

CHAPTER XVIII

THROUGH THE FOG

The dense veil overhanging the city, while favorable to John Steele in some respects, lessening for the time his own danger, made more difficult the task to which he now set himself. He dared not too closely approach the figure before him, lest he should be seen and his purpose divined; once or twice Dandy Joe looked around, more, perhaps, from habit than any suspicion that he was followed. Then the other, slackening his steps, sometimes held back too far and through caution imperiled his plan by nearly losing sight of Dandy Joe altogether. As they went on with varying pace, the shuffling form ahead seemed to find the way by instinct; crossed unhesitatingly many intersecting thoroughfares; paused only on the verge of a great one.

Here, where opposing currents had met and become congested, utter confusion reigned; from the masses of vehicles of all kinds, constituting a seemingly inextricable blockade, arose the din of hoarse voices. With the fellow's figure a vague swaying shadow before him, John Steele, too, stopped; stared at the dim blotches of light; listened to the anathemas, the angry snapping of whips. Would Dandy Joe plunge into the mêlée; attempt to pass through that tangle of horses and men? Apparently he found discretion the better part of valor and moving back so quickly he almost touched John Steele, he walked down the

intersecting avenue.

Several blocks farther on, the turmoil seemed less marked, and here he essayed to cross; by dint of dodging and darting between restless horses he reached the other side. A sudden closing in of cabs and carts midway between curbs held John Steele back; he caught quickly at the bridle of the nearest horse and forced it aside. An expostulating shout, a half-scream from somewhere greeted the action; a whip snapped, stung his cheek. An instant he paused as if to leap up and drag the aggressor from his seat, but instead with closed hands and set face he pushed on; to be blocked again by an importunate cab.

"Turn back; get out of this somehow, cabby!" He heard familiar tones, saw the speaker, Sir Charles, and, by his side--yes, through the curtain of fog, so near he could almost reach out and touch her, he saw as in a flash, Jocelyn Wray!

She, too, saw him, the man in the street, his pale face lifted up, ghost-like, from the mist. A cry fell from her lips, was lost amid other sounds. An instant eyes looked into eyes; hers, dilated; his, unnaturally bright, burning! Then as in a daze the beautiful head bent toward him; the daintily clad figure leaned forward, the sensitive and trembling lips half parted.

John Steele sprang back, to get free, to get out of there at once! Did she call? he did not know; it might be she had given voice to her

surprise, but now only the clatter and uproar could be heard. In the fog, however, her face seemed still to follow; confused, for a moment, he did not heed his way. Something struck him--a wheel? He half fell, recovered himself, managed to reach the curb.

He was conscious now of louder shoutings; of the sting on his cheek; of the traffic, drifting on--slowly. Then he, too, started to walk away, in the opposite direction; it mattered little whither he bent his footsteps now. Dandy Joe had disappeared; the hope of attaining his end through him, of being led to the retreat of one he had so long desired to find, had proved illusive. The last moment's halt had enabled him to escape, to fade from view like a will-o'-the-wisp.

John Steele did not go far in mere aimless fashion; leaning against a wall he strove once more to plan, but ever as he did so, through his thought the girl's fair face, looking out from enshrouding lace, intruded. Again he felt the light of her eyes, all the bitterness of spirit their surprise, consternation, had once more awakened in him.

He looked out at the wagons, the carts, the nondescript vehicles of every description; but a moment before she had been there,--so near; he had caught beneath filmy white the glitter of gold,--her hair, the only bright thing in that murk and gloom. He recalled how he had once sat beside her at the opera. How different was this babel, this grinding and crunching of London's thundering wheels!

But around her had always been dreams that had led him into strange byways, through dangerous, though flowery paths! To what end? To see her start, her eyes wide with involuntary dread, shrinking? Could he not thus interpret that look he had seen by the flare of a carriage lamp, when she had caught sight of him?

Dread of him? It seemed the crowning mockery; his blood surged faster; he forgot his purpose, when a figure coming out of a public house, through one of the doors near which he had halted, caught his attention. Dandy Joe, a prodigal with unexpected riches, wiped his lips as he sauntered past John Steele and continued his way, lurching a little.

How long did Steele walk after him? The distance across the city was far; groping, occasionally stumbling, it seemed interminable now. Once or twice Dandy Joe lost his way, and jocularly accosted passers-by to inquire. At Seven Dials he experienced difficulty in determining which one of the miserable streets radiating as from a common hub, would lead him in the desired direction; but, after looking hastily at various objects--a barber's post, a metal plate on a wall--he selected his street. Narrow, dark, it wormed its way through a cankered and little-traversed part of old London.

