

CHAPTER XV

CURRENTS AND COUNTER CURRENTS

Not far from one of the entrances to Regent's Park or the hum of Camden Town's main artery of traffic, lay a little winding street which, because of its curving lines, had long been known as Spiral Row. Although many would not deign in passing to glance twice down this modest thoroughfare, it presented, nevertheless, a romantic air of charm and mystery. The houses nestled timidly behind time-worn walls; it was always very quiet within this limited precinct, and one wondered sometimes, by day, if the various secluded abodes were really inhabited, and by whom? An actress, said vague rumor; a few scribblers, a pair of painters, a military man or two. Here Madam Grundy never ventured, but Calliope and the tuneful nine were understood to be occasional callers.

One who once lived in the Row has likened it to a tiny Utopia where each and every one minded his own business and where the comings and goings of one's neighbor were matters of indifference.

Into this delectable byway there turned, late in the night of the second day after that memorable evening at Strathorn House, a man who, looking quickly around him, paused before the closed gate of one of the dwellings. The street, ever a quiet one, appeared at that advanced hour absolutely deserted, and, after a moment's hesitation, the man pulled

the bell; for some time he waited; but no response came. He looked in; through the shrubbery he could dimly make out the house, set well back, and in a half uncertain way he stood staring at it, when from the end of the street, he heard a vehicle coming rapidly toward him.

More firmly the man jerked at the handle of the bell; this time his efforts were successful; a glimmer as from a candle appeared at the front door, and a few minutes later a dark form came slowly down the graveled walk. As it approached the vehicle also drew nearer; the man regarded the latter sidewise; now it was opposite him, and he turned his back quickly to the flare of its lamps. But in a moment it had whirled by, with a note of laughter from its occupants, light pleasure seekers; at the same time a key turned in a lock and the gate swung open.

"Good evening, Dennis," said the caller. The faint gleam of the candle revealed the drowsy and unmistakably Celtic face of him he addressed, a man past middle age, who regarded the new-comer with a look of recognition. "I'm afraid I've interrupted your slumbers. This is rather a late hour at which to arrive."

"No matter, sir. Sure and I sat up expecting you, Mr. Steele, until after midnight, and had only just turned in when--"

"What--?" The new-comer, now fairly within the garden, could not suppress a start of surprise, which however the other, engaged in relocking the gate, did not appear to notice. "Expecting--?"

"Although I'd given up thinking you'd be here to-night," the latter went on. "But won't you be stepping in, sir?"

The other silently followed, walking in the manner of one tired and worn; he did not, however, at that moment seem concerned with fatigue or physical discomfort; the uncertain light of the candle before him showed his brows drawn, his eyes questioning, as if something had happened to cause him to think deeply, doubtfully. At the door the servant stood aside to allow him to enter; then ushered him into a fairly commodious and comfortable sitting-room.

"My master did not come back with you, sir, from Strathorn House?"

"No; Captain Forsythe's gone on to Germany."

"To attend some court, I suppose. Sure, 'tis a dale he has done of that, Mr. Steele, after the both of us were wounded by those black devils in India and retired from active service." The servant's voice had an inquiring accent; his glance rested now in some surprise on the new-comer's garments,--a gamekeeper's well-worn coat and cap,--and on the dusty, almost shabby-looking shoes.

"A wager," said John Steele, noting the old orderly's expression. "From Strathorn House to London by foot, within a given time, don't you know; fell in with some rough customers last night who thought my coat and hat

better than these."

"I beg your pardon, sir, but--" The man's apprehensive look fastened itself on a dark stain on the coat, near the shoulder.

"Just winged me--a scratch," replied John Steele with an indifferent shrug, sinking into a chair near the fire which burned low.

"It's lucky you came off no worse, sir, and you'll be finding a change of garments up-stairs; I put them out for you myself--"

"I'm afraid, Dennis, I'm rather large for your master's clothes," was the visitor's reply in a voice that he strove vainly to make light.

"Sure, they're your own, sir." The other looked up quickly. "I'll get everything ready for a bath, and if you've a mind for anything to eat afterward--"

"I think I'll have a little of the last, first," said the visitor slowly.

