

## CHAPTER X

### A CONTEST

A few days passed; the usual round of pastimes inseparable from house parties served to while away the hours; other guests arrived, one or two went. Lord Ronsdale had greeted John Steele perfunctorily; the other's manner was likewise mechanically courteous. It could not very well have been otherwise; a number of people were near.

"Come down for a little sport?" the nobleman, his hands carelessly thrust into the pockets of his shooting trousers, had asked with a frosty smile.

"Perhaps--if there is any!" Steele allowed his glance for the fraction of a moment to linger on Lord Ronsdale's face.

"I'll answer for that." A slight pause ensued. "Decided rather suddenly to run down, didn't you?"

"Rather."

"Heard you were on the continent. From Sir Charles, don't you know. Pleasant time, I trust?" he drawled.

"Thank you!" John Steele did not answer directly. "Your solicitude," he laughed, "honors me--my Lord!"

And that had been all, all the words spoken, at least. To the others there had been nothing beneath the surface between them; for the time the two men constituted but two figures in a social gathering.

A rainy spell put a stop to outdoor diversions; for twenty-four hours now the party had been thrown upon their own resources, to devise such indoor amusement as occurred to them. Strathorn House, however, was large; it had its concert stage, a modern innovation; its armory hall and its ball-room. Pleasure seekers could and did find here ample facilities for entertaining themselves.

The second morning of the dark weather discovered two of the guests in the oak-paneled smoking-room of Strathorn House. One of them brushed the ash from his cigar meditatively and then stretched himself more comfortably in the great leather chair.

"No fox-hunt or fishing for any of us to-day," he remarked with a yawn.

The other, who had been gazing through a window at a prospect of dripping leaves and leaden sky, answered absently; then his attention

centered itself on the small figure of a boy coming up through the avenue of trees toward a side entrance.

"Believe I shall run over to Germany very soon, Steele," went on the first speaker.

"Indeed?" John Steele's brows drew together; the appearance of the lad was vaguely familiar. He remembered him now, the hostler boy at the Golden Lion.

"Yes; capital case coming on in the criminal courts there."

"And you don't want to miss it, Forsythe?"

"Not I! Weakness of mine, as you know. Most people look to novels or plays for entertainment; I find mine in the real drama, unfolded every day in the courts of justice."

Forsythe paused as if waiting for some comment from his companion, but none came. John Steele watched the boy; he waved a paper in his hand and called with easy familiarity to a housemaid in an open window above:

"Telegram from London, Miss. My master at the Golden Lion said there'd be a sixpence here for delivering it!"

"Well, I'll be down in a moment, Impudence."

The silence that followed was again broken by Captain Forsythe's voice:

"There are one or two features in this German affair that remind me of another case, some years back--one of our own--that interested me."

"Ah?" The listener's tone was only politely interrogatory.

"A case here in London--perhaps you have heard of it? The murder of a woman, once well-known before the footlights, by a one-time champion of the ring--the 'Frisco Pet, I think he was called."

The other moved slightly; his back had been toward Forsythe; he now half-turned. "Yea, I have heard of it," he said slowly, after a pause.

"But why should this case across the water interest you; because it is like--this other one you mention?"

"Because I once puzzled a bit over that one; investigated it somewhat on my own account, don't you know."

"In what way?" Steele's manner was no longer indifferent. "I'm rather familiar with some of the details myself," he added.

"Then it attracted you, too, as an investigator?" murmured the captain in a gratified tone. "For your book, perhaps?"

"Not exactly. But you haven't yet told me," in a keen, alert tone, "why you looked into it, 'on your own account.' It seems simple, obvious. Not of the kind that would attract one fond of nice criminal problems."

"That is just it," said Captain Forsythe, rising. "It was, perhaps, a little too simple! too obvious."

"How," demanded John Steele, "can a matter of this sort be too obvious? But," bending his eyes on the other, "you attended the trial of this fellow?" His tone vibrated a little oddly.

"The last part of it; wasn't in England when it first came on; and what I heard of it raised some questions and doubts in my mind. Not that I haven't the greatest respect for English justice! However, I didn't think much more about the case until a good many months later, when chance alone drew my attention more closely to it."

