

## CHAPTER IX

### AWAY FROM THE TOWN

When John Steele, contrary to custom, set aside, in deciding to leave London that day, all logical methods of reasoning and acted on what was nothing more than an irresistible impulse, he did not attempt to belittle to himself the possible consequences that might accrue from his action. He was not following the course intelligence had directed; he was not embarking on a journey his best interests would have prompted; on the contrary, he knew himself mad, foolish. But not for one moment did he regret his decision; stubbornly, obstinately he set his back toward the town; with an enigmatical gleam in his dark eyes he looked away from the blur Sir Charles and he had left behind them.

Green pastures, bright prospects! Whence were they leading him? His gaze was now somber, then bright; though more often shadows passed over his face, like clouds in the sky.

Outwardly his manner had become unconcerned, collected; he listened to Sir Charles' jokes, offered casual comments of his own. He even performed his wonted part in relieving the tedium of a long journey with voluntary contributions to conversations on divers topics in which he displayed wide and far-reaching knowledge. He answered the many questions of his companion on the different habits of criminals; how

they lived; the possibilities for reforming the worst of the lot; the various methods toward this end advocated by the idealist. These and other subjects he touched on with poignant, illuminating comment.

Sir Charles regarded him once or twice in surprise. "You have seen a deal in your day," he observed, "of the under world, I mean!" John Steele returned an evasive answer. The nobleman showed a tendency to doze in his seat, despite the jolts and jars of the way, and, thereafter, until they arrived at Strathorn the two fellow travelers rode on in silence.

This little hamlet lay in a sleepy-looking dell; as the driver swung down a hill he whipped up his horses and literally charged upon the town; swept through the main thoroughfare and drew up with a flourish before the principal tavern. Sir Charles started, stretched his legs; John Steele got down.

"Conveyance of any kind here, waiting to take us to Strathorn House?" called out the former as he stiffly descended the ladder at the side of the coach.

The landlord of the Golden Lion, who had emerged from his door, returned an affirmative reply and at the same time ushered the travelers into a tiny private sitting-room. As they crossed the hall, turning to the right to enter this apartment, some one in the room opposite, a more public place, who had been furtively peering through the half-opened

door to observe the new-comers, at sight of John Steele drew quickly back. Not, however, before that gentleman had caught a glimpse of him. A strange face, indeed,--but the fellow's manner--his expression--the act itself somehow struck the observer,--unduly, no doubt, and yet--A moment later this door closed, and from beyond came only a murmur of men's voices over pots.

"Trap will be in front directly, Sir Charles," said the landlord lingering. "Meanwhile if there is anything--"

"Nothing, thank you! Only a short distance to Strathorn House," he explained to John Steele, "and I fancy we'll do better by waiting for what we may require there. But what is the latest news at Strathorn? Anything happened? Business quiet?"

"It 'asn't been so brisk, and it 'asn't been so dull, your Lordship, what with now and then a gentleman from London!"

"From London? Isn't that rather unusual?"

"Somewhat. But as for your lordship's first question, I don't know of any news, except Squire Thompson told me to inform your lordship he would have the three hunters he was telling your lordship about, down at his stud farm this afternoon, and if your lordship cared to have a look at them--"

"If?" cried Sir Charles. "There isn't any 'if.' Three finer animals man never threw leg over, judging from report," he explained to John Steele. "Stud farm's about a mile in the opposite direction from Strathorn House. Mind a little jog to the farm first?"

"Not at all!" John Steele had been looking thoughtfully toward the door that had closed upon the man whose quick regard he had detected. "Only, if you will allow me to make a counter proposal,--Strathorn House, you say, is near; I am in the mood for exercise, after sitting so long, and should like to walk there."

"By all means," returned the other, "since it's your preference. Pretty apt to overtake you," he went on, after giving his guest a few directions. "Especially if you linger over any points of interest!"

The trap drew up; the two men separated. Sir Charles rattled briskly down one way, Steele turned to go the other. But before setting out, he asked a casual question or two of the landlord, relating to the occasional "gentleman from London"; the host, however, appeared to know little of any cosmopolitan visitors who had happened to drift that way, and John Steele, eliciting no information in this regard, finally started on his walk. Whatever his thoughts, many quaint and characteristic bits of the town failed to divert them; he looked neither to the right, at a James I. sun-dial; nor to the left, where a small sign proclaimed that an event of historical importance had made noteworthy that particular spot. Over the cobblestones, smoothed by the

feet of many generations, he walked with eyes bent straight before him until he reached an open space on the other side of the village, where he paused. On either side hedges partly screened undulating meadows, the broad sweeps of emerald green interspersed here and there with small groups of trees in whose shadows cattle grazed. A stream with lively murmur meandered downward; in a bush, at his approach, a bird began to sing, and involuntarily the man stopped; but only for a moment. Soon rose before him the top of a modest steeple; then a church, within the sanctuary of whose yard old stones mingled with new. He stepped in; "straight on across the churchyard!" had been Sir Charles' direction. John Steele moved quickly down the narrow path; his eye had but time to linger a moment on the monuments, ancient and crumbling, and on headstones more recently fashioned, when above, another picture caught and held his attention.

