

CHAPTER XII

FESTIVITIES

The windows in Strathorn House shone bright; from within came the sound of music; in the billiard room, adjoining the spacious hall, a number of persons were smoking, playing, or watching the dancers. At one of the tables two men had about finished a game; by the skilful stroke of him who showed the better score, the balls clicked briskly, separated, and came together once more.

"Enough to go out with!" The player, Captain Forsythe, counted his score. "Shall we say another, Steele?"

"Not for me!" John Steele placed his cue in the rack. "I'm out for a breath of air." And he stepped through an open French window, leading upon a balcony that almost spanned the rear of the house.

"Mr. Steele seems to be rather out of form to-night." A plump, short woman with doll-like eyes, who had been watching the game from a seat near-by, now spoke, with subtle meaning in her accents.

"Quite so. Can't really understand it. Steele can put up a deuced strong game, don't you know, but to-night--Did you notice how he failed at one of the easiest shots?"

"That was when Jocelyn Wray looked in," murmured the other.

"Miss Wray!" Captain Forsythe set the balls for a practice shot. "Well, Steele's a splendid chap," he said irrelevantly.

"You have known him for some time?"

"Not a great while; he's rather a new man, don't you know. But Sir Charles is quite democratic; took him up, well, as one might in Australia, without," good-naturedly, "inquiring into his family or his antecedents, or all that sort of rubbish."

"Indeed?" Her voice was non-committal. "But as for its being rubbish--"

"Oh, I say, Mrs. Nallis!" The other's tone was expostulating. "Strong man; splendid sort of chap, Steele! A jolly good athlete, too! Witness our little fencing contest of this morning!"

"True! You are an evident admirer of Mr. Steele, Captain Forsythe. And if I am not mistaken," she laughed, "others share your opinion. Sir Charles, for example, and Jocelyn Wray. She didn't look displeased this morning, did she? When the contest was over, I mean. Not that I would imply--of course, her position and his--so far apart from a social standpoint." A retort of some kind seemed about to spring from the listener's lips but she did not give him the opportunity to speak; went

on: "Besides, when I came here, I understood a marriage had been, or was about to be arranged between Sir Charles' niece and--"

"Not interrupting a bit of gossip, I trust?" a cynical voice inquired; at the same time a third person, who had quietly approached, paused to regard them.

"Ah, Lord Ronsdale!" Just for an instant the lady was disconcerted. "Gossip?" She repeated in a tone that meant: "How can you?"

He waved his hand; leaned against the table. "Beg your pardon! Very wrong of me, no doubt; only the truth is--" his lashes drooped slightly to veil his eyes, "I like a bit of gossip myself occasionally!"

"We were talking about your friendly set-to with John Steele," said Captain Forsythe bluntly.

The nobleman's long fingers lifted, pulled at his mustache; in the bright glare, his nails, perfectly kept, looked sharp and pointed. "Ah, indeed!" he remarked. "Steele is handy with the foils; an all-round sportsman, I fancy; or once was!" softly.

"Never heard of him, though, in the amateur sporting world!" observed the lady. "Never saw his name mentioned in any gentlemen's events--tennis or golf tournaments, track athletics, rowing, and all that."

"No?" Lord Ronsdale gazed down; half-sitting on the corner of the table, he swung one glossy shoe to and fro.

"Perhaps he's hiding his light under a bushel?" said the lady.

The nobleman made a sound. "Perhaps!"

"I was asking Captain Forsythe about his antecedents. No one here seems to know. Possibly you can enlighten us."

"I?" Lord Ronsdale's tone was purring. "Why should I be able to? But I see Miss Wray," rising and walking toward the door. "My dance, don't you know."

She gazed after him. "I wonder why Lord Ronsdale does not approve of, or shall we say, dislikes Mr. John Steele?"

"Eh?--what?--I never noticed."

"A man notice?" She laughed. "But your game of billiards? You are looking for some one. If I will do--?"

"Delighted!" he said with an accent of reserve.

Meanwhile the principal subject of this conversation had been walking

slowly on the broad stone balcony toward the ball-room; there he had stopped; then stepping to the balustrade, he stood looking off. The night was warm; in the sky, stars seemed trying to maintain their places between dark, floating clouds. Near at hand the foliage shimmered with pale flashes of light; the perfumes of dew-laden flowers were like those of an oriental bower. Faint rustlings, soft undertones broke upon the ear from dark places; mists seemed drawn like phantom ribbons, now here, now there. He looked at the stars; watched one of them, very small, drop into the maw of a black-looking monster of vapor. As it vanished the sound of music was wafted from within; John Steele listened; they were beginning once more to dance.

