

CHAPTER XXII

NEAR THE RIVER

A dubious sort of day, one that seemed vainly trying to appear cheerful! A day that threw out half-promises, that showed tentatively on the sky a mottled blur where the sun should have been! On such a day, a month after that night in Lord Ronsdale's rooms, Captain Forsythe, calling on John Steele, found himself admitted to the sitting-room. While waiting for an answer to his request to see Mr. Steele, he gazed disapprovingly around him. The rooms were partly dismantled; a number of boxes littering the place indicating preparations to move. Captain Forsythe surveyed these cases, more or less filled; then he shook his head and lighted a cigar. But as he smoked he seemed asking himself a question; he had not yet found the answer when a footstep was heard and the subject of his ruminations entered the room. John Steele's face was paler than it had been; thinner, like that of a man who had recently suffered some severe illness.

"Ah, Forsythe!" he said, with an assumption of cheeriness. "So good of you!"

"That's all very well," was the answer. "But what about those?" With his cigar he indicated vaguely the boxes.

"Those? Not yet all packed, are they? Lazy beggars, your London servants, just before leaving you!" he laughed.

"See here!" Forsythe looked at him. "You're not well enough yet to--"

"Never felt better!"

"No chance to get you to change your mind, I suppose?"

"Not in the least!"

For a few moments Forsythe said nothing; then, "Weed?" he asked, offering Steele a cigar.

"Don't believe I'll begin just yet a while."

"Oh!" significantly. "Quite fit, eh?" Forsythe's tone sounded, in the least, scoffing; John Steele went to the window; stood with his back to it. A short time passed; the military man puffed more quickly. It seemed the irony of fate, or friendship, that now that he was just beginning to get better acquainted with Steele the latter should inconsistently determine to leave London.

"Anything I can do for you when you're away?" began Captain Forsythe.

"Command me, if there is. Needn't say--"

"There's only one thing," John Steele looked at him; his voice was steady, quiet. "And we've already spoken about that. You will let me know if Ronsdale doesn't keep to the letter of the condition?"

"Very well." Captain Forsythe's expression changed slightly, but the other did not appear to notice. "Although I don't imagine the contingency will arise," he added vaguely, looking at his cigar rather than John Steele.

"Nevertheless I shall leave with you certified copies of all the papers," said Steele in a short matter-of-fact tone. "These, together with the one you furnished me, are absolutely conclusive."

"The one I furnished you!" Captain Forsythe rested his chin on the knob of his stick. "Odd about that, wasn't it?--that the day in the library at Strathorn House, when I was about to tell you how I had better success the second time I visited the landlady, we should have been interrupted. And," looking at the other furtively, "by Jocelyn Wray!" Steele did not answer. "If I had only seen the drift of your inquiries, had detected more than a mere perfunctory interest! With the confession given me on her death-bed by the landlady, that she had testified falsely to protect her good-for-nothing son, and acknowledging that another whom she did not know by name, but whom she described minutely, had entered the house on the fatal night--with this confession in your hands, a world of trouble might have been saved. As it is," he ended half-ruefully, "you have found me most unlike the proverbial friend in

need, who is--"

"A friend, indeed!" said John Steele, placing a hand on the other's shoulder, while a smile, somewhat constrained, lighted his face for a moment. "Who at once rose to the occasion; hastened to London on the receipt of a letter that was surely a test of friendship--"

"Oh, I don't know about that!" quickly. "Test of friendship, indeed!" Captain Forsythe looked slightly embarrassed beneath the keen searching eyes. "Don't think of it, or--Besides," brightening, "I had to come; telegram from Miss Wray, don't you know."

"Miss Wray!" Steele's hand fell suddenly to his side; he looked with abrupt, swift inquiry at the other.

Captain Forsythe bit his lips. "By Jove!--forgot--" he murmured. "Wasn't to say anything about that."

