

## CHAPTER V

### IN THE PARK

Close at hand, the trees in Hyde Park seemed to droop their branches, as if in sympathy with the gray aspect of the day, while afar, across the green, the sylvan guardians of the place had either receded altogether in the gray haze or stood forth like shadowy ghosts. In the foreground, not far from the main entrance, a number of sheep and their young nibbled contentedly the wet and delectable grass, and as some bright gown paused or whisked past, the juxtaposition of fine raiment and young lamb suggested soft, shifting Bouchers or other dainty French pastorals in paint. The air had a tang; the dampness enhanced the perfumes, made them fuller and sweeter, and a joyous sort of melancholy seemed to hold a springtime world in its grasp.

Into this scene of rural tranquillity rode briskly about the middle of the morning Jocelyn Wray and others. The glow on the girl's cheeks harmonized with the redness of her lips; the sparkling blue eyes mocked at all neutral hues; her gown and an odd ribbon or two waved, as it were, light defiance to motionless things--still leaves and branches, flowers and buds, drowsy and sleeping. Her mount was deep black, with fine arching neck and spirited head; on either side of the head, beneath ears sensitive, delicately pointed, had been fastened a rose, badge of favor from a bunch nestling at the white throat of the young girl. She

rode with a grace and rhythmical ease suggestive of large experience in the pastime; the slender, supple figure swayed as if welcoming gladly the swing and the quick rush of air. Sometimes at her side, again just behind, galloped the horse bearing John Steele, and, as they went at a fair pace, preceded and followed by others of a gay party, the eyes of many passers-by turned to regard them.

"By Jove, they're stunning! It isn't often you see a man put up like that."

"Or a girl more the picture of health!"

"And beauty!"

Unconscious of these and other comments from the usual curious contingent of idlers filling the benches or strolling along the paths, the girl now set a yet swifter gait, glancing quickly over her shoulder at her companion: "Do you like a hard gallop? Shall we let them out?"

His brightening gaze answered; they touched their horses and for some distance raced madly on, passed those in front and left them far behind. Now Steele's eyes rested on the playing muscles of her superb horse, then lifted to the lithe form of Jocelyn Wray, the straight shoulders, a bit of a tress, disordered, floating rebelliously to the wind.

As abruptly as she had pressed her horse to that inspiring speed, she

drew him in to a walk. "Wasn't that worth coming to the park for?" she said gaily.

He looked at her, at the flowers she readjusted, at the lips, half-parted to her quick breath.

"More than worth it."

"You see what you missed in the past," she observed in a tone slightly mocking.

"You were not here to suggest it," he returned quietly, with gaze only for blue eyes.

She suffered them to linger. "I suppose I should feel nattered that a suggestion from little me--"

"A suggestion from little you would, I fancy, go a long ways with many people." A spark shone now in the man's steady look; the girl seemed not afraid of it.

"I am fortunate," she laughed. "A compliment from Mr. John Steele!"

"Why not say--the truth?" he observed.

She stroked her horse's glossy neck and smiled furtively at the soft,

velvet surface. "The truth?" she replied. "What is it? Where shall we find it? Isn't it something the old philosophers were always searching for? Plato, and--some of the others we were taught of in school."

He started as if to speak, but his answer remained unuttered; the man's lips closed tighter; a moment he watched the small gloved hand, then his gaze turned to the gray sky.

"So you see, I call compliments, compliments," she ended lightly.

He offered no comment; the horses moved on; suddenly she looked at him. One of those odd changes she had once or twice noticed before had come over John Steele; his face appeared too grave, too reserved; she might almost fancy a stormy play of emotion behind that mask of immobility. The girl's long lashes lowered; a slightly puzzled expression shone from her eyes. It may be she had but the natural curiosity of her sex, that her interest was compelled, because, although she had studied this man from various standpoints, his personality, strong, direct in some ways, she seemed unable to fathom. The golden head tilted; she allowed an impression of his profile to grow upon her.

"Do you know," she laughingly remarked, "you are not very interesting?"

He started. "Interesting!"

"A penny for your thoughts!" ironically.

"They're not worth it."

"No?"

He bent a little nearer; she swept back the disordered lock; an instant the man seemed to lose his self-possession. "Ah," he began, as if the words forced themselves from his lips, "if only I might--"

What he had been on the point of saying was never finished; the girl's quick glance, sweeping an instant ahead, had lingered on some one approaching from the opposite direction, and catching sight of him, she had just missed noting that swift alteration in John Steele's tones, the brief abandonment of studied control, a flare of irresistible feeling.

"Isn't that Lord Ronsdale?" asked the girl, continuing to gaze before her.

