

CHAPTER XIV

AN ANSWER

The girl made no motion to obey and the knocking was repeated; mechanically she moved toward the threshold. "Yes?" All the color had left her face. "What--what is it?"

"Don't mean to alarm you, my dear, but Mr. Gillett thinks the convict might be concealing himself somewhere in the house; indeed, that it is quite likely. So we are making a little tour of inspection. Shall we not go through your rooms? There! don't be frightened!" quickly, "only as a matter of precaution, you know."

"I," she seemed to catch her breath, "it is really quite unnecessary. I have been through them myself."

"Might have known that!" with an attempt at jocoseness. "But thought we would make sure. Your balcony, you have looked there?"

"Yes."

"Very well; lock your window leading to it. Only as a matter of precaution," he repeated hastily. "No need of our coming in, I fancy. You had retired?"

"I--was about to."

"Quite right." A moment the party lingered. "Shall I send one of the maids to sleep in your dressing-room? Company, you know! Your voice sounds a little nervous."

"Does it? Not at all!" she said hastily. "I am--not in the least nervous."

"Good night, then!" They went. "One of my men in the garden felt sure he had seen him return toward the house," Mr. Gillett's voice was wafted back, became fainter, died away.

The man in the room stood motionless now, his face like that of a statue save for the light and life of his eyes. The clock beat the moments; he looked at her. The girl was almost turned from him; he saw more of the bright hair than the pale profile, so still against the delicately carved arabesques of the panel.

"The other way would have been--preferable!"

There was nothing reckless or bold in his bearing now; but, looking away, she did not see. Was he tempted, if only in an infinitesimal degree, to suggest a plea of mitigating circumstances--not for his own sake but for hers; that she might feel less keenly that sense of hurt,

of outraged pride, for having smiled on him, admitted him to a certain frank, free intimacy? Before the words fell from his lips, however, she turned; her gaze arrested his purpose, made him feel poignantly, acutely, the distance now between them. "What were you," she hesitated, emphasized over-sharply the word, "transported for?"

An instant his eyes flashed suddenly back at her, as if he were on the point of answering, telling her all, disavowing; but to what end? To ask more of her than of others, throw himself on her generosity?

"What does it matter?"

True; what did it matter to her; he had been in prisons before, by his own words.

"Your name, of course, is not John Steele?"

He confessed it a purloined asset.

"What was it?"

He looked at her--beyond! To a storm-tossed ship, a golden-haired child, her curls in disorder, moving with difficulty, yet clinging so steadfastly to a small cage. His name? It may be he heard again the loud pounding and knocking; held her once more to his breast, felt the confiding, soft arms.

"What does it matter?" he repeated.

What, indeed? That which she had not been able to penetrate, to understand in him, this was it! This!

"But why"--fragments of what he had said recurred to her; she spoke mechanically--"when you found yourself recognized, did you not leave England; why did you come here--to Strathorn House; incur the danger, the risk?"

"Why?" He still continued to look straight before him. "Because you--were here!" He spoke quietly, simply.

"I?" she trembled.

"Oh, you need not fear!" quickly. "You!" a bitter smile crossed his face. "One may see a star and long to draw nearer it, though one knows it is always beyond reach, unattainable! May even stumble forward, led by its light--bright, beautiful! Whither?" He laughed abruptly. "One has not asked, nor cared."

"Cared?" Her figure swayed; he too stood uncertainly; the lights seemed to tremble.

The man suddenly straightened; then turned. "And now," his voice sounded

harsh, tense; he stepped toward the balcony.

His words, the abrupt action--what it portended, aroused her.

"No; no!" The exclamation broke from her involuntarily; she seemed to waken as from something unreal that had momentarily held her.

"There--there may be a safer way!" She hardly knew what she was saying; one thought alone possessed her mind; she looked with strained, bright glance before her. "The Queen Elizabeth staircase leading into the garden from my--" The words were arrested; her blue eyes, dark, dilated, lingered on him in an odd, impersonal way. "Wait!" Bright spots of color now tinted her cheeks; she went quickly toward the door she had left, her manner that of one who hastens to some course on impulse, without pausing to reason. "A few minutes!" She listened, turned the key; then opening the door, stepped hastily out into the hall.

The latch clicked; the man stood alone. Whatever her purpose, only the desire to act quickly, to have done with an intolerable situation moved him. Once more he looked toward the window through which he had entered; first, however, before going, he bethought himself of something, an answer to one of her questions. She should find the answer after he was gone! His fingers thrust themselves into a breast-pocket; he took out a small object, wrapped in velvet. An instant his eyes rested upon it; then, stooping, he picked up the bit of lace handkerchief from the floor and laying the dark velvet against it placed the two on the table.

Would she understand? The debt he had felt he owed her long before to-night, that sense of obligation to the child who had reached out her hand, in a different life, a different world! No; she had, of course, forgotten; still he would leave it, that talisman so precious, which he had cherished almost superstitiously.

When a few minutes later the girl hastily reentered the room, she carried on her arm a man's coat and hat; her appearance was feverish, her eyes wide and shining.

"Your clothes are torn--would attract attention! These were on the rack--I don't know whose--but I stole them!--stole them!"

She spoke quickly with a little hard note of self-mockery. Her voice broke off suddenly; she looked around her.