"However, as you have--" John Steele regarded him steadily. "You received a telegram from--"

"At the same time that your letter intercepted me at Brighton."

"Asking you to return to London?"

"Exactly. She--wanted to see me."

"About?" John Steele's eyes asked a question; the other nodded. "Of course; not difficult to understand; her desire to hush up the affair; her fear," with a short laugh, "lest the scandal become known. A guest at Strathorn House had been--"

"I don't think it was for--"

"You found out," shortly, "that she, too, had learned--knew--"

"Yes; she made me aware of that at once when she came to see me with Sir Charles. It was she sent your luggage--"

"Sir Charles? Then he, also?--"

"No. You--you need feel no apprehension on that score." A peculiar expression came into the other's glance. "You see his niece told him it was not her secret; asked him to help her, to trust her. Never was a man more perplexed, but he kept the word he gave her on leaving for London, and forebore to question her. Even when they drove through London in that fog--"

"Yes, yes. I know--"

"You? How--?"

John Steele seemed not to hear. "She saw you that night?"

"She did, alone in the garden of Rosemary Villa. Sir Charles behaved splendidly. 'All right, my dear; some day you'll tell me, perhaps,' he said to her. 'Meanwhile, I'll possess my soul in patience.' So while he smoked in the cab, we talked it over." An instant he regarded John Steele as if inviting him to look behind these mere words; but John Steele's half-averted face appeared set, uncommunicative. Perhaps again he saw the girl as he had last seen her at Strathorn House; her features, alive, alight, with scorn and wounded pride.

"Well?" he said shortly. "And the upshot of it all was--"

"She suggested my going to Lord Ronsdale."

"To invoke his assistance, perhaps!" Steele once more laughed. "As an old friend!" Captain Forsythe started to speak; the other went on:

"Well, we'll keep his secret, as long as he keeps his compact."

"But--"

"I promised. What does it matter? Sir Charles may be disappointed at not being able to bring about--But for her sake--that is the main consideration."

"And you, the question of your own innocence--to her?" Forsythe looked

at him narrowly, smiled slightly to himself.

"Is--inconsequential! The main point is--the 'Frisco Pet is dead. Gillett won't speak; you won't; Lord Ronsdale can't. Another to whom I am about to tell the story, will, I am sure, be equally silent."

"Another? You don't mean to say you are deliberately going to--" Captain Forsythe frowned; a bell rang.

John Steele smiled. "Can you think of no one to whom I am bound to tell the truth, the whole truth? Who extended me his hand in friendship, invited me to his home? Of course it would be easier to go without speaking; it is rather difficult to own that one has accepted a man's hospitality, stepped beneath his roof and sat at his board, as--not to mince words--an impostor. I could have delegated you--to tell him all; but that wouldn't do. It is probably a part of the old, old debt; but I must meet him face to face; so I have sent for--"

A servant opened the door of the library; Sir Charles Wray walked in.

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Below, in the cab, Jocelyn waited; her pale face expressed restlessness; her eyes, deep and shining, were bent on the river, fixed unseeingly on a small boat that struggled, struggled almost in vain, against the current. Then they lowered to something she held in her hand, a bit of

crumpled paper. It was John Steele's note to Sir Charles asking him to call; stating nothing beyond a mere perfunctory request to that end, giving no reason for his wish to see him.

Her eyes lingered on the message; beneath the bright golden hair, her brows drew together. The handwriting was in the least unlike his, not quite so bold and firm as that she remembered in one or two messages from him to her--some time ago. But then he had been ill, Captain Forsythe had told her, and was still, he thought, far from well.

She made a movement; the little fingers crumpled the message; then one of them thrust it within her glove. She continued to sit motionless, how long? The small boat, with sail at the bow and plodding oar at stern, at length drew out of sight; the paper made itself felt in her warm palm. Why did not her uncle return? He had been gone some time now; what--what could detain him?

