

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.

THE WHEELS OF JUSTICE. LONDON in the spring! Sunshine, the Thames agleam with silver ripples, singing as it flows; red sails! Joyous London that has emerged from fogs and banks beneath blue skies! On such a day about 10 o'clock in the morning three persons whose appearance distinguished them from the ordinary passers-by turned into a narrow thoroughfare not far from the Strand.

"Quite worth while going to hear John Steele conduct his client, I assure you, Lord Ronald," observed one, a tall, military-looking man, who walked with a slight limp and carried a cane. "He's a new man, but he's making his mark. When he asked to be admitted to the English bar he surprised even his examiners. His summing up in the Daugherty murder case was, I heard his lordship remark one of the most masterly efforts he ever listened to. Just take the circumstantial evidence to pieces and freed his man! Besides his profession at the bar, he is an unusually gifted criminologist, takes a strong personal interest in the lowest riff-raff, is writing a book, I understand—one of the kind that will throw a new light on the subject."

"Just what is a criminologist?" The speaker, a bit of about eighteen, turned as she lightly asked the question to glance over her shoulder toward several persons who followed them.

"One who seeks to apply to the criminal the methods of psychology, psychiatry and anthropology," he answered, with jesting impressiveness.

"When one is only a sort of country cousin," the girl waved a small, daintily gloved hand to the little group of friends who now approached and joined them. "Captain Forsythe is trying to persuade me it is a legitimate part of our slumming plan to take in murder trials, uncle," she said lightly, addressing the foremost of the newcomers, "just because it's a fad of his. Speaking of this acquaintance or friend of yours, Mr. Steele—you are something of a criminologist, too, are you not, Captain Forsythe?"

"Well, every man should have a hobby," returned that individual, "and, although I don't aspire to the long name you call me, I confess to a slight amateur interest."

"Slight?" she repeated. "Would you believe it, aunt—to a portly lady among those who had approached—"he never misses a murder trial? I believe he likes to watch the poor fellows fighting for their lives, to study their faces, their expressions when they're being sentenced perhaps to one of those horrible convict ships?"

"Don't speak of them, my dear Jocelyn!" returned that worthy person, with a shudder. "When I think of the Lord Nelson and that awful night—"

"You were three days in an open boat before being sighted and picked up, I believe, Lady Wray?" observed Captain Forsythe.

"Every one behaved splendidly," interposed Sir Charles. "You," gazing contemplatively at the girl, "were but a child then, Jocelyn."

She did not answer. The beautiful face had abruptly changed. All laughter had gone from the clear blue eyes. "She is thinking of the convict who saved her," observed Sir Charles in an explanatory tone to Captain Forsythe.

"And the amazing part of it is the fellow looked like a brute, had the low, ignorant face of an ex-bruiser."

"You must not speak of him that way!" The girl's hands were clasped; the slender, shapely figure was very straight. Her beautiful blue eyes, full of varying lights, flashed, then became dimmed. A suspicion of mist lurked along the long, sweeping lashes. "He had a big, noble spark in his soul, and I think of him many, many times," she repeated, the sweet, gay lips trembling sensitively. "Brave fellow! Brave fellow!"

"Pity he should have been drowned, though," Captain Forsythe went on. "He would, I am sure, have made a most interesting study in contrasts."

Here Ronald lifted his hat. "May I have back this hat," he observed. "That is," looking at Jocelyn Wray, "if you don't object."

"If not at all. Of course it would bore you—a trial! You are so easily bored. Is it the club?"

"No, another engagement. Thank you so much for permission to return for you. Very kind. Hope you will find it amusing. Good morning!" And Lord Ronald vanished down the narrow way.

