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THE CRIMSON BLIND

By FRED. M. WHITE

1905

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CHAPTER

THE CRIMSON BLIND.

CHAPTER I

"WHO SPEAKS?"

David Steel dropped his eyes from the mirror and shuddered as a man who sees his own soul bared for the first time. And yet the mirror was in itself a thing of artistic beauty—engraved Florentine glass in a frame of deep old Flemish oak. The novelist had purchased it in Bruges, and now it stood as a joy and a thing of beauty against the full red wall over the fireplace. And Steel had glanced at himself therein and seen murder in his eyes.

He dropped into a chair with a groan for his own helplessness. Men have done that kind of thing before when the cartridges are all gone and the bayonets are twisted and broken and the brown waves of the foe come snarling over the breastworks. And then they die doggedly with the stones in their hands, and cursing the tardy supports that brought this black shame upon them.

But Steel's was ruin of another kind. The man was a fighter to his finger-tips. He had dogged determination and splendid physical courage; he had gradually thrust his way into the front rank of living novelists, though the taste of poverty was still bitter in his mouth. And how good success was now that it had come!

People envied him. Well, that was all in the sweets of the victory. They praised his blue china, they lingered before his Oriental dishes and the choice pictures on the panelled walls. The whole thing was still a constant pleasure to Steel's artistic mind. The dark walls, the old oak and silver, the red shades, and the high artistic fittings soothed him and pleased him, and played upon his tender imagination. And behind there was a study, filled with books and engravings, and beyond that again a conservatory, filled with the choicest blossoms. Steel could work with the passion flowers above his head and the tender grace of the tropical ferns about him, and he could reach his left hand for his telephone and call Fleet Street to his ear.

It was all unique, delightful, the dream of an artistic soul realised. Three years before David Steel had worked in an attic at a bare deal table, and his mother had £3 per week to pay for everything. Usually there was balm in this recollection.

But not to-night, Heaven help him, not to-night! Little grinning demons were dancing on the oak cornices, there were mocking lights gleaming from Cellini tankards that Steel had given far too much money for. It had not seemed to matter just at the time. If all this artistic beauty had emptied Steel's purse there was a golden stream coming. What mattered it that the local tradesmen were getting a little restless? The great expense of the novelist's life was past. In two years he would be rich. And the pathos of the thing was not lessened by the fact that it was true. In two years' time Steel would be well off. He was terribly short of ready money, but he had just finished a serial story for which he was to be paid £500 within two months of the delivery of the copy; two novels of his were respectively in their fourth and fifth editions. But these novels of his he had more or less given away, and he ground his teeth as he thought of it. Still, everything spelt prosperity. If he lived, David Steel was bound to become a rich man.

And yet he was ruined. Within twenty-four hours everything would pass out of his hands. To all practical purposes it had done so already. And all for the want of £1,000! Steel had earned twice that amount during the past twelve months, and the fruits of his labour were as balm to his soul about him. Within the next twelve months he could pay the debt three times over. He would cheerfully have taken the bill and doubled the amount for six months' delay.

And all this because he had become surety for an absconding brother. Steel had put his pride in his pocket and interviewed his creditor, a little, polite, mild-eyed financier, who meant to have his money to the uttermost farthing. At first he had been suave and sympathetic, until he had discovered that Steel had debts elsewhere, and then—

Well, he had signed judgment, and to-morrow he could levy execution. Within a few hours the bottom would fall out of the universe so far as Steel was concerned. Within a few hours every butcher and baker and candle-stick-maker would come abusively for his bill. Steel, who could have faced a regiment, recoiled fearfully from that. Within a week his oak and silver would have to be sold and the passion flower would wither on the walls.

Steel had not told anybody yet; the strong man had grappled with his trouble alone. Had he been a man of business he might have found some way out of the difficulty. Even his mother didn't know. She was asleep upstairs, perhaps dreaming of her son's greatness. What would the dear old mater say when

she knew? Well, she had been a good mother to him, and it had been a labour of love to furnish the house for her as for himself. Perhaps there would be a few tears in those gentle eyes, but no more. Thank God, no reproaches there.

David lighted a cigarette and paced restlessly round the dining-room. Never had he appreciated its quiet beauty more than he did now. There were flowers, blood-red flowers, on the table under the graceful electric stand that Steel had designed himself. He snapped off the light as if the sight pained him, and strode into his study. For a time he stood moodily gazing at his flowers and ferns. How every leaf there was pregnant with association. There was the Moorish clock droning the midnight hour. When Steel had brought that clock—

"Ting, ting, ting. Pring, pring, ping, pring. Ting, ting, ting, ting."

But Steel heard nothing. Everything seemed as silent as the grave. It was only by a kind of inner consciousness that he knew the hour to be midnight. Midnight meant the coming of the last day. After sunrise some greasy lounger pregnant of cheap tobacco would come in and assume that he represented the sheriff, bills would be hung like banners on the outward walls, and then.—

"Pring, pring, pring. Ting, ting, ting, ting, ting, ting, ting, ting.
Pring, pring, pring."

Bells, somewhere. Like the bells in the valley where the old vicarage used to stand. Steel vaguely wondered who now lived in the house where he was born. He was staring in the most absent way at his telephone, utterly unconscious of the shrill impatience of the little voice. He saw the quick pulsation of the striker and he came back to earth again.

Jefferies of the *Weekly Messenger*, of course. Jefferies was fond of a late chat on the telephone. Steel wondered grimly, if Jefferies would lend him £1,000. He flung himself down in a deep lounge-chair and placed the receiver to his ear. By the deep, hoarse clang of the wires, a long-distance message, assuredly.

"From London, evidently. Halloa, London! Are you there?"

London responded that it was. A clear, soft voice spoke at length.

"Is that you, Mr. Steel? Are you quite alone? Under the circumstances you are not busy to-night?"

Steel started. He had never heard the voice before. It was clear and soft and commanding, and yet there was just a suspicion of mocking irony in it.

"I'm not very busy to-night," Steel replied. "Who is speaking to me?"

"That for the present we need not go into," said the mocking voice. "As certain old-fashioned contemporaries of yours would say, 'We meet as strangers!' Stranger yet, you are quite alone!"

"I am quite alone. Indeed, I am the only one up in the house."

"Good. I have told the exchange people not to ring off till I have finished with you. One advantage of telephoning at this hour is that one is tolerably free from interruption. So your mother is asleep? Have you told her what is likely to happen to you before many hours have elapsed?"

Steel made no reply for a moment. He was restless and ill at ease to-night, and it seemed just possible that his imagination was playing him strange tricks. But, no. The Moorish clock in its frame of celebrities droned the quarter after twelve; the scent of the Dijon roses floated in from the conservatory.

"I have told nobody as yet," Steel said, hoarsely. "Who in the name of
Heaven are you?"

"That in good time. But I did not think you were a coward."

"No man has ever told me so—face to face."

"Good again. I recognise the fighting ring in your voice. If you lack certain phases of moral courage, you are a man of pluck and resource. Now, somebody who is very dear to me is at present in Brighton, not very far from your own house. She is in dire need of assistance. You also are in dire need of assistance. We can be of mutual advantage to one another."

"What do you mean by that?" Steel whispered.

"Let me put the matter on a business footing. I want you to help my friend, and in return I will help you. Bear in mind that I am asking you to do nothing wrong. If you will promise me to go to a certain address in Brighton to night and see my friend, I promise that before you sleep the sum of £1,000 in Bank of England notes shall be in your possession."

No reply came from Steel. He could not have spoken at that moment for the fee-simple of Golconda. He could only hang gasping to the telephone. Many a strange and weird plot came and went in that versatile brain, but never one more wild than this. Apparently no reply was expected, for the speaker resumed:—

"I am asking you to do no wrong. You may naturally desire to know why my friend does not come to you. That must remain my secret, our secret. We are trusting you because we know you to be a gentleman, but we have enemies who are ever on the watch. All you have to do is to go to a certain place and give a certain woman information. You are thinking that this is a strange mystery. Never was anything stranger dreamt of in your philosophy. Are you agreeable?"

The mocking tone died out of the small, clear voice until it was almost pleading.

"You have taken me at a disadvantage," Steel said. "And you know—"

"Everything. I am trying to save you from ruin. Fortune has played you into my hands. I am perfectly aware that if you were not on the verge of social extinction you would refuse my request. It is in your hands to decide. You know that Beckstein, your creditor, is absolutely merciless. He will get his money back and more besides. This is his idea of business. To-morrow you will be an outcast—for the time, at any rate. Your local creditors will be insolent to you; people will pity you or blame you, as their disposition lies. On the other hand, you have but to say the word and you are saved. You can go and see the Brighton representatives of Beckstein's lawyers, and pay them in paper of the Bank of England."

"If I was assured of your bona-fides," Steel murmured.

A queer little laugh, a laugh of triumph, came over the wires.

"I have anticipated that question. Have you Greenwich time about you?"

Steel responded that he had. It was five-and-twenty minutes past twelve. He had quite ceased to wonder at any questions put to him now. It was all so like one of his brilliant little extravanganzas.

"You can hang up your receiver for five minutes," the voice said.
"Precisely at half-past twelve you go and look on your front doorstep.
Then come back and tell me what you have found. You need not fear that I
shall go away."

Steel hung up the receiver, feeling that he needed a little rest. His cigarette was actually scorching his left thumb and forefinger, but he was heedless of the fact. He flicked up the dining-room lights again and rapidly made himself a sparklet soda, which he added to a small whisky. He looked almost lovingly at the gleaming Cellini tankard, at the pools of light on the fair damask. Was it possible that he was not going to lose all this, after all?

The Moorish clock in the study droned the half-hour.

David gulped down his whisky and crept shakily to the front door with a feeling on him that he was doing something stealthily. The bolts and chain rattled under his trembling fingers. Outside, the whole world seemed to be sleeping. Under the wide canopy of stars some black object picked out with shining points lay on the white marble breadth of the top step. A gun-metal cigar-case set in tiny diamonds.

The novelist fastened the front door and staggered to the study. A pretty, artistic thing such as David had fully intended to purchase for himself. He had seen one exactly like it in a jeweller's window in North Street. He had pointed it out to his mother. Why, it was the very one! No doubt whatever about it! David had had the case in his hands and had reluctantly declined the purchase.

He pressed the spring, and the case lay open before him. Inside were papers, soft, crackling papers; the case was crammed with them. They were white and clean, and twenty-five of them in all. Twenty-five Bank of England notes for £10 each—£250!

David fought the dreamy feeling off and took down the telephone receiver.

"Are you there?" he whispered, as if fearful of listeners. "I—I have found your parcel."

"Containing the notes. So far so good. Yes, you are right, it is the same cigar-case you admired so

much in Lockhart's the other day. Well, we have given you an instance of our bona-fides. But £250 is of no use to you at present. Beckstein's people would not accept it on account—they can make far more money by 'selling you up,' as the poetic phrase goes. It is in your hands to procure the other £750 before you sleep. You can take it as a gift, or, if you are too proud for that, you may regard it as a loan. In which case you can bestow the money on such charities as commend themselves to you. Now, are you going to place yourself entirely in my hands?"

Steel hesitated no longer. Under the circumstances few men would, as he had a definite assurance that there was nothing dishonourable to be done. A little courage, a little danger, perhaps, and he could hold up his head before the world; he could return to his desk to-morrow with the passion flowers over his head and the scent groves sweet to his nostrils. And the mater could dream happily, for there would be no sadness or sorrow in the morning.

"I will do exactly what you tell me," he said.

"Spoken like a man," the voice cried. "Nobody will know you have left the house—you can be home in an hour. You will not be missed. Come, time is getting short, and I have my risks as well as others. Go at once to Old Steine. Stand on the path close under the shadow of the statue of George IV. and wait there. Somebody will say 'Come,' and you will follow. Goodnight."

Steel would have said more, but the tinkle of his own bell told him that the stranger had rung off. He laid his cigar-case on the writing-table, slipped his cigarette-case into his pocket, satisfied himself that he had his latch-key, and put on a dark overcoat. Overhead the dear old mater was sleeping peacefully. He closed the front door carefully behind him and strode resolutely into the darkness.

CHAPTER II

THE CRIMSON BLIND

David walked swiftly along, his mind in a perfect whirl. Now that once he had started he was eager to see the adventure through. It was strange, but stranger things had happened. More than one correspondent with queer personal experiences had taught him that. Nor was Steel in the least afraid. He was horribly frightened of disgrace or humiliation, but physical courage he had in a high degree. And was he not going to save his home and his good name?

David had not the least doubt on the latter score. Of course he would do nothing wrong, neither would he keep the money. This he preferred to regard as a loan—a loan to be paid off before long. At any rate, money or no money, he would have been sorry to have abandoned the adventure now.

His spirits rose as he walked along, a great weight had fallen from his shoulders. He smiled as he thought of his mother peacefully sleeping at home. What would his mother think if she knew? But, then, nobody was to know. That had been expressly settled in the bond.

Save for an occasional policeman the streets were deserted. It was a little cold and raw for the time of year, and a fog like a pink blanket was creeping in from the sea. Down in the Steine the big arc-lights gleamed here and there like nebulous blue globes; it was hardly possible to see across the road. In the half-shadow behind Steel the statue of the First Gentleman in Europe glowed gigantic, ghost-like in the mist.

It was marvellously still there, so still that David could hear the tinkle of the pebbles on the beach. He stood back by the gate of the gardens watching the play of the leaf silhouettes on the pavement, quaint patterns of fantastic designs thrown up in high relief by the arc-light above. From the dark foggy throat of St. James's Street came the tinkle of a cycle bell. On so still a night the noise seemed bizarre and out of place. Then the cycle loomed in sight; the rider, muffled and humped over the front wheel, might have been a man or a woman. As the cyclist flashed by something white and gleaming dropped into the road, and the single word "Come" seemed to cut like a knife through the fog. That was all; the rider had looked neither to the right nor to the left, but the word was distinctly uttered. At the same instant an arm dropped and a long finger pointed to the gleaming white square in the road. It was like an instantaneous photograph—a flash, and the figure had vanished in the fog.

"This grows interesting," Steel muttered. "Evidently my shadowy friend has dropped a book of rules in the road for me. The plot thickens."

It was only a plain white card that lay in the road. A few lines were typed on the back of it. The words might have been curt, but they were to the point:—

"Go along the sea front and turn into Brunswick Square. Walk along the right side of the square until you reach No. 219. You will read the number over the fanlight. Open the door and it will yield to you; there is no occasion to knock. The first door inside the hall leads to the dining-room. Walk into there and wait. Drop this card down the gutter just opposite you."

David read the directions once or twice carefully. He made a mental note of 219. After that he dropped the card down the drain-trap nearest at hand. A little way ahead of him he heard the cycle bell trilling as if in approval of his action. But David had made up his mind to observe every rule of the game. Besides, he might be rigidly watched.

The spirit of adventure was growing upon Steel now. He was no longer holding the solid result before his eyes. He was ready to see the thing through for its own sake. And as he hurried up North Street, along Western Road, and finally down Preston Street, he could hear the purring tinkle of the cycle bell before him. But not once did he catch sight of the shadowy rider.

All the same his heart was beating a little faster as he turned into Brunswick Square. All the houses were in pitchy darkness, as they naturally would be at one o'clock in the morning, so it was only with great difficulty that Steel could make out a number here and there. As he walked slowly and hesitatingly along the cycle bell drummed impatiently ahead of him.

"A hint to me," David muttered. "Stupid that I should have forgotten the directions to read the number over the fanlight. Also it is logical to suppose that I am going to find lights at No. 219. All right, my friend; no need to swear at me with that bell of yours."

He quickened his pace again and finally stopped before one of the big houses where lights were gleaming from the hall and dining-room windows. They were electric lights by their great power, and, save for the hall and dining-room, the rest of the house lay in utter darkness. The cycle bell let off an approving staccato from behind the blankety fog as Steel pulled up.

There was nothing abnormal about the house, nothing that struck the adventurer's eye beyond the extraordinary vividness of the crimson blind. The two side-windows of the big bay were evidently shuttered, but the large centre gleamed like a flood of scarlet overlaid with a silken sheen. Far across the pavement the ruby track struck into the heart of the fog.

"Vivid note," Steel murmured. "I shall remember that impression."

He was destined never to forget it, but it was only one note in the gamut of adventure now. With a firm step he walked up the marble flight and turned the handle. It felt dirty and rusty to the touch. Evidently the servants were neglectful, or they were employed by people who had small regard for outward appearances.

The door opened noiselessly, and Steel closed it behind him. A Moorish lantern cast a brilliant flood of light upon a crimson carpet, a chair, and an empty oak umbrella-stand. Beyond this there was no atom of furniture in the hall. It was impossible to see beyond the dining-room door, for a heavy red velvet curtain was drawn across. David's first impression was the amazing stillness of the place. It gave him a queer feeling that a murder had been committed there, and that everybody had fled, leaving the corpse behind. As David coughed away the lump in his throat the cough sounded strangely hollow.

He passed into the dining-room and looked eagerly about him. The room was handsomely furnished, if a little conventional—a big mahogany table in the centre, rows of mahogany chairs upholstered in morocco, fine modern prints, most of them artist's proofs, on the walls. A big marble clock, flanked by a pair of vases, stood on the mantelshelf. There were a large number of blue vases on the sideboard. The red distemper had faded to a pale pink in places.

"Tottenham Court Road," Steel smiled to himself. "Modern, solid, expensive, but decidedly inartistic. Ginger jars fourteen guineas a pair, worth about as many pence. Moneyed people, solid and respectable, of the middle class. What brings them playing at mystery like this?"

The room was most brilliantly lighted both from overhead and from the walls. On the shining desert of the dining-table lay a small, flat parcel addressed to David Steel, Esq. The novelist tore off the cover and disclosed a heap of crackling white papers beneath. Rapidly he fluttered the crisp sheets over—seventy-five Bank of England notes for £10 each.

It was the balance of the loan, the price paid for Steel's presence. All he had to do now was to place the money in his pocket and walk out of the house. A few steps and he would be free with nobody to say

him nay. It was a temptation, but Steel fought it down. He slipped the precious notes into his pocket and buttoned his coat tightly over them. He had no fear for the coming day now.

"And yet," he murmured, "what of the price I shall have to pay for this?"

Well, it was worth a ransom. And, so long as there was nothing dishonourable attached to it, Steel was prepared to redeem his pledge. He knew perfectly well from bitter experience that the poor man pays usurious rates for fortune's favours. And he was not without a strange sense of gratitude. If—

Click, click, click. Three electric switches were snapped off almost simultaneously outside, and the dining-room was plunged into pitchy darkness. Steel instantly caught up a chair. He was no coward, but he was a novelist with a novelist's imagination. As he stood there the sweetest, most musical laugh in the world broke on his ear. He caught the swish of silken drapery and the subtle scent that suggested the fragrance of a woman's hair. It was vague, undefined, yet soothing.

"Pray be seated, Mr. Steel," the silvery voice said. "Believe me, had there been any other way, I would not have given you all this trouble. You found the parcel addressed to you? It is an earnest of good faith. Is not that a correct English expression?"

David murmured that it was. But what did the speaker mean? She asked the question like a student of the English language, yet her accent and phrasing were perfect. She laughed again noiselessly, and once more Steel caught the subtle, entrancing perfume.

"I make no further apology for dragging you here at this time," the sweet voice said. "We knew that you were in the habit of sitting up alone late at night, hence the telephone message. You will perhaps wonder how we came to know so much of your private affairs. Rest assured that we learnt nothing in Brighton. Presently you may gather why I am so deeply interested in you; I have been for the past fortnight. You see, we were not quite certain that you would come to our assistance unless we could find some means of coercing you. Then we go to one of the smartest inquiry agents in the world and say: 'Tell us all about Mr. David Steel without delay. Money is no object.' In less than a week we know all about Beckstein. We leave matters till the last moment. If you only knew how revolting it all was!"

"So your tone seems to imply, madam," Steel said, drily.

"Oh, but truly. You were in great trouble, and we found a way to get you out. At a price; ah, yes. But your trouble is nothing compared with mine—which brings me to business. A fortnight ago last Monday you posted to Mr. Vanstone, editor of the *Piccadilly Magazine*, the synopsis of the first four or five chapters of a proposed serial for the journal in question. You open that story with a young and beautiful woman who is in deadly peril. Is not that so?"

"Yes," Steel said, faintly. "It is just as you suggest. But how—"

"Never mind that, because I am not going to tell you. In common parlance—is not that the word?—that woman is in a frightful fix. There is nothing strained about your heroine's situation, because I have heard of people being in a similar plight before. Mr. Steel, I want you to tell me truthfully and candidly, can you see the way clear to save your heroine? Oh, I don't mean by the long arm of coincidence or other favourite ruses known to your craft. I mean by common sense, logical methods, by brilliant ruses, by Machiavelian means. Tell me, do you see a way?"

The question came eagerly, almost imploringly, from the darkness. David could hear the quick gasps of his questioner, could catch the rustle of the silken corsage as she breathed.

"Yes," he said, "I can see a brilliant way out that would satisfy the strictest logician. But you—"

"Thank Heaven! Mr. Steel, I am your heroine. I am placed in exactly the same position as the woman whose story you are going to write. The setting is different, the local colouring is not the same, but the same deadly peril menaces me. For the love of Heaven hold out your hand to save a lonely and desperate woman whose only crime is that she is rich and beautiful. Providence had placed in my hands the gist of your heroine's story. Hence this masquerade; hence the fact that you are here to-night. I have helped *you*—help *me* in return."

It was some time before Steel spoke.

"It shall be as you wish," he said. "I will tell you how I propose to save my heroine. Her sufferings are fiction; yours will be real. But if you are to be saved by the same means, Heaven help you to bear the troubles that are in front of you. Before God, it would be more merciful for me to be silent and let you go your own way."

CHAPTER III

THE VOICE IN THE DARKNESS

David was silent for some little time. The strangeness of the situation had shut down on him again, and he was thinking of nothing else for the moment. In the dead stillness of the place he could hear the quick breathing of his companion; the rustle of her dress seemed near to him and then to be very far off. Nor did the pitchy darkness yield a jot to his now accustomed eyes. He held a hand close to his eyes, but he could see nothing.

"Well?" the sweet voice in the darkness said, impatiently. "Well?"

"Believe me, I will give you all the assistance possible. If you would only turn up the light—"

"Oh, I dare not. I have given my word of honour not to violate the seal of secrecy. You may say that we have been absurdly cautious in this matter, but you would not think so if you knew everything. Even now the wretch who holds me in his power may have guessed my strategy and be laughing at me. Some day, perhaps—"

The speaker stopped, with something like a sob in her throat.

"We are wasting precious time," she went on, more calmly. "I had better tell you my history. In *your* story a woman commits a crime: she is guilty of a serious breach of trust to save the life of a man she loves. By doing so she places the future and the happiness of many people in the hands of an abandoned scoundrel. If she can only manage to regain the thing she has parted from the situation is saved. Is not that so?"

"So far you have stated the case correctly," David murmured.

"As I said before, I am in practically similar case. Only, in my situation, I hastened everything and risked the happiness of many people for the sake of a little child."

"Ah!" David cried. "Your own child? No! The child of one very near and dear to you, then. From the mere novelist point of view, that is a far more artistic idea than mine. I see that I shall have to amend my story before it is published."

A rippling little laugh came like the song of a bird in the darkness.

"Dear Mr. Steel," the voice said, "I implore you to do nothing of the kind. You are a man of fertile imagination—a plot more or less makes no difference to you. If you publish that story you go far on the way to ruin me."

"I am afraid that I am in the dark in more senses than one," David murmured.

"Then let me enlighten you. Daily your books are more widely read. My enemy is a great novel reader. You publish that story, and what results? You not only tell that enemy my story, but you show him my way out of the difficulty, and show him how he can checkmate my every move. Perhaps, after I have escaped from the net—"

"You are right," Steel said, promptly. "From a professional point of view the story is abandoned. And now you want me to show you a rational and logical, a *human* way out."

"If you can do so you have my everlasting gratitude."

"Then you must tell me in detail what it is you want to recover. My heroine parts with a document which the villain knows to be a forgery. Money cannot buy it back because the villain can make as much money as he likes by retaining it. He does as he likes with the family property; he keeps my heroine's husband out of England by dangling the forgery and its consequences over his head. What is to be done? How is the ruffian to be bullied into a false sense of security by the one man who desires to throw dust in his eyes?"

"Ah," the voice cried, "ah, if you could only tell me that! Let *my* ruffian only imagine that I am dead; let him have proofs of it, and the thing is done. I could reach him *then*; I could tear from him the letter that—but I need not go into details. But he is cunning as the serpent. Nothing but the most convincing proofs would satisfy him."

"A certificate of death signed by a physician beyond reproach?"

"Yes, that would do. But you couldn't get a medical man like that to commit felony."

"No, but we could trick him into it," Steel exclaimed. "In my story a fraud is perpetrated to blind the villain and to deprive him of his weapons. It is a case of the end justifying the means. But it is one thing, my dear lady, to commit fraud actually and to perpetrate it in a novel. In the latter case you can defy the police, but unfortunately you and I are dealing with real life. If I am to help you I must be a party to a felony."

"But you will! You are not going to draw back now? Mr. Steel, I have saved your home. You are a happy man compared to what you were two hours ago. If the risk is great you have brains and imagination to get out of danger. Show me how to do it, and the rest shall be mine. You have never seen me, you know nothing, not even the name of the person who called you over the telephone. You have only to keep your own counsel, and if I wade in blood to my end you are safe. Tell me how I can die, disappear, leaving that one man to believe I am no more. And don't make it too ingenious. Don't forget that you promised to tell me a rational way out of the difficulty. How can it be done?"

"In my pocket I have a cutting from the *Times*, which contains a chapter from the history of a medical student who is alone in London. It closely resembles my plot. He says he has no friends, and he deems it prudent for reasons we need not discuss to let the world assume that he is dead. The rest is tolerably easy. He disguises himself and goes to a doctor of repute, whom he asks to come and see his brother —*i.e.,* himself—who is dangerously ill. The doctor goes later in the day and finds his patient in bed with severe internal inflammation. This is brought about by a free use of albumen. I don't know what amount of albumen one would take without extreme risk, but you could pump that information out of any doctor. Well, our medical man calls again and yet again, and finds his patient sinking. The next day the patient, disguised, calls upon his doctor with the information that his 'brother' is dead. The doctor is not in the least surprised, and without going to view the body gives a certificate of death. Now, I admit that all this sounds cheap and theatrical, but you can't get over facts. The thing actually happened a little time ago in London, and there is no reason why it shouldn't happen again."

"You suggest that I should do this thing?" the voice asked.

"Pardon me, I did nothing of the kind," Steel replied "You asked me to show you how my heroine gets herself out of a terrible position, and I am doing it. You are not without friends. The way I was called up tonight and the way I was brought here prove that. With the aid of your friends the thing is possible to you. You have only to find a lodging where people are not too observant and a doctor who is too busy, or too careless, to look after dead patients, and the thing is done. If you desire to be looked upon as dead—especially by a powerful enemy—I cannot recommend a more natural, rational way than this. As to the details, they may be safely left to you. The clever manner in which you have kept up the mystery to-night convinces me that I have nothing to teach you in this direction. And if there is anything more I can do—"

"A thousand, thousand thanks," the voice cried, passionately. "To be looked upon as 'dead,' to be near to the rascal who smiles to think that I am in my grave.... And everything so dull and prosaic on the surface! Yes, I have friends who will aid me in the business. Some day I may be able to thank you face to face, to tell you how I managed to see your plot. May I?"

The question came quite eagerly, almost imploringly. In the darkness Steel felt a hand trembling on his breast, a cool, slim hand, with many rings on the fingers. Steel took the hand and carried it to his lips.

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure," he said. "And may you be successful. Good-night."

"Good-night, and God bless you for a real gentleman and a true friend. I will go out of the room first and put the lights up afterwards. You will walk away and close the door behind you. The newspaper cutting! Thanks. And once more good-night, but let us hope not good-bye."

She was gone. Steel could hear the distant dying swish of silk, the rustling of the portière, and then, with a flick, the lights came up again. Half-blinded by the sudden illumination Steel fumbled his way to the door and into the street. As he did so Hove Town Hall clock chimed two. With a cigarette between his teeth David made his way home.

He could not think it all out yet; he would wait until he was in his own comfortable chair under the roses and palms leading from his study. A fine night of adventure, truly, and a paying one. He pressed the precious packet of notes to his side and his soul expanded.

He was home at last. But surely he had closed the door before he started? He remembered distinctly trying the latch. And here the latch was back and the door open. The quick snap of the electric light declared nobody in the dining-room. Beyond, the study was in darkness. Nobody there, but—stop!

A stain on the carpet; another by the conservatory door. Pots of flowers scattered about, and a huddled mass like a litter of empty sacks in one corner. Then the huddled mass resolved itself into the figure of a man with a white face smeared with blood. Dead! Oh, yes, dead enough.

Steel flew to the telephone and rang furiously.

"Give me 52, Police Station," he cried. "Are you there? Send somebody at once up here—15, Downend Terrace. There has been murder done here. For Heaven's sake come quickly."

Steel dropped the receiver and stared with strained eyes at the dreadful sight before him.

CHAPTER IV

IN EXTREMIS

For some time—a minute, an hour—Steel stood over the dreadful thing huddled upon the floor of his conservatory. Just then he was incapable of consecutive ideas.

His mind began to move at length. The more he thought of it the more absolutely certain he was that he had fastened the door before leaving the house. True, the latch was only an ordinary one, and a key might easily have been made to fit it. As a matter of fact, David had two, one in reserve in case of accidents. The other was usually kept in a jewel-drawer of the dressing-table. Perhaps—

David went quietly upstairs. It was just possible that the murderer was in the house. But the closest search brought nothing to light. He pulled out the jewel-drawer in the dressing-table. The spare latchkey had gone! Here was something to go upon.

Then there was a rumbling of an electric bell somewhere that set David's heart beating like a drum. The hall light streamed on a policeman in uniform and an inspector in a dark overcoat and a hard felt hat. On the pavement was a long shallow tray, which David recognised mechanically as the ambulance.

"Something very serious, sir?" Inspector Marley asked, quietly. "I've brought the doctor with me."

David nodded. Both the inspector and the doctor were acquaintances of his. He closed the door and led the way into the study. Just inside the conservatory and not far from the huddled figure lay David's new cigar-case. Doubtless, without knowing it, the owner had whisked it off the table when he had sprung the telephone.

"'Um," Marley muttered. "Is this a clue, or yours, sir?"

He lifted the case with its diamonds gleaming like stars on a dark night. David had forgotten all about it for the time, had forgotten where it came from, or that it contained £250 in bank-notes.

"Not mine," he said. "I mean to say, of course, it is mine. A recent present. The shock of this discovery has deprived me of my senses pretty well."

Marley laid the cigar-case on the table. It seemed strange to him, who could follow a tragedy calmly, that a man should forget his own property. Meanwhile Cross was bending over the body. David could see a face smooth like that of a woman. A quick little exclamation came from the doctor.

"A drop of brandy here, and quick as possible," he commanded.

"You don't mean to say," Steel began; "you don't—"

Cross waved his arm, impatiently. The brandy was procured as speedily as possible. Steel, watching intently, fancied that he detected a slight flicker of the muscles of the white, stark face.

"Bring the ambulance here," Cross said, curtly. "If we can get this poor chap to the hospital there is just a chance for him. Fortunately, we have not many yards to go."

As far as elucidation went Marley naturally looked to Steel.

"I should like to have your explanation, sir," he said, gravely.

"Positively, I have no explanation to offer," David replied. "About midnight I let myself out to go for a stroll, carefully closing the door behind me. Naturally, the door was on the latch. When I came back an hour or so later, to my horror and surprise I found those marks of a struggle yonder and that poor fellow lying on the floor of the conservatory."

"'Um. Was the door fast on your return?"

"No, it was pulled to, but it was open all the same."

"You didn't happen to lose your latch-key during your midnight stroll, sir?"

"No, it was only when I put my key in the door that I discovered it to be open. I have a spare latch-key which I keep for emergencies, but when I went to look for it just now the key was not to be found. When I came back the house was perfectly quiet."

"What family have you, sir? And what kind of servants?"

"There is only myself and my mother, with three maids. You may dismiss any suspicion of the servants from your mind at once. My mother trained them all in the old vicarage where I was born, and not one of the trio has been with us less than twelve years."

"That simplifies matters somewhat," Marley said, thoughtfully. "Apparently your latch-key was stolen by somebody who has made careful study of your habits. Do you generally go for late walks after your household has gone to bed, sir?"

David replied somewhat grudgingly that he had never done such a thing before. He would like to have concealed the fact, but it was bound to come out sooner or later. He had strolled along the front and round Brunswick Square. Marley shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, it's a bit of a puzzle to me," he admitted. "You go out for a midnight walk—a thing you have never done before—and when you come back you find somebody has got into your house by means of a stolen latch-key and murdered somebody else in your conservatory. According to that, two people must have entered the house."

"That's logic," David admitted. "There can be no murder without the slain *and* the slayer. My impression is that somebody who knows the ways of the house watched me depart. Then he lured his victim in here under pretence that it was his own house—he had the purloined latch-key—and murdered him. Audacious, but a far safer way than doing it out of doors."

But Marley's imagination refused to go so far. The theory was plausible enough, he pointed out respectfully, if the assassin had been assured that these midnight rambles were a matter of custom. The point was a shrewd one, and Steel had to admit it. He almost wished now that he had suggested that he often took these midnight rambles. He regretted the fiction still more when Marley asked if he had had some appointment elsewhere to-night.

"No," David said, promptly, "I hadn't."

He prevaricated without hesitation. His adventure in Brunswick Square could not possibly have anything to do with the tragedy, and nothing would be gained by betraying that trust.

"I'll run round to the hospital and come and see you again in the morning, sir," Marley said. "Whatever was the nature of the crime, it wasn't robbery, or the criminal wouldn't have left that cigar-case of yours behind. Sir James Lythem had one stolen like that at the last races, and he valued it at £80."

"I'll come as far as the hospital with you," said Steel.

At the bottom of the flight of steps they encountered Dr. Cross and the policeman. The former handed over to Marley a pocket-book and some papers, together with a watch and chain.

"Everything that we could find upon him," he explained.

"Is the poor fellow dead yet?" David asked.

"No," Cross replied. "He was stabbed twice in the back in the region of the liver. I could not say for sure, but there is just a chance that he may recover. But one thing is pretty certain—it will be a good long time before he is in a position to say anything for himself. Good-night, Mr. Steel."

David went indoors thoughtfully, with a general feeling that something like a hand had grasped his brain and was squeezing it like a sponge. He was free from his carking anxiety now, but it seemed to

him that he was paying a heavy price for his liberty. Mechanically, he counted out the bank-notes, and almost as mechanically he cut his initials on the gun-metal inside the cigar-case. He was one of the kind of men who like to have their initials everywhere.

He snapped the lights out and went to bed at last. But not to sleep. The welcome dawn came at length and David took his bath gratefully. He would have to tell his mother what had happened, suppressing all reference to the Brunswick Square episode. It was not a pleasant story, but Mrs. Steel assimilated it at length over her early tea and toast.

"It might have been you, my dear," she said, placidly. "And, indeed, it is a dreadful business. But why not telephone to the hospital and ask how the poor fellow is?"

The patient was better but was still in an unconscious condition.

CHAPTER V

"RECEIVED WITH THANKS."

Steel swallowed a hasty breakfast and hurried off town-wards. He had £1,000 packed away in his cigar-case, and the sooner he was free from Beckstein the better he would be pleased. He came at length to the offices of Messrs. Mossa and Mack, whose brass-plate bore the legend that the gentry in questions were solicitors, and that they also had a business in London. As David strode into the offices of the senior partner that individual looked up with a shade of anxiety in his deep, Oriental eyes.

"If you have come to offer terms," he said, nasally, "I am sorry—"

"To hear that I have come to pay you in full," David said, grimly; "£974 16s. 4d. up to yesterday, which I understand is every penny you can rightfully claim. Here it is. Count it."

He opened the cigar-case and took the notes therefrom. Mr. Mossa counted them very carefully indeed. The shade of disappointment was still upon his aquiline features. He had hoped to put in execution to-day and sell David up. In that way quite £200 might have been added to his legitimate earnings.

"It appears to be all correct," Mossa said, dismally.

"So I imagined, sir. You will be so good as to indorse the receipt on the back of the writ. Of course you are delighted to find that I am not putting you to painful extremities. Any other firm of solicitors would have given me time to pay this. But I am like the man who journeyed from Jericho to Jerusalem —"

"And fell amongst thieves! You dare to call me a thief? You dare—"

"I didn't," David said, drily. "That fine, discriminating mind of yours saved me the trouble. I have met some tolerably slimy scoundrels in my time, but never any one of them more despicable than yourself. Faugh! the mere sight of you sickens me. Let me get out of the place so that I can breathe."

David strode out of the office with the remains of his small fortune rammed into his pocket. In the wild, unreasoning rage that came over him he had forgotten his cigar-case. And it was some little time before Mr. Mossa was calm enough to see the diamonds winking at him.

"Our friend is in funds," he muttered. "Well, he shall have a dance for his cigar-case. I'll send it up to the police-station and say that some gentleman or other left it here by accident. And if that Steel comes back we can say that there is no cigar-case here. And if Steel does not see the police advertisement he will lose his pretty toy, and serve him right. Yes, that is the way to serve him out."

Mr. Mossa proceeded to put his scheme into execution whilst David was strolling along the sea front. He was too excited for work, though he felt easier in his mind than he had done for months. He turned mechanically on to the Palace Pier, at the head of which an Eastbourne steamer was blaring and panting. The trip appealed to David in his present frame of mind. Like most of his class, he was given to acting on the spur of the moment.… It was getting dark as David let himself into Downend Terrace with his latchkey.

How good it was to be back again! The eye of the artist rested fondly upon the beautiful things around. And but for the sport of chance, the whim of fate, these had all passed from him by this time. It was good to look across the dining-table over venetian glass, to see the pools of light cast by the shaded

electric, to note the feathery fall of flowers, and to see that placid, gentle face in its frame of white hair opposite him. Mrs. Steel's simple, unaffected pride in her son was not the least gratifying part of David's success.

"You have not suffered from the shock, mother?" he asked.

"Well, no," Mrs. Steel confessed, placidly. "You see, I never had what people call nerves, my dear. And, after all, I saw nothing. Still, I am very, very sorry for that poor young man, and I have sent to inquire after him several times."

"He is no worse or I should have heard of it."

"No, and no better. And Inspector Marley has been here to see you twice to-day."

David pitied himself as much as a man could pity himself considering his surroundings. It was rather annoying that this should have happened at a time when he was so busy. And Marley would have all sorts of questions to ask at all sorts of inconvenient seasons.

Steel passed into his study presently and lighted a cigarette. Despite his determination to put the events of yesterday from his mind, he found himself constantly returning to them. What a splendid dramatic story they would make! And what a fascinating mystery could be woven round that gun-metal cigar-case!

By the way, where was the cigar-case? On the whole it would be just as well to lock the case away till he could discover some reasonable excuse for its possession. His mother would be pretty sure to ask where it came from, and David could not prevaricate so far as she was concerned. But the cigar-case was not to be found, and David was forced to the conclusion that he had left it in Mossa's office.

A little annoyed with himself he took up the evening *Argus*. There was half a column devoted to the strange case at Downend Terrace, and just over it a late advertisement to the effect that a gun-metal cigar-case had been found and was in the hands of the police awaiting an owner.

David slipped from the house and caught a 'bus in St. George's Road.

At the police-station he learnt that Inspector Marley was still on the premises. Marley came forward gravely. He had a few questions to ask, but nothing to tell.

"And now perhaps you can give me some information?" David said, "You are advertising in to-night's *Argus* a gun-metal cigar-case set with diamonds."

"Ah," Marley said, eagerly, "can you tell us anything about it?"

"Nothing beyond the fact that I hope to satisfy you that the case is mine."

Marley stared open-mouthed at David for a moment, and then relapsed into his sapless official manner. He might have been a detective cross-examining a suspected criminal.

"Why this mystery?" David asked. "I have lost a gun-metal cigar-case set with diamonds, and I see a similar article is noted as found by the police. I lost it this morning, and I shrewdly suspect that I left it behind me at the office of Mr. Mossa."

"The case was sent here by Mr. Mossa himself," Marley admitted.

"Then, of course, it is mine. I had to give Mr. Mossa my opinion of him this morning, and by way of spiting me he sent that case here, hoping, perhaps, that I should not recover it. You know the case Marley—it was lying on the floor of my conservatory last night."

"I did notice a gun-metal case there," Marley said, cautiously.

"As a matter of fact, you called my attention to it and asked if it was mine."

"And you said at first that it wasn't, sir."

"Well, you must make allowances for my then frame of mind," David laughed. "I rather gather from your manner that somebody else has been after the case; if that is so, you are right to be reticent. Still, it is in your hands to settle the matter on the spot. All you have to do is to open the case, and if you fail to find my initials, D.S., scratched in the left-hand top corner, then I have lost my property and the other fellow has found his."

In the same reticent fashion Marley proceeded to unlock a safe in the corner, and from thence he

produced what appeared to be the identical cause of all this talk. He pulled the electric table lamp over to him and proceeded to examine the inside carefully.

"You are quite right," he said, at length. "Your initials are here."

"Not strange, seeing that I scratched them there last night," said David, drily. "When? Oh, it was after you left my house last night."

"And it has been some time in your possession, sir?"

"Oh, confound it, no. It was—well, it was a present from a friend for a little service rendered. So far as I understand, it was purchased at Lockhart's, in North Street. No, I'll be hanged if I answer any more of your questions, Marley. I'll be your Aunt Sally so far as you are officially concerned. But as to yonder case, your queries are distinctly impertinent."

Marley shook his head gravely, as one might over a promising but headstrong boy.

"Do I understand that you decline to account for the case?" he asked.

"Certainly I do. It is connected with some friends of mine to whom I rendered a service a little time back. The whole thing is and must remain an absolute secret."

"You are placing yourself in a very delicate position, Mr. Steel."

David started at the gravity of the tone. That something was radically wrong came upon him like a shock. And he could see pretty clearly that, without betraying confidence, he could not logically account for the possession of the cigar-case. In any case it was too much to expect that the stolid police officer would listen to so extravagant a tale for a moment.

"What on earth do you mean, man?" he cried.

"Well, it's this way, sir," Marley proceeded to explain. "When I pointed out the case to you lying on the floor of your conservatory last night you said it wasn't yours. You looked at it with the eyes of a stranger, and then you said you were mistaken. From information given me last night I have been making inquiries about the cigar-case. You took it to Mr. Mossa's, and from it you produced notes to the value of nearly £1,000 to pay off a debt. Within eight-and forty hours you had no more prospect of paying that debt than I have at this moment. Of course, you will be able to account for those notes. You can, of course?"

Marley looked eagerly at his visitor. A cold chill was playing up and down Steel's spine. Not to save his life could he account for those notes.

"We will discuss that when the proper time comes," he said, with fine indifference.

"As you please, sir. From information also received I took the case to Walen's, in West Street, and asked Mr. Walen if he had seen the case before. Pressed to identify it, he handed me a glass and asked me to find the figures (say) '1771. x 3,' in tiny characters on the edge. I did so by the aid of the glass, and Mr. Walen further proceeded to show me an entry in his purchasing ledger which proved that a cigar-case in gun-metal and diamonds bearing that legend had been added to the stock quite recently—a few weeks ago, in fact."

"Well, what of that?" David asked, impatiently. "For all I know, the case might have come from Walen's. I said it came from a friend who must needs be nameless for services equally nameless. I am not going to deny that Walen was right."

"I have not quite finished," Marley said, quietly. "Pressed as to when the case had been sold, Mr. Walen, without hesitation, said: 'Yesterday, for £72 15s.' The purchaser was a stranger, whom Mr. Walen is prepared to identify. Asked if a formal receipt had been given, Walen said that it had. And now I come to the gist of the whole matter. You saw Dr. Cross hand me a mass of papers, etc., taken from the person of the gentleman who was nearly killed in your house?"

David nodded. His breath was coming a little faster. His quick mind had run on ahead; he saw the gulf looming before him.

"Go on," said he, hoarsely, "go on. You mean to say that—"

"That amongst the papers found in the pocket of the unfortunate stranger was a receipted bill for the very cigar-case that lies here on the table before you!"

CHAPTER VI

A POLICY OF SILENCE

Steel dropped into a chair and gazed at Inspector Marley with mild surprise. At the same time he was not in the least alarmed. Not that he failed to recognise the gravity of the situation, only it appealed in the first instance to the professional side of his character.

"Walen is quite sure?" he asked. "No possible doubt about that, eh?"

"Not in the least. You see, he recognised his private mark at once, and Brighton is not so prosperous a place that a man could sell a £70 cigar-case and forget all about it—that is, a second case, I mean. It's most extraordinary."

"Rather! Make a magnificent story, Marley."

"Very," Marley responded, drily. "It would take all your well-known ingenuity to get your hero out of this trouble."

Steel nodded gravely. This personal twist brought him to the earth again. He could clearly see the trap into which he had placed himself. There before him lay the cigar-case which he had positively identified as his own; inside, his initials bore testimony to the fact. And yet the same case had been identified beyond question as one sold by a highly respectable local tradesman to the mysterious individual now lying in the Sussex County Hospital.

"May I smoke a cigarette?" David asked.

"You may smoke a score if they will be of any assistance to you, sir," Marley replied. "I don't want to ask you any questions and I don't want you—well, to commit yourself. But really, sir, you must admit—"

The inspector paused significantly. David nodded again.

"Pray proceed," he said: "speak from the brief you have before you."

"Well, you see it's this way," Marley said, not without hesitation. "You call us up to your house, saying that a murder has been committed there; we find a stranger almost at his last gasp in your conservatory with every signs of a struggle having taken place. You tell us that the injured man is a stranger to you; you go on to say that he must have found his way into your house during a nocturnal ramble of yours. Well, that sounds like common sense on the face of it. The criminal has studied your habits and has taken advantage of them. Then I ask if you are in the habit of taking these midnight strolls, and with some signs of hesitation you say that you have never done such a thing before. Charles Dickens was very fond of that kind of thing, and I naturally imagined that you had the same fancy. But you had never done it before. And, the only time, a man is nearly murdered in your house."

