

CHAPTER VII

INCIDENTS

Several months went by and John Steele saw nothing further, although he heard often, of Miss Jocelyn Wray. His business to the continent, whatever its nature, had seemed sufficiently important to authorize from him to her, in due process of time, a short perfunctory message regretting his inability to present himself at the appointed hour at Strathorn House. Whether the young girl found in the letter a vagueness warranting a suspicion that John Steele preferred the heavy duties of the city to the light frivolities of the country matters not; suffice it the weeks passed and no further invitations, in the ponderous script of the wife of Sir Charles, arrived to tempt him from his accustomed ways. But the days of this long interim had not passed altogether uneventfully; a few incidents, apart from the routine of his work, obtruded themselves upon his attention.

A number of supposedly prospective clients had called to ask for him at his office during his sojourn on the other side of the channel. That was to have been expected; but one or two of these, by dint of flattery, or possibly silver-lined persuasion, had succeeded in gaining access to his chambers.

"I should like to have a look into John Steele's library; I've heard

it's worth while," one had observed to the butler at the door. "Only a bit of a peep around!" His manner of putting his desire, supplemented by a half-crown, left the butler no alternative save to comply with the request, until the "peep around" began to develop into more than cursory examination, when his sense of propriety became outraged and the visitor's welcome was cut short.

"He was that curious, a regular Paul Pry!" explained the servant to John Steele, in narrating the incident on the latter's return to London.

"Seemed specially taken by the reports of the old trials you have on the shelves, sir. 'What an interesting collection of *_causes célèbres!*' he kept remarking. 'I suppose your master makes much of them?' He would have been handling of them, too, and when I showed him the door--trusting I did right, sir, even if he should happen to be a client!--he asked more questions before going."

"What questions?" quietly.

"Personal-like. But I put a stop to that."

For a few moments John Steele said nothing; his face, on his reappearance in London, had looked slightly paler, more set and determined, not unlike that of a man, who, strongly assailed, has made up his mind to do battle to the end. With whom? How many? He might put out his hand, clench it; the thin air made no answer. He regarded the shadows now; they seemed to wave around him, intangible, obscure. A dark

day in town, the streets were oppressive; the people below passed like poorly done replicas of themselves; the rattle of the wheels resembled a sullen, disgruntled mumble.

"You will admit no one to my chambers during my absence in the future," said Steele at length, to the man, sternly. "No one, you understand, under any pretext whatever; even," a flicker of grim humor in the deep eyes, "if he should say he was a client of mine!"

The butler returned a subdued answer, and John Steele, after a moment's thought, stepped to a large safe in the corner, and applying a somewhat elaborate combination, swung open the door. Taking from a compartment a bundle of papers carefully rolled, he unfastened the tape, spread them on a table and examined them, one after the other. They made a voluminous heap; here and there on the white pages in bold regular script appeared the name of a woman; her life lay before him, the various stages of an odd and erratic career. At a cabaret at Montmartre; at a casino in the Paris Bohemian quarter; in London--at a variety hall of amusement. And afterward!--wastrel, nomad! Throughout the writing, in many of the documents, another name, too, a titled name, a man's, often came and went, flitted elusively from leaf to leaf.

The reader looked at this name, wrote a page or two, and inserted them. But his task seemed to afford him little satisfaction; his face wore an expression not remote from discouragement; none knew better than he the actual value, for his purpose, of the material before him. The chaff,

froth, bubble of the case!--almost contemptuously he regarded it. Had he sought the unattainable? Certainly he had left no stone unturned, no stone, and yet the head and front of what he sought had ever escaped him--should he ever grasp it?--with these new secret activities menacing him?--harassing the future?

He drew himself up suddenly, as if to shake off momentary doubt or depression. Replacing his documents in the safe and locking it, he walked into a room adjoining; in a bare, square place on the wall hung foils and broadswords, and the only furnishings were the conventional appointments of a home gymnasium.

Here, having doffed his street clothes and assumed the scant costume of the athlete, for an hour or more he exercised vigorously, every muscle responding to its task with an untiring ease that told of a perfect system of training. As he stood in the glow, breathing deep and full, his figure, with its perfect lines of strength and litheness, the superb but not too pronounced swell of limb and shoulder, would have been the delight of the professional expounder of dumb-bells, bars and clubs, as the most proper medium of "fitness" and condition. Whether he exercised for the sake of exercising, or because bodily movement served to stimulate his mind in the consideration of problems of moment, John Steele certainly had never been in finer physical fettle than at this particular period of his varied and eventful career. Which proved of service to him and his well-being, for one night, not long thereafter, he was called upon to defend himself from a number of footpads who set

upon him.

The episode occurred in his own street near a corner, where the shadows were black at an hour when the narrow way seemed silent and deserted. For a block or more footfalls had sounded behind him, now quickening, then becoming more deliberate, in unison with his own steps, as from time to time he purposely altered his pace. Once he had stopped; whereupon they too had paused. A moment he stood looking up at St. Paul's, immense, ominous, casting at that late hour a dim patch of shadow over scores of pigmy buildings and paltry byways; when he went on, patter!--patter!--the trailing of feet, inevitable as fate, followed through the darkness. But they came no nearer until, abruptly wheeling, he entered the short street where his chambers were located; at the same time two men, apparently sauntering from the river in that side thoroughfare, approached him somewhat rapidly, separating slightly as they did so.