The others of the party entered the courtroom and were shown to the seats that Captain Forsythe had taken particular pains to reserve for them. "That's John Steele cross examining

now," Captain Forsythe whispered to the girl. And the witness—that's Dandy Joe, as he's called, one of the police spies, cheap race track man and so on, in the box. He came to the front in a murder trial quite celebrated in its day and one I always had my own little theory about. Not that it matters now," he added, with a sigh. But the girl was listening to another voice, a clear voice, a quiet voice, a voice capable of the strongest varying accents. She looked at the speaker. He held himself with the assurance of one certain of his ground. His shoulders were straight and broad. He stood like an athlete, and when he moved it was impossible to be unconscious of a certain physical grace that came from well trained muscles. He carried his head high, as if from a habit of thought of looking up, not down. When he turned from the pages of the heavy tomes in his study. His face conveyed an impression of intelligence and intensity. His eyes, dark and deep, searched fully those they rested on.

He had reached a point in his cross examination where he had almost thoroughly discredited this witness for the prosecution when, turning toward a table to take up a paper, his glance, casually lifting, rested on the distinguished party in the rear of the room, or, rather, it rested on one of them. Against the dark background the girl's golden hair was well calculated to catch the wandering gaze. The flowers in her hat, the great bunch of violets in her dress added insistent alluring bits of color in the dim spot where she sat. Erect as a lily stem, she looked oddly out of place in that large, sombre room. There, where the harsh regimen of bruised and broken lives some presence typical of spring, wafted thither by mistake. The man continued to regard her. Suddenly he started, and his eyes almost eagerly searched the lovely, proud face.

His back was turned to the judge, who stirred nervously, but waited a fraction of a second before he spoke. "If the cross examination is finished," he began.

"A privilege, Sir Charles, to meet one we have heard of so often in the antipodes." "Thank you. His lordship, Judge Beeson, in 'dear, whose decisions—" "Allow me to congratulate you, sir!" The enthusiastic voice was that of Captain Forsythe, addressing John Steele. "Your cross examination was masterly. Had you been in a certain other case years ago when the evidence of that very person on the stand today in the main convicted a man of murder I fancy the result then would have been different."

John Steele seemed not to hear. His eyes were turned toward the beautiful girl. She was standing quite close to him now. He could detect the fragrance of the violets she wore, a fresh sweet smell so welcome in that close, musty atmosphere.

"My niece, your lordship, Miss Wray."

Steele saw her bow and heard her speak to that august court personage. Then as the latter, after further brief talk, hurried away—

"Sir Charles, let me present to you Mr. Steele," said Captain Forsythe. "Lady Wray—"

"Happy to know you, sir," said the governor heartily.

"Miss Jocelyn Wray," added the military man, "who," with a laugh, "experienced some doubts about a visit of this kind being conducive to pleasure."

John Steele took the small gloved hand she gave him. Her eyes were very bright.

"I enjoyed it—don't mean that—I am so glad I came," said the girl—"and heard you!" she added.

He thanked her in a low tone, looking at her hand as he dropped it. "You—you are making England your home?" His voice was singularly hesitating.

"Yes." She looked at him a little surprised. "At least for the present! But how—she broke off. "I suppose, though, you could tell my accent. I've lived nearly all my life in Australia, and—"

Sir Charles, interrupting, reminded the papers. Amid voluminous wastes of type an item in the court and society column had caught his eye:

Sir Charles and Lady Wray, who are intending nonresidence to reside in England, have returned to the stately Wray mansion in Piccadilly, where they will be for the season. Our well known governor and his lady are accompanied by their niece, the beautiful and accomplished Miss Jocelyn Wray, only child of Sir Charles' younger brother, the late Hon. Mr. Richard Wray, whose estate included enormous holdings in Australia as well as several thousand acres in Devonshire. This charming young colonial has already captivated London society.

John Steele read carefully this bit of news and then reread it. He even found himself guilty of perusing all the other paragraphs, the comings and goings, the fine doings! They related to a world he had thought little about, a world within the world, just as the people who lived in tunnels and dark passages constituted another world within the world. Her name danced in illustrious company. Here were dukes and earls and viscounts, a sprinkling of the foreign element, beguins, emirs, the nation's guests. He saw also "Sir Charles, Lady Wray and Miss Wray" among the long list of box holders for that night at the opera, a gala occasion, commanded by royalty for the entertainment of royalty and incidentally of certain barbarian personages who had come across the seas to be diplomatically coddled and fed.