"Perfectly correct," David murmured. "Gaboriau could not have put it better. You might have been a pupil of my remarkable acquaintance Hatherly Bell."

"I am a pupil of Mr. Bell's," Marley said, quietly. "Seven years ago he induced me to leave the Huddersfield police to go into his office, where I stayed until Mr. Bell gave up business, when I applied for and gained my present position. Curious you should mention Mr. Bell's name, seeing that he was here so recently as this afternoon."

"Staying in Brighton?" Steel asked, eagerly. "What is his address?"

"No. 219, Brunswick Square."

It took all the nerve that David possessed to crush the cry that rose to his lips. It was more than strange that the man he most desired to see at this juncture should be staying in the very house where the novelist had his great adventure. And in the mere fact might be the key to the problem of the cigar-case.

"I'll certainly see Bell," he muttered. "Go on, Marley."

"Yes, sir. We now proceed to the cigar-case that lies before you. It was also lying on the floor of your conservatory on the night in question. I suggested that here we might have found a clue, taking the precaution at the same time to ask if the article in question was your property. You looked at the case as one does who examines an object for the first time, and proceeded to declare that it was not yours. I

am quite prepared to admit that you instantly corrected yourself. But I ask, is it a usual thing for a man to forget the ownership of a £70 cigar-case?"

"A nice point, and I congratulate you upon it," David said.

"Then we will take the matter a little farther. A day or two ago you were in dire need of something like £1,000. Temporarily, at any rate, you were practically at the end of your resources. If this money were not forthcoming in a few hours you were a ruined man. In vulgar parlance, you would have been sold up. Mossa and Mack had you in their grip, and they were determined to make all they could out of you. The morning following the outrage at your house you call upon Mr. Mossa and produce the cigar-case lying on the table before you. From that case you produce notes sufficient to discharge your debt —Bank of England notes, the numbers of which, I need hardly say, are in my possession. The money is produced from the case yonder, which case we *know* was sold to the injured man by Mr. Walen."

Marley made a long and significant pause. Steel nodded.

"There seems to be no way out of it," he said.

"I can see one," Marley suggested. "Of course, it would simplify matters enormously if you merely told me in confidence whence came those notes. You see, as I have the numbers, I could verify your statement beyond question, and—"

Marley paused again and shrugged his shoulders. Despite his cold, official manner, he was obviously prompted by a desire to serve his companion. And yet, simple as the suggestion seemed, it was the very last thing with which Steel could comply.

The novelist turned the matter over rapidly in his mind. His quick perceptions flashed along the whole logical line instantaneously. He was like a man who suddenly sees a midnight landscape by the glare of a dazzling flash of lightning.

"I am sorry," he said, slowly, "very sorry, to disappoint you. Were our situations reversed, I should take up your position exactly. But it so happens that I cannot, dare not, tell you where I got those notes from. So far as I am concerned they came honestly into my hands in payment for special services rendered. It was part of my contract that I should reveal the secret to nobody. If I told you the story you would decline to believe it; you would say that it was a brilliant effort of a novelist's imagination to get out of a dangerous position."

"I don't know that I should," Marley replied. "I have long since ceased to wonder at anything that happens in or connected with Brighton."

"All the same I can't tell you, Marley," Steel said, as he rose. "My lips are absolutely sealed. The point is: what are you going to do?"

"For the present, nothing," Marley replied. "So long as the man in the hospital remains unconscious I can do no more than pursue what Beaconsfield called 'a policy of masterly inactivity.' I have told you a good deal more than I had any right to do, but I did so in the hope that you could assist me. Perhaps in a day or two you will think better of it. Meanwhile—"

"Meanwhile I am in a tight place. Yes, I see that perfectly well. It is just possible that I may scheme some way out of the difficulty, and if so I shall be only too pleased to let you know. Good-night, Marley, and many thanks to you."

But with all his ingenuity and fertility of imagination David could see no way out of the trouble. He sat up far into the night scheming; there was no flavour in his tobacco; his pictures and flowers, his silver and china, jarred upon him. He wished with all his heart now that he had let everything go. It need only have been a temporary matter, and there were other Cellini tankards, and intaglios, and line engravings in the world for the man with money in his purse.

He could see no way out of it at all. Was it not possible that the whole thing had been deliberately planned so as to land him and his brains into the hands of some clever gang of swindlers? Had he been tricked and fooled so that he might become the tool of others? It seemed hard to think so when he recalled the sweet voice in the darkness and its passionate plea for help. And yet the very cigar-case that he had been told was the one he admired at Lockhart's had proved beyond question to be one purchased from Walen's!

If he decided to violate his promise and tell the whole story nobody would believe him. The thing was altogether too wild and improbable for that. And yet, he reflected, things almost as impossible happen in Brighton every day. And what proof had he to offer?

Well, there was one thing certain. At least three-quarters of those bank-notes—the portion he had collected at the house with the crimson blind—could not possibly be traced to the injured man. And, again, it was no fault of Steel's that Marley had obtained possession of the numbers of the notes. If the detective chose to ferret out facts for himself no blame could attach to Steel. If those people had only chosen to leave out of the question that confounded cigar-case!

David's train of thought was broken as an idea came to him. It was not so long since he had a facsimile cigar-case in his hand at Lockhart's, in North Street. Somebody connected with the mystery must have seen him admiring it and reluctantly declining the purchase, because the voice from the telephone told him that the case was a present and that it had come from the famous North Street establishment.

"By Jove!" David cried. "I'll go to Lockhart's tomorrow and see if the case is still there. If so, I may be able to trace it."

Fairly early the next morning David was in North Street. For the time being he had put his work aside altogether. He could not have written a dozen consecutive lines to save the situation. The mere effort to preserve a cheerful face before his mother was a torture. And at any time he might find himself forced to meet a criminal charge.

The gentlemanly assistant at Lockhart's remembered Steel and the cigar-case perfectly well, but he was afraid that the article had been sold. No doubt it would be possible to obtain a facsimile in the course of a few days.

"Only I required that particular one," Steel said. "Can you tell me when it was sold and who purchased it?"

A junior partner did, and could give some kind of information. Several people had admired the case, and it had been on the point of sale several times. Finally, it had passed into the hands of an American gentleman staying at the Metropole.

"Can you tell me his name?" David asked, "or describe him?"

"Well, I can't, sir," the junior partner said, frankly. "I haven't the slightest recollection of the gentleman. He wrote from the Metropole on the hotel paper describing the case and its price and inclosed the full amount in ten-dollar notes and asked to have the case sent by post to the hotel. When we ascertained that the notes were all right, we naturally posted the case as desired, and there, so far as we are concerned, was an end of the matter."

"You don't recollect his name?"

"Oh, yes. The name was John Smith. If there is anything wrong—-"

David hastily gave the desired assurance. He wanted to arouse no suspicion. All the same, he left Lockhart's with a plethora of suspicions of his own. Doubtless the jewellers would be well and fairly satisfied so long as the case had been paid for, but from the standpoint of David's superior knowledge the whole transaction fairly bristled with suspicion.

Not for one moment did Steel believe in the American at the Metropole. Somebody stayed there doubtless under the name of John Smith, and that said somebody had paid for the cigar-case in dollar notes the tracing of which might prove a task of years. Nor was it the slightest use to inquire at the Metropole, where practically everybody is identified by a number, and where scores come and go every day. John Smith would only have to ask for his letters and then drop quietly into a sea of oblivion.

Well, David had got his information, and a lot of use it was likely to prove to him. As he walked thoughtfully homewards he was debating in his mind whether or not he might venture to call at or write to 219, Brunswick Square, and lay his difficulties before the people there. At any rate, he reflected, with grim bitterness, they would know that he was not romancing. If nothing turned up in the meantime he would certainly visit Brunswick Square.

He sat in his own room puzzling the matter out till his head ached and the flowers before him reeled in a dazzling whirl of colour. He looked round for inspiration, now desperately, as he frequently did when the warp of his delicate fancy tangled. The smallest thing sometimes fed the machine again—a patch of sunshine, the chip on a plate, the damaged edge of a frame. Then his eye fell on the telephone and he jumped to his feet.

"What a fool I am!" he exclaimed. "If I had been plotting this business out as a story. I should have thought of that long ago…. No, I don't want any number, at least, not in that way. Two nights ago I was

called up by somebody from London who held the line for fully half an hour or so. I've—I've forgotten the address of my correspondent, but if you can ascertain the number ... yes, I shall be here if you will ring me up when you have got it.... Thanks."

Half an hour passed before the bell trilled again. David listened eagerly. At any rate, now he was going to know the number whence the mysterious message came—0017, Kensington, was the number. David muttered his thanks and flew to his big telephone directory. Yes, there it was—"0017, 446, Prince's Gate, Gilead Gates."

The big volume dropped with a crash on the floor. David looked down at the crumpled volume with dim, misty amazement.

"Gilead Gates," he murmured. "Quaker, millionaire, and philanthropist. One of the most highly-esteemed and popular men in England. And from his house came the message which has been the source of all the mischief. And yet there are critics who say the plots of my novels are too fantastic!"

CHAPTER VII

NO. 218, BRUNSWICK SQUARE

The emotion of surprise seemed to have left Steel altogether. After the last discovery he was prepared to believe anything. Had anybody told him that the whole Bench of Bishops was at the bottom of the mystery he would have responded that the suggestion was highly probable.

"Still, it's what the inimitable Dick Swiveller would call a staggerer," he muttered. "Gates, the millionaire, the one great capitalist who has the profound respect of the labour world. No, a man with a record like that couldn't have anything to do with it. Still, it must have been from his house that the mysterious message came. The post-office people working the telephone trunk line would know that—a fact which probably escaped the party who called me up.... I'll go to Brunswick Square and see that woman. Money or no money, I'll not lie under an imputation like this."

There was one thing to be done beforehand, and that was to see Dr. Cross. From the latter's manner he evidently knew nothing of the charge hanging over Steel's head. Marley was evidently keeping that close to himself and speaking to nobody.

"Oh, the man is better." Cross said, cheerfully. "He hasn't been identified yet, though the Press has given us every assistance. I fancy the poor fellow is going to recover, though I am afraid it will be a long job."

"He hasn't recovered consciousness, then?"

"No, and neither will he for some time to come. There seems to be a certain pressure on the brain which we are unable to locate, and we dare not try the Röntgen rays yet. So on the whole you are likely to escape with a charge of aggravated assault."

David smiled grimly as he went his way. He walked the whole distance to Hove along North Street and the Western Road, finally turning down Brunswick Square instead of *up* it, as he had done on the night of the great adventure. He wondered vaguely why he had been specially instructed to approach the house that way.

Here it was at last, 219, Brunswick Square—220 above and, of course, 218 below the house. It looked pretty well the same in the daylight, the same door, the same knocker, and the same crimson blind in the centre of the big bay window. David knocked at the door with a vague feeling of uncertainty as to what he was going to do next. A very staid, old-fashioned footman answered his ring and inquired his business.

"Can—can I see your mistress?" David stammered.

The staid footman became, if possible, a little more reserved. If the gentleman would send in his card he would see if Miss Ruth was disengaged. David found himself vaguely wondering what Miss Ruth's surname might be. The old Biblical name was a great favourite of his.

"I'm afraid I haven't a card," he said. "Will you say that Mr. Steel would like to see—er—Miss Ruth for

a few minutes? My business is exceedingly pressing."

The staid footman led the way into the dining-room. Evidently this was no frivolous house, where giddy butterflies came and went; such gaudy insects would have been chilled by the solemn decorum of the place. David followed into the dining-room in a dreamy kind of way, and with the feeling that comes to us all at times, the sensation of having done and seen the same thing before.

Nothing had been altered. The same plain, handsome, expensive furniture was here, the same mahogany and engravings, the same dull red walls, with the same light stain over the fire-place—a dull, prosperous, square-toed-looking place. The electric fittings looked a little different, but that might have been fancy. It was the identical room. David had run his quarry to earth, and he began to feel his spirits rising. Doubtless he could scheme some way out of the difficulty and spare his phantom friends at the same time.

"You wanted to see me, sir? Will you be so good as to state your business?"

David turned with a start. He saw before him a slight, graceful figure, and a lovely, refined face in a frame of the most beautiful hair that he had ever seen. The grey eyes were demure, with just a suggestion of mirth in them; the lips were made for laughter. It was as if some dainty little actress were masquerading in Salvation garb, only the dress was all priceless lace that touched David's artistic perception. He could imagine the girl as deeply in earnest as going through fire and water for her convictions. Also he could imagine her as Puck or Ariel—there was rippling laughter in every note of that voice of hers.

"I—I, eh, yes," Steel stammered. "You see, I—if I only knew whom I had the pleasure of addressing?"

"I am Miss Ruth Gates, at your service. Still, you asked for me by name."

David made no reply for a moment. He was tripping over surprises again. What a fool he had been not to look out the name of the occupant of 219 in the directory. It was pretty evident that Gilead Gates had a house in Brighton as well as one in town. Not only had that telephone message emanated from the millionaire's residence, but it had brought Steel to the philanthropist's abode in Brighton. If Mr. Gates himself had strolled into the room singing a comic song David would have expressed no emotion.

"Daughter of the famous Gilead Gates?" David asked, feebly.

"No, niece, and housekeeper. This is not my uncle's own house, he has merely taken this for a time. But, Mr. Steel—"

"Mr. *David*, Steel—is my name familiar to you?"

David asked the question somewhat eagerly. As yet he was only feeling his way and keenly on the lookout for anything in the way of a clue. He saw the face of the girl grow white as the table-cover, he saw the lurking laughter die in her eyes, and the purple black terror dilating the pupils.

"I—I know you quite well by reputation," the girl gasped. Her little hands were pressed to her left side as if to check some deadly pain there. "Indeed, I may say I have read most of your stories. I—I hope that there is nothing wrong."

Her self-possession and courage were coming back to her now. But the spasm of fear that had shaken her to the soul was not lost upon Steel.

"I trust not," he said, gravely. "Did you know that I was here two nights ago?"

"Here!" the girl cried. "Impossible! In the house! The night before last!
Why, we were all in bed long before midnight."

"I am not aware that I said anything about midnight," David responded, coldly.

An angry flush came sweeping over the face of the girl, annoyance at her own folly, David thought. She added quickly that she and her uncle had only been down in Brighton for three days.

"Nevertheless, I was in this room two nights ago," David replied. "If you know all about it, I pray you to give me certain information of vital importance to me; if not, I shall be compelled to keep my extraordinary story to myself, for otherwise you would never believe it. Do you or do you not know of my visit here?"

The girl bent her head till Steel could see nothing but the glorious amber of her hair. He could see, too, the fine old lace round her throat was tossing like a cork on a stream.

"I can tell you nothing," she said. "Nothing, nothing, nothing."

It was the voice of one who would have spoken had she dared. With anybody else Steel would have been furiously angry. In the present case he could only admire the deep, almost pathetic, loyalty to somebody who stood behind.

"Are you sure you were in this house?" the girl asked, at length.

"Certain!" David exclaimed. "The walls, the pictures, the furniture—all the same. I could swear to the place anywhere. Miss Gates, if I cannot prove that I was here at the time I name, it is likely to go very hard with me."

"You mean that a certain inconvenience—"

"Inconvenience! Do you call a charge of murder, or manslaughter at best, inconvenient? Have you not seen the local papers? Don't you know that two nights ago, during my absence from home, a strange man was practically done to death in my conservatory? And during the time of the outrage, as sure as Heaven is above us, I was in this room."

"I am sorry, but I am sure that you were not."

"Ah, you are going to disappoint me? And yet you know something. You might have been the guiltiest of creatures yourself when I disclosed my identity. No prisoner detected in some shameful crime ever looked more guilty than you."

The girl stood there, saying nothing. Had she rang the bell and ordered the footman to put him out of the house, Steel would have had no cause for complaint. But she did nothing of the kind. She stood there torn by conflicting emotions.

"I can give you no information," she said, presently. "But I am as positive one way as you are another that you have never been in this house before. I may surmise things, but as I hope to be judged fairly I can give you no information. I am only a poor, unhappy girl, who is doing what she deems to be the best for all parties concerned. And I can tell you nothing, nothing. Oh, won't you believe that I would do anything to serve you if I were only free?"

She held out her hand with an imploring gesture, the red lips were quivering, and her eyes were full of tears. David's warm heart went out to her; he forgot all his own troubles and dangers in his sympathy for the lovely creature in distress.

"Pray say no more about it," he cried. He caught the outstretched hand in his and carried it to his lips. "I don't wish to hurry you; in fact, haste is dangerous. And there is ample time. Nor am I going to press you. Still, before long you may find some way to give me a clue without sacrificing a jot of your fine loyalty to—well, others. I would not distress you for the world, Miss Gates. Don't you think that this has been the most extraordinary interview?"

The tears trembled like diamonds on the girl's long lashes and a smile flashed over her face. The sudden transformation was wonderfully fascinating.

"What you might call an impossible interview," she laughed. "And all the more impossible because it was quite impossible that you could ever have been here before."

"When I was in this room two nights ago," David protested, "I saw—-"

"Did you see me, for instance? If not, you couldn't have been here."

A small, misshapen figure, with the face of a Byron—Apollo on the bust of a Satyr—came in from behind the folding doors at the back of the dining-room carrying some letters in his hand. The stranger's dark, piercing eyes were fixed inquiringly upon Steel.

"Bell," the latter cried; "Hatherly Bell! you have been listening!"

The little man with the godlike head admitted the fact, coolly. He had been writing letters in the back room and escape had been impossible for him.

"Funny enough, I was going to look you up to-day," he said. "You did me a great service once, and I am longing to repay you. I came down here to give my friend Gates the benefit of my advice and assistance over a large philanthropic scheme he has just evolved. And, writing letters yonder on that subject, I heard your extraordinary conversation. Can I help you, Steel?"

"My dear fellow," David cried, "if you offered me every intellect in

Europe I should not choose one of them so gladly as yours."

"Then let us shake hands on the bargain. And now I am going to stagger you; I heard you state positively that two nights ago you were in this very room."

"I am prepared to testify the fact on oath anywhere, my dear Bell."

"Very well; will you be good enough to state the hour?"

"Certainly. I was here from one o'clock—say between one and two."

"And I was here also. From eleven o'clock till two I was in this very room working out some calculations at this very table by the aid of my reading-lamp, no other light being in the room, or even in the house, as far as I know. It is one of my fads—as fools call them—to work in a large, dark room with one brilliant light only. Therefore you could not possibly have been in the house, to say nothing of this room, on the night in question."

David nodded feebly. There was no combating Bell's statement.

"I presume that this is No. 219?" he asked.

"Certainly it is," Miss Gates replied. "We are all agreed about *that*."

"Because I read the number over the fanlight," Steel went on. "And I came here by arrangement. And there was everything as I see it now. Bell, you must either cure me of this delusion, or you must prove logically to me that I have made a mistake. So far as I am concerned, I am like a child struggling with the alphabet."

"We'll start now," said Bell. "Come along."

Steel rose none too willingly. He would fain have lingered with Ruth. She held out her hand; there was a warm, glad smile on her face.

"May you be successful," she whispered. "Come and see me again, because I shall be very, very anxious to know. And I am not without guilt…. If you only knew!"

"And I may come again?" David said, eagerly.

A further smile and a warm pressure of the hand were the only reply. Presently Steel was standing outside in the road with Bell. The latter was glancing at the house on either side of 219. The higher house was let; the one nearest the sea—218—was empty. A bill in the window gave the information that the property was in the hands of Messrs. Wallace and Brown, Station Quadrant, where keys could be obtained.

"We'll make a start straightaway," said Bell. "Come along."

"Where are you going to at that pace?" Steel asked.

"Going to interview Messrs. Wallace and Brown. At the present moment I am a gentleman who is in search of a house of residence, and I have a weakness for Brunswick Square in particular, especially for No. 218. Unless I am greatly mistaken I am going to show you something that will startle even the most callous novelist."

CHAPTER VIII

HATHERLY BELL

The queer, misshapen figure striding along by Steel's side would have attracted attention anywhere; indeed, Hatherly Bell had been an attractive personality from his schooldays. A strange mixture of vanity and brilliant mental qualities, Bell had almost as many enemies as friends. He was morbidly miserable over the score of his personal appearance despite the extraordinary beauty of his face—to be pitied or even sympathised with almost maddened him. Yet there were many women who would gladly have shared the lot of Hatherly Bell.

For there was strength in the perfectly moulded face, as well as beauty. It was the face of a man possessed of marvellous intellectual powers, and none the less attractive because, while the skin was as fair as a woman's and the eyes as clear as a child's, the wavy hair was absolutely white. The face of a man who had suffered fiercely and long. A face hiding a great sorrow.

Time was when Bell had promised to stand in the front rank of operative physicians. In brain troubles and mental disorders he had distinguished himself. He had a marvellous faculty for psychological research; indeed, he had gone so far as to declare that insanity was merely a disease and capable of cure the same as any ordinary malady. "If Bell goes on as he has started," a great German specialist once declared, "he will inevitably prove to be the greatest benefactor to mankind since the beginning of the world." Bell was to be the man of his time.

And then suddenly he had faded out as a star drops from the zenith. There had been dark rumours of a terrible scandal, a prosecution burked by strong personal influence, mysterious paragraphs in the papers, and the disappearance of the name of Hatherly Bell from the rank of great medical jurists. Nobody seemed to know anything about it, but Bell was ignored by all except a few old friends, and henceforth he devoted his attention to criminology and the evolution of crime. It was Bell's boast that he could take a dozen men at haphazard and give you their vices and virtures point-blank. He had a marvellous gift that way.

A few people stuck to him, Gilead Gates amongst the number. The millionaire philanthropist had need of someone to pick the sheep from the goats, and Bell made no mistakes. David Steel had been able to do the specialist some slight service a year or two before, and Bell had been pleased to magnify this into a great favour.

"You are a fast walker," David said, presently.

"That's because I am thinking fast," Bell replied. "Steel, you are in great trouble?"

"It needs no brilliant effort on your part to see that," David said, bitterly. "Besides, you heard a great deal just now when you—you—"

"Listened," Bell said, coolly. "Of course I had no intention of playing eavesdropper; and I had no idea who the Mr. Steel was who wanted to see Miss Gates. They come day by day, my dear fellow, garbed in the garb of Pall Mall or Petticoat Lane as the case may be, but they all come for money. Sometimes it is a shilling, sometimes £100. But I did not gather from your chat with Miss Gates what your trouble was."

"Perhaps not, but Miss Gates knew perfectly well."

Bell patted his companion, approvingly.

"It is a pleasure to help a lucid-minded man like yourself," he said. "You go straight to the root of the sore and cut all the superfluous matter away. I was deeply interested in the conversation which I overheard just now. You are in great trouble, and that trouble is connected with 219, Brunswick Square—a house where you have never been before."

"My dear chap, I was in that dining-room two nights ago. Nothing will convince me to the—"

"There you are wrong, because I am going to convince you to the contrary. You may smile and shake your head, but before an hour has passed I am going to convince you beyond all question that you were never inside No. 219."

"Brave words," David muttered. "Still, an hour is not a long time to wait."

"No. But you must enlighten me if I am to assist you. I am profoundly interested. You come to the house of my friend on a desperate errand. Miss Gates is a perfect stranger to you, and yet the mere discovery of your identity fills her with the most painful agitation. Therefore, though you have never been in 219 before, you are pretty certain, and I am pretty certain, that Ruth Gates knows a deal about the thing that is touching you. On the contrary, I know nothing on that head. Won't you let me into the secret?"

"I'll tell you part," Steel replied. "And I'll put it pithily. For mere argument we assume that I am selected to assist a damsel in distress who lives at No. 219, Brunswick Square. We will assume that the conversation leading up to the flattering selection took place over the telephone. As a matter of fact, it did take place over the telephone. The thing was involved with so much secrecy that I naturally hesitated. I was offered £1,000 for my services; also I was reminded by my unseen messenger that I was in dire need of that money."

"And were you?"

"My dear fellow, I don't fancy that I should have hesitated at burglary to get it. And all I had to do was to meet a lady secretly in the dead of night at No. 219, and tell her how to get out of a certain difficulty. It all resolved itself round the synopsis of a proposed new story of mine. But I had better go into details."

David proceeded to do so. Bell, with his arm crooked through that of his companion, followed the story with an intelligent and flattering interest.

"Very strange and very fascinating," he said, presently. "I'll think it out presently. Nobody could possibly think of anything but their toes in Western Road. Go on."

"Now I am coming to the point. I had the money, I had that lovely cigar-case, and subsequently I had that battered and bleeding specimen of humanity dumped down in the most amazing manner in my conservatory. The cigar-case lay on the conservatory floor, remember—swept off the table when I clutched for the telephone bell to call for the police. When Marley came he asked if the cigar-case was mine. At first I said no, because, you see—"

"I see quite plainly. Pray go on."

"Well, I lose that cigar-case; I leave it in the offices of Mossa, to whom I pay nearly £1,000. Mossa, to spite me, takes or sends the case to the police, who advertise it not knowing that it is mine. You will see why they advertise it presently—"

"Because it belonged to the injured man, eh?"

David pulled up and regarded his companion with amazement.

"How on earth—" he gasped. "Do you mean to say that you know—"

"Nothing at present, I assure you," Bell said, coolly. "Call it intuition, if you like. I prefer to call it the result of logical mental process. I'm right, of course?"

"Of course you are. I'd claimed that case for my own. I had cut my initials inside, as I showed Marley when I went to the police-station. And then Marley tells me how I paid Mossa nearly £1,000; how the money must have come into my hands in the nick of time. That was pretty bad when I couldn't for the life of me give a lucid reason for the possession of those notes; but there was worse to come. In the pocket of the injured man was a receipt for a diamond-studded gun-metal cigar-case, purchased the day of the outrage. And Walen, the jeweller, proved beyond a doubt that the case I claimed was purchased at his shop."

Bell nodded gravely.

"Which places you in an exceedingly awkward position," he said.

"A mild way of putting it," David replied. "If that fellow dies the police have enough evidence to hang me. And what is my defence? The story of my visit to No. 219. And who would believe that cock-and-bull story? Fancy a drama like that being played out in the house of such a pillar of respectability as Gilead Gates."

"It isn't his house," said Bell. "He only takes it furnished."

"In anybody else your remark would be puerile," David said, irritably.

"It's a deeper remark than you are aware of at present," Bell replied. "I quite see your position. Nobody would believe you, of course. But why not go to the post-office and ask the number of the telephone that called you up from London?"

The question seemed to amuse David slightly. Then his lips were drawn humorously.

"When my logical formula came back I thought of that," he said. "On inquiring as to who it was rang me up on that fateful occasion I learnt that the number was 0017 Kensington and that—"

"Gates's own number at Prince's Gate," Bell exclaimed. "The plot thickens."

"It does, indeed," David said, grimly. "It is Wilkie Collins gone mad, Gaboriau *in extremis*, Du Boisgobey suffering from *delirium tremens*. I go to Gates's house here, and am solemnly told in the midst of surroundings that I can swear to that I have never been there before; the whole mad expedition is launched by the turning of the handle of a telephone in the house of a distinguished,

trusted, if prosaic, citizen. Somebody gets hold of the synopsis of a story of mine, Heaven knows how—"

"That is fairly easy. The synopsis was short, I suppose?"

"Only a few lines, say 1,000 words, a sheet of paper. My writing is very small. It was tucked into a half-penny open envelope—a magazine office envelope, marked 'Proof, urgent.' There were the proofs of a short story in the buff envelope."

"Which reached its destination in due course?"

"So I hear this morning. But how on earth—"

"Easily enough. The whole thing gets slipped into a larger open envelope, the kind of big-mouthed affair that enterprising firms send out circulars and patterns with. This falls into the hands of the woman who is at the bottom of this and every other case, and she reads the synopsis from sheer curiosity. The case fits her case, and there you are. Mind you, I don't say that this is how the thing actually happened, but how it might have done so. When did you post the letter?"

"I can't give you the date. Say ten days ago."

"And there would be no hurry for a reply," Bell said, thoughtfully. "And you had no cause for worry on that head. Nor need the woman who found it have kept the envelope beyond the delay of a single post, which is only a matter of an hour or so in London. If you go a little farther we find that money is no object, hence the £1,000 offer and the careful, and doubtless expensive, inquiry into your position. Steel, I am going to enjoy this case."

"You're welcome to all the fun you can get out of it," David said, grimly. "So far as I am concerned, I fail to see the humour. Isn't this the office you are after?"

Bell nodded and disappeared, presently to return with two exceedingly rusty keys tied together with a drab piece of tape. He jingled them on his long, slender forefinger with an air of positive enjoyment.

"Now come along," he said. "I feel like a boy who has marked down something rare in the way of a bird's nest. We will go back to Brunswick Square exactly the same way as you approached it on the night of the great adventure."

CHAPTER IX

THE BROKEN FIGURE

"Any particular object in that course?" David asked.

"There ought to be an object in everything that even an irrational man says or does," Bell replied. "I have achieved some marvellous results by following up a single sentence uttered by a patient. Besides, on the evening in question you were particularly told to approach the house from the sea front."

"Somebody might have been on the look-out near the Western Road entrance," Steel suggested.

"Possibly. I have another theory…. Here we are. The figures over the fanlights run from 187 upwards, gradually getting to 219 as you breast the slope. At one o'clock in the morning every house would be in darkness. Did you find that to be so?"

"I didn't notice a light anywhere till I reached 219."

"Good again. And you could only find 219 by the light over the door. Naturally you were not interested in and would not have noticed any other number. Well, here is 218, where I propose to enter, and for which purpose I have the keys. Come along."

David followed wonderingly. The houses in Brunswick Square are somewhat irregular in point of architecture, and Nos. 218 and 219 were the only matched pair thereabouts. Signs were not wanting, as Bell pointed out, that at one time the houses had been occupied as one residence. The two entrance-halls were back to back, so to speak, and what had obviously been a doorway leading from one to the other had been plastered up within comparatively recent memory.

The grim and dusty desolation of an empty house seemed to be supplemented here by a deeper desolation. Not that there was any dust on the ground floor, which seemed a singular thing seeing that elsewhere the boards were powdered with it, and festoons of brown cobwebs hung everywhere. Bell smiled approvingly as David Steel pointed the fact out to him.

"Do you note another singular point?" the former asked.

"No," David said, thoughtfully; "I—stop! The two side-shutters in the bay-windows are closed, and there is the same vivid crimson blind in the centre window. And the self colour of the walls is exactly the same. The faint discoloration by the fireplace is a perfect facsimile."

"In fact, *this* is the room you were in the other night," Bell said, quietly.

"Impossible!" Steel cried. "The blind may be an accident, so might the fading of the distemper. But the furniture, the engravings, the fittings generally—"

"Are all capable of an explanation, which we shall arrive at with patience."

"Can we arrive at the number over the door with patience?"

"Exactly what I was coming to. I noticed an old pair of steps in the back sitting-room. Would you mind placing them against the fanlight for me?"

David complied readily enough. He was growing credulous and interested in spite of himself. At Bell's instigation he placed the steps before the fanlight and mounted them. Over his head were the figures 218 in elongated shape and formed in white porcelain.

"Now then," Bell said, slowly. "Take this pocket-knife, apply the blade to the *right-hand* lower half of the bottom of the 8—to half the small O, in fact—and I shall be extremely surprised if the quarter section doesn't come away from the glass of the fanlight, leaving the rest of the figure intact. Very gently, please. I want you to convince yourself that the piece comes away because it is broken, and not because the pressure has cracked it. Now then."

The point of the knife was hardly under the edge of the porcelain before the segment of the lower circle dropped into Steel's hand. He could feel the edges of the cement sticking to his fingers. As yet the full force of the discovery was not apparent to him.

"Go out into the road and look at the fanlight," Bell directed.

David complied eagerly. A sharp cry of surprise escaped him as he looked up. The change was apparent. Instead of the figures 218 he could read now the change to 219—a fairly indifferent 9, but one that would have passed muster without criticism by ninety-nine people out of a hundred. With a strong light behind the figures the clumsy 9 would never have been noticed at all. The very simplicity and ingeniousness of the scheme was its safeguard.

"I should like to have the address of the man who thought that out,"
David said, drily.

"Yes, I fancy that you are dealing with quite clever people," Bell replied. "And now I have shown you how utterly you have been deceived over the number we will go a little farther. For the present, the way in which the furniture trick was worked must remain a mystery. But there has been furniture here, or this room and the hall would not have been so carefully swept and garnished whilst the rest of the house remains in so dirty a condition. If my eyes don't deceive me I can see two fresh nails driven into the archway leading to the back hall. On those nails hung the curtain that prevented you seeing more than was necessary. Are you still incredulous as to the house where you had your remarkable adventure?"

"I confess that my faith has been seriously shaken," David admitted. "But about the furniture? And about my telephone call from Mr. Gates's town house? And about my adventure taking place in the very next house to the one taken by him at Brighton? And about Miss Gates's agitation when she learnt my identity? Do you call them coincidences?"

"No, I don't," Bell said, promptly. "They are merely evidences of clever folks taking advantage of an excellent strategic position. I said just now that it was an important point that Mr. Gates had merely taken the next door furnished. But we shall come to that side of the theory in due course. Have you any other objection to urge?"

"One more, and I have finished for the present. When I came here the other night—provided of course that I did come here—immediately upon my entering the dining-room the place was brilliantly

illuminated. Now, directly the place was void the supply of electric current would be cut off at the meter. So far as I can judge, some two or three units must have been consumed during my visit. There could not be many less than ten lights burning for an hour. Now, those units must show on the meter. Can you read an electric meter?"

"My dear fellow, there is nothing easier."

"Then let us go down into the basement and settle the matter. There is pretty sure to be a card on the meter made up to the day when the last tenant went out. See, the supply is cut off now."

As Steel spoke he snapped down the hall switch and no result came. Down in the basement by the area door stood the meter. Both switches were turned off, but on Bell pressing them down Steel was enabled to light the passage.

"There's the card," Bell exclaimed. "Made up to 25th June, 1895, since when the house has been void. Just a minute whilst I read the meter. Yes, that's right. According to this the card in your hand, provided that the light has not been used since the index was taken, should read at 1521. What do you make of the card?"

"1532," David cried. "Which means eleven units since the meter was last taken. Or, if you like to put it from your point of view, eleven units used the night that I came here. You are quite right, Bell. You have practically convinced me that I have been inside the real 219 for the first time to-day. And yet the more one probes the mystery the more astounding does it become…. What do you propose to do next?"

"Find out the name of the last tenant or owner." Bell suggested. "Discover what the two houses were used for when they were occupied by one person. Also ascertain why on earth the owners are willing to let a house this size and in this situation for a sum like £80 per annum. Let us go and take the keys back to the agents."

Steel was nothing loth to find himself in the fresh air again. Some progress had been made like the opening of a chess-match between masters, and yet the more Steel thought of it the more muddled and bewildered did he become. No complicated tangle in the way of a plot had ever been anything like the skein this was.

"I'm like a child in your hands," he said. "I'm a blind man on the end of a string; a man dazed with wine in a labyrinth. And if ever I help a woman again—"

He paused as he caught sight of Ruth Gates's lovely face through the window of No. 219. Her features were tinged with melancholy; there was a look of deepest sympathy and feeling and compassion in her glorious eyes. She slipped back as Steel bowed, and the rest of his speech was lost in a sigh.

CHAPTER X

THE HOUSE OF THE SILENT SORROW

A bell tolled mournfully with a slow, swinging cadence like a passing bell. On winter nights folks, passing the House of the Silent Sorrow, compared the doleful clanging to the boom that carries the criminal from the cell to the scaffold. Every night all the year round the little valley of Longdean echoed to that mournful clang. Perhaps it was for this reason that a wandering poet christened the place as the House of the Silent Sorrow.

For seven years this had been going on now, until nobody but strangers noticed it. From half-past seven till eight o'clock that hideous bell rang its swinging, melancholy note. Why it was nobody could possibly tell. Nobody in the village had ever been beyond the great rusty gates leading to a dark drive of Scotch firs, though one small boy bolder than the rest had once climbed the lichen-strewn stone wall and penetrated the thick undergrowth beyond. Hence he had returned, with white face and staring eyes, with the information that great wild dogs dwelt in the thickets. Subsequently the village poacher confirmed this information. He was not exactly loquacious on the subject, but merely hinted that the grounds of Longdean Grange were not salubrious for naturalists with a predatory disposition.

Indeed, on moonlight nights those apocryphal hounds were heard to bay and whimper. A shepherd up

late one spring night averred that he had seen two of them fighting. But nobody could say anything about them for certain; also it was equally certain that nobody knew anything about the people at Longdean Grange. The place had been shut up for thirty years, being understood to be in Chancery, when the announcement went forth that a distant relative of the family had arranged to live there in future.

What the lady of the Grange was like nobody could say. She had arrived late one night accompanied by a niece, and from that moment she had never been beyond the house. None of the large staff of servants ever left the grounds unless it was to quit altogether, and then they were understood to leave at night with a large bonus in money as a recompense for their promise to evacuate Sussex without delay. Everything was ordered by telephone from Brighton, and left at the porter's lodge. The porter was a stranger, also he was deaf and exceedingly ill-tempered, so that long since the village had abandoned the hope of getting anything out of him. One rational human being they saw from the Grange occasionally, a big man with an exceedingly benevolent face and mild, large, blue eyes—a man full of Christian kindness and given to largesse to the village boys. The big gentleman went by the name of "Mr. Charles," and was understood to have a lot of pigeons of which he was exceedingly fond. But who "Mr. Charles" was, or how he got that name, it would have puzzled the wisest head of the village to tell.

And yet, but for the mighty clamour of that hideous bell and that belt of wildness that surrounded it, Longdean Grange was a cheerful-looking house enough. Any visitor emerging from the drive would have been delighted with it. For the lawns were trim and truly kept, the beds were blazing masses of flowers, the creepers over the Grange were not allowed to riot too extravagantly. And yet the strange haunting sense of fear was there. Now and again a huge black head would uplift from the coppice growth, and a long, rumbling growl come from between a double row of white teeth. For the dogs were no fiction, they lived and bred in the fifteen or twenty acres of coppice round the house, where they were fed regularly and regularly thrashed without mercy if they showed in the garden. Perhaps they looked more fierce and truculent than they really were, being Cuban bloodhounds, but they gave a weird colour to the place and lent it new terror to the simple folk around.

The bell was swinging dolefully over the stable-turret; it rang out its passing note till the clock struck eight and then mercifully ceased. At the same moment precisely as she had done any time the last seven years the lady of the house descended the broad, black oak staircase to the hall. A butler of the old-fashioned type bowed to her and announced that dinner was ready. He might have been the butler of an archbishop from his mien and deportment, yet his evening dress was seedy and shiny to the last degree, his patent leather boots had long lost their lustre, his linen was terribly frayed and yellow. Two footmen in livery stood in the hall. They might have been supers playing on the boards of a travelling theatre, their once smartly cut and trimmed coats hung raggedly upon them.

As to the lady, who was tall and handsome, with dark eyes and features contrasting strangely with hair as white as the frost on a winter's landscape, there was a far-away, strained look in the dark eyes, as if they were ever night and day looking for something, something that would never be found. In herself the lady was clean and wholesome enough, but her evening dress of black silk and lace was dropping into fragments, the lace was in rags upon her bosom, though there were diamonds of great value in her white hair.

And here, strangely allied, were wealth and direst poverty; the whole place was filled with rare and costly things, pictures, statuary, china; the floors were covered with thick carpets, and yet everything was absolutely smothered in dust. A thick, white, blankety cloud of it lay everywhere. It obscured the china, it dimmed the glasses of the pictures, it piled in little drifts on the heads and arms of the dingy statues there. Many years must have passed since a housemaid's brush or duster had touched anything in Longdean Grange. It was like a palace of the Sleeping Beauty, wherein people walked as in a waking dream.

The lady of the house made her way slowly to the dining-room. Here dinner was laid out daintily and artistically enough—a *gourmet* would have drawn up to the table with a feeling of satisfaction. Flowers were there, and silver and cut-glass, china with a history of its own, and the whole set out on a tablecloth that was literally dropping to pieces.

It was a beautiful room in itself, lofty, oak panelled from floor to roof, with a few pictures of price on the walls. There was plenty of gleaming silver glowing like an argent moon against a purple sky, and yet the same sense of dust and desolation was everywhere. Only the dinner looked bright and modern.

There were two other people standing by the table, one a girl with a handsome, intellectual face full of passion but ill repressed; the other the big fair man known to the village as "Mr. Charles." As a matter of fact, his name was Reginald Henson, and he was distantly related to Mrs. Henson, the strange chatelaine of the House of the Silent Sorrow. He was smiling blandly now at Enid Henson, the

wonderfully beautiful girl with the defiant, shining eyes.

"We may be seated now that madam is arrived," Henson said, gravely.

He spoke with a certain mocking humility and a queer wry smile on his broad, loose mouth that filled Enid with a speechless fury. The girl was hot-blooded—a good hater and a good friend. And the master passion of her life was hatred of Reginald Henson.

"Madam has had a refreshing rest?" Henson suggested. "Pardon our anxious curiosity."

Again Enid raged, but Margaret Henson might have been of stone for all the notice she took. The far-away look was still in her eyes as she felt her way to the table like one in a dream. Then she dropped suddenly into a chair and began grace in a high, clear voice.

"…. And the Lord make us truly thankful. And may He, when it seemeth good to Him, remove the curse from this house and in due season free the innocent and punish the guilty. For the burden is sore upon us, and there are times when it seems hard to bear."

The big man played with his knife and fork, smilingly. An acute observer might have imagined that the passionate plaint was directed at him. If so it passed harmlessly over his broad shoulders. In his immaculate evening dress he looked strangely out of place there. Enid had escaped the prevailing dilapidation, but her gown of grey homespun was severe as the garb of a charity girl.

"Madam is so poetical," Henson murmured. "And charmingly sanguine."

"Williams," Mrs. Henson said, quite stoically, "my visitor will have some champagne."

She seemed to have dropped once again into the commonplace, painfully exact as a hostess of breeding must be to an unwelcome guest. And yet she never seemed to see him; those dark eyes were looking, ever looking, into the dark future. The meal proceeded in silence save for an oily sarcasm from Henson. In the dense stillness the occasional howl of a dog could be heard. A slight flush of annoyance crossed Henson's broad face.

"Some day I shall poison all those hounds," he said.

Enid looked up at him swiftly.

"If *all* the hounds round Longdean were poisoned or shot it would be a good place to live in," she said.

Henson smiled caressingly, like Petruchio might have done in his milder moments.

"My dear Enid, you misjudge me," he said. "But I shall get justice some day."

Enid replied that she fervently hoped so, and thus the strange meal proceeded with smiles and gentle words from Henson, and a wild outburst of bitterness from the girl. So far as she was concerned the servants might have been mere automatons. The dust rose in clouds as the latter moved silently. It was hot in there, and gradually the brown powder grimed like a film over Henson's oily skin. At the head of the table Margaret Henson sat like a woman in a dream. Ever, ever her dark eyes seemed to be looking eagerly around. Thirsty men seeking precious water in a desert might have looked like her. Ever and anon her lips moved, but no sound came from them. Occasionally she spoke to one or the other of her guests, but she never followed her words with her eyes. Such a sad, pathetic, pitiable figure, such a grey sorrow in her rags and snowy hair.

The meal came to an end at length, and Mrs. Henson rose suddenly. There was a grotesque suggestion of the marionette in the movement. She bowed as if to some imaginary personage and moved with dignity towards the door. Reginald Henson stood aside and opened it for her. She passed into the dim hall as if absolutely unconscious of his presence. Enid flashed a look of defiance at him as she disappeared into the gloom and floating dust.

Henson's face changed instantly, as if a mask had fallen from his smug features. He became alert and vigorous. He was no longer patron of the arts, a wide-minded philanthropist, the man who devotes himself to the good of humanity. The blue eyes were cold and cruel, there was a hungry look about the loose mouth.

"Take a bottle of claret and the cigars into the small library,
Williams," he said. "And open the window, the dust stifles me."

The dignified butler bowed respectfully. He resembled the typical bad butler of fiction in no respect, but his thoughts were by no means pleasant as he hastened to obey. Enid was loitering in the hall as Williams passed with the tray.

"Small study and the window open, miss," he whispered. "There's some game on—oh, yes, there is some blessed game on again to-night. And him so anxious to know how Miss Christiana is. Says she ought to call him in professionally. Personally I'd rather call in an undertaker who was desperately hard up for a job."

"All right, Williams," Enid replied. "My sister is worse to-night. And unless she gets better I shall insist upon her seeing a doctor. And I am obliged for the hint about Mr. Henson. The little study commands the staircase leading to my sister's bedroom."

"And the open window commands the garden," Williams said, drily.

"Yes, yes. Now go. You are a real friend, Williams, and I will never forget your goodness. Run along—I can actually *feel* that man coming."

As a matter of fact, Henson was approaching noiselessly. Despite his great bulk he had the clean, dainty step of a cat; his big, rolling ears were those of a hare. Henson was always listening. He would have listened behind a kitchen door to a pair of chattering scullery-maids. He liked to find other people out, though as yet he had not been found out himself. He stood before the world as a social missioner; he made speeches at religious gatherings and affected the women to tears. He was known to devote a considerable fortune to doing good; he had been asked to stand for Parliament, where his real ambition lay. Gilead Gates had alluded to Reginald Henson as his right-hand man.

He crept along to the study, where the lamps were lighted and the silver claret-jug set out. He carefully dusted a big arm-chair and began to smoke, having first carefully extinguished the lamps and seen that the window leading to the garden was wide open. Henson was watching for something. In his feline nature he had the full gift of feline patience. To serve his own ends he would have sat there watching all night if necessary. He heard an occasional whimper, a howl from one of the dogs; he heard Enid's voice singing in the drawing-room. The rest of the house was quite funereal enough for him.

