CHAPTER XXIII

PAST AND PRESENT

And yet those tones were not exactly like John Steele's; they sounded familiar, yet different. What made the difference? His recent illness? The character of what he was saying, the fact that he represented himself, not another, in this case? He was speaking quickly, clearly, tersely. Very tersely, thought the girl; not, however, to spare himself; a covert ring of self-scorn precluded that idea.

"Those boxes contained books; yours, Sir Charles!" were the first words the girl caught.

"Mine! Bless my soul!" Her uncle's surprised voice broke in. "You don't mean to tell me that all those volumes I had boxed for Australia and which I thought lost on the _Lord Nelson_ came ashore on your little coral isle?"

Came ashore on his coral isle; the girl caught at the words. Of course he had been saved, he who had saved her from the wild sea; she had realized that after their last meeting at Strathorn House. But how? He had reached an island, then--by what means? Some day her uncle would tell her; she understood now why he had sent for Sir Charles, the motive that had prompted him to an ordeal, not at all easy. She was glad; she

would never have told herself, and yet she could realize, divine, the poignant pain this lifting of the curtain, this laying bare the past, must cost him. She, too, seemed to feel a part of that pain; why? It was unaccountable.

"Exactly!" said John Steele succinctly. "And never were angels in disguise more foully welcomed!"

"Bless my soul!" Sir Charles' amazed voice could only repeat. "I remember most of those books well--a brave array; poets, philosophers, lawmakers! Then that accounts for your--! It is like a fairy tale."

"A fairy tale!" Jocelyn Wray gazed around her; at books, books, on every side. She regarded the door leading out; was half-mindful to go; but heard the man-servant in the hall--and lingered.

"Nothing so pleasant, I assure you," John Steele answered Sir Charles shortly. Then with few words he painted a picture uncompromisingly; the girl shrank back; perhaps she wished she had not come. This, truly, was no fairy tale, but a wild, savage drama, primeval, the picture of a soul battling with itself on the little lonely isle. She could see the hot, angry sun, feel its scorching rays, hear the hissing of the waves. All the man's strength for good, for ill, went into the story; the isle became as the pit of Acheron; at first there were no stars overhead. The girl was very pale; she could not have left now; she had never imagined anything like this. She had looked into Greek books, seen pictures of

men chained to rocks and struggling against the anger of the gods--but they had appeared the mere fantasies of mythology. The drama of the little coral isle seemed to unfold a new and real vista of life into which she had unconsciously strayed. She hardly breathed; her hand had leaped to her breast; she felt alternately oppressed, thrilled. Her eyes were star-like; but like stars behind mist. Strange! strange!

"When the man woke," he had said, "he cursed the sea for bringing him as he thought nothing. One desire tormented him. It became intolerable. Day after day he went down to the ocean, but the surf only leaped in derision. For the thousandth time he cursed it, the isle to which he was bound. Weeks passed, until, almost mad through the monotony of the long hours, one day he inadvertently picked up a book. The brute convict could just read. Where, how he ever learned, I forget. He began to pick out the words. After that--"

"After that?" The girl had drawn closer; his language was plain, matter-of-fact. The picture that he drew was without color; she, however, saw through a medium of her own. The very landscape changed now, remained no longer the terrible, barren environment. She seemed to hear the singing of the birds, the softer murmur of the waves, the purring of the stream. It was like a mask, one of those poetic interpolations that the olden poets sometimes introduced in their tragedies. John Steele paused. Was it over?--Almost; the coral isle became a study; there was not much more to tell. Through the long months, the long years, the man had fought for knowledge as he had

always fought for anything; with all his strength, passion, energy.

"Incredible! By Jove!" she heard Sir Charles' voice, awed and admiring. "I told you, Steele, when you were about to begin, that we people of the antipodes take a man for what he is, not for what he was. But I am glad to have had your confidence and--and--tell me, how did you happen to light on the law, for special study and preparation?"

"You forget that about half your superb library was law-books, Sir Charles. A most comprehensive collection!"

"So they were! But you must have had wonderful aptitude."

"The law--the ramifications it creates for the many, the attendant restraints for the individual--I confess interested me. You can imagine a personal reason or--an abstract one. From the lonely perspective of a tiny coral isle, a system, or systems,--codes of conduct, or morals, built up for the swarming millions, so to speak!--could not but possess fascination for one to whom those millions had become only as the far-away shadows of a dream. You will find a few of those books, minus fly-leaf and book-plate, it shames me to say!--still in my library, and--"

"Bless you; you're welcome to them," hastily. "No wonder that day in my library you spoke as you did about books. 'Gad! it's wonderful! But you say at first you could hardly read? Your life, then, as a boy--pardon

me; it's not mere idle curiosity."