Folding his newspaper, John Steele turned to his legal papers, strove to replace idleness by industry, but the spirit of work failed to respond. He looked at his watch, rang sharply a bell.

"Put out my clothes," he said to the servant who appeared with a lamp, "and have a cab at the door."

The opera had already begun, but pandemonium still reigned about the box office. A thunder of applause from within, indicating that the first act had come to an end, was followed by the usual gush of black and white figures impatient for cigarettes and light lobby gossip.

"Divine, eh? The opera, I mean?" A voice accented John Steele, and, turning, he beheld a familiar face with black whiskers, that of Captain Forsythe. "This is somewhat different from the morning's environment?"

"Yes," said the other. "But your first question," with a smile, "I'm afraid I can't answer. I've just come, and if I hadn't—well, I'm up judge of music." A bell sounded. John Steele, excusing himself, entered the auditorium and was shown to his seat.

The curtain went up at last, the music began, and melodies that seemed born in the springtime succeeded one another. Personal in freshness, theme followed theme; what joy, what gladness, what merriment, what madness! How long was the act; how short? It came to a sudden end. After applause and bravos men again got up and walked out. He, too, left his seat and strolled toward the back.

"Mr. Steele! One moment!" He found himself once more addressed by the good humored Captain Forsythe. "Behold in me a Mercury, committed to an imperative mission. You are commanded to appear not in the royal box, but in Sir Charles'."

"Sir Charles Wray's?" John Steele regarded the speaker quickly.

"Yes," laughed the other. "You see, I happened to mention I had seen you. Why didn't you bring him with you to the box?" queried Sir Charles. He, by the by, went in for law himself before he became governor.

"Only had time to shake hands this morning." "Yes; why didn't you?" spoke up Miss Jocelyn. "You command me to bring him? I inquired. 'By all means,' she laughed. 'I command.' So here I am."

John Steele did not answer, but Captain Forsythe without waiting for a reply turned and started up the broad stairway. The other, after a moment's hesitation, followed. Only entered one of the larger boxes, duly to Sir Charles and his wife and returned the bow of their niece. Amid varied platitudes Steele's glance turned oftener to the girl. She was dressed in white; a snowy boa drooped from the slender bare shoulders as if it might any moment slip off; a string of pearls, each one with a pearl of pure light in the center, clasped her throat.

She waved her hand to the seat next to her and as he sat down, "Isn't it splendid!" irrelevantly.

"The spectacle of the opera?" he asked slowly, looking into blue eyes.

"It was the opera I mean. I suppose the spectacle is very grand; but," enthusiastically, "it was the music! I was thinking of. How it grips one! Tell me what you think of 'The Barber,' Mr. Steele."

"I'm afraid my views wouldn't be very interesting," he answered, "I know nothing whatever about music."

"Nothing?" Her eyes widened a little. In her accent was mild wonder.

He looked down at the shimmering white folds near his feet. "In earlier days my environment was not exactly a musical one."

"No? I suppose you were engaged in more practical concerns?"

He did not answer directly. "Perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me something about Rossini's music, Miss Wray?"

"I tell you?" Her light silvery laugh rang out. "And Captain Forsythe has only been telling me—all of us—that you were one of the best informed men he had ever met."

"You see how wrong he was."

The abrupt appearance of the musicians and the dissonances attendant on tuning interrupted her response. Steele rose and was about to take his departure when Sir Charles intervened.

"Why don't you stay?" he asked, with true colonial heartiness. "Plenty

of room! Unless you've a better place! Two vacant chairs!"

John Steele looked around. He saw three vacant chairs and took one a little aside and slightly behind the young girl, while the governor's wife, who had moved from the front at the conclusion of the previous act, now returned to her place next her niece. During the act some one came in and took a seat in the background. If Steele heard he did not look around. His gaze remained fastened on the stage. Between him and it—or them, art's gayly attired illusions—a tress of golden hair sometimes intervened, but he did not move. Through threads like woven flashes of light he regarded the scene of the poet's fantasy. Did they make her a part of it—did they seem to the man the fantasy's intangible medium, its imagery? Threads of gold, threads of melody! He saw the former, heard the latter. He seemed content with a partial view of the stage and so remained until the curtain went down. The girl turned. In her eyes was a question.