In the midst of the drawing-room Margaret Henson sat still as a statue. The distant, weary expression never left her eyes for a moment. As the stable clock, the only one going on the premises, struck ten, Enid crossed over from the piano to her aunt's side. There was an eager look on her face, her eyes were gleaming like frosty stars.

"Aunt," she whispered; "dear, I have had a message!"

"Message of woe and desolation," Margaret Henson cried. "Tribulation and sorrow on this wretched house. For seven long years the hand of the Lord has lain heavily upon us."

She spoke like one who was far away from her surroundings. And yet no one could look in her eyes and say that she was mad. It was a proud, passionate spirit, crushed down by some bitter humiliation. Enid's eyes flashed.

"That scoundrel has been robbing you again," she said.

"Two thousand pounds," came the mechanical reply, "to endow a bed in some hospital. And there is no escape, no hope unless we drag the shameful secret from him. Bit by bit and drop by drop, and then I shall die and you and Christiana will be penniless."

"I daresay Chris and myself will survive that," Enid said, cheerfully. "But we have a plan, dear aunt; we have thought it out carefully. Reginald Henson has hidden the secret somewhere and we are going to find it. The secret is hidden not far off, because our cousin has occasion to require it frequently. It is like the purloined letter in Edgar Poe's wonderful story."

Margaret Henson nodded and mumbled. It seemed almost impossible to make her understand. She babbled of strange things, with her dark eyes ever fixed on the future. Enid turned away almost despairingly. At the same time the stable clock struck the half-hour after ten. Williams slipped in with a tray of glasses, noiselessly. On the tray lay a small pile of tradesmen's books. The top one was of dull red with no lettering upon it at all.

"The housekeeper's respectful compliments, miss, and would you go through them to-morrow?" Williams said. He tapped the top book significantly. "To-morrow is the last day of the month."

Enid picked up the top book with strange eagerness. There were pages of figures and cabalistic entries that no ordinary person could make anything of. Pages here and there were signed and decorated with pink receipt stamps. Enid glanced down the last column, and her face grew a little paler.

"Aunt," she whispered, "I've got to go out. At once; do you understand? There is a message here; and I am afraid that something dreadful has happened. Can you sing?"

"Ah, yes; a song of lamentation—a dirge for the dead."

"No, no; seven years ago you had a lovely voice. I recollect what a pleasure it was to me as a child; and they used to say that my voice was very like yours, only not so sweet or so powerful. Aunt, I must go out; and that man must know nothing about it. He is by the window in the small library now, watching—watching. Help me, for the love of Heaven, help me."

The girl spoke with a fervency and passion that seemed to waken a responsive chord in Margaret Henson's breast. A brighter gleam crept into her eyes.

"You are a dear girl," she said, dreamily; "yes, a dear girl. And I loved singing; it was a great grief to me that they would not let me go upon the stage. But I haven't sung since—since *that*—"

She pointed to the huddled heap of china and glass and dried, dusty flowers in one corner. Ethel [Updater's note: Enid?] shuddered slightly as she followed the direction of the extended forefinger.

"But you must try," she whispered. "It is for the good of the family, for the recovery of the secret. Reginald Henson is sly and cruel and clever. But we have one on our side now who is far more clever. And, unless I can get away to-night without that man knowing, the chance may be lost for ever. Come!"

Margaret commenced to sing in a soft minor. At first the chords were thin and dry, but gradually they increased in sweetness and power. The hopeless, distant look died from the singer's eyes; there was a flush on her cheeks that rendered her years younger.

"Another one," she said, when the song was finished, "and yet another.
How wicked I have been to neglect this balm that God sent me all these
years. If you only knew what the sound of my own voice means to me!
Another one, Enid."

"Yes, yes," Enid whispered. "You are to sing till I return. You are to leave Henson to imagine that I am singing. He will never guess. Now then."

Enid crept away into the hall, closing the door softly behind her. She made her way noiselessly from the house and across the lawn. As Henson slipped through the open window into the garden Enid darted behind a bush. Evidently Henson suspected nothing so far as she was concerned, for she could see the red glow of the cigar between his lips. The faint sweetness of distant music filled the air. So long as the song continued Henson would relax his vigilance.

He was pacing down the garden in the direction of the drive. Did the man know anything? Enid wondered. He had so diabolically cunning a brain. He seemed to find out everything, and to read others before they had made up their minds for themselves.

The cigar seemed to dance like a mocking sprite into the bushes. Usually the man avoided those bushes. If Reginald Henson was afraid of one thing it was of the dogs. And in return they hated him as he hated them.

Enid's mind was made up. If the sound of that distant voice should only cease for a moment she was quite sure Henson would turn back. But he could hear it, and she knew that she was safe. Enid slipped past him into the bushes and gave a faint click of her lips. Something moved and whined, and two dark objects bounded towards her. She caught them together by their collars and cuffed them soundly. Then she led the way back so as to get on Henson's tracks.

He was walking on ahead of her now, beating time softly to the music of the faintly distant song with his cigar. Enid could distinctly see the sweep of the red circle.

"Hold him, Dan," she whispered. "Watch, Prance; watch, boy."

There was a low growl as the hounds found the scent and dashed forward. Henson came up all standing and sweating in every pore. It was not the first time he had been held up by the dogs, and he knew by hard experience what to expect if he made a bolt for it.

Two grim muzzles were pressed against his trembling knees; he saw four rows of ivory flashing in the dim light. Then the dogs crouched at his feet, watching him with eyes as red and lurid as the point of his own cigar. Had he attempted to move, had he tried coercion, they would have fallen upon him and torn him in pieces.

"Confusion to the creatures!" he cried, passionately. "I'll get a revolver; I'll buy some prussic acid and poison the lot. And here I'll have to stay till Williams locks up the stables. Wouldn't that little Jezebel laugh at me if she could see me now? She would enjoy it better than singing songs in the drawing-room to our sainted Margaret. Steady, you brutes! I didn't move."

He stood there rigidly, almost afraid to take the cigar from his lips, whilst Enid sped without further need for caution down the drive. The lodge-gates were closed and the deaf porter's house in darkness, so that Enid could unlock the wicket without fear of detection. She rattled the key on the bars and a figure slipped out of the darkness.

"Good heavens, Ruth, is it really *you*?" Enid cried.

"Really me, Enid. I came over on my bicycle. I am supposed to be round at some friend's house in Brunswick Square, and one of the servants is sitting up for me. Is Reginald safe? He hasn't yet discovered the secret of the tradesman's book?"

"That's all right, dear. But why are you here? Has something dreadful happened?"

"Well, I will try to tell you so in as few words as possible. I never felt so ashamed of anything in my life."

"Don't tell me that our scheme has failed!" "Perhaps I need not go so far as that. The first part of it came off all right, and then a very dreadful thing happened. We have got Mr. David Steel into frightful trouble. He is going to be charged with attempted murder and robbery."

"Ruth! But tell me. I am quite in the dark."

"It was the night when—well, you know the night. It was after Mr. Steel returned home from his visit to 219, Brunswick Square—"

"You mean 218, Ruth."

"It doesn't matter, because he knows pretty well all about it by this time. It would have been far better for us if we hadn't been quite so clever. It would have been far wiser to have taken Mr. Steel entirely into our confidence. Oh, oh, Enid, if we had only left out that little sentiment over the cigar-case! Then we should have been all right."

"Dearest girl, my time is limited. I've got Reginald held up for the time, but at any moment he may escape from his bondage. What about the cigar-case?"

"Well, Mr. Steel took it home with him. And when he got home he found a man nearly murdered lying in his conservatory. That man was conveyed to the Sussex County Hospital, where he still lies in an unconscious state. On the body was found a receipt for a gun-metal cigar-case set with diamonds."

"Good gracious, Ruth, you don't mean to say—"

"Oh, I do. I can't quite make out how it happened, but that same case that we—that Mr. Steel has—has been positively identified as one purchased from Walen by the injured man. There is no question about it. And they have found out about Mr. Steel being short of money, and the £1,000, and everything."

"But we *know* that that cigar-case from Lockhart's in North Street was positively—"

"Yes, yes. But what has become of that? And in what strange way was the change made? I tell you that the whole thing frightens me. We thought that we had hit upon a scheme to solve the problem, and keep our friends out of danger. There was the American at Genoa who volunteered to assist us. A week later he was found dead in his bed. Then there was Christiana's friend, who disappeared entirely. And now we try further assistance in the case of Mr. Steel, and he stands face to face with a terrible charge. And he has found us out."

"He has found us out? What do you mean?"

"Well, he called to see me. He called at 219, of course. And directly I heard his name I was so startled that I am afraid I betrayed myself. Such a nice, kind, handsome man, Enid; so manly and good over it all. Of course he declared that he had been at 219 before, and I could only declare that he had done nothing of the kind. Never, never have I felt so ashamed of myself in my life before."

"It seems a pity," Enid said, thoughtfully. "You said nothing about 218?"

"My dear, he found it out. At least, Hatherly Bell did for him. Hatherly

Bell happened to be staying down with us, and Hatherly Bell, who knows Mr. Steel, promptly solved, or half solved, that side of the problem. And Hatherly Bell is coming here to-night to see Aunt Margaret. He—"

"Here!" Enid cried. "To see Aunt Margaret? Then he found out about you. At all hazards Mr. Bell must not come here—he *must* not. I would rather let everything go than that. I would rather see auntie dead and Reginald Henson master here. You *must*—"

In the distance came the rattle of harness bells and the trot of a horse.

"I'm afraid it's too late," Ruth Gates said, sadly. "I am afraid that they are here already. Oh, if we had only left out that wretched cigar-case!"

CHAPTER XI

AFTER REMBRANDT

"Before we go any farther," Bell said, after a long pause, "I should like to search the house from top to bottom. I've got a pretty sound theory in my head, but I don't like to leave anything to chance. We shall be pretty certain to find something."

"I am entirely in your hands," David said, wearily. "So far as I am capable of thinking out anything, it seems to me that we have to find the woman."

"*Cherchez la femme* is a fairly sound premise in a case like this, but when we have found the woman we shall have to find the man who is at the bottom of the plot. I mean the man who is not only thwarting the woman, but giving you a pretty severe lesson as to the advisability of minding your own business for the future."

"Then you don't think I am being made the victim of a vile conspiracy?"

"Not by the woman, certainly. You are the victim of some fiendish counterplot by the man, who has not quite mastered what the woman is driving at. By placing you in dire peril he compels the woman to speak to save you, and thus to expose her hand."

"Then in that case I propose to sit tight," David said, grimly. "I am bound to be prosecuted for robbery and attempted murder in due course. If my man dies I am in a tight place."

"And if he recovers your antagonist may be in a tighter," Bell chuckled. "And if the man gets well and that brain injury proves permanent—I mean if the man is rendered imbecile—why, we are only at the very threshold of the mystery. It seems a callous thing to say, but this is the prettiest problem I have had under my hands."

"Make the most of it," David said, sardonically. "I daresay I should see the matter in a more rational light if I were not so directly concerned. But, if we are going to make a search of the premises, the sooner we start the better."

Upstairs there was nothing beyond certain lumber. There were dust and dirt everywhere, save in the hall and front dining-room, which, as Bell sapiently pointed out, had obviously been cleared to make ready for Steel's strange reception. Down in the housekeeper's room was a large collection of dusty furniture, and a number of pictures and engravings piled with their faces to the wall. Bell began idly to turn the latter over.

"I am a maniac on the subject of old prints," he explained. "I never see a pile without a wild longing to examine them. And, by Jove, there are some good things here. Unless I am greatly mistaken—here, Steel, pull up the blinds! Good heavens, is it possible?"

"Found a Sistine Madonna or a stray Angelo?" David asked. "Or a ghost? What *is* the matter? Is it another phase of the mystery?"

"The Rembrandt," Bell gasped. "Look at it, man!"

Steel bent eagerly over the engraving. An old print, an old piece of china, an antique jewel, always exercised a charm over the novelist. He had an unerring eye for that kind of thing.

"Exquisite," he cried. "A Rembrandt, of course, but I don't recollect the picture."

"The picture was destroyed by accident after Rembrandt had engraved it with his own hand," Bell proceeded to explain. He was quite coherent now, but he breathed fast and loud, "I shall proceed to give you the history of the picture presently, and more especially a history of the engraving."

"Has it any particular name?" David asked.

"Yes, we found that out. It was called 'The Crimson Blind!'"

"No getting away from the crimson blind," David murmured. "Still, I can quite imagine that to have been the name of the picture. That shutter or blind might have had a setting sun behind it, which would account for the tender warmth of the kitchen foreground and the deep gloom where the lovers are seated. By Jove, Bell, it is a magnificent piece of work. I've a special fancy for Rembrandt engravings, but I never saw one equal to that."

"And you never will," Bell replied, "save in one instance. The picture itself was painted in Rembrandt's modest lodging in the Keizerskroon Tavern after the forced sale of his paintings at that hostel in the year 1658. At that time Rembrandt was painfully poor, as his recorded tavern bills show. The same bills also disclose the fact that 'The Crimson Blind' was painted for a private customer with a condition that the subject should be engraved as well. After one impression had been taken off the plate the picture was destroyed by a careless servant. In a sudden fit of rage Rembrandt destroyed the plate, having, they say, only taken one impression from it."

"Then there is only one of these engravings in the world? What a find!"

"There is one other, as I know to my cost," Bell said, significantly. "Until a few days ago I never entertained the idea that there were two. Steel, you are the victim of a vile conspiracy, but it is nothing to the conspiracy which has darkened my life."

"Sooner or later I always felt that I should get to the bottom of the mystery, and now I am certain of it. And, strange as it may seem, I verily believe that you and I are hunting the same man down—that the one man is at the bottom of the two evils. But you shall hear my story presently. What we have to find out now is who was the last tenant and who is the present owner of the house, and incidentally learn who this lumber belongs to. Ah, this has been a great day for me!"

Bell spoke exultingly, a great light shining in his eyes. And David sapiently asked no further questions for the present. All that he wanted to know would come in time. The next move, of course, was to visit the agent of the property.

A smart, dapper little man, looking absurdly out of place in an exceedingly spacious office, was quite ready to give every information. It was certainly true that 218, Brunswick Square, was to be let at an exceedingly low rent on a repairing lease, and that the owner had a lot more property in Brighton to be let on the same terms. The lady was exceedingly rich and eccentric; indeed, by asking such low rents she was doing her best to seriously diminish her income.

"Do you know the lady at all?" Bell asked.

"Not personally," the agent admitted. "So far as I can tell, the property came into the present owner's hands some years ago by inheritance. The property also included a very old house, called Longdean Grange, not far from Rottingdean, where the lady, Mrs. Henson, lives at present. Nobody ever goes there, nobody ever visits there, and to keep the place free from prying visitors a large number of savage dogs are allowed to prowl about the grounds."

Bell listened eagerly. Watching him, David could see that his eyes glinted like points of steel. There was something subtle behind all this common-place that touched the imagination of the novelist.

"Has 218 been let during the occupation of the present owner?" Bell asked.

"No," the agent replied. "But the present owner—as heir to the property—I am told, was interested in both 218 and 219, which used to be a kind of high-class convalescent home for poor clergy and the widows and daughters of poor clergy in want of a holiday. The one house was for the men and the other for the women, and both were furnished exactly alike; in fact, Mr. Gates's landlord, the tenant of 219, bought the furniture exactly as it stands when the scheme fell through."

Steel looked up swiftly. A sudden inspiration came to him.

"In that case what became of the precisely similar furniture in 218?" he asked.

"That I cannot tell you," the agent said. "That house was let as it stood to some sham philanthropist whose name I forget. The whole thing was a fraud, and the swindler only avoided arrest by leaving the country. Probably the goods were stored somewhere or perhaps seized by some creditor. But I really can't say definitely without looking the matter up. There are some books and prints now left in the house out of the wreck. We shall probably put them in a sale, only they have been overlooked. The whole lot will not fetch £5."

"Would you take £5 for them?" Bell asked.

"Gladly. Even if only to get them carted away."

Bell gravely produced a £5 note, for which he asked and received a receipt. Then he and Steel repaired to 218 once more, whence they recovered the Rembrandt, and subsequently returned the keys of the house to the agent. There was an air of repressed excitement about Bell which was not without its effect upon his companion. The cold, hard lines seemed to have faded from Bell's face; there was a brightness about him that added to his already fine physical beauty.

"And now, perhaps, you will be good enough to explain," David suggested.

"My dear fellow, it would take too long," Bell cried. "Presently I am going to tell you the story of the tragedy of my life. You have doubtless wondered, as others have wondered, why I dropped out of the road when the goal was in sight. Well, your curiosity is about to be gratified. I am going to help you, and in return you are going to help me to come back into the race again. By way of a start, you are going to ask me to come and dine with you to-night."

"At half-past seven, then. Nothing will give me greater pleasure."

"Spoken like a man and a brother. We will dine, and I will tell you my story after the house is quiet. And if I ask you to accompany me on a midnight adventure you will not say me nay?"

"Not in my present mood, at any rate. Adventure, with a dash of danger in it, suits my present mood exactly. And if there is to be physical violence, so much the better. My diplomacy may be weak, but physically I am not to be despised in a row."

"Well, we'll try and avoid the latter, if possible," Bell laughed. "Still, for your satisfaction, I may say there is just the chance of a scrimmage. And now I really must go, because I have any amount of work to do for Gates. Till half-past seven, *au revoir*."

Steel lighted a cigarette and strolled thoughtfully homewards along the front. The more he thought over the mystery the more tangled it became. And yet he felt perfectly sure that he was on the right track. The discovery that both those houses had been furnished exactly alike at one time was a most important one. And David no longer believed that he had been to No. 219 on the night of the great adventure. Then he found himself thinking about Ruth Gates's gentle face and lovely eyes, until he looked up and saw the girl before him.

"You—you wanted to speak to me?" he stammered.

"I followed you on purpose," the girl said, quietly, "I can't tell you everything, because it is not my secret to tell. But believe me everything will come out right in the end. Don't think badly of me, don't be hard and bitter because—"

"Because I am nothing of the kind," David smiled. "It is impossible to look into a face like yours and doubt you. And I am certain that you are acting loyally and faithfully for the sake of others who—"

"Yes, yes, and for your sake, too. Pray try and remember that. For your sake, too. Oh, if you only knew how I admire and esteem you! If only—"

She paused with the deep blush crimsoning her face. David caught her hand, and it seemed to him for a moment that she returned the pressure.

"Let me help you," he whispered. "Only be my friend and I will forgive everything."

She gave him a long look of her deep, velvety eyes, she flashed him a little smile, and was gone.

CHAPTER XII

"THE CRIMSON BLIND"

Hatherly Bell turned up at Downend Terrace gay and debonair as if he had not a single trouble in the world. His evening dress was of the smartest and he had a rose in his buttonhole. From his cab he took a square brown paper parcel, which he deposited in David's study with particular care.

He made no allusion whatever to the sterner business of the evening; he was gay and light-hearted as a child, so that Mrs. Steel sat up quite an hour later than her usual time, absolutely unconscious of the fact that she had broken a rigid rule of ten years' standing.

"Now let us go into the study and smoke a cigar," David suggested.

Bell dragged a long deck-chair into the conservatory and lighted a Massa.
Steel's offer of whisky and soda was declined.

"An ideal place for a novelist who has a keen eye for the beautiful," he said. "There you have your books and pictures, your stained glass and china, and when you turn your eyes this way they are gladdened by green foliage and lovely flowers. It's hard to connect such a room with a tragedy."

"And yet the tragedy was worked out close by where you are sitting. But never mind that. Come to your story, and let me see if we can fit it into mine."

Bell took a fresh pull at his cigar and plunged into his subject.

"About seven years ago professional business took me to Amsterdam; a brilliant young medical genius who was drinking himself prematurely into his grave had made some wonderful discoveries relating to the brain and psychology generally, so I decided to learn what I could before it was too late. I found the young doctor to be an exceedingly good fellow, only too ready to speak of his discoveries, and there I stayed for a year. My word! what do I not owe to that misguided mind! And what a revolution he would have made in medicine and surgery had he only lived!

"Well, in Amsterdam I got to know everybody who was worth knowing—medical, artistic, social. And amongst the rest was an Englishman called Lord Littimer, his son, and an exceedingly clever nephew of his, Henson by name, who was the son's tutor. Littimer was a savant, a scholar, and a fine connoisseur as regarded pictures. He was popularly supposed to have the finest collection of old prints in England. He would travel anywhere in search of something fresh, and the rumour of some apocryphal treasure in Amsterdam had brought him thither. He and I were friends from the first, as, indeed, were the son and myself. Henson, the nephew, was more quiet and reserved, but fond, as I discovered, of a little secret dissipation.

"In those days I was not averse to a little life myself. I was passionately fond of all games of cards, and I am afraid that I was in the habit of gambling to a greater extent than I could afford. I don't gamble now and I don't play cards: in fact, I shall never touch a card again as long as I live. Why, you shall hear all in good time.

"We were all getting on very well together at that time when Lord Littimer's sister paid us a visit. She came accompanied by a daughter called Enid. I will not describe her, because no words of mine could do her justice. In a word, I fell over head and ears in love with Enid, and in that state I have remained ever since. Of all the crosses that I have to bear the knowledge that I love Enid and that she loves—and despises—me, is by far the heaviest. But I don't want to dwell upon ythat."

"We were a very happy party there until Van Sneck and Von Gulden turned up. Enid and I had come to an understanding, and, though we kept our secret, we were not going to do so for long. From the very first Von Gulden admired her. He was a handsome, swaggering soldier, a good-looking, wealthy man, who had a great reputation for gallantry, and something worse. Perhaps the fellow guessed how things lay, for he never troubled to conceal his dislike and contempt for me. It is no fault of mine that I am extremely sensitive as to my personal appearance, but Von Gulden played upon it until he drove me nearly mad. He challenged me sneeringly to certain sports wherein he knew I could not shine; he challenged me to écarté, where I fancied I was his master.

"Was I? Well, we had been dining that night, and perhaps too freely, for I entirely lost my head before

I began the game in earnest. Those covert sneers had nearly driven me mad. To make a long story short, when I got up from the table that night, I owed my opponent nearly £800, without the faintest prospect of paying a tenth part of it. I was only a poor, ambitious young man then, with my way to make in the world. And if that money were not forthcoming in the next few days I was utterly ruined."

"The following morning the great discovery was made. The Van Sneck I have alluded to was an artist, a dealer, a man of the shadiest reputation, whom my patron, Lord Littimer, had picked up. It was Van Sneck who produced the copy of 'The Crimson Blind.' Not only did he produce the copy, but he produced the history from some recently discovered papers relating to the Keizerskroon Tavern of the year 1656, which would have satisfied a more exacting man than Littimer. In the end the Viscount purchased the engraving for £800 English.

"You can imagine how delighted he was with his prize—he had secured an engraving by Rembrandt that was absolutely unique. Under more favourable circumstances I should have shared that pleasure. But I was face to face with ruin, and therefore I had but small heart for rejoicing.

"I came down the next morning after a sleepless night, and with a wild endeavour to scheme some way of getting the money to pay my creditor. To my absolute amazement I found a polite note from the lieutenant coldly thanking me for the notes I had sent him by messenger, and handing me a formal receipt for £800. At first I regarded it as a hoax. But, with all his queer ways, Von Gulden was a gentleman. Somebody had paid the debt for me. And somebody had, though I have never found out to this day."

"All the same, you have your suspicions?" Steel suggested.

"I have a very strong suspicion, but I have never been able to verify it. All the same, you can imagine what an enormous weight it was off my mind, and how comparatively cheerful I was as I crossed over to the hotel of Lord Littimer after breakfast. I found him literally beside himself with passion. Some thief had got into his room in the night and stolen his Rembrandt. The frame was intact, but the engraving had been rolled up and taken away."

"Very like the story of the stolen Gainsborough."

"No doubt the one theft inspired the other. I was sent off on foot to look for Van Sneck, only to find that he had suddenly left the city. He had got into trouble with the police, and had fled to avoid being sent to gaol. And from that day to this nothing has been seen of that picture."

"But I read to-day that it is still in Littimer Castle," said David.

"Another one," Bell observed. "Oblige me by opening yonder parcel. There you see is the print that I purchased to-day for £5. This, *this*, my friend, is the print that was stolen from Littimer's lodgings in Amsterdam. If you look closely at it you will see four dull red spots in the left-hand corner. They are supposed to be blood-spots from a cut finger of the artist. I am prepared to swear that this is the very print, frame and all, that was purchased in Amsterdam from that shady scoundrel Van Sneck."

"But Littimer is credited with having one in his collection,"
David urged.

"He has one in his collection," Bell said, coolly, "And, moreover, he is firmly under the impression that he is at present happy in the possession of his own lost treasure. And up to this very day I was under exactly the same delusion. Now I know that there must have been two copies of the plate, and that this knowledge was used to ruin me."

"But," Steel murmured, "I don't exactly see—"

"I am just coming to that. We hunted high and low for the picture, but nowhere could it be found. The affair created a profound impression in Amsterdam. A day or two later Von Gulden went back to his duty on the Belgian frontier and business called me home. I packed my solitary portmanteau and departed. When I arrived at the frontier I opened my luggage for the Custom officer and the whole contents were turned out without ceremony. On the bottom was a roll of paper on a stick that I quite failed to recognise. An inquisitive Customs House officer opened it and immediately called the lieutenant in charge. Strange to say, he proved to be Von Gulden. He came up to me, very gravely, with the paper in his hand.

"'May I inquire how this came amongst your luggage?' he asked.

"I could say nothing; I was dumb. For there lay the Rembrandt. The red spots had been smudged out of the corner, but there, the picture was.

"Well, I lost my head then. I accused Von Gulden of all kinds of disgraceful things. And he behaved like a gentleman—he made me ashamed of myself. But he kept the picture and returned it to Littimer, and I was ruined. Lord Littimer declined to prosecute, but he would not see me and he would hear of no explanation. Indeed, I had none to offer. Enid refused to see me also or reply to my letters. The story of my big gambling debt, and its liquidation, got about. Steel, I was ruined. Some enemy had done this thing, and from that day to this I have been a marked man."

"But how on earth was it done?" Steel cried.

"For the present I can only make surmises," Bell replied. "Van Sneck was a slippery dog. Of course, he had found two of those plates. He kept the one back so as to sell the other at a fancy price. My enemy discovered this, and Van Sneck's sudden flight was his opportunity. He could afford to get rid of me at an apparently dear rate. He stole Littimer's engraving—in fact, he must have done so, or I should not have it at this moment. Then he smudged out some imaginary spots on the other and hid it in my luggage, knowing that it would be found. Also he knew that it would be returned to Littimer, and that the stolen plate could be laid aside and produced at some remote date as an original find. The find has been mine, and it will go hard if I can't get to the bottom of the mystery now. It is strange that your mysterious trouble and mine should be bound up so closely together, but in the end it will simplify matters, for the very reason that we are both on the hunt for the same man."

"Which man we have got to find, Bell."

"Granted. We will bait for him as one does for a wily old trout. The fly shall be the Rembrandt, and you see he will rise to it in time. But beyond this I have made one or two important discoveries to-day. We are going to the house of the strange lady who owns 218 and 219, Brunswick Square, and I shall be greatly mistaken if she does not prove to be an old acquaintance of mine. There will be danger."

"You propose to go to-night?"

"I propose to go at once," Bell said. "Dark hours are always best for dark business. Now, which is the nearest way to Longdean Grange?"

"So the House of the Silent Sorrow, as they call it, is to be our destination! I must confess that the place has ever held a strange fascination for me. We will go over the golf links and behind Ovingdean village. It is a rare spot for a tragedy."

Bell rose and lighted a fresh cigar.

"Come along," he said. "Poke that Rembrandt behind your books with its face to the wall. I would not lose that for anything now. No, on second thoughts I find I shall have to take it with me."

David closed the door carefully behind him, and the two stepped out into the night.

CHAPTER XIII

"GOOD DOG!"

Two dancing eyes of flame were streaming up the lane towards the girls, a long shadow slanted across the white pathway, the steady flick of hoofs drew nearer. Then the hoofs ceased their smiting of the dust and a man's voice spoke.

"Better turn and wait for us by the farm, driver," the voice said. "Bell, can you manage, man?"

"Who was that?" Enid whispered. "A stranger?"

"Not precisely," Ruth replied. "That is Mr. David Steel. Oh, I am sure we can trust him. Don't annoy him. Think of the trouble he is in for our sakes."

"I do," Enid said, drily. "I am also thinking of Reginald. If our dear Reginald escapes from the fostering care of the dogs we shall be ruined. That man's hearing is wonderful. He will come creeping down here on those large flat feet of his, and that cunning brain will take in everything like a flash. Good dog!"

A hound in the distance growled, and then another howled mournfully. It was the plaint of the beast who has found his quarry, impatient for the gaoler to arrive. So long as that continued Henson was safe. Any attempt to escape, and he would be torn to pieces. Just at the present moment Enid almost hoped that the attempt would be made. It certainly was all right for the present, but then Williams might happen along on his way to the stables at any moment.

The two men were coming nearer. They both paused as the dogs gave tongue. Through the thick belt of trees lights gleamed from one or two windows of the house. Steel pulled up and shuddered slightly in spite of himself.

"Crimson blinds," he said. "Crimson blinds all through this business.
They are beginning to get on my nerves. What about those dogs, Bell?"

"Dogs or no dogs, I am not going back now," Bell muttered. "It's perfectly useless to come here in the daytime; therefore we must fall back upon a little amateur burglary. There's a girl yonder who might have assisted me at one time, but—"

Enid slipped into the road. The night was passably light and her beautiful features were fairly clear to the startled men in the road.

"The girl is here," she said. "What do you want?"

Bell and his companion cried out simultaneously: Bell because he was so suddenly face to face with one who was very dear to him, David because it seemed to him that he recognised the voice from the darkness, the voice of his great adventure. And there was another surprise as he saw Ruth Gates side by side with the owner of that wonderful voice.

"Enid!" Bell cried, hoarsely. "I did not expect—"

"To confront me like this," the girl said, coldly. "That I quite understand. What I don't understand is why you intrude your hated presence here."

Bell shook his handsome head mournfully. He looked strangely downcast and dejected, and none the less, perhaps, because a fall in crossing the down had severely wrenched his ankle. But for a belated cab on the Rottingdean road he would not have been here now.

"As hard and cruel as ever," he said. "Not one word to me, not one word in my defence. And all the time I am the victim of a vile conspiracy—"

"Conspiracy! Do you call vulgar theft a conspiracy?"

"It was nothing else," David put in, eagerly. "A most extraordinary conspiracy. The kind of thing that you would not have deemed possible out of a book."

"And who might this gentleman be?" Enid asked, haughtily.

"A thousand pardons for my want of ceremony," David said. "If I had not been under the impression that we had met before I should never have presumed—"

"Oh, a truce to this," Bell cried. "We are wasting time. The hour is not far distant, Enid, when you will ask my pardon. Meanwhile I am going up to the house, and you are going to take me there. Come what way, I don't sleep to-night until I have speech with your aunt."

David had drawn a little aside. By a kind of instinct Ruth Gates followed him. A shaft of grey light glinted upon her cycle in the grass by the roadside. Enid and Bell were talking in vehement whispers—they seemed to be absolutely unconscious of anybody else but themselves. David could see the anger and scorn on the pale, high-bred face; he could see Bell gradually expanding as he brought all his strength and firm power of will to bear.

"What will be the upshot of it?" Ruth asked, timidly.

"Bell will conquer," David replied. "He always does, you know."

"I am afraid you don't take my meaning, Mr. Steel."

David looked down into the sweet, troubled face of his companion, and thence away to the vivid crimson patches beyond the dark belt of foliage. Ever and anon the intense stillness of the night was broken by the long-drawn howl of one of the hounds. David remembered it for years afterwards; it formed the most realistic chapter of one of his most popular novels.

"Heaven only knows," he said. "I have been dragged into this business, but what it means I know no more than a child. I am mixed up in it, and Bell is mixed up in it, and so are you. Why we shall perhaps know some day."

"You are not angry with me?"

"Why, no. Only you might have had a little more confidence in me."

"Mr. Steel, we dared not. We wanted your advice, and nothing more. Even now I am afraid I am saying too much. There is a withering blight over yonder house that is beyond mere words. And twice gallant gentlemen have come forward to our assistance. Both of them are dead. And if we had dragged you, a total stranger, into the arena, we should morally have murdered you."

"Am I not within the charmed circle now?" David smiled.

"Not of our free will," Ruth said, eagerly. "You came into the tangle with Hatherly Bell. Thank Heaven you have an ally like that. And yet I am filled with shame—"

"My dear young lady, what have you to be ashamed of?"

Ruth covered her face with her hands for a moment and David saw a tear or two trickle through the slim fingers. He took the hands in his, gently, tenderly, and glanced into the fine, grey eyes. Never had he been moved to a woman like this before.

"But what will you think of me?" Ruth whispered. "You have been so good and kind and I am so foolish. What can you think of a girl who is all this way from home at midnight? It is so—so unmaidenly."

"It might be in some girls, but not in you," David said, boldly. "One has only to look in your face and see that only the good and the pure dwell there. But you were not afraid?"

"Horribly afraid. The very shadows startled me. But when I discovered your errand to-night I was bound to come. My loyalty to Enid demanded it, and I had not one single person in the world whom I could trust."

"If you had only come to me, Miss Ruth—"

"I know, I know now. Oh, it is a blessed thing for a lonely girl to have one good man that she can rely upon. And you have been so very good, and we have treated you very, very badly."

But David would not hear anything of the kind. The whole adventure was strange to a degree, but it seemed to matter nothing so long as he had Ruth for company. Still, the girl must be got home. She could not be allowed to remain here, nor must she be permitted to return to Brighton alone. Bell strode up at the same moment.

"Miss Henson has been so good as to listen to my arguments," he said. "I am going into the house. Don't worry about me, but send Miss Gates home in the cab. I shall manage somehow."

David turned eagerly to Ruth.

"That will be best," he said. "We can put your machine on the cab, and I'll accompany you part of the way home. Our cabman will think that you came from the house. I shan't be long, Bell."

Ruth assented gratefully. As David put her in the cab Bell whispered to him to return as soon as possible, but the girl heard nothing of this.

"How kind—how kind you are," she murmured.

"Perhaps some day you will be kind to me," David said, and Ruth blushed in the darkness.

CHAPTER XIV

BEHIND THE BLIND

There was a long pause till the sound of the horse's hoofs died away. Bell was waiting for his companion to speak. Her head was partly turned from him, so that he could only watch the dainty beauty of her profile. She stood there cold and still, but he could see that she was profoundly agitated.

"I never thought to see the day when I should trust you again," she said;
"I never expected to trust any man again."

"You will trust me, darling," Bell said, passionately. "If you still care for me as I care for you. *Do* you?"

The question came keen as steel. Enid shivered and hesitated. Bell laid a light hand on her arm.

"Speak," he said. "I am going to clear myself, I am going to take back my good name. But if you no longer care for me the rest matters nothing. Speak."

"I am not one of those who change, God pity me," Enid murmured.

Bell drew a long, deep breath. He wanted no assurance beyond that.

"Then lead the way," he said. "I have come at the right time; I have been looking for you everywhere, and I find you in the hour of your deepest sorrow. When I knew your aunt last she was a cheerful, happy woman. From what I hear now she is suffering, you are all suffering, under some blighting grief."

"Oh, if you only knew what that sorrow was, Hatherly."

"Hatherly! How good the old name sounds from your lips. Nobody has ever called me that since—since we parted. And to think that I should have been searching for you all these years, when Miss Ruth Gates could have given me the clue at any time. And why have you been playing such strange tricks upon my friend David Steel? Why have you—-What is that?"

Somebody was moving somewhere in the grounds, and a voice shouted for help. Enid started forward.

"It is Williams coming from the stables," she said. "I have so arranged it that the dogs are holding up my dear cousin, Reginald Henson, who is calling upon Williams to release him. If Reginald gets back to the house now we are ruined. Follow me as well as you can."

Enid disappeared down a narrow, tangled path, leaving Bell to limp along painfully in her track. A little way off Henson was yelling lustily for assistance. Williams, who had evidently taken in the situation, was coming up leisurely, chuckling at the discomfiture of the enemy. The hounds were whining and baying. From the house came the notes of a love song passionately declaimed. A couple of the great dogs came snarling up to Bell and laid their grimy muzzles on his thighs. A cold sensation crept up and down his spine as he came to a standstill.

"The brutes!" he muttered. "Margaret Henson must be mad indeed to have these creatures about the place. Ah! would you? Very well, I'll play the game fairly, and not move. If I call out I shall spoil the game. If I remain quiet I shall have a pleasant night of it. Let us hope for the best and that Enid will understand the situation."

Meanwhile Enid had come up with Williams. She laid her hand imperiously upon his lips.

"Not a word," she whispered. "Mr. Henson is held up by the dogs. He must remain where he is till I give you the signal to release him. I know you answered his call, but you are to go no farther."

Williams assented willingly enough. Everything that tended to the discomfort of Reginald Henson filled him with a peculiar and deep-seated pleasure.

"Very well, miss," he said, demurely. "And don't you hurry, miss. This is a kind of job that calls for plenty of patience. And I'm really shocking deaf tonight."

Williams retreated leisurely in the direction of the stables, but his malady was not so distressing that he failed to hear a groan and a snarling curse from Henson. Enid fled back along the track, where she found Bell standing patiently with a dog's muzzle close to either knee. His face was white and shining, otherwise he showed no signs of fear. Enid laid a hand on the head of either dog, and they rolled like great cats at her feet in the bushes.

"Now come swiftly," she whispered. "There is no time to be lost."

They were in the house at last, crossing the dusty floor, with the motes dancing in the lamp-light, deadening their footsteps and muffling the intense silence. Above the stillness rose the song from the drawing-room; from without came the restless murmur of the dogs. Enid entered the drawing-room,

and Bell limped in behind her. The music immediately ceased. As Enid glanced at her aunt she saw that the far-away look had died from her eyes, that the sparkle and brightness of reason were there. She had come out of the mist and the shadows for a time at any rate.

"Dr. Hatherly Bell to see you, aunt," Enid said, in a low tone.

Margaret Henson shot up from the piano like a statue. There was no welcome on her face, no surprise there, nothing but deep, unutterable contempt and loathing.

"I have been asleep," she said. She passed her hand dreamily over her face. "I have been in a dream for seven long years. Enid brought me back to the music again to-night, and it touched my heart, and now I am awake again. Do you recollect the 'Slumber Song,' Hatherly Bell? The last time I sang it you were present. It was a happy night; the very last happy night in the world to me."

"I recollect it perfectly well, Lady Littimer," Bell said.

"Lady Littimer! How strange it is to hear that name again. Seven years since then. Here I am called Margaret Henson, and nobody knows. And now *you* have found out. Do you come here to blackmail and rob me like the rest?"

"I come here entirely on your behalf and my own, my lady."

"That is what they all say—and then they rob me. You stole the Rembrandt."

The last words came like a shot from a catapult. Enid's face grew colder. Bell drew a long tube of discoloured paper carefully tied round a stick from his pocket.

"I am going to disprove that once and for all," he said. "The Rembrandt is at present in Lord Littimer's collection. There is an account of it in to-day's *Telegraph*. It is perfectly familiar to both of you. And, that being the case, what do you think of this?"

He unrolled the paper before Enid's astonished eyes. Margaret Henson glanced at it listlessly; she was fast sinking into the old, strange oblivion again. But Enid was all rapt attention.

"I would have sworn to that as Lord Littimer's own," she gasped.

"It is his own," Bell replied. "Stolen from him and a copy placed by some arch-enemy in my portmanteau, it was certain to be found on the frontier. Don't you see that there were two Rembrandts? When the one from my portmanteau was restored to Littimer his own was kept by the thief. Subsequently it would be exposed as a new find, with some story as to its discovery, only, unfortunately for the scoundrel, it came into my possession."

"And where did you find it?" Enid asked. "I found it," Bell said, slowly, "in a house called 218, Brunswick Square, Brighton."

A strange cry came from Enid's lips. She stood swaying before her lover, white as the paper upon which her eyes were eagerly fixed. Margaret Henson was pacing up and down the room, her lips muttering, and raising a cloud of pallid dust behind her.

"I—I am sorry," Enid said, falteringly. "And all these years I have deemed you guilty. But then the proof was so plain; I could not deny the evidence of my own senses. And Von Gulden came to me saying how deeply distressed he was, and that he would have prevented the catastrophe if he could. Well?"

A servant stood waiting in the doorway with wondering eyes at the sight of a stranger.

"I'm sorry, miss," she said, "but Miss Christiana is worse; indeed, she quite frightens me. I've taken the liberty of telephoning to Dr. Walker."

The words seemed to bring consciousness to Margaret Henson.

"Christiana worse," she said. "Another of them going; it will be a happy release from a house of sorrow like this. I will come up, Martin."

She swept out of the room after the servant. Enid appeared hardly to have heard. Bell looked at her inquiringly and with some little displeasure.

"I fancy I have heard you speak of your sister Christiana," he said.
"Is she ill?"

"She is at the point of death, I understand; you think that I am callous. Oh, if you only knew! But the light will come to us all in time, God willing. Look at this place, look at the blight of it, and wonder how we endure it. Hatherly, I have made a discovery."

"We seem to be living in an atmosphere of discoveries. What is it?"

"I will answer your question by asking another. You have been made the victim of a vile conspiracy. For seven years your career has been blighted. And I have lost seven years of my life, too. Have you any idea who your enemy is?"

"Not the faintest, but, believe me, I shall find out in time. And then—-"

A purple blackness like the lurid light of a storm flashed into his eyes, the lines of his mouth grew rigid. Enid laid a hand tenderly on his arm.

"Your enemy is the common enemy of us all," she said. "We have wasted the years, but we are young yet. Your enemy is Reginald Henson."

"Enid, you speak with conviction. Are you sure of this?"

"Certain. When I have time I will tell you everything. But not now. And that man must never know that you have been near the house to-night, not so much for your sake as for the sake of your friend David Steel. Now I can see the Providence behind it all. Hatherly, tell me that you forgive me before the others come back."

"My darling, I cannot see how you could have acted otherwise."

Enid turned towards him with a great glad light in her eyes. She said nothing, for the simple reason that there was nothing to say. Hatherly Bell caught her in his strong arms, and she swayed to reach his lips. In that delicious moment the world was all forgot.

But not for long. There was a sudden rush and a tumble of feet on the stairs, there was a strange voice speaking hurriedly, then the drawing-room door opened and Margaret Henson came in. She was looking wild and excited and talked incoherently. An obviously professional man followed her.

"My dear madam," he was saying, "I have done all I can. In the last few days I have not been able to disguise from myself that there was small hope for the patient. The exhaustion, the shock to the system, the congestion, all point to an early collapse."

"Is my sister so much worse, Dr. Walker?" Enid asked, quietly.

"She could not be any worse and be alive," the doctor said. "Unless I am greatly mistaken the gentleman behind you is Mr. Hatherly Bell. I presume he has been called in to meet me? If so, I am sincerely glad, because I shall be pleased to have a second opinion. A bad case of"—here followed a long technical name—"one of the worst cases I have ever seen."

"You can command me, Enid," Bell said. "If I can."

"No, no," Enid cried. "What am I saying? Please to go upstairs with Martin."

Bell departed, wonderingly. Enid flew to the door and out into the night. She could hear Henson cursing and shouting, could hear the snarling clamour of the dogs. At the foot of the drive she paused and called Steel softly by name. To her intense relief he came from the shadow.

"I am here," he cried. "Do you want me?"

"Yes, yes," Enid panted. "Never more were your services needed. My sister is dying; my sister must—die. And Hatherly Bell is with her, and—you understand?"

"Yes," said David. A vivid flash of understanding had come to him. "Bell shall do as I tell him. Come along."

"Hold him up, dear doggies," Enid murmured. "Hold him up and I'll love both of you for ever."

CHAPTER XV

David Steel followed his guide with the feelings of the man who has given himself over to circumstances. There was a savour of nightmare about the whole thing that appealed distinctly to his imagination. The darkness, the strange situation, the vivid streaks of the crimson blinds—the crimson blind that seemed an integral part of the mystery—all served to stimulate him. The tragic note was deepened by the whine and howling of the dogs.

"There is a man over there," David whispered.

"A man who is going to stay there," Enid said, with grim satisfaction. "It is virtually necessary that Mr. Reginald Henson should not be disturbed. The dogs have a foolish weakness for his society. So long as he shows no signs of boredom he is safe."

David smiled with a vague grasp of the situation. Apparently the cue was to be surprised at nothing that he saw about the House of the Silent Sorrow. The name of Reginald Henson was more or less familiar to him as that of a man who stood high in public estimation. But the bitter contempt in his companion's voice suggested that there was another side to the man's character.

"I hope you are not asking me to do anything wrong," David murmured.

"I am absolutely certain of it," the girl said. "It is a case of the end justifying the means; and if ever the end justified the means, it does in this case. Besides—"

Enid Henson hesitated. David's quick perception prompted him.

"Besides, it is my suggestion," he said. "When I had the pleasure of seeing you before—"

"Pardon me, you have never had the pleasure of seeing me before."

"Ah, you would make an excellent Parliamentary fencer. I bow to your correction and admit that I have never *seen* you before. But your voice reminds me of a voice I heard very recently under remarkable circumstances. It was my good fortune to help a lady in distress a little time back. If she had told me more I might have aided her still further. As it is, her reticence has landed me into serious trouble."

Enid grasped the speaker's arm convulsively.

"I am deeply sorry to hear it," she whispered. "Perhaps the lady in question was reticent for your sake. Perhaps she had confided more thoroughly in good men before. And suppose those good men had disappeared?"

"In other words, that they had been murdered. Who by?"

There was a snarl from one of the hounds hard by, and a deep, angry curse from Henson. Enid pointed solemnly in his direction. No words of hers would have been so thrilling and eloquent. David strode along without further questions on that head.

"But there is one thing that you must tell me," he said, as they stood together in the porch. "Is the first part of my advice going to be carried out?"

"Yes. That is why you are here now. Stay here one moment whilst I get you pencil and paper… There! Now will you please write what I suggest? Dr. Bell is with my sister. At least, I suppose he is with her, as Dr. Walker desired to have his opinion. My sister is dying—dying, you understand?"

