

CHAPTER XVII

THE UNEXPECTED

Before the sudden fierce passion gleaming on John Steele's face, the bright flame of his look, the person who had accosted him shrank back; his pinched and pale face showed surprise, fear; almost incoherently he began to stammer. Steele's arm had half raised; it now fell to his side; his eyes continued to study, with swift, piercing glance, the man who had called. He was not a fear-inspiring object; hunger and privation seemed so to have gripped him that now he presented but a pitiable shadow of himself.

Did John Steele notice that changed, abject aspect, that bearing, devoid totally of confidence? All pretense of a certain coster smartness that he remembered, had vanished; the hair, once curled with cheap jauntiness, hung now straight and straggling; a tawdry ornament which had stood out in the past, absurdly distinct on a bright cravat, with many other details that had served to build up a definite type of individual, seemed to have dropped off into oblivion.

Steele looked about; they two, as far as he could see, were alone. He regarded the man again; it was very strange, as if a circular stage, the buskined world's tragic-comic wheel of fortune, had turned, and a person

whom he had seen in one character had reappeared in another.

"I ask your pardon." The fellow found his voice. "I'll not be troubling you further, Mr. Steele."

The other's expression altered; he could have laughed; he had been prepared for almost anything, but not this. The man's tones were hopeless; very deferential, however.

"You were about to beg--of me?" John Steele smiled, as if, despite his own danger, despite his physical pangs, he found the scene odd, unexampled, between this man and himself--this man, a sorry vagrant; himself, become now but a--"You were about to--?"

"I had, sir, so far forgotten myself as to venture to think of applying for temporary assistance; however--" Dandy Joe began to shuffle off in a spiritless way, when--

"You are hungry?" said John Steele.

"A little, sir."

"A modest answer in view of the actual truth, I suspect," observed the other. But although his words were brusque, he felt in his pocket; a sovereign--it was all he had left about him. When he had departed post-haste for Strathorn House, he had neglected to furnish himself with

funds for an indefinite period; a contingency he should have foreseen had risen; for the present he could not appear at the bank to draw against the balance he always maintained there. His own future, how he should be able to subsist, even if he could evade those who sought him, had thus become problematical. John Steele fingered that last sovereign; started to turn, when he caught the look in the other's eyes. Did it recall to him his own plight but a short twenty-four hours before?

"Very well!" he said, and was about to give the coin to the man and walk away, when another thought held him.

This fellow had been a link in a certain chain of events; the temptation grew to linger with him, the single, tangible, though paltry and useless, figure in the drama he could lay hands on. John Steele looked around; in a byway he saw the lighted window of a cheap oyster buffet. It appeared a place where they were not likely to be interrupted, and motioning to the man, he wheeled abruptly and started for it.

A few minutes later found them seated in the shabby back room; a number of faded sporting pictures adorned the wall; one--how John Steele started!--showed the 'Frisco Pet in a favorite attitude. Absorbed in studying it, he hardly heard the proprietor of the place, and it was Joe who first answered him; he had the honor of being asked there by this gentleman, and--he regarded John Steele expectantly.

Steele spoke now; his dark eyes shone strangely; a sardonic expression

lurked there. The proprietor could bring his companion a steak, if he had one. Large or small?--large--with an enigmatical smile.

The "hexhibition styke" in the window; would that do, queried the proprietor, displaying it.

Would it? the eyes of the erstwhile dandy of the east side asked of John Steele; that gentleman only answered with a nod, and the supplemental information that he would take "half a dozen natives himself." The proprietor bustled out; from an opposite corner of the room, the only other occupant regarded with casual curiosity the two ill-assorted figures. Tall, florid, Amazonian, this third person represented a fair example of the London grisette, the *_petite dame_* who is not very petite, of its thoroughfares. Setting down a pewter pot fit for a guardsman, she rose and sauntered toward the door; stopping there, with one hand on her hip, she looked back.