"Beautiful!" said the man, looking at her.

"Charming! What coloratura! And the bravura!" Captain Forsythe applauded vigorously.

"You've never met Lord Ronald, I believe. Mr. Steele?" Sir Charles' voice, close to his ear, inquired.

"Lord Ronald?" John Steele looked pertinently around toward the back of the box and saw there a face faintly illumined in the light from the stage, a cynical face, white, mask-like. Had his own features not been set from the partial glow that sifted upward the sudden emotion that swept Steele's countenance would have been observed. A sound escaped his lips—

was drowned, however, in a renewed outbreak of applause.

"Old friend, don't you know," went on the voice of Sir Charles. "Had one rare adventure together, one of the kind that cements a man to you."

As he spoke the light in the theater flared up. John Steele, no longer hesitating, uncertain, rose. His face had regained its composure. He regarded the slender, aristocratic figure of the nobleman in the background. Faultlessly dressed, Lord Ronald carried himself with his habitual languid air of assurance. The two bowed. The stony glance of the lord met the impassive one of the man. Then a puzzled look came into the nobleman's eyes. He gazed at Steele more closely. His glance cleared.

"Thought for an instant I'd seen you somewhere before, by Jove!" he drawled in his metallic tone. "But of course I haven't. Never forget a face, don't you, know?"

"I may not say so much, may not have the diplomat's gift of always remembering people to the extent your lordship possesses it, but I am equally certain I have never before enjoyed the honor of being presented to your lordship!" said John Steele. Steele turned and, holding out his hand, thanked Sir Charles and his wife for their courtesy.

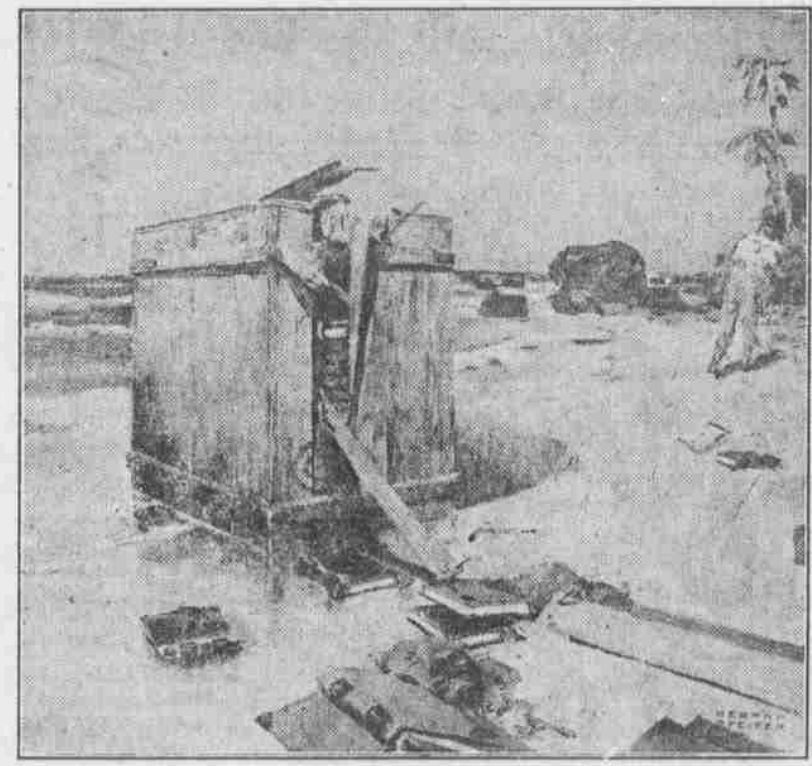
Jocelyn Wray gazed around. "You are leaving before the last act," she said, with an accent of surprise.

"Our day at home, Mr. Steele, is Thursday," put in the governor's lady, majestically gracious.