"Chance?"

"Was down in the country--jolly good trout district--when one night, while riding my favorite hobby, I happened to get on this almost-forgotten case of the 'Frisco Pet. Whereupon the landlord of the inn where I put up, informed me that one of the villagers in this identical little town had been landlady at the place where the affair occurred."

"The woman who testified no one had been to her place that night except--" John Steele spoke sharply.

"This fellow? Quite so." Captain Forsythe walked up and down. "Now, I'd always had a little theory. Could never get out of my mind one sentence this poor, ignorant fellow uttered at the trial. 'Seems as if I could remember a man's face, a stranger's, that looked into mine that night, your Lordship, but I ain't exactly cock-sure!' 'Ain't exactly cock-sure,'" repeated Captain Forsythe. "That's what caught me. Would a man, not telling the truth, be not quite 'cock-sure'; or would he testify to the face as a fact?" The other did not answer. "So the impression grew on me. Can you understand?"

"Hum! Very interesting, Forsythe; very ingenious; quite plausible!"

"Now you're laughing at me, Steele?"

"On the contrary, my dear fellow, go on."

"The landlady's testimony excluded the face, made it a figment of an imagination, disordered by drink!" Captain Forsythe waved his hand airily as he stepped back and forth.

"You went to see this woman?"

"Out of curiosity, and found she was, indeed, the same person. She seemed quite ill and feeble; I talked with her about an hour that day. Tried in every way to get her to remember she had possibly let in some other person that night, but--"

"But?"

"Bless you, she stuck to her story," laughed Captain Forsythe. "Couldn't move her an iota." One of the listener's arms fell to his side; his hand closed hard. "Quite bowled over my little theory, don't you know! Of course I told myself it didn't matter; the man convicted was gone, drowned. However,--" he broke off. A swish of silk was heard in the hallway; Forsythe stopped before the door.

"Ah, Miss Jocelyn! Haven't you a word in passing?"

She paused, looked in. Amid neutral shades the girl's slender figure shone most insistent; her gown, of a color between rose and pink, was warm-hued rather than bright, like the tints in an ancient embroidery. Around her neck gleamed a band of old cloth of silver but the warmth of tone did not cease at the argent edge, but leaped over to kiss the fair cheeks and soft, smiling lips. "Is this the way you men amuse yourselves?" she asked with a laugh. "Talking shop, no doubt?"

"Afraid we must plead guilty," said Captain Forsythe.

"And that is why," with a quick sidelong glance, drawing her skirts around her as she stood gracefully poised, "Mr. Steele appears so interested?"

"Interested?" The subject of her comment seemed to pull himself together with a start, regarded her. Was he, in the surprise of the moment, just in the least disconcerted by that bright presence, the beautiful clear eyes, straight, direct, though laughing? "Perhaps appearances are--" he found himself saying.

"Deceptive!" she completed lightly. "Well, if you weren't interested, Captain Forsythe was. He, I know, is quite incorrigible when you get him on his hobby."

"Oh, I say, Miss Jocelyn!"

She came forward; light and brightness entered the room with her.

"Quite!" The slender figure stood between the two men. "We expect any time he'll be looking around here next, to find something to investigate!"

"Here?" John Steele smiled. "What should he find here?"

"In sleepy Strathorn? True!"

A shrill whistle smote the air; Steele's glance turned to the window. The boy, having delivered his message, had left the door; with lips puckered to the loud and imperfect rendition of a popular street melody, he was making his way through the grounds. Involuntarily the man's look lingered on him. "A telegram from London? For whom?"



"I'm afraid it's hopeless, Captain Forsythe. Nothing ever happens at Strathorn." At the instant the girl's laughing voice seemed a little farther off. "If something only would--to help pass the time. Don't you agree with me, Mr. Steele?"

"I--" his glance returned to her quickly, "by all means!"

She looked at him; had she detected that momentary swerving from the serious consideration of her light words? Her own eyes turned to the window where they saw nothing but rain. She smiled vaguely, stood with her hands behind her; it was he now who regarded her, straight, slender, lithe. There was also something inflexible appearing in that young form, though so replete with grace and charm.

