

# Half A Chance

BY FREDERICK S. ISHAM.

Author of "The Strollers," "Under the Rose," "The Lady of the Mount," Etc.

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### CHAPTER XI. REVELATIONS.

NIGHT at Strathorn House. John Steele walked slowly on the broad stone balcony toward the ballroom. There he had stopped; then, stepping to the balustrade, he stood looking off. The night was warm. In the sky stars seemed trying to maintain their places between dark, floating clouds. The sound of music was wafted from within. John Steele listened. They were beginning once more to dance. He stepped toward the window and paused. His eyes seemed searching the throng. They found what they sought—a slender, erect form, the gown soft, white, like foam; a face animated, joyous. For an instant only, however, he saw the beautiful features; then as Jocelyn turned in the dance around her waist glimpsed a black band tipped by slender masculine fingers; above, a cynical countenance. Or was it all cynical now? A brief glance showed more than the habitual expression, a sedulousness, some passionate feeling. Lord Ronsdale's look seemed once more to say he held and claimed her—that she was his or soon would be.

The moments passed. A distant buzz replaced melody—the human murmur, the scraping of strings. From the forest came a faraway cry, the melancholy sound of some wood creature. He continued motionless, then suddenly wheeled swiftly.

"That is you, Mr. Steele?" A voice, young, gay, sounded near. Jocelyn Wray came toward him. From her shoulders floated a white scarf. "You have come out for the freshness of the garden? Although," she added, "you shouldn't altogether seclude yourself from the madding crowd."

"No?" Did she note the strangeness of the look she seemed to have surprised on his face? Her own glance grew on the instant slightly puzzled and showed a passing constraint. Then her manner became light again. "No. Especially as— You are leaving tomorrow, I believe?"

"Yes." He tried to speak in conventional tones, but his gaze swerved from the graceful figure with its dim, white lines that changed and fluttered in the faint breath of air, stealing so gently by them and away. "My time is almost up—the allotted period of my brief Elysium!" he half laughed. "I have enjoyed myself immensely—much more than I deserve."

"Have you?" She glanced at him. A flicker of light touched the strong face.

It seemed difficult for him to speak. Finally he said: "I have neglected or forgotten the pleasure," with a slight laugh, "of congratulating you. Is that the word? Or Lord Ronsdale—be, I believe, is the one to be congratulated."

"Congratulations?" Her face had changed, grown colder. His hand grasped the stone balustrade, but he forced a smile to his lips. "I cannot imagine who has started—why you speak thus. Lord Ronsdale is an old friend of my uncle and mine, too, but that is all. You are mistaken."

"Mistaken?" The word broke from him quickly. The strained expression of his face gave way to another he could ill conceal.

"Goodby!" he said slowly. "I am leaving rather early in the morning. I shall not see you again."

"Goodby—at least until we meet in London," she ended lightly.

"That may not be."

"Why, you are not thinking of deserting your dingy metropolis?" He did not answer.

Did she realize he was saying goodby to her for all time? She held her head higher, pressed her lips slightly closer; then she sought to withdraw her hand, but he, as hardly knowing what he did or yielding to sudden, irresistible temptation, clasped for an instant the slim fingers closer. They seemed to quiver in his.

John Steele breathed deeply. He continued to regard her, so fair, so beautiful. An instant and he bent. A breath or his lips swept the delicate white fingers; then he dropped them. Her hand swung back against the cold stone. On her breast something bright, an ornament, fluttered, became still. Behind a bird chirped. Her glance turned toward the ballroom.

"I—" Other voices, loud, merry, coming from one of the open French windows interrupted.

"Jocelyn!" they called to her. Faces looked out. "Jocelyn!"

"Yes!" She was walking rapidly from him now, a laugh, a little forced, on her lips.

John Steele moved slowly down the stone steps leading to the garden below. He could go, and she would never know she had honored by her friendship, had sheltered beneath her roof, one who— As he walked down the dimly lighted path somebody, a man, standing under the trees at one

side, at that moment touched his arm. "I should like to speak with you, sir!" said a voice, and, turning with a quick jerk, Steele saw the familiar features of Gillett, the former police agent, behind him other men.

"What do you want?" The Scotland Yard man coughed significantly. "Out here is a nice, quiet place for a word or so," he said in his blandest manner. "And if you will be so good?"

John Steele's reply was as emphatic as it was sudden. A laugh burst from his throat. With the quickness of thought he launched himself forward.

In a corridor on the second floor of Strathorn House the voice of Lord Ronsdale was heard. It was followed by that of Jocelyn Wray.

"Never fear! They'll get the fellow yet," my lord had said.

Jocelyn answered mechanically. "Although it was most bungling on their part to have permitted him to get away," Ronsdale went on, "I hope, however, this little unexpected episode won't disturb your rest." An instant the steely eyes seemed to contemplate her closer. "Many going away tomorrow?" he asked, as if to divert her thoughts from the exciting experience of the evening before leaving her.

"Only Captain Forsythe and—Mr. Steele."

Did he notice the slightest hesitation on her part before speaking the last name? My lord's eyes fell; an odd expression appeared on his face.

As the door closed behind her young mistress a maid came quickly forward. "Did you learn anything more, Miss Jocelyn, if I may be so bold as to ask, from the police agent? Who the criminal was or?"

"The police agent only said he was an escaped convict, no ordinary one, who had escaped from London and was making for the sea. They got word he was at the village and followed him there, but he managed to elude them, and they traced him to Strathorn House park, where he had taken refuge. The police did not

acquaint Sir Charles, Lord Ronsdale or any one with their purpose, thinking not to alarm us needlessly beforehand. And— I believe that is all."

A moment the woman waited. "I—shall I?"

The girl looked before her. Tiny flames from the grate heightened the sheen on her gown. They threw passing lights on the somewhat tired, proud face. "I shall not need you, Dobson," she said. "You may go. A moment."

The woman, who had half turned, waited. Jocelyn's glance had lowered to the fire. In its reflection her slim, delicate fingers were rosy. She unclasped them and smoothed the brocade absent with one hand. "One or two are leaving early tomorrow. You will see—you will give instructions that everything is provided for their comfort."

The maid responded and left the room. A faint shout from somewhere in the gardens, far off, aroused Jocelyn. The girl looked around, but immediately silence again reigned. She got up.

Again the sound. This time she placed it—the creaking of the giant branch of ivy that ran up and around her own balcony. The girl paused irresolutely, her hand on the heavy, ancient hanging. Leaning forward, she waited, but the noise stopped. She heard nothing more, told herself it was nothing and was about to move out again when her gaze was suddenly held by something that passed like a shadow—a man's arm—on the other side of the nearest window, between the modern French curtains, not quite drawn together. The window opened wider, noiselessly, but quickly. Then a hand, strong, shapely, pushed the curtains aside. The intruder acted as one certain of his ground, now drawing the window draperies quickly together behind him as if seeking to escape observation from any one below. He stepped out into the room.

Did the intruder hear a sound, a quick breath? His gaze swerved to the opposite end of the room, where it saw a living presence. For a moment they looked at each other. The man's face turned very pale; his hand touched the back of a chair; he steadied himself.

(To Be Continued.)

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