"Right you are, sir. You do look a bit done up, sir," sympathetically, "but there's a veal and 'ammer in the cupboard that will soon make you fit."

"One moment, Dennis." John Steele leaned back; the dying embers revealed

a haggard face; his eyes half closed as if from lack of sleep but immediately opened again. "You spoke of expecting me; how," he stretched out his legs, "did you know--?"

"Sure, sir, by your luggage; it arrived with my master's heavier boxes that he didn't take along with him over the wather." The listener did not stir; was he too weary to experience surprise or even deeper emotion?

His luggage there!--where no one knew--could have known, he was going! The place he had selected, under what he had considered propitious circumstances, as a haven, a refuge; where he might find himself for a brief period comparatively safe, could he reach it, turn in, without being detected! This last he believed he had successfully accomplished; and then to be told by the man--All John Steele's excuses for coming in this unceremonious fashion that he had planned to put to the servant of Captain Forsythe were at the moment forgotten. Who could have guessed that he would make his way straight hither--or had any one? An enemy, divining a lurking place for which he was heading, would not have obligingly forwarded his belongings. What then? Had Jocelyn Wray ordered them sent on with Captain Forsythe's boxes and bags, in order that they might be less likely to fall into the hands of the police?

This line of reasoning seemed to lead into most unwonted channels; it was not probable she would concern herself so much further about a common fugitive. The cut and bruised fingers of the man before the

fireplace linked and unlinked; an indefinable feeling of new dangers he had not calculated on assailed him. Suppose the police should have learned--should elect to trace, those articles of his? It was a contingency, a hazard to be considered; he knew that every possible effort would be made to find him; that if his antagonists were eager before, they would embark on the present quest with redoubled zeal. He had been in their hands and had got away; disappointment would drive them more fiercely on to employ every expedient. They might even now be at the gate; at the moment, however, he felt as if he hardly cared, only that he was very tired, too exhausted to move on. His exertions of the last few days had been of no ordinary kind; his shoulder was stiff and it pained.

"Here you are, sir." The servant had entered and reentered, had set the table without the man in the arm-chair being conscious of his coming and going. "Remembered my master inviting you once, when you were here, to pitch your camp at Rosemary Villa any time you should be after yearning for that quietood essential for literary composition and to windin' up the campaign on your book. So when I saw your luggage--"

"Exactly." It was curious the man should have spoken thus, should have voiced one of the very subterfuges Steele had had in mind himself to utter, to show pretext for his too abrupt appearance. But now--?

The situation was changed; yet he felt too exhausted to disavow the servant's conclusion. Certainly the episode of the luggage had made his

task easier at this point; only, however, to enhance the greater hazards, as if fate were again laughing at him, offering him too much ease, too great comfort, seeking to allure him with a false estimate of his security. As he ate, mechanically, but with the zest of one who had long fasted, he listened; again a vehicle went by; then another.

"Rather livelier than usual to-night?" he observed and received an affirmative answer. Some evenings now you'd hardly ever hear anything passing from sunset to sunrise and find it as quiet as the tomb.

Who lived on the right, on the left? The visitor asked several questions casually; the house to the right, the man thought, might be vacant; no one appeared to live in it very long. At least the moving van seemed to have acquired a habit of stopping there; the one on the left had a more stable tenant; a lady who appeared in the pantomime, or the opera, he wasn't sure which,--only, foreign people sometimes went in and out.

John Steele rose with an effort; no, there was nothing more he required, except rest! Which room would he prefer, he was asked when he found himself on the upper landing; the man had put his things in a front chamber; but the back one was larger. John Steele forced himself to consider; he even inspected both of the rooms; that on the front floor had one window facing the Row; the second chamber looked out over a rear wall separating the vegetable garden of Rosemary Villa from the shrub-adorned confines of a place which fronted on the next street.