"To help pass the time!" John Steele laughed. "I--let us hope so."

There had been moments in the past when she had felt she could not quite understand him; they were moments like these when she seemed to become aware of something obscuring, falling before her--between them--that seemed to hold him aloof from her, from the others, to invest him almost with mystery. Mystery,--romantic idea! A slight laugh welled from the white throat. In these prosaic days!

"By the way, what particular case were you discussing when I happened by?"

"Nothing very new," answered the military man, "an old crime perpetrated by a fellow called the--"

"Beg pardon!" A footman stood in the doorway. "Sir Charles' compliments to the gentlemen, and will they be good enough to join him in armory hall?"

John Steele turned quickly to the servant, so quickly a close observer might have fancied he welcomed the interruption. "Captain Forsythe's and Mr. Steele's compliments to Sir Charles," he said at once, "and say it will give them pleasure to comply. That is," he added, bowing, "with your permission, Miss Wray."

She assented lightly; preceded by the girl, the two men left the room and mounted the broad stairway leading to the second story.

Armory hall was a large and lofty chamber with vaulted ceiling, that dated back almost to the early Norman period; its walls, decorated in geometrical designs, were covered with many varieties of antique weapons of warfare; halberd and mace gleamed and mingled with harquebus, poleax or lance. At one end of the hall were ranged in a row suits of armor which at first glance looked like real knights, drawn up in company front; then the empty helmets dawned on the beholder, transforming them into mere vacuous relics.

As Steele and his companion together with Jocelyn Wray entered, sounds of merriment and applause greeted the ear; two men in fencing array who had apparently just ended a match were the center of an animated company.

"A little contest with the foils! A fencing bout! Good!" exclaimed Forsythe.

Jocelyn Wray walked over to the group and Forsythe followed.

"Bravo, Ronsdale!" A number of people applauded.

"He has won. Now the reward! What is it to be?"

"Not so fast! Here are others."

"True!" Ronsdale looked around with his cold smile; his glance vaguely included John Steele and Captain Forsythe.

"Count me out!" laughed the latter. "Not in my line, don't you know, since I joined the retired list!"

"However, there's Steele," Sir Charles, pipe in hand, remarked.

Ronsdale had stepped to the girl's side; his eyes, regarding her in the least degree too steadily, shone with a warmer gleam. She appeared

either not to notice, or to mind; with look unreservedly bright, she smiled back at him; then her gaze met John Steele's.

"Do you use the foils, Mr. Steele?"

He moved forward; Lord Ronsdale stood near her, bending over with a slightly proprietary air.

"I--" Steele looked at them, at the girl's questioning eyes. "Only a little!"

"Then you must try conclusions with Lord Ronsdale!" called out Sir Charles. "As victor over the rest he must meet all comers."

A light swept John Steele's face; perhaps the situation appealed to a certain sense of humor; he hesitated.

"Nothing to be put out by, being beaten by Ronsdale," interposed an observer. "Had the reputation of being one of the best swordsmen on the continent; has even had, I believe," with a laugh, "one or two little affairs of honor."

"Honor!" Steele's glance swung around, played brightly on the nobleman.

The latter's face remained impassive; he lifted his foil carelessly and swung it; the hiss that followed might have been construed as a

challenge. John Steele tossed aside his coat.

"Can't promise this contest will be as interesting as the other little affairs you speak of!" he laughed. Through the fine, white linen of his shirt could be discerned the superb swell and molding of the muscles, as he now, with the gleaming toy in hand, stood before Ronsdale.

The latter's eyes suddenly narrowed; a covert expectancy made itself felt in his manner. "Aren't you going to roll up your sleeve?" he asked softly. "Usually find it gives greater freedom of movement, myself."