"Can you drop in at my chambers for a few minutes?" John Steele had written. "A few minutes;" the blue eyes shone with impatience. He was leaving London, Captain Forsythe had informed her; and, she concluded, he wanted to see her uncle before he left. But not her, no; she had driven there, however, with Sir Charles, on some light pretext--for want of something better to do--to be out in the air--

"I'll wait here in the cab," she had said to her uncle, when he had left it before John Steele's dwelling. "At least," meeting the puzzled gaze

that had rested on her more than once lately, "I may, or may not wait. If I get tired--if when you come back, you don't find me, just conclude," capriciously, "I have gone on some little errand of my own. Shopping, perhaps."

"Jocelyn!" he had said, momentarily held by her eyes, her feverish manner. "There is something wrong, isn't there? Hasn't the time come yet, to tell?"

"Something wrong? What nonsense!" she had laughed.

She recalled these words now, found it intolerable to sit still. Abruptly she rose and stepped from the cab.

"My uncle is gone a long while," she said to the man, up behind.

"Oh, no, miss; not so werry!" consulting a watch. "A matter of ten minutes; no more."

No more! She half started to move away; looked toward the house. Brass plates, variously disposed around the entrance and appearing nearly all alike as to form and size, stared at her. One metal sign a shock-headed lad was removing--"John Steele"--she read the plain, modest letters, the inscription, "Barrister" beneath; she caught her breath slightly.

"He certainly is very long," she repeated mechanically.

"Why don't you go in and see wot's detaining of him?" vouchsafed the cabby in amicable fashion as he regarded the hesitating, slender figure. "That's wot my missus allus does, when she thinks the occasion--which I'll not be mentioning--the proper one."

"Third floor to the right, miss!" said the boy, occupied in removing the sign and stepping aside as he spoke, to allow her to pass. "If it's Mr. Steele's office you're looking for! You'll see 'Barrister' in brass letters, as I said to the old gentleman; I haven't got at them yet; to take them down, I mean."

"Thank you," she said irresolutely, and without intending to enter, found herself within the hall. There a narrow stairway lay before her; he pointed to it; with an excess of juvenile solicitude and politeness, boyhood's involuntary tribute to youth and beauty in need of assistance, he told her to go on, "straight up."

And she did, unreasoningly, mechanically; one flight, two flights! The steps were well worn; how many people had walked up and down here carrying burdens with them. Poor people, crime-laden people! Before many doors, she saw other signs, "Barristers." And of that multitude of clients, how many left these offices with heavy hearts! In that dim, vague light of stairway and landings she seemed to feel, to see, a ghostly procession, sad-eyed, weary. But Captain Forsythe had said that John Steele had helped many, many. Her own heart seemed strangely inert,

without life; she stood suddenly still, as if asking herself why she was there.

Near his door! About to turn, to retrace her steps--an illogical sequence to the illogical action that had preceded it, she was held to the spot by the door suddenly opening; a man--a servant, broom in hand--who had evidently been engaged in cleaning one of the chambers within, was stepping out! In surprise he regarded her, this unusual type of visitor, simply yet perfectly gowned. A lady, or a girl--patrician, aristocratic to her finger-tips; very fair, striking to look upon! So different from most of the people who came hither to air their troubles, to seek assistance.

"You wished to see Mr. Steele?"

For an instant the servant's words and his direct, almost challenging look held the girl. Usually self-contained as she was, she felt that perhaps he had caught some fleeting expression in her eyes, when at his abrupt appearance she had lifted them with a start from the brass letters. The proud head nodded affirmatively to the inquiry.

"Well, you can be stepping into the library, miss," said the man. "Mr. Steele is engaged just now; but--"

"That is just it," she said, straightening. "My uncle is with him, and I wished to see--"

"If you will walk in," he said. "You can wait here."

Jocelyn on the instant found no reason for refusing; the door closed behind her; she looked around. She stood in a library alone; beyond, in another chamber, she heard voices--her uncle's, John Steele's.

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