

Half a Chance

By FREDERIC S. ISHAM, Author of "The Strollers," "Under the Rose," "The Lady of the Mount," Etc.

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CHAPTER I.—A party of titled passengers on a ship bound for Australia visit a section "below decks" where a gang of convicts sentenced to deportation are confined. II.—The ship, the Lord Nelson, is wrecked. A convict, the "Frisco Pet," jumps overboard with Jocelyn Wray, a pretty little girl. III.—The convict after returning the girl to her friends is himself cast away alone on a deserted island.

CHAPTER IV.—Years have passed. Lord Ronsdale and other members of the party wrecked on the Lord Nelson, including Jocelyn Wray, go to the criminal courts in London to hear John Steele, a famous young lawyer, try a case. Steele and Jocelyn meet and form a liking for each other.

CHAPTER V and VI.—Lord Ronsdale, who would marry Jocelyn, forms a violent dislike for Steele. Ronsdale had at the wreck of the Lord Nelson prevented the rescue of the "Frisco Pet" by a lifeboat.

CHAPTER VII.—Ronsdale is started at the sight of a tattoo mark on Steele's arm.

CHAPTER VIII.—Ronsdale trusts a detective, Gillett, on Steele's trail to establish his identity. He is certain Steele is the "Frisco Pet." Steele, none other than the "Frisco Pet," begins a hunt for Tom Rogers, the only man who can establish his innocence of the murder for which he had been deported years before.

CHAPTER IX and X.—Steele visits Strathorn House, where Jocelyn Wray, Lord Ronsdale and others are present. Steele, in love with the girl, has recognized her as the one he rescued at the wreck of the Lord Nelson.

CHAPTER XI.—Ronsdale tries to have Steele arrested at Strathorn House. Steele reveals to Jocelyn that he was once the "Frisco Pet," her rescuer.

CHAPTER XII.
AN ANSWER.

THE girl made no motion to obey, and the knocking was repeated. Mechanically she moved toward the threshold.

"Yes?" All the color had left her face.

"What—what is it?"

"Don't mean to alarm you, my dear, but Mr. Gillett thinks the convict might be concealing himself somewhere in the house; indeed, that it is quite likely. So we are making a little tour of inspection."

"I," she seemed to catch her breath—"it really quite unnecessary. I have been through them myself."

"Might have known that!" with an attempt at jocoseness. "But thought we would make sure. Good night, then!" They went.

The man in the room stood motionless now, his face like that of a statue save for the light and life of his eyes.

"The other way would have been preferable," he said.

"What were you?" she bestrided, emphasized oversharply the word—"transported for?"

"What does it matter?"

"True! What did it matter to her? He had been in prisons before, by his own words."

"Your name, of course, is not John Steele? What was it?"

He looked at her—beyond, to a storm tossed ship, a golden haired child, her curls in disorder, moving with difficulty, yet clinging so steadfastly to a small cage! His name?

It may be he heard again the loud pounding and knocking; heid her once more to his breast, felt the confiding, soft arms.

"What does it matter?" he repeated. She spoke mechanically. "When you found yourself recognized, why did you come here—to Strathorn House—incur the danger?"

"Why?" He still continued to look straight before him. "Because you were here?"

"I?" she trembled.

"Oh, you need not fear!" quickly "You?" a bitter smile crossed his face. "And now?" his voice sounded harsh, tense, and he stepped toward the balcony.

His words, the abrupt action, what it portended, aroused her.

"No, no!" The exclamation broke from her involuntarily. "There—there may be a safer way! Wait!" Bright spots of color now tinted her cheeks. She went quickly toward the door she had left. She listened, turned the key, then, opening the door, stepped hastily out into the hall.

Whatever her purpose, only the desire to set quickly, to have done with an intolerable situation, moved him. Once more he looked toward the window through which he had entered. First, however, before going, he thought himself of something—an answer to one of her questions. She should find the answer after he was gone. His fingers thrust themselves into a breast pocket. He took out a small object wrapped in velvet. An instant his eyes rested upon it; then, stooping, he picked up the bit of lace handkerchief from the door and,

you'd be here tonight," the latter went on. "But won't you be stepping in, sir?"

The other silently followed, walking in the manner of one tired and worn. "My master did not come back with you, sir, from Strathorn House?"

"No, Captain Forsythe's gone on to Germany."

The servant's glance rested now in some surprise on the newcomer's garments—a gamekeeper's well worn coat and cap—and on the dusty, almost shabby laced shoes.

"A wagger," said John Steele, noting the old orderly's expression. "From Strathorn House to London by foot within a given time, don't you know. Fell in with some rough customers last night who thought my coat and hat better than those."

"I beg your pardon, sir, but"—The man's apprehensive look fastened itself on a dark stain on the coat near the shoulder.

"Just winged me—a scratch," replied John Steele, with an indifferent shrug, sinking into a chair near the fire, which burned low.

"One moment, Dennis," John Steele leaned back. The dying embers revealed a haggard face. His eyes half closed as if from lack of sleep, but immediately opened again. "You spoke of expecting me. How," he said, stretching out his legs, "did you know?"

"Sure, sir, by your luggage. It arrived with my master's heavier boxes that he didn't take along with him over the water."

His luggage there—where no one knew—could have known—he was going! The place he had selected under what he had considered propitious circumstances as a haven, a refuge, where he might find himself for a brief period comparatively safe, could he reach it, turn in without being detected? This last he believed he had successfully accomplished, and then to be told by the man—all John Steele's excuses for coming in this unceremonious fashion that he had planned to put to the servant of Captain Forsythe were at the moment forgotten. Who could have guessed that he would make his way straight hither—or had any one? An enemy, divining a lurking place for which he was heading, would not have obligingly forwarded



"THERE—THERE MAY BE A SAFER WAY! WAIT!" SHE EXCLAIMED.

his belongings. What then? Had Jocelyn Wray ordered them sent on with Captain Forsythe's boxes and bags in order that they might be less likely to fall into the hands of the police?

