

## CHAPTER VIII

### A CHANGE OF FRONT

HE found the task no easy one, however, although he went at it with his characteristic vigor and energy. Few men knew the seamy side of London better than John Steele: its darksome streets and foul alleys, its hovels and various habitations. And this knowledge he utilized to the best advantage, always to find that his efforts came to naught. The snares he set before possible hiding-places proved abortive; the artifices he employed to uncover the quarry in maze or labyrinth were fruitless. The man had appeared like a vision from the past, and vanished. Whither? Out of the country, once more? Over the seas? Had he taken quick alarm at Steele's words, and effected a hasty retreat from the scenes of his graceless and nefarious career?

Reluctantly John Steele found himself forced to entertain the possibility of this being so; otherwise the facilities at his command were such that he should most likely, ere this, have been able to attain his end, find what he sought. Soberly attired, he attracted no very marked attention in the slums,--breeding spots of the criminal classes; the denizens knew John Steele; he had been there oft before.

He had, on occasion, assisted some of them with stern good advice or

more substantial services. He was acquainted with these men and women; had, perhaps, a larger charity for them than most people find it expedient to cherish. His glance had always seemed to read them through and through, with uncompromising realization of their infirmities, weaknesses of the flesh and inherited moral imperfections. His very fearlessness had ever commended him to that lower world; it did now, enabling him the better to cast about in divers directions.

To hear nothing, to learn nothing, at least, very little! One man had seen the object of Steele's solicitude and to this person, a weazened little "undesirable," the red-headed giant had confided that London was pretty hot and he thought of decamping from it.

"'Arter all this time that's gone by,' he says to me, bitter-like, 'to think a man can't come back to 'is native 'ome without being spied on for what ought long ago to be dead and forgot!' But you're not trying to lay hands on 'im, to put 'im in the pen, gov'ner?"

"I?" A singular glint shot from Steele's gaze. "No, no, my man, I'm not seeking him for that. But he didn't say where he expected to go?"

"Not he."

"Nor what had brought him to London?"

"I expect it was 'omesickness, sir. 'E's been a bad lot, but 'e has a

heart, arter all. It was to see 'is mother 'e came back; the old woman drew 'im 'ere. You see 'e had written 'er from foreign parts, but could never 'ear; 'cause she had moved; used to keep a place where a woman was found--"

"Dead?"

"Murdered!" said the man; John Steele was silent. "And she, 'is mother 'ad gone, 'aving saved a bit, out into a peaceable-like little 'amlet, where there weren't no bobbies, only instead, bits of flower gardens and bright bloomin' daffy-down-dillies. But, blime me, when Tom come and found out where she 'ad changed to, if she 'adn't gone and shuffled off, and all 'e 'ad for 'is pains was the sight of a mound in the churchyard."

"Yes; she's buried," said John Steele thoughtfully, "and all she might have told about the woman who was--murdered, is buried with her."

"But she did tell, sir; at the time," quickly, "of the trial."

"True." The visitor's tone changed. "If you can find Tom, give him this note; you'll be well paid--"

"I ain't askin' for that; you got me off easy once and gave me a lift, arter I was let out--"

"Well, well!" Steele made a brusque gesture. "We all need a helping hand sometimes," he said turning away.

And that was as near as he had come to attainment of his desires.

Summer passed; sometimes, the better to think, to plan, to keep himself girded by constant exercise, he repaired to the park, now neglected by fashion and given over to that nebulous quantity of diverse qualities called the people. Where fine gentlemen and beaux had idled, middle-class nurse-maids now trundled their charges or paused to converse with the stately guardians of the place. Almost deserted were roads and row; landau, victoria and brougham, with their varied coats-of-arms, no longer rolled pompously past; only the occasional democratic cab, of nimble possibilities, speeding by with a fare lent pretext of life to the scene. True, the nomad appeared in ever increasing numbers, holding his right to the sword for a couch as an inalienable privilege; John Steele encountered him on every hand. Once, beneath a great tree, where Jocelyn Wray and he had stopped their horses to talk for a moment, the bleared, bloated face of what had been a man looked up at him. The sight for an instant seemed to startle the beholder; a wave of anger at that face, set in a place where imagination had an instant before played with a picture altogether different, passed over him; then quickly went.