Enid's voice had sunk to a passionate whisper. The hand that she laid on David's shoulder was trembling strangely. At that moment he would've done anything for her. A shaft of light filtered from the hall into the porch, and lit up the paper that the girl thrust upon Steel.

"Now write," she commanded. "Ask no questions, but write what I ask, and trust me implicitly."

David nodded. After all, he reflected, he could not possibly get himself into a worse mess than he was in already. And he felt that he could trust the girl by his side. Her beauty, her earnestness, and her obvious sincerity touched him.

"Write," Enid whispered. "Say, 'See nothing and notice nothing, I implore you. Only agree with everything that Dr. Walker says, and leave the room as quickly as possible!' Now sign your name. We can go into the drawing-room and wait till Dr. Bell comes down. You are merely a friend of his. I will see that he has this paper at once."

Enid led the way into the drawing-room. She gave no reasons for the weird strangeness of the place, it was no time for explanations. As for Steel, he gazed around him in fascinated astonishment. A novelist ever on the look-out for new scenes and backgrounds, the aspect of the room fascinated him. He saw the dust rising in clouds, he saw the wilted flowers, he noted the overturned table, obviously untouched and neglected for years, and he wondered. Then he heard the babel of discordant voices overhead. What a sad house it was, and how dominant was the note of tragedy.

Meanwhile, with no suspicion of the path he was treading, Bell had gone upstairs. He came at length to the door of the room where the sick girl lay. There was a subdued light inside and the faint suggestion of illness that clings to the chamber of the sufferer. Bell caught a glimpse of a white figure lying motionless in bed. It was years now since he had acted thus in a professional capacity, but the old quietness and caution came back by instinct. As he would have entered Margaret Henson came out and closed the door.

"You are not going in there," she said. "No, no. Everything of mine you touch you blight and wither. If the girl is to die, let her die in peace."

She would have raised her voice high, but a lightning glance from Bell quieted her. It was not exactly madness that he had to deal with, and he knew it. The woman required firm, quiet treatment. Dr. Walker stood alongside, anxious and nervous. The man with the quiet practice of the well-to-do doctor was not used to scenes of this kind.

"You have something to conceal," Bell said, sternly. "Open the door."

"Really, my dear sir," Walker said, fussily. "Really, I fancy that under the circumstances—"

"You don't understand this kind of case," Bell interrupted. "I do."

Walker dropped aside with a muttered apology. Bell approached the figure in the doorway and whispered a few words rapidly in her ear. The effect was electrical. The figure seemed to wilt and shrivel up, all the power and resistance had gone. She stepped aside, moaning and wringing her hands. She babbled of strange things; the old, far-away look came into her eyes again.

Without a word of comment or sign of triumph Bell entered the sick room. Then he raised his head and sniffed the heavy atmosphere as an eager hound might have done. A quick, sharp question rose to his lips, only to be instantly suppressed as he noted the vacant glance of his colleague.

The white figure on the bed lay perfectly motionless. It was the figure of a young and exceedingly beautiful girl, a beauty heightened and accentuated by the dead-white pallor of her features. Still the face looked resolute and the exquisitely chiselled lips were firm.

"Albumen," Bell muttered. "What fiend's game is this? I wonder if that scoundrel—but, no. In that case there would be no object in concealing my presence here. I wonder—"

He paused and touched the pure white brow with his fingers. At the same moment Enid came into the room. She panted like one who has run fast and far.

"Well," she whispered, "is she better, better or—Hatherly, read this."

The last words were so low that Bell hardly heard them. He shot a swift glance at his colleague before he opened the paper. One look and he had mastered the contents. Then the swift glance was directed from Walker to the girl standing there looking at Bell with a world of passionate entreaty and longing in her eyes.

"It is *your* sister who lies there," Bell whispered, meaningly, "and yet you—"

He paused, and Enid nodded. There was evidently a great struggle going on in Bell's mind. He was grappling with something that he only partially understood, but he did know perfectly well that he was being asked to do something absolutely wrong and that he was going to yield for the sake of the girl he loved.

He rose abruptly from the bedside and crossed over to Walker.

"You are perfectly correct," he said. "At this rate—at this rate the patient cannot possibly last till the morning. It is quite hopeless."

Walker smiled feebly.

"It is a melancholy satisfaction to have my opinion confirmed," he said. "Miss Henson, if you will get Williams to see me as far as the lodge-gates … it is so late that—er—"

Williams came at length, and the little doctor departed. Enid fairly cowered before the blazing, searching look that Bell turned upon her. She fell to plucking the bedclothes nervously.

"What does it mean?" he asked, hoarsely. "What fiend's plaything are you meddling with? Don't you know that if that girl dies it will be murder? It was only for your sake that I didn't speak my mind before the fool who has just gone. He has seen murder done under his eyes for days, and he is ready to give a certificate of the cause of death. And the strange thing is that in the ordinary way he would be quite justified in doing so."

"Chris is not going to die; at least, not in that way," Enid whispered, hoarsely.

"Then leave her alone. No more drugs; no medicine even. Give Nature a chance. Thank Heaven, the girl has a perfect constitution."

"Chris is not going to die," Enid repeated, doggedly, "but the certificate will be given, all the same. Oh, Hatherly, you must trust me—trust me as you have never done before. Look at me, study me. Did you ever know me to do a mean or dishonourable thing?"

They were down in the drawing-room again; David waiting, with a strange sense of embarrassment under Margaret Henson's distant eyes; indeed, it was probable that she had never noticed him at all. All the same she turned eagerly to Bell.

"Tell me the worst," she cried. "Tell me all there is to know."

"Your niece's sufferings are over," Bell said, gravely; "I have no more to tell you."

A profound silence followed, broken presently by angry voices outside. Then Williams looked in at the door and beckoned Enid to him. His face was wreathed in an uneasy grin.

"Mr. Henson has got away," he said. "Blest if I can say how. And they dogs have rolled him about, and tore his clothes, and made such a picture of him as you never saw. And a sweet temper he's in!"

"Where is he now?" Enid asked. "There are people here he must not see."

"Well, he came back in through the study window, swearing dreadful for so respectable a gentleman. And he went right up to his room, after ordering whisky and soda-water."

Enid flew back to the drawing-room. Not a moment was to be lost. At any hazard Reginald Henson must be kept in ignorance of the presence of strangers. A minute later, and the darkness of the night had swallowed them up. Williams fastened the lodge-gates behind them, and they turned their faces in the direction of Rottingdean Road.

"A strange night's work," David said, presently.

"Aye, but pregnant with result," Bell answered. There was a stern, exulting ring in his voice. "There is much to do and much danger to be faced, but we are on the right track at last. But why did you send me that note just now?"

David smiled as he lighted a cigarette.

"It is part of the scheme," he said. "Part of my scheme, you understand.
But, principally, I sent you the note because Miss Enid asked me to."

CHAPTER XVI

MARGARET SEES A GHOST

With a sigh of unutterable relief Enid heard Williams returning. Reginald Henson had not come down yet, and the rest of the servants had retired some time. Williams came up with a request as to whether he could do anything more before he went to bed.

"Just one thing," said Enid. "The good dogs have done their work well to-night, but they have not quite finished. Find Rollo for me, and bring him here quick. Then you can shut up the house, and I will

see that Mr. Henson is made comfortable after his fright."

The big dog came presently and followed Enid timidly upstairs. Apparently the great black-muzzled brute had been there before, as evidently he knew he was doing wrong. He crawled along the corridor till he came to the room where the sick girl lay, and here he followed Enid. The lamp was turned down low as Enid glanced at the bed. Then she smiled faintly, yet hopefully.

There was nobody in the room. The patient's bed was empty!

"It works well," Enid murmured. "May it go on as it has been started. Lie down, Rollo; lie there, good dog. And if anybody comes in tear him to pieces."

The great brute crouched down obediently, thumping his tail on the floor as an indication that he understood. As if a load had been taken from her mind Enid crept down the stairs. She had hardly reached the hall before Henson followed her. His big face was white with passion; he was trembling from head to foot from fright and pain. There was a red rash on his forehead that by no means tended to improve his appearance.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded, hoarsely.

Enid looked at him coolly. She could afford to do so now. All the danger was past, and she felt certain that the events of the evening were unknown to him.

"I might ask you the same question," she said. "You look white and shaken; you might have been thrown violently into a heap of stones. But please don't make a noise. It is not fitting now. Chris—"

Enid hesitated; the prevarication did not come so easily as she had expected.

"Chris has gone," she said. "She passed away an hour ago."

Henson muttered something that sounded like consolation. He could be polite and suave enough on occasions, but not to-night. Even philanthropists are selfish at times. Moreover, his nerves were badly shaken and he wanted a stimulant badly.

"I am going to bed," Enid said, wearily. "Goodnight."

She went noiselessly upstairs, and Henson passed into the library. He was puzzled over this sudden end of Christiana Henson. He was half inclined to believe that she was not dead at all; he belonged to the class of men who believe nothing without proof. Well, he could easily ascertain that for himself. There would be quite time enough in the morning.

For a long time Henson sat there thinking and smoking, as was his usual custom. Like other great men, he had his worries and troubles, and that they were mainly of his own making did not render them any lighter. So long as Margaret Henson was under the pressure of his thumb, money was no great object. But there were other situations where money was utterly powerless.

Henson was about to give it up as a bad job, for tonight at any rate. He wondered bitterly what his admirers would say if they knew everything. He wondered—what was that?

Somebody creeping about the house, somebody talking in soft, though distinct, whispers. His quick ears detected that sound instantly. He slipped into the hall; Margaret Henson was there, with the remains of what had once been a magnificent opera-cloak over her shoulders.

"How you startled me!" Henson said, irritably. "Why don't you go to bed?"

Enid, looking over the balustrade from the landing, wondered so also, but she kept herself prudently hidden. The first words that she heard drove all the blood from her heart.

"I cannot," the feeble, moaning voice said. "The house is full of ghosts; they haunt and follow me everywhere. And Chris is dead, and I have seen her spirit."

"So I'm told," Henson said, with brutal callousness. "What was the ghost like?"

"Like Chris. All pale and white, with a frightened look on her face. And she was all dressed in white, too, with a cloak about her shoulders. And just when I was going to speak to her she turned and disappeared into Enid's bedroom. And there are other ghosts—"

"One at a time, please," Henson said, grimly. "So Christiana's ghost passed into her sister's bedroom. You come and sit quietly in the library whilst I investigate matters."

Margaret Henson complied in her dull, mechanical way, and Enid flew like a flash of light to her room. Another girl was there—a girl exceedingly like her, but looking wonderfully pale and drawn.

"That fiend suspects," Enid said. "How unfortunate it was that you should meet aunt like that. Chris, you must go back again. Fly to your own room and compose yourself. Only let him see you lying white and still there, and he must be satisfied."

Chris rose with a shudder.

"And if the wretch offers to touch me," she moaned, "If he does—"

"He will not. He dare not. Heaven help him if he tries any experiment of that kind. If he does, Rollo will kill him to a certainty."

"Ah, I had forgotten the faithful dog. Those dogs are more useful to us than a score of men. I will step by the back way and through my dressing-room. Oh, Enid, how glad I shall be to find myself outside the walls of this dreadful house!"

She flew along the corridor and gained her room in safety. It was an instant's work to throw off her cloak and compose herself rigidly under the single white sheet. But though she lay still her heart was beating to suffocation as she heard the creak and thud of a heavy step coming up the stairs. Then the door was opened in a stealthy way and Henson came in. He could see the outline of the white figure, and a sigh of satisfaction escaped him. A less suspicious man would have retired at once; a man less engaged upon his task would have seen two great amber eyes close to the floor.

"An old woman's fancy," he muttered. "Still, as I am here, I'll make sure that—"

He stretched out his hand to touch the marble forehead, there was a snarl and a gurgle, and Henson came to the ground with a hideous crash that carried him staggering beyond the door into the corridor. Rollo had the intruder by the throat; a thousand crimson and blue stars danced before the wretched man's eyes; he grappled with his foe with one last despairing effort, and then there came over him a vague, warm unconsciousness. When he came to himself he was lying on his bed, with Williams and Enid bending over him.

"How did it happen?" Enid asked, with simulated anxiety.

"I—I was walking along the corridor," Henson gasped, "going—going to bed, you see; and one of those diabolical dogs must have got into the house. Before I knew what I was doing the creature flew at my throat and dragged me to the floor. Telephone for Walker at once. I am dying, Williams."

He fell back once more utterly lost to his surroundings. There was a great, gaping, raw wound at the side of the throat that caused Enid to shudder.

"Do you think he is—dead, Williams?" she asked.

"No such luck as that," Williams said, with the air of a confirmed pessimist. "I hope you locked that there bedroom door and put the key in your pocket, miss. I suppose we'd better send for the doctor, unless you and me puts him out of his misery. There's one comfort, however, Mr. Henson will be in bed for the next fortnight, at any rate, so he'll be powerless to do any prying about the house. The funeral will be over long before he's about again."

* * * * *

The first grey streaks of dawn were in the air as Enid stood outside the lodge-gates. She was not alone, for a neat figure in grey, marvellously like her, was by her side. The figure in grey was dressed for travelling and she carried a bag in her hand.

"Good-bye, dear, and good luck to you," she said. "It is dangerous to delay."

"You have absolutely everything that you require?" Enid asked.

"Everything. By the time you are at breakfast I shall be in London. And once I am there the search for the secret will begin in earnest."

"You are sure that Reginald Henson suspected nothing?"

"I am perfectly certain that he was satisfied; indeed, I heard him say so. Still, if it had not been for the dogs! We are going to succeed, Enid, something at my heart tells me so. See how the sun shines on your face and in your dear eyes. Au revoir, an omen—an omen of a glorious future."

CHAPTER XVII

THE PACE SLACKENS

Steel lay sleepily back in the cab, not quite sure whether his cigarette was alight or not. They were well into the main road again before Bell spoke.

"It is pretty evident that you and I are on the same track," he said.

"I am certain that I am on the right one," David replied; "but, when I come to consider the thing calmly, it seems more by good luck than anything else. I came out with you to-night seeking adventure, and I am bound to admit that I found it. Also, I found the lady who interviewed me in the darkness, which is more to the point."

"As a matter of fact, you did nothing of the kind," said Bell, with the suggestion of a laugh.

"Oh! Case of the wrong room over again. I was ready to swear it. Whom did I speak to? Whose voice was it that was so very much like hers?"

"The lady's sister. Enid Henson was not at 218, Brunswick Square, on the night in question. Of that you may be certain. But it's a queer business altogether. Rascality I can understand. I am beginning to comprehend the plot of which I am the victim. But I don't mind admitting that up to the present I fail to comprehend why those girls evolved the grotesque scheme for getting assistance at your hands. The whole thing savours of madness."

"I don't think so," David said, thoughtfully. "The girls are romantic as well as clever. They are bound together by the common ties of a common enmity towards a cunning and utterly unscrupulous scoundrel. By the merest accident in the world they discovered that I am in a position to afford them valuable advice and assistance. At the same time they don't want me to be brought into the business, for two reasons—the first, because the family secret is a sacred one; the second, because any disclosures would land me in great physical danger. Therefore they put their heads together and evolve this scheme. Call it a mad venture if you like, but if you consider the history of your own country you can find wilder schemes evolved and carried out by men who have had brains enough to be trusted with the fortunes of the nation. If these girls had been less considerate for my safety—"

"But," Bell broke in eagerly, "they failed in that respect at the very outset. You must have been spotted instantly by the foe, who has cunningly placed you in a dangerous position, perhaps as a warning to mind your own business in future. And if those girls come forward to save you—and to do so they must appear in public, mind you—they are bound to give away the whole thing. Mark the beautiful cunning of it. My word, we have a foe worthy of our steel to meet."

"*We*? Do you mean to say that your enemy and mine is a common one?"

"Certainly. When I found my foe I found yours."

"And who may he be, by the same token?"

"Reginald Henson. Mind you, I had no more idea of it than the dead when I went to Longdean Grange to-night. I went there because I had begun to suspect who occupied the place and to try and ascertain how the Rembrandt engraving got into 218, Brunswick Square. Miss Gates must have heard us talking over the matter, and that was why she went to Longdean Grange to-night."

"I hope she got home safe," said David. "The cab man says he put her down opposite the Lawns."

"I hope so. Well, I found out who the foe was. And I have a pretty good idea why he played that trick upon me. He knew that Enid Henson and myself were engaged; he could see what a danger to his schemes it would be to have a man like myself in the family. Then the second Rembrandt turned up, and there was his chance for wiping me off the slate. After that came the terrible family scandal between Lord Littimer and his wife. I cannot tell you anything of that, because I cannot speak with definite authority. But you could judge of the effect of it on Lady Littimer to-night."

"I haven't the faintest recollection of seeing Lady Littimer to-night."

"My dear fellow, the poor lady whom you met as Mrs. Henson is really Lady Littimer. Henson is her maiden name, and those girls are her nieces. Trouble has turned the poor woman's brain. And at the bottom of the whole mystery is Reginald Henson, who is not only nephew on his mother's side, but is also next heir but one to the Littimer title. At the present moment he is blackmailing that unhappy

creature, and is manoeuvring to get the whole of her large fortune in his hands. Reginald Henson is the man those girls want to circumvent, and for that reason they came to you. And Henson has found it out to a certain extent and placed you in an awkward position."

"Witness my involuntary guest and the notes and the cigar-case," David said. "But does he know what I advised one of the girls—my princess of the dark room—to do?"

"I don't fancy he does. You see, that advice was conveyed by word of mouth. The girls dared not trust themselves to correspondence, otherwise they might have approached you in a more prosaic manner. But I confess you startled me to-night."

"What do you mean by that?"

"When you sent me that note. What you virtually asked me to do was to countenance murder. When I went into the sick room I saw that Christiana Henson was dying. The first idea that flashed across my mind was that Reginald Henson was getting the girl out of the way for his own purposes. My dear fellow, the whole atmosphere literally spoke of albumen. Walker must have been blind not to see how he was being deceived. I was about to give him my opinion pretty plainly when your note came up to me. And there was Enid, with her whole soul in her large eyes, pleading for my silence. If the girl died I was accessory after and before the fact. You will admit that that was a pretty tight place to put a doctor in."

"That's because you didn't know the facts of the case, my dear Bell."

"Then perhaps you'll be so good as to enlighten me," Bell said, drily.

"Certainly. That was part of my scheme. In that synopsis of the story obtained by the girls by some more or less mechanical means, the reputed death of a patient forms the crux of the tale. The idea occurred to me after reading a charge against a medical student some time ago in the *Standard*. The man wanted to get himself out of the way; he wanted to be considered as dead, in fact. By the artful use of albumen in certain doses he produced symptoms of disease which will be quite familiar to you. He made himself so ill that his doctor naturally concluded that he was dying. As a matter of fact, he was dying. Had he gone on in the same way another day he would have been dead. Instead of this he drops the dosing and, going to his doctor in disguise, says that he *is* dead. He gets a certificate of his own demise, and there you are. I am not telling you fiction, but hard fact recorded in a high-class paper. The doctor gave the certificate without viewing the body. Well, it struck me that we had here the making of a good story, and I vaguely outlined it for a certain editor. In my synopsis I suggested that it was a woman who proposed to pretend to die thus so as to lull the suspicions of a villain to sleep, and thus possess herself of certain vital documents. My synopsis falls into certain hands. The owner of those hands asks me how the thing was done. I tell her. In other words, the so-called murder that you imagined you had discovered to-night was the result of design. Walker will give his certificate, Reginald Henson will regard Miss Christiana as dead and buried, and she will be free to act for the honour of the family."

"But they might have employed somebody else."

"Who would have had to be told the history of the family dishonour. So far I fancy I have made the ground quite clear. But the mystery of the cigar-case and the notes and the poor fellow in the hospital is still as much a mystery as ever. We are like two allied forces working together, but at the same time under the disadvantage of working in the dark. You can see, of course, that the awful danger I stand in is as terrible for those poor girls."

"Of course I do. Still, we have a key to your trouble. It is a dreadfully rusty one and will want a deal of oiling before it's used, but there it is."

"Where, my dear fellow, where?" David asked.

"Why, in the Sussex County Hospital, of course. The man may die, in which case everything must be sacrificed in order to save your good name. On the other hand, he may get better, and then he will tell us all about it."

"He might. On the other hand, he might plead ignorance. It is possible for him to suggest that the whole affair was merely a coincidence, so far as he was concerned."

"Yes, but he would have to explain how he burgled your house, and what business he had to get himself half murdered in your conservatory. Let us get out here and walk the rest of the way to your house. Our cabby knows quite enough about us without having definite views as to your address."

The cabman was dismissed with a handsome *douceur*, and the twain turned off the front at the corner of Eastern Terrace. Late as it was, there were a few people lounging under the hospital wall, where there was a suggestion of activity about the building unusual at that time of the night. A rough-looking fellow, who seemed to have followed Bell and Steel from the front, dropped into a seat by the hospital gates and laid his head back as if utterly worn out. Just inside the gates a man was smoking a cigarette.

"Halloa, Cross," David cried, "you are out late tonight!"

"Heavy night," Cross responded, sleepily, "with half a score of accidents to finish with. Some of Palmer of Lingfield's private patients thrown off a coach and brought here in the ambulance. Unless I am greatly mistaken, that is Hatherly Bell with you."

"The same," Bell said, cheerfully. "I recollect you in Edinburgh. So some of Palmer's patients have come to grief. Most of his special cases used to pass through my hands."

"I've got one here to-night who recollects you perfectly well," said Cross. "He's got a dislocated shoulder, but otherwise he is doing well. Got a mania that he's a doctor who murdered a patient."

"Electric light anything to do with the story?" Bell asked, eagerly.

"That's the man. Seems to have a wonderfully brilliant intellect if you can only keep him off that topic. He spotted you in North Street yesterday, and seemed wonderfully disappointed to find you had nothing whatever to do with this institution."

"If he is not asleep," Bell suggested, "and you have no objection—"

Cross nodded and opened the gate. Before passing inside Bell took the rolled-up Rembrandt from his deep breast-pocket and handed it to David.

"Take care of this for me," he whispered. "I'm going inside. I've dropped upon an old case that interested me very much years ago, and I'd like to see my patient again. See you in the morning, I expect. Good-night."

David nodded in reply and went his way. It was intensely quiet and still now; the weary loafer at the outside hospital seat had disappeared. There was nobody to be seen anywhere as David placed his key in the latch and opened the door. Inside the hall-light was burning, and so was the shaded electric lamp in the conservatory. The study leading to the conservatory was in darkness. The effect of the light behind was artistic and pleasing.

It was with a sense of comfort and relief that David fastened the door behind him. Without putting up the light in the study David laid the Rembrandt on his table, which was immediately below the window in his work-room. The night was hot; he pushed the top sash down liberally.

"I must get that transparency removed," he murmured, "and have the window filled with stained glass. The stuff is artistic, but it is so frankly what it assumes to be."

CHAPTER XVIII

A COMMON ENEMY

David idly mixed himself some whisky and soda water in the dining-room, where he finished his cigarette. He was tired and ready for bed now, so tired that he could hardly find energy enough to remove his boots and get into the big carpet slippers that were so old and worn. He put down the dining-room lights and strolled into the study. Just for a moment he sat there contemplating with pleased, tired eyes the wilderness of bloom before him.

Then he fell into a reverie, as he frequently did. An idea for a fascinating story crept unbidden into his mind. He gazed vaguely around him. Some little noise outside attracted his attention, the kind of noise made by a sweep's brushes up a chimney. David turned idly towards the open window. The top of it was but faintly illuminated by the light of the conservatory gleaming dully on the transparency over the glass. But David's eyes were keen, and he could see distinctly a man's thumb crooked downwards over the frame of the ash. Somebody had swarmed up the telephone holdfasts and was getting in

through the window. Steel slipped well into the shadow, but not before an idea had come to him. He removed the rolled-up Rembrandt from the table and slipped it behind a row of books in the book-case. Then he looked up again at the crooked thumb.

He would recognise that thumb again anywhere. It was flat like the head of a snake, and the nail was no larger than a pea—a thumb that had evidently been cruelly smashed at one time. The owner of the thumb might have been a common burglar, but in the light of recent events David was not inclined to think so. At any rate he felt disposed to give his theory every chance. He saw a long, fustian-clad arm follow the scarred thumb, and a hand grope all over the table.

"Curse me," a foggy voice whispered, hoarsely. "It ain't here. And the bloke told me—"

The voice said no more, for David grabbed at the arm and caught the wrist in a vice-like grip. Instantly another arm shot over the window and an ugly piece of iron piping was swung perilously near Steel's head. Unfortunately, he could see no face. As he jumped back to avoid a blow his grasp relaxed, there was a dull thud outside, followed by the tearing scratch of boots against a wall and the hollow clatter of flying feet. All David could do was to close the window and regret that his impetuosity had not been more judiciously restrained.

"Now, what particular thing was he after?" he asked himself. "But I had better defer any further speculations on the matter till the morning. After the fright he had my friend won't come back again. And I'm just as tired as a dog."

But there were other things the next day to occupy David's attention besides the visit of his nocturnal friend. He had found out enough the previous evening to encourage him to go farther. And surely Miss Ruth Gates could not refuse to give him further information.

He started out to call at 219, Brunswick Square, as soon as he deemed it excusable to do so. Miss Gates was out, the solemn butler said, but she might be found in the square gardens. David came upon her presently with a book in her lap and herself under a shady tree. She was not reading, her eyes were far away. As she gave David a warm greeting there was a tender bloom on her lovely face.

"Oh, yes, I got home quite right," she said. "No suspicion was aroused at all. And you?"

"I had a night thrilling enough for yellow covers, as Artemus Ward says.
I came here this morning to throw myself on your mercy, Miss Gates. Were
I disposed to do so, I have information enough to force your hand. But I
prefer to hear everything from your lips."

"Did Enid tell you anything?" Ruth faltered.

"Well, she allowed me to know a great deal. In the first place, I know that you had a great hand in bringing me to 218 the other night. I know that it was you who suggested that idea, and it was you who facilitated the use of Mr. Gates's telephone. How the thing was stage-managed matters very little at present. It turns out now that your friend and Dr. Bell and myself have a common enemy."

Ruth looked up swiftly. There was something like fear in her eyes.

"Have—have you discovered the name of that enemy?" she asked.

"Yes, I know now that our foe is Mr. Reginald Henson."

"A man who is highly respected. A man who stands wonderfully high in public estimation. There are thousands and thousands of people who look upon him as a great and estimable creature. He gives largely in charities, he devotes a good deal of his time to the poor. My uncle, who *is* a good man, if you like, declares that Reginald Henson is absolutely indispensable to him. At the next election that man is certain to be returned to Parliament to represent an important northern constituency. If you told my uncle anything about him, he would laugh at you."

"I have not the slightest intention of approaching your uncle on this matter at present."

"Because you could prove nothing. Nobody can prove anything."

"But Christiana Henson may in time."

Once more Ruth flashed a startled look at her companion.

"So you have discovered something about that?" she whispered.

"I have discovered everything about it. Legally speaking, the young lady is dead. She died last night,

as Dr. Walker will testify. She passed away in the formula presented by me the night that I met her in the darkness at 218, Brunswick Square. Now, will you be so good as to tell me how those girls got hold of my synopsis?"

"That came about quite naturally. Your synopsis and proof in an open envelope were accidentally slipped into a large circular envelope used by a firm of seed merchants and addressed to Longdean Grange, sent out no doubt amongst thousands of others. Chris saw it, and, prompted by curiosity, read it. Out of that our little plot was gradually evolved. You see, I was at school with those two girls, and they have few secrets from me. Naturally, I suggested the scheme because I see a great deal of Reginald Henson. He comes here; he also comes very frequently to our house in Prince's Gate. And yet I am sorry, from the bottom of my heart, that I ever touched the thing, for your sake."

The last words were spoken with a glance that set David's pulses beating.
He took Ruth's half-extended hand in his, and it was not withdrawn.

"Don't worry about me," he said. "I shall come out all right in the end. Still, I shall look eagerly forward to any assistance that you can afford me. For instance, what hold has Henson got on his relatives?"

"That I cannot tell you," Ruth cried. "You must not ask me. But we were acting for the best; our great object was to keep you out of danger."

"There is no danger to me if I can only clear myself," Steel replied. "If you could only tell me where those bank-notes came from! When I think of that part of the business I am filled with shame. And yet if you only knew how fond I am of my home.... At the same time, when I found that I was called upon to help ladies in distress I should have refused all offers of reward. If I had done so I should have had no need of your pity. And yet—and yet it is very sweet to me."

He pressed the hand in his, and the pressure was returned. David forget all about his troubles for the time; and it was very cool and pleasant and quiet there.

"I am afraid that those notes were forced upon us," she said. "Though I frankly believe that the enemy does not know what we have learnt to do from you. And as to the cigar-case: would it not be easy to settle that matter by asking a few questions?"

"My dear young lady, I have done so. And the more questions I ask the worse it is for me. The cigar-case I claimed came from Walen's, beyond all question, and was purchased by the mysterious individual now in the hospital. I understood that the cigar-case was the very one I admired at Lockhart's some time ago, and—"

"If you inquire at Lockhart's you will find such to be the case."

David looked up with a puzzled expression. Ruth spoke so seriously, and with such an air of firm conviction, that he was absolutely staggered.

"So I did," he said. "And was informed in the most positive way by the junior partner that the case I admired had been purchased by an American called Smith and sent to the Metropole after he had forwarded dollar-notes for it. Surely you don't suppose that a firm like Lockhart's would be guilty of anything—"

Ruth rose to her feet, her face pale and resolute.

"This must be looked to," she said. "The cigar-case sent to you on that particular night was purchased at Lockhart's by myself and paid for with my own money!"

CHAPTER XIX

ROLLO SHOWS HIS TEETH

The blinds were all down at Longdean Grange, a new desolation seemed to be added to the gloom of the place. Out in the village it had by some means become known that there was somebody dead in the house, either madam herself or one of those beautiful young ladies whom nobody had ever seen. Children loitering about the great lodge-gates regarded Williams with respectful awe and Dr. Walker

with curiosity. The doctor was the link connecting the Grange with the outside world.

To add to the gloom of it all the bell over the stables clanged mournfully. The noise made Walker quite nervous as he walked up the drive by Williams's side. Not for a pension would he have dared approach the house alone. Williams, in the seediest and most dilapidated rusty black, had a face of deepest melancholy.

"But why that confound—Why do they ring that bell?" Walker asked, irritably.

"Madam ordered it, sir," Williams replied. "She's queerer than ever, is mistress. She don't say much, but Miss Christiana's death is a great shock to her. She ordered the bell to be tolled, and she carried on awful when Miss Enid tried to stop it."

Walker murmured vaguely something doubtless representing sympathy.

"And my other patient, Williams?" he asked. "How is he getting along? Really, you ought to keep those dogs under better control. It's a dreadful business altogether. Fancy a man of Mr. Henson's high character and gentle disposition being attacked by a savage dog in the very house! I hope the hound is securely kennelled."

"Well, he isn't, sir," Williams said, with just the glint of a grin on his dry features. "And it wasn't altogether Rollo's fault. That dog was so devoted to Miss Christiana as you never see. And he got to know as the poor young lady was dying. So he creeps into the house and lies before her bedroom door, and when Mr. Henson comes along the dog takes it in his 'ead as he wants to go in there. And now Rollo's got inside, and nobody except Miss Enid dare go near. I pity that there undertaker when he comes."

Walker shuddered slightly. Longdean Grange was a fearful place for the nerves. Nothing of the routine or the decorous ever happened there. The fees were high and the remuneration prompt, or Walker would have handed over his patient cheerfully to somebody else. Not for a moment did he imagine that Williams was laughing at him. Well, he need not see the body, which was a comfort. With a perfectly easy conscience he could give a certificate of death. And if only somebody would stop that hideous bell! Someone was singing quietly in the drawing-room, and the music seemed to be strangely bizarre and out of place.

Inside it seemed like a veritable house of the dead—the shadow of tragedy loomed everywhere. The dust rose in clouds from the floor as the servants passed to and fro. They were all clad in black, and shuffled uneasily, as if conscious that their clothes did not belong to them. Enid came out into the hall to meet the doctor. Her face seemed terribly white and drawn; there was something in her eyes that suggested anxiety more than grief.

"I suppose you have come principally to see Mr. Henson?" she said. "But my sister—"

"No occasion to intrude upon your grief for a moment, Miss Henson," Walker said, quietly. "As I have told you before, there was very little hope for your sister from the first. It was a melancholy satisfaction to me to find my diagnosis confirmed in every detail by so eminent an authority as Dr. Hatherly Bell. I will give you a certificate with pleasure—at once."

"You would like to see my sister?" Enid suggested.

The quivering anxiety was in her eyes again, the strained look on her face. Walker was discreetly silent as to what he had heard about that bloodhound, but he had by no means forgotten it.

"Not the least occasion, I assure you," he said, fervently. "Your sister had practically passed away when I last saw her. There are times when—er—you see—but really there is no necessity."

"Mr. Henson is terribly fastidious about these things."

"Then he shall be satisfied. I shall tell him that I have—er—seen the body. And I have, you know. In these matters a medical man cannot be too careful. If you will provide me with pen and ink—"

"Thank you very much. Will you come this way, please?"

Walker followed into the drawing-room. Mrs. Henson, wearing something faded and dishevelled in the way of a mourning dress, was crooning some dirge at the piano. Her white hair was streaming loosely over her shoulders, there was a vacant stare in her eyes. The intruders might have been statues for all the heed she took of them. Presently the discordant music ceased, and she began to pace noiselessly up and down the room.

"Another one gone," she murmured; "the best-beloved. It is always the best-beloved that dies, and the one we hate that is left. Take all those coaches away, send the guests back home. Why do they come chattering and feasting here? She shall be drawn by four black horses to Churchfield in the dead of the night, and there laid in the family vault."

"Mrs. Henson's residence," Enid explained, in a whisper. "It is some fifteen miles away. She has made up her mind that my sister shall be taken away as she says—to-morrow night. Is this paper all that is necessary for the—you understand? I have telephoned to the undertaker in Brighton."

Walker hastened to assure the girl that what little further formality was required he would see to himself. All he desired now was to visit Henson and get out of the house as soon as possible. As he hurried from the drawing-room he heard Mrs. Henson crooning and muttering, he saw the vacant glare in her eyes, and vaguely wondered how soon he should have another patient here.

Reginald Henson sat propped up in his bed, white and exhausted. Beyond doubt he had had a terrible shock and fright, and the droop of his eyelids told of shattered nerves. There was a thick white bandage round his throat, his left shoulder was strapped tightly. He spoke with difficulty.

"Do we feel any better this morning?" Walker asked, cheerfully.

"No, we don't," said Henson, with a total absence of his usual graciousness of manner. "We feel confoundedly weak, and sick, and dizzy. Every time I drop off to sleep I wake with a start and a feeling that that infernal dog is smothering me. Has the brute been shot yet?"

"I don't fancy so; in fact, he is still at his post upstairs, and therefore—"

"Therefore you have not seen the body of my poor dear cousin?"

"Otherwise I could have given no certificate," Walker said, with dignity. "If I have satisfied myself, sir, and the requirements of the law, why, then, everybody is satisfied. I *have* seen the body."

Technically the little doctor spoke the truth. Henson muttered something that sounded like an apology. Walker smiled graciously and suggested that rest and a plain diet were all that his patient needed. Rest was the great thing. The bandages need not be removed for a day or two, at the expiration of which time he would look in again. Once the road was reached in safety Walker took off his hat and wiped the beads from his forehead.

"What a house," he muttered. "What a life to lead. Thank goodness I need not go there again before Saturday. If anybody were to offer me a small glass of brandy with a little soda now, I should feel tempted to break through my rule and drink it."

Meanwhile the long terror of the day dragged on inside the house. The servants crept about the place on tiptoe, the hideous bell clanged out, Mrs. Henson paced wearily up and down the drawing-room, singing and muttering to herself, until Enid was fain to fly or break down and yell hysterically. It was one of Margaret Henson's worst days.

The death of Christiana seemed to affect her terribly. Enid watched her in terror. More than once she was fearful that the frail thread would snap—the last faint glimmer of reason go out for ever. And yet it would be madness to tell Margaret Henson the truth. In the first place she would not have understood, and on the other hand she might have comprehended enough to betray to Reginald Henson. As it was, her grief was obvious and sincere enough. The whole thing was refinedly cruel, but really there was no help for it. And things had gone on splendidly.

Henson was powerless to interfere, and the doctor was satisfied. Once she had put her hand to the plough Enid's quick brain saw her through. But she would have been hard put to it to deceive Henson under his very nose without the help of the bloodhound. Now she could see her way still farther. She waited nervously for a ring from the lodge-gates to the house, and about four o'clock it came. The undertaker was at the gates waiting for an escort to the Grange.

Enid passed her tongue out over a pair of dry lips. The critical moment was at hand. If she could get through the next hour she was safe. If not—but there must be no "if not," she told herself. The undertaker came, suave, quiet, respectful, but he dropped back from the bedroom door as he saw two gleaming, amber eyes regarding him menacingly.

"The dog loved my sister," Enid explained, quietly. "But he has found his way to her room, and he refuses to move. He fancies that we have done something her…. Oh, no, I couldn't poison him! And it would be a dreadful thing if there were to be anything like a struggle *here*. Come, Rollo."

Evidently the dog had learned his lesson well. He wagged his great tail, but refused to move. The

undertaker took a couple of steps forward and Rollo's crest rose. There was a flash of white teeth and a growl. At the end of half an hour no progress had been made.

"There's only one thing for it," suggested Williams, in his rusty voice. "We can get the dog away for ten minutes at midnight. He likes a run then, and I'll bring the other dogs to fetch him, like."

"My time is very valuable just now," the undertaker suggested, humbly.

"Then you had better measure me," said Enid, turning a face absolutely flaming red and deadly white to the speaker. "It is a dreadful, ghastly business altogether, but I cannot possibly think of any other way. The idea of anything like a struggle here is abhorrent.... And the dog's fidelity is so touching. My sister and I were exactly alike, except that she was fairer than me."

The undertaker was understood to demur slightly on professional grounds.
It was very irregular and not in the least likely to give satisfaction.

"What does it matter?" Enid cried, passionately. She was acting none the less magnificently because her nerves were quivering like harpstrings. "When I am dead you can fling me in a ditch, for all I care. We are a strange family and do strange things. The question of satisfaction need not bother you. Take my measure and send the coffin home to-morrow, and we will manage to do the rest. Then to-morrow night you will have a four-horse hearse here at eleven o'clock, and drive the coffin to Churchfield Church, where you will be expected. After that your work will be finished."

The bewildered young man responded that things should be exactly as the young lady required. He had seen many strange and wild things in his time, but none so strange and weird as this. It was all utterly irregular, of course, but people after all had a right to demand what they paid for. Enid watched the demure young man in black down the corridor, and then everything seemed to be enveloped in a dense purple mist, the world was spinning under her feet, there was a great noise like the rush of mighty waters in her brain. With a great effort she threw off the weakness and came to herself, trembling from head to foot.

"Courage," she murmured, "courage. This life has told on me more than I thought. With Chris's example before me I must not break down now."

CHAPTER XX

FRANK LITTIMER

The lamps gleamed upon the dusty statuary and pictures and faded flowers in the hall, they glinted upon a long polished oak casket there reposing upon trestles. Ever and anon a servant would peep in and vanish again as if ashamed of something. The house was deadly quiet now, for Mrs. Henson had fallen asleep worn out with exhaustion, and Enid had instantly stopped the dreadful clamour of the bell. The silence that followed was almost as painful as the noise had been.

On the coffin were wreaths of flowers. Enid sat in the drawing-room with the door open, where she could see everything, but was herself unseen. She was getting terribly anxious and nervous again; the hour was near eleven, and the hearse might arrive at any time. She would know no kind of peace until she could get that hideous mockery out of the house.

She sat listening thus, straining her ears to catch the slightest sound. Suddenly there came a loud clamour at the front door, an imperative knocking that caused Enid's heart to come into her mouth. Who could it be? What stranger had passed the dogs in that way?

She heard crabbed, sour, but courageous old Williams go to the door. She heard the clang of bolts and the rattle of chains, and then a weird cry from Williams. A voice responded that brought Enid, trembling and livid, into the hall. A young man with a dark, exceedingly handsome face and somewhat effeminate mouth stood there, with eyes for nothing but the shining flower-decked casket on the trestles. He seemed beside himself with rage and grief; he might have been a falsely imprisoned convict face to face with the real culprit.

"Why didn't you let me know?" he cried. "Why didn't you let me know?"

His voice rang in the roof. Enid flew to his side and placed her hand upon his lips.

"Your mother is asleep, Frank," she said. "She has had no sleep for three nights. A long rest may be the means of preserving her sanity. Why did you come here?"

The young man laughed silently. It was ghastly mirth to see, and it brought the tears into Enid's eyes. She had forgotten the danger of the young man's presence.

"I heard that Chris was ill," he said. "They told me that she was dying. And I could not keep away. And now I have come too late. Oh, Chris, Chris!"

He fell on his knees by the side of the coffin, his frame shaken by tearless sobs. Enid bit her lips to keep back the words that rose to them. She would have given much to have spoken the truth. But at any hazard she must remain silent. She waited till the paroxysm of grief had passed away, then she touched the intruder gently on the shoulder.

"There is great danger for you in this house," she said.

"What do I care for danger when Chris lies yonder?"

"But, dear Frank, there are others to consider besides yourself. There is your mother, for instance. Oh, you ought not to have come here to-night. If your father knew!"

"My father? He would be the last person in the world to know. And what cares he about anything, so long as he has his prints and his paintings? He has no feelings, no heart, no soul, I may say."

"Frank, you must go at once. Do you know that Reginald Henson is here? He has ears like a hare; it will be nothing less than a miracle unless he hears your voice. And then—"

The young man was touched at last. The look of grief died out of his eyes and a certain terror filled them.

"I think that I should have come in any case," he whispered. "I don't want to bring any further trouble upon you, Enid, but I wanted to see the last of her. I came here, and some of the dogs remembered me. If not, I might have had no occasion to trouble you. And I won't stay, seeing that Henson is here. Let me have something to remember her by; let me look into her room for a moment. If you only knew how I loved her! And you look as if you had no grief at all."

Enid started guiltily. She had quite forgotten her *rôle* for the time. Indeed, there was something unmistakably like relief on her face as she heard the porter's bell ring from the lodge to the house. Williams shuffled away, muttering that he would be more useful in the house than out of it just now, but a glance from Enid subdued him. Presently there came the sound of wheels on the gravel outside.

"They have come for the—the coffin," Enid murmured. "Frank, it would be best for you to go. Go upstairs, if you like; you know the way. Only, don't stay here."

The young man went off dreamily. A heavy grief dulled and blinded his senses; he walked along like one who wanders in his sleep. Christiana's room door was open and a lamp was there. There were dainty knick-knacks on the dressing-table, a vase or two of faded flowers—everything that denotes the presence of refined and gracious womanhood.

Frank Littimer stood there looking round him for some little time. On a table by the bedside stood a photograph of a girl in a silver frame. Littimer pounced upon it hungrily. It was a good picture—the best of Christiana's that he had ever seen. He slipped out into the corridor and gently closed the door behind him. Then he passed along with his whole gaze fixed on the portrait. The girl seemed to be smiling out of the frame at him. He had loved Christiana since she was a child; he felt that he had never loved her so much as at this moment. Well, he had something to remember her by—he had not come here in vain.

It seemed impossible yet to realise that Christiana was dead, that he would never look into her sunny, tender face again. No, he would wake up presently and find it had all been a dream. And how different to the last time he was here. He had been smuggled into the house, and he had occupied the room with the oak door. He—

The room with the oak door opened and a big man with a white bandage round his throat stood there with tottering limbs and an ugly smile on his loose mouth. Littimer started back.

"Reginald," he exclaimed, "I didn't expect to see you here, or—"

"Or you would never have dared to come?" Henson said, hoarsely. "I heard your voice and I was bound to give you a welcome, even at considerable personal inconvenience. Help me back to bed again.

And now, you insolent young dog, how dare you show your face here?"

"I came to see Chris," Littimer said, doggedly. "And I came too late. Even if I had known that I was going to meet you, I should have been here all the same. Oh, I know what you are going to say; I know what you think. And some day I shall break out and defy you to do your worst."

Henson smiled as one might do at the outbreak of an angry child. His eyes flashed and his tongue spoke words that Littimer fairly cowed before. And yet he did not show it. He was like a boy who has found a stone for the man who stands over him with the whip. With quick intuition Henson saw this, and in a measure his manner changed.

"You will say next that you are not afraid of me," he suggested.

"Well," Littimer replied, slowly; "I am not so much afraid of you as I was."

"Ah! so you imagine that you have discovered something?"

Littimer apparently struggled between a prudent desire for silence and a disposition to speak. The sneer on the face of his enemy fairly maddened him.

"Yes," he said, with a note of elation in his voice, "I have made a discovery, but I am not going to tell you how or where my discovery is. But I've found Van Sneck."

A shade of whiter pallor came over Henson's face. Then his eyes took on a murderous, purple-black gleam. All the same, his voice was quite steady as he replied.

"I'm afraid that is not likely to benefit you much," he said. "Would you mind handing me that oblong black book from the dressing-table? I want you to do something for me. What's that?"

There was just the faintest suggestion of a sound outside. It was Enid listening with all her ears. She had not been long in discovering what had happened. Once the ghastly farcical incubus was off her shoulders she had followed Littimer upstairs. As she passed Henson's room the drone of voices struck on her ears. She stood there and listened. She would have given much for this not to have happened, but everything happened for the worst in that accursed house.

But Henson's last words were enough for her. She gathered her skirts together and flew down the stairs. In the hall Williams stood, with a grin on his face, pensively scraping his chin with a dry forefinger.

"Now what's the matter, miss?" he cried.

"Don't ask questions," Enid cried. "Go and get me the champagne nippers. The champagne nippers at once. If you can't find them, then bring me a pair of pliers. Then come to me on the leads outside the bathroom. It's a matter of life and death."