"Ever see 'im?" she observed, nodding her bonnet at the portrait.

"Noticed you appeared hinterested, as if you 'ad!"

"Perhaps!" Steele laughed, not pleasantly. "In my mind's eye, as the poet says."

"Wot the--!" she retorted elegantly. "'Ere's a swell toff to chawf a lidy! 'Owever," reflectively, "I've 'eard 'e could 'it 'ard!"

"But that," said the gentleman, indicating the tankard, "could hit harder."

"My hyes; wot's the name of yer missionary friend, ragbags?" to Joe.

"The gentleman's a lawyer, and when I tell you his name is--"

John Steele reached over and stopped the speaker; the woman laughed.

"Perhaps it ayn't syfe to give it!"

Her voice floated back now from the threshold; predominated for a moment later in one of the corners of the bar leading to the street: "Oi soi, you cawn't go in for a 'arf of bitters without a bloomin' graveyard mist comin' up be'ind yer back!" Then the door slammed; the modern prototype of the "roaring girl" vanished, and another voice--hoarse, that of a man--was heard:

"The blarsted fog is coming down fast."

For some time the two men in the little back room sat silent; then one of them leaned over: "She might have asked you that question, eh, Joe?" The speaker's eyes had turned again to the picture.

The smaller man drew back; a shiver seemed to run over him. "They're a long while about the steak," he murmured.

"For your testimony helped to send him over the water, I believe?" went on the other.

"How do you--? I ain't on the stand now, Mr. Steele!" A spark of defiance momentarily came into Dandy Joe's eyes.

"No; no!" John Steele leaned back, half closed his eyes; again pain, fatigue seemed creeping over him. Outside sounded the clicking and clinking of glasses, a staccato of guffaws, tones *_vivace_*. "The harm's been done so far as you are concerned; you, as a factor, have disappeared from the case."

"Glad to hear you say so, Mr. Steele. I mean," the other's voice was uncertain, cautious, "that's a matter long since dead and done with. Didn't imagine you ever knew about it; because that was before your time; you weren't even in London then." The keen eyes of the listener rested steadily on the other; seemed to read deeper. "But as for my testimony helping to send him over the water--"

"Or under!" *_sotto voce_*.

Joe swallowed. "It was true, every word of it."

"Good!" John Steele spoke almost listlessly. "Always stick by any one who sticks to you,--whether a friend, or a pal, or a patron."

"A patron!" From the other's lips fell an oath; he seemed about to say something but checked himself; the seconds went by.

"But even if there had been something not quite--strictly in accord--which there wasn't"--quickly--"a man couldn't gainsay what had been said," Dandy Joe began.

"He could," indifferently.

"But that would be--"

"Confessing to perjury? Yes."

"Hold on, Mr. Steele!" The man's eyes began to shine with alarm. "I'm not on the---"

"I know. And it wouldn't do any good, if you were."

"You mean--" in spite of himself, the fellow's tones wavered--"because he's under the water?"

"No; I had in mind that even if he hadn't been drowned, your---"

"Wot! Hadn't---"

"A purely hypothetical case! If the sea gave up its dead"--Joe stirred uneasily--"any retraction on your part wouldn't serve him. In the first place, you wouldn't confess; then if you did--which you wouldn't--to employ the sort of Irish bull you yourself used--you would be discredited. And thus, in any contingency," leaning back with folded arms, his head against the wall, "you have become _nil_!"

"Blest if I follow you, sir!"

"That, also," said John Steele, "doesn't matter. The principal subject of any consequence, relating to you, is the steak, which is now coming." As he spoke, he rose, leaving Dandy Joe alone at the table.

For a time he did not speak; sitting before a cheerless fire, that feebly attempted to assert itself, he looked once or twice toward the door, as if mindful to go out and leave the place.