Strathorn House! A noble dwelling, massive, gray! And yet one that lifted itself with charming lightness from its solid, baronial-like foundation! It adorned the spot, merged into the landscape. Behind, the forest, a dark line, penciled itself against the blue horizon; before the ancient stone pile lay a park. Noble trees guarded the walks, threw over them great gnarled limbs or delicately-trailing branches. Between, the interspaces glowed bright with flowers; amid all, a little lake shone like a silver shield bearing at its center a marble pavilion.

Long the man looked; through a faint veil of mist, turret and tower quivered; strong lines of masonry vibrated. Wavering as in the spell of

an optical illusion, the structure might have seemed but a figment of imagination, or one of those fanciful castles sung by the Elizabethan brotherhood of poets. Did the image occur to John Steele, did he feel for the time, despite other disquieting, extraneous thoughts, the subtle enchantment of the scene? The minutes passed; he did not move.

"You find it to your liking?"

A voice, fresh, gay, interrupted; with a great start, he turned.

Jocelyn Wray, for it was she, laughed; so absorbed had he been, he had not heard her light footstep on the grass behind.

"You find it to your liking?" she repeated, tilting quizzically her fair head.

His face changing, "Entirely!" he managed to say. And then, "I--did not know you were near."

"No? But I could see that. Confess," with accent a little derisory, "I startled you." As she spoke she leaned slightly back against the low stone wall of the churchyard; the shifting light through the leaves played over her; her eyes seemed to dance in consonance with that movement.

"Perhaps," he confessed.

The girl laughed again; one would have sworn there was; oy in her voice.

"You must have been much absorbed," she continued, "in the view!"

"It is very fine." He saw now more clearly the picture she made: the details of her dress, the slender figure, closely sheathed in a garb of blue lighter in shade than her eyes.

She put out her hand. "I am forgetting--you came down with my uncle, I suppose?" in a matter-of-fact tone. "A pleasure we hardly expected! Let me see. I haven't seen you since--ah, when was it?"

He told her. "Yes; I remember now. Wasn't that the day the Scotch bagpipes went by? You had business that called you away. Something very important, was it not? You were successful?"

"Quite."

"How oddly you say that!" She looked at him curiously. "But shall we walk on toward the house? I went down into the town thinking to meet my uncle," she explained, "but as I had a few errands, on account of a children's fête we are planning, reached the tavern after he had gone."

"He went to a farm not far distant."

As he spoke, she stepped into the path leading from the churchyard; it

was narrow and she walked before him.

"Yes; so the landlord said," she remarked without looking around. And then, irrelevantly, "The others went hunting. Are you a Nimrod, Mr. Steele?"

"Not a mighty one."

"Oh, you wouldn't have to be that--for rabbits!"

She shot a glance over her shoulder; her eyes were glad; but to the man they were bright merely with the joy of youth that drops glances like sunshine for all alike. Perhaps he would have found pleasure in thinking she appeared gayer for sight of him; but if the thought came, bitterly, peremptorily it was dismissed. Sir Charles' words rang through his mind; Lord Ronsdale!--John Steele's hat shaded his eyes; he stopped to pick a small flower from the hedge. When he looked up he saw her face no longer; only the golden hair seemed to flash in his eyes, the beautiful, bright meshes, and the light, slender figure, so graceful, so buoyant, so near he could almost touch it, but moving away, moving from him--

It may be, amid other thoughts, at that moment, he asked himself why he had come. What had driven him to this folly? Why was he stepping on blindly, oblivious of definite plan or policy, like a man walking in the dark? No, not in the dark; all was too bright. He could see but too plainly--her!--felt impelled to draw nearer--



But at that instant, she stepped quickly from the byway into the main road. "There it is," she said, pointing with a small white finger.

He held himself abruptly back. "What?" fell from his lips.

"The way in, of course," said the girl.

He moved now at her side; at the entrance, broad, imposing, she paused; a thousand perfumes seemed wafted from the garden; the rustling of myriad wings fell on the senses, like faint cadences of music. The girl made a courtesy; her red lips curved. "Welcome to Strathorn House, Mr. John Steele!" she said gaily.

Within the stately house, near a recessed window at the front, a man stood at that moment, reading a letter handed to him but a short time before. This document, though brief, was absorbing:

"Shall be down to see you soon. Am sending this by private messenger who may be trusted. Case coming on; links nearly all complete. Involve a new and bewildering possibility that I must impart to you personally. Have discovered the purpose of S.'s visit to the continent. It was--"

Lord Ronsdale perused the words more rapidly; paused, on his face an expression of eagerness, expectancy.

"So that was it," he said to himself slowly. "I might have known--"

Voices without caught his attention; he glanced quickly through the window. Jocelyn Wray and some one else had drawn near, were walking up the marble steps.

"John Steele!" He, Lord Ronsdale, crumpled the paper in his hand.

"Here!"

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