

CHAPTER II

AT THE OPERA

When John Steele left the court toward the end of the day, he held his head as a man who thinks deeply. From the door he directed his steps toward Charing Cross. But only to wheel abruptly, and retrace his way. He was not an absent-minded man, yet he had been striding unconsciously not toward his customary destination at that hour, the several chambers at once his office and his home. For a moment the strong face of the man relaxed, as if in amusement at his own remissness; gradually however, it once more resumed its expression of musing thoughtfulness. The stream of human beings, in the main, flowed toward him; he breasted the current as he had for many evenings, only this night he did not look into the faces of these, his neighbors; the great city's concourse of atoms swept unmeaningly by.

Turning into a narrow way, not far from the embankment, he stopped before the door of a solid-looking brick building, let himself in, and made his way up-stairs. On the third floor he applied another and smaller key to another lock and, from a hall, entered a large apartment, noteworthy for its handsome array of books that reached from floor to ceiling wherever there was shelf space. Most of these volumes were soberly bound in conventional legal garb but others in elegant, more gracious array, congregated, a little cosmopolitan community, in a

section by themselves.

Passing through this apartment, John Steele stepped into that adjoining, the sitting-and dining-room. The small table had already been set; the sun's dying rays that shot through the window revealed snowy linen, brightly gleaming silver and a number of papers and letters. They showed, also, a large cage with a small bird that chirped as the man came in; John Steele looked at it a moment, walked to a mirror and looked at himself. Long the deep eyes studied the firm resolute face; they seemed endeavoring to gaze beyond it; but the present visage, like a shadow, waved before him. The man's expression became inscrutable; stepping to the window, he gazed out on the Thames. A purplish glimmer lent enchantment to the noble stream; it may be as he looked upon it, his thoughts flowed with the river, past dilapidated structures, between whispering reeds on green banks, to the sea!

A discreet rapping at the door, followed by the appearance of a round-faced little man, with a tray, interrupted further contemplation or reverie on John Steele's part. Seating himself at the table, he responded negatively to the servant's inquiry if "anythink" else would be required, and when the man had withdrawn, mechanically turned to his letters and to his simple evening repast. He ate with no great evidence of appetite, soon brushed the missives, half-read, aside, and pushed back his chair.

Lighting a pipe he picked up one of the papers, and for some moments his

attention seemed fairly divided between a casual inspection of the light arabesques that ascended in clouds from his lips and the heavy-looking columns of the morning sheet. Suddenly, however, the latter dissipated his further concern in his pipe; he put it down and spread out the big paper in both hands. Amid voluminous wastes of type an item, in the court and society column, had caught his eye:

"Sir Charles and Lady Wray, who are intending henceforth to reside in England, have returned to the stately Wray mansion in Piccadilly, where they will be for the season. Our well-known Governor and his Lady are accompanied by their niece, the beautiful and accomplished Miss Jocelyn Wray, only child of Sir Charles' younger brother, the late Honorable Mr. Richard Wray, whose estate included enormous holdings in Australia as well as several thousand acres in Devonshire. This charming young colonial has already captivated London society."

John Steele read carefully this bit of news, and then re-read it; he even found himself guilty of perusing all the other paragraphs; the comings and goings, the fine doings! They related to a world he had thought little about; a world within the world; just as the people who lived in tunnels and dark passages constituted another world within the

world. Her name danced in illustrious company; here were dukes and earls and viscounts; a sprinkling of the foreign element: begums, emirs, the nation's guests. He saw, also, "Sir Charles, Lady Wray and Miss Wray" among the long list of box-holders for that night at the opera, a gala occasion, commanded by royalty for the entertainment of royalty, and, incidentally, of certain barbarian personages who had come across the seas to be diplomatically coddled and fed.

Folding his newspaper, John Steele turned to his legal papers; strove to replace idleness by industry; but the spirit of work failed to respond. He looked at his watch, rang sharply a bell.

"Put out my clothes," he said to the servant who appeared with a lamp, "and have a cab at the door."

The opera had already begun, but pandemonium still reigned about the box-office, and it was half an hour before John Steele succeeded in reaching the little aperture, with a request for anything that chanced to be left down-stairs. Armed with a bit of pasteboard, Steele was stopped as he was about to enter. A thunder of applause from within, indicating that the first act had come to an end, was followed by the usual egress of black and white figures, impatient for cigarettes and light lobby gossip.

"Divine, eh? The opera, I mean!" A voice accosted John Steele, and, turning, he beheld a familiar face with black whiskers, that of Captain

Forsythe. "This is somewhat different from the morning's environment?"

"Yes," said the other. "But your first question," with a smile, "I'm afraid I can't answer. I've just come; and, if I hadn't--well, I'm no judge of music."

"Then you must look as if you were!" laughed the captain frankly. "Don't know one jolly note from another, but, for goodness' sake, don't betray me. Just been discussing trills and pizzicatos with Lady Wray."