John Steele seemed oblivious. He moved into a doorway and drawing from his pocket a cigar, unconcernedly lighted a match. The fellows looked at him, at the tiny flame; it flickered and went out. They hesitated; he felt in his pocket, giving them time to move by. They did not do so; in a moment the others from the main highway would join them. As if disappointed in not finding what he sought, Steele, looking around, appeared to see for the first time the evil-looking miscreants who had come from the direction of the Thames, and striding toward them asked bruskiy for a light. One of the fellows thus unceremoniously addressed

had actually begun to feel in his shabby garments for the article required when his companion uttered a short derisory oath.

It served as a sudden stimulus to him against whom it was directed; the old precept that he who strikes first strikes best, John Steele seemed fully to appreciate. His heavy stick flashed in the air, rang hard; the way before him cleared, he did not linger. But close behind now the others came fast; his door, however, was near. Now he reached it, fitted the heavy key. Had it turned as usual, the episode would have been brought to a speedy conclusion, but, as it was, the key stuck. The foremost of those who had been trailing fell upon Steele but soon drew back; one of them, unable to repress a groan, held his hand to a broken wrist, while from his helpless fingers a knife dropped to the ground.

A hoarse voice in thieves' jargon, unintelligible to the layman, cursed them for cowards; John Steele on a sudden laughed loudly, exultantly; whereupon he who had thus spoken from the background stared. A ponderous, hulking fellow, about six feet three, with a shock of red hair and a thick hanging lip,--obviously this one of his assailants possessed immense, unusual strength. In appearance he was the reverse of pleasing; his bloodshot eyes seemed to shine like coals from the darkness, the huge body to quiver with rage or with lust for the conflict.

"Let me at him, ye--!" he cried in foul and flash tongue, when John Steele suddenly called him by name, said something in that selfsame

dialect of pickpurses and their ilk.

Whatever the words or their portent, the effect was startling. Steele's bulky assailant paused, remained stock-still, his purpose arrested, all his anger gone out of him.

"How the--? Who--?" the man began.

"Call off your fellows!" John Steele's voice seemed to thrill; a fierce elation shone from his glance. "I want to talk with you. It'll be more worth your while than any priggish or bagging you've ever yet done."

"Well, I'm blowed!" The man's tone was puzzled; surprise, suspicion gleamed from the bloodshot eyes. "How should a swell gent like you know--? And you want to talk with me? Here's a gamey cove!"

"I tell you I must talk with you! And it will be better for you, my man--" a sharp metallic click told that the speaker had turned the key in the lock behind him--"to step in here with me. You needn't be afraid I'm going to nab you; I've got a lay better than hooking you for the dock. As for the others, they can go, for all of me."

"Oh, they can!" The big man's face expressed varying feelings--vague wonder; at the same time he began to edge cautiously away. "That would be a nice plant, wouldn't it? Let's out of this, blokes!" suddenly, "this cove knows too much, and--"

"Wait!" Steele stepped slightly toward him. "I want you, Tom Rogers, and I'm going to have you; it'll be quids in your pocket and not Newgate."

"Slope for it, mates!" The big man's voice rang out; around the corner in the direction of the Thames the burly figure of a policeman appeared in the dim light. "That's his little game!" and turned.

But John Steele sprang savagely forward. "You fool! You'll not get away so easily!" he exclaimed, when one of the others put out a foot. It caught the pursuing man fairly and tripped him. John Steele went down hard; his head struck the stone curb violently.

For some moments he lay still; when at length he did move, to lift himself on his elbow, as through a mist he made out the broad and solicitous face of a policeman bending over him.

"That was a nasty fall you got, sir."

"Fall?" John Steele arose, stood swaying. "That man!--must not escape--Do you hear? must not!" As he spoke he made as if to rush forward; the other laid steadying fingers on his arm.

"Hold hard a bit, sir," he said. "Not quite yourself; besides, they're well out of sight now. No use running after."

Steele moved, grasped the railing leading up the front step; his brow throbbed; a thousand darting pains shot through his brain. But for the moment these physical pangs were as nothing; disappointment, self-reproach moved him. To have allowed himself to go down like that; to have been caught by such a simple trick! Clumsy clod!--and at a moment when--He laughed fiercely; from his head the blood flowed; he did not feel that hurt now.

The officer regarded the strong, noble figure moving just a little to and fro, the lips set ironically, the dark eyes that gleamed in the night as with sardonic derision.

"Pardon me, sir," he said in a brisker tone, "but hadn't we better go in? This, I take it, is your house; you can look after yourself somewhat, and afterward describe your assailants. Then we'll start out to find and arrest them, if possible!"

"Arrest?" John Steele looked at the officer; his gaze slowly regained its accustomed steadiness. "I am afraid I can't help you; the darkness, the suddenness of the attack--"

"But surely you must have noticed something, sir; whether they were large, or small; what sort of clothes they wore--" The other shook his head; the man appeared disappointed. "Well, I'll make a report of the attack, but--"

Steele loosened his hold on the railing; he appeared now to have recovered his strength. "That's just what I don't want you to do. My name is John Steele, you know of me?" And, as the other returned a respectful affirmative, "It is my desire to escape any notoriety in this little matter, you understand? As one whose profession brings him in connection with these people, the episode seems rather anomalous as well as humiliating. It might even," his accents had a covert mocking sound, "furnish a paragraph for one of the comic weeklies. So you see--" Something passed from his hand to the policeman's.

"I didn't think of that, sir; but I suppose there is something in your way of looking at it, and as there isn't much chance of getting them, anyhow, without any clue, or description--" his voice died away.

Walking quickly up the steps John Steele opened the door, murmured a perfunctory "Good night" and let himself in. But as he mounted to his chambers, some of the moment's exultation that had seized him at sight of the man, revived.

"He has come back--he is here--in London. I surely can lay hands on him--I must! I will!"

* * * * *