He glanced around; splashes of color met the eye; hues that shifted, mingled; came swiftly and went. In the great hall, staring Lelys and Knellers looked down from their high, gilded frames; the glaring lights of a great crystal chandelier threw a flood of rays over the scene at once brilliant and dazzling. Steele stepped toward the window, paused; his eyes seemed searching the throng. They found what they sought, a slender, erect form, the gown soft, white, like foam; a face, animated, joyous. For an instant only, however, he saw the beautiful features; then as Jocelyn turned in the dance, around her waist glimpsed a black band, tipped by slender masculine fingers; above, a cynical countenance. Or was it all cynical now? A brief glance showed more than the habitual expression, a sedulousness--some passionate feeling? Lord Ronsdale's look seemed once more to say he held and claimed her; that she was his, or soon would be.

A fleeting picture; she was gone and other figures intervened. John Steele stood with hands tightly clasped. Then his gaze gradually lowered; he moved restlessly back and forth; but the music sounded louder and he walked away from it, to the end of the balcony and again looked off--into darkness.

The moments passed; a distant buzz replaced melody; the human murmur, the scraping of strings. From the forest came a far-away cry, the melancholy sound of some wood-creature. He continued motionless, suddenly wheeled swiftly.

"That is you, Mr. Steele?" A voice, young, gay, sounded near; Jocelyn Wray came toward him; from her shoulders floated a white scarf. "You have come out for the freshness of the garden? Although," she added, "you shouldn't altogether seclude yourself from the madding crowd."

"No?" In the eyes that met hers flashed a question, the question that he had ever been asking himself since coming to Strathorn House, that had driven him there.

Did she note the strangeness of the look she seemed to have surprised on his face? Her own glance grew on the instant slightly puzzled, showed a passing constraint; then her manner became light again. "No. Especially as--You are leaving to-morrow, I believe?"

"Yes." He tried to speak in conventional tones; but his gaze swerved from the graceful figure with its dim, white lines that changed and fluttered in the faint breath of air, stealing so gently by them and away. "My time is almost up; the allotted period of my brief Elysium!" he half-laughed.

"And yet it was rather hard to get you here, wasn't it? You remember you quite scorned our first invitation," gaily.

"Scorned?" In the semi-darkness he could only divine her features. "That is hardly the word."

"Isn't it? Well, then, you had business more important," she laughed.

"Not more important,--imperative." Was his voice, beneath an assumption of carelessness, just a shade uncertain? again it became conventional.

"I--have enjoyed myself immensely."

"Have you?" She glanced at him; a flicker of light touched the strong face. "So good of you to say so! I believe that answer is the proper formula. Invented by our ancestors," lightly, "and handed down!"

He did not at once reply; again she caught a suggestion of that searching look she had noted before, and after a moment the girl turned; walking to a rose-bush that partly screened one end of the balcony, she bent over the flowers. "Of course I might use my influence with my aunt

to have the time allotted you, as you put it, extended. Especially as you are so appreciative!" she laughed. "Until after the children's fête, for example! What do you say? Shall I plead for you until then? If you will promise to make yourself very useful!"

"I--you are very good--but--"

"Don't!" She spread out her hands. "Forgive me for presuming to think that Strathorn House and its poor attractions could longer keep Mr. John Steele from smoky London-town and the drone of its courts!"

"It is not that"--he began, stopped.

"Go; we abandon you to your fate." It may be that he had made her feel she had been somewhat over gracious, as he had, once or twice before,--that night at the opera, when they had first met; afterward on taking leave of him on the return from Hyde Park. But she only laughed again, perhaps a little constrainedly this time. "You will miss the revival of a few old rural pastimes!" she went on. "That sounds quite trivial to you though, does it not? Several of our present guests will stay, however; others are coming; Lord Ronsdale," lightly, "has even begged to remain; we shall probably lead the old country-dance."

"Lord Ronsdale!--You!--The flame again played in the dark eyes, more strongly now, no longer to be suppressed.

"Mr. Steele!" Her brows arched in sudden surprise; she drew back a little.