For a time they two seemed the only pedestrians that had ventured forth that night in a locality so uninviting. On either side the houses pressed closer upon them. Touching a wall here and there, John Steele experienced the vague sensation that he had walked that way on other

occasions, long, long ago. Or was it only a bad dream that again stirred him? Through the gulch-like passage swept a cold draft of air; it made little rifts in the fog; showed an entrance, a dim light. At the same time the sound of the footsteps in front abruptly ceased.

For a few minutes Steele waited; he looked toward the place Dandy Joe had entered. It was well-known to him, and, what seemed more important, to Mr. Gillett; the latter would remember it in connection with the 'Frisco Pet; presumably turn to it as a likely spot to search for him who had been forced to leave Captain Forsythe's home. That contingency--nay, probability--had to be considered; the one person he most needed to find had taken refuge in one of the places he would have preferred not to enter. But no time must be lost hesitating; he had to choose. Dismissing all thought of danger from without, thinking only of what lay before him within, he moved quickly forward and tried the door.

It yielded; had Dandy Joe left it unfastened purposely to lure him within, or had his potations made him unmindful? The man outside neither knew nor cared; the mocking consciousness that he had turned that knob before, knew how to proceed, held him. He entered, felt his way in the darkness through winding passages, downward, avoiding a bad step--did he remember even that?

How paltry details stood out! The earthen floor still drowned the sound of footsteps; the narrow hall took the same turns; led on and on in devious fashion until he could hear, like the faint hum of bees, the

distant rumble from the great thoroughfares, somewhere above, that paralleled the course of the river. At the same time a slant of light like a sword, from the crack of a door, gleamed on the dark floor before him; he stepped toward it; the low sound of men's tones could be heard--Joe's; a strange voice! no, a familiar one!--that caused the listener's every fiber to vibrate.

"And what did you say, when he pumped you for the cote?"

"That you would rather call on him."

"And then he cared nought for the job? You're sure"--anxiously--"he wasn't playing to find out?"

The other answered jocosely and walked away; a door closed behind him. For a time the stillness remained unbroken; then a low rattle, as of dice on a table, caused John Steele to glance through a crevice. What he saw seemed to decide him to act quickly; he lifted a latch and stepped in. As he did so a huge man with red hair sprang to his feet; from one great hand the dice fell to the floor; his shaggy jowl drooped. Casting over his shoulder the swift glance of an entrapped animal, he seemed about to leap backward to escape by a rear entrance when the voice of the intruder arrested his purpose, momentarily held him.

"Oh, I'm alone! There are no police outside." He spoke in the dialect of the pick-purse and magsman. To prove it, John Steele stooped and locked

the door.

The small bloodshot eyes lighted with wonder; the heavy brutish jaws began to harden. "Alone?"

The other tossed the key; it fell at the man's feet; John Steele walked over to the opposite door and shot a heavy bolt there. "Looks as if it would hold," he said in thieves' argot as he turned around.

"Are ye a gaby?" The red-headed giant stared ominously at him.

"On the contrary," coolly, "I know very well what I am doing."

A question interlarded with oaths burst from the other's throat; John Steele regarded the man quietly. "I should think it apparent what I want!" he answered. As he spoke, he sat down. "It is you," bending his bright, resolute eyes on the other.

"And you've come alone?" He drew up his ponderous form.

John Steele smiled. "I assure you I welcomed the opportunity."

"You won't long." The great fists closed. "Do you know what I am going to do to you?"

"I haven't any curiosity," still clinging to thieves' jargon or St.

Giles Greek. "But I'm sure you won't play me the trick you did the last time I saw you."

The fellow shot his head near; in his look shone a gleam of recognition. "You're the swell cove who wanted to palaver that night when--"

"You tried to rob me of my purse?"

John Steele laughed; his glance lingered on his bulky adversary with odd, persistent exhilaration, as if after all that had gone before, this contest royal, which promised to become one of sheer brute strength, awoke to its utmost a primal fighting force in him. "Do you know the penalty for attempting that game, Tom Rogers, alias Tom-o'-the-Road; alias---"

The man fell back, in his eyes a look of ferocious wonderment. "Who are you? By---!" he said.

"John Steele."

"John Steele?" The bloodshot eyes became slightly vacuous. "The--? Then you used him," indicating savagely the entrance at the back, "for a duck to uncover?" Steele nodded. "And you're the one who's been so long at my heels?" Rage caused the hot blood to suffuse the man's face. "I'll burke you for that."