A black look replaced the sudden flame in Steele's gaze; the hand holding the reins closed on them tightly.

"Rather early for him, I fancy," she said, regarding the slim figure of the approaching rider. "With his devotion to clubs and late hours, you know! Do you, Mr. Steele, happen to belong to any of his clubs?"

"No." He spoke in a low voice, almost harshly.

Her brow lifted; his face was turned from her. Had he been mindful he might have noted a touch of displeasure on the proud face, that she regarded him as from a vague, indefinite distance.

"Lord Ronsdale is a very old friend of my uncle's," she observed severely, "and--mine!"

Was it that she had divined a deep-seated prejudice or hostility toward the nobleman hidden in John Steele's breast, that she took this occasion to let him know definitely that her friends were her friends? "Even when I was only a child he was very nice to me," she went on.

He remained silent; she frowned, then turned to the nobleman with a smile. Lord Ronsdale found that her greeting left nothing to be desired; she who had been somewhat unmindful of him lately on a sudden seemed really glad to see him. His slightly tired, aristocratic face lightened; the sunshine of Jocelyn Wray's eyes, the tonic of youth radiating from her, were sufficient to alleviate, if not dispel, ennui or lassitude.

"So good of you!" she murmured conventionally, as Steele dropped slightly back among the others who had by this time drawn near. "To arrive at such an unfashionable hour, I mean!"

His pleased but rather suspicious eyes studied her; he answered lightly; behind them now, he who had been riding with my lady could hear their

gay laughter. Lord Ronsdale was apparently telling her a whimsical story; he had traveled much, met many people, bizarre and otherwise, and could be ironically witty when stimulated to the effort. John Steele did not look at them; when the girl at a turn in the way allowed her glance a moment to sweep aside toward those following, she could see he was riding with head slightly down bent.

"Good-looking beggar, isn't he," observed the nobleman suddenly, his gaze sharpened on her.

"Who?" asked the girl.

"That chap, Steele," he answered insinuatingly.

"Is he?" Her voice was flute-like. "What is that noise?" abruptly.

"Noise?" Lord Ronsdale listened. "That's music, or supposed to be! Unless I am mistaken, The Campbells are Coming," he drawled.

"The Campbells? Oh, I understand! Let us wait!"

They drew in their horses; the black one became restive, eyed with obvious disapproval a gaily bedecked body of men swinging smartly along toward them. At their head marched pipers, blowing lustily; behind strode doughty clansmen, heads up, as became those carrying memories of battles won. They approached after the manner of veterans who felt that

they deserved tributes of admiration from beholders: that in the piping times of peace they were bound to be conquerors still.

Louder shrieked the wild concords; bare legs flashed nearer; bright colors flaunted with startling distinctness. And at the sight and sound, the girl's horse, unaccustomed to the pomp and pride of martial display, began to plunge and rear. She spoke sharply; tried to control it but found she could not. Lord Ronsdale saw her predicament but was powerless to lend assistance, being at the moment engaged in a vigorous effort to prevent his own horse from bolting.

The bagpipes came directly opposite; the black horse reared viciously; for the moment it seemed that Jocelyn would either be thrown or that the affrighted animal would fall over on her, when a man sprang forward and a hand reached up. He stood almost beneath the horse; as it came down a hoof struck his shoulder a glancing blow, grazed hard his arm, tearing the cloth. But before the animal could continue his rebellious tactics a hand like iron had reached for, grasped the bridle; those who watched could realize a great strength in the restraining fingers, the unusual power of Steele's muscles. The black horse, trembling, soon stood still; the bagpipes passed on, and Steele looked up at the girl.

"If you care to dismount--"

"Thank you," she said. "I'm not afraid. Especially," she added lightly, "with you at the bridle!"



"Few riders could have kept their seats so well," he answered, with ill-concealed admiration.

"I have always been accustomed to horses. In Australia we ride a great deal."

"For the instant," his face slightly paler, "I thought something would happen."

"It might have," she returned, a light in her eyes, "but for a timely hand. My horse apparently does not appreciate Scotch airs."

"Ugly brute!" Lord Ronsdale, a dissatisfied expression on his handsome countenance, approached. "A little of the whip--" the words were arrested; the nobleman stared at John Steele, or rather at the bare arm which the torn sleeve revealed well above the elbow.

The white, uplifted arm suddenly dropped; Steele drew the cloth quickly about it, but not before his eyes had met those of Lord Ronsdale and caught the amazement, incredulity, sudden terror--was it terror?--in their depths.

