

CHAPTER XXI

A CONDITION

Lord Ronsdale hesitated; his thin jaws were set so that the bones of the cheek showed; his eyes gleamed. When he did move it was as if blindly, precipitately, to carry out his first impulse.

"I wouldn't!" What John Steele held vaguely included, in the radius of its possibilities, Mr. Gillett. "Unless--"

"You wouldn't dare!" Lord Ronsdale trembled, but with impotent passion, not fear. "It would be--"

"Self-defense! The paper would remain--full vindication. In fact the paper already is mine. Whether I kill you or not is merely incidental. And to tell you the truth I don't much care how you decide!"

Again Lord Ronsdale seemed almost to forget caution; almost, but not quite; perhaps he was deterred by the look on John Steele's face, scornful, mocking, as half-inviting him to cast all prudence to the winds. This bit of evidence that he had not calculated upon, it was hard to give it up; but no other course remained. Besides, another, Gillett, knew of its existence; Lord Ronsdale felt he could not depend on that person in an emergency of this kind; the police agent's manner was not

reassuring. He seemed inclined to be more passive than aggressive; perhaps he had been somewhat overcome by this unexpected revelation and the deep waters he who boasted of an "eminently respectable and reputable agency" had unwittingly drifted into; in climaxes of this character one's thoughts are likely to center on self, to the exclusion of patron or employer, however noble. The police agent looked at Ronsdale and waited to see what he would do.

The nobleman moved toward the desk; the paper fluttered from his cold fingers; when once more John Steele buttoned his coat the affidavit had again found lodgment in his waistcoat pocket.

It seemed a tame, commonplace end; but it was the end; all three men knew it. John Steele's burning glance swept from Lord Ronsdale to Gillett; lingered with mute contemplation. What now remained to be done should be easily, it seemed almost too easily, accomplished. He felt like one lingering on the stage after the curtain had gone down; the varied excitement, the fierce play of emotion was over; the actors hardly appeared interesting.

What he said was for Lord Ronsdale alone; after Gillett had gone, he laid down a condition. In certain respects it was a moment of triumph; but he experienced no exultation, only a supreme weariness, an anxiety to be done with the affair, to go. But the one point had first to be made, emphasized; to be accepted by the other violently, quietly, resignedly,--John Steele did not care what his attitude might be; what

he chiefly felt was that he did not wish to waste much time on him.

"And if I refuse to let you dictate in a purely private concern?" Lord Ronsdale, white with passion, had answered.

"The end will be the same for you. As matters stand, Sir Charles no doubt thinks still that you would make a desirable _parti_ for his niece. His wife, Lady Wray, unquestionably shares that opinion. Their combined influence might in time prevail, and Jocelyn Wray yield to their united wishes. This misfortune," with cutting deadliness of tone, "it is obvious must be averted. You will consent to withdraw all pretensions in that direction, or you will force me to make public this paper. A full exposition of the case I think would materially affect Sir Charles and Lady Wray's attitude as to the desirability of an alliance between their family and yours."

"And yourself? You forget," with a sneer, "how it would affect you!"

"Myself!" John Steele laughed. "You fool! Do you imagine I would hesitate for that reason?"

The nobleman looked at him, at the glowing, contemptuous eyes.

"Hesitate? Perhaps not! You love her yourself, and--"

John Steele stepped toward him. "Stop, or--I have once been almost on the point of killing you to-night--don't--" he broke off. "The

condition? You consent or not?"

"And if I--? You would--?"

"Keep your cowardly secret? Yes!"

To this the other had replied; of necessity the scene had dragged along a little farther; then John Steele found himself on the stairway, going down.

It was over, this long, stubborn contest; he hardly heard or saw a cab drive up and stop before the house as he went out to the street, was scarcely conscious of some one leaving it, some one about to enter who suddenly stopped at sight of him and exclaimed eagerly, warmly. He was not surprised; with apathy he listened to the new-comer's words; rambling, disconnected, about a letter that had intercepted him at Brighton and brought him post-haste to London.

A letter? John Steele had entered the cab; he sank back; when had he written a letter? Weeks ago; he looked at this face, familiar, far-off; the fog was again rising around him. He could hardly see; he was glad he did not have to stir; he seemed to breathe with difficulty.

"Where--are we going?"

"To Rosemary Villa."

"I--should prefer--my own chambers"--John Steele spoke with an effort--"it is nearer--and I'm a bit done up. Besides, after a little rest, there are--some business matters--to be attended to--that will need looking after as soon as--"

His head fell forward; Captain Forsythe looked at him; called up loudly, excitedly to the driver.

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