John Steele did not stir; for an instant his look, confident, assured, seemed to keep the other back. "How? With the lead, or--"

The fellow lifted his hairy fists. "Those are all I--"

"In that case--" Steele took the weapon, on which his hand had rested, from his pocket; rising with alacrity he placed it on a rickety stand behind him. "You have me a little outclassed; about seventeen stone, I should take it; barely turn thirteen, myself. However," tossing his coat in the corner, "you look a little soft; hardly up to what you were when you got the belt for the heavy-weight championship. Do you remember? The 'Frisco Pet went against you; but he was only a low, ignorant sailor and had let himself get out of form. You beat him, beat him," John Steele's eyes glittered; he touched the other on the arm, "though he fought seventeen good rounds! You stamped the heart out of him, Tom."

The red-headed giant's arms fell to his side. "How do you--"

"I was there!" An odd smile crossed Steele's determined lips. "Lost a little money on that battle. Recall the fourteenth round? He nearly had you; but you played safe in the fifteenth, and then--you sent him down--down," John Steele's voice died away. "It was a long time before he got up," he added, almost absently.

The listener's face had become a study; perplexity mingled with other conflicting emotions. "You know all that--?"

"And all the rest! How for you the fascination of the road became greater than that of the ring; how the old wildness would crop out; how the highway drew you, until--"

"See here, what's your little game? Straight now; quick! You come here, without the police, why?"

John Steele's reply was to the point; he stated exactly what he wanted and what he meant that the other should give him. As the fellow heard, he breathed harder; he held himself in with difficulty.

"And so that's what you've come for, Mister?" he said, a hoarse guffaw falling from the coarse lips. John Steele answered quietly. "And you think there is any chance of your getting it? May I be asking," with an evil grin, "how you expect to make me, Tom Rogers," bringing down his great fist, "do your bidding?"

"In the first place by assuring you no harm shall come to you. It is in my power to avert that, in case you comply. In the second place, you will be given enough sovereigns to--"

"Quids, eh? Let me have sight of them, Mister. We might talk better."

"Do you think I'd bring them here, Tom-o'-the-Road? No, no!" brusily.

"That settles it." The other made a gesture, contemptuous, dissenting.

John Steele's manner changed; he turned suddenly on the fellow like lightning. "In the next place by giving you your choice of doing what I ask, or of being turned over to the traps."

"The traps!" The other fellow's face became contorted. "You mean that you--"

"Will give you up for that little job, unless--"

For answer the man launched his huge body forward, with fierce swinging fists.

What happened thereafter was at once brutish, terrible, Homeric; the fellow's reserves of strength seemed immense; sheer animal rage drove him; he ran amuck with lust to kill. He beat, rushed, strove to close. His opponent's lithe body evaded a clutch that might have ended the contest. John Steele fought without sign of anger, like a machine, wonderfully trained; missing no point, regardless of punishment. He knew that if he went down once, all rules of battle would be discarded; a powerful blow sent him staggering to the wall; he leaned against it an instant; waited, with the strong, impelling look people had noticed on his face when he was fighting in a different way, in the courts.

The other came at him, muttering; the mill had unduly prolonged itself;

he would end it. His fist struck at that face so elusive; but crashed against the wall; like a flash Steele's arm lifted. The great form staggered, fell.

Quickly, however, it rose and the battle was resumed. Now, despite John Steele's vigilance, the two came together. Tom Rogers' arm wound round him with suffocating power; strove, strained, to hurl him to earth. But the other's perfect training, his orderly living, saved him at that crucial moment; his strength of endurance lasted; with a great effort he managed to tear himself loose and at the same time with a powerful upper stroke to send Rogers once more to the floor. Again, however, he got to his feet; John Steele's every muscle ached; his shoulder was bleeding anew. The need for acting quickly, if he should hope to conquer, pressed on him; fortunately Rogers in his blind rage was fighting wildly. John Steele endured blow after blow; then, as through a mist, he found at length the opening he sought; an instant's opportunity on which all depended.

Every fiber of his physical being responded; he threw himself forward, the weight of his body, the force of a culminating impetus, went into his fist; it hit heavily; full on the point of the chin beneath the brutal mouth. Tom Rogers' head shot back as if he had received the blow of a hammer; he threw up his arms; this time he lay where he struck the ground.

John Steele swayed; with an effort he sustained himself. Was it over?

Still Rogers did not move; Steele stooped, felt his heart; it beat slowly. Mechanically, as if hardly knowing what he did, John Steele began to count; "Time!" Rogers continued to lie like a log; his mouth gaped; the blow, in the parlance of the ring, had been a "knock-out"; or, in this case, a *_quid pro quo_*. Yes, the last, but without referee or spectators! The prostrate man did stir now; he groaned; John Steele touched him with his foot.

"Get up," he said.

The other half-raised himself and regarded the speaker with dazed eyes.

"What for?"

John Steele went to the stand, picked up his revolver, and then sat down at a table. "You're as foul a fighter as you ever were," he said contemptuously.

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