CHAPTER XXI

A FIND

David did not appear in the least surprised; indeed, he was long since past that emotion. Before the bottom of the mystery was reached a great many more strange things were pretty sure to happen.

"So you bought that cigar-case yourself?" he said.

"Indeed, I did," Ruth answered, eagerly. "Of course I have long known you by name and I have read pretty well all your tales. I—I liked your work so much."

David was flattered. The shy, sweet admiration in Ruth's eyes touched him.

"And I was very glad to meet you," Ruth went on. "You see, we all liked your stories. And we knew one or two people who had met you, and gradually you became quite like a friend of ours—Enid and Chris and myself, you understand. Then a week or two ago I came down to Brighton with my uncle to settle all about taking the house here. And I happened to be in Lockhart's buying something when you came in and asked to see the cigar-case. I recognised you from your photographs, and I was interested.

Of course, I thought no more of it at the time, until Enid came up to London and told me all about the synopsis, and how strangely the heroine's case in your proposed story was like hers. Enid wondered how you were going to get the girl out of her difficulty, and I jokingly suggested that she had better ask you. She accepted the idea quite seriously, saying that if you had a real, plausible way out of the trouble you might help her. And gradually our scheme was evolved. You were not to know, because of the possible danger to yourself."

"At the hands of Reginald Henson, of course?"

"Yes. Our scheme took a long time, but we got it worked out at last. We decided on the telephone because we thought that we could not be traced that way, never imagining for a moment that you could get the number of your caller over the trunk line. Enid came up to town, and worked the telephone, Chris was in No. 218, and I brought the money."

"You placed that cigar-case on my doorstep?"

"Yes, I was wound up for anything. It was I whom you saw riding the bicycle through Old Steine; it was I who dropped the card of instructions. It seems a shameful thing to say and to do now, but I—well, I enjoyed it at the time. And I did it for the sake of my friends. Do I look like that sort of a girl, Mr. Steel?"

David glanced into the beautiful shy eyes with just the suggestion of laughter in them.

"You look all that is loyal and good and true," he exclaimed. "And I don't think I ever admired you quite so much as I do at this moment."

Ruth laughed and looked down. There was something in David's glance that thrilled her and gave her a sense of happiness she would have found it hard to describe.

"I am so glad you do not despise me," she whispered.

"Despise you!" David cried. "Why? If you only knew how I, well, how I loved you! Don't be angry. I mean every word that I say; my feelings for you are as pure as your own heart. If you could care for me as you do for those others I should have a friend indeed."

"You have made me care for you very much indeed, Mr. Steel," Ruth whispered.

"Call me David..... How nice my plain name sounds from your lips. Ruth and David. But I must hold myself in hand for the present. Still, I am glad you like me."

"Well, you have been so good and kind. We have done you a great deal of injury and you never blamed us. And you are just the man I have always pictured as the man I could love ... David!"

"Well, it was only one little kiss, and I'm sure nobody saw us, dear. And later on, when you are my wife—"

"Don't you think we had better keep to business for the present?" Ruth said, demurely.

"Perhaps. There is one little point that you must clear up before we go any farther. How did you manage to furnish those two big dining-rooms exactly alike?"

"Why, the furniture is there. At the top of the house, in a large attic, all the furniture is stored."

"But the agent told me it had been removed."

"He was wrong. You can't expect the agent to recollect everything about a house. The place belonged to the lady whom we may call Mrs. Margaret Henson at one time. When her home scheme fell through she sold one house as it was. In the other she stored the furniture. Enid knew of all this, of course. We managed to get a latch—key to fit 218, and Enid and a man did the rest. Her idea was to keep you in the dark as much as possible. After the interview the furniture was put back again, and there you are."

"Diplomatic and clever, and decidedly original, not to say feminine. In the light of recently acquired knowledge I can quite see why your friends desired to preserve their secret. But they need not have taken all those precautions. Had they written—"

"They dared not. They were fearful as to what might become of the reply."

"But they might have come to me openly."

"Again, they dared not for your sake. You know a great deal, David, but there is darkness and trouble

and wickedness yet that I dare not speak of. And you are in danger. Already Reginald Henson has shown you what he can do."

"And yet he doesn't know everything," David smiled. "He may have stabbed me in the back, but he is quite ignorant as to what advice I gave to Enid Henson, which brings me back to the cigar-case. You saw me looking at it in Lockhart's. Go on."

"Yes, I watched you with a great deal of curiosity. Finally you went off out of the shop saying that you could not afford to buy the cigar-case, and I thought no more of the matter for a time. Then we found out all about your private affairs. Oh, I am ashamed almost to go on."

The dainty little face grew crimson; the hand in David's trembled.

"But we were desperate. And, after all, we were doing no harm. It was just then that the idea of the cigar-case came into my mind. We knew that if we could get you to take that money it would only be as a loan. I suggested the gift of the case as a memento of the occasion. I purchased that case with my own money and I placed it with its contents on the doorstep of your house."

"Did you watch it all the time?"

"No, I didn't. But I was satisfied that nobody passed, and I was sufficiently near to hear your door open at the hour appointed. Of course, we had carefully rehearsed the telephone conversation, and I knew exactly what to do."

David sat very thoughtfully for some little time.

"The case must have been changed," he said. "It is very difficult to say how, but there is no other logical solution of the matter. At about half-past twelve on that eventful night you placed on my doorstep a gun-metal cigar-case, mounted in diamonds, that you had purchased from Lockhart's?"

"Yes, and the very one that you admired. Of that I am certain."

"Very well. I take that case with me to 218, Brunswick Square, and I bring it back again. Did I take it with me or not? Anyhow, it was found on the floor beside the body. It never passed out of my possession to my knowledge. Next day I leave it at the office of Messrs. Mossa and Mack, and it gets into the hands of the police."

"Was it not possibly changed there, David?"

"No, because of the initials I had scratched inside it. And beyond all question that case—the same case, mind you, that I picked up on my doorstep—was purchased by the man now lying in the hospital here from Walen's, in West Street. Now, how was the change made?"

"If I could only see my way to help you!"

"The change was made the day you bought the case. By the way, what time was it?"

"I can't tell you the exact time," Ruth replied. "It was on the morning of the night of your adventure."

"And you kept it by you all the time."

"Yes. It was in a little box sealed with yellow wax and tied with yellow string. I went to 219 after I had made the purchase. My uncle was there and he was using the back sitting-room as an office. He had brought a lot of papers with him to go through."

"Ah! Did you put your package down?"

"Just for a moment on the table. But surely my uncle would not—"

"One moment, please. Was anybody with your uncle at the time?"

Ruth gave a sudden little cry.

"How senseless of me to forget," she cried. "My uncle was down merely for the day, and, as he was very busy, he sent for Mr. Reginald Henson to help him. I did not imagine that Mr. Henson would know anything. But even now I cannot see what—"

"Again let me interrupt you. Did you leave the room at all?"

"Yes. It is all coming back to me now. My uncle's medicine was locked up in my bag. He asked me to go for it and I went, leaving my purchase on the table. It is all coming back to me now.... When I

returned Mr. Henson was quite alone, as somebody had called to see my uncle. Mr. Henson seemed surprised to see me back so soon, and as I entered he crushed something up in his hand and dropped it into the waste-paper basket. But my parcel was quite intact."

"Yellow wax and yellow string and all?"

"Yes, so far as I remember. It was Mr. Henson who reminded my uncle about his medicine."

"And when you were away the change was made. Strange that your uncle should be so friendly with both Henson and Bell. Have they ever met under your roof?"

"No," Ruth replied. "Henson has always alluded to Dr. Bell as a lost man.
He professes to be deeply sorry for him but he has declined to meet him.
Where are you going?"

"I am going with you to see if we can find anything in the waste-paper basket at No. 219. Bell tells me that your servants have instructions to touch no papers, and I know that the back sitting-room of your house is used as a kind of office. I want, if possible, to find the paper that Henson tried to hide on the day you bought the cigar-case."

The basket proved to be a large one, and was partially filled with letters that had never been opened —begging-letters, Ruth said. For half an hour David was engaged in smoothing out crumpled sheets of paper, until at length his search was rewarded. He held a packet of note-paper, the usual six sheets, one inside the other, that generally go to correspondence sheets of good quality. It was crushed up, but Steel flattened it out and held it up for Ruth's inspection.

"Now, here is a find!" he cried. "Look at the address in green at the top: '15, Downend Terrace.' Five sheets of my own best notepaper, printed especially for myself, in this basket! Originally this was a block of six sheets, but the one has been written upon and the others crushed up like this. Beyond doubt the paper was stolen from my study. And—what's this?"

He held up the thick paper to the light. At the foot of the top sheet was plainly indented in outline the initials "D. S."

"My own cipher," David went on. "Scrawled in so boldly as to mark on the under sheet of paper. Almost invariably I use initials instead of my full name unless it is quite formal business."

"And what is to be done now?" Ruth asked.

"Find the letter forged over what looks like a genuine cipher," David said, grimly.

CHAPTER XXII

"THE LIGHT THAT FAILED"

Bell followed Dr. Cross into the hospital with a sense of familiar pleasure. The cool, sweet smell of the place, the decorous silence, the order of it all appealed to him strongly. It was as the old war-horse who sniffs the battle from afar. And the battle with death was ever a joy to Bell.

"This is all contrary to regulations, of course," he suggested.

"Well, it is," Cross admitted. "But I am an enthusiast, and one doesn't often get a chance of chatting with a brilliant, erratic star like yourself. Besides, our man is not in the hospital proper. He is in a kind of annexe by my own quarters, and he scoffs the suggestion of being nursed."

Bell nodded, understanding perfectly. He came at length to a brilliantly-lighted room, where a dark man with an exceedingly high forehead and wonderfully piercing eyes was sitting up in bed. The dark eyes lighted with pleasure as they fell upon Bell's queer, shambling figure and white hair.

"The labour we delight in physics pain," he greeted with a laugh and a groan. "It's worth a badly twisted shoulder to have the pleasure of seeing Hatherly Bell again. My dear fellow, how are you?"

The voice was low and pleasant, there was no trace of insanity about the speaker. Bell shook the proffered hand. For some little time the conversation proceeded smoothly enough. The stranger was a

good talker; his remarks were keen and to the point.

"I hope you will be comfortable here," Bell suggested.

A faint subtle change came over the other's face.

"All but one thing," he whispered. "Don't make a fuss about it, because Cross is very kind. But I can't stand the electric light. It reminds me of the great tragedy of my life. But for the electric light I should be a free man with a good practice to-day."

"So you are harping on that string again," Bell said, coldly. "I fancied that I had argued you out of that. You know perfectly well that it is all imagination, Heritage."

Heritage passed his left hand across his eyes in a confused kind of way.

"When you look at one like that I fancy so," he said. "When I was under your hands I was forgetting all about it. And now it has all come back again. Did I tell you all about it, Cross?"

Bell gave Cross a significant glance, and the latter shook his head.

"Well, it was this way," Heritage began, eagerly. His eyes were gleaming now, his whole aspect was changed. "I was poor and struggling, but I had a grand future before me. There was a patient of mine, a rich man, who had a deadly throat trouble. And he was going to leave me all his money if I cured him. He told me he had made a will to that effect, and he had done so. And I was in direst straits for some ready cash. When I came to operate I used an electric light, a powerful light—you know what I mean. The operation failed and my patient died. The operation failed because the electric light went out at a critical time.

"People said it was a great misfortune for me, because I was on the threshold of a new discovery which would have made my name. Nothing of the kind. I deliberately cut the positive wire of the electric light so that I should fail, and so that my patient might die and I might get all his money at once. And he did die, and nobody suspected me—nobody could possibly have found me out. Then I went mad and they put me under Bell's care. I should have got well, only he gave up his practice and drifted into the world again. My good, kind friend Reginald Henson heard of my case; he interested some people in me and placed me where I am at present."

"So Reginald Henson knows all about it?" Bell asked, drily.

"My dear fellow, he is the best friend I have in the world. He was most interested in my case. I have gone over it with him a hundred times. I showed him exactly how it was done. And now you know why I loathe the electric light. When it shines in my eyes it maddens me; it brings back to me the recollection of that dreadful time, it causes me to—"

"Heritage," Bell said, sternly, "close your eyes at once, and be silent."

The patient obeyed instantly. He had not forgotten the old habit of obedience. When he opened his eyes again at length he looked round him in a foolish, shamefaced manner.

"I—I am afraid I have been rambling," he muttered. "Pray don't notice me, Bell; if you are as good a fellow as you used to be, come and see me again. I'm tired now."

Bell gave the desired assurance, and he and Cross left the room together.

"Any sort of truth in what he has been saying?" asked the latter.

"Very little," Bell replied. "Heritage is an exceedingly clever fellow who has not yet recovered from a bad breakdown some years ago. I had nearly cured him at one time, but he seems to have lapsed into bad ways again. Some day, when I have time, I shall take up his case once more."

"Did he operate, or try some new throat cure?"

"Exactly. He was on the verge of discovering some way of operating for throat cases with complete success. You can imagine how excited he was over his discovery. Unfortunately the patient he experimented on died under the operation, not because the light went out or any nonsense of that kind, but from failure of the heart's action owing to excitement. Heritage had no sleep for a fortnight, and he broke down altogether. For months he was really mad, and when his senses came back to him he had that hallucination. Some day it will go, and some day Heritage will take up the dropped threads of his discovery and the world will be all the better for it. And now, will you do me a favour?"

"I will do anything that lies in my power."

"Then be good enough to let me have a peep at the man who was found half-murdered in my friend David Steel's conservatory. I'm interested in that case."

Cross hesitated for a moment.

"All right," he said. "There can't be any harm in that. Come this way."

Bell strolled along with the air of a man who is moved by no more than ordinary curiosity. But from the first he had made up his mind not to lose this opportunity. He had not the remotest idea what he expected to find, but he had a pretty good idea that he was on the verge of an important discovery. He came at length to the bedside of the mysterious stranger. The man was lying on his back in a state of coma, his breath came heavily between his parted lips.

Bell bent low partly to examine the patient, partly to hide his face from Cross. If Bell had made any discovery he kept the fact rigidly to himself.

"Looks very young," he muttered. "But then he is one of those men who never grow any hair on their faces. Young as he looks, I should judge him to be at least forty-five, and, if I am not mistaken, he is a man who has heard the chimes at midnight or later. I'm quite satisfied."

"It's more than I am," Cross said, when at length he and his visitor were standing outside together. "Look here, Bell, you're a great friend of Steel's, whom I believe to be a very good fellow. I don't want to get him into any harm, but a day or two ago I found this letter in a pocket-book in a belt worn by our queer patient. Steel says the fellow is a perfect stranger to him, and I believe that statement. But what about this letter? I ought to have sent it to the police, but I didn't. Read it."

And Cross proceeded to take a letter from his pocket. It was on thick paper; the stamped address given was "15, Downend Terrace." There was no heading, merely the words "Certainly, with pleasure, I shall be home; in fact, I am home every night till 12.30, and you may call any time up till then. If you knock quietly on the door I shall hear you.—D.S."

"What do you make of it?" Cross asked.

"It looks as if your patient had called at Steel's house by appointment," Bell admitted. "Here is the invitation undoubtedly in Steel's handwriting. Subsequently the poor fellow is found in Steel's house nearly murdered, and yet Steel declares solemnly that the man is a perfect stranger to him. It is a bad business, but I assure you that Steel is the soul of honour. Cross, would you be so good as to let me have that letter for two or three days?"

"Very well," Cross said, after a little hesitation. "Good-night."

Bell went on his way homeward with plenty of food for thought.

He stopped just for a moment to light a cigar.

"Getting towards the light," he muttered; "getting along. The light is not going to fail after all. I wonder what Reginald Henson would say if he only knew that I had been to the hospital and recognised our mutual friend Van Sneck there!"

CHAPTER XXIII

INDISCRETION

The expression on Henson's usually benign countenance would have startled such of his friends and admirers as regarded him as a shining light and great example. The smug satisfaction, the unctuous sweetness of the expansive blue eyes were gone; a murderous gleam shone there instead. His lips were set and rigid, the strong hand seemed to be strangling the bedclothes. It wanted no effort of imagination to picture Henson as the murderer stooping over his prey. The man had discarded his mask altogether.

"Oh," he said, between his teeth, "you are a clever fellow. You would have made an excellent detective. And so you have found out where Van Sneck is?"

"I have already told you so," Littimer said, doggedly.

"How many days have you been hanging about Brighton?"

"Two or three. I came when I heard that Chris was ill. I didn't dare to come near the house, at least not too near, for fear of being seen. But I pumped the doctor. Then he told me that Chris was dead, and I risked it all to see the last of her."

"Yes, yes," Henson said, testily; "but what has this to do with
Van Sneck?"

"I was looking for Van Sneck. I found that he had been here. I discovered that he had left his rooms and had not returned to them. Then it occurred to me to try the hospital. I pretended that I was in search of some missing relative, and they showed me three cases of bad accidents, the victims of which had not been identified. And the third was Van Sneck."

Littimer told his story with just the suggestion of triumph in his voice.
Henson was watching him with the keenest possible interest.

"Do you know how Van Sneck got there?" he asked.

Littimer nodded. Evidently he had heard most of the story. Henson was silent for some little time. He was working out something in his mind. His smile was not a pleasant one; it was nothing like his bland platform smile, for instance.

"Give me that black book," he said. "Do you know how to work the telephone?"

"I daresay I could learn. It doesn't look hard."

"Well, that is an extension telephone on the table yonder worked in connection with the main instrument in the library. I like to have my own telephone, as it is of the greatest assistance to me. Turn that handle two or three times and put that receiver to your ear. When the Exchange answers tell them to put you on to O,017 Gerrard."

Littimer obeyed mechanically, but though he rang and rang again no answer came. With a snarling curse Henson dragged himself out of bed and crossed the room, with limbs that shook under him.

He twirled the handle round passionately.

"You always were a fool," he growled, "and you always will be."

Still no reply came. Henson whirled angrily, but he could elicit no response. He kicked the instrument over and danced round it impotently. Littimer had never seen him in such a raging fury before. The language of the man was an outrage, filthy, revolting, profane. No yelling, drunken Hooligan could have been more fluent, more luridly diffuse.

"Go on," Littimer said, bitterly. "I like to hear you. I like to hear the smug, plausible Pharisee, the friend of the good and pious, going on like this. I'd give fifty years of my life to have just a handful of your future constituents here for a moment."

Henson paused suddenly and requested that Littimer should help him into bed.

"I can afford to speak freely before you," he said. "Say a word against me and I'll crush you. Put out a hand to injure me and I'll wipe you off the face of the earth. It's absolutely imperative that I should send an important telephone message to London at once, and here the machine has broken down and no chance of its being repaired for a day or two. Curse the telephone."

He lay back on his bed utterly exhausted by his fit of passion. One of the white bandages about his throat had started, and a little thin stream of blood trickled down his chest. Littimer waited for the next move. He watched the crimson fluid trickle over Henson's sleeping-jacket. He could have watched the big scoundrel bleeding to death with the greatest possible pleasure.

"What was Van Sneck doing here?"

The voice came clear and sharp from the bed. Littimer responded to it as a cowed hound does to a sudden yet not quite unexpected lash from a huntsman's whip. His manliness was of small account where Henson was concerned. For years he had come to heel like this. Yet the question startled him and took him entirely by surprise.

"He was looking for the lost Rembrandt."

But Littimer's surprise was as nothing to Henson's amazement. He lay flat on his back so that his face could not be seen. From the expression of it he had obtained a totally unexpected reply to his question. He was so amazed that he had no words for the moment. But his quick intelligence and amazing cunning grasped the possibilities of the situation. Littimer was in possession of information to which he was a stranger. Except in a vague way he had not the remotest idea what Littimer was talking about. But the younger man must not know that.

"So Van Sneck told you so?" he asked. "What a fool he must have been! And why should he come seeking for the Rembrandt in Brighton?"

"Because he knows it was there, I suppose."

"It isn't here, because it doesn't exist. The thing was destroyed by accident by the police when they raided Van Sneck's lodgings years ago."

"Van Sneck told me that he had actually seen the picture in Brighton."

Henson chuckled. The noise was intended to convey amused contempt, and it had that effect, so far as Littimer was concerned. It was well for Henson that the latter could not see the strained anxiety of his face. The man was alert and quivering with excitement in every limb. Still he chuckled again as if the whole thing merely amused him.

"'The Crimson Blind' is Van Sneck's weak spot," he said. "It is King Charles's head to him. By good or bad luck—it is in your hands to say which—you know all about the way in which it became necessary to get Hatherly Bell on our side. All the same, the Rembrandt—the *other* one—is destroyed."

"Van Sneck has seen the picture," Littimer said, doggedly.

"Oh, play the farce out to the end," Henson laughed, good-humouredly.
"Where did he see it?"

"He says he saw it at 218, Brunswick Square."

Henson's knees suddenly came up to his nose, then he lay quite flat again for a long time. His face had grown white once more, his lips utterly bloodless. Fear was written all over him. A more astute man than Littimer would have seen the beads standing out on his forehead. It was some little time before he dared trust himself to speak again.

"I know the house you mean," he said. "It is next door to the temporary residence of my esteemed friend, Gilead Gates. At the present moment the place is void—"

"And has been ever since your bogus 'Home' broke up. Years ago, before you used your power to rob and oppress us as you do now, you had a Home there. You collected subscriptions right and left in the name of the Reverend Felix Crosbie, and you put the money into your pocket. A certain weekly journal exposed you, and you had to leave suddenly or you would have found yourself in the hands of the police. You skipped so suddenly that you had no time even to think of your personal effects, which you understood were sold to defray expenses. But they were not sold, as nobody cared to throw good money after bad. Van Sneck got in with the agent under pretence of viewing the house, and he saw the picture there."

"Why didn't he take it with him?" Henson asked, with amused scorn. He was master of himself again and had his nerves well under control.

"Well, that was hardly like Van Sneck. Our friend is nothing if not diplomatic. But when he did manage to get into the house again the picture was gone."

"Excellent!" Henson cried. "How dramatic! There is only one thing required to make the story complete. The picture was taken away by Hatherly Bell. If you don't bring that in as the *dénouement* I shall be utterly disappointed."

"You needn't be," Littimer said, coolly. "That is exactly what did happen."

Henson chuckled again, quite a parody of a chuckle this time. He could detect the quiet suggestion of triumph in Littimer's voice.

"Did Van Sneck tell you all this?" he asked.

"Not the latter part of it," Littimer replied, "seeing that he was in the hospital when it happened. But I know it is true because I saw Bell and David Steel, the novelist, come away from the house, and Bell had the picture under his arm. And that's why Van Sneck's agent couldn't find it the second time he

went. Check to you, my friend, at any rate. Bell will go to my father with Rembrandt number two, and compare it with number one. And then the fat will be in the fire."

Henson yawned affectedly. All the same he was terribly disturbed and shaken. All he wanted now was to be alone and to think. So far as he could tell nobody besides Littimer knew anything of the matter. And no starved, cowed, broken-hearted puppy was ever closer under the heel of his master than Littimer. He still held all the cards; he still controlled the fortunes of two ill-starred houses.

"You can leave me now," he said. "I'm tired. I have had a trying day, and I need sleep; and the sooner you are out of the house the better. For your own sake and for the sake of those about you, you need not say one word of this to Enid Henson."

Littimer promised meekly enough. With those eyes blazing upon him he would have promised anything. We shall see presently what a stupendous terror Henson had over the younger man, and in what way all the sweetness and savour of life was being crushed out of him.

He closed the door behind him, and immediately Henson sat up in bed. He reached for his handkerchief and wiped the big beads from his forehead.

"So the danger has come at last," he muttered. "I am face to face with it, and I knew I should be. Hatherly Bell is not the man to quietly lie down under a cloud like that. The man has brains, and patience, and indomitable courage. Now, does he suspect that I have any hand in the business? I must see him when my nerves are stronger and try and get at the truth. If he goes to Lord Littimer with that picture he shakes my power and my position perilously. What a fool I was not to get it away. But, then, I only escaped from the Brighton police in those days by the skin of my teeth. And they had followed me from Huddersfield like those cursed bloodhounds here. I wonder—"

He paused, as the brilliant outline of some cunning scheme occurred to him. A thin, cruel smile crept over his lips. Never had he been in a tight place yet without discovering a loophole of escape almost before he had seen the trap.

A fit of noiseless laughter shook him.

"Splendid," he whispered. "Worthy of Machiavelli himself! Provided always that I can get there first. If I could only see Bell's face afterwards, hear Littimer ordering him off the premises. The only question is, am I up to seeing the thing through?"

CHAPTER XXIV

ENID LEARNS SOMETHING

Reginald Hensen struggled out of bed and into his clothing as best he could. He was terribly weak and shaky, far more weak than he had imagined himself to be, but he was in danger now, and his indomitable will-power pulled him through. What a fool Littimer had been to tell him so much merely so that he might triumph over his powerful foe for a few minutes. But Henson was planning a little scheme by which he intended to repay the young man tenfold. He had no doubt as to the willingness of his tool.

He took a bottle of brandy from a drawer and helped himself to a liberal dose. Walker had expressly forbidden anything of the kind, but it was no time for nice medical obedience. The grateful stimulant had its immediate effect. Then Henson rang the bell, and after a time Williams appeared tardily.

"You are to go down to Barnes and ask him to send a cab here as soon as possible," Henson said. "I have to go to London by the first train in the morning."

Williams nodded, with his mouth wide open. He was astonished and not a little alarmed at the strength and vitality of this man. And only a few hours before Williams had learnt with deep satisfaction that Henson would be confined to his bed for some days.

Henson dressed at length and packed a small portmanteau. But he had to sit on his bed for some little time and sip a further dose of brandy before he could move farther. After all there was no hurry. A full hour was sure to elapse before the leisurely Barnes brought the cab to the lodge-gates.

Henson crept downstairs at length and trod his catlike way to the library. Once there he proceeded to

make a minute inspection of the telephone. He turned the handle just the fragment of an inch and a queer smile came over his face. Then he crept as silently upstairs, opened the window of the bathroom quietly, and slipped on to the leads. There were a couple of insulators here, against the wire of one of which Henson tapped his knuckles gently. The wire gave back an answering twang. The other jangled limp and loose.

"One of the wires cut," Henson muttered. "I expected as much. Madame Enid is getting a deal too clever. I suppose this is some suggestion of her very astute friend David Steel. Well, I have given Mr. Steel one lesson in minding his own business, and if he interferes further I shall have to give him another. He will be in gaol before long charged with attempted murder and robbery with violence, and so exit Steel. After that the girl will be perhaps chary of seeking outside assistance. And this will be the third I have had to get rid of. Heavens! How feeble I feel, how weak I am. And yet I must go through this thing now."

He staggered into the house again and dropped into a chair. There was a loud buzzing in his ears, so that he could hardly hear the murmur of voices in the drawing-room below. This was annoying, because Henson liked to hear everything that other folks said. Then he dropped off into a kind of dreamy state, coming back presently to the consciousness that he had fainted.

Meanwhile Frank Littimer had joined Enid in the drawing-room. The house was perfectly quiet and still by this time; the dust-cloud hung on the air and caused the lamps to burn with a spitting blue flame. Enid's face looked deadly pale against her black dress.

"So you have been seeing Reginald," she said. "Why—why did you do it?"

"I didn't mean to," Frank muttered. "I never intended him to know that I had been in the house at all. But I was passing his room and he heard me. He seemed to know my footsteps. I believe if two mice ran by him twice in the darkness he could tell the difference between them."

"You had an interesting conversation. What did he want to use the telephone for?"

"I don't know. I tried to manipulate it for him, but the instrument was out of order."

"I know. I had a pretty shrewd idea what our cousin was going to do. You see, I was listening at the door. Not a very ladylike thing to do, but one must fight Henson with his own tools. When I heard him ask for the telephone directory I ran out and nipped one of the wires by the bathroom. Frank, it would have been far wiser if you hadn't come."

Littimer nodded gloomily. There was something like tears in his eyes.

"I know it," he said. "I hate the place and its dreadful associations. But I wanted to see Chris first. Did she say anything about me before—before—"

"My dear boy, she loved you always. She knew and understood, and was sorry. And she never, never forgot the last time that you were in the house."

Frank Littimer glanced across the room with a shudder. His eyes dwelt with fascination on the overturned table with its broken china and glass and wilted flowers in the corner.

"It is not the kind of thing to forget," he said, hoarsely. "I can see my father now—"

"Don't," Enid shuddered, "don't recall it. And your mother has never been the same since. I doubt if she will ever be the same again. From that day to this nothing has ever been touched in the house. And Henson comes here when he can and makes our lives hideous to us."

"I fancy I shook him up to-night," Littimer said, with subdued triumph.
"He seemed to shudder when I told him that I had found Van Sneck."

Enid started from her chair. Her eyes were shining with the sudden brilliancy of unveiled stars.

"You have found Van Sneck!" she whispered. "Where?"

"Why, in the Brighton Hospital. Do you mean to say that you don't know about it, that you don't know that the man found so mysteriously in Mr. David Steel's house and Van Sneck are one and the same person?"

Enid resumed her seat again. She was calm enough now.

"It had not occurred to me," she said. "Indeed, I don't know why it should have done. Sooner or later, of course, I should have suggested to Mr. Steel to try and identify the man, but—"

"My dear Enid, what on earth are you talking about?"

"Nonsense," Enid said, in some confusion. "Things you don't understand at present, and things you are not going to understand just yet. I read in the papers that the man was quite a stranger to Mr. Steel. But are you certain that it *is* Van Sneck?"

"Absolutely certain. I went to the hospital and identified him."

"Then there is no more to be said on that point. But you were foolish to tell Reginald."

"Not a bit of it. Why, Henson has known it all along. You needn't get excited. He is a deep fellow, and nobody knows better than he how to disguise his feelings. All the same, he was just mad to know what I had discovered, you could see it in his face. Reginald Henson—"

Littimer paused, open-mouthed, for Henson, dressed and wrapped ready for the journey, had come quietly into the drawing-room. The deadly pallor of his face, the white bandages about his throat, only served to render his appearance more emphatic and imposing. He stood there with the halo of dust about him, looking like the evil genius of the place.

"I fear I startled you," he said, with a sardonic smile. "And I fear that in the stillness of the place I have overheard a great part of your conversation. Frank, I must congratulate you on your discretion, so far. But seeing that you are young and impressionable, I am going to move temptation out of your way. Enid, I am going on a journey."

"I trust that it is a long one, and that it will detain you for a considerable period," Enid said, coldly.

"It is neither far, nor is it likely to keep me," Henson smiled. "Williams has just come in with the information that the cab awaits me at the gate. Now, then!"

The last words were flung at Littimer with contemptuous command. The hot blood flared into the young man's face. Enid's eyes flashed.

"If my cousin likes to stay here," she said, "why—"

"He is coming with me," Henson said, hoarsely. "Do you understand? With me! And if I like to drag him—or *you*, my pretty lady—to the end of the world or the gates of perdition, you will have to come. Now, get along before I compel you."

Enid stood with fury in her eyes and clenched hands as Littimer slunk away out of the house, Henson following between his victim and Williams. He said no words till the lodge-gates were past and the growl of the dogs had died into the distance.

"We are going to Littimer Castle," said Henson.

"Not there," Littimer groaned—"not there, Henson! I couldn't—I couldn't go to that place!"

Henson pointed towards the cab.

"Littimer or perdition!" he said. "You don't want to go to the latter just yet? Jump in, then!"

CHAPTER XXV

LITTIMER CASTLE

If you had asked the first five people on the Littimer Estate what they thought of the lord of the soil you would have had a different answer from every one. One woman would have said that a kinder and better man never lived; her neighbour would have declared Lord Littimer to be as hard as the nether millstone. Farmer George would rate him a jolly good fellow, and tell how he would sit in the kitchen over a mug of ale; whilst Farmer John swore at his landlord as a hard-fisted, grasping miser devoid of the bowels of compassion.

At the end of an hour you would be utterly bewildered, not knowing what to believe, and prepared to set the whole village down as a lot of gossips who seemed to mind everything but its own business. And, perhaps, Lord Littimer might come riding through on his big black horse, small, lithe, brown as

mahogany, and with an eye piercing as a diamond-drill. One day he looked almost boyishly young, there would be a smile on his tanned face. And then another day he would be bent in the saddle, huddled up, wizened, an old, old man, crushed with the weight of years and sorrow.

In sooth he was a man of moods and contradictions, changeable as an April sky, and none the less quick-tempered and hard because he knew that everybody was terribly afraid of him. And he had a tongue, too, a lashing, cutting tongue that burnt and blistered. Sometimes he would be quite meek and angry under the reproaches of the vicar, and yet the same day history records it that he got off his horse and administered a sound thrashing to the village poacher. Sometimes he got the best of the vicar, and sometimes that worthy man scored. They were good friends, these two, though the vicar never swerved in his fealty to Lady Littimer, whose cause he always championed. But nobody seemed to know anything about that dark scandal. They knew that there had been a dreadful scene at the castle seven years before, and that Lady Littimer and her son had left never to return. Lady Littimer was in a madhouse somewhere, they said, and the son was a wanderer on the face of the earth. And when Lord Littimer died every penny of the property, the castle included, would go to her ladyship's nephew, Mr. Reginald Henson.

In spite of the great cloud that hung over the family Lord Littimer did not seem to have changed. He was just a little more caustic than ever, his tongue a little sharper. The servants could have told a different story, a story of dark moods and days when the bitterness of the shadow of death lay on the face of their master. Few men could carry their grief better, and because Littimer carried his grief so well he suffered the more. We shall see what the sorrow was in time.

There are few more beautiful places in England than Littimer Castle. The house stood on a kind of natural plateau with many woods behind, a trout stream ran clean past the big flight of steps leading to the hall, below were terrace after terrace of hanging gardens, and to the left a sloping, ragged drop of 200ft into the sea. To the right lay a magnificently-timbered park, with a herd of real wild deer—perhaps the only herd of this kind in the country. When the sun shone on the grey walls they looked as if they had been painted by some cunning hand, so softly were the greys and reds and blues blended.

Inside the place was a veritable art gallery. There were hundreds of pictures and engravings there. All round the grand staircase ran a long, deep corridor, filled with pictures. There were alcoves here fitted up as sitting-rooms, and in most of them some gem or another was hung. When the full flood of electric light was turned on at night the effect was almost dazzling. There were few pictures in the gallery without a history.

Lord Littimer had many hobbies, but not one that interested him like this. There were hundreds of rare birds shot by him in different parts of the world; the corridors and floors were covered by skins, the spoil of his rifle; here and there a stuffed bear pranced startlingly; but the pictures and prints were the great amusement of his lordship's lonely life.

He passed along the corridor now towards the great oriel window at the end. A brilliant sunlight filled the place with shafts of golden and blue and purple as it came filtered through the stained glass. At a table in the window a girl sat working a typewriter. She might have passed for beautiful, only her hair was banded down in hideously Puritan fashion on each side of her delicate, oval face, her eyes were shielded by spectacles. But they were lovely, steady, courageous blue eyes, as Littimer did not fail to observe. Also he had not failed to note that his new secretary could do very well without the glasses.

The typewriter and secretary business was a new whim of Littimer's. He wanted an assistant to catalogue and classify his pictures and prints, and he had told the vicar so. He wanted a girl who wasn't a fool, a girl who could amuse him and wouldn't be afraid of him, and he thought he would have an American. To which the vicar responded that the whole thing was nonsense, but he had heard of a Boston girl in England who had a passion for that kind of thing and who was looking for a situation of the kind in a genuine old house for a year or so. The vicar added that he had not seen the young lady, but he could obtain her address. A reply came in due course, a reply that so pleased the impetuous Earl that he engaged the applicant on the spot. And now she had been just two hours in the house.

"Well," Littimer cried, "and how have you been getting on?"

Miss Christabel Lee looked up, smilingly.

"I am getting on very well indeed," she said. "You see, I have made a study of this kind of thing all my lifetime, and most of your pictures are like old friends to me. Do you know, I fancy that you and I are going to manage very well together?"

"Oh, do you? They say I am pretty formidable at times."

"I shan't mind that a bit. You see, my father was a man with a villainous temper. But a woman can

always get the better of a bad-tempered man unless he happens to be one of the lower classes who uses his boots. If he is a gentleman you have him utterly at your mercy. Have you a sharp tongue?"

"I flatter myself I can be pretty blistering on occasions," Littimer said, grimly.

"How delightful! So can I. You and I will have some famous battles later on. Only I warn you that I never lose my temper, which gives me a tremendous advantage. I haven't been very well lately, so you must be nice to me for a week or two."

Littimer smiled and nodded. The grim lord of the castle was not accustomed to this kind of thing, and he was telling himself that he rather liked it.

"And now show me the Rembrandt," Miss Lee said, impatiently.

Littimer led the way to a distant alcove lighted from the side by a latticed window. There was only one picture in the excellent light there, and that was the famous Rembrandt engraving. Littimer's eyes lighted up quite lovingly as they rested upon it. The Florentine frame was hung so low that Miss Lee could bring her face on a level with it.

"This is the picture that was stolen from you?" she asked.

"Yes, that's the thing that there was all the fuss about. It made a great stir at the time. But I don't expect that it will happen again."

"Why not?" Miss Lee asked. "When an attempt of that sort is made it is usually followed by another, sometimes after the lapse of years. Anybody getting through that window could easily get the frame from its two nails and take out the paper."

"Do you think so?" Littimer asked, uneasily.

"I am certain of it. Take my advice and make it secure. The panels behind are hard wood—thick black oak. Lord Littimer, I am going to get four brass-headed stays and drive them through some of the open ornamental work into the panel so as to make the picture quite secure. It is an iron frame, I suppose."

"Wrought-iron, gilt," said Littimer. "Yes, one could easily drive four brass-headed stays through the open work and make the thing safe. I'll have it seen to."

But Miss Lee insisted that there was no time like the present. She had discovered that Littimer had an excellent carpenter's shop on the premises; indeed, she admitted to being no mean performer with the lathe herself. She flitted down the stairs light as thistledown.

"A charming girl!" Littimer said, cynically. "I wonder why she came to this dull hole? A quarrel with her young man, perhaps. If I were a young man myself I might—But women are all the same. I should be a happier man if I had never trusted one. If—"

The face darkened; a heavy scowl lined his brows as he paced up and down. Christabel came back presently with hammer and some brass-headed stays in her hand.

"Don't utterly destroy the frame," Littimer said, resignedly. "It is reputed to be Quentin Matsy's work, and I had it cut to its present fashion. I'll go to the end of the gallery till the execution's over."

"On the contrary," Miss Lee said, firmly, "you will stay where you are told."

A little to his own surprise Littimer remained. He saw the nails driven firmly in and finished off with a punch so that there might be no danger of hammering the exquisitely wrought frame. Miss Lee stood regarding her work with a suggestion of pride.

"There," she said, "I flatter myself a carpenter could have done no better."

"You don't know our typical carpenter," Littimer said. "Here is Tredwell with a telegram. For Miss Lee? I hope it isn't an intimation that some relative has died and left you a fortune. At least, if it is, you mustn't go until we've had one of those quarrels you promised me."

Christabel glanced at the telegram and slipped it into her pocket. There were just a few words in the telegram that would have been unintelligible to the ordinary understanding. The girl did not even comprehend, but Littimer's eyes were upon her, and the cipher had to keep for a time. Littimer walked away at an intimation that his steward desired to see him.

Instantly the girl's manner changed. She glanced at the Rembrandt with a shrewd smile that meant something beyond a mere act of prudence well done. Then she went down to the library and began an

eager search for a certain book. She found it at length, the "David Copperfield" in the "Charles Dickens" edition of the great novelist's works. For the next hour or so she was flitting over the pages with the cipher telegram spread out before her. A little later and the few jumbled, meaningless words were coded out into a lengthy message. Christabel read them over a few times, then with the aid of a vesta she reduced the whole thing, telegram and all, to tinder, which she carefully crushed and flung out of the window.

She looked away down the terrace, she glanced at the dappled deer knee-deep in the bracken, she caught a glimpse of the smiling sea, and her face saddened for a moment.

"How lovely it all is," she murmured. "How exquisitely beautiful and how utterly sad! And to think that if I possessed the magician's wand for a moment I could make everything smile again. He is a good man—a better man than anybody takes him to be. Under his placid, cynical surface he conceals a deal of suffering. Well, we shall see."

She replaced the "Copperfield" on the shelf and turned to go again. In the hall she met Lord Littimer dressed for riding. He smiled as she passed.

"Au revoir till dinner-time," he said. "I've got to go and see a tenant.
Oh, yes, I shall certainly expect the pleasure of your company to dinner.
And now that the Rembrandt—"

"It is safe for the afternoon," Christabel laughed. "It is generally when the family are dining that the burglar has his busy time. A pleasant ride to you."

CHAPTER XXVI

AN UNEXPECTED GUEST

Lord Littimer returned, as he declared, with the spirits and appetite of a schoolboy. All the same, he did not for one moment abandon his usual critical analysis. He rattled on gaily, but he was studying his guest all the same. She might have been the typical American lady student; but he was not blind to the fact that the plain muslin and lace frock she wore was made in Paris or that her manners and style must have been picked up in the best society. She sat there under the shaded lights and behind the bank of flowers like as to the manner born, and her accent was only sufficiently American to render her conversation piquant.

"You have always been used to this class of life?" Littimer asked.

"There you are quite mistaken," Christabel said, coolly. "For the last few years my existence has been anything but a bed of roses. And your remark, my lord, savours slightly of impertinent curiosity. I might as well ask you why your family is not here."

"We agree to differ," Littimer responded. "I recollect it caused me a great deal of annoyance at the time. And my son chose to take his mother's part. You knew I had a son?"

"Yes," said Christabel, without looking up from the peach she was peeling. "I have met him."

"Indeed. And what opinion did you form of my son, may I ask?"

"Well, I rather liked him. He seemed to me to be suffering from some great trouble, and trouble I am sure that was not of his own creating."

"Which means to say you feel rather sorry for Frank. But when you say the trouble was not of his own creating you are entirely mistaken. It is not a nice thing to say, Miss Lee, but my son was an utter and most unmitigated young scoundrel. If he came here he would be ordered out of the house. So far as I am concerned, I have no son at all. He sides with his mother, and his mother has a considerable private fortune of her own. Where she is at the present moment I have no idea. Nor do I care. Seems odd, does it not, that I should have been very fond of that woman at one time, just as it seems odd to think that I should have once been fond of treacle tart?"

Littimer spoke evenly and quietly, with his eyes full upon the girl. He was deceiving himself, but he was not deceiving her for a moment. His callousness seemed to be all the more marked because the

servants were in the room. But Christabel could see clearly what an effort it was.

"You love your wife still," she said, so low that only Littimer heard.
His eyes flashed, his face flamed with a sudden spasm of passion.

"Are we to quarrel so early as this?" he whispered.

"I never quarrel," Christabel said, coolly; "I leave my antagonist to do that. But I have met your son, and I like him. He may be weak, but he is a gentleman. You have made a mistake, and some day you will be sorry for it. Do you grow those orchids yourself?"

Littimer laughed, with no sign of anger remaining. All the same, Christabel could see that his thin brown hand was shaking. She noticed the lines that pain had given under those shrewd black eyes.

"You must see my orchids," he said. "Most of the specimens I obtained myself. They tell me I have at least three unique kinds. And now, if you will permit me, I am going to smoke. The drawing-room is at your disposal, though I rarely enter it myself. I always retire at eleven, but that need not bind you in any way. It has been altogether a most delightful evening."

But Christabel did not dally long in the drawing-room. As she went upstairs and along the corridor she heard the snapping of the electric lights all over the house as the servants were preparing to retire. She paused just a moment in the alcove where the precious Rembrandt was and located carefully the position of the switch there. Then she retired to her own room, where she changed her dress for a simple black gown. A big clock somewhere was striking twelve as she finished. She looked out of her door. The whole house was in darkness, the silence seemed to cling like a curtain.

She paused for a moment as if afraid to take the next step. If it was fear, she shook it aside resolutely and crept into the corridor. She carried something shining in her hands—something that gleamed in the dim, uncertain light from the big window. She stood just for an instant with a feeling that somebody was climbing up the ivy outside the house. She felt her way along until she came to the alcove containing the Rembrandt and then she stopped. Her hand slid along the wall till her fingers touched the switch of the electric light.

She stood for a long time there perfectly motionless. It was a still night outside, and there was nothing to account for the rustling of the ivy leaves. The rattling came in jerks, spasmodically, stopping every now and then and resuming again. It was no longer a matter of imagination, it was a certainty. Somebody was climbing up the ivy to the window.

Leaning eagerly forward, Christabel could hear the sound of laboured breathing. She seemed to see the outline of an arm outside, she could catch the quick rattle of the sash, she could almost see a bent wire crooked through the beaded edges of the casement. Yes, she was right. The window swung noiselessly back and a figure stood poised on the ledge outside.

With a quick breath and a fluttering of her heart Christabel felt for the switch.

"It will be all right," she murmured; "the other one will fancy that the light is necessary. Courage, my dear courage, and the game is yours. Ah!"

The intruder dropped inside and pulled the window behind him. Evidently he was on familiar ground, though he seemed to be seeking an unfamiliar object. Christabel's hand stole along to the switch; there was a click, and the alcove was bathed in brilliant light. The intruder shrank back with a startled cry. He rubbed his dazed eyes.

"Why not come in through the front door, Mr. Littimer?" Christabel drawled, coolly.

Frank Littimer had no words for a moment. He was wondering who this woman was and what she was doing here. American, evidently, by her accent, and also by the revolver that she handled so assuredly.

"That is the way you used to enter," Christabel proceeded, "when you had been out contrary to parental instructions and the keepers expected to have a fracas with the poachers. Your bedroom being exactly opposite, detection was no easy matter. Your bedroom has never been touched since you left. The key is still outside the door. Will you kindly enter it?"

"But—" Frank stammered. "But I assure you that I cannot—"

"Take the Rembrandt away. You cannot. The frame is of iron, and it is fastened to the wall. It would take an experienced carpenter quite a long time to remove it. Therefore your mission has failed. It is very annoying, because it puts the other man in a very awkward position. The position is going to be

still more awkward presently. Please go to your room."

