets, and then, sinking in a dazed fashion into a chair, tried to think what had become of his purse and loose change. His watch, a silver one, was under his pillow, where he had placed it the night before, and his ready cash was represented by the shilling which hung upon the chain.

(To be continued.)

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