He seemed about to speak but with an effort checked himself and looked down. "I beg your pardon." His face was half-turned; for a moment he did not go on. "I beg your pardon." He again raised his head; his face was steady, very steady now; his words too. "Your mentioning Lord Ronsdale reminded me of a social obligation; which I have neglected, or forgotten; the pleasure," with a slight laugh, "of congratulating you--is that the word? Or Lord Ronsdale,--he, I believe, is the one to be congratulated!"

"Congratulated?" Her face had changed, grown colder. His hand grasped the stone balustrade, but he forced a smile to his lips. "I can not imagine who has started--why you speak thus. Lord Ronsdale is an old friend of my uncle, and--mine, too. But that is all; I am not--have not been. You are mistaken."

"Mistaken?" The word broke from him quickly; the strained expression of his face gave way to another he could ill conceal. Before the light in his gaze, the fire, the ardency, her own slowly fell; she turned slightly as if to go. But he made no effort to stop her, spoke no word. She took a step, hesitated; John Steele moved.

"Good-by," he said slowly. "I am leaving rather early in the morning; I shall not see you again."

"Good-by." She raised her head with outward assurance. "At least until we meet in London," she ended lightly.

"That may not be--"

"Why, you are not thinking of leaving London?" with gaiety perhaps a trifle forced, "of deserting your dingy metropolis?"

He did not answer; she looked at him quickly; something in his face held her; a little of the lightness went from hers.

"Once more, good-by, Miss--Jocelyn."

His look was now resolute; but his voice lingered on her name. He extended his hand in the matter-of-fact manner of one who knew very well what he had to do; the girl's eyes widened on him. Did she realize he was saying "Good-by" to her for all time? She held her head higher, pressed her lips slightly closer. Then she sought to withdraw her hand but he, as hardly knowing what he did, or yielding to sudden, irresistible temptation, clasped for an instant the slim fingers closer; they seemed to quiver in his. The girl's figure moved somewhat from him; she stood almost amid the roses, dark spots that nodded around her. The bush was a mass of bloom; did she tremble ever so slightly? Or was it but the fine, sensitive petals behind her that stirred when kissed by the sweet-scented breeze?

John Steele breathed deeply; he continued to regard her, so fair, so beautiful! A leaf fell; she made a movement; it seemed to awaken him to realization. He started and threw back his head; the dark, glowing eyes became once more resolute. An instant, and he bent; a breath, or his lips, swept the delicate, white fingers; then he dropped them. Her hand swung back against the cold stone; on her breast, something bright--an ornament--fluttered, became still. Behind, a bird chirped; her glance turned toward the ball-room.

"I--"

Other voices, loud, merry, coming from one of the open French windows interrupted.

"Jocelyn!" They called to her; faces looked out. "Jocelyn!"

"Yes!" She was walking rapidly from him now, a laugh, a little forced, on her lips.

On the balcony a number of persons appeared. "A cotillion! We're going to have a cotillion; that is, if you--"

"Of course, if you wish." The gay group surrounded her; light, heedless voices mingled; then she, all of them, vanished into the ball-room.

John Steele moved slowly down the stone steps leading to the garden below. One thought vibrated in his mind. Sir Charles had erred when he told him that day in the park of his niece and Ronsdale. Perhaps because the wish was father to the thought--But the girl's own assurance dispelled all doubts and fears. He, John Steele, had been mistaken. Those were her words, "Mistaken!"

He could go away now, gladly, gladly! No; not that, perhaps; but he could go. If need be,--far from England; never to be seen, heard of, more by her. He could go, and she would never know she had honored by her friendship, had sheltered beneath her roof, one who--As he walked down the dimly lighted path somebody--a man--standing under the trees, at one side, at that moment touched his arm.

"I should like to speak with you, sir!" said a voice, and turning with a quick jerk, Steele saw the familiar features of Gillett, the former police agent; behind him, other men.

"What do you want?"

The Scotland Yard man coughed significantly. "Out here is a nice, quiet place for a word, or so," he said in his blandest manner. "And if you will be so good--"

John Steele's reply was as emphatic as it was sudden; he had been dreaming; the awakening had come. A glint like lightning flashed from

his eyes; well, here was something tangible to be grappled with! A laugh burst from his throat; with the quickness of thought he launched himself forward.

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