"Told you not to trust him, Jocelyn!" Sir Charles' loud, hearty voice at the same moment interrupted. "There was a look about him I didn't like from the beginning."

"Perhaps he needs only a little toning down to be fit," put in Captain Forsythe, as he and the others drew near. "A few seasons with the hounds, or--"

"Chasing some poor little fox!" said the girl with light scorn.

"One might be doing something worse!"

"One might!" Her accents were dubious.

"You don't believe in the chase, or the hunt? Allow me to differ; people always must hunt something, don't you know; primeval instinct! Used to hunt one another," he laughed. "Sometimes do now. Fox is only a substitute for the joys of the man-hunt; sort of sop to Cerberus, as it were. Eh, Ronsdale?"

But the nobleman did not answer; his face looked drawn and gray; with one hand he seemed almost clinging to his saddle. John Steele's back was turned; he was bending over the girth of his saddle and his features could not be seen, but the hand, so firm and assured a moment before, seemed a little uncertain as it made pretext to readjust a fastening or buckle.

"Why, man, you look ill!" Captain Forsythe, turning to Lord Ronsdale, exclaimed suddenly.

"It's--nothing--much--" With vacant expression the nobleman regarded the speaker; then lifted his hand and pressed it an instant to his breast.

"Heart," he murmured mechanically. "Beastly bad heart, you know, and sometimes a little thing--slight shock--Miss Wray's danger--"

"Take some of this!" The captain, with solicitude, pressed a flask on him; the nobleman drank deeply. "There; that'll pick you up."

"Beastly foolish!" A color sprang to Lord Ronsdale's face; he held himself more erect.

"Not at all!" Sir Charles interposed. "A man can't help a bad liver or a bad heart. One of those inscrutable visitations of Providence! But shall we go on? You're sure you're quite yourself?"

"Quite!" The nobleman's tone was even harder and more metallic than usual; his thin lips compressed to a tight line; his eyes that looked out to a great distance were bright and glistening.

"Are you ready, Mr. Steele?" Jocelyn Wray waited a moment as the others started, looked down at that gentleman. Her voice was gracious; its soft accents seemed to say: "You may ride with me; it is your reward!"

For one restored so quickly to favor, with a felicitous prospect of gay words and bright glances, John Steele seemed singularly dull and

apathetic. He exhibited no haste in the task he was engaged in; straightened slowly and mounted with leisure. Once again in the saddle, and on their way, it is true he appeared to listen to the girl; but his responses were vague, lacking both in vivacity and humor. It was impossible she should not notice this want of attention; she bit her lips once; then she laughed.

"Do you know, Mr. Steele, if I were vain I should feel hurt."

"Hurt?" he repeated.

"You haven't heard what I have been saying." Her eyes challenged his.

"Haven't I?"

"Deny it."

He did not; again she looked at him merrily.

"Of course, I can't afford to be harsh with my rescuer. Perhaps"--in the same tone--"you really did save my life! Have you ever really saved any one--any one else, shall I say?--you who are so strong?"

A spasm as of pain passed over his face; his look, however, was not for her; and the girl's eyes, too, had now become suddenly set afar. Was she thinking of another scene, some one her own words conjured to mind? Her

mood seemed to gain in seriousness; she also became very quiet; and so almost in silence they went on to the entrance, down the street, to her home.

"\_Au revoir\_, and thank you!" she said there, regaining her accustomed lightness.

"Good-by! At least for the present," he added. "I am leaving London," abruptly.

"Leaving?" She regarded him in surprise. "To be gone long?"

"It is difficult to say. Perhaps."

"But--you must have decided suddenly?"

"Yes."

"While we have been riding home?" Again he answered affirmatively; the blue eyes looked at him long. "Is it--is it serious?"

"A little."

"Men make so much of business, nowadays," she observed, "it--it always seems serious, I suppose. We--we are moving into the country in a few weeks. Shall I--shall we, see you before then?"

"To my regret, I am afraid not."

"And after"--in a voice matter-of-fact--"I think aunt has put you down for July; a house party; I don't recall the exact dates. You will come?"

"Shall we say, circumstances permitting--" "Certainly," a little stiffly, "circumstances permitting." She gave him her hand. "\_Au revoir!\_ Or good-by, if you prefer it." He held the little gloved fingers; let them drop. There was a suggestion of hopelessness in the movement that fitted oddly his inherent vigor and self-poise; she started to draw away; an ineffable something held her.

"Good luck in your business!" she found herself saying, half-gaily, half-ironically.

He answered, hoarsely, something--what?--rode off. With color flaming high, the girl looked after him until Lord Ronsdale's horse, clattering near, caused her to turn quickly.

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