"My dear lady, if my father knows that I am in the house—"

"He is not going to know that you are in the house, at least not for some little time. And when you see him it will be better not to say more than is necessary. Later on you will recognise what a friend I am to you."

"You are not showing it at present," Littimer said, desperately.

"The patient rarely sees any virtue in his medicine. Now, please, go to your room. I can hear the other man muttering and getting anxious down below. Now, if you approach that window again I am pretty certain that my revolver will go off. You see, I am an American, and we are so careless with such weapons. Please go to your room at once."

"And if I refuse your ridiculous request?"

"You will not find my request in the least ridiculous. If you refuse I shall hold you up with my weapon and alarm the whole house. But I don't want to do that, for the sake of the other man. He is so very respectable, you know, and anything unconventional may be so awkward for him. Yes, it is just as I expected. He is coming up the ivy to investigate himself. Go!"

The revolver covered Littimer quite steadily. He could see into the blue rim, and he was conscious of strange cold sensations down his spine. A revolver is not a pretty thing at the best of times; it is doubly hazardous in the hands of a woman.

"What do you want with me?" he asked.

"My dear man, I want to do nothing with you. Only do as you are told and—there! The other man is coming up the ivy. He can't understand the light and you not returning. He imagines that you are looking in the wrong place. Please go."

Littimer backed before the weapon, backed until he was in the doorway. Suddenly the girl gave him a push, shut the door to, and turned the key in the lock. Almost at the same instant another figure loomed large in the window-frame.

CHAPTER XXVII

SLIGHTLY FARCICAL

Something bulky was struggling to get through the window. Half hidden in the shadow, Christabel watched with the deepest interest. If she had been afraid at first that sensation had entirely departed by this time. From the expression of her face she might have been enjoying the novel situation. It was certainly not without a suggestion of the farcical.

The burly figure contrived to squeeze through the narrow casement at length and stood breathing loudly in the corridor. It was not a pleasant sight that met Christabel's gaze—a big man with a white, set face and rolling eyes and a stiff bandage about his throat. Evidently the intruder was utterly exhausted, for he dropped into a chair and nursed his head between his hands.

"Now what has become of that fool?" he muttered. "Ah!"

He looked round him uneasily, but his expression changed as his eyes fell on the Rembrandt. He had the furtive look of a starving man who picks up a purse whilst the owner is still in sight. He staggered towards the picture and endeavoured to take it gently from the support. He tried again and again, and then in a paroxysm of rage he tore at the frame-work.

"I guess that it can't be done," Christabel said, drawlingly. "See, stranger?"

Reginald Henson fairly gasped. As he turned round the ludicrous mixture of cunning and confusion, anger and vexatious alarm on his face caused the girl to smile.

"I—I beg your pardon," he stammered.

"I said it can't be done," the girl drawled, coolly. "Sandow couldn't do it. The frame is made of iron and it is fixed to the wall by four long stays. It's a neat job, though I say it myself; I persuaded Lord Littimer to have it done. And when I heard you two prowling about down there I was glad. I've got the other one safe."

"Oh, you've got the other one safe?" Henson said, blankly.

He would have liked to have burst out into a torrent of passion, only he recognised his position. The thing was shamefully funny. It was anything but nice for a man of his distinguished position to be detected in an act suspiciously like vulgar burglary. Still, there must be some plausible way out of the difficulty if he could only think of it. Only this girl with the quaint, pretty face and spectacles did not look in the least like a fool. He would have to try what blandishments would do.

"Are you aware who I am?" he asked, blandly.

"What does it matter? I've got the other one, and no doubt he will be identified by the police. If he doesn't say too much he may get off with a light sentence. It is quite easy to see that you are the greater scoundrel of the two."

"My dear young lady, do you actually take me for a burglar?"

There was a note of deep pain in Henson's voice. He had dropped into a chair again, with a feeling of utter weakness upon him. The girl's resolute mien and the familiar way in which she handled her revolver filled him with the deepest apprehension.

"I am a very old friend and relative of Lord Littimer's," he said.

"Oh, indeed. And is the other man a relative of Lord Littimer's also?"

"Oh, why, confound it, yes. The other man, as you call him, is Lord Littimer's only son."

Christabel glanced at Henson, not without admiration.

"Well, you are certainly a cool hand," she said. "You are two clever thieves who have come here for the express purpose of robbing Lord Littimer of one of his art treasures. I happen to catch one, and he immediately becomes the son of the owner of the place. I am so fortunate as to bag the other bird, and he resolves himself into a relative of my host's. And you really expect me to believe a Hans Andersen fairy story like that!"

"I admit that appearances are against me," Henson said, humbly. "But I am speaking the truth."

"Oh, indeed. Then why didn't you come in through the front door? The violent exercise you were taking just now must be dangerous to a man of your build!"

"I am afraid I shall have to make a clean breast of it," Henson said, with what he fondly imagined to be an engaging smile. "You may, perhaps, be aware that yonder Rembrandt has a history. It was stolen from its present owner once, and I have always said that it will be stolen again. Many a time have I urged Lord Littimer to make it secure."

"How grateful you should be to me for having done so!"

"Ah, you are cynical still, which is a bad thing for one so young and—er—charming. I came down here to see my very noble relative, and his son accompanied me. I came to try and make peace between father and son. But that is a family matter which, forgive me, I cannot discuss with a stranger. Our train was late, or we should have been here long ago. On reaching the castle it struck me as a good idea to give Lord Littimer a lesson as to his carelessness. My idea was to climb through the window, abstract the Rembrandt, and slip quietly into my usual bedroom here. Then in the morning, after the picture has been missed, I was going to tell the whole story. That is why Mr. Littimer entered this way and why I followed when I found that he had failed to return. It was a foolish thing to do, and the *dénouement* has been most humiliating. I assure you that is all."

"Not quite," Christabel drawled. "There is something else."

"And what may that be, my dear young lady?"

"To tell your story to Lord Littimer before you sleep. That kind of romance may do for Great Britain, but it wouldn't make good family reading in the States."

"But, my dear young lady, I beg of you, implore you—"

"Come off the grass! I'm to let you go quietly to bed and retire myself, so that when morning arrives you will be missing together with as much plunder as you can carry away. No, sir."

Henson advanced angrily. His prudence had gone for the time. As he came down upon Christabel she raised her revolver and fired two shots in quick succession over Henson's shoulder. The noise went echoing and reverberating along the corridor like a crackling of thunder. A door came open with a click, then a voice demanded to know what was wrong.

"Now I guess the fat is in the fire," Christabel said.

Henson dropped into a chair and groaned. Lord Littimer, elegantly attired in a suit of silk pyjamas and carrying a revolver in his hand, came coolly down the corridor. A curious servant or two would have followed, but he waved them back crisply.

"Miss Lee," he said, with a faint, sarcastic emphasis, "and my dear friend and relative, Reginald Henson—Reginald, the future owner of Littimer Castle!"

"So he told me, but I wouldn't believe him," said Christabel.

"It is a cynical age," Littimer remarked. "Reginald, what does this mean?"

Henson shook his head uneasily.

"The young lady persisted in taking me for a burglar," he groaned.

"And why not?" Christabel demanded. "I was just going to bed when I heard voices in the forecourt below and footsteps creeping along. I came into the corridor with my revolver. Presently one of the men climbed up the ivy and got into the corridor. I covered him with my revolver and fairly drove him into a bedroom and locked him in."

"So you killed with both barrels?" Littimer cried, with infinite enjoyment.

"Then the other one came. He came to steal the Rembrandt."

"Nothing of the kind," the wretched Henson cried. "I came to give you a lesson, Lord Littimer. My idea was to get in through the window, steal the Rembrandt, and, when you had missed it, confess the whole story. My character is safe."

"Giddy," Littimer said, reproachfully. "You are so young, so boyish, so buoyant, Reginald. What would your future constituents have said had they seen you creeping up the ivy? They are a grave people who take themselves seriously. Egad, this would be a lovely story for one of those prying society papers. 'The Philanthropist and the Picture.' I've a good mind to send it to the Press myself."

Littimer sat down and laughed with pure enjoyment.

"And where is the other partridge?" he asked, presently.

Christabel seemed to hesitate for a moment, her sense of humour of the situation had departed. Her hand shook as she turned the key in the door.

"I am afraid you are going to have an unpleasant surprise," Henson said.

Littimer glanced keenly at the speaker. All the laughter died out of his eyes; his face grew set and stern as Frank Littimer emerged into the light.

"And what are you doing here?" he asked, hoarsely. "What do you expect to gain by taking part in a fool's trick like this? Did I not tell you never to show your face here again?"

The young man said nothing. He stood there looking down, dogged, quiet, like one tongue-tied. Littimer thundered out his question again. He crossed over, laying his hands on his son's shoulders and shaking him as a terrier might shake a rat.

"Did you come for anything?" he demanded. "Did you expect any mercy from—"

Frank Littimer shook off his grasp gently. He looked up for the first time.

"I expected nothing," he said. "I—I did not come of my own free will. I am silent now for the sake of myself and others. But the time may come—God knows it has been long delayed. For the present, I am bound in honour to hold my tongue."

He flashed one little glance at Henson, a long, angry glance. Littimer looked from one to the other in

hesitation for a moment. The hard lines between his brows softened.

"Perhaps I am wrong," he muttered. "Perhaps there has been a mistake somewhere. And if ever I find out I have—pshaw, I am talking like a sentimental schoolgirl. Have I not had evidence strong as proof of Holy Writ that … Get out of my sight, your presence angers me. Go, and never let me see you again. Reginald, you were a fool to bring that boy here to-night. See him off the premises and fasten the door again."

"Surely," Christabel interfered, "surely at this time of the night—"

"You should be in bed," Littimer said, tartly. "My dear young lady, if
you and I are to remain friends I must ask you to mind your own business.
It is a dreadfully difficult thing for a woman to do, but you must try.
You understand?"

Christabel was evidently putting a strong constraint on her tongue, for she merely bowed and said nothing. She had her own good reasons for the diplomacy of silence. Henson and Frank Littimer were disappearing in the direction of the staircase.

"I say nothing," Christabel said. "But at the same time I don't fancy I shall care very much for your distinguished friend Reginald Henson."

Littimer smiled. All his good humour seemed to have returned to him. Only the dark lines under his eyes were more accentuated.

"A slimy, fawning hound," he whispered. "A mean fellow. And the best of it is that he imagines that I hold the highest regard for him. Good-night."

CHAPTER XXVIII

A SQUIRE OF DAMES

A little later, and Christabel sat before her looking-glass with her lovely hair about her shoulders. The glasses were gone and her magnificent eyes gleamed and sparkled.

"Good night's work," she said to her smiling reflection. "Now the danger is passed and now that I am away from that dreadful house I feel a different being. Strange what a difference a few hours has made! And I hardly need my disguise—even at this moment I believe that Enid would not recognise me. She will be pleased to know that her telegram came in so usefully. Well, here I am, and I don't fancy that anybody will recognise Christabel Lee and Chris Henson for one and the same person."

She sat there brushing her hair and letting her thoughts drift along idly over the events of the evening. Reginald Henson would have felt less easy in his mind had he known what these thoughts were. Up to now that oily scoundrel hugged himself with the delusion that nobody besides Frank Littimer and himself knew that the second copy of "The Crimson Blind" had passed into Bell's possession.

But Chris was quite aware of the fact. And Chris *as* Chris was supposed by Henson to be dead and buried, and was, therefore, in a position to play her cards as she pleased. Up to now it seemed to her that she had played them very well indeed. A cipher telegram from Longdean had warned her that Henson was coming there, had given her more than a passing hint what Henson required, and her native wit had told her why Henson was after the Rembrandt.

Precisely why he wanted the picture she had not discovered yet. But she knew that she would before long. And she knew also that Henson would try and obtain the print without making his presence at Littimer Castle obvious. He was bringing Frank Littimer with him, and was therefore going to use the younger man in some cunning way.

That Henson would try and get into the castle surreptitiously Chris had felt from the first. Once he did so the rest would be easy, as he knew exactly where to lay his hand on the picture. Therefore he could have no better time than the dead of night. If his presence were betrayed he could turn the matter aside as a joke and trust to his native wit later on. If he had obtained the picture by stealth he would have discreetly disappeared, covering his tracks as he retreated.

Still, it had all fallen out very fortunately. Henson had been made to look ridiculous; he had been forced to admit that he was giving Littimer a lesson over the Rembrandt, and though the thing appeared innocent enough on the surface, Chris was sanguine that later on she could bring this up in evidence against him.

"So far so good," she told herself. "Watch, watch, watch, and act when the time comes. But it was hard to meet Frank to-night and be able to say nothing. And how abjectly miserable he looked! Well, let us hope that the good time is coming."

Chris was up betimes in the morning and out on the terrace. She felt no further uneasiness on the score of the disguise now. Henson was certain to be inquisitive, it was part of his nature, but he was not going to learn anything. Chris smiled as she saw Henson lumbering towards her. He seemed all the better for his night's rest.

"The rose blooms early here," he said, gallantly. "Let me express the hope that you have quite forgiven me for the fright I gave you last night."

"I guess I don't recollect the fright," Chris drawled. "And if there was any fright I calculate it was on the other side. And how are you this morning? You look as if you had been in the wars. Got some trouble with your throat, or what?"

"A slight operation," Henson said, airily. "I have been speaking too much in public lately and a little something had to be removed. I am much better."

The ready lie tripped off his tongue. Chris smiled slightly.

"Do you know, you remind me very much of somebody," he went on. "And yet I don't know why, because you are quite different. Lord Littimer tells me you are an American."

"The Stars and Stripes," Chris laughed. "I guess our nation is the first on earth. Now, if you happen to know anything about Boston—"

"I never was in Boston in my life," Henson replied, hastily. The name seemed to render him uneasy. "Have you been in England very long?"

Chris replied that she was enjoying England for the first time. But she was not there to answer questions, her *rôle* was to ask them. But she was dealing with a past-master in the art of gleaning information, and Henson was getting on her nerves. She gave a little cry of pleasure as a magnificent specimen of a bloodhound came trotting down the terrace and paused in friendly fashion before her.

"What a lovely dog," she exclaimed. "Do you like dogs, Mr. Henson?"

She looked up beamingly into his face as she spoke; she saw the heavy features darken and the eyes grow small with anger.

"I loathe them, and they loathe me," Henson growled. "Look at him!"

He pointed to the dog, who showed his teeth with an angry growl. And yet the great sleek head lay against the girl's knee in perfect confidence. Henson looked on uneasily and backed a little way. The dog marked his every movement.

"See how the brute shows his teeth at me," he said.

"Please send him away, Miss Lee. I am certain he is getting ready for a spring."

Henson's face was white and hot and wet, his lips trembled. He was horribly afraid. Chris patted the silky head and dismissed the dog with a curt command. He went off instantly with a wistful, backward look in his eye.

"We are going to be great friends, that doggie and I," Chris said, gaily. "And I don't like you any the better, Mr. Henson, because you don't like dogs and they don't like you. Dogs are far better judges of character than you imagine. Dr. Bell says—"

"What Dr. Bell?" Henson demanded, swiftly.

Chris had paused just in time: perhaps her successful disguise had made her a trifle reckless.

"Dr. Hatherly Bell," she said. "He used to be a famous man before he fell into disgrace over something or another. I heard him lecture on the animal instinct in Boston once, and he said—but as

you don't care for dogs it doesn't matter what he said."

"Do you happen to know anything about him?" Henson asked.

"Very little. I never met him, if that is what you mean. But I heard that he had done something particularly disgraceful. Why do you ask?"

"Nothing more than a mere coincidence," Henson replied. "It is just a little strange that you should mention his name here, especially after what had happened last night. I suppose that, being an American, you fell in love with the Rembrandt. It was you who suggested securing it in its place, and then preventing my little jest from being successfully carried out. Of course you have heard that the print was stolen once?"

"The knowledge is as general as the spiriting away of the
Gainsborough Duchess."

"Quite so. Well, the man who stole the Rembrandt was Dr. Hatherly Bell. He stole it that he might pay a gambling debt, and it was subsequently found in his luggage before he could pass it on to the purchaser. I am glad you mentioned it, because the name of Bell is not exactly a favourite at the castle."

"I am much obliged to you," said Chris, gravely. "Was Dr. Bell a favourite once?"

"Oh, immense. He had great influence over Lord Littimer. He—but here comes Littimer in one of his moods. He appears to be angry about something."

Littimer strode up, with a frown on his face and a telegram in his hand.
Henson assumed to be mildly sympathetic.

"I hope it is nothing serious?" he murmured.

"Serious," Littimer cried. "The acme of audacity—yes. The telegram has just come. 'Must see you tonight on important business affecting the past. Shall hope to be with you some time after dinner!'"

"And who is the audacious aspirant to an interview?" Chris asked, demurely.

"A man I expect you never heard of," said Littimer, "but who is quite familiar to Henson here. I am alluding to that scoundrel Hatherly Bell."

"Good heavens!" Henson burst out. "I—I mean, what colossal impudence!"

CHAPTER XXIX

THE MAN WITH THE THUMB AGAIN

Chris gave Henson one swift searching glance before her eyes dropped demurely to the ground. Lord Littimer appeared to be taking no heed of anything but his own annoyance. But quick as Chris had been, Henson was quicker. He was smiling the slow, sad smile of the man who turns the other cheek because it is his duty to do so.

"And when does Dr. Bell arrive?" he asked.

"He won't arrive at all," Littimer said, irritably. "Do you suppose I am going to allow that scoundrel under my roof again? The amazing impudence of the fellow is beyond everything. He will probably reach Moreton Station by the ten o'clock train. The drive will take him an hour, if I choose to permit the drive, which I don't. I'll send a groom to meet the train with a letter. When Bell has read that letter he will not come here."

"I don't think I should do that," Henson said, respectfully.

"Indeed! You are really a clever fellow. And what would you do?"

"I should suffer Bell to come. As a Christian I should deem it my duty to do so. It pains me to say so, but I am afraid that I cannot contravert your suggestion that Bell is a scoundrel. It grieves me to prove any man that. And in the present instance the proofs were overpowering. But there is always a chance

—a chance that we have misjudged a man on false evidence."

"False evidence! Why, the Rembrandt was actually found in Bell's portmanteau."

"Dear friend, I know it," Henson said, with the same slow, forgiving smile. "But there have been cases of black treachery, dark conspiracies that one abhors. And Bell might have made some stupendous discovery regarding his character. I should see him, my lord; oh, yes, I should most undoubtedly see him."

"And so should I," Chris put in, swiftly.

Littimer smiled, with all traces of his ill-temper gone. He seemed to be contemplating Henson with his head on one side, as if to fathom that gentleman's intentions. There was just the suspicion of contempt in his glance.

"In the presence of so much goodness and beauty I feel quite lost," he said. "Very well, Henson, I'll see Bell. I may find the interview diverting."

Henson strolled away with a sigh of gentle pleasure. Once out of sight he flew to the library, where he scribbled a couple of telegrams. They were carefully worded and related to some apocryphal parcel required without delay, and calculated to convey nothing to the lay mind. A servant was despatched to the village with them. Henson would have been pleased had he known that the fascinating little American had waylaid his messenger and read his telegrams under the plea of verifying one of the addresses. A moment or two later and those addresses were carefully noted down in a pocket-book. It was past five before Chris found herself with a little time on her hands again. Littimer had kept her pretty busy all the afternoon, partly because there was so much to do, but partly from the pleasure that he derived from his secretary's society. He was more free with her than he had been with any of her sex for years. It was satisfactory, too, to learn that Littimer regarded Henson as a smug and oily hypocrite, and that the latter was only going to be left Littimer Castle to spite the owner's other relations.

"Now you run into the garden and get a blow." Littimer said at length. "I am telling you a lot too much. I am afraid you are a most insinuating young person."

Chris ran out into the garden gaily. Despite the crushing burden on her shoulders she felt an elation and a flow of spirits she had not been conscious of for years. The invigorating air of the place seemed to have got into her veins, the cruel depression of the House of the Silent Sorrow was passing away. Again, she had hope and youth on her side, and everything was falling out beautifully. It was a pleasanter world than Chris had anticipated.

She went along more quietly after a time. There was a tiny arbour on a terrace overlooking the sea to which Chris had taken a particular fancy. She picked her way daintily along the grass paths between the roses until she suddenly emerged upon the terrace. She had popped out of the roses swiftly as a squirrel peeps from a tree.

Somebody was in the arbour, two people talking earnestly. One man stood up with his back to Chris, one hand gripping the outside ragged bark of the arbour frame with a peculiarly nervous, restless force. Chris could see the hand turned back distinctly. A piece of bark was being crumbled under a strong thumb. Such a thumb! Chris had seen nothing like it before.

It was as if at some time it had been smashed flat with a hammer, a broad, strong, cruel-looking thumb, flat and sinister-looking as the head of a snake. In the centre, like a pink pearl dropped in a filthy gutter, was one tiny, perfectly-formed nail.

The owner of the thumb stepped back the better to give way to a fit of hoarse laughter. He turned slightly aside and his eyes met those of Chris. They were small eyes set in a coarse, brutal face, the face of a criminal, Chris thought, if she were a judge of such matters. It came quite as a shock to see that the stranger was in clerical garb.

"I—I beg your pardon," Chris stammered. "But I—"

Henson emerged from the arbour. For once in a way he appeared confused, there was a flush on his face that told of annoyance ill suppressed.

"Please don't go away," he said. "Mr. Merritt will think that he has alarmed you. Miss Lee, this is my very good friend and co-worker in the field, the Reverend James Merritt."

"Is Mr. Merritt a friend of Lord Littimer's?" Chris asked, demurely.

"Littimer hates the cloth," Henson replied "Indeed, he has no sympathy whatever with my work. I met

my good friend quite by accident in the village just now, and I brought him here for a chat. Mr. Merritt is taking a well-earned holiday."

Chris replied graciously that she didn't doubt it. She did not deem it necessary to add that she knew that one of Mr. Henson's mystic telegrams had been addressed to one James Merritt at an address in Moreton Wells, a town some fifteen miles away. That the scoundrel was up to no good she knew perfectly well.

"Your work must be very interesting," she said. "Have you been in the Church long, Mr. Merritt?"

Merritt said hoarsely that he had not been in the Church very long. His dreadful grin and fog voice suggested that he was a brand plucked from the burning, and that he had only recently come over to the side of the angels. The whole time he spoke he never met Chris's glance once. The chaplain of a convict prison would have turned from him in disgust. Henson was obviously ill at ease. In his suave, diplomatic way he contrived to manoeuvre Merritt off the ground at length.

"An excellent fellow," he said, with exaggerated enthusiasm. "It was a great day for us when we won over James Merritt. He can reach a class which hitherto we have not touched."

"He looks as if he had been in gaol," Chris said.

"Oh, he has," Henson admitted, candidly. "Many a time."

Chris deemed it just possible that the unpleasant experience might be endured again, but she only smiled and expressed herself to be deeply interested. The uneasiness in Henson's manner gradually disappeared.

Evidently the girl suspected nothing. She would have liked to have asked a question or two about Mr. Merritt's thumb, but she deemed it prudent not to do so.

Dinner came at length, dinner served in the great hall in honour of the recently arrived guest, and set up in all the panoply and splendour that Littimer affected at times. The best plate was laid out on the long table. There were banks and coppices of flowers at either corner, a huge palm nodded over silver and glass and priceless china. The softly shaded electric lights made pools of amber flame on fruit and flowers and gleaming crystal. Half-a-dozen big footmen went about their work with noiseless tread.

Henson shook his head playfully at all this show and splendour. His good humour was of the elephantine order, and belied the drawn anxiety of his eyes. Luxurious and peaceful as the scene was, there seemed to Chris to be a touch of electricity in the air, the suggestion of something about to happen. Littimer glanced at her admiringly. She was dressed in white satin, and she had in her hair a single diamond star of price.

"Of course Henson pretends to condemn all this kind of thing," Littimer said. "He would have you believe that when he comes into his own the plate and wine will be sold for the benefit of the poor, and the seats of the mighty filled with decayed governesses and antiquated shop-walkers."

"I hope that time may long be deferred," Henson murmured.

"And so do I," Littimer said, drily, "which is one of the disadvantages of being conservative. By the way, who was that truculent-looking scoundrel I saw with you this afternoon?"

Henson hastened to explain. Littimer was emphatically of opinion that such visitors were better kept at a distance for the present. When all the rare plate and treasures of Littimer Castle had been disposed of for philanthropic purposes it would not matter.

"There was a time when the enterprising burglar got his knowledge of the domestic and physical geography of a house from the servants. Now he reforms, with the great advantage that he can lay his plan of campaign from personal observation. It is a much more admirable method, and tends to avert suspicion from the actual criminal."

"You would not speak thus if you knew Merritt," said Henson.

"All the same, I don't want the privilege," Littimer smiled. "A man with a face like that couldn't reform; nature would resent such an enormity. And yet you can never tell. Physically speaking, my quondam friend Hatherly Bell has a perfect face."

"I confess I am anxious to see him," Chris said. "I—I heard him lecture in America. He had the most

interesting theory about dogs. Mr. Henson hates dogs."

"Yes," Henson said, shortly, "I do, and they hate me, but that does not prevent my being interested in the coming of Dr. Bell. And nobody hopes more sincerely than myself that he will succeed in clearly vindicating his character."

Littimer smiled sarcastically as he trifled with his claret glass. In his cynical way he was looking forward to the interview with a certain sense of amusement. And there was a time when he had enjoyed Bell's society immensely.

"Well, you will not have long to wait now," he said. "It is long past ten, and Bell is due at any moment after eleven. Coffee in the balcony, please."

It was a gloriously warm night, with just a faint suspicion of a breeze on the air. Down below the sea beat with a gentle sway against the cliffs; on the grassy slopes a belated lamb was bleating for its dam. Chris strolled quietly down the garden with her mind at peace for a time. She had almost forgotten her mission for the moment. A figure slipped gently past her on the grass, but she utterly failed to notice it.

"An exceedingly nice girl, that," Littimer was saying, "and distinctly amusing. Excuse me if I leave you here—a tendency to ague and English night air don't blend together."

CHAPTER XXX

GONE!

It was the very moment that Henson had been waiting for. All his listlessness had vanished. He sprang to his feet and made his way hurriedly across the lawn. Dark as it was, he slipped along with the ease of one who is familiar with every inch of the ground. A man half his weight and half his age could have been no more active.

He advanced to what seemed to be the very edge of the cliff and disappeared. There were rocks and grassy knolls which served as landmarks to him. A slip of the foot might have resulted in a serious accident. Above the gloom a head appeared.

"That you, Merritt?" Henson asked, hoarsely.

"Oh, it's me right enough," came the muttered reply. "Good job as I'm used to a seafaring life, or I should never have got up those cliffs. Where's the girl?"

"Oh, the girl's right enough. She's standing exactly where she can hear the cry of the suffering in distress. You can leave that part of the drama to me. She's a smart girl with plenty of pluck, but all the same I am going to make use of her. Have you got the things?"

"Got everything, pardner. Got a proper wipe over the skull, too."

"How on earth did you manage to do that?"

"Meddling with Bell, of course. Why didn't you let him come and produce his picture in peace? We should have been all ready to flabbergaster him when he did come."

"My good Merritt, I have not the slightest doubt about it. My plans are too carefully laid for them to go astray. But, at the same time, I firmly believe in having more than one plan of attack and more than two ways of escape. If we could have despoiled Bell of his picture it would have been utterly useless for him to have come here. He would have gone back preferring to accept defeat to arriving with a cock-and-bull story to the effect that he had been robbed of his treasure on the way. And so he got the best of you, eh?"

"Rather! I fancied that I was pretty strong, but—well, it doesn't matter. Here I am with the tools, and I ain't going to fail this time. Before Bell comes the little trap will be ready and you will be able to prove an alibi."

Henson chuckled hoarsely. He loved dramatic effect, and here was one to hand. He almost fancied that he could see the white outline of Chris's figure from where he stood.

"Get along," he said. "There is no time to lose."

Merritt nodded and began to make his way upward. Some way above him Chris was looking down. Her quick ear had detected some suspicious sound. She watched eagerly. Just below her the big electric light on the castle tower cast a band of flame athwart the cliff. Chris looked down steadily at this. Presently she saw a hand uplifted into the belt of flame, a hand grasping for a ledge of rock, and a quickly stifled cry rose to her lips. The thumb on the hand was smashed flat, there was a tiny pink nail in the centre.

Chris's heart gave one quick leap, then her senses came back to her. She needed nobody to tell her that the owner of the hand was James Merritt. Nor did she require any fine discrimination to perceive that he was up to no good. That it had something to do with the plot against Bell she felt certain. But the man was coming now, he could only reach the top of the cliffs just under the wall where she was standing. Chris peered eagerly down into the path of light until the intruder looked up. Then she jerked back, forgetting that she was in the darkness and absolutely invisible. The action was disastrous, however, for it shook Chris's diamond star from her head, and it fell gently almost at the feet of the climber. An instant later and his eyes had fallen upon it.

"What bloomin' luck," he said, hoarsely. "I suppose that girl yonder must have dropped it over. Well, it is as good as a couple of hundred pound to me, anyway. Little missie, you'd better take a tearful farewell of your lumps of sugar, as you'll never see them again."

To Chris's quivering indignation he slipped the star into his breast-pocket. Just for the moment the girl was on the point of crying out. She was glad she had refrained a second after, for a really brilliant thought occurred to her. She had never evolved anything more clever in her life, but she did not quite realise that as yet.

Nearer and nearer the man with the maimed thumb came. Chris stepped back into the shadow. She waited till the intruder had slipped past her in the direction of the castle, and prepared to follow at a discreet distance. Whatever he was after, she felt sure he was being ordered and abetted by Reginald Henson. Two minutes, five minutes, elapsed before she moved.

What was that? Surely a voice somewhere near her moaning for help. Chris stood perfectly still, listening for the next cry. Her sense of humanity had been touched, she had forgotten Merritt entirely. Again the stifled cry for help came.

"Who are you?" Chris shouted. "And where are you?"

"Henson," came the totally unexpected reply. "I'm down below on a ledge of rock. No, I'm not particularly badly hurt, but I dare not move."

Chris paused for a moment, utterly bewildered. Henson must have been on the look-out for his accomplice, she thought, and had missed his footing and fallen. Pity he had not fallen a little farther, she murmured bitterly, and broken his neck. But this was only for a moment, and her sense of justice and humanity speedily returned.

"I cannot see anything of you," she said.

"All the same, I can see your outline," Henson said, dismally. "I don't feel quite so frightened now. I can hang on a bit longer, especially now I know assistance is at hand. At first I began to be afraid that I was a prisoner for the night. No; don't go. If I had a rope I should have the proper confidence to swarm up again. And there is a coil of rope in the arbour close by you. Hang it straight down over that middle boulder and fasten your end round one of those iron pilasters."

The rope was there as Henson stated; indeed, he had placed it there himself. With the utmost coolness and courage Chris did as she was desired. But it took some little time to coax the rope to go over in the proper direction. There was a little mutter of triumph from below, and presently Henson, with every appearance of utter exhaustion, climbed over the ledge to the terrace. At the same moment an owl hooted twice from the long belt of trees at the bottom of the garden.

"I hope you are none the worse for your adventure?" Chris asked, politely.

Henson said sententiously that he fancied not. His familiarity with the cliffs had led him too far. If he had not fallen on a ledge of rock goodness only knows what might have happened. Would Chris be so good as to lend him the benefit of her arm back to the castle? Chris was graciously willing, but she was full of curiosity at the same time. Had Henson really been in danger, or was the whole thing some part of an elaborate and cunning plot? Henson knew perfectly well that she had taken a great fancy to the upper terrace, and he might—

Really it was difficult to know what to think. They passed slowly along till the lights here and there from the castle shone on their faces. At the same time a carriage had driven up to the hall door and a visitor was getting out. With a strange sense of eagerness and pleasure Chris recognised the handsome features and misshapen shape of Hatherly Bell.

"The expected guest has arrived," Henson said.

There was such a queer mixture of snarling anger and exulting triumph in his voice that Chris looked up. Just for an instant Henson had dropped the mask. A ray of light from the open door streamed fully across his face. The malignant pleasure of it startled Chris. Like a flash she began to see how she had been used by those miscreants.

"He is very handsome," she contrived to say, steadily.

"Handsome is that handsome does," Henson quoted. "Let us hope that Dr.
Bell will succeed in his mission. He has my best wishes."

Chris turned away and walked slowly as possible up the stairs. Another minute with that slimy hypocrite and she felt she must betray herself. Once out of sight she flew along the corridor and snapped up the electric light. She fell back with a stifled cry of dismay, but she was more sorrowful than surprised.

"I expected it," she said. "I knew that this was the thing they were after."

The precious copy of Rembrandt was no longer there!

CHAPTER XXXI

BELL ARRIVES

There were more sides to the mystery than David Steel imagined. It had seemed to him that he had pretty well all the threads in his hands, but he would have been astonished to know how much more Hatherly Bell and Enid Henson could have told him.

But it seemed to Bell that there was one very important thing to be done before he proceeded any farther. He was interested in the mystery as he was interested in anything where crime and cunning played a part. But he was still more intent upon clearing his good name; besides, this would give him a wider field of action.

In the light of recent discoveries it had become imperative that he should once more be on good terms with Lord Littimer. Once this was accomplished, Bell saw his way to the clearing up of the whole complication. It was a great advantage to know who his enemy was; it was a still greater advantage to discover the hero of the cigar-case and the victim of the outrage in Steel's conservatory was the graceless scamp Van Sneck, the picture dealer, who had originally sold "The Crimson Blind" to Lord Littimer.

It was all falling out beautifully. Not only had Van Sneck turned up in the nick of time, but he was not in a position to do any further mischief. It suited Bell exactly that Van Sneck should be *hors de combat* for the moment.

The first thing to be done was to see Lord Littimer without delay. Bell had no idea of humbly soliciting an interview. He proceeded to a telegraph office the first thing the following morning and wired Littimer to the effect that he must see him on important business. He had an hour or two at his disposal, so he took a cab as far as Downend Terrace. He found Steel slug-hunting in the conservatory, the atmosphere of which was blue with cigarette smoke.

"So you are not working this morning?" he asked.

"How the dickens can I work?" David exclaimed, irritably. "Not that I haven't been trying. I might just as well take a long holiday till this mystery is cleared up for all the good I am. What is the next move?"

"My next move is to go to Littimer and convince him that he has done me a great wrong. I am bound to have Littimer's ear once more."

"You are going to show him the spare Rembrandt, eh?"

"That's it. I flatter myself I shall astonish him. I've sent a telegram to say I'm coming to-day, after which I shall proceed to storm the citadel. I feel all the safer because nobody knows I have the engraving."

"My dear chap, somebody knows you have the picture."

"Impossible!" Bell exclaimed. "Only yourself and Enid Henson can possibly be aware that—"

"All the same, I am speaking the truth," David said. "Last night when you went into the hospital you gave me the print to take care of. At the same time I noticed a rough-looking man presumedly asleep on the seat in the road facing the hospital. Afterwards when I looked round he had disappeared. At the time I thought nothing of it. When I came in here I placed the precious roll of paper on my writing-table under the window yonder. The window is a small one, as you can see, and was opened about a foot at the top. I sat here with the light down and the room faintly illuminated by the light in the conservatory. After a little time I saw a hand and arm groping for something on the table, and I'm quite sure the hand and arm were groping for your Rembrandt. The fellow muttered something that I failed to understand, and I made a grab for him and got him. Then the other hand made a dash for my head with an ugly piece of gas-piping, and I had to let go."

"And you saw no more of the fellow?"

"No; I didn't expect to. I couldn't see his face, but there was one peculiarity he had that I might tell you for your future guidance. He had a thumb smashed as flat as the head of a snake, with one tiny pink nail in the middle of it. So, if you meet a man like that on your journey to-day, look to yourself. On the whole, you see that our enemies are a little more awake than you give them credit for."

Bell nodded thoughtfully. The information was of the greatest possible value to him. It told him quite plainly that Reginald Henson knew exactly what had happened. Under ordinary circumstances by this time Henson would be on his way to Littimer Castle, there to checkmate the man he had so deeply injured. But fortunately Henson was laid by the heels, or so Bell imagined.

"I am really obliged to you," Bell said. "Your information is likely to be of the greatest possible service to me. I'm sorry you can't work."

"Don't worry about me," David said, grimly. "I'm gaining a vast quantity of experience that will be of the greatest value to me later on. Besides, I can go and compare notes with Miss Ruth Gates whilst you are away. She is soothing."

"So I should imagine," Bell said, drily. "No, I must be off. I'll let you know what happens at Littimer Castle. Good luck to you here."

And Bell bustled off. He was pleased to find a recent telegram of acceptance from Littimer awaiting him, and before five o'clock he was in the train for London. It was only after he left London that he began to crawl along. Thanks to slow local lines and a badly fitting cross service it was nearly eleven o'clock before he reached Moreton Station. It did not matter much, because Littimer had said that a carriage should meet him.

However, there was no conveyance of any kind outside the station. One sleepy porter had already departed, and the other one, who took Bell's ticket, and was obviously waiting to lock up, deposed that a carriage from the castle had come to the station, but that some clerical gentleman had come along and countermanded it. Whereupon the dog-cart had departed.

"Very strange," Bell muttered. "What sort of a parson was it?"

"I only just saw his face," the porter yawned. "Dressed in black, with a white tie and a straw hat. Walked in a slouching kind of way with his hands down; new curate from St. Albans, perhaps. Looked like a chap as could take care of himself in a row."

"Thanks," Bell said, curtly. "I'll manage the walk; it's only two miles.
Good-night."

Bell's face was grim and set as he stepped out into the road. He knew fairly well what this meant. It was pretty evident that his arch-enemy knew his movements perfectly well, and that a vigorous attempt was being made to prevent him reaching the castle. He called back to the porter.

"How long since the carriage went?" he asked.

A voice from the darkness said "Ten minutes," and Bell trudged on with the knowledge that one of his enemies at least was close at hand. That Reginald Henson was at the castle he had not the remotest idea. Nor did he fear personal violence. Despite his figure, he was a man of enormous strength and courage. But he had not long to wait.

Somebody was coming down the lonely road towards him, somebody in clerical attire. The stranger stopped and politely, if a little huskily, inquired if he was on the right way to Moreton Station. Bell responded as politely that he was, and asked to know the time. Not that he cared anything about the time; what he really wanted was to see the stranger's hands. The little ruse was successful. In the dim light Bell could see a flattened, hideous thumb with the pink parody of a nail upon it.

"Thanks, very much," he said, crisply. "Keep straight on."

He half turned as the stranger swung round. The latter darted at Bell, but he came too late. Bell's fist shot out and caught him fairly on the forehead. Then the stick in Bell's left hand came down with crushing force on the prostrate man's skull. So utterly dazed and surprised was he that he lay on the ground for a moment, panting heavily.

"You murderous ruffian," Bell gasped. "You escaped convict in an honest man's clothes. Get up! So you are the fellow—"

He paused suddenly, undesirous of letting the rascal see that he knew too much. The other man rolled over suddenly like a cat and made a dash for a gap in the hedge. He was gone like a flash. Pursuit would be useless, for pace was not Bell's strong point. And he was not fearful of being attacked again.

"Henson seems to be pretty well served," he muttered, grimly.

Meanwhile, the man with the thumb was flying over the fields in the direction of Littimer. He made his way across country to the cliffs with the assured air of one who knows every inch of the ground. He had failed in the first part of his instructions, and there was no time to be lost if he was to carry out the second part successfully.

He struck the cliffs at length a mile or so away, and proceeded to scramble along them till he lay hidden just under the terraces at Littimer Castle. He knew that he was in time for this part of the programme, despite the fact that his head ached considerably from the force and vigour of Bell's assault. He lay there, panting and breathing heavily, waiting for the signal to come.

Meanwhile, Bell was jogging along placidly and with no fear in his heart at all. He did not need anybody to tell him what was the object of his late antagonist's attack. He knew perfectly well that if the ruffian had got the better of him he would never have seen the Rembrandt again. Henson's hounds were on the track; but it would go hard if they pulled the quarry down just as the sanctuary was in sight. Presently Bell could see the lights of the castle.

By the lodge-gates stood a dog-cart; in the flare of the lamps Bell recognised the features of the driver, a very old servant of Littimer's. Bell took in the situation at a glance.

"Is this the way you come for me, Lund?" he asked.

"I'm very sorry, sir," Lund replied. "But a clergyman near the station said you had gone another way, so I turned back. And when I got here I couldn't make top nor tail of the story. Blest if I wasn't a bit nervous that it might have been some plant to rob you. And I was going to drive slowly along to the station again when you turned up."

"Oh, there's nothing wrong," said Bell, cheerfully. "And I don't look as if I'd come to any harm. Anybody staying at the castle, Lund?"

"Only Mr. Reginald Henson, sir," Lund said, disparagingly.

Bell started, but his emotion was lost in the darkness. It came as a great surprise to him to find that the enemy was actually in the field. And how apprehensive of danger he must be to come so far with his health in so shattered a condition. Bell smiled to himself as he pictured Henson's face on seeing him once more under that roof.

"How long has Mr. Henson been here?" he asked.

"Only came yesterday, sir. Shall I drive you up to the house? And if you wouldn't mind saying nothing to his lordship about my mistake, sir—"

"Make your mind easy on that score," Bell said, drily. "His lordship shall know nothing whatever about it. On the whole, I had better drive up to the house. How familiar it all looks, to be sure."

A minute later and Bell stood within the walls of the castle.

CHAPTER XXXII

HOW THE SCHEME WORKED OUT

Chris crossed the corridor like one who walks in a dream. She had not enough energy left to be astonished even. Her mind travelled quickly over the events of the past hour, and she began to see the way clear. But how had somebody or other managed to remove the picture? Chris examined the spot on the wall where the Rembrandt had been with the eye of a detective.

That part of the mystery was explained in a moment. A sharp cutting instrument, probably a pair of steel pliers with a lever attachment, had been applied to the head of the four stays, and the flat heads had been pinched off as clean as if they had been string. After that it was merely necessary to remove the frame, and a child could have done the rest.

"How clever I am," Chris told herself, bitterly. "I'm like the astute people who put Chubb locks on Russia leather jewel-cases that anybody could rip open with a sixpenny penknife. And in my conceit I deemed the Rembrandt to be absolutely safe. Now what—what is the game?"

It was much easier to ask the question than to answer it. But there were some facts sufficiently obvious to Chris. In the first place she knew that Reginald Henson was at the bottom of the whole thing; she knew that he had traded on the fact that she had taken a fancy to the terrace as an after-dinner lounge; indeed, she had told him so earlier in the day. He had traded on the knowledge that he could prove an alibi if any suspicions attached to him. The fact that he was in danger owing to a slip on the edge of the cliff was all nonsense. He had not been in any danger at all; he had seen Chris there, and he had made all that parade with an eye to the future. As a matter of course, he was down there settling matters with his accomplice of the maimed thumb, who had chosen the cliff way of getting into the castle as the swiftest and the surest from detection.

Yes, it was pretty obvious that the man with the thumb had stolen the print, and that by this time he was far away with his possession. While Chris was helping Henson the latter's accomplice had slipped into the castle and effected the burglary. Chris flicked out the light in the alcove as a servant came along. It was not policy for any of the domestics to be too wise. Chris forced a smile to her face as the maid came along.

"Allen," she asked, "are there many owls about here?"

"Never a one as I know, miss," the maid responded confidently. "I've been here for eleven years, and I never heard of such a thing. Clifford, the head keeper, couldn't sleep at nights if he thought as there was such a thing on the estate. Have you heard one, miss?"

"I was evidently mistaken," Chris said. "Of course you would know best."

So the cry of the owl had been a signal of success. Chris sat in the gloom there resolved to see the comedy played through. The events of the night were not over yet.

"I'd give something to know what has taken place in the dining-room,"
Chris murmured.

She was going to know before long. The lights were being extinguished all over the house. Henson came up to bed heavily, as one who is utterly worn out. At the same time he looked perfectly satisfied with himself. He might have been a vigilant officer who had settled all his plans and was going to seek a well-earned rest before the enemy came on to his destruction. In sooth Henson was utterly worn out. He had taxed his strength to the uttermost, but he was free to rest now.

Meanwhile, the conference in the dining-room proceeded. Lord Littimer had received his guest with frigid politeness, to which Bell had responded with an equally cold courtesy. Littimer laid his cigar aside and looked Bell steadily in the face.

"I have granted your request against my better judgment," he said. "I am not sanguine that the least possible good can come of it. But I have quite grown out of all my illusions; I have seen the impossible proved too often. Will you take anything?"

"I hope to do so presently," Bell said, pointedly; "but not yet. In the first instance I have to prove to you that I have not stolen your Rembrandt."

"Indeed? I should like to know how you propose to do that."

"I shall prove it at once. You were under the impression that you possessed the only copy of the 'Crimson Blind' in existence. When you lost yours and a copy of the picture was found in my possession, you were perfectly justified in believing that I was the thief."

"I did take that extreme view of the matter," Littimer said, drily.

"Under the circumstances I should have done the same thing. But you were absolutely wrong, because there were two copies of the picture. Yours was stolen by an enemy of mine who had the most urgent reasons for discrediting me in your eyes, and the other was concealed amongst my belongings. It was no loss to the thief, because subsequently the stolen one—my own one being restored to you—could have been exposed and disposed of as a new find. Your print is in the house?"

"It hangs in the gallery at the present moment."

"Very good. Then, my lord, what do you say to this?"

Bell took the roll of paper from his pocket, and gravely flattened it out on the table before him, so that the full rays of the electric light should fall upon it. Littimer was a fine study of open-mouthed surprise. He could only stand there gaping, touching the stained paper with his fingers and breathing heavily.

"Here is a facsimile of your treasure," Bell went on. "Here is the same thing. You are a good judge on these matters, and I venture to say you will call it genuine. There is nothing of forgery about the engraving."

"Good heavens, no," Littimer snapped. "Any fool could see that."

"Which you will admit is a very great point in my favour," Bell said, gravely.

"I begin to think that I have done you a great injustice," Littimer admitted; "but, under the circumstances, I don't see how I could have done anything else. Look at that picture. It is exactly the same as mine. There is exactly the same discolouration in the margin in exactly the same place."

