

CHAPTER IV

TIDES VARYING

One evening about a fortnight later Lord Ronsdale, in a dissatisfied frame of mind, strolled along Piccadilly. His face wore a dark look, the expression of one ill-pleased with fortune's late attitude toward him. Plans that he had long cherished seemed to be in some jeopardy; he had begun to flatter himself that the flowery way to all he desired lay before him and that he had but to tread it, when another, as the soothsayers put it, had crossed his path.

A plain man, a man without title! Lord Ronsdale told himself Miss Jocelyn Wray was no better than an arrant coquette, but the next moment questioned this conclusion. Had she not really been a little taken by the fellow? Certainly she seemed not averse to his company; when she willed, and she willed often, she summoned him to her aide. Nor did he now appear reluctant to come at her bidding; self-assertive though he had shown himself to be he obeyed, *_sans_ demur*, the wave of my lady's little hand. Was it a certain largeness and reserve about him that had awakened her curiosity? From her high social position had she wished merely to test her own power and amuse herself after a light fashion, surely youth's and beauty's privilege?

But whatever the girl's motive, her conduct in the matter reacted on my

lord; the fellow was in the way, very much so. How could he himself pay court to her when she frivolously, if only for the moment, preferred this commoner's company? That very afternoon my lord, entering the music-room of the great mansion, had found her at the piano playing for him, her slim fingers moving over the keys to the tune of one of Chopin's nocturnes. He had surprised a steady, eloquent look in the fellow's eye turned on her when she was unconscious of his gaze, a glance the ardency of which there was no mistaking. It had altered at my lord's rather quiet and abrupt appearance, crystallized into an impersonal icy light, colder even than the nobleman's own stony stare. He had, perforce, to endure the other's presence and conversation, an undercurrent to the light talk of the girl who seemed, Lord Ronsdale thought, a little maliciously aware of the constraint between the two men, and not at all put out by it.

What made the situation even more anomalous to Ronsdale and the less patiently to be borne, was that Sir Charles understood and sympathized with his desires and position in the matter. And why not? Ronsdale's father and Sir Charles had been old and close friends; there were reasons that pointed to the match as a suitable one, and Sir Charles, by his general manner and attitude, had long shown he would put no obstacle in the way of the nobleman's suit for the hand of his fair niece. As for Lady Wray, Lord Ronsdale knew that he had in that practical and worldly person a staunch ally of his wishes; these had not become less ardent since he had witnessed the unqualified success of the beautiful colonial girl in London; noted how men, illustrious in various walks of life,

grave diplomats, stately ambassadors, were swayed by her light charm and impulsive frankness of youth. And to have her who could have all London at her feet, including his distinguished self, show a predilection, however short-lived and capricious, for--

"Confound the cad! Where did he come from? Who are his family--if he has one!"

Thus ruminating he had drawn near his club, a square, imposing edifice, when a voice out of the darkness caused him abruptly to pause:

"If it isn't 'is lordship!"

The tones expressed surprise, satisfaction; the nobleman looked down; gave a slight start; then his face became once more cold, apathetic.

"Who are you? What do you want?" he said roughly.

The countenance of the fellow who had ventured to accost the nobleman fell; a vindictive light shone from his eyes.

"It's like a drama at old Drury," he observed, with a slight sneer.

"Only your lordship should have said: 'Who the devil are you?'"

Lord Ronsdale looked before him to where, in the distance, near a street lamp, the figure of a policeman might be dimly discerned; then, with

obvious intention, he started toward the officer; but the man stepped in front of him. "No, you don't," he said.

The impassive, steel-like glance of Ronsdale played on the man; a white, shapely hand began to reach out. "One moment, and I'll give you in charge as--"

The fellow saw that Ronsdale meant it; he had but an instant to decide; a certain air of cheap, jaunty assurance he had begun to assume vanished. "All right," he said quickly, but with a ring of suppressed venom in his voice. "I'll be off. Your lordship has it all your own way since the Lord Nelson went down." There was a note of bitterness in his tones. "Besides, Dandy Joe's not exactly a favorite at headquarters just now, after the drubbing John Steele gave him."

"John Steele!" Lord Ronsdale looked abruptly round.

The fellow regarded him and ventured to go on: "I was witness for the police and Mr. Gillett, and he--Steele," with a curse, "had me on the stand. He knows every rook and welsher and every swell magsman, and all their haunts and habits. And he knows me--blame--" he made use of another expression more forcible--"if he don't know me as well as if he'd once been a pal. And now," in an injured tone, "Mr. Gillett calls me hard names for bringing discredit, as he terms it, on the force."

"What's this to me?"

The fellow stopped short in what he was saying; his small eyes glistened and he took a step forward. "Your lordship remembers the 'Frisco Pet? Your lordship remembers him?" he repeated, thrusting an alert face closer.

"I believe there was a prize-fighter of that name," was the calm reply.

"I say!" The fellow let his jaw fall slightly; he gazed at the nobleman with mingled shrewdness and admiration. "Your lordship remembers him _only_," with an accent, "as a patron of sport. Tossed a quid on him"--with a look of full meaning--"as your lordship would a bone to a dog. Perhaps," gaining in audacity, "your lordship would be so generous as to throw one or two now at one he once favored with his bounty."

