

CHAPTER III

A LESSON IN BOTANY

John Steele was rather late in arriving at the house of Sir Charles Wray in Piccadilly the following Thursday. But nearly every one else was late, and, perhaps knowing the fashionable foible, he had purposely held back to avoid making himself conspicuous by being prompt. The house, his destination, was not unlike other dwellings on that historic thoroughfare; externally it was as monotonous as the average London mansion. The architect had disdained any attempt at ornamentation. As if fearful of being accused of emulating his brother-in-art across the channel, he had put up four walls and laid on a roof; he had given the front wall a slightly outward curve. In so doing, he did not reason why; he was merely following precedent that had created this incomprehensible convexity.

But within, the mansion made a dignified and at the same time a pleasant impression. John Steele, seated at the rear of a spacious room, where he a few moments later found himself among a numerous company, looked around on the old solid furnishings, the heavy rich curtains and those other substantial appurtenances to a fine and stately town house. That funereal atmosphere common to many homes of an ancient period was, however, lacking. The observer felt as if some recent hand, the hand of youth, had been busy hereabouts indulging in light touches that relieved

and gladdened the big room. Hues, soft and delicate, met the eye here and there; rugs of fine pattern favored the glance, while tapestries of French workmanship bade it wander amid scenes suggestive of Arcadia. Many found these innovations to their liking; others frowned upon them; but everybody flocked to the house.

The program on the present occasion included a poet and a woman novelist. The former, a Preraphaelite, led his hearers through dim mazes, Hyrcanian wilds. The novelist on the other hand was direct; in following her there seemed no danger of losing the way. At the conclusion of the program proper, an admirer of the poet asked if their young hostess would not play a certain musical something, the theme of one of the bard's effusions, and at once Jocelyn Wray complied. Lord Ronsdale stood sedulously near, turning the leaves; Steele watched the deft hand; it was slim, aristocratic and suggested possibilities in legerdemain.

"An attractive-looking pair!" whispered a woman near John Steele to another of her sex, during a louder passage in the number. "Are they--"

"I don't know; my dear. Perhaps. She's extremely well-off in this world's goods, and he has large properties, but--a diminishing income." She lowered her voice rather abruptly as the cadence came to a pause. The music went on again to its appointed and spirited climax.

"Was formerly in the diplomatic service, I believe;"--the voice also

went on--"has strong political aspirations, and, with a wealthy and clever wife--"

"A girl might do worse. He is both cold and capable--an ideal combination for a political career--might become prime minister--with the prestige of his family and hers to--"

John Steele stirred; the whispering ceased. My lord turned the last page; the girl rose and bent for an instant her fair head. And as Steele looked at her, again there came over him--this time, it may be, not without a certain bitterness!--an impression of life and its joys--spring-tide and sunshine, bright, remote!--so remote--for him--

A babel of voices replaced melody; the people got up. A number lingered; many went, after speaking to their hostesses and Sir Charles. John Steele, at the rear, looked at the door leading into the main hall toward the young girl, then stepped across the soft rugs and spoke to her. She answered in the customary manner and others approached. He was about to draw back to leave, when--

"Oh, Mr. Steele," she said, "my uncle wishes to see you before you go. He was saying he had some--"

"Quite right, my dear!" And Sir Charles, who had approached, took John Steele's arm. "Some curious old law books I picked up to-day at a bargain and want your opinion of!" he went on, leading the other into a

lofty and restful apartment adjoining, the library. Steele looked around him; his gaze brightened as it rested on the imposing and finely bound volumes.

"You have a superb collection of books," he observed with a sudden quick look at his host.

"Yes; I rather pride myself on my library," said Sir Charles complacently. "Lost a good many of the choicest though," he went on in regretful tones, "some years ago, as I was returning to Australia. A rare lot of law books, a library in themselves, as well as a large collection of the classics, the world's poets and historians, went down with the ill-fated Lord Nelson."

"Ah?" John Steele looked away. "A great mart, London, for fine editions!" he said absently after a pause.

"It is. But here are those I spoke of." And Sir Charles indicated a number of volumes on a large center table. John Steele handled them thoughtfully and for some time his host ran on about them. A choice copy of one of the Elizabethan poets, intruding itself in that august company, then attracted Steele's attention; he picked it up, weighed and caressed it with gentle fingers.

"Who shall measure the influence of--a little parcel like this?" he said at length lightly.

"True." Sir Charles' eye caught the title. "As Portia says: 'It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.' Excellent bit of binding that, too! But," with new zest, "take any interest in rare books of the ring, full of eighteenth century colored prints, and so on?"

"I can't say, at present, that the doings of the ring or the history of pugilists attract me."

"That's because you've never seen an honest, hard-fought battle, perhaps?"

"A flattering designation, I should say, of the spectacle of two brutes disfiguring their already repulsive visages!"

"Two brutes?--disfiguring?"--the drawling voice of Lord Ronsdale who had at that moment stepped in, inquired. "May I ask what the--talk is about?"

Sir Charles turned. "Steele was differing from me about a good, old, honest English sport."

"Sport?" Lord Ronsdale dropped into a chair and helped himself to whisky and soda conveniently near.

"I refer to the ring--its traditions--its chronicles--"

"Ah!" The speaker raised his glass and looked at John Steele. The latter was nonchalantly regarding the pages of a book he yet held; his face was half-turned from the nobleman. The clear-cut, bold profile, the easy, assured carriage, so suggestive of strength, seemed to attract, to compel Lord Ronsdale's attention.

"For my part," went on Sir Charles in a somewhat disappointed tone, "I am one who views with regret the decadence of a great national pastime."