"Probably they lay flat on the top of one another for scores of years."

"Possibly. I can't see the slightest difference in the smallest particular. Even now I cannot rid myself of the feeling that I am the victim of some kind of plot or delusion. The house is quiet now and there is nobody about. Before I believe the evidence of my senses—and I have had cause to doubt them more than once—I should like to compare this print with mine. Will you follow me to the gallery, if you haven't forgotten the way?"

Littimer took up the treasure from the table gingerly.

He was pleased and at the same time disappointed; pleased to find that he had been mistaken all these years, sorry in the knowledge that his picture was unique no longer. He said nothing until the alcove was reached, and Chris drew back in the shadow to let the others pass.

"Now to settle the question for all time," Littimer said. "Will you be so good as to turn on the electric light? You will find the switch in the angle of the wall on your right. And when we have settled the affair and I have apologized to you in due form, you shall command my services and my purse to right the wrong. If it costs me £10,000 the man who has done this thing shall suffer. Please to put up the light, Bell."

Chris listened breathlessly. She was not quite certain what she was about to see. She could hear Bell fumbling for the light, she heard the click of the switch, and then she saw the brilliant belt of flame flooding the alcove. Littimer paused and glanced at Bell, the latter looked round the alcove as if seeking for something.

"I cannot see the picture here," he said. "If have made a mistake—"

Littimer stood looking at the speaker with eyes like blazing stars. Just for a moment or two he was

speechless with indignation.

"You charlatan," he said, hoarsely. "You barefaced trickster."

Bell started back. His mute question stung Littimer to the quick.

"You wanted to be cleared," the latter said. "You wanted to befool me again. You come here in some infernally cunning fashion, you steal my picture from the frame and have the matchless audacity to pass it off for a second one. Man alive, if it were earlier I would have you flogged from the house like the ungrateful dog that you are."

Chris checked down the cry that rose to her lips. She saw, as in a flash of lightning, the brilliancy and simplicity and cunning of Henson's latest and most masterly scheme.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE FRAME OF THE PICTURE

After the first passionate outburst of scorn Lord Littimer looked at his visitor quietly. There was something almost amusing in the idea that Bell should attempt such a trick upon him. And the listener was thoroughly enjoying the scene now. There was quite an element of the farcical about it. In the brilliant light she could see Littimer's dark, bitter face and the helpless amazement on the strong features of Hatherly Bell. And, meanwhile, the man who had brought the impossible situation about was calmly sleeping after his strenuous exertions.

Chris smiled to herself as she thought out her brilliant *coup*. It looked to her nothing less than a stroke of genius, two strokes, in fact, as will be seen presently. Before many hours were over Henson's position in the house would be seriously weakened. He had done a clever thing, but Chris saw her way to a cleverer one still.

Meanwhile the two men were regarding one another suspiciously. On a round Chippendale table the offending Rembrandt lay between them.

"I confess," Bell said, at length, "I confess that I am utterly taken by surprise. And yet I need not be so astonished when I come to think of the amazing cunning and audacity of my antagonist. He has more foresight than myself. Lord Littimer, will you be so kind as to repeat your last observation over again?"

"I will emphasize it, if you like?" Littimer replied. "For some deep purpose of your own, you desired to make friends with me again. You tell me you are in a position to clear your character. Very foolishly I consent to see you. You come here with a roll of paper in your possession purporting to be a second copy of my famous print. All the time you knew it to be mine—mine, stolen an hour or two ago and passed instantly to you. Could audacity go farther? And then you ask me to believe that you came down from town with a second engraving in your possession."

"As I hope to be saved, I swear it!" Bell cried.

"Of course you do. A man with your temerity would swear anything. Credulous as I may be, I am not credulous enough to believe that *my* picture would be stolen again at the very time that you found *yours*."

"Abstracted by my enemy on purpose to land me in this mess."

"Ridiculous," Littimer cried. "Pshaw, I am a fool to stand here arguing; I am a fool to let you stay in the house. Why, I don't believe you could bring a solitary witness to prove that yonder picture was yours."

"You are mistaken, my lord. I could bring several."

"Credible witnesses? Witnesses whose characters would bear investigation?"

"I fancy so," Bell said, quietly. "Two nights ago, for instance, I showed the very picture lying before you to a lady of your acquaintance, Miss Enid Henson. I couldn't have had *your* picture two nights ago, could I? And Miss Henson was graciously pleased to observe that I had been made the victim of a vile

conspiracy."

"Why do you insult me by mentioning that name?" Littimer said, hoarsely. His face was very pale, and sombre anger smouldered in his eyes. "Tell me you showed the thing to my wife next."

"I did," said Bell, coolly. "Lady Littimer was in the room at the time."

Something like a groan escaped from Littimer's pallid lips. The smouldering light in his eyes flashed into flame. He advanced upon Bell with a quivering, uplifted arm. Chris slipped swiftly out of the shade and stood between the two men.

"Dr. Bell speaks the truth," she said. "And I am going to prove it."

Littimer dropped into a chair and gave way to silent laughter. His mood had changed utterly. He lounged there, a cynical, amused man of the world again.

"Upon my word, I am vastly obliged to you for your comedy," he said. "I hope your salary as leading lady in Bell's company is a handsome one, Miss Lee."

"Let us hope that it is more handsome than your manners, my lord," Chris said, tartly. "I beg to remark that I have never seen Dr. Bell before. Oh, yes, I have been listening to your conversation, because I expected something of the kind. The Rembrandt was stolen some time before Dr. Bell arrived here, and in due course I shall show you the thief. Lord Littimer, I implore you to be silent and discreet in this matter. Have a little patience. Quite by accident I have made an important discovery, but this is hardly the place to discuss it. Before daylight I hope to be able to prove beyond question that you have greatly wronged Dr. Bell."

"I shall be glad to be convinced of it," Littimer said, sincerely. "But why this secrecy?"

"Secrecy is absolutely necessary for the conviction of the thief."

Bell looked eagerly at the speaker.

"I have not the remotest notion who this young lady is," he said, "but I am greatly obliged to her."

"My secretary, Miss Lee," Littimer murmured; "an American from Boston, and evidently a great deal cleverer than I gave her credit for, which is saying a great deal. Miss Lee, if you know anything, I implore you to speak."

"Not here," Chris said, firmly. "Stone walls have ears. I tell you the Rembrandt was stolen just before Dr. Bell reached the house. Also I tell you it is imperative that nobody but ourselves must know the fact for the present. You trust me, Lord Littimer?"

"I trust you as implicitly as I do anybody."

Chris smiled at the diplomatic response. She approached the panel of the wall on which the Rembrandt had been fastened. She indicated the long steel stays which had been clamped on to the iron frame. "Look at them," she said. "It was my suggestion that the stays should be attached to the frame to prevent anything like this robbery. I made the stays secure myself. And what happened to justify my prudence? Why, the very same night somebody came here after the picture."

"Henson!" Littimer cried. "Ah! But he could have come openly."

"It is not in the nature of the man to do things openly," Chris went on. "I know more about the man than you imagine, but that you are to keep to yourself. He comes here in the dead of the night and he gets into the house through an upstair window. A man of his bulk, if you please! And he comes here hot-foot and breathless at a time when common prudence should have kept him in bed. Why? Because he knows that Dr. Bell has the other Rembrandt and will come to prove it, and because he knows that if he can steal the Littimer Rembrandt he can precipitate the very impasse that he has brought about. But he could not steal the picture because it was fast."

"You are a very clever young lady," Littimer said, drily. "You will tell me next that you expected Henson to try this thing on."

"I did," Chris said, coolly. "I had a telegram to warn me so."

Littimer smiled. All this mystery and cleverness was after his own heart. He lighted his cigarette and tendered his case in the friendliest possible manner to Bell.

"Go on," he said, "I am deeply interested."

"I prefer not to go into details," Chris resumed. "All I ask you to do is to be entirely guided by me when you have heard my story. I have admitted to you that I knew when Henson was coming, and why am I interested? Because it happens that Reginald Henson has greatly injured someone I cared for deeply. Well, I fastened up the picture—he came. He sneaked in like the thief that he was because his accomplice and tool had failed to save him the trouble. Lord Littimer, I will not pain you by saying who Henson's accomplice was."

Littimer nodded gloomily.

"Not that I blame that accomplice; he could not help himself. Ah, when the whole truth comes to be told, what a black business it will be. Well, Henson came to steal the picture and I caught him in the act. If you had seen his fat, greasy, crestfallen face! Then he pretended that it was all done for a jest and as a warning to Lord Littimer. And Lord Littimer, the most cynical of men, allowed it to pass."

"I couldn't see what he had to gain," Littimer pleaded. "I don't now, as a matter of fact."

"Neither will you for the present," said Chris. "Still, you will be so good as to assume the same hospitality and courtesy towards Henson as you extend at present."

"I daresay I can manage it," said Littimer, cynically. "I used to be a society man once."

"Henson did not deceive me for a moment," Chris went on. "He was bound to have the picture, and, being baffled one way, he tried another. Look here, Lord Littimer. Let me assume for a moment that Dr. Bell came down here to steal your picture, get rid of the frame, and palm off your own engraving for another. Now, in the name of common sense, let me ask you a single question. Could Dr. Bell have possibly known that the frame of the Rembrandt was securely fastened to the wall and that I had attached it quite recently? And could he in the short time at his disposal have procured the necessary tools to cut away the stays? Again, Dr. Bell can prove, I suppose, exactly what time he left London to-day. No, we must look farther for the thief."

"There is something else also we have to look for," said Dr. Bell. "And that is the frame. You say it was of iron and consequently heavy. The thief would discard the frame and roll up the print."

"That is a brilliant suggestion," said Chris, eagerly. "And if we only had the frame I could set Lord Littimer's doubts to rest entirely. I happen to know that the real thief came and went by the cliff under the terrace. If the frame was thrown into the gorse, there it—"

"Might stay for ages," Littimer exclaimed. "By Jove, I'm just in the mood to carry this business a stage or two farther before I go to bed. Bell, there are two or three cycle lamps in the gun-room. You used to be a pretty fearless climber. What do you say to a hunt round for an hour or two whilst the house is quiet?"

Bell assented eagerly. Chris waited with what patience she could command till daylight began to show faintly and redly in the east. Then she heard the sound of voices outside, and Littimer and Bell staggered in carrying the frame between them.

"Got it," Littimer exclaimed, with the triumphant exultation of a schoolboy who has successfully looted a rare bird's-nest. "We found it half-way down the cliff, hidden behind a patch of samphire. And it doesn't seem to be any the worse for the adventure. Now, Miss Wiseacre, seeing that we have the frame, perhaps you will fulfil your promise of convincing me, once and for all, that yonder Rembrandt cannot possibly belong to me."

"I am going to do so," Chris said, quietly. "You told me you had to cut the margin of your print by an inch or so round to fit that quaint old frame. So far as I can see, the print before you is quite intact. Now, if it is too large for the frame—"

Littimer nodded eagerly. Bell fitted the dingy paper to the back of the frame and smiled. There was an inch or more to spare all round. Nobody spoke for a moment.

"You could make it smaller, but you couldn't make it bigger," Littimer said. "Bell, when I have sufficiently recovered I'll make a humble and abject apology to you. And now, wise woman from the West, what is the next act in the play?"

CHAPTER XXXIV

Chris smiled with the air of one who is perfectly satisfied with her work.

"For the present I fancy we have done enough," she said. "I want to go to bed now, and I want you both to do the same. Also I shall be glad if you will come down in the morning as if nothing had happened. Tell Reginald Henson casually that you have been convinced that you have done Dr. Bell a grave injustice, and give no kind of particulars. And please treat Mr. Henson in the same fashion as before. There is only one other thing."

"Name it, and it is yours," Littimer cried.

"Well, cut the margin off that print, or at any rate turn the margin down, fit it into the frame, and hang it up as if nothing had happened."

Littimer looked at Chris with a puzzled expression for a moment, and then his features relaxed into a satyr-like grin.

"Capital," he said, "I quite understand what you mean. And I must be there to see it, eh?—yes, I must be there to see. I would not miss it for strawberry leaves."

The thing was done and the picture restored to its place. Bell drew Chris aside for a moment.

"Do you rise early in the morning?" he asked, meaningly.

"Always," Chris replied, demurely. "I find the terrace charming before breakfast. Good-night."

Bell was down betimes despite the fact that it had been daylight before he was in bed. Along the terrace, looking over the cliffs, Chris was already walking, a great cluster of red and yellow roses in her hand. She looked as fresh and bright as if she and excitement were strangers. All the same she seemed to avoid Bell's eyes.

"Isn't it lovely here?" she exclaimed. "And these roses with the dew still upon them. Well, Dr. Bell, have you made fresh discoveries?"

"I have discovered that Henson is going to take his breakfast in bed," Bell said gravely. "Also that he requires a valet at half-past ten. At that time I hope to be in the corridor with Lord Littimer and yourself. Also I have made a further discovery."

"And what is that, Dr. Bell?"

"That you and I have met before—once before when I attended you in a kind of official capacity, and when I behaved in a distinctly discreditable professional manner. Dr. Walker was present. Dr. Walker seems to have been singularly short-sighted."

The roses fell from Chris's hands on to the path. Her face had grown very pale indeed; there was a frightened, appealing look in her eyes.

"Dr. Bell," she gasped, "do you suppose that anybody else knows—Henson, for instance? And I imagined that I had utterly deceived him!"

Bell smiled meaningly.

"I don't think you need have the slightest anxiety on that score," he said. "You see, Henson is comfortably assured that you are dead and buried. Whereas I know all about it. Fortunately for me, I became mixed up in this strange business on behalf of my friend, David Steel; indeed, but for Steel, I should probably have given you away to our friend Walker."

"But surely you guessed that—"

"Not for the moment. You see, it was only a few minutes before that a flood of interesting light had been let in upon Henson's character by your sister to me, and my first idea was that Henson was poisoning you for some purpose of his own. Subsequently Steel told me all about that side of the story on our way back to Brighton."

"How did you penetrate my disguise?"

"My dear young lady, I have not penetrated your disguise. Your disguise is perfect—so quaint and daringly original—and would deceive even Henson's eyes. I guessed who you were directly I found that

you were taking a philanthropic interest in our friend. It came to me by a kind of intuition, the knack that stood me in such good stead in my professional days. When you said that you had been warned of Henson's coming by telegram I was certain."

"Then perhaps you guessed that Enid sent me the telegram?"

"That was obvious. Also it was obvious that Henson brought Frank Littimer along."

"Oh, he did. It was Frank's mission to steal the picture. I confronted him with a revolver and locked him in one of the bedrooms. It took all my courage and good resolutions to prevent me from betraying myself to the poor fellow."

"Rather cruel of you, wasn't it?"

"Well, yes. But I wanted to make the exposure as complete as possible. When the time comes to strip Reginald Henson of his pretentions and flog him from the family, the more evidence we can pile up the better. But Frank is not bad; he is merely weak and utterly in the power of that man. If we can only break the bonds, Frank will be a powerful factor on our side."

"I daresay. But how was the Rembrandt stolen? Littimer's, I mean."

"It was worked through an accomplice," Chris explained. "It had to be done before you arrived. And there was no better time than night for the operation. I guessed that when Henson drew the fact from me that I liked the terrace after dinner. By a bit of good luck I found the accomplice and himself together in the day; in fact, I forced Reginald's hand so that he had to introduce me to the man."

"In which case you would know him again?"

"Of course. Presently I am going to show you a little more of the comedy. Well, I was on the terrace pretty late when I heard dear Reginald down the cliff calling for assistance. He pretended that he had slipped down the cliff and could not get up again. By the aid of a rope that fortunately happened to be close at hand I saved our dear friend's life. I have learnt from one of the gardeners just now that Reginald placed the rope there himself—a most effective touch, you must admit."

"Very," Bell said, drily. "But I quite fail to see why—"

"I am coming to that. Don't you see that if anything happened Reginald could prove that he was not near the house at the time? But just before that I saw his accomplice come up the cliff; indeed, he passed quite close to me on his way to the house. Reginald quite overlooked this fact in his heed for his own safety. When I had effected my gallant rescue I heard an owl hoot. Now, there are no owls about here.

"I guessed what that meant—it was a signal of success. Then I went back to the corridor and the Rembrandt was gone. The stays had been cut away. At first I was dreadfully upset, but the more I thought of it the more sure I was that it was all for the best."

"But you might have raised an alarm and caught the thief, who—"

"Who would have been promptly disclaimed by Reginald. Let me tell you, sir, that I have the thief and the lost Rembrandt in the hollow of my hands. Before the day is out I shall make good my boast. And there's the breakfast bell."

It looked quite natural some time later for the three conspirators to be lounging about the gallery when Henson emerged from his bedroom. He appeared bright and smiling, and most of the bandages had been removed from his throat. All the same he was not pleased to see Bell there; he gazed uneasily at the doctor and from him to Littimer.

"You know Bell," the latter said, carelessly. "Fact is, there's been a great mistake."

Bell offered him his hand heartily. It cost him a huge effort, but the slimy scoundrel had to be fought with his own weapons. Henson shook his head with the air of a man extending a large and generous meed of forgiveness. He sought in vain to read Bell's eyes, but there was a steady, almost boyish, smile in them.

"I indeed rejoice," he said, unctuously. "I indeed rejoice—rejoice—rejoice!"

He repeated the last word helplessly; he seemed to have lost all his backbone, and lapsed into a flabby, jellified mass of quivering white humanity. His vacant, fishy eyes were fixed upon the Rembrandt in a kind of dull, sleepy terror.

"I'm not well," he gasped. "Not so strong as I imagined. I'll—I'll go and lie down again. Later on I shall want a dogcart to drive me to Moreton Wells. I—"

He paused again, glanced at the picture, and passed heavily to his room.
Littimer smiled.

"Splendid," he said. "It was worth thousands just to see his face."

"All the same," Chris said, quietly; "all the same, that man is not to leave for Moreton Wells till I've had a clear hour's start of him. Dr. Bell will you accompany me?"

CHAPTER XXXV

CHRIS HAS AN IDEA

Lord Littimer polished his rarely used eye-glass carefully and favoured Chris with a long, admiring stare. At the same time he was wondering why the girl should have taken such a vivid interest in Reginald Henson and his doings. For some years past it had been Littimer's whim to hold up Henson before everybody as his successor, so far as the castle went. He liked to see Henson's modest smirk and beautiful self-abasement, for in sooth his lordship had a pretty contempt for the man who hoped to succeed him. But the will made some time ago by Littimer would have come as a painful shock to the philanthropist.

"It is a very pretty tangle as it stands," he said. "Miss Lee, let me compliment you upon your astuteness in this matter. Only don't tell me you schemed your way here, and that you are a lady detective. I read a good many novels, and I don't like them."

"You may be easy on that score," Chris laughed. "I am not a lady detective. All the same, I have defeated Mr. Reginald Henson."

"You think he is at the bottom of the mystery of the other Rembrandt."

"I am certain of it; unless you like to believe in the truth of his charming scheme to give you a lesson, as he called it. As a matter of fact, Mr. Henson discovered the existence of the other print; he discovered that Dr. Bell possessed it—the rest I leave to your own astuteness. You saw his face just now?"

"Oh, yes. It was a fine study in emotions. If you could find the other picture—"

"I hope to restore it to you before the day has passed."

Littimer applauded, gently. He was charmed, he said, with the whole comedy. The first two acts had been a brilliant success. If the third was only as good he would regard Miss Lee as his benefactor for ever. It was not often that anybody intellectually amused him; in fact, he must add Miss Lee to his collection.

"Then you must play a part yourself," Chris said, gaily. "I am going into Moreton Wells, and Dr. Bell accompanies me. Mr. Henson is not to know that we have gone, and he is not to leave the house for a good hour or so after our departure. What I want is a fair start and the privilege of bringing a guest home to dinner."

"Vague, mysterious, and alluring," Littimer said. "Bring the guest by all means. I will pledge my diplomacy that you have a long start. Really, I don't know when I have enjoyed myself so much. You shall have the big waggonette for your journey."

"And join it beyond the lodge-gates," Chris said, thoughtfully. "Dr. Bell, you shall stroll through the park casually; I will follow as casually later on."

A little later Henson emerged from his room dressed evidently for a journey. He looked flabby and worried; there was an expression very like fear in his eyes. The corridor was deserted as he passed the place where the Rembrandt hung. He paused before the picture in a hesitating, fascinated way. His feet seemed to pull up before it involuntarily.

"What does it mean?" he muttered. "What in the name of fate has happened? It is impossible that Merritt could have played me a trick like that; he would never have dared. Besides, he has too much to gain by following my instructions. I fancy—"

Henson slipped up to the picture as a sudden idea came to him. If the picture had not been removed at all the stays would still be intact. And if they were intact Merritt was likely to have a bad quarter of an hour later on. It would be proof that—

But the stays were not intact. The heads had been shaved off with some cutting instrument; the half of the stays gleamed like silver in the morning light. And yet the Rembrandt was there. The more Henson dwelt upon it the more he was puzzled. He began to wonder whether some deep trap was being laid for him.

But, no, he had seen no signs of it. In some way or another Bell had managed to ingratiate himself with Littimer again, but not necessarily for long, Henson told himself, with a vicious grin. Nor was Littimer the kind of man who ever troubled himself to restrain his feelings. If he had got to the bottom of the whole business he would have had Henson kicked out of the house without delay.

But Littimer suspected nothing. His greeting just now showed that Bell suspected nothing, because he had shaken hands in the heartiest manner possible. And as for Miss Lee, she was no more than a smart Yankee girl, and absolutely an outsider.

Still, it was dreadfully puzzling. And it was not nice to be puzzled at a time when the arch-conspirator ought to know every move of the game. Therefore it became necessary to go into Moreton Wells and see Merritt without delay. As Henson crossed the hall the cheerful voice of Littimer hailed him.

"Reginald," he cried, "I want your assistance and advice."

With a muttered curse Henson entered the library. Littimer was seated at a table, with a cigarette in his mouth, his brows drawn over a mass of papers.

"Sit down and have a cigar," he said. "The fact is I am setting my affairs in order—I am going to make a fresh will. If you hadn't come down last night I should probably have sent for you. Now take my bank-book and check those figures."

"Shall we be long?" Henson asked, anxiously.

Littimer tartly hoped that Henson could-spare him an hour. It was not usual, he said, for a testator to be refused assistance from the chief benefactor under his will. Henson apologized, with a sickly smile. He had important business of a philanthropic kind in Moreton Wells, but he had no doubt that it could wait for an hour. And then for the best part of the morning he sat fuming politely, whilst Littimer chattered in the most amiable fashion. Henson had rarely seen him in a better mood. It was quite obvious that he suspected nothing. Meanwhile Chris and Bell were bowling along towards Moreton Wells. They sat well back in the roomy waggonette, so that the servants could not hear them. Chris regarded Bell with a brilliant smile on her face.

"Confess," she said, "confess that you are consumed with curiosity."

"It would be just as well to acknowledge it at once," Bell admitted. "In the happy old days your sister Enid always said that you were the clever and audacious one of the family. She said you would do or dare anything."

"I used to imagine so," Chris said, more quietly. "But the life of the last few years tried one's nerves terribly. Still, the change has done me a deal of good—the change and the knowledge that Reginald Henson regards me as dead. But you want to know how I am going to get the Rembrandt?"

"That is what is consuming me at present," Bell said.

"Well, we are going to see the man who has it," Chris explained, coolly. "I have his address in Moreton Wells at the present moment, and for the rest he is called the Rev. James Merritt. Between ourselves he is no more a reverend than you are."

"And if the gentleman is shy or refuses to see us?"

"Then he will be arrested on a charge of theft."

"My dear young lady, before you can get a warrant for that kind of thing you have to prove the theft, you have to swear an information to the effect that you believe the property is in the possession of the thief, and that is not easy."

"There is nothing easier. I am prepared to swear that cheerfully."

"That you actually know that the property is in the possession of the thief?"

"Certainly I do. I saw him put it in his pocket."

Bell looked at the speaker with blank surprise. If such was the fact, then Chris's present statement was exactly opposed to all that she had said before. She sat opposite to Bell, with a little gleam of mischief in her lovely eyes.

"You saw that man steal the Rembrandt?" Bell gasped.

"Certainly not. But I did see him steal my big diamond star and put it in his pocket. And I can swear an information on *that*."

"I see that you have something interesting to tell me," Bell said.

"Oh, indeed, I have. We will hark back now to the night before last, when Reginald Henson made his personal attempt to obtain the Rembrandt and then played the trick upon you that was so very near to being a brilliant success."

"It would have been but for you," Bell murmured.

"Well, really, I am inclined to think so. And perhaps Lord Littimer would have given you in custody on a second charge of theft. If he had done so it would have gone hard with you to prove your innocence. But I am wandering from the point. Henson failed. But he was going to try again. I watched him carefully yesterday and managed to see his letters and telegrams. Then I found that he had telegraphed to James Merritt, whose address in Moreton Wells I carefully noted down. It did not require much intellect to grasp the fact that this Merritt was to be the accomplice in the new effort to steal the picture, Mr. Merritt came over and saw his chief, with whom he had a long conversation in the grounds. I also forced myself on Mr. Merritt's notice.

"He was introduced to me as a brand plucked from the burning, a converted thief who had taken orders of some kind. He is a sorry-looking scoundrel, and I took particular note of him, especially the horrible smashed thumb."

"The what!" Bell exclaimed. "A thumb like a snake's head with a little pink nail on it?"

"The same man. So you happen to have met him?"

"We met on our way here," Bell said, drily. "The rascal sent the dogcart away from the station so that I should have to walk home, and he attacked me in the road. But I half-expected something of the kind, and I was ready for him. And he was the man with the thumb. I should have told you all this before, but I had forgotten it in watching your fascinating diplomacy. When the attack was defeated the rascal bolted in the direction of the cliffs. Of course, he was off to tell Henson of the failure of the scheme and to go on with the plot for getting the other picture. If he had stolen my Rembrandt then the other would have remained. I couldn't have turned up with a cock-and-bull story of having started with the picture and being robbed of it by a total stranger in the road … But I am interrupting you."

"Well, I marked that thumb carefully. I have already told you that the thief passed me on his way to the house when he came up the cliff. I was leaning over the terrace when I saw him emerge into a band of light caused by the big arc in the castle tower. I forgot that I was in deep shadow and that he could not possibly see me. I jerked my head back suddenly, and my diamond star fell out and dropped almost at the feet of the intruder. Then he saw it, chuckled over it—placed it in his pocket. I was going to call out, but I didn't. I had a sudden idea, Dr. Bell—I had an idea that almost amounted to an inspiration."

Chris paused for a moment and her eyes sparkled. Bell was watching her with the deepest interest and admiration.

"I let the man keep it," Chris went on, more slowly, "with an eye to the future. The man had stolen the thing and I was in a position to prove it. He would be pretty sure to pawn the star—he probably has done so by this time, and therefore we have him in our power. We have only to discover where the diamonds have been 'planted'—is that the correct expression?—I can swear an information, and the police will subsequently search the fellow's lodgings. When the search is made the missing Rembrandt will be found there. Mr. Merritt would hardly dare to pawn that."

"Even if he knew its real value, which I doubt," Bell said, thoughtfully. "Henson would not tell his tool too much. Let me congratulate you upon your idea, Miss Chris. That diamond star of yours is a powerful factor in our hands, and you always have the consciousness of knowing that you can get it

back again. Now, what are we going to do next?"

"Going to call upon Mr. Merritt, of course," Chris said, promptly. "You forget that I have his address. I am deeply interested in the welfare of the criminal classes, and you are also an enthusiast. I've looked up the names of one or two people in the directory who go in for that kind of thing, and I'm going to get up a bazaar at Littimer Castle for the benefit of the predatory classes who have turned over a new leaf. I am particularly anxious for Mr. Merritt to give us an address. Don't you think that will do?"

"I should think it would do very well indeed," Bell said.

The quaint and somewhat exclusive town of Moreton Wells was reached in due course and the street where the Rev. James Merritt resided located at length. It was a modest two-storeyed tenement, and the occupier of the rooms was at home. Chris pushed her way gaily in, followed by Bell, before the occupant could lay down the foul clay pipe he was smoking and button the unaccustomed stiff white collar round his throat. Merritt whipped a tumbler under the table with amazing celerity, but no cunning of his could remove the smell of gin that hung pungently on the murky atmosphere.

Merritt dodged his head back defiantly as if half expecting a blow. His eyes were strained a little anxiously over Bell's shoulder as if fearful of a shadow. Bell had seen the type before—Merritt was unconsciously looking for the police.

"I am so glad to find you at home," Chris said, sweetly.

Merritt muttered something that hardly sounded complimentary. It was quite evident that he was far from returning the compliment. He had recognised Bell, and was wondering fearfully if the latter was as sure of his identity. Bell's face betrayed nothing. All the same he was following Merritt's uneasy eye till it rested on a roll of dirty paper on the mantelshelf. That roll of paper was the missing Rembrandt, and he knew it.

"Won't you offer me a chair?" Chris asked, in the sweetest possible manner.

Merritt sulkily emptied a chair of a pile of cheap sporting papers, and demanded none too politely what business the lady had with him. Chris proceeded to explain at considerable length. As Merritt listened his eyes gleamed and a broadening grin spread over his face. He had done a great deal of that kind of thing, he admitted. Since Henson had taken him up the police had not been anything like so inquisitive, and his present pose was fruitful of large predatory gains. The latter fact Merritt kept to himself. On the whole the prospect appealed to his imagination. Henson wouldn't like it, but, then, Henson was not in a position to say too much.

"I thought perhaps if you came over with us and dined at the castle," Chris suggested. She spoke slowly and thoughtfully, with her eyes on the ground. "Say to-night. Will you come?"

Merritt grinned extensively once more. The idea of his dining at the castle appealed to his own peculiar sense of humour. He was at his ease, seeing that Bell failed to recognise him. To dine at the castle, to note the plate, and get a minute geographical knowledge of the place from personal observation! … His mouth watered at the thought.

"They ought to be more careful yonder," he suggested. "There's plate and there's pictures."

"Nothing has ever been stolen from Littimer Castle," Bell said, crisply. He read the leer in Merritt's eyes as he spoke of pictures. "Nothing whatever."

"What, not lately?" Merritt asked. "Didn't I hear tell of a—"

He paused, conscious of saying too much. Bell shook his head again. An utterly puzzled expression crept over Mr. Merritt's engaging countenance. At the present moment an art treasure of price stood in that very room, and here was a party from the castle utterly innocent of the robbery. Chris glanced at Bell and smiled.

"I love the pictures," she said, "especially the prints. That Rembrandt, 'The Crimson Blind,' for instance. I found a fresh light in it this morning and called Lord Littimer's attention to it before we started. I should lock that up if it were mine."

Merritt's eyes fairly bulged as he listened. Had he not half-suspected some deep "plant" he would have been vastly amused. But then he had got the very picture these people were speaking about close to hand at the very moment.

"Tell you what," he said, suddenly. "I ain't used to swell society ways, but I'm always ready to sacrifice myself to the poor fellows who ain't found the straight path like me. And if you gets up your

bazaar, I'll do what I can to 'elp."

"Then you will dine with us to-night?" Chris asked, eagerly. "Don't say no, I met a man once with a past like yours at Lady Roslingham's, and he was so interesting. We will call for you in an hour's time with the waggonette. Then we can settle half our plans before dinner."

Merritt was graciously pleased to be agreeable. Moreover, he was utterly puzzled and absolutely consumed with an overpowering curiosity. It seemed also to him to be a sheer waste of providence to discard such an offer. And the plate at Littimer Castle was superb!

Meanwhile Chris and Bell walked down the street together. "He was puzzled over the Rembrandt," Chris said. "Seeing that he has our picture—"

"No doubt about it. The picture was rolled up and stood on the mantelshelf. I followed Merritt's gaze, knowing perfectly well that it would rest presently on the picture if it was in the room. At the same time, our interesting friend, in chuckling over the way he has deceived us, clean forgot the yellow pawnticket lying on the table."

"Dr. Bell, do you mean to say that—"

"That I know where your diamond star was pledged. Indeed I do. Merritt had probably just turned out his pockets as we entered. The pawnticket was on the table and related to a diamond aigrette pawned by one James Merritt—mark the simple cunning of the man—with Messrs. Rutter and Co., 117, High Street. That in itself is an exceedingly valuable discovery, and one we can afford to keep to ourselves for the present. At the same time I should very much like to know what Rutter and Co. are like. Let me go down to the shop and make some simple purchase."

Rutter and Co. proved to be a very high-class shop indeed, despite the fact that there was a pawnbroking branch of the business. The place was quite worthy of Bond Street, the stock was brilliant and substantial, the assistants quite above provincial class. As Bell was turning over some sleeve-links, Chris was examining a case of silver and gold cigarette-cases and the like. She picked up a cigar-case at length and asked the price. At the mention of fifty guineas she dropped the trifle with a little *moue* of surprise.

"It looks as if it had been used," she said.

"It is not absolutely new, madam," the assistant admitted, "therefore the price is low. But the gentleman who sold it to us proved that he had only had it for a few days. The doctor had ordered him not to smoke in future, and so—"

Chris turned away to something else. Bell completed his purchase, and together they left the shop. Once outside Chris gripped her companion's arm excitedly.

"Another great discovery," she said. "Did you see me looking at that cigar-case—a gun-metal one set with diamonds? You recollect that Ruth Gates purchased a case like that for that—that foolishness we thought of in connection with Mr. Steel. The case had a little arrow shaped scratch with the head of the arrow formed of the biggest diamond. Enid told me all this the night before I left Longdean Grange. Dr. Bell, I am absolutely certain that I have had in my hand just now the very case bought by Ruth from Lockhart's in Brighton!"

CHAPTER XXXVI

A BRILLIANT IDEA

Bell was considerably impressed with the importance of Chris's discovery, though at the same time he was not disposed to regard it in the light of a coincidence.

"It's a useful discovery in its way," he said; "but not very remarkable when you come to think of it. Somebody with an eye to damaging Steel changed that cigar-case. How the change affected Steel you know as well as I do. But the cigar-case purchased by Ruth Gates must be somewhere, and we are as likely to find it near Reginald Henson as anywhere else, seeing that he is at the bottom of the whole business. That change was made either by himself or by somebody at his instigation. Once the change was made he would not bother about the spare cigar-case. His ally probably came here to see Henson;

the latter as likely as not threw him over, knowing that the fellow would not dare to talk; hence the thing is turned into money. I am merely speculating, of course, under the assumption that you are quite sure of your facts."

"Absolutely," Chris cried, eagerly. "Two long, irregular scratches leading up in arrow-headed shape to the big diamond in the centre. Ruth told Enid all about that the very last time they discussed the matter together."

"How came Ruth Gates to remember it so clearly?"

"Well, she did it herself. She was rubbing some specks off the case at the last moment, and the scratches were made accidentally with the stones in one of her rings."

Bell was fain to admit that the discovery was an important one. "We'll leave it for the present," he said. "In a small place like this so valuable an article is likely to remain in stock for some time. I'll call in again to-morrow on the pretence of getting further goods and obtain all the information there is to be gained as to who sold the case and what he was like. There is just time for a little lunch before we take up our reverend friend. Where shall we go?"

Chris would like to see the Lion. There was a marvellous coffee-room there with panelled walls and a ceiling by Pugin, and an Ingle-nook filled with rare Dutch tiles. They had the beautiful old place to themselves, so that they could talk freely. Chris crumbled her bread and sipped her soup with an air of deep abstraction.

"A great idea is forming itself in my mind," she said.

"What, another one?" Bell smiled. "Is it the air of the place or what?
Really, there is a brilliancy about you that is striking."

Chris laughed. She was full of the joy of life to-day.

"It is the freedom," she said. "If you only knew what it is to feel free after the dull, aching, monotonous misery of the last few years. To be constantly on the treadmill, to be in the grasp of a pitiless scoundrel. At first you fight against it passionately, with a longing to be doing something, and gradually you give way to despair. And now the weight is off my shoulders, and I am free to act. Fancy the reward of finding Reginald Henson out!"

"Reginald Henson is the blight upon your house. In what way?"

"Ah, I cannot tell you. It is a secret that we never discuss even among ourselves. But he has the power over us, he has blighted all our lives. But if I could get hold of a certain thing the power would be broken. That is what I am after, what I am working for. And it is in connection with my endeavour that the new idea came to me."

"Can't you give me some general idea of it?" Bell asked.

"Well, I want to make Merritt my friend. I want him to imagine that I am as much of an adventuress as he is an adventurer. I want to let him see that I could send him to prison—"

"So you can by telling the police of the loss of your star."

"And getting Merritt arrested and sent to gaol where I couldn't make use of him? No, no. The thing is pretty vague in my mind at present. I have to work it out as one would a story; as David Steel would work it out, for instance. Ah!"

Chris clapped her hands rapturously, and a little cry of delight escaped her.

"The very thing," she exclaimed. "If I could lay all the facts before Mr. Steel and get him to plan out all the details! His fertile imagination would see a way out at once. But he is far away and there is no time to be lost. Is there no way of getting at him?"

Chris appealed almost imploringly to her companion. She made a pretty picture with the old oak engravings behind her. Bell smiled as he helped himself to asparagus.

"Why not adopt the same method by which you originally introduced yourself to the distinguished novelist?" he asked. "Why not use Littimer's telephone?"

Chris pushed her plate away impetuously.

"I am too excited to eat any more," she said. "I am filled with the new idea. Of course, I could use the

telephone to speak to Mr. Steel, and to Enid as well. If the scheme works out as I anticipate, I shall have to hold a long conversation with Enid, a dangerous thing so long as Reginald Henson is about."

"I'll keep Henson out of the way. The best thing is to wait till everybody has gone to bed to-night and call Steel up then. You will be certain to get him after eleven, and there will be no chance of your being cut off at that hour of the night in consequence of somebody else wanting the line. The same remark applies to your sister."

Chris nodded radiantly.

"Thrice blessed telephone," she said. "I can get in all I want without committing myself to paper or moving from the spot where my presence is urgently needed. We will give Mr. Steel a pleasant surprise to-night, and this time I shall get him into no trouble."

The luncheon was finished at length, and an intimation sent to Merritt that his friends were waiting for him at the Lion. As his powerful figure was seen entering the big Norman porch Henson came down the street driving a dog-cart at a dangerous rate of speed.

"Our man is going to have his trouble for his pains," Bell chuckled. "He has come to interview Merritt. How pleased he will be to see Merritt at dinner-time."

Merritt shambled in awkwardly, obviously suppressing a desire to touch his forelock. There was a sheepish grin on his face, a suppressed triumph in his eyes. He had been recently shaved and his hair cut, but despite these improvements, and despite his clerical garb, he was not exactly the class of man to meet in a dark lane after sunset.

Chris, however, showed nothing of this in her greeting. Long before Littimer Castle was reached she had succeeded in putting Merritt quite at his ease. He talked of himself and his past exploits, he boasted of his cunning. It was only now and again that he pulled himself up and piously referred to the new life that he was now leading. Bell was studying him carefully; he read the other's mind like an open book. When the waggonette finally pulled up before the castle Littimer strolled up and stood there regarding Merritt quietly.

"So this is the gentleman you were going to bring to dinner?" he said, grimly. "I have seen him before in the company of our dear Reginald. I also—"

Chris shot Littimer an imploring glance. Merritt grinned in friendly fashion. Bell, in his tactful way, piloted the strange guest to the library before Littimer and Chris had reached the hall. The former polished his eyeglass and regarded Chris critically.

"My dear young lady," he said smoothly, "originality is a passion with me, eccentricity draws me as a magnet; but as yet I have refrained from sitting down to table with ticket-of-leave men. Your friend has 'convict' writ large upon his face."

"He has been in gaol, of course," Chris admitted, cheerfully.

"Then let me prophesy, and declare that he will be in gaol again. Why bring him here?"

"Because it is absolutely necessary," Chris said, boldly. "That man can help me—help *us*, Lord Littimer. I am not altogether what I seem. There is a scoundrel in your house compared with whom James Merritt is an innocent child. That scoundrel has blighted your life and the lives of your family; he has blighted my life for years. And I am here to expose him, and I am here to right the wrong and bring back the lost happiness of us all. I cannot say more, but I implore you to let me have my own way in this matter."

"Oh!" Littimer said, darkly, "so you are masquerading here?"

"I am. I admit it. Turn me out if you like; refuse to be a party to my scheme. You may think badly of me now, probably you will think worse of me later on. But I swear to you that I am acting with the best and purest motives, and in your interest as much as my own."

"Then you are not entitled even to the name you bear?"

"No, I admit it freely. Consider, I need not have told you anything. Things cannot be any worse than they are. Let me try and make them better. Will you, will you *trust* me?"

Chris's voice quivered, there were tears in her eyes. With a sudden impulse Littimer laid his hands upon her shoulders and looked long and searchingly into her eyes.

"Very well," he said, with a gentle sigh. "I will trust you. As a matter of fact, I have felt that I could

trust you from the first. I won't pry into your schemes, because if they are successful I shall benefit by them. And if you like to bring a cartload of convicts down here, pray do so. It will only puzzle the neighbours, and drive them mad with curiosity, and I love that."

"And you'll back me up in all I say and do?" Chris asked.

"Certainly I will. On the whole, I fancy I am going to have a pleasant evening. I don't think dear Reginald will be pleased to see his friend at dinner. If any of the spoons are missing I shall hold you responsible."

Chris went off to her room well pleased with the turn of events. Brilliant audacity had succeeded where timid policy might have resulted in dismal failure. And Littimer had refrained from asking any awkward questions. From the window she could see Bell and Merritt walking up and down the terrace, the latter talking volubly and worrying at a big cigar as a dog might nuzzle at a bone. Chris saw Littimer join the other two presently and fall in with their conversation. His laugh came to the girl's ear more than once. It was quite evident that the eccentric nobleman was enjoying the ex-convict's society. But Littimer had never been fettered by conventional rules.

The dog-cart came up presently and Henson got out. He had an anxious, worried look; there was an ugly frown between his brows. He contrived to be polite as Chris emerged. He wanted to know where Littimer was.

"On the terrace, I fancy," Chris said, demurely. "I guess he is having a long chat with that parson friend of yours—the brand plucked from the burning, you know."

"Merritt," Henson said, hoarsely. "Do you mean to say that Merritt is here? And I've been looking for —I mean, I have been into Moreton Wells. Why did he come?"

Chris opened her eyes in innocent surprise.

"Why," she said, "I fetched him. I'm deeply interested in brands of that kind."

CHAPTER XXXVII

ANOTHER TELEPHONIC MESSAGE

Henson forced a smile to his face and a hand from his side as he approached Merritt and the rest. It was not until the two found themselves alone that the mask was dropped.

"You infernally insolent scoundrel," Henson said, between his teeth. "How dare you come here? You've done your work for the present, and the sooner you go back to your kennel in London the better. If I imagined that you meant any harm I'd crush you altogether."

"I didn't come on my own," Merritt whined. "So keep your 'air on. That young lady came and fetched me—regular gone on me, she is. And there's to be high jinks 'ere—a bazaar for the benefit of pore criminals as can't get no work to do. You 'eard what his lordship said. And I'm goin' to make a speech, like as I used to gull the chaplains. Lor', it's funny, ain't it?"

Henson failed to see the humour of the situation. He was uneasy and suspicious. Moreover, he was puzzled by this American girl, and he hated to be puzzled. She had social aspirations, of course; she cared nothing for decayed or reformed criminals, and this silly bazaar was only designed so that the ambitious girl could find her way into the county set. Then she would choose a husband, and nothing more would be heard of Merritt and Co. Henson had a vague notion that all American girls are on the look-out for English husbands of the titled order.

"Littimer must be mad," he muttered. "I can't understand Littimer; I can't understand anything. Which reminds me that I have a crow to pluck with you. Why didn't you do as I told you last night?"

"Did," said Merritt, curtly. "Got the picture and took it home with me."

"You liar! The picture is in the corridor at the present time."

"Liar yourself! I've got the picture on my mantelshelf in my sitting-room rolled up as you told me to

roll it up and tied with a piece of cotton. It was your own idea as the thing was to be left about casual-like as being less calculated to excite suspicion. And there it is at the present moment, and I'll take my oath to it."

Henson fairly gasped. He had been inside that said sitting-room not two hours before, and he had not failed to notice a roll of paper on the mantelshelf. And obviously Merritt was telling the truth. And equally obviously the Rembrandt was hanging in the corridor at the present moment. Henson had solved and evolved many ingenious puzzles in his time, but this one was utterly beyond him.

"Some trick of Dr. Bell's, perhaps," Merritt suggested.

"Bell suspects nothing. He is absolutely friendly to me. He could not disguise his feelings like that. Upon my word I was never so utterly at sea before in all my life. And as for Littimer, why, he has just made a fresh will more in my favour than the old one. But I'll find out. I'll get to the bottom of this business if it costs me a fortune."

He frowned moodily at his boots; he turned the thing over in his mind until his brain was dazed and muddled. The Rembrandt had been stolen, and yet there was the Rembrandt in its place. Was anything more amazing and puzzling? And nobody else seemed in the least troubled about it. Henson was more than puzzled; deep down in his heart he was frightened.

"I must keep my eyes open," he said. "I must watch night and day. Do you suppose Miss Lee noticed anything when she called to-day?"

"Not a bit of it," said Merritt, confidently "She came to see me; she had no eyes for anybody but your humble servant. Where did she get my address from? Why, didn't you introduce me to the lady yourself, and didn't I tell her I was staying at Moreton Wells for a time? I'm goin' to live in clover for a bit, my pippin. Cigars and champagne, wine and all the rest of it."

"I wish you were at the bottom of the sea before you came here," Henson growled. "You mind and be careful what you're doing with the champagne. They don't drink by the tumbler in the society you are in now, remember. Just one or two glasses and no more. If you take too much and let your tongue run you will find your stay here pretty short."