"I--favored you? You lie!" The answer was concise; it cut like a lash; it robbed the man once more of all his hardihood. He slunk back.

"Very good," he muttered.

Lord Ronsdale turned and with a sharp swish of his cane walked on. The other, his eyes resentfully bright, looked after the tall, aristocratic, slowly departing figure.

As the nobleman ascended the steps of his club he seemed again to be thinking deeply; within, his preoccupation did not altogether desert

him. In a corner, with the big pages of the *_Times_* before him, he read with scant interest the doings of the day; even a perennial telegram concerning a threatened invasion of England did not awaken momentary interest. He passed it over as casually as he did the markets, or a grudging, conservative item from the police courts, all that the blue pencil had left of the hopeful efforts of some poor penny-a-liner. From the daily fulminator he had turned to the weekly medium of fun and fooling, when, from behind another paper, the face of a gray-haired, good-natured appearing person, quite different off the bench, chanced to look out at him.

"Eh? That you, Ronsdale?" he said, reaching for a steaming glass of hot beverage at his elbow. "What do you think of it, this talk of an invasion by the Monseers?"

"Don't think anything of it."

"Answered in the true spirit of a Briton!" laughed the other. "I fancy, too, it'll be a long time before John Bull ceases to stamp around, master of his own shores, or Britannia no longer rules the deep. But how is your friend, Sir Charles Wray? I had the pleasure of meeting him the other morning in the court room."

"Same as usual, I imagine, Judge Beeson."

"And his fair niece, she takes kindly to the town and its gaieties?"

"Very kindly," dryly.

"A beautiful girl, our young Australian!" The elder man toyed with his glass, stirred the contents and sipped. "By the way, didn't I see John Steele in their box at the opera the other night?"

"It is possible," shortly.

"Rising man, that!" observed the other lightly. "Combination of brains and force! Did you ever notice his fist? It might belong to a prize-fighter, except that the hands are perfectly kept! You'd know at once he was a man accustomed to fighting, who would sweep aside obstacles, get what he wanted!"

"Think so?" Lord Ronsdale smoked steadily. "You, as a magistrate, I suppose, know him well?"

"Should hardly go that far; taciturn chap, don't you know! I don't believe any one really knows him."

"Or about him?" suggested the other, crossing his legs nonchalantly.

"Not much; only that he is an alien."

"An alien?" quickly. "Not a colonial?"

"No; he has lived in the colonies--Tasmania, and so on. But by birth he's an American."

"An American, eh? And practising at the British bar?"

"Not the first case of the kind; exceptions have been made before, and aliens 'called,' as we express it. Steele's hobby of criminology brought him to London, and his earnestness and ability in that line procured for him the privilege he sought. As member of the incorporated society that passes upon the qualifications of candidates it was my pleasure to sit in judgment on him; we raked him fore and aft but, bless you, he stood squarely on his feet and refused to be tripped."

"So he came to England to pursue a certain line?" said Lord Ronsdale half to himself.

"A man with a partiality for criminal work would naturally look to the modern Babylon. Steele apparently works more to gratify that predilection than for any reward in pounds and pence. Must have private means; have known him to spend a deal of time and money on cases there couldn't have been a sixpence in."

"How'd he happen to get down in Tasmania? Odd place for a Yankee!"

"That's one of the questions he wasn't asked," laughingly. "Perhaps what

our Teutonic friends would call the _Wander-lust_ took him there."

Rising, "My compliments to Sir Charles when you see him."

Lord Ronsdale remained long at the club and the card-table that night; over the bits of pasteboard, however, his zest failed to flare high, although instinctively he played with a discernment that came from long practice. But the sight of a handful of gold pieces here, of a little pile there, the varying shiftings of the bright disks, as the vagaries of chance sent them this way or that, seemed to move him in no great degree,--perhaps because the winning or losing of a few hundred pounds, more or less, would have small effect on his fortunes or misfortunes. At a late, or rather, early, hour he pushed back his chair, richer by a few coins that jingled in his pocket, and, yawning, walked out. Summoning a cab, he got in, but as he found himself rattling homeward to the chambers he had taken in a fashionable part of town, he was aware that any emotions of annoyance and discontent experienced earlier that night, had suffered no abatement.

"Tasmania!" The horse's hoofs beat time to vague desultory thoughts; he stared out, perhaps, in fancy, at southern seas, looked up at stars more lustrous than those that hung over him now. Then the divers clusters of points, glowing, insistent, swam around, and he fell into a half doze, from which he was awakened by the abrupt stopping of the cab. Having paid the man he went up to his rooms. On the table in an inner apartment, his study, something bright, white, met his gaze: a note in Jocelyn Wray's handwriting! Quickly he reached for it and tore it open.

"A party of us ride in the park to-morrow morning. Will you join us?"

That was all; brief and to the point; Lord Ronsdale frowned.

"A party!" That would include John Steele perhaps. Once before on a morning, the girl's fair face and dancing eyes had wooed Steele away from his desk, or the court, to the park.

Should he go? The note slipped from his fingers to the carpet; he permitted it to lie there; the importance to himself and others of his decision he little realized. Could he have foreseen all that was involved by his going, or staying away, he would not so carelessly have thrown off his clothes and retired, dismissing the matter until the morrow, or rather, until he should chance to waken.

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