He regarded Ronsdale; the latter set down his glass untasted. "My own opinion," he said crisply; then his face changed; he looked toward the door.

"Well, it's over!" the light tones of Jocelyn Wray interrupted; the girl stood on the threshold, glancing gaily from one to the other. "Did you tell my uncle, Mr. Steele, what you thought of his purchase? I see, while on his favorite subject, he has forgotten to offer you a cigar."

Sir Charles hastened to repair his remissness.

"But how," she went on, "did it go? The program, I mean. Have you forgiven me yet for asking you to come, Mr. Steele?"

"Forgiven?" he repeated. Lord Ronsdale's eyes narrowed on them.

"Confess," she continued, sinking to the arm of a great chair, "you had your misgivings?"

He regarded the supple, slender figure, so airily poised. As she bent forward, he noticed in her hair several flowers shaped like primroses, but light crimson in hue. "What misgivings was it possible to have?" he replied.

"Oh," she replied, "the usual masculine ones! Misgivings, for example, about stepping out of the routine. Routine that makes slaves of men!" with an accent slightly mocking. "And stepping into what? Society! The bugbear of so many men! Poor Society! What flings it has to endure! By the way, did your convict get off?"

"Get off? What--"

"The one you represented--is that the word?--when we were in court."

"Yes; he was acquitted."

"I am glad; somehow you made me feel he was innocent."

"I believed in him," said John Steele.

"And yet the evidence was very strong against him! If some one else had appeared for him--Do you think many innocent people have been--hanged,

or sent out of the country, Mr. Steele?" Her eyes looked brighter, her face more earnest now.

"Evidence can play odd caprices."

"Still, your average English juryman is to be depended on!" put in Lord Ronsdale quickly.

"Do you think so?" An instant Steele's eyes rested on the speaker. "No doubt you are right." A sardonic flash seemed to play on the nobleman.

"At all events you voice the accepted belief."

"I'm glad you defend, don't prosecute people, Mr. Steele," said the girl irrelevantly.

"A pleasanter task, perhaps!"

"Speaking of sending prisoners out of the country," broke in Sir Charles, "I am not in favor of the penal system myself."

"Rather a simple way of getting rid of undesirables--transportation--it has always seemed to me," dissented Lord Ronsdale.

"Don't they sometimes escape and come back to England?" asked the girl.

"Not apt to, when death for returning stares them in the face," remarked

the nobleman.

"Death!" The girl shivered slightly.

John Steele smiled. "The penalty should certainly prove efficacious," he observed lightly.

"Is not such a penalty--for returning, I mean--very severe, Mr. Steele?" asked Jocelyn Wray.

"That," he laughed, "depends somewhat on the point of view, the criminal's, or society's!" His gaze returned to her; the bright bit of color in her hair again seemed to catch and hold his glance. "But," with a sudden change of tone, "will you explain something to me, Miss Wray? Those flowers you wear--surely they are primroses, and yet--"

"Crimson," said the girl. "You find that strange. It is very simple. If you will come with me a moment." She rose, quickly crossed the room to a door at the back, and Steele, following, found himself in a large conservatory that looked out upon an agreeable, if rather restricted, prospect of green garden. Several of the windows of the glass addition were open and the warm sunshine and air entered. A butterfly was fluttering within; in a corner, a bee busied himself buzzing loudly between flowers and sips of saccharine sweetness. Jocelyn Wray stepped in its direction, stooped. The sunlight touched the white neck, where spirals of gold nestled, and fell over her gown in soft, shifting waves.

"You see?" She threw over her shoulder a glance at him; he looked down at primroses, pale yellow; a few near-by were half-red, or spotted with crimson; others, still, were the color of those that nodded in her hair.

"You can imagine how it has come about?"

He regarded a great bunch of clustering red roses--the winged marauder hovering noisily over. "I think I can guess. The bees have carried the hue of the roses to them."

"Hue!" cried the girl, with light scorn. "What a prosaic way to express it! Say the soul, the heart's blood. Some of the primroses have yielded only a little; others have been transformed."

"You think, then, some flowers may be much influenced by others?"

"They can't help it," she answered confidently.

"Just as some people," he said in a low tone, "can't help taking into their lives some beautiful hue born of mere casual contact with some one, some time."

"What a poetical sentiment!" she laughed. "Really, it deserves a reward." As he spoke, she plucked a few flowers and held them out in her palm to him; he regarded her merry eyes, the bright tints.

Erect, with well-assured poise, she looked at him; he took one of the flowers, gazed at it, a tiny thing in his own great palm, a tiny, red thing, like a jewel in hue--that reminded him of--what? As through a mist he saw a spark--where?

"Only one?" she said in the same tone. "You are modest. And you don't even condescend to put it in your coat?"

He did so; in his gaze was a sudden new expression, something so compelling, so different, it held her, almost against her will. He seemed to see her and yet not fully to be aware of her presence; she drew back slightly. The girl's crimson lips parted as with a suspicion of faint wonder; the blue eyes, just a little soberer, were, also, in the least degree, perplexed. The man's breast suddenly stirred; a breath--or was it the merest suggestion of a sigh?--escaped the firm lips. He looked out of the window at the garden, conventional, the arrangement of lines one expected.

When his look returned to her it was the same he had worn when he had first stepped forward to speak with her that afternoon.

"Thank you for the lesson in botany, Miss Wray!" he said easily. "I shall not forget it."

The other primroses fell from her fingers; with a response equally careless if somewhat reserved, she turned and reentered the library.

Lord Ronsdale regarded both quickly; then started, as he caught sight of the flower in John Steele's coat. A frown crossed his face and he looked away to conceal the singularly cold and vindictive gleam that sprang to his eyes.

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