

CHAPTER XX

THE PAPER

When John Steele began to recover, he was dimly aware that he was in a four-wheeler which rattled along slowly through streets, now slightly more discernible; by his side sat a figure that stirred when he did; spoke in crisp, official accents. He, Mr. Steele, would kindly not place any further obstacles in the way of justice being done; it was useless to attempt that; the police agent had come well armed, and, moreover, had taken the precaution for this little journey of providing a cab in front and one behind, containing those who knew how to act should the necessity arise.

John Steele heard these words without answering; his throat pained him; he could scarcely swallow; his head seemed bound around as by a tight, inflexible band. The cool air, however, gradually revived him; he drank it in gratefully and strove to think. A realization of what had occurred surged through his brain,--the abrupt attack at the door; the arrival of the police agent.

Furtively the prisoner felt his pocket; the memorandum book containing the paper that had cost so much was gone; he looked at the agent. Had it been shifted to Mr. Gillett's possession, or, dimly he recalled his assailant's last words, had Rogers succeeded in snatching the precious

evidence from his breast before escaping? In the latter case, it had, undoubtedly, ere this, been destroyed; in the former, it would, presumably, soon be transferred to the police agent's employer. To regain the paper, if it existed, would be no light task; yet it was the pivot upon which John Steele's fortunes hung. The principal signer was, in all likelihood, making his way out of London now; he would, in a few hours, reach the sea, and after that disappear from the case. At any rate, John Steele could have nothing to hope from him in the future; the opportune or inopportune appearance of the police agent would savor of treachery to him. John Steele moved, quickly, impatiently; but a hand, swung carelessly behind him, moved also,--a hand that held something hard.

Thereafter he remained outwardly quiescent; resistance on his part, and the consequences that would ensue, might not be displeasing to his chief enemy; it would settle the case in short and summary fashion.

Justification for extreme proceedings would be easily forthcoming and there would be none to answer for John Steele.

Where were they going? John Steele could not surmise; he saw, however that they had left behind the neighborhood of hovels, narrow passages and byways, and traversed now one of the principal circuses. There the street traffic moved smoothly; they seemed but an unimportant part of an endless procession which they soon left to turn into a less public, more aristocratic highway. A short distance down this street, the carriages suddenly stopped before an eminently respectable and sedate front, and,

not long after, John Steele, somewhat to his surprise, found himself in Lord Ronsdale's rooms and that person's presence.

The nobleman had been forewarned of John Steele's coming. He sat behind a high desk, his figure and part of his face screened by its massive back. One drawer of the desk was slightly opened. What could be seen of his features appeared sharper than usual, as if the inner virulence, the dark hidden passions smoldering in his breast had at length stamped their impression on the outer man. When he first spoke his tones were more irascible, less icily imperturbable, than they had been hitherto. They seemed to tell of a secret tension he had long been laboring under; but the steady cold eyes looked out from behind the wood barrier with vicious assurance.

The police agent he addressed first; his services could be dispensed with for the present; he should, however, remain in the hall with his men. Mr. Gillett looked from the speaker to him he had brought there and after a moment turned and obeyed; but the instant's hesitation seemed to say that he began to realize there was more to the affair than he had fathomed.

"There is no need for many words between us, Mr. Steele." Lord Ronsdale's accents were poignant and sharp. "Had you listened to what Mr. Gillett, on my behalf, would have said to you that night in the gardens at Strathorn House, we might, possibly, both of us, have been saved some little annoyance. We now start at about where we were before

that little contretemps."

John Steele silently looked at Lord Ronsdale; his brain had again become clear; his thoughts, lucid. The ride through the cool and damp air, this outré encounter at the end of the journey, had acted as a tonic on jaded sense and faculty. He saw distinctly, heard very plainly; his ideas began to marshal themselves logically. He could have laughed at Lord Ronsdale, but the situation was too serious; the weakness of his defenses too obvious. Proofs, proofs, proofs, were what the English jury demanded, and where were his? He could build up a story; yes, but--if he could have known what had taken place between Mr. Gillett and this man a few minutes before, when the police agent had stepped in first and tarried here a brief period before ushering him in!

Had Mr. Gillett delivered to his noble patron the memorandum book and other articles filched from John Steele's pockets? That partly opened drawer--what did it contain? The nobleman's hand lingered on the edge of it; with an effort the other resisted allowing his glance to rest there.

He even refused to smile when Lord Ronsdale, after a sharper look, asked him to be seated; he seemed to sift and weigh the pros and cons of the invitation in a curious, calm fashion; as if he felt himself there in some impersonal capacity for the purpose of solving a difficult catechetical problem.