But for an inexplicable reason he did not do so; there was nothing to be gained here; yet he lingered. Perhaps one of those subtle, illusory influences we do not yet understand, and which sometimes shape the blundering finite will, mysteriously, without conscious volition, was at work. One about to stumble blindly forward, occasionally stops; why, he knows not.

John Steele continued to regard the dark coals; to divers and sundry sounds from the table where the other ate, he seemed oblivious. Once

when the proprietor stepped in, he asked, without looking around, for a certain number of grains of quinine with a glass of water; they probably kept it at the bar. Yes, the man always had it on hand and brought it in.

A touch of fever, might he ask, as the visitor took it; nothing to speak of, was the indifferent answer.

Well, the gentleman should have a care; the gentleman did not reply except to ask for the reckoning; the proprietor figured a moment, then departed with the sovereign that had been tossed to the table.

By this time Dandy Joe had pushed back his chair; his dull eyes gleamed with satisfaction; also, perhaps, with a little calculation.

"Thanking you kindly, sir, it's more than I had a right to expect. If ever I can do anything to show--"

"You can't!"

"I don't suppose so," humbly. Joe looked down; he was thinking; a certain matter in which self-interest played no small part had come to mind. John Steele was known to be generous in his services and small in his charges. Joe regarded him covertly. "Asking your pardon for referring to it--but you've helped so many a poor chap--there's an old pal of mine what is down on his luck, and, happenin' across him the

other day, he was asking of me for a good lawyer, who could give him straight talk. One moment, sir! He can pay, or soon would be able to, if--"

"I am not at present," Steele experienced a sense of grim humor, "looking for new clients."

"Well, I thought I'd be mentioning the matter, sir, although I hadn't much hopes of him being able to interest the likes of you. You see he's been out of old England for a long time, and was goin' away again, when w'at should he suddenly hear but that his old woman that was, meaning his mother, died and left a tidy bit. A few hundred pounds or so; enough to start a nice, little pub. for him and me to run; only it's in the hands of a trustee, who is waiting for him to appear and claim it."

"You say he has been out of England?" John Steele stopped. "How long?"

"A good many years. There was one or two little matters agin him when he left 'ome; but he has heard that certain offenses may be 'outlawed.' Not that he has much 'ope his'n had, only he wanted to see a lawyer; and find out, in any case, how he could get his money without--"

"The law getting hold of him? What is his name?"

"Tom Rogers."

For some minutes John Steele did not speak; he stood motionless. On the street before the house a barrel-organ began to play; its tones, broken, wheezy, appealed, nevertheless, to the sodden senses of those at the bar:

"Down with the Liberals, Tories,
Parties of all degree."

Dandy Joe smiled, beat time with his hand.

"You can give me," John Steele spoke brusquely, taking from his pocket a note-book, "this Tom Rogers' address."

Joe looked at the other, seemed about to speak on the impulse, but did not; then his hand slowly ceased its motion.

"I, sir--you see, I can't quite do that--for Tom's laying low, you understand. But if you would let him call around quiet-like, on you--"

John Steele replaced the note-book. "On me?" He spoke slowly; Dandy Joe regarded him with small crafty eyes. "I hardly think the case will prove sufficiently attractive."

The other made no answer; looked away thoughtfully; at the same moment the proprietor stepped in. Steele took the change that was laid on the table, leaving a half-crown, which he indicated that Dandy Joe could

appropriate.

"Better not think of going now, sir," the proprietor said to John Steele. "Never saw anything like it the way the fog has thickened; a man couldn't get across London to-night to save his neck."

"Couldn't he?" Dandy Joe stepped toward the door. "I'm going to have a try."

A mist blew in; Dandy Joe went out. John Steele waited a moment, then with a perfunctory nod, walked quietly to the front door. The man had not exaggerated the situation; the fog lay before him like a thick yellow blanket. He looked in the direction his late companion had turned; his figure was just discernible; in a moment it would have been swallowed by the fog, when quickly John Steele walked after him.

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