"As a boy!" John Steele repeated the words almost mechanically. "My parents died when I was a child; they came of good stock--New England." He uttered the last part of the sentence involuntarily; stopped. "I was bound out, was beaten. I fought, ran away. In lumber camps, the drunken riffraff cursed the new scrub boy; on the Mississippi, the sailors and stevedores kicked him because the mate kicked them. Everywhere it was the same; the boy learned only one thing, to fight. Fight, or be beaten! On the plains, in the mountains, before the fo'castle, it was the same. Fight, or--" he broke off. "It was not a boyhood; it was a contention."

"I believe you." Sir Charles' accents were half-musing. "And if you will pardon me, I'll stake a good deal that you fought straight." He paused. "But to go back to your isle, your magic isle, if you please. You were rescued, and then?"

"In a worldly sense, I prospered; in New Zealand, in Tasmania. Fate, as if to atone for having delayed her favors, now lavished them freely; work became easy; a mine or two that I was lucky enough to locate, yielded, and continues to yield, unexpected returns. Without especially desiring riches, I found myself more than well-to-do."

"And then having fairly, through your own efforts, won a place in the world, having conquered fortune, why did you return to England knowing the risk, that some one of these fellows like Gillett, the police agent,

might--"

"Why," said John Steele, "because I wished to sift, to get to the very bottom of this crime for which I was convicted. For all real wrong-doing--resisting officers of the law--offenses against officialdom--I had paid the penalty, in full, I believe. But this other matter--that was different. It weighed on me through those years on the island and afterward. A jury had convicted me wrongfully; but I had to prove it; to satisfy myself, to find out beyond any shadow of a doubt, and--"

"He did." For the first time Captain Forsythe spoke. "Steele has in his possession full proofs of his innocence and I have seen them; they go to show that he suffered through the cowardice of a miserable cad, a titled scoundrel who struck his hand from the gunwale of the boat when the _Lord Nelson_ went down, yes, you told that story in your fevered ramblings, Steele."

"Forsythe!" the other's voice rang out warningly. "Didn't I tell you the part he played was to be forgotten unless--"

"All right, have your way," grudgingly.

"A titled scoundrel! There was only one person of rank on the _Lord Nelson_ besides myself, and--Forsythe"--the old nobleman's voice called out sharply--"you have said too much or too little."

John Steele made a gesture. "I have given my word not to--"

"But I haven't!" said Captain Forsythe. "The confession I procured, and what I subsequently learned, led me directly to--Here is the tale, Sir Charles."

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It was over at last; they were gone, Sir Charles and Captain Forsythe; their hand-clasps still lingered in his. That was something, very much, John Steele told himself; but, oddly, with no perceptible thrill of satisfaction. Had he become dead to approval? What did he want? Or what had been wanting? Sir Charles had been affable, gracious; eminently just in his manner. But the old man's sensibilities had been cruelly shocked; Ronsdale, the son of his old friend, a miserable coward who, if the truth were known, would be asked to resign from every club he belonged to! And he, Sir Charles, had desired a closer bond between him and one he loved well, his own niece!

Perhaps John Steele divined why the hearty old man's face had grown so grave. Sir Charles might well experience shame for this retrogression of one of his own class, the broken obligations of nobility; the traditions shattered. But he thanked John Steele in an old-fashioned, courtly way for what he had once done for his niece whose life he had saved. Perhaps it was the reaction in himself; perhaps John Steele merely fancied a

distance in the other's very full and punctilious expression of personal indebtedness; his courteous reiteration that he should feel honored by his presence at any and all times at his house!

For a few moments now John Steele remained motionless, listening to their departing footsteps; then turned and gazed around him.

Never had his rooms appeared more cheerless, more barren, more empty. No, not empty; they were filled with memories. Hardly pleasant ones; recollections of struggles, contentions that had led him to--what? His chambers seemed very still; the little street very silent. Time had been when he had not felt its solitude; now he experienced only a sense of irksomeness, isolation. The man squared his shoulders and looked out again from the window toward that small bit of the river he could just discern. Once he had gazed at it when its song seemed to be of the green banks and flowers it had passed by; but that had been on a fairer occasion; at the close of a joyous, spring day. How it came back to him; the solemn court of justice, the beautiful face, an open doorway, with the sunshine golden without and a figure that, ere passing into it, had turned to look back! It was but for an instant, yet again his gaze seemed to leap to that luring light, the passing gleam of her eyes, that had lingered--

That he saw now! or was it a dream? At the threshold near-by, some one looked out; some one as fair, fairer, if that could be, whose cheeks wore the tint of the wild rose.

"Pardon me; I came up to see if my uncle--"

He stared at her, at the beautiful, tremulous lips, the sheen of her hair--

"You!--"

"Yes." She raised a small, gloved hand and swept back a disordered tress.

