

Half A Chance

BY FREDERICK S. ISHAM.

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

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"I thought—to enter armory hall. Did not know your rooms were here," he managed to say in a low tone, "at this corner of Strathorn House."

She did not answer, so they stood silently, absurdly. The man had to speak first. He pulled himself together. The bad fortune that had dogged him so long, that he had fought against so hard, now found its culmination. It had cast him of all places at her feet. So be it. Well, destiny now could harm him little more.

"I had hoped you would never know, but the gods, it seems—could even laugh—have ordained otherwise. 'Fata obstant.'"

He stopped. A suggestion of pain crept into her expression. But the laugh returned to his lips, the luster to his eyes.

"A good many people have their pasts. Can you imagine what mine may have been?"

She seemed to stand in a hateful dream. Looking at him—the torn evening clothes, his face, pale, different. Listening to him—to what?

"A convict?" said the man. "Yes, that's what I was. Had been in jail—jails! And was sent out of the country years ago—transported. But time went by, and the convict thought he might safely come back—boldly, with impunity. The years and circumstances had altered him, wrought great changes. He felt compelled to return—why is of no moment—believed himself secure in so doing and was until chance led him out of his accustomed way—to new walks, new faces, where lay the danger, the ambush, into which he who thought himself strong like a weak fool walked or was led blindly."

The blue eyes bent like stars now on this man in her room standing before her with bold, mocking face as if his dark eyes read, understood every thought that passed through her brain.

"You! Then it was you—John Steele—that they—"

"The convict they tried to arrest? Yes."

"You? I don't!" Her voice was almost childlike.

"I will help you to understand!" An ashen shade came over his face.

The man paused. There was a strange gleam in the dark eyes that lingered on her. Its light was succeeded by another, a fiercer expression. For the first time she moved, shrank back slightly. "I'm afraid I used a few of them roughly," he said with look derisive. "There was no time for soft talk. It was cut and run—give 'em the leg!" as the thieves say. "Did he purposely relapse into coarser words to clinch home the whole damning, detestable truth?"

"But it was a close call out there in the garden! They were before the convict in the woods. He must needs double back to the shadow of the house! At the bottom of a moat he looked up to a balcony overhead, small as Juliet's, though I swear he thought it led to armory hall, not here. It is he known the truth he would have stayed there first, and—"

But, as it was, he heard voices around the corner, afar, men approaching. The ivy at Strathorn House is almost as old as the house itself, the main branches larger than a man's arm. It was not difficult to get here, though I wish now—he dared smile bitterly—"they had come on me first."

She moved slowly out into the room. His face was half averted. He did not turn, although he must have known she was near. With his back toward her he gazed down at the soft, bright hues of the rug and on it a white thing, a tiny bit of lace, a handkerchief that some time before had fluttered to the floor and had been left lying there.

"But"—she spoke now—"you—you who seemed all that was—I can't believe—it is impossible, inconceivable!" "I have told you the truth because"—the words broke from him—"I had to! Must I?—despite himself there was an accent of acute pain in his voice—"repeat it?"

"Oh," she said, "it was infamous!" The word struck him like a whip and lashed his face to a dull red. The silence grew.

"I would not presume to dispute or to contradict any conclusion you may have reached." He spoke at length in a low, even voice. "I had not, as I said, intended this last, this most inexcusable intrusion. You have now only one course to pursue—his gaze turned to the long silken bell rope on the wall—"and I promise not to resist. Well?" he said.

She had suddenly stopped. In the hall voices were heard approaching. He, too, caught them.

"That simplifies matters," he remarked.

"Jocelyn!" The voice was that of Sir Charles. "Are you there?" She did not answer. "Kindly unlock the door."

CHAPTER XII.

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 is 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 hesitated, 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; held 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 act 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 le 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 floor and, laying the dark velvet against it, placed the two on the table.

Would she understand—the debt he had felt he owed her long before to-night, that sense of obligation to the child who had reached out her hand in a different life, a different world? No. She had of course forgotten. Still, he would leave it, that talisman so precious, which he had cherished almost superstitiously.

When a few minutes later the girl hastily re-entered the room she carried on her arm a man's coat and hat. Her appearance was feverish, her eyes wide and shining.

"Your clothes are torn—would attract attention! These were on the rack. I don't know whose, but I stole them—stole them!"

She spoke quickly, with a little, hard note of self mockery. Her voice broke suddenly. She looked about her. The coat and hat slipped from her arm. She looked at the window. The curtain still moved as if a hand had but recently touched it. She stared at it incredulously. He had gone. He would have none of her assistance then; preferred—she listened, but caught only the rustling of the heavy silk.

She became aware of a throbbing in her head, a dull pain, and, mechanically sending herself near one of the tables, she put up her hand and started to draw the pins from her hair, but soon desisted. Again she began to think, more clearly this time, more poignantly, of all she had experienced, listened to, that night.

She, a Wray, sprung from a long line of proud, illustrious folk! And he? The breath of the roses outside was wafted upward. Her eyes, deep, self scoffing, rested without seeing on a small dark object on a handkerchief on the table. What was it to her if they took him—what, indeed? Her fingers played with the object, closed hard on it. Why should she care if he paid the penalty—he, a self confessed—

(To Be Continued.)

NOTICE TO CONTRACTORS.

Sealed bids will be received at the district clerk's office in district No. 12, Jackson county, Oregon, for the erection of a school building according to plans and specifications now on file in his office, before July 2, 1910. Each bid must be accompanied by sufficient bond to secure the entrance of a contract.

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"When I go back home and tell the folks," said the old gentleman, "that I counted 40 automobiles standing along the curbs on Main street in Medford, as I was walking down town, and couldn't count the ones that were whizzing back and forth, I will lose my reputation for truth and veracity entirely, because they won't believe there are that many automobiles in the world."

"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?"

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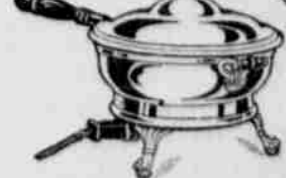
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