The visitor decided on the former chamber; he carefully closed the blinds and drew across the window the dark, heavy curtains. This would answer very well; excellent accommodations for a man whose own chambers in the city were now in the hands of renovators--the painters, the paper-hangers, the plumbers. And the back room? He paused, as if considering the servant's assumption of his purpose in coming hither. He might as well let the fellow think--

Yes, he would venture to make use of that for his work; could thus take advantage of the force of circumstances that had arisen to alienate him from prosaic citations, writs or arraignments. But he must, with strained lightness, emphasize one point; for a brief spell he did not wish to be disturbed. People might call; people probably would, anxious clients, almost impossible to get rid of, unless--

No one must know where he was, under any circumstances; his voice sounded almost jocular, at singular variance with the heaviness, the weariness of his face. He, the old servant, had been a soldier; knew how to fulfil, then, a request or an order. Something crinkled in the speaker's hand, passed to the other who was now busying himself with the bath; the man's moist fingers did not hesitate to close on the note. He had been a hardened campaigner and incidentally a good forager; he remarked at once he would carry out to the letter all his master's visitor asked.

Half an hour later, John Steele, clad in his dressing-gown, sat alone

near the fire in his room; every sound had ceased save at intervals a low creaking of old timber. Now it came from overhead, then from the hall or near the window, as if spirit feet or fingers were busy in that venerable, quaint domicile. But these faint noises, inseparable from houses with a history, John Steele did not hear; the food and the bath had awakened in him a momentary alertness; he seemed waiting--for what? Something that did not happen; heaviness, depression again weighed on him; to keep awake he stirred himself and again glanced about. Here were evidences of odd taste on the part of the tenant in the matter of household decoration; a chain and ball that had once been worn by a certain famous convict reposed on an *étagère*, instead of the customary vase or jug of pottery; other souvenirs of prisons and the people that had been in them adorned a few shelves and brackets.

John Steele smiled grimly; but soon his thoughts seemed floating off beyond control, and rising suddenly, he threw himself on the bed. For a moment he strove to consider one or two tasks that should have been accomplished this night but which he must defer; was vaguely conscious of the slamming of a blind next door; then over-strained nature yielded.

Hours passed; the sun rose high in the heavens, began to sink; still the heavy sleep of utter exhaustion claimed him. Once or twice the servant came to the door, listened, and stole away again. The afternoon was well advanced when, as half through a dream, John Steele heard the rude jingling of a bell,--the catmeat man, or the milkman, drowsily he told himself. In fancy he seemed to see the broad, flowing river from a

window of his own chambers, the dawn stealing over, marshaling its tints,--crimson until--

Slowly through the torpor of his brain realization began also to dawn; this room?--it was not his. The gleaming lances of sunlight that darted through the half-closed shutters played on the strange wall-paper of a strange apartment; no, he remembered it now--last night!

The loud and emphatic closing of the front gate served yet more speedily to arouse him; hastily he sat up; his head buzzed from a long-needed sleep that had been over sound; his limbs still ached, but every sense on an instant became unnaturally keen. Footsteps resounded on the gravel; he heard voices; those of two men, who were coming toward the house.

"So it's the meter man you are?" John Steele recognized the inquiring voice as that of the caretaker. "Sure, you're a new one from the last that was here."

"Yes; we change beats occasionally," was the careless answer, as the men passed around the side of the house and entered a rear door. For a time there was silence; John Steele sprang from his bed and crept very softly toward the hall. "A new man--" He heard them talking again after a few minutes; he remained listening at his door, now slightly ajar.

"There must be a leak somewhere from the quantity you've burned. I'll

have a look around; might save your master a few shillings."

The man moved from room to room and started, at length, up the stairs. John Steele closed and noiselessly locked his door; the "meter man" crossed the upper hall and stepped, one after the other, into the several rooms. Having apparently made there the necessary examination, he walked over and tried the door of John Steele's room.

"This room's occupied by a visitor," interposed the servant quickly in a hushed voice. "And he's asleep now; he wouldn't thank you for the disturbing of his repose."

"All right." Did the listener detect an accent of covert satisfaction in the caller's low tones? "I'll not wake him. Don't find the leak I was looking for; will drop in again, though, when I have more time."

Their footsteps receded and shortly afterward, the man left the house; as he did so, John Steele, pushing back the blinds a little, looked out of his room; the man who had reached the front of the place glanced back. His gaze at that instant, meeting the other's, seemed to betray a momentary eagerness; quickly Steele turned away; no doubt now lingered in his mind as to the purpose of the visit.

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