

CHAPTER VI

A CONFERENCE

The book-worms' row, hardly a street, more a short-cut passage between two important thoroughfares, had through the course of many years exercised a subtle fascination for pedant, pedagogue or itinerant litterateur. At one end of the way was rush and bustle; at the other, more rush and bustle; here might be found the comparative hush of the tiny stream that for a short interval has left the parent current. Dusty and musty shops looked out on either side, and within on shelves, or without on stands, unexpected bargains lay carelessly about, rare Horaces or Ovids, Greek tragedies, ponderous volumes of the golden age of the English poets and philosophers. Truth nestled in dark corners; knowledge lay hidden in frayed covers and beauty enshrined herself behind cobwebs.

Not that the thoroughfare, in its entirety, was devoted to books; nor that it housed no other people than bibliomaniacs or antiquarians! Higher, above the little shops, small rooms, reached by rickety stairways, offered quiet corners for divers and sundry gentlemen whose occupations called for discreet and retired nooks.

In one of these places, described on the door as "a private, confidential, inquiry office," sat, on the morning following John

Steele's ride in the park, a little man with ferret-like eyes at a dusty desk near a dusty window. He did not seem to be very busy, was engaged at the moment in drawing meaningless cabalistic signs on a piece of paper, when a step in the hallway and a low tapping at the door caused him to throw down his pen and straighten expectantly. A client, perhaps!--a woman?--no, a man! With momentary surprise, he gazed on the delicately chiseled features of his caller; a gentleman faultlessly dressed and wearing a spring flower in his coat.

"Mr. Gillett?" The visitor's glance veiled an expression of restlessness; his face, although mask-like, was tinted with a faint flush.

The police agent at once rose. "The same, sir, at your service; I--but I beg your pardon; unless I am mistaken--haven't we--"

"Yes; a number of years ago on the Lord Nelson," said the caller in a hard matter-of-fact tone. "We were fellow passengers on her, until--"

"We became fellow occupants of one of her small boats! An aging experience! But won't you," with that deference for rank and position those of his type are pleased to assume, "honor me by being seated, Lord Ronsdale?"

As he spoke, he dusted vigorously with his handkerchief a chair which his caller, after a moment's hesitation, sank into; Mr. Gillett regarded

the one he himself had been occupying; then, in an apologetic manner ventured to take it. "Your lordship is well? Your lordship looks it. Your lordship was, last I heard, in Australia, I believe. A genuine pleasure to see your lordship once more."

The visitor offered no acknowledgment to this flattering effusion; his long fingers rubbed one another softly. He looked at the table, the window, anywhere save at the proprietor of the establishment, then said: "I saw by an advertisement in the morning papers that you had severed your connection with the force and had opened this--a private consultation bureau."

"Quite so!" The other looked momentarily embarrassed. "A little friction--account of some case--unreliable witness that got tangled up--They undertook to criticize me, after all my faithful service--" He broke off. "Besides, the time comes when a man realizes he can do better for himself by himself. I am now devoting myself to a small, but strictly high-class," with an accent, "clientele."

Lord Ronsdale considered; when he spoke, his voice was low, but it did not caress the ear. "You know John Steele, of course?"

The ferret eyes snapped. "That I do, your Lordship. What of him?" quickly.

The caller made no reply but tapped the floor lightly with his cane,

and--"What of him?" repeated Mr. Gillett.

Lord Ronsdale's glance turned; it had a strange brightness. His next question was irrelevant. "Ever think much about the _Lord Nelson,_ Gillett?"

"She isn't a boat one's apt to forget, after what happened, your Lordship," was the answer. "And if I do say it, her passengers were of the kind to leave pleasant recollections," the police agent diplomatically added.

"Her passengers?" The caller's thin lips compressed; a spark seemed to leap from his gaze, but not before he had dropped it. "Among them, if memory serves me, were a number of convicts?"

"A job lot of precious jailbirds that I was acting as escort of, your Lordship!"

"But who never reached Australia!" quickly.

"Drowned!--every mother's son of them!" observed Mr. Gillett, with a possible trace of complacency. "Not that I fancy the country they were going to mourned much about that. I understand a strong sentiment's growing out there against that sort of immigration."

The visitor's white hand held closer the head of his cane; the stick

bent to his weight. "_Were_ they all drowned, by the way?" he observed as if seeking casual information on some subject that had partly passed from his mind.

"No doubt of it. They were not released until the second boat got off, and then there was no time to get overboard the life rafts!"

"True." Lord Ronsdale gazed absently out of the window, through a film, as it were, at a venerable figure below; one of the species *_helluo librorum_* standing before a book-stall opposite. "Recall the day on that memorable voyage you were telling us about them--who they were, and so on?"

"Very well," replied Mr. Gillett, good-humoredly. If his caller cared to discuss generalities rather than come at once to the business at hand, whatever had brought him there, that was none of his concern. These titled gentry had a leisurely method, peculiar to themselves, of broaching a subject; but if they paid him well for his time he could afford to appear an amiable and interested listener. In this case, the thought also insinuated itself, that his visitor had something of the manner of a man who had been up late the night before; the glint of his eye was that of your fashionable gamester; Mr. Gillett smiled sympathetically.

"One, if I recall rightly," went on Lord Ronsdale, "was known as--let me see"--the elastic stick described a sharper curve--"the 'Frisco Pet?"

Remember?" He bent slightly nearer.

"That I do. Not likely to forget him. Unmanageable; one of the worst! Was transported for life, with death as a penalty for returning." A slight sound came from the nobleman's throat. "A needless precaution," laughed the speaker, "for he's gone to his reward. And so your lordship remembers--"

"I remember when he used to step into the ring," said Lord Ronsdale, his voice rising somewhat. "Truth is, sight of you brought back old recollections. Things I haven't thought of for a long time, don't you see!"