"Here you are, sir." The servant had entered and re-entered, had set the table without the man in the armchair being conscious of his coming and going. "Remembered my master inviting you once when you were here to pitch your camp at Rosemary Villa any time you should be after yearning for that quietude essential for literary composition and to wind up the campaign on your book. So when I saw your luggage—"

"Exactly!" It was curious the man should have spoken thus, should have voiced one of the very subtleties Steele had had in mind himself to utter to show pretext for his too abrupt appearance. But now—

As he ate mechanically, but with the zest of one who had long fasted, John Steele listened; again a vehicle went by; then another.

John Steele rose with an effort. No, there was nothing more to be required except rest! Which room would he prefer? He was asked when he found himself on the upper landing. The man had put his things in a front chamber, but the back one was larger. John Steele forced himself to consider. He even inspected both of the rooms. That on the front floor had one window facing out over a rear wall separating the vegetable garden of Rosemary Villa from the shrub adorned

reappeared and stood now at the top of the landing looking in at him. "It's a sound sleep you've had."

John Steele glanced at the clock. The afternoon was waning.

The servant was now eyeing the visitor dubiously. John Steele wheeled, a perfunctory answer on his lips, and, going to the dining room, swallowed hastily a few mouthfuls.

He made up his mind as to his course then, the last desperate shift. Auld a turmoil of thoughts a certain letter he had had in mind to send to Captain Forsythe occurred to him, and, calling for paper and pen, he wrote there, facing the window, feverishly, hastily, several pages. Then he gave the letter to the servant for the postman, whose special call at the iron knocker without had just sounded. The letter would have served John Steele ill had it fallen into his enemies' hands, but once in the care of the royal mails it would be safe. If it were, indeed, that person at the gate and not some one—

"One moment, Dennis!" The man paused. "Of course you will make sure it is the postman?"

"As if I didn't know his knock!" he said, departing.

John Steele's pulses now throbbled expectantly. He had obtained a key to the gate and moved toward the front door. By this time the darkness had deepened, and, key in hand, he stepped out.

At first he walked toward the front on the gravel that the servant might bear him, but near the entrance he paused, hesitating, to look out. As he remained thus some one who had been standing not far off drew near. John Steele stole around the place until he reached the back wall.

There he examined his position, felt the top, then placed his fingers on the wall. It was about six feet high, but, solving hold, he was about to spring into the air, when behind him, from the direction of the row, a low metallic sound caught his attention. The front gate to the Forsythe house had suddenly clicked. Some one had entered.

John Steele looked back. Even as he did so a number of figures abruptly ran forward from the gate. He waited no longer, but drew himself up to a level with the top of the wall. The effort made him acutely aware of his wounded shoulder. He winced, but set his teeth hard and swung himself over until one foot came in contact with the iron frame of the greenhouse next to the masonry. To crawl to the end of the lean-to, bending to hold to the wall and then to let himself down, occupied but a brief interval.

He heard behind him an imperative knocking at the front door of Captain Forsythe's house, succeeded by the noise of feet hastening into the house.

For some time nothing save these sounds was waited to the listener. Then a loud, disappointed voice, sounding above another voice, came from a half opened window. John Steele stood still no longer. Great hazard, almost certain capture, lay before him in the direction he was going—the street this garden led to would be watched—but he could not remain where he was. He moved quickly forward. As he neared the house, more imposing than Captain Forsythe's, a stream of light poured from a window. Through this bright space he darted quickly, catching a fleeting view of people within, several with their faces turned toward him. Close to a side of the square looking house he paused, his heart beating fast. To attempt to reach the gate, to get out to Surrey road, John Steele ex-ecuted as to what he waited him there. He remained motionless. Sharp twinges again shot through his shoulder. Then on a sudden he became un mindful of physical discomfort. A plan of action that had flashed through his brain held him oblivious to all else. It offered only the remotest chance of escape, but still a chance, which he weighed, determined to take! It had come to him while listening to the merry voices within the room near him talking of the gay dinner just ended, of the box party at the theater that was to follow.

Already cabs were at the door. A servant walked out and unlocked the gate, and with light badinage the company issued forth. As they did so John Steele, unobserved, stepped forward. In the semidarkness the party passed through the entrance into the street. Taking his place among the last of the laughing, dimly seen figures, John Steele walked boldly on and found himself a moment later on the sidewalk of Surrey road. He was aware that some one, a woman, had touched his arm as if to take it, of a light feminine voice and an abrupt exclamation of surprise. Walking swiftly to one of the last cabs, he sprang in.

"A little errand first, driver," he called out. "To"—and mentioned a street—"as fast as you can." The man straightened, touched his horse with his whip, and, wheeling quickly, they dashed away.

As they did so John Steele thought he heard exclamations behind. Looking through the cab window, he saw at the gate the company gazing after him, obviously not yet recovered from their thrill of surprise following his unexpected action. He observed also two men on the other side of the street, who now ran across and held a brief altercation with one of the cabs. As they were about to enter the cab several persons in the party apparently interested, expostulating vigorously, it was not difficult to surmise the resentment of the group at this attempted summary seizure of a second one of their cabs.

"Those men must not overtake us, cabby. Go where you will! You understand?"

The man did. His fingers closed

(To be Continued.)

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