As he strode forward at a swinging pace, his thoughts swept swiftly again into another channel, one they had been flowing in when he had

first entered the park that day. Above him the leaves rustled ceaselessly; their restless movements seemed in keeping with his mood wherein impatience mingled with other and fiercer emotions. Fate had been against him, the inevitable "what must be," which, in the end, crushes alike Faintheart or Strongheart. Of what avail to square his shoulders? the danger pressed close; he felt it, by that intuition men sometimes have. What if he left, left the field, this England? Who could accuse him of cowardice if in that black moment he yielded to the hateful course and went, like the guilty, pitiable skulkers?

"How do you do, Steele? Just the man I wanted to see!"

Near the main exit, toward which John Steele had unconsciously stepped, the sound of a familiar voice and the appearance of a well-known stocky form broke in, with startling abruptness, on the dark train of thought.

"Deep in some point of law?" went on Sir Charles. "'Pon honor, believe you would have cut me. However, don't apologize; you're forgiven!"

"Most amiable of you to say so, Sir Charles!" perfunctorily.

"Not at all! Especially as our meeting is quite apropos. Obligated to run up to town on a little matter of business; but, thank goodness, it's done. Never saw London more deserted. Dined at the club, nobody there. Supped at the hotel, dining-room empty. Strolled up Piccadilly, not a soul to be seen. That is," he added, "no one whom one has seen before,

which is the same thing. But how did you enjoy your trip to the continent?"

"It was not exactly a trip for pleasure," returned the other with a slight accent of constraint.

"Ah, yes; so I understood. But fancy going to the continent on business! One usually goes for--which reminds me, how would you like to go back into the country with me?"

"I? It is impossible at the moment for--"

But Sir Charles seemed not to listen. "Deuced dull journey for a man to take alone; good deal of it by coach. You'll find a few salmon to kill--trout and all that. Think of the joy of whipping a stream, after having been mewed up all these months in the musty metropolis! Besides, I made a wager with Jocelyn you wouldn't refuse a second opportunity to bask in Arcadia." He laughed. "'I really couldn't presume to ask him again,' is the way she expressed it, 'but if you can draw a sufficiently eloquent picture of the rural attractions of Strathorn to woo him from his beloved dusty byways, you have my permission to try.'"

"Did she say that?" John Steele spoke quickly. Then, "I am sorry, it is impossible, but," in a low tone, "how is Miss Wray?"

"Never better. Enjoying every moment. Jolly party and all that. Lord

Ronsdale and--" Here Sir Charles enumerated a number of people.

"Lord Ronsdale is there?"

"Yes; couldn't keep him away from Strathorn House now," he laughed. "As a matter of fact he has asked my permission to--there!" Sir Charles stopped, then laughed again with a little embarrassment. "I've nearly let the cat out of the bag."

John Steele spoke no word; his face was set, immovable; his lashes shaded his eyes. A flood of traffic at a corner held them; he appeared attentive only for it. The wheels pounded and rattled; the whips snapped and cracked.

"You mean he has proposed for her hand and she--" Steele seemed to speak with difficulty--"has consented?"

The noise almost drowned the question but Sir Charles heard.

"Well, not exactly. She appears complaisant, as it were," he answered.

"But really, I shouldn't have mentioned the matter at all; quite premature, you understand. Let's say no more about it. And--what was it you said about going back with me?"

"Yes," said John Steele with a sudden strength and energy that Sir Charles might attribute to the desire to make himself understood above

the din of the street. "I'll go back with you at"--the latter words, lower spoken, the other did not catch--"no matter what cost!"

Sir Charles dodged a vehicle; he did not observe the light, the fire, the sudden play of fierce, dark passion on his companion's face.

"Good!" he said. "And when you get tired of 'books in the running brooks'--"

Steele's hand closed on his arm. "When do you leave?" he asked abruptly.

"To-day--to-morrow--Suit your convenience."

"Let it be to-day, then! To-day!"

Sir Charles looked at him quickly; John Steele's face recovered its composure.

"I believe I have become weary of what your niece calls the 'dusty byways,'" he explained with a forced laugh.

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