The coat and hat slipped from her arm; she looked at the window; the curtain still moved, as if a hand had but recently touched it. She stared at it--incredulously. He had gone; he would have none of her assistance then; preferred--She listened, but caught only the rustling of the heavy silk. When? Minutes passed; at her left, a candle, carelessly adjusted by the maid, dripped to the dresser; its over-long wick threw weird, ever-changing shadows; her own silhouette appeared in various distorted forms on hangings and wall.

Still she heard nothing, nothing louder than the faint sounds at the

window; the occasional, mysterious creakings of old woodwork. He must have long since reached the ground--the bottom of the old moat; perhaps, as the police agent and several of his men were in the house, he might even have attained the fringe of the wood. It was not so far distant,--the space intervening from the top of the moat contained many shrubs; in their friendly shadows--

She stole to the corner of the window now and cautiously peered out. The sky was overcast; below, faint markings could just be discerned; beyond, Cimmerian gloom--Strathorn wood.

Had he reached, could he reach it? A cool breeze fanned her cheeks without lessening the flush that burned there; her lips were half-parted. She stepped uncertainly back; a reaction swept over her; the most trivial thoughts came to mind. She remembered that she had not locked the door of her boudoir; that Sir Charles had told her to do so. She almost started to obey; but laughed nervously instead. How absurd! What, however, should she do? She looked toward the next room. Go to bed? It seemed the commonplace, natural conclusion, and, after all, life was very commonplace. But the coat and hat she had brought there? Consideration of them, also, came within the scope of the commonplace.

It did not take her long to dispose of them, not on the rack, however. Standing again, a few moments later, at the head of the stairway, in the upper hall, she heard voices approaching. Whereupon she quickly dropped both hat and coat on a chair near-by and fled to her room.

None too soon! From above footsteps were descending; people now passed by; they evidently had been searching the third story. She could hear their low, dissatisfied voices; the last persons to come she at once recognized by their tones.

"You have made a bungling job of it," said Lord Ronsdale. There was a suppressed fierce bitterness in his accents, which, however, in the excitement of the moment, the girl failed to notice.

"He had made up his mind not to be taken alive, my Lord."

"Then--" The other interrupted Mr. Gillett harshly, but she failed to catch more of his words.

"We've not lost him, my Lord," Mr. Gillett spoke again. "If he's not in the house, he's near it, in the garden, and we have every way guarded."

"Every way guarded!" The girl drew her breath; as they disappeared, the striking of the clock caused her to start. One! two! About four hours of darkness, hardly that long remained for him! And yet she would have supposed it later; it had been after one o'clock when she had come to her room.

She became aware of a throbbing in her head, a dull pain, and mechanically seating herself near one of the tables, she put up her hand

and started to draw the pins from her hair, but soon desisted. Again she began to think, more clearly this time, more poignantly, of all she had experienced--listened to--that night!

She, a Wray, sprung from a long line of proud, illustrious folk! And he? The breath of the roses outside was wafted upward; her eyes, deep, self-scoffing, rested, without seeing, on a small dark object on a handkerchief on the table. What was it to her if they took him?--What indeed? Her fingers played with the object, closed hard on it. Why should she care if he paid the penalty; he, a self-confessed---

Something fell from the velvet covering in her hand and struck with a musical sound on the hard, polished top. Amid a turmoil of thoughts, she was vaguely aware of it gleaming there on the cold white marble, a small disk--a gold coin. At first it seemed only to catch without interesting her glance; then slowly she took it, as if asking herself how it came there, on her handkerchief, which, she dimly remembered, had been lying on the floor. Some one, of course, must have picked up the handkerchief; but no one had been in the room since she had noticed it except--

Her gaze swung to the window; he, then, had left it. Why? What had she to do with anything that had been his?

More closely she scrutinized it, the shining disk on her rosy palm; a King George gold piece! Above the monarch's face and head with its flowing locks, appeared a tiny hole, as if some one had once worn it;

beneath, just discernible, was the date, 1762. She continued to regard it; then looked again at the bit of velvet, near-by. It had been wrapped in that, carefully; for what reason? Like something more than what it seemed--a mere gold piece!

"1762." Why, even as she gazed at the cloth, felt it, did the figures seem to reiterate themselves in her brain? "1762." There could be nothing especially significant about the date; yet even as she concluded thus, by some introspective process she saw herself bending over, studying those figures on another occasion. Herself--and yet--

She was looking straight before her now; suddenly she started and sprang up. "A King George gold piece!" Her hair, unbound, fell around her, below her waist; her eyes like sapphires, gazed out from a veritable shimmer of gold. "Date--" She paused. "Why, this belonged to me once, as a child, and I--"

The blue eyes seemed searching--searching; abruptly she found what she sought. "I gave it to the convict on the Lord Nelson." She almost whispered the words. "The brave, brave fellow who sacrificed his life for mine." Her warm fingers closed softly on the coin; she seemed wrapped in the picture thus recalled.

"Then how--" Her brows knitted, she swept the shining hair from her face. "If he were drowned, how could it have been left here by--" Her eyes were dark now with excitement. "Him? Him?" she repeated. "Unless,"

her breast suddenly heaved--"he was not drowned, after all; he--"

A sudden shot from the park rang out; the coin fell from the girl's hand; other shots followed. She ran out upon the balcony, a stifled cry on her lips; she stared off, but only the darkness met her gaze.

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