For a few moments they continued their talk; chance had made them known to each other some time before, and Captain Forsythe had improved every opportunity to become better acquainted with one for whom he entertained a frank admiration. Steele's reserve, however, was not easily penetrated; he accepted and repaid the other's advances with uniform courtesy but Forsythe could not flatter himself the acquaintance had progressed greatly since their first meeting.

A bell sounded; John Steele, excusing himself, entered the auditorium and was shown to his seat. It proved excellently located, and, looking around, he found himself afforded a comprehensive view of a spectacle brilliant and dazzling. Boxes shone with brave hues; gems gleamed over-plentifully; here and there, accentuating the picture, the gorgeous colors of some eastern prince stood out like the brighter bits in a kaleidoscope. Steele's glance swept over royalty, rank and condition. It took in persons who were more than persons--personages; it passed over

the impassive face of a dark ameer who looked as if he might have stepped from one of the pages of *The Arabian Nights*, and lingered on a box a little farther to one side. Here were seated Sir Charles and his wife and party; and among them he could discern the features of Jocelyn Wray--not plainly, she was so far away! Only her golden hair appeared distinct amid many tints.

The curtain went up at last; the music began; melodies that seemed born in the springtime succeeded one another. Perennial in freshness, theme followed theme; what joy, what gladness; what merriment, what madness! John Steele, in the main, kept his attention directed toward the stage; once or twice he glanced quickly aside and upward; now in the dimness, however, the people in the boxes conveyed only a vague shadowy impression. How long was the act; how short? It came to a sudden end; after applause and bravos, men again got up and walked out; he, too, left his seat and strolled toward the back.

"Mr. Steele! One moment!" He found himself once more addressed by the good-humored Captain Forsythe. "Behold in me a Mercury, committed to an imperative mission. You are commanded to appear--not in the royal box--but in Sir Charles'."

"Sir Charles Wray's?" John Steele regarded the speaker quickly.

"Yes," laughed the other. "You see I happened to mention I had seen you. 'Why didn't you bring him with you to the box?' queried Sir Charles. He,

by the by, went in for law himself, before he became governor. 'Only had time to shake hands this morning!' 'Yes, why didn't you?' spoke up Miss Jocelyn. 'You _command_ me to bring him?' I inquired. 'By all means!' she laughed, 'I command.' So here I am."

John Steele did not answer, but Captain Forsythe, without waiting for a reply, turned and started up the broad stairway. The other, after a moment's hesitation, followed, duly entered one of the larger boxes, spoke to Sir Charles and his wife and returned the bow of their niece. Amid varied platitudes Steele's glance turned oftenest to the girl. She was dressed in white; a snowy boa drooped from the slender bare shoulders as if it might any moment slip off; a string of pearls, each one with a pearl of pure light in the center, clasped her throat. In her eyes the brightness seemed to sing of dancing cadenzas; her lips, slightly parted, wore the faint suggestion of a smile, as if some canticle or clear cadence had just trembled from them. The small shoe that peeped from beneath silken folds tapped softly to rhythms yet lingering; on her cheeks two small roses unfolded their glad petals.

"I trust Captain Forsythe did not repeat that absurd remark of mine?" she observed lightly, when John Steele, after a few moments' general talk, found himself somehow by her side.

"About 'commanding'?"

"So he did?" she answered gaily. "He told me he was going to. It is like

him; he poses as a _bel esprit_. Stupid, was it not?"

He answered a word in the negative; the girl smiled; where other men would press the opportunity for a compliment he apparently found no opening.

She waved her hand to the seat next to her, and as he sat down--"Isn't it splendid!" irrelevantly.

"The spectacle, or the opera?" he asked slowly, looking into blue eyes.

"It was the opera I meant. I suppose the spectacle is very grand; but," enthusiastically, "it was the music I was thinking of--how it grips one! Tell me what you think of _The Barber_, Mr. Steele."

"I'm afraid my views wouldn't be very interesting," he answered. "I know nothing whatever about music."

"Nothing?" Her eyes widened a little; in her accent was mild wonder.

He looked down at the shimmering white folds near his feet. "In earlier days my environment was not exactly a musical one."

"No? I suppose you were engaged in more practical concerns?"

He did not answer directly. "Perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me

something about Rossini's music, Miss Wray?"

"I tell you?" Her light silvery laugh rang out. "And Captain Forsythe has only been telling me--all of us--that you were one of the best informed men he had ever met."

"You see how wrong he was!"

"Quite!" The blue eyes regarded him sidewise. He, the keen, strong man, so assured, so invincible in the court room, sat most humbly by her side, confessing his ignorance, want of knowledge about something every school-girl is mistress of! "Or, perhaps, it is because your world is so different from mine! Music, laughter, the traditions of Italian _bel canto_, you have no room for them, they are too light, too trifling. You are above them," poising her fair head a little higher.

"Perhaps they have been above me," he answered, his tone unconsciously taking an accent of gaiety from the lightness of hers.