Steele did not at once reply; in his eyes bent on Ronsdale a question seemed to flash; then a bolder, more daring light replaced it. "Perhaps you are right!" he said coolly, and following the nobleman's example he pushed back his sleeve. The action revealed the splendid arm of the perfectly-trained athlete marked, however, by a great scar extending from just above the wrist to the elbow. Lord Ronsdale's eyes fastened on it; his lips moved slightly but if any sound fell from them, it was rendered inaudible by Sir Charles' exclamation:

"Bad jab, that, Steele! Looks as if it might have been made by an African spear!"

"No." John Steele smiled, encountering other glances, curious, questioning. "Can't include the land of ivory among the countries I've been in," he added easily.

Lord Ronsdale breathed quickly. "Recent wound, I should say."

"Not very old," said John Steele.

"If there's a good story back of it, we'll have it later," Captain Forsythe remarked.

"Perhaps Mr. Steele is too modest to tell it," Ronsdale again interposed.

"Your good opinion flatters me." Steele's eyes met the other's squarely; then he made a brusque movement. "But if you are ready?"

Their blades crossed. Ronsdale's suppleness of wrist and arm, his cold steadiness, combined with a knowledge of many fine artifices, had already made him a favorite with those of the men who cared to back their opinions with odd pounds. As he pressed his advantage, the girl's eyes turned to John Steele; her look seemed to express just a shade of disappointment. His manner, or method, appeared perfunctory, too perfunctory! Why did he not enter into the contest with more abandon? Between flashes of steel she again saw the scar on his arm; it seemed to exercise a sort of fascination over her.

What had caused it, this jagged, irregular mark? He had not said. Lord Ronsdale's words, "A recent wound--perhaps Mr. Steele is too modest--"

returned to her. It was not so much the words as the tone, an inflection almost too fine to notice, a covert sneer. Or, was it that? Her brows drew together slightly. Of course not. And yet she felt vaguely puzzled, as if some fine instinct in her divined something, she knew not what, beneath the surface. Absurd! Her eyes at that moment met John Steele's. Did he read, guess what was passing through her brain? An instant's carelessness nearly cost him the match.

"Ten to five!" one of the men near her called out jovially. "Odds on Ronsdale! Any takers?"

"Done!"

She saw John Steele draw himself back sharply just in time; she also fancied a new, ominous gleam in his eyes. His demeanor underwent an abrupt change. If Ronsdale's quickness was cat-like, the other's movements had now all the swiftness and grace of a panther. The girl's eyes widened; all vague questioning vanished straightway from her mind; it was certainly very beautiful, that agility, that deft, incessant wrist play.

"Hello!" Through the swishing of steel she heard again the man at her side exclaim, make some laughing remark: "Perhaps I'd better hedge--"

But even as he spoke, with a fiercer thrusting and parrying of blades the end came; a sudden irresistible movement of John Steele's arm, and

the nobleman's blade clattered to the floor.

"Egad! I never saw anything prettier!" Sir Charles came forward quickly.

"Met your match that time, Ronsdale," in a tone the least bantering.

The nobleman stooped for his foil. "That time, yes!" he drawled. If he felt chagrin, or annoyance, he concealed it.

"Lucky it wasn't one of those real affairs of honor, eh?" some one whom Ronsdale had defeated laughed good-naturedly.

Again he replied. Steele found himself walking with Jocelyn Wray toward the window. Across the room a footman who had been waiting for the conclusion of the contest, and an opportune moment, now approached Lord Ronsdale and extended a salver.

"It came a short time ago, my Lord!"

John Steele heard; his glance flashed toward Ronsdale. The telegram, then, had been for--? He saw an inscrutable smile cross the nobleman's face.

"Any more aspirants?" the military man called out.

"Only myself left," observed Sir Charles. "And I resign the privilege!"



"Then," said the girl, standing somewhat apart with John Steele, near one of the great open windows, "must you, Mr. Steele, be proclaimed victor?"

"Victor!" He looked down. Between them bright colors danced, reflections of hues from the old stained glass above; they shone like red roses fallen from her lap at his feet. For a moment he continued to regard them; then slowly gazed up to the soft colored gown, to the beautiful young face, the hair that shone brightly against the background of branches and twigs, gleaming with watery drops like thousands of gems. "Victor!" He--

A door closed quietly as Lord Ronsdale went out.

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