"Quite so! Delighted, I am sure. I didn't know so much about him then; that came after; except that the gentlemen found him a figure worth looking at when he got up at the post--"

"Yes; he was worth looking at." Lord Ronsdale's eyes half closed. "A heavy-fisted, shapely brute; with muscles like steel. But ignorant--" He lingered on the word; then his glance suddenly lifted--"Had something on his arm; recall noticing it while the bout was on!"

Mr. Gillett with a knowing expression rose, took a volume from a bookcase and opened it.

"The 'something' you speak of, my Lord," he observed proudly, "should be

here; I will show it that you may appreciate my system; the method I have of gathering and tabulating data. You will find an encyclopedia of information in that bookcase. All that Scotland Yard has, and perhaps a little besides."

"Really?" The nobleman's eyes fastened themselves on the book.

"To illustrate: Here's his case." Gillett's fingers moved lightly over the page. "'Testimony of Dandy Joe, down-stairs at the time with landlady who kept the house where the crime was committed. Heard 'Frisco Pet, who had been drinking, come in; go up-stairs, as they supposed, to his own room; shortly after, loud voices; pistol shot. Landlady and Joe found woman, Amy Gerard, dead in shabby little sitting-room. Pet, the worse for liquor, in a dazed condition at a table, head in his hands. Testimony of Joe corroborated by landlady; she swore no one had been in house except parties here mentioned, all lodgers.

"'Private mem.--House in bad neighborhood, near the Adelphi catacombs. Son of landlady, red-headed giant, also one-time prize-fighter, used to live here; the Pet's last fight in the ring was with him. Later Tom took to the road; was wanted by the police at the time of the crime for some brutal highway work--' But," breaking off, "I am wearying your lordship. Here is what I was especially looking for, the markings on the arm of the 'Frisco Pet. Perhaps, however, your lordship doesn't care to listen further--"

"Go on!" The words broke sharply from the visitor's lips; then he gave a metallic laugh. "I am interested in this wonderful system of yours."

Mr. Gillett read slowly: "'On the right arm of the 'Frisco Pet, just below the elbow, appears the figure of a man, in sparring attitude, done in sailor's tattooing; about the waist a flag, the stars and stripes in their accustomed colors; crudely drawn but not to be mistaken by noting following defects and details--' which," closing the book, "I won't read."

His lordship's head had turned; at first he did not speak. "A good system," he remarked after an interval. "And a very good description, and yet--" His voice died away; for a moment he sat motionless. "But my purpose--the purpose of my visit--I--we have wandered quite from that. Let us, I beg of you, talk business."

Mr. Gillett started as if to venture a mild expostulation, but thought better of the impulse. "What is your lordship's business with me?" he observed in his most professional tone.

"I believe"--the visitor moistened his lips--"I believe I mentioned--John Steele when I came in?"

"Your lordship did."

"It--concerns him."

"I am all attention, your Lordship." Mr. Gillett's manner was keen, energetic; if he felt surprise he suppressed it. "Good! your lordship's business concerns John Steele."

"For reasons that need not be mentioned, I want to find out all I can about him. That, I believe, is the sort of work you undertake. The terms for your services can be arranged later. It is unnecessary to say you will be well paid. I assume you can command competent and trustworthy help, that you have agents, perhaps, in other countries?"

Mr. Gillett nodded. "If your lordship would give me some idea of the scope of the inquiry--"

The long fingers opened, then closed tightly.

"In the first place, you are to ascertain where John Steele was before he came to England; how he got there; what he did. Naturally, if he has lived in a far-away port you would seek to know the ship that brought him there; the names of the captain and the crew."

"Your lordship thinks, then, our investigation may lead us to distant lands?"

"Who can tell?" The nobleman's voice was sharp, querulous. "That is what you are to find out."

"It shall be done, your Lordship," replied the other quickly. "I shall embark in the matter with great zest, and, I may add, interest."

"Interest?" The nobleman looked at him. "Oh, yes!"

"If I might be so bold, may I ask, does your lordship expect to find anything that would--ahem!--cast any reflection on the high standing John Steele is building up for himself in the community, or---"

A shadow seemed to darken the mask-like features of the visitor; his gaze at once glittering, vaguely questioning, was fastened on the wall; then slowly, without answering, he got up. "Surmises are not to enter into this matter," he said shortly. "It is facts, I want--facts!"

"And your lordship shall have them. The case appears simple; not hard to get at the bottom of!" An odd expression shone from the visitor's eyes.

"Which reminds me he has left town," added Gillett.

"Left town!" Lord Ronsdale wheeled abruptly. "You mean--"

"For a little trip to the continent I should imagine; heard of it because he got some unimportant court matter put over."

"Gone away!" The nobleman, his back to the other, lifted a hand to his

brow. "When?"

"Last night."

"It was only yesterday morning I was riding with him!"

"And he didn't mention the matter?"

The visitor did not answer. "Why should he have gone away?" he murmured, half aloud. "Was it because--" He walked to the door; at the threshold stopped and looked back. "You might begin your inquiry by learning all you can about this little trip," he suggested. "And by the by, whatever you may find out, if anything, you will regard as belonging to me exclusively; to be mentioned, under no circumstances, without my permission, to any one whosoever--"

"Your lordship!" Mr. Gillett's hurt voice implied the little need for such admonition. "In my profession absolute integrity toward one's client demands that secrecy should be the first con--"

"It is understood then. Let me hear from you from time to time," and the nobleman went out.

Mr. Gillett looked after him, then, reflectively, at the closed door. Outside the sound of shuffling feet alone broke the stillness; before the book-stand the bibliomaniac buried his face deeper in the musty

pages of an old tragedy.

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