The abrupt appearance of the musicians and the dissonances attendant on tuning, interrupted her response; Steele rose and was about to take his departure, when Sir Charles intervened.

"Why don't you stay?" he asked, with true colonial heartiness. "Plenty of room! Unless you've a better place! Two vacant chairs!"

John Steele looked around; he saw three vacant chairs and took one, a little aside and slightly behind the young girl, while the governor's wife, who had moved from the front at the conclusion of the previous act, now returned to her place, next her niece. During the act, some one came in and took a seat in the background; if Steele heard, he did not look around. His gaze remained fastened on the stage; between him and it--or them, art's gaily attired illusions!--a tress of golden hair sometimes intervened, but he did not move. Through threads like woven flashes of light he regarded the scene of the poet's fantasy. Did they make her a part of it,--did they seem to the man the fantasy's intangible medium, its imagery? Threads of gold, threads of melody! He saw the former, heard the latter. They rose and fell wilfully, capriciously, with many an airy and fanciful turn. The man leaned his head on his hand; a clear strain died like a filament of purest metal gently broken. She breathed a little quicker; leaned farther forward; now her slender figure obtruded slightly between him and the performers. He seemed content with a partial view of the stage, and so remained until the curtain went down. The girl turned; in her eyes was a question.

"Beautiful!" said the man, looking at her.

"Charming! What colorature! And the bravura!" Captain Forsythe applauded vigorously.

"You've never met Lord Ronsdale, I believe, Mr. Steele?" Sir Charles'

voice, close to his ear, inquired.

"Lord Ronsdale!" John Steele looked perfunctorily around toward the back of the box and saw there a face faintly illumined in the light from the stage: a cynical face, white, mask-like. Had his own features not been set from the partial glow that sifted upward, the sudden emotion that swept Steele's countenance would have been observed. A sound escaped his lips; was drowned, however, in a renewed outbreak of applause. The diva came tripping out once more, the others, too--bowing, smiling--recipients of flowers. John Steele's hand had gripped his knee tightly; he was no longer aware of the stage, the people, even Jocelyn Wray. The girl's attention had again centered on the actors; she with the others had been oblivious to the glint of his eyes, the hard, set expression of his features.

"Old friend, don't you know," went on the voice of Sir Charles when this second tumult of applause had subsided. "Had one rare adventure together. One of the kind that cements a man to you."

As he spoke, the light in the theater flared up; John Steele, no longer hesitating, uncertain, rose; his face had regained its composure. He regarded the slender, aristocratic figure of the nobleman in the background; faultlessly dressed, Lord Ronsdale carried himself with his habitual languid air of assurance. The two bowed; the stony glance of the lord met the impassive one of the man. Then a puzzled look came into the nobleman's eyes; he gazed at Steele more closely; his glance

cleared.

"Thought for an instant I'd seen you somewhere before, b'Jove!" he drawled in his metallic tone. "But, of course, I haven't. Never forget a face, don't you know."

"I may not say so much, may not have the diplomat's gift of always remembering people to the extent your lordship possesses it, but I am equally certain I have never before enjoyed the honor of being presented to your lordship!" said John Steele. The words were punctiliously spoken, his accents as cold as the other's. An infinitesimal trace of constraint seemed to have crept into the box; Steele turned and holding out his hand, thanked Sir Charles and his wife for their courtesy.

Jocelyn Wray gazed around. "You are leaving before the last act?" she said with an accent of surprise.

He looked down at her. "Not through preference!"

"Ah!" she laughed. "Business before--music, of course!"

"Our day at home, Mr. Steele, is Thursday," put in the governor's lady, majestically gracious.

"And you'll meet a lot of learned people only too glad to talk about music," added the young girl in a light tone. "That is, if you were

sincere in your request for knowledge, and care to profit by the opportunity?"

His face, which had been contained, impassive, now betrayed in the slightest degree an expression of irresolution. Her quick look caught it, became more whimsical; he seemed actually, for an instant, asking himself if he should come. She laughed ever so slightly; the experience was novel; who before had ever weighed the pros and cons when extended this privilege? Then, the next moment, the blue eyes lost some of their mirth; perhaps his manner made her feel the frank informality she had unconsciously been guilty of; she regarded him more coldly.

"Thank you," he said. "You are very good. I shall be most glad."

And bowing to her and to the others he once more turned; as he passed Lord Ronadsle, the eyes of the two men again met; those of the nobleman suddenly dilated and he started.

"B'Jove!" he exclaimed, his gaze following the retreating figure.

"What is it?" Sir Charles looked around. "Recall where you thought you saw him?"

Lord Ronsdale did not at once answer and Sir Charles repeated his question; the nobleman mechanically raised his hand to his face. "Yes; a mere fugitive resemblance," he answered rather hurriedly. "Some

one--you--you never met. Altogether quite a different sort of person, don't you know!" regaining his drawl.

"Well," observed Sir Charles, "fugitive resemblances will happen!"

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