"Yes; I think I will." He sat down in a stiff, straight-backed chair; it

may be he felt the need of holding in reserve all his physical force, of not refusing to rest, even here.

Lord Ronsdale's glance narrowed; he hesitated an instant. "To go back to Strathorn House--a very beautiful place to go back to," his tones for the moment lapsed to that high pitch they sometimes assumed, "Mr Gillett had there received from me certain instructions. Whatever you once were," seeming not to notice the other's expression, "you have since by your own efforts attained much. How--?" His brows knit as at something inexplicable. "But the fact remained, was perhaps considered. Exposure would have meant some--unpleasantness for your friends." The eyes of the two men met; those of Lord Ronsdale were full of sardonic meaning. "Friends who had trusted you; who," softly, "had admitted you to their firesides, not knowing--" he broke off. "They," he still adhered to the plural, "would have been deeply shocked, pained; would still be if they should learn--"

"If?" John Steele did manage to contain himself, but it was with an effort; perhaps he saw again through the fog a girl's face, white and accusing, which had appeared; vanished. "You spoke of certain instructions?" he even forced himself to say.

"Mr. Gillett, in the garden at Strathorn House, was authorized by me to offer you one chance of avoiding exposure, and," deliberately, "the attendant consequences; you were to be suffered to leave London, this country, with the stipulation that you should never return." John Steele

shifted slightly. "You did not expect this," quickly, "you had not included that contingency in your calculations?"

"I confess," in an even, emotionless voice, "your lordship's complaisance amazes me."

"And you would have accepted the alternative?" The nobleman's accents were now those of the service, diplomatic; they were concise but measured.

"Why discuss what could never have been considered?" was the brusque answer.

Lord Ronsdale frowned. "We are still fencing; we will waste no more time." Perhaps the other's manner, assured, contemptuously distant, goaded him; perhaps he experienced anew all that first violent, unreasoning anger against this man whose unexpected coming to London had plunged him into an unwelcome and irritating role. "That alternative is still open. Refuse, and--you will be in the hands of the authorities to-night. Resist--" His glittering eyes left no doubt whatever as to his meaning.

"I shall not resist," said John Steele. "But--I refuse." He spoke recklessly, regardlessly.

"In that case--" Lord Ronsdale half rose; his face looked drawn but

determined; he reached as if to touch a bell. "You force the issue, and--"

"One moment." As he spoke John Steele stepped toward the fireplace; he gazed downward at a tiny white ash on the glowing coals; a little film that might have been--paper? "In a matter so important we may consider a little longer, lest," still regarding the hearth, "there may be after-regrets." His words even to himself sounded puerile; but what they led to had more poignancy; he lifted now his keen glowing eyes. "In one little regard I did your lordship an injustice."

"In what way?" The nobleman had been studying him closely, had followed the direction of his glance; noted almost questioningly what it had rested on--the coals, or vacancy?

"In supposing that you yourself murdered Amy Gerard," came the unexpected response. The other started violently. "Your lordship will forgive the assumption in view of what occurred on a certain stormy night at sea, when a drowning wretch clung with one hand to a gunwale, and you, in answer to his appeal for succor, bent over and--"

"It's a lie!" The words fell in a sharp whisper.

"What?" John Steele's laugh sounded mirthlessly. "However, we will give a charitable interpretation to the act; the boat was already overcrowded; one more might have endangered all. Call it an impulse of

self-preservation. Self-preservation," he repeated; "the struggle of the survival of the fittest! Let the episode go. Especially as your lordship incidentally did me a great service; a very great service." The other stared at him. "I should have looked at it only in that light, and then it would not have played me the trick it did of affording a false hypothesis for a certain conclusion. Your lordship knows what I mean, how the true facts in this case of Amy Gerard have come to light?"

John Steele's glance was straight, direct; if the other had the paper, had read it, he would know.

Lord Ronsdale looked toward the bell, hesitated. "I think you had better tell me," he said at last.

"If your lordship did not kill the woman--if the 'Frisco Pet did not, then who did?" Ronsdale leaned forward just in the least; his eyes seemed to look into the other's as if to ask how much, just what, he had learned. John Steele studied the nobleman with a purpose of his own. "Why, she killed herself," he said suddenly.

"How?" The nobleman uttered this word, then stopped; John Steele waited. Had Lord Ronsdale been surprised at his knowledge? He could hardly tell, from his manner, whether or not he had the affidavit and had read it.

"How--interesting!" The nobleman was willing to continue the verbal contest a little longer; that seemed a point gained. "May I ask how it

occurred?"