"Your--your uncle has just gone," he said.

"I know."

"You do?" He knew it was no dream, that the fever had not returned, that she really stood there. Yet it seemed inexplicable.

"I was in the library when they--went out. I had come up to see--I was with my uncle in the cab--and wondered why he--"

She stopped; he took a quick step toward her. "You were in there, that room, when--"

"Yes," she said, and threw back her head, as if to contradict a sudden mistiness that seemed stupidly sweeping over her gaze. "Why did you not

tell me--you did not?--that you were innocent?"

"You were in there?" He did not seem to catch her words.
"Heard--heard--?"

A moment they stood looking at each other; suddenly she reached out her hands to him. With a quick exclamation he caught and held them.

But in a moment he let them fall. What had he been about to say, to do, with the fair face, the golden head, so near? He stepped back quickly--madness! Had he not yet learned control? Had the lessons not been severe enough? But he was master of himself now, could look at her coldly. Fortunately she had not guessed, did not know he had almost--She stood near the back of a chair, her face half-averted; perhaps she appeared slightly paler, but he was not sure; it might be only the shadow of the thick golden hair.

"You--are going away?" She was the first to speak. Her voice was, in the least, uncertain.

"To-morrow," without looking at her.

"Where, if I may ask?"

"To my own country."

"America."

"Yes."

"It is very large," irrelevantly. "I remember--of course, you are an American; I--I have hardly realized it; we, we Australians are not so unlike you."

"Perhaps," irrelevantly on his part, "because your country, also, is--"

"Big," said the girl. Her hands moved slightly. "Are--are you going to remain there? In America, I mean?"

He expected to; John Steele spoke in a matter-of-fact tone; he could trust himself now. The interview was just a short, perfunctory one; it would soon be over; this he repeated to himself.

"But--your friends--here?" Her lips half-veiled a tremulous little smile.

"My friends!" Something flashed in his voice, went, leaving him very quiet. "I am afraid I have not made many while in London." Her eyes lifted slightly, fell. "Call it the homing instinct!" he went on with a laugh. "The desire once more to become part and parcel of one's native land; to become a factor, however small, in its activities."

"I don't think you--will be--a small factor," said the girl in a low tone.

He seemed not to hear. "To take up the fight where I left it, when a boy--"

"The fight!" The words had a far-away sound; perhaps she saw once more, in fancy, an island, the island. Life was for strong people, striving people. And he had fought and striven many times; hardest of all, with himself. She stole a glance at his face; he was looking down; the silence lengthened. He waited; she seemed to find nothing else to say. He too did not speak; she found herself walking toward the door.

"Good-by." The scene seemed the replica of a scene somewhere else, sometime before. Ah, in the garden, amid flowers, fragrance. There were no flowers here--

"Good-by." He spoke in a low voice. "As I told Captain Forsythe, you--you need not feel concern about the story ever coming out--"

"Concern? What do you mean?"

"Your telegram to Captain Forsythe, the fear that brought you to London--"

"The--you thought that?"--swiftly.

"What else?"

The indignation in her eyes met the surprise in his.

"Thank you," she said; "thank you for that estimate of me!"

"Miss Wray!" Contrition, doubt, amazement mingled in his tone.

"Good-by," she said coldly.

And suddenly, as one sees through a rift in the clouds the clear light, he understood.

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"You will go with me? You!"

"Why, as for that--"

Fleece of gold! Heaven of blue eyes! They were so near!

"And if I did, you who misinterpret motives, would think--"

"What?"

"That I came here to--"

"I should like to think that."

"Well, I came," said the girl, "I don't know why! Unless the boy who was taking down the signs had something to do with it!"

"The--?"

"He said to go 'straight up'!" she laughed.

He laughed, too; all the world seemed laughing. He hardly knew what he said, how she answered; only that she was there, slender, beautiful, as the springtime full of flowers; that a miracle had happened, was happening. The mottled blur in the sky had become a spot of brightness; sunshine filled the room; in a cage above, a tiny feathered creature began to chirp.

"And Sir Charles? Lady Wray?" He spoke quietly, but with wild pulsing of temples, exultant fierce throbbing of heart; he held her from all the world.

"They?" She was silent a moment; then looked up with a touch of her old, bright imperiousness. "My uncle loves me, has never denied me anything, and he will not in this--that is, if I tell him--"

"What?"

Did her lips answer; or was it only in her wilful, smiling eyes that he read what he sought?

"Jocelyn!"

Above the little bird, with a red spot on its breast, bent its bead-like eyes on them; but neither saw, noticed. Besides, it was only a successor to the bird that had once been hers; that had flown like a flashing jewel from her soul to his, in that place, seawashed, remote from the world.