

CHAPTER XI

WAYS AND MEANS

The afternoon of that same day there arrived at the village of Strathorn from London a discreet-looking little man who, descending at the Golden Lion, was shown to a private sitting-room on the second story. Calling for a half-pint from the best tap and casually surveying the room, he settled himself in a chair with an air of nonchalance, which a certain eagerness in his eyes seemed to belie.

"Any mail or message for me, landlord?" he inquired, giving his name, when that worthy reappeared with the tankard.

"No, sir."

"Nor any callers?"

"None that I've heard of--" A sound of wheels at that moment interrupted; the landlord went to the window. "Why, it's his lordship," he remarked. "And such weather to be out in!" as a sudden gust of rain beat against the pane. "Lord Ronsdale who is staying at Strathorn House," he explained for the stranger's benefit. "And he's coming in!"

The host hurried to the door but already a footstep was heard on the

stairway and the voice of the nobleman inquiring for the new-comer's room.

"Right up this way! The gentleman is in here, your Lordship," called down the landlord. Lord Ronsdale mounted leisurely and entered the room.

"I didn't expect to have the honor of a call from your lordship," said the guest of the Golden Lion, bowing low. "If your lordship had indicated to me his pleasure--"

The nobleman whipped a greatcoat from his shoulders and tossed it to the landlord. "Was coming to the village on another little matter, and thought I might as well drop in and see you," he observed to the guest, "instead of waiting for you to come to Strathorn House. You have the stock-lists and market prices with you?" he queried meaningly. The other answered in the affirmative. "Very good, we will consider the matter, and--you may go, landlord."

But when the innkeeper had taken his departure no further word was said by the nobleman of securities or values; Lord Ronsdale gazed keenly at his companion. Without, the wind swept drearily down the little winding street, and sighed about the broad overhanging eaves.

"Well," he spoke quickly, "I fancy you have a little something to tell me, Mr. Gillett?"

"A little something?" The latter rubbed his hands. "More than a little! Your lordship little dreamed, when--"

"Spare me your observations," broke in the nobleman. "Come at once to the business on hand." His voice, though low, had a strident pitch; behind it might be fancied strained nerves.

"As your lordship knows, good fortune or chance favored me at the start; that is, along one line, the line of general investigation. The special inquiry which your lordship mentioned, just as he was leaving my office, proved for a time most illusive."

"You mean the object of John Steele's visit to the continent?"

"Exactly. And the object of that visit solved, I have now a matter of greatest importance to communicate, so important it could only be imparted by word of mouth!" The police agent spoke hastily and moved nearer.

"Indeed?" Lord Ronsdale's thin, cold lips raised slightly, but not to suggest a smile; his eyes met the police agent's. "You have reached a conclusion? One that you sought to reject, perhaps, but that wouldn't be discarded?"

Mr. Gillett looked at him earnestly. "You don't mean--it isn't possible that you knew all the while--?"

The white, aristocratic hand of Lord Ronsdale waved. "Let us start at the beginning."

"True, your Lordship," Mr. Gillett swallowed. "As your lordship is aware, we were fortunate enough in the beginning to find out through our agent in Tasmania that John Steele came to that place in a little trading schooner, the *Laura Deane*, of Portsmouth; that he had been rescued from a tiny uncharted reef, or isle, on December twenty-first, some three years before. The spot, by longitude and latitude, marks, through an odd coincidence, the place where the *Lord Nelson* met her fate."

"A coincidence truly," murmured the nobleman. "But at this stage in your reasoning you recalled that all on board were embarked in the ships' boats and reached civilization, except possibly--"

"A few of my charges between decks? True; I remembered that. A bad lot of ugly brutes!" Mr. Gillett paused; Lord Ronsdale raised his head. "The story of John Steele's rescue," went on Mr. Gillett, "as told by himself," significantly, "was well known in Tasmania and not hard to learn. A man of splendid intellect, a lawyer by profession, he had been passenger on a merchant vessel, the *Mary Vernon*, of Baltimore, United States. This vessel, like the *Lord Nelson*, had come to grief; after being tossed about, a helpless, water-logged wreck, it had finally been abandoned. All of those in John Steele's boat had perished except him;

some had gone mad through thirst and suffering; others had killed their fellows in a frenzy. Being of superb physique, having been through much physical training--" the listener stirred in his chair--"he managed to survive, to reach the little isle, where, according to his story, he remained almost a year."

"A year? Then he set foot in Tasmania about four years after the _Lord Nelson_ went down," observed the nobleman, a curious glitter in his eyes. "Four years after," he repeated, accenting the last word.

"Such were the details gathered in Tasmania," answered the police agent.

"Go on," said Lord Ronsdale. "You subsequently learned with more definiteness the actual circumstances of his rescue?"

"From the mate of the _Laura Deane_, the schooner that rescued him from the isle, and one of her crew whom I managed to locate at Plymouth, as I have informed your lordship by letter," answered Mr. Gillett. "These men now furnish lodgings to seamen, and incidentally shanghai a few of them for dubious craft! Both of them, the mate and the sailor, recalled the man of fine bearing and education whom they found on the little isle, a sort of Greek statue, half-clothed in rags, so to speak, who made his personality felt at once on these simple, ignorant fellows!" Mr. Gillett paused to look at Lord Ronsdale, seemed waiting for the latter to say something, but the nobleman only leaned forward and pushed at the coals with a poker.

