

CHAPTER XIX

THE LAST SHIFT

The candle burned low; it threw now on grimy floor and wall the shadows of the two men, one seated at the table, the other not far from it.

Before John Steele lay paper and ink, procured from some niche. He had ceased writing; for the moment he leaned back, his vigilant gaze on the figure near-by. From a corner of the room the rasping sound of a rat, gnawing, broke the stillness, then suddenly ceased.

"Where were you on the night this woman, Amy Gerard, was found dead?"

A momentary expression of surprise, of alarm, crossed the bruised and battered face; it was succeeded by an angry suspicion that glowed from the evil eyes. "You're not trying to fix that job on---"

"You? No."

"Then what did you follow him here for, to pump me? The Yankee that got transported is--"

"As alive as when he stepped before you in the ring!"

"Alive?" The fellow stared. "Not in England? It was death for him to

come back!"

"Never mind his whereabouts."

The man looked at Steele closer. "Blame, if there isn't something about you that puzzles me," he said.

"What?" laconically.

The fellow shook his head. "And so he's hired you?"

"Not exactly. Although I may say I represent him."

"Well, he got a good one. You know how to use your fists, Mister."

"Better than this 'Frisco Pet did once, eh, Tom?" The man frowned. "But to return to the subject in hand. That question you seemed afraid to answer just now was superfluous; I know where you were the night the woman was shot."

"You do?"

"Yes; you were--" John Steele leaned forward and said something softly.

"How'd you find that out?" asked the man.

"The 'Frisco Pet knew where you were all the time; but did not speak, because he did not wish to get you into trouble. Also, because he did not know, then, what he long afterward learned,--indirectly!--that you could have cleared him!"

"Indirectly? I? What do you--?"

"Through your once having dropped a few words. Wine in, wits out!"

The fellow scowled; edged his chair closer.

"Keep where you are!" John Steele's hand touched the revolver now on the table before him; even as it did so, the room seemed to sway, and it was only by a strong effort of will he kept his attention on the matter in hand, fought down the dizziness. "And let's get through with this! I don't care to waste much more of my time on you."

"You're sure nothing will happen to me, if--" The man watched him closer.

"This paper need never be made public."

"Then what--"

"That's my business. It might be useful in certain contingencies."

"Such as the police discovering he hadn't gone to Davy Jones' locker?" shrewdly.

John Steele's answer was short, as if he found this verbal contest trite, paltry, after the physical struggle that had preceded it.

"And what am I to get if I do what you--" The pupils of the fellow's eyes, fastened on him, were now like pin-points.

The other smiled grimly; this bargaining and trafficking with such a man, in a place so foul! It seemed grotesque, incongruous; and yet was, withal, so momentous. He knew just what Rogers should say; what he would force him to do! In his overwrought state he overlooked one or two points that would not have escaped him at another time: a certain craftiness, or low cunning that played occasionally on that disfigured face.

"What did you say I was to get if--"

"You shall have funds to take you out of the country, and I will engage to get and forward to you the money left in trust. The alternative," he bent forward, "about fifteen years, if the traps--"

The fellow pondered; at last he answered. For a few minutes then John Steele wrote, looking up between words. His head bent now closer to the paper, then drew back from it, as if through a slight uncertainty of

vision or because of the dim light. The fellow's eyes, watching him, lowered.

"You know--none better!--that on that particular night some one else--some one besides the 'Frisco Pet--entered your mother's house?"

Oaths mingled with low filchers' slang; but the reply was forthcoming; other questions, too, were answered tentatively; sometimes at length, with repulsive fullness of detail. The speaker hesitated over words, shot sharp, short looks at the other; from the hand that wrote, to the fingers near that other object,--strong, firm fingers that seemed ready to leap; ready to act on any emergency. Unless--a shadow appeared to pass over the broad, white brow, the motionless hand to waver, ever so little. Then quickly the hand moved, rested on the brown handle of the weapon, enveloped it with light careless grasp.

"You can state of your own knowledge what happened next?" John Steele spoke sharply; the fellow's red brows suddenly lifted.

"Oh, yes," he replied readily.

John Steele's manner became shorter; his questions were put fast; he forced quick replies. He not only seemed striving to get through his task as soon as possible; but always to hold the other's attention, to permit his brain no chance to wander from the subject to any other. But the fellow seemed now to have become as tractable as before he had been

sullen, stubborn; gave his version in his own vernacular, always keenly attentive, observant of the other's every motion. His strength had apparently returned; he seemed little the worse for his late encounter. At length came an interval; just for an instant John Steele's eyes shut; the fingers that had held the pen closed on the edge of the table. A quick passing expression of ferocity hovered at the corners of the observer's thick lips; he got up; at the same time John Steele rose and stepped abruptly back.

"You know how to write your name?" His voice was firm, unwavering; the revolver had disappeared from the table and lay now in his pocket.

"All right, gov'ner!" The other spoke with alacrity. "I'm game; a bargain is a bargain, and I'll take your word for it," leaning over and laboriously tracing a few letters on the paper. "You'll do your part. You'll find me square and above board, although you did use me a little rough. There, here's your affadavy."

John Steele moved back to a corner of the room and pulled a wire; in some far-away place a bell rang faintly. "Are----," he spoke a woman's name, obviously a sobriquet, "and her daughter still here?"

"How?"

"Never mind; answer."

"Yes, they're here, gov'ner. You'll want them for witnesses, I suppose. Well, I'll not be gainsaying you." His tones were loud; conveyed a sense of rough heartiness; the other made no reply.

Not long after, the paper, duly witnessed, lay on the table; the landlady and her daughter had gone; John Steele only waited for the ink to dry. He had no blotter, or sand; the fluid was old, thick; the principal signature in its big strokes, with here and there a splutter, would be unintelligible if the paper were folded now. So he lingered; both men were silent; a few tense minutes passed. John Steele leaned against the wall; his temples throbbed; the fog seemed creeping into the room and yet the door was closed. He moved toward the paper; still maintaining an aspect of outward vigilance, took it and held it before him as if to examine closer.

The other said nothing, made no movement. When the women had come in, his accents had been almost too frank; the gentleman had called on a little matter of business; he, Tom Rogers, had voluntarily signed this little paper, and they could bear witness to the fact. Now all that profanely free air had left him; he stood like a statue, his lips compressed; his eyes alone were alive, speaking, alert.

John Steele folded the paper and placed it in an inside pocket. The other suddenly breathed heavily; John Steele, looking at him, walked to the door leading to the street. He put his hand on the key and was about to turn it, but paused. Something without held his attention,--a

crunching sound as of a foot on a pebble. It abruptly revived misgivings that had assailed him before entering the place, that he had felt as a vague weight while dealing with the fellow. The police agent! Time had passed, too great an interval, though he had hastened, hastened as best he might, struggling with his own growing weakness, the other's reviving power.

Again the sound! Involuntarily he turned his head; it was only an instant's inattention, but Tom Rogers had been waiting for it. Springing behind in a flash, he seized John Steele by the throat. It was a deadly, terrible grip; the fingers pressed harder; the other strove, but slowly fell. As dizziness began to merge into oblivion, Rogers, without releasing his hold, bent over.

"You fool! Did you think I would let you get away with the paper? That I couldn't see you were about done for?"

He looked at the white face; started to unbutton the coat; as he reached in, his attention was suddenly arrested; he threw back his head.

"The traps!"

Voices below resounded without.

"So that was your game! Well," savagely, "I think I have settled with you."

He had but time to run to the rear door, unbolt it and dash out, when a crashing of woodwork filled the place, and Mr. Gillett looked in.

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