His face, which had been contained, impassive, now betrayed in the slightest degree an expression of irresolution. Her quick look caught it, became more whimsical. He seemed actually for an instant asking himself if he should come. She laughed ever so slightly. The experience was novel. Who before had ever weighed the pros and cons when extended this privilege? Then the next moment the blue eyes lost some of their mirth. Perhaps his manner made her feel the frank informality she had unconsciously been guilty of. She regarded him more coldly.

"Thank you," he said. "You are very good. I shall be most glad."

And, bowing to her and to the others, he once more turned. As he passed Lord Ronald the eyes of the two men again met. Those of the nobleman suddenly dilated, and he started. His gaze followed the retreating figure.



WHAT HE FOUND PROVED A DIFFERENT SORT OF MERCHANDISE.

John Steele wheeled; his face changed; a smile of singular charm accompanied his answer.

"Your lordship will pardon me; the human mind has its aberrations. At the moment, by a curious psychological turn, a feature of another problem seized me. It was like playing two games of chess at once. Perhaps your honor has experienced the sensation."

His lordship beamed. "Quite so," he observed unctuously.

The business of the morning ran on, and John Steele at length concluded his cross examination. "I think, your lordship, the question of the reliability of this man as a witness in this or—any other case—fully established."

"Any other case?" said his lordship. "We are not trying any other case."

"Witness may go," said his lordship brusquely.

Dandy Joe, a good deal damaged in the world's estimation, stepped down. His erstwhile wild curled mustache of brick dust had seemed to drop as he slunk out of the box. He appeared subdued, the almost frightened, quite unlike the jaunty little cockney that had stepped so blithely forth to give his testimony.

The witnesses all heard. John Steele, for the defense, spoke briefly, but his words were well chosen, his sentences of classic purity. As the girl listened it seemed to her not strange that Captain Forsythe, as well as others perhaps, should be drawn hither on occasions when this man appeared. Straight, direct logic characterized the speech from beginning to end. Only once did a suggestion of sentiment—cut pity for that gin besotted thing, the prisoner—obtrude itself; then it passed so quickly his lordship forgot to intervene, and the effect remained, a flash, illuminating, Rembrandt-like.

Time slipped by. The judge looked at his watch, betwought him of a big silver dish filled with amber hued sipped of the Ship and Turtle and adjourned court. His address interrupted by the exigencies of the moment, John Steele began mechanically to gather up his books. He absently separated them again. At the same time Sir Charles and his party walked toward the bench. They were met by his lordship and cordially greeted.

CHAPTER V.

AT THE OPERA. WHEN John Steele left the court toward the end of the day he held his head as a man who thinks deeply.

From the door he directed his steps toward Charing Cross, but only to wheel abruptly and retrace his way. He was not an absentminded man, yet he had been strolling unconsciously, not toward his customary destination at that hour, the several chambers at once his office and his home. For a moment the strong face of the man relaxed as if in amusement at his own remissness. Gradually, however, it once more resumed its expression of musing thoughtfulness.

Turning into a narrow way not far from the embankment, he stopped before the door of a solid looking brick building, set himself in and made his way upstairs. On the third floor he applied another and smaller key to another lock and from a hall entered a large apartment, noteworthy for its handsome array of books that reached from floor to ceiling wherever there was shelf space. Passing through this apartment, John Steele stepped into that adjoining, the sitting and dining room.

A discreet rapping at the door, followed by the appearance of a round faced little man with a tray, interrupted further contemplation or reverie on John Steele's part. Seating himself at the table, he responded negatively to the servant's inquiry if "anything" else would be required and when the man had withdrawn mechanically turned to his letters and to his simple evening repast. He ate with no great evidences of appetite, soon brushed the misadvised, half read, aside and pushed back his chair.

Lighting a pipe, he picked up one of

them of an appointment. The party turned. A slender figure inclined itself very slightly toward John Steele. A voice wished him good morning. The man stood with his hands on his boots. It did not occur to him to accompany her to the door. Suddenly he looked over his shoulder. At the threshold she, too, had turned her head. At instant their glances met. The next she was gone.

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