"Which brings to my mind the one point," with emphasis, "that I haven't been able so far to reconcile or to explain. Your lordship, who seems to have divined a great deal, can, perhaps. A man of fine education and bearing, as I said, yet the other had been--"

"It is your business, not mine, to explain," interrupted the listener.

"Tell all you know."

"At the spring on the little island the seamen filled their water-butts; this kept them several days, mixing labor with skylarking, during which time one of them picked up something, a pouch marked with a name."

"Which was--?"

Mr. Gillett leaned forward, spoke softly; Lord Ronsdale stared straight ahead. "Of course," he said, "of course!"

"This, I will confess, startled, puzzled me," continued the police agent after a pause. "What did it mean? I tried to explain it in a dozen different ways but none of them seemed exactly to fit. Then it was that the line of special investigation helped. John Steele's outing to which you directed my attention was passed on the continent. What did he do there; was it business; was it pleasure took him there? After a good deal of pains, we discovered that he visited a certain large building, centrally located. This proved a starting-point; why did he go there? At

the top was a studio; from the concierge we learned that he had asked for the artist. From the artist we ascertained that John Steele had bought a picture; that he had called several times to watch the painter at his work. So far, so good, or bad! For was it likely John Steele had come to Paris to buy a bit of canvas, or was his interest in art assumed to cover his real purpose? When he left the studio, did he, without the knowledge of the concierge, call on some one else in the building?

"This thought led to an inspection of the tenants. They proved of all sorts and kinds; the place was a beehive; hundreds of people entered and left every day. At this time I happened on an item in a periodical about some remarkable work in a certain line by a high-class medical specialist. Here is the paragraph."

Lord Ronsdale took the slip of paper the other handed him and briefly looked at it. "You visited this person?"

"Yes, as his office address was mentioned as being in the large building we were interested in. But at the moment I had no suspicion that John Steele's pilgrimage to Paris could have been for the purpose of consulting,--"

"An eminent specialist in the line of removing birth-marks," glancing at the slip of paper, "or other disfigurements--"

"Such as I described to your lordship from the book that day in the

office," murmured the police agent.

For some moments both were again silent; only the sounds of the wind and the rain, mingled with monotonous creakings, broke the stillness.

"You say this shipwrecked man was like a Greek statue, half clothed in rags. Perhaps then," slowly, "since he was only half-clothed the rescuers might have noticed--"

"I sought them at once," with sudden eagerness, "to verify what your lordship suggests, and I have their full corroboration; what the evidence of their eyes told them, that the rescued man bore on his arm the exact markings described in my book."

"A coincidence not easily accounted for." The speaker's tones had a rasping sound. "And now--"

"One question, my Lord. He is discerning--knows that you--"

"Knows? Yes; he found that out one day in Hyde Park, never mind how; about the same time I, too, learned something."

"And yet he deliberately comes down here, dares to leave London where at least his chances are better for--but why? It is unreasonable; I don't understand."

"Why?" Lord Ronsdale's smile was not agreeable. "When does a man become illogical, stray from the path good reasoning should keep him in? When does he accept chances, however desperate?"

"When?" The police agent's tones expressed vague wonder. "Why, when--there is a woman in the case!" suddenly.

"A woman, or a girl."

"Your lordship means--"

"One who is beautiful enough to enmesh any man's fancy," he spoke as to himself, "whose golden hair is a web to draw lovers like the fleece of old; whose eyes like the sunny heavens tempt them to bask in their light."

The words were mocking yet seemed to force themselves from his lips. "When you add that she has high position; is as opulent in the world's goods as she is rich in personal--" abruptly he paused. "But this is irrelevant," he added almost angrily. "Is there anything else you have to tell me?"

"Only one thing, and it may have no bearing on the case; some one who has not been seen in these parts in years, the red-headed son of the landlady where the Gerard murder occurred has been back in London, and--Steele's been looking for him. For what purpose, I don't know." The

nobleman moved quickly. "But he hasn't found him--yet; apparently the fellow took alarm, knowing the police agent might want him, and vanished again."

Lord Ronsdale moistened his lips; then got up, walked back and forth. A brisker gust, without, and the tin symbol of the Golden Lion over the entrance to the inn swung with a harsh rattle almost around the bar that held it. The nobleman stopped short; from the dim corner where he stood his eyes gleamed with animal brightness.

"And now?" suggested Mr. Gillett. "Your lordship of course knows what this means, if your lordship uses the weapons you have in your hands? The penalty for one transported returning to England is--"

"I know," interrupted the other. "He has, however, dared to come back, to incur that risk. Any plea he could hope to make," Lord Ronsdale spoke with studied deliberation, "to justify the act, he could not--substantiate." The speaker lingered on the word then went on more crisply. "He stands in the position of a person who has broken one of the most exacting laws of the realm and one which has on all occasions been rigorously enforced. He has presumed to trespass in the highest circles, to mingle with people of rank, our gentry, our ladies--"

"Then your lordship will--"

"I have made my plans. And--I intend to act."

"Where?"

"Here."

"But would it not be better to wait until he returns to London, my Lord?"

"And give him more time to--" he broke off. "We act here, at once!"

Lord Ronsdale again seated himself; his face had regained its hard mask; he motioned the other man to draw his chair closer. "I'll tell you how to proceed."

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