"Oh, it is all very commonplace! Your lordship had received a threatening letter and called on the woman. She wanted money; you refused. She already had a husband living in France, a ruined gambler of the Bourse, but had tricked you into thinking she was your wife. You had discovered the deception and discarded her. From a music-hall singer she had gone down--down, until she, once beautiful, courted, had become a mere--what she was, associate of one like Dandy Joe, cunning, unscrupulous. At your refusal to become the victim of their blackmailing scheme, she in her anger seized a weapon; during the struggle, it was accidentally discharged."

Was Lord Ronsdale asking himself how the other had learned this? If Rogers had escaped with the paper, John Steele knew Ronsdale might well wonder that the actual truth should have been discovered; he would not, under those circumstances, even be aware of the existence of a witness of the tragedy. But was Lord Ronsdale assuming a manner, meeting subtlety with subtlety? John Steele went on quietly, studying his enemy with close, attentive gaze.

"At sound of the shot, Joe, who had been waiting below in the kitchen with the landlady, rushed up-stairs. You explained how it happened; were willing enough to give money now to get away quietly without being dragged into the affair. The dead woman's confederate, greedy for gain even at such a moment, would have helped you; but there was a

difficulty: would the police accept the story of suicide? There were signs of a struggle. At that instant some one entered the house, came stumbling up the stairs; it was the--'Frisco Pet.'

John Steele paused; his listener sat stiff, immovable. "Joe hurried you out, toward a rear exit, but not before," leaning slightly toward Lord Ronsdale, "an impression of your face, pale, drawn, had vaguely stamped itself on the befuddled brain," bitterly, "of the fool-brute. You lost no time in making your escape; little was said between you and Joe; but he proved amenable to your suggestion; the way out of the difficulty was found. He hated the Pet, who had once or twice handled him roughly for abusing this poor creature. You gave Joe money to have the landlady's testimony agree with his; she never got that money," meaningly, "but gave the desired evidence. Joe had found out something."

Once more the speaker stopped; there remained a crucial test. If Lord Ronsdale had the paper, what John Steele was about to say would cause him no surprise; he would be prepared for it. The words fell sharply:

"The landlady's son, Tom Rogers, was at the time in the house, in hiding from the police. He was concealed above in a small room or garret; through a stove-pipe opening, disused, he looked down into the sitting-room below and heard, saw all!"

The effect was instantaneous, magical; Lord Ronsdale sprang to his feet; John Steele looked at him, at the wavering face, the uncertain eyes. No

doubt existed now in his mind; Gillett had not secured the paper, or he would have given it to his patron when they were alone. That fact was patent; the document was gone, irretrievably; there could be no hope of recovering it. The bitter knowledge that it had really once existed would not serve John Steele long. But with seeming resolution he went on: "I had the story from his own lips," deliberately, "put in the form of an affidavit, duly signed and witnessed."

"You did?" Lord Ronsdale stared at him a long time. "This is a subterfuge."

"It is true."

"Where--is the paper?"

"Not in my pocket."

The other considered. "You mean it is in a safe place?"

"One would naturally take care of such a document."

"You did not have any such paper at Strathorn."

"No?" John Steele smiled but he did not feel like smiling. "Not there certainly."

"I mean no such paper existed then, or you would have taken advantage of it."

John Steele did not answer; he looked at the drawer. The affidavit was not there; but something else was.

"You are resourceful, that is all."

Lord Ronsdale had now quite recovered himself; he sank back into his chair. "You have, out of fancy, constructed a libelous theory; one that you can not prove; one that you would be laughed at for advancing. A cock-and-bull story about a witness who was not a witness; a paper that doesn't exist, that never existed."

A sound at the door caused him to turn sharply; a knocking had passed unheeded. The door opened, closed. Mr. Gillett, a troubled, perturbed look on his face, stood now just within. "Your lordship!"

"Well?" the nobleman's manner was peremptory.

The police agent, however, came forward slowly. "I have here something that one of our men has just turned over to me." John Steele started; but neither of the others noticed. "He found it at the last place we were; evidently it had been dropped by the fellow who was there and who fled at our coming." As he spoke, he stepped nearer the desk, in his hand a paper.

"What is it?" Lord Ronsdale demanded testily.

Mr. Gillett did not at once answer; he looked at John Steele; the latter stood like a statue; only his eyes were turned toward the nobleman, to the thin aristocratic hand yet resting on the edge of the drawer.

"If your lordship will glance at it?" said Mr. Gillett, proffering the sheet.

The nobleman did so; his face changed; his eyes seemed unable to leave the paper. Suddenly he gave a smothered explanation; tore the sheet once, and started up, took a step toward the fire.

"Stop!" The voice was John Steele's; he stood now next to the partly-opened drawer, in his hand that which had been concealed there, something bright, shining. Lord Ronsdale wheeled, looked at the weapon and into the eyes behind it. "Place those two bits of paper there--on the edge of the desk!"

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