Apparently the hint was not lost on Merritt, for dinner found him in a chastened mood. His natural audacity was depressed by the splendour and luxury around him; the moral atmosphere held him down. There were so many knives and forks and glasses on the table, such a deal of food that was absolutely strange to him. The butler behind made him shiver. Hitherto in Merritt's investigations into great houses he had fought particularly shy of butlers and coachmen and upper servants of that kind. The butler's sniff and his cold suggestion as to hock slightly raised Merritt's combative spirit. And the champagne was poor, thin stuff after all. A jorum of gin and water, or a mug of beer, was what Merritt's soul longed for.

And what a lot of plate there was on the table and sideboard! Some of it was gold, too. Merritt's greedy professional eye appraised the collection at some hundreds of pounds—hundreds of pounds—that is, after the stuff had been disposed of. In imagination he had already drugged the butler and was stuffing the plate into his bag.

Henson said very little. He was too busily engaged in watching his confederate. He wished from the bottom of his heart now that Chris had never seen Merritt. She was smiling at him now and apparently hanging on every word. Henson had seen society ladies doing this kind of thing before with well-concealed contempt. So long as people liked to play his game for him he had no objection. But this was quite different. Merrit had warmed a little under the influence of his fifth glass of champagne, but his eye looked lovingly and longingly in the direction of a silver spirit-stand on the sideboard. The dinner came to an end at length, to Henson's great relief, and presently the whole party wandered out to the terrace. Bell dropped behind with Chris.

"Now is your time," he whispered. "Henson dare not lose sight of Merritt before he goes to bed, and I'll keep the latter out here for a good long spell. I've muffled the striker of the telephone so that the bell will make no noise when you get your call back from Brighton, so that you must be near enough to the instrument to hear the click of the striker. Make haste."

Chris dropped back to the library and rapidly fluttered over the leaves of the "Telephone Directory." She found what she wanted at length and asked to be put on to Brighton. Then she sat down in an armchair in the darkness close under the telephone, prepared to wait patiently. She could just see the men on the terrace, could catch the dull glow red of their cigars.

Her patience was not unduly tried. At the end of a quarter of an hour the striker clicked furiously.

Chris reached for the receiver and lay back comfortably in her chair with the diaphragm to her ear. "Are you there?" she asked, quietly. "Is that you, Mr. Steel?" To her great relief the answering voice was Steel's own. He seemed to be a little puzzled as to who his questioner was.

"Can't you guess?" Chris replied. "This is not the first time I have had you called. You have not forgotten 218, Brunswick Square, yet?"

Chris smiled as she heard Steel's sudden exclamation.

"So you are my fair friend whom I saw in the dark?" he said. "Yes, I recognise your voice now. You are Miss Chris—well, I won't mention the name aloud, because people might ask what a well-regulated corpse meant by rousing respectable people up at midnight. I hope you are not going to get me into trouble again."

"No, but I am going to ask your advice and assistance. I want you to be so good as to give me the plot of a story after I have told you the details. And you are to scheme the thing out at once, please, because delay is dangerous. Dr. Bell—"

"What's that? Will you tell me where you are speaking from?"

"I am at present located at Littimer Castle. Yes, Dr. Bell is here. Do you want him?"

"I should think so," Steel exclaimed. "Please tell him at once that the man who was found here half dead—you know the man I mean—got up and dressed himself in the absence of the nurse and walked out of the hospital this morning. Since then he has not been seen or heard of. I have been looking up Bell everywhere. Will you tell him this at once? I'll go into your matter afterwards. Don't be afraid; I'll tell the telephone people not to cut us off till I ring. Please go at once."

The voice was urgent, not to say imperative. Chris dropped the receiver into its space and crept into the darkness in the direction of the terrace.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

A LITTLE FICTION

Bell seemed to know by intuition that Chris required him, or perhaps he caught a glimpse of her white dress from the terrace. Anyway, he strolled leisurely in her direction.

"Something has happened?" he whispered, as he came up.

"Well, yes," Chris replied, "though I should like to know how you guessed that. I had no difficulty in getting Mr. Steel on the telephone, but he would say nothing directly he heard that you were here beyond a peremptory request that you were to be told at once that Van Sneck has gone."

"Gone!" Bell echoed, blankly. "What do you mean by that?"

"He has disappeared from the hospital at Brighton to-day. Mr. Steel thinks they were extra busy, or something of that kind. Anyway, Van Sneck got up and dressed himself and left the hospital without being observed. It seems extraordinary to me."

"And yet quite possible," Bell said, thoughtfully. "Van Sneck had practically recovered from the flesh wounds; it was the injury to his head that was the worst part. He resembled an irresponsible lunatic more than anything else. Steel wants me, of course?"

"He suggests that you should go down to Brighton without delay."

"All right, I'll make some excuse to take the first train in the morning. We've got a fine start of Henson, and that's a good thing. If Van Sneck comes within his net we shall have a deal of trouble. I had hoped to get permission to operate on Van Sneck, and relied upon him to solve the mystery. And now you had better go back to your telephone."

Chris hurried back again. A whispered word satisfied her that Steel was still at the other end.

"Dr. Bell starts as early as possible to-morrow," she said. "If you will listen carefully I will give you a

brief outline of all that has happened since I have been here."

Chris proceeded to tell her story succinctly and briefly. From little sounds and signs she could tell that Steel was greatly interested. The story of the man with the thumb fascinated him. It appealed to his professional instincts.

"And what do you want to do with him?" Steel asked.

"Well, you see, I have him in my power," Chris explained. "We can get the other Rembrandt any time we like now, but that is quite a minor consideration. What I want is for Merritt to know that I can have him arrested at any time for stealing my star. It's Enid's star, as a matter of fact; but that is a detail."

"An important one, surely," Steel's voice came thin and clear. "Suppose that our dear friend chances to recognise it? … No, don't ring off yet."

"I'm not. Oh, you are speaking to the Exchange people … Yes, yes; we shall be a long time yet … Are you there? Well, Henson has never seen the star. Enid bought it just before the great trouble came, and afterwards she never had the heart to wear it."

"I understand. You want Merritt to know this?"

"Well, I do and I don't," Chris explained. "I am anxious not to frighten the man. I want to get him in my power, and I want to prove to him that it would be to his advantage for him to come over to my side. Suppose that Enid gave it out that the star had been stolen? And suppose that I could save him at the critical moment? I shouldn't mind him thinking that I had stolen the star in the first place. That is why I am asking you as a novelist to help me."

"You would have made an excellent novelist yourself," David said, admiringly. "Give me five minutes…. Are you there? I fancy I have it. Can't you hear me? That's better. I'll see Miss Gates the first thing in the morning and get her to go over to Longdean and see your sister…. Confound it, don't cut us off yet. What does it matter so long as the messages are paid for? Nobody else wants the line. Well, I may for an hour more…. Are you there? Very sorry; it's the fault of the Post Office people. Here is the plot in a nutshell. Your sister has lost a diamond star. She gives a minute description of it to the police, and drops a hint to the effect that she believes it was taken away by mistake—in other words, was stolen—from her in London by a chance acquaintance called Christabel Lee—"

"Ah," Chris cried, "how clever you are!"

"I have long suspected it," the thin voice went on, drily. "The full description of the star will be printed in the *Police Gazette*, a copy of which every respectable pawnbroker always gets regularly. I suppose the people where the star was pawned are respectable?"

"Highly so. They have quite a Bond Street establishment attached."

"So much the better. They will see the advertisement, and they will communicate with the police. The Reverend James Merritt will be arrested—"

"I don't quite like that," Chris suggested.

"Oh, it's necessary. He will be arrested at the castle. Knowing his antecedents, the police will not stand upon any ceremony with him. You will be filled with remorse. You have plunged back into a career of crime again a being who was slowly climbing into the straight path once more. You take the blame upon yourself—it was at your instigation that Merritt pawned the star."

"But, really, Mr. Steel—"

"Oh, I know. But the end justifies the means. You save Mr. Merritt, there is a bond of sympathy between you, he will regard you as a great light in his interesting profession. You saved him because you had appropriated the star yourself."

"And go to gaol instead of Mr. Merritt?"

"Not a bit of it. The star you deemed to be yours. You had one very like it when you saw Miss Henson, when you were staying in London at the same hotel. By some means the jewels got mixed. You are confident that an exchange has been made. Also you are confident that if Miss Henson will search her jewel-case she will find a valuable star that does not belong to her. Miss Henson does so, she is distressed beyond measure, she offers all kinds of apologies. Exit the police. You need not tell Merritt how you get out of the difficulty, and thus you increase his respect for you. There, that would make a very ingenious and plausible magazine story. It should be more convincing in real life."

"Capital!" Chris murmured. "What an advantage it is to have a novelist to advise one! Many, many thanks for all your kindness. Good-night!"

Chris rang off with a certain sense of relief. It was some time later before she had a chance of conveying to Bell what had happened. He listened gravely to all that Chris had to say.

"Just the sort of feather-brained idea that would occur to a novelist," he said. "For my part, I should prefer to confront Merritt with his theft, and keep the upper hand of him that way."

"And he would mistrust me and betray me at the first opportunity. Besides, in that case, he would know at once that I wanted to get to the bottom of his connection with Reginald Henson. Mr. Steel's plan may be bizarre, but it is safe."

"I never thought of that," Bell admitted. "I begin to imagine that you are more astute than I gave you credit for, which is saying a great deal."

Chris was down early the following morning, only to find Bell at breakfast with every sign of making an early departure. He was very sorry, he explained, gravely, to his host and Chris, but his letters gave him no option, He would come back in a day or two if he might. A moment later Henson came into the room, ostentatiously studying a Bradshaw.

"And where are you going?" Littimer asked. "Why do you all abandon me? Reginald, do you mean to say that you are going to refuse me the light of your countenance?"

"Is Dr. Bell going, too?" Henson asked, with just a suggestion of uneasiness. "I mean—er—"

"Business," Bell said. "I came here at great personal inconvenience. And you?"

"London," Henson replied. "A meeting to-day that I cannot get out of. A couple of letters by this morning's post have decided me."

Chris said nothing; she appeared to be quite indifferent until she had a chance to speak to Bell alone. She looked a little anxious.

"He has found out about Van Sneck," she said. "Truly he is a marvellous man! And he had no letters this morning. I opened the post-bag personally. But I'm glad he's going, because I shall have James Merritt all to myself."

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE FASCINATION OF JAMES MERRITT

On the whole Mr. James Merritt, ex-convict and now humanitarian, was enjoying himself immensely. He did not sleep at the castle, for Lord Littimer drew the line there, but he contrived to get most of his meals under that hospitable roof, and spent a deal of time there. It was by no means the first time he had been "taken up" by the aristocracy since his conversion, and his shyness was wearing off. Moreover, Henson had given his henchman strict instructions to keep his eyes open with a view to getting at the bottom of the Rembrandt mystery.

Still, there is always a crumpled rose-leaf somewhere, and Merritt had his. A few days after Henson departed so hurriedly from town the stolen Rembrandt disappeared from Merritt's rooms. Nobody knew anything about it; the thing had vanished, leaving no trace of the thief behind. Perhaps Merritt would have been less easy in Littimer's society had he known that the missing print was securely locked away in the latter's strong room. Still, had Merritt been acquainted with the classics, *carpe diem* would like as not have been his favourite motto. He declined to worry over the matter until Henson's return. It was not for him to know, yet, that Chris had actually gone over to Moreton Wells, and, during the absence of Merritt's landlady, calmly walked into the house and taken the picture away.

"You are going to see some fun presently," she said, coolly, to the astonished Littimer, as she laid the missing picture before him. "No, I shall not tell you anything more at present. You shall hear the whole story when Reginald Henson stands in the pillory before you. You know now that Henson was at the bottom of the plot to destroy Dr. Bell's character?"

"I always felt that our Reginald was a great scoundrel," Littimer purred over his cigarette. "And if you succeed in exposing him thoroughly I shall watch the performance with the greatest possible pleasure. I am not curious, my dear young lady, but I would give sixpence to know who you are."

"Keep your sixpence," Chris laughed, "and you'll know all in good time.
All I ask is not to be astonished at anything that happens."

Littimer averred that he had long since lost the power of astonishment. There was a brightness and restlessness about Chris to-day that considerably added to her charms. It was nearly a week now since Bell and Henson had departed, and in the meantime Chris had heard nothing from Longdean. Half an hour before a telegram had arrived to the effect that a gentleman in a blue coat might be expected at Littimer Castle at any moment. The police were coming, and Merritt was late to-day. If Merritt failed to turn up the whole situation would be spoilt. It was with a feeling of unutterable relief that Chris saw him coming up the drive.

"Come on the terrace," she said. "I have something very serious to say to you. Mr. Merritt, you have got us both into very serious trouble. Why did you do it?"

"Ain't done nothing," Merritt said, doggedly. He repeated the old formula, "What's up?"

"Er—it's about my diamond star," said Chris. "I lost it a few days ago. If I had known what was going to happen I should have put up with my loss. But I made inquiries through the police without saying a word to anybody, and now I find the star was pawned in Moreton Wells."

"Oh, lor," Merritt gasped. "You don't mean to say the police know that, miss?"

"Indeed I do. You see, once I allowed matters to go out of my hands I was powerless. The case now rests entirely with the police. And I am informed that they may come here and arrest you at any moment. I fear there is no escape for you—you pawned the thing yourself in your own name. What a thousand pities you yielded to sudden temptation."

"But I found it," Merritt whined. "I'll take my oath as I found it under the terrace. I—I—was rambling along the cliffs one day and I found it. And I didn't know it was yours. If I had known it was yours, I'd never have gone and done no such a thing."

Chris shook her head sadly.

"And just as you were getting on so nicely," she said.

"That's it," Merritt whined, brokenly. "Just as I was properly spoofing everybody as I—I mean just as I was getting used to a better life. But you can save me, miss; you can say as you were hard up for money and that, knowing as I knew the ropes, you got me to pawn it for you. Put it in that way and there's not a policeman in England as can touch me."

"I had thought of it," Chris said, with a pretty assumption of distress.
"But, but—Mr. Merritt, I have a terrible confession to make. It was not
I who started the police: it was somebody else. You see, the star was not
my property at all. I—I got it in London."

Mr. Merritt looked up with involuntary admiration.

"You don't mean to say as you nicked it?" he asked. "Well, well."

Chris bent her face lower to conceal her agitation, Her shoulders were heaving, but not with emotion. The warmth of Merritt's admiration had moved her to silent laughter, and she had made the exact impression that she had desired.

"I have telegraphed to the lady, who is more or less of a friend of mine," she said. "I have urged her to take no further steps in the matter. I fancy that she is a good and kind girl and that—but a reply might come at any time."

There was a reply on the way now, as Chris knew perfectly well. The whole thing had been carefully arranged and planned to the moment by Steel and the others.

"I dare say they'll let you down easy," Merritt said, disconsolately; "but it'll be hot for me. I've copped it too many times before, you see."

"Yes, I see," Chris said, thoughtfully. "Mr. Merritt, I have made up my mind: if I had not—er—borrowed that star, it would not have been lost, and you would not have found it, and there would have been no trouble. My conscience would not rest if I allowed you to be dragged back into the old life

again. I am going to save you—I am going to tell the police that you pawned that star for me at my instigation."

Merritt was touched even to tears. There was not an atom of chivalry in the rascal's composition. He had little or no heed for the trouble that his companion appeared to be piling up for herself, but he was touched to the depths of his soul. Here was a clever girl, who in her own way appeared to be a member of his profession, who was prepared to sacrifice herself to save another. Self-sacrifice is a beautiful and tender thing, and Merritt had no intention of thwarting it.

"Do that, and I'm your pal for life," he said, huskily. "And I never went back on a pal yet. Ask anybody as really knows me. 'Tain't as if you weren't one of us, neither. I'd give a trifle to know what your little game is here, eh?"

Chris smiled meaningly. Merritt's delusion was distinctly to be fostered.

"You shall help me then, presently," she said in a mysterious whisper. "Help me and keep your own counsel, and there will be the biggest job you ever had in your life. Only let you and I get out of this mess, and we shall see what we shall see presently."

Merritt looked speechless admiration. He had read of this class of high-toned criminals in the gutter stories peddled by certain publishers, but he had never hoped to meet one in the flesh. He was still gazing open-mouthed at Chris as two men came along the avenue.

They were both in plain clothes, but they had "policeman" writ large all over them.

"Cops, for a million," Merritt gurgled, with a pallid face. "You can tell 'em when you're asleep. And they are after me; they're coming this way. I'll be all right presently."

"I hope so," Chris said, with a curling lip. "You look guilty enough now."

Merritt explained that it was merely the first emotion, and would pass off presently. Nor did he boast in vain. He was quite cool as the officers came up and called him by name.

"That's me," Merritt said. "What's the trouble?"

One of the officers explained. He had no warrant, he said, but all the same he would have to trouble Mr. Merritt to accompany him to Moreton Wells. A diamond star not yet definitely identified had been handed over to the police, the same having been pawned by James Merritt.

"That's quite right," Merritt said, cheerfully. "I pawned it for this young lady here—Miss Lee. Of course, if it is not her property, why, then—"

The officer was palpably taken back. He knew more than he cared to say. The star had been pledged by Merritt, as he cheerfully admitted, but the owner of the star had lost the gem in London under suspicious circumstances in which Miss Lee was mixed up. And at present it was not the policy of the police to arrest Miss Lee. That would come later.

"I am afraid that there has been a misapprehension altogether," Chris said. "Allow me to explain: Mr. Merritt, would you step aside for a moment? I have to speak of private matters. Thank you. Now, sir, I am quite prepared to admit that the ornament pledged does not belong to me, but to Miss Henson, whom I met in London. I took the star by mistake. You may smile, but I have one very like it. If Miss Henson had searched her jewels properly she would have found that she had my star—that I had hers. I heard of the business quite by accident, and telegraphed to Miss Henson to look searchingly amongst her jewels. She has a large amount, and might easily have overlooked my star. Here is a boy with a telegram. Will you take it from him and read it aloud? It is addressed to me, you will find."

It was. It was signed "Enid Henson"; it went on to say that the sender was fearfully sorry for all the trouble she had caused, but that she had found Miss Lee's star with her jewels. Also she had telegraphed at once to the police at Moreton Wells to go no farther.

"Looks like a mistake," the officer muttered. "But if we get that telegram—"

"Which has reached the police-station by this time," Chris interrupted. "Come into the castle and ask the question over the telephone. I suppose you are connected?"

The officer said they were; in fact, they had only recently joined the Exchange. A brief visit to the telephone, and the policeman came back, with a puzzled air and a little more deference in his manner, with the information that he was to go back at once, as the case was closed.

"I've seen some near things in my time, but nothing nearer than this," he said. "Still, it's all right now.

Very sorry to have troubled you, miss."

The officers departed with the air of men who had to be satisfied, despite themselves. Merritt came forward with an admiration almost fawning. He did not know quite how the thing had happened, but Chris had done the police. Smartness and trickery of that kind were the highest form of his idolatry. His admiration was nearly beyond words.

"Well, strike me," he gasped. "Did ever anyone ever see anything like that? You, as cool as possible, and me with my heart in my mouth all the time. And there ain't going to be no trouble, no sort of bother over the ticket?"

"You hand over that ticket to me," Chris smiled, "and there will be an end of the matter. And if you try to play me false in any way, why, it will be a bad day for you. Give me your assistance, and it will be the best day's work you ever did in your life."

Merritt's heart was gained. His pride was touched.

"Me go back on you?" he cried, hoarsely. "After what you've done? Only say the word, only give old Jim Merritt a call, and it's pitch-and-toss to manslaughter for those pretty eyes of yours. Good day's work! Aye, for both of us."

And Chris thought so too.

CHAPTER XL

A USEFUL DISCOVERY

Waiting with the eagerness of the greyhound in leash, David Steel was more annoyed and vexed over the disappearance of the wounded Van Sneck than he cared to admit. He had an uneasy feeling that the unseen foe had checkmated him again. And he had built up so many hopes upon this strangely-uninvited guest of his. If that man spoke he could tell the truth. And both Cross and Bell had declared that he would not die.

David found Cross in a frame of mind something like his own. It was late in the afternoon before it transpired that Van Sneck was gone, and, unfortunately, David did not know where to find Bell just at the moment. Cross had very little to say.

"A most unpleasant incident," he remarked. "But these things will happen, you know. We have been so busy lately, and our vigilance has been slightly relaxed. Oh, it is impossible to guard against everything, but he is certain to be found."

"You don't think," David suggested, "that anybody secretly connected with the man's past—"

"No, I don't," Cross snapped; "that would be impossible. The man had something on his mind, and so far as bodily condition was concerned he was getting quite strong again. In his dazed state he got up and dressed himself and went away. He seems to have been seeking for somebody or something for days. We are certain to have him again before long."

With which poor consolation David returned home again. He was restless and desirous of human companionship. He even resented it, as a kind of affront, that his mother had chosen at this time to go to Hassocks to stay with an old friend for a couple of days. That Mrs. Steel knew practically nothing of her son's trouble counted for naught. Therefore it was with something akin to pleasure that David found Ruth Gates waiting in the drawing-room for him when he came in from his walk on the following afternoon. Nothing had been heard of Van Sneck in the meantime, but thanks to Chris's telephone message late the previous night he had got in touch with Bell, who was coming south without delay.

There was a look of shy pleasure in Ruth's eyes and a deep carmine flush on her cheeks.

"You don't think that this is very bold of me?" she asked.

"I am pretty Bohemian in any case," David laughed, as he looked down fondly into the shy, sweet eyes. "And I'm too overjoyed to see you to think about anything else. I wish my mother was at home. No, I don't, because I have you all to myself."

"David! On an occasion like this you ought to be the pink of propriety. Do you know, I believe that I have made a great discovery?"

"Indeed, little girl! And what have you found out?"

"Well, you must tell me something before my discovery seems valuable. David, you are a close student of human nature. Is it possible for men of phenomenal cunning to make careless mistakes? Do the most clever criminals ever make childish blunders?"

"My dear child, if they didn't the police would have very little chance. For instance, I have discovered how those enemies of ours got hold of the notepaper that lured Van Sneck here. They sent a messenger to Carter's, in East Street, presumedly knowing that my dies were there, and ordered a quarter of a ream of paper and envelopes. These were to be sent to an address in East Grinstead in a hurry. Now, that was very clever and smart, but here comes the folly. Those people, in the stress of business, actually forgot to ascertain the cost and pay for the paper, so that it was down yesterday in my last quarter's bill. Oh, yes, I assure you, the most brilliant criminals do the most incredibly foolish things."

Ruth looked relieved. Her pretty features relaxed into a smile.

"Then I fancy Reginald Henson has done so," she said. "I fancy I have solved the mystery of the cigar-case—I mean, the mystery of the one I bought."

"And which was changed for the one purchased at Walen's, hence these tears. But Lockharts say that *our* case was really purchased by an American."

"Yes, I know. And I fancy that the manager honestly thought so. But I think I can explain that."

It was David's turn to look up eagerly.

"Do you mean it?" he exclaimed. "It will make a wonderful difference if you can. That has been one of the most bewildering knots of the whole puzzle. If we could only trace the numbers of those notes, I suppose changed at the same time as the cigar-case."

"Indeed they were not," Ruth cried. "I have ascertained that the case was changed by Henson, as you and I have already decided. Henson made the exchange not at the time we thought."

"Not when you left the package on the table for him to see?"

"No; at least I can't say. He had the other case then, probably, passed on to him by Van Sneck. Or perhaps he merely ascertained what I had purchased. That was sufficient for his purpose. Of course he must have found out all about our scheme. After I had laid my cigar-case on your doorstep a man quietly changed it for the other purchased at Walen's. But this is the alternate theory only. Any way, I am absolutely certain that you got exactly the same notes that we had placed in the original case."

"That might be," David said, thoughtfully. "But that does not explain the fact that Lockhart's sold *your* case to an American at the Metropole."

"I fancy I can even explain that, dear. My uncle came down suddenly to-day from London. He wanted certain papers in a great hurry. Now, those papers were locked up in a drawer at 219 given over specially to Mr. Henson. My uncle promptly broke open the drawer and took out the papers. Besides those documents the drawer contained a package in one of Lockhart's big linen-lined envelopes—a registered letter envelope, in fact. My uncle had little time to spare, as he was bound to be back in London to-night. He suggested that as the back of the drawer was broken and the envelope presumably contained valuables, I had better take care of it. Well, I must admit at once that I steamed the envelope open. I shouldn't have done so if Lockhart's name had not been on the flap. In a little case inside I found a diamond bracelet, which I have in my pocket, together with a receipted bill for seventy odd pounds made out to me."

"To you?" David cried. "Do you mean to say that—"

"Indeed I do. The receipt was made out to me, and with it was a little polite note to the effect that Messrs. Lockhart had made the exchange of the cigar-case for the diamond bracelet, and that they hoped Miss Gates would find the matter perfectly satisfactory."

David was too astonished to say anything for the moment. The skein was too tangled to be thought out all at once. Presently he began to see his way.

"Under ordinary circumstances the change seems impossible," he said. "Especially seeing that the juggling could not have been done without both the cases—but I had forgotten how easily the cases

were changed. I have it! What is the date of that letter?"

Ruth slowly unfolded a document she had taken from her purse.

"The day following what you call your great adventure," she said. "Henson or somebody took the real case—my case—back to Lockhart's and changed it in my name. I had previously been admiring this selfsame bracelet, and they had tried to sell it to me. My dear boy, don't you see this is all part of the plot to plunge you deeper and deeper into trouble, to force us all to speak to save you? There are at least fifteen assistants at Lockhart's. Of course the ultimate sale of the cigar-case to this American could be proved, seeing that the case had got back into stock again, and at the same time the incident of the change quite forgotten. And when you go and ask questions at Lockhart's—as you were pretty sure to do, as Henson knew—you are told of the sale only to the American. Depend upon it, that American was Henson himself or somebody in his pay. David, that man is too cunning, *too* complex. And some of these days it is going to prove his fall."

David nodded thoughtfully. And yet, without something very clever and intricate in the way of a scheme, Henson could not have placed him in his present fix.

"There is only one thing to be done," he said. "You and I must go down to Lockhart's and make a few inquiries. With that diamond bracelet and letter in your possession you should have no difficulty in refreshing their memories. Will you have some tea?"

"I am too excited," Ruth laughed. "I couldn't eat or drink anything just at present. David, what a lovely house you have."

"I'm glad to hear that you are going to like it," David said, drily.

Lockhart's received their customers in the usual courtly style. They were sorry they had no recollection of the transaction to which madam referred. The sale of the bracelet was clear, because that was duly and properly recorded on the books, and as indeed was the sale of the gun-metal cigar-case to an American gentleman at the Metropole. If madam said that she had purchased the cigar-case, why—still the polite assistant was most courteously incredulous.

The production of the letter made a difference. There was a passing of confidences from one plate-glass counter to another, and presently another assistant came forward. He profoundly regretted that there had been a mistake, but he remembered the incident perfectly. It was the day before he had departed on his usual monthly visit to the firm's Paris branch. Madam had certainly purchased the cigar-case; but before the sale could be posted in the stock ledger madam had sent a gentleman to change the case for the diamond bracelet previously admired. The speaker had attended to both the sale and the exchange; in fact, his cab was waiting for him during the latter incident.

"I trust there is nothing wrong?" he asked, anxiously.

"Not in the least," Ruth hastened to reply. "The whole matter is a kind of comedy that I wanted to solve. It is a family joke, you understand. And who made the exchange?"

"Mr. Gates, madam. A tall gentleman, dressed in—"

"That is quite sufficient, thank you," said Ruth. "I am sorry to trouble you over so silly a matter."

The assistant assured madam with an air of painful reproach that nothing was counted a trouble in that establishment. He bowed his visitors out and informed them that it was a lovely afternoon, a self-evident axiom that the most disputatious could not well deny.

"You see how your inquiries might have been utterly baffled but for this find of mine," Ruth said, as the two went along North Street. "We shall find presently that the Metropole American and Reginald Henson are one and the same person."

"And you fancy that he made the exchange at Lockhart's?"

"I feel pretty certain of it," Ruth replied. "And you will be sure later on to find that he had a hand in the purchase of the other cigar-case from Walen's. Go to Marley's and get him to make inquiries as to whether or not Walen's got their case down on approval."

David proceeded to do so without further delay. Inspector Marley was out, but David left a message for him. Would he communicate by telephone later on? Steel had just finished his dinner when Marley rang him up.

"Are you there? Yes, I have seen Walen. Your suggestion was quite right. Customer had seen cigar-

case exactly like it in Lockhart's, only too dear. Walen dealt with some manufacturers and got case down. Oh, no, never saw customer again. That sort of thing happens to shopkeepers every day. Yes. Walen thinks he would recognise his man again. Nothing more? Good-night, sir."

CHAPTER XLI

A DELICATE ERRAND

It looked like being a long, dull evening for Steel if he were not going to the theatre or anything of that kind. He generally read till about eleven o'clock, after which he sat up for another couple of hours plotting out the day's task for to-morrow. To-night he could only wander restlessly about his conservatory, snipping off a dead leaf here and there and wondering where the whole thing was going to end.

With a certain sense of relief David heard the front door-bell trill about eleven o'clock. Somebody was coming to see him, and it didn't matter much who in Steel's present frame of mind. But he swept into the study with a feeling of genuine pleasure as Hatherly Bell was announced.

"My dear fellow, I'm delighted to see you," he cried. "Take the big armchair. Let me give you a cigar and a whisky and soda and make you comfortable. That's better."

"I'm tired out," Bell said. "In London all day, and since six with Cross.
Can you put me up for the night?"

"My bachelor bedroom is always ready, Bell."

"Thanks. I don't fancy you need be under any apprehension that anybody has spirited Van Sneck away. In the first place Henson, who seems to have discovered what happened, is in a terrible state about it. He wanted very badly to remain at Littimer, but when he heard that Van Sneck had left the hospital he came down here; in fact, we travelled together. Of course he said nothing whatever about Van Sneck, whom he is supposed to know nothing about, but I could see that he was terribly disturbed. The worst of it is that Cross was going to get me to operate on Van Sneck; and Heritage, who seems wonderfully better, was going to assist."

"Is your unfortunate friend up to that kind of thing now?" David asked.

"I fancy so. Do you know that Heritage used to have a fairly good practice near Littimer Castle? Lord Littimer knows him well. I want Heritage to come into this. I want to get at the reason why Henson has been so confoundedly good to Heritage. For years he has kept his eye upon him; for years he has practically provided him with a home at Palmer's. And when Heritage mentions Henson's name he always does so with a kind of forced gratitude."

"You think that Heritage is going to be useful to us?"

"I fancy so. Mind you, it is only my idea—what I call intuition, for want of a better word. And what have you been doing lately?"

David proceeded to explain, giving the events of the afternoon in full detail. Bell followed the account with the deepest interest. Then he proceeded to tell his own story. David appeared to be fascinated with the tale of the man with the thumb-nail.

"So Miss Chris hopes to hypnotise the man with the thumb," he said. "You have seen more of her than I have, Bell. Does she strike you as she strikes me—a girl of wonderfully acute mind allied to a pluck and audacity absolutely brilliant?"

"She is that and more," Bell said, warmly. "Now that she is free to act she has developed wonderfully. Look how cleverly she worked out that Rembrandt business, how utterly she puzzled Henson, and how she helped me to get into Littimer's good books again without Henson even guessing at the reason. And now she has forced the confidence of that rascal Merritt. She has saved him from a gaol into which she might have thrown him at any moment, she has convinced him that she is something exceedingly brilliant in the way of an adventuress, with a great *coup* ahead. Later on she will use Merritt, and a fine hard-cutting tool she will find him."

"Where is Henson at the present moment?" David asked.

"I left him in London this afternoon," Bell replied. "But I haven't the slightest doubt in the world that he has made his way to Brighton by this time. In all probability he has gone to Longdean."

Bell paused as the telephone bell rang out shrilly. The mere sound of it thrilled both of them with excitement. And what a useful thing the telephone had proved!

"Are you there?" came the quick, small whisper. "Is that you, Mr. Steel?
I am Enid Henson."

There was a long pause, during which David was listening intently. Bell could see him growing rigid with the prospect of something keen, alert, and vigorous.

"Bell is here with me at this moment," he said. "Just wait a minute whilst I tell him. Don't go away, please. Under the circumstances it might be dangerous for me to ring you … Just a moment. Here's a pretty mess."

"Well," Bell said, impatiently, "I'm only a mere man, after all."

"Henson is at Longdean; he turned up an hour ago, and at the present moment is having his supper in the library before going to bed. But that is not the worst part of it. Williams heard the dogs making a great noise by the gates, and went to see what was wrong. Some poor, demented fellow had climbed over the wall, and the dogs were holding him up. Fortunately, he did not seem to be conscious of his danger, and as he stood still the hounds did him no harm. Williams was going to put the intruder into the road again when Miss Henson came up. And whom do you suppose the poor, wandering tramp to be?"

Bell pitched his cigar into the grate full of flowers and jumped to his feet.

"Van Sneck, for a million," he cried. "My head to a cocoanut on it."

"The same. They managed to get the poor fellow into the house before Williams brought Henson from the lodge, and he's in the stables now in a rather excited condition. Now, I quite agree with Miss Henson that Henson must be kept in ignorance of the fact, also that Van Sneck must be got away without delay. To inform the hospital authorities would be to spoil everything and play into Henson's hands. But he must be got away to-night."

"Right you are. We'll go and fetch him. *Et apres*?"

"*Et apres* he will stay here. He shall stay *here*, and you shall say that it is dangerous to remove him. Cross shall be told and Marley shall be told, and the public shall be discreetly kept in ignorance for the present. I'll go over there at once, as there is no time to be lost. Miss Henson suggests that I should come, and she tells me that Williams will wait at the lodge-gates for me. But you are going to stay here."

"Oh, indeed! And why am I going to stay here?"

"Because, my dear friend, I can easily manage the business single-handed, and because you must run no risk of meeting Henson yonder. You are not now supposed to know where the family are, nor are you supposed to take the faintest interest in them. Stay here and make yourself comfortable till I return…. Are you there? I will be at Longdean as soon as possible and bring Van Sneck here. No, I won't ring off; you had better do that. I shall be over in less than an hour."

David hung up the receiver and proceeded to don a short covert coat and a cap. In the breast-pocket of the coat he placed a revolver.

"Just as well to be on the safe side," he said. "Though I am not likely to be troubled with the man with the thumb again. Still, Henson may have other blackguards; he may even know where Van Sneck is at the present moment, for all I know to the contrary."

"I feel rather guilty letting you go alone," Bell said.

"Not a bit of it," said David, cheerfully. "Smoke your cigar, and if you need any supper ring for it. You can safely leave matters in my hands. Van Sneck shall stay here till he is fit, and then you shall operate upon him. After that he ought to be as clay in the hands of the potter. So long."

And David went off gaily enough. He kept to the cliffs for the first part of the distance, and then struck off across the fields in the direction of Longdean. The place was perfectly quiet, the village was all in darkness as he approached the lodge-gates of the Grange. Beyond the drive and between the

thick, sad firs that shielded the house he could see the crimson lights gleaming here and there. He could catch the rumble and scratch in the bushes, and ever and again a dog whined. The big gate was closed as David peeped in searching for his guide.

"Williams," he whispered; "Williams, where are you?"

But no reply came. The silence was full of strange, rushing noises, the rush of blood in David's head. He called again and again, but no reply came. Then he heard the rush and fret of many feet, the cry of a pack of hounds, a melancholy cry, with a sombre joy in it. He saw a light gleaming fitfully in the belt of firs.

"No help for it," David muttered. "I must chance my luck. I never saw a dog yet that I was afraid of. Well, here goes."

He scrambled over the wall and dropped on the moist, clammy earth on the other side. He fumbled forward a few steps, and then stopped suddenly, brought up all standing by the weird scene which was being solemnly enacted under his astonished eyes.

CHAPTER XLII

PRINCE RUPERT'S RING

Whilst events were moving rapidly outside, time at Longdean Grange seemed to stand still. The dust and the desolation were ever there. The gloom brooded like an evil spirit. And yet it was but the calm before the storm that was coming to banish the hoary old spectres for good.

Still, Enid felt the monotony to be as maddening as ever. There were times when she rebelled passionately against the solitude of the place. There were moments to her when it seemed that her mind couldn't stand the strain much longer.

But she had hope, that blessed legacy to the sanguine and the young. And there were times when she would creep out and see Ruth Gates, who found the Rottingdean Road very convenient for cycling just now. And there was always the anticipation of a telephone message from Chris. Originally the telephone had been established so that the household could be run without the intrusion of tradesmen and other strangers. It had seemed a great anomaly at the time, but now Enid blessed it every moment of the day. And she was, perhaps, not quite so unhappy as she deemed herself to be. She had her lover back again now, with his character free from every imputation.

The sun straggled in through the dim, dusty panes; the monotonous voice of Mrs. Henson droned in the drawing-room. It was what Williams called one of the unhappy lady's "days." Sometimes she was quiet and reasonable, at other times the dark mood hung heavily upon her. She was pacing up and down the drawing-room, wringing her hands and whimpering to herself. Enid had slipped into the grounds for a little fresh air; the house oppressed her terribly to-day. The trim lawns and blazing flowerbeds were a pleasant contrast to the misery and disorder of the house.

Enid passed on into the shadow of the plantation. A little farther on nearer the wall the dogs seemed to be excited about something. William's rusty voice could be heard expostulating with some intruder. By him stood a man who, though fairly well dressed, looked as if he had slept in his garments for days. There was a dazed, puzzled, absent expression on his face.

"You might have been killed," Williams croaked. "If you hadn't stood still they dogs would have pulled you to pieces. How did you get here?"

"I've lost it," the stranger muttered. "I've lost it somewhere, and I shall have no rest till I find it."

"Well, go and look in the road," Williams suggested, smoothly. "Nothing ever gets lost here. Just you hop over that wall and try your luck outside."

Enid came forward. Evidently the intruder was no stranger to her.
Williams started to explain volubly. But Enid cut him short at once.

"A most extraordinary thing has happened," she said. "It is amazing that this man should come here of all places. Williams, this is the man Van Sneck."

"What, the chap as was wounded in the hospital, miss?"

"The same. The man is not in full possession of his senses. And if Reginald Henson finds him now it is likely to go hard with him. He must be taken into the house and looked after until I can communicate with somebody I can trust. Mr. Steel, I think. He must be got back to the hospital. It is the only place where he is safe."

Van Sneck seemed to be looking on with the vacant stare of the mindless. He suffered himself to be led to the house, where he was fed like a child. It was in vain that Enid plied him with all kinds of questions. He had lost something—he would have no peace till he had found it. This was the one burden of his cry. Enid crossed to the window in some perplexity. The next moment she had something else to occupy her mind. Reginald Henson was coming up the drive. Just for an instant Enid felt inclined to despair.

"Williams," she cried, "Mr. Henson is here. On no account must he see our unfortunate visitor. He cannot possibly know that Van Sneck is here; the whole thing is an accident. I am going down into the hall. I shall contrive to get Mr. Henson into the drawing-room. Without delay you must smuggle Mr. Van Sneck into your apartments over the stable. You will be perfectly safe if you go down the back staircase. As soon as the drawing-room door closes, go."

Williams nodded. He was essentially a man of action rather than words.
With all the coolness she could summon up Enid descended to the hall.
She gave a little gesture of surprise and disdain as she caught sight
of Henson.

"So you came down to welcome me?" Enid said, coldly.

A sudden light of rage lit up Henson's blue eyes. He caught Enid almost roughly by the shoulders and pushed her into the drawing-room. There was something coming, she knew. It was a relief a minute or two later to hear Williams's whistle as he crossed the courtyard. Henson knew nothing of Van Sneck's presence, nor was he likely to do so now.

"You are forgetting yourself," Enid said. "How dare you touch me like that?"

"By heavens," Henson whispered, vehemently, "when I consider how I have been fooled by you I wonder that I do not strike the life out of you. Where is your sister?"

Enid assumed an air of puzzled surprise. She raised her eyebrows, coldly. But it needed no very brilliant intelligence to tell her that Henson had discovered something.

"I had only one sister," she said, "and she is—"

"Dead! Rot. No more dead than I am. A nice little scheme you had put up together with that scribbling ass David Steel. But Steel is going to get a lesson not to interfere in my affairs, and you are going to get one also. Where is your sister?"

Despite his bullying triumph there was something nervous and anxious about the tone of the question. It was not quite like Henson to let his adversary see that he had scored a point. But since the affair of the dogs Henson had not been quite his old self. It was easy to see that he had found out a great deal, but he had not found out where Chris was yet.

"I know nothing," said Enid. "I shall answer no questions."

"Very well. But I shall find out. Accident put me on the trail first. And I have been to see that man Walker. He never saw your sister after her 'death,' nor did the undertaker. And I might have met my death at the fangs of that dog you put upon me. What a fool Walker was."

Enid looked up a little anxiously. Had Walker said anything about a second opinion? Had he betrayed to Henson the fact that he had been backed up by Hatherly Bell? Because they had taken a deal of trouble to conceal the fact that Bell had been in the house.

"Dr. Walker should have called in another opinion," she said, mockingly.

"The man was too conceited for that, and you know it," Henson growled; "and finely you played upon his vanity."

Enid was satisfied. Walker had evidently said nothing about Bell; and
Henson, though he had just come from Littimer, knew nothing about Chris.

"You have made a statement," she said, "and in reply I say nothing. You have chosen to assume that

my sister is still alive. Well, it is a free country, and you are at liberty to think as you please. If we had anything to gain by the course you suggest—"

"Anything to gain!" Henson burst out angrily.

"Everything to gain. One whom I deemed to be dead is free to follow me to pry into my affairs, to rob me. That was part of Steel's precious scheme, I presume. If you and your sister and Miss Gates hadn't talked so loudly that day in the garden I might not—"

"Have listened," said Enid, coldly. "Ears like a hare and head like a cat. But you don't know everything, and you never will. You scoundrel, you creeping, crawling scoundrel! If I only dared to speak. If I cared less for the honour of this unhappy family—"

"If you could only get the ring," said Henson, with a malicious sneer. "But the ring is gone. The ruby ring lies at the bottom of the North Sea."

Some passionate, heedless words rose to Enid's lips, but she checked them. All she could do now was to watch and wait till darkness. Van Sneck must be got out of the way before anything else was done. She did not dare to use the telephone yet, though she had made up her mind to ask Steel to come over and take Van Sneck away. Later on she could send the message.

Van Sneck had eaten a fairly good meal, so Williams said, and had fallen into a heavy sleep. There was nothing for it but to wait and watch. Dinner came in due course, with Mrs. Henson, ragged and unkempt as usual, taking no notice of Henson, who watched her furtively during the meal. Enid escaped to her own room directly afterwards, and Henson followed his hostess to the drawing-room.

Once there his manner changed entirely. His lips grew firm, his eyes were like points of steel. Mrs. Henson was pacing the dusty floor, muttering and crooning to herself. Henson touched her arm, at the same time holding some glittering object before her eyes. It was a massive ruby ring with four black pearls on either side.

"Look here," he whispered. "Do you recognise it? Have you seen it before?"

A pitiful, wailing cry came from Mrs. Henson's lips. She was trembling from head to foot with a strange agitation. She gazed at the ring as a thirsty man in a desert might have looked on a draught of cold spring water. She stretched out her hand, but Henson drew back.

"I thought you had not forgotten it," he smiled. "It means much to you, honour, peace, happiness—your son restored to his proper place in the world. Last time I was here I wanted money, a mere bagatelle to you. Now I want £10,000."

"No, no," Mrs. Henson cried. "You will ruin me—£10,000! What do you do with all the money? You profess to give it all to charity. But I know better. Much you give away that more may come back from it. But that money you get from a credulous public. And I could expose you, ah, how I could expose you, Reginald Henson."

"Instead of which you will let me have that £10,000."

"I cannot. You will ruin me. Have you not had enough? Give me the ring."

Henson smilingly held the gem aloft. Mrs. Henson raised her arm, with the dust rising in choking clouds around her. Then with an activity astonishing in one of her years she sprang upon Henson and tore the ring from his grasp. The thing was so totally unexpected from the usually gentle lady that Henson could only gasp in astonishment.

"I have it," Mrs. Henson cried. "I have it, and I am free!"

Henson sprang towards her. With a quick, fleet step she crossed to the window and fled out into the night. A raging madness seemed to have come over her again; she laughed and she cried as she sped on into the bushes, followed by Henson. In his fear and desperation the latter had quite forgotten the dogs. He was in the midst of them, they were clustered round himself and Mrs. Henson, before he was aware of the fact.

"Give me the ring," he said. "You can't have it yet. Some day I will restore it to you. Be sensible. If anybody should happen to see you." Mrs. Henson merely laughed. The dogs were gambolling around her like so many kittens. They did not seem to heed Henson in the joy of her presence. He came on again, he made a grab for her dress, but the rotten fabric parted like a cobweb in his hand. A warning grunt came from one of the dogs, but Henson gave no heed.

"Give it me," he hissed; "or I will tear it from you."

CHAPTER XLIII

HEARING THE TRUTH

David Steel stood contemplating the weird scene with almost doubting eyes. In his wildest moments he had never imagined anything more dramatic than this. The candle in its silver sconce that Mrs. Henson had snatched up before her flight was perilously near her flimsy dress. Henson caught her once more in a fierce grip. David could stand it no longer. As Henson came by him his right arm flashed out, there was a dull thud, and Henson, without having the least idea what had happened, fell to the ground, with a very hazy idea of his surroundings for a moment or two.

Equally unconscious that she had a protector handy, Mrs. Henson turned and fled for the house. A minute later and she was followed by Henson, still puzzling his racking head to know what had happened. David would have followed, but the need for caution flashed upon him. If he stood there perfectly still Henson would never know who his antagonist was. David stood there waiting. As he glanced round he saw some little object glittering near to his feet. It was the ruby ring!

"Be you there, sir?" a rusty voice whispered close by.

"I am, Williams," David replied; "I have been waiting for some time."

Williams chuckled, making no kind of apology for his want of punctuality.

"I've been looking after our man, sir," he said. "That Dutch chap what Miss Enid said you'd come for. And I saw all that business in the shrubbery just now. My! if I didn't feel good when you laid out Henson on the grass. The sound of that smack was as good as ten years' wages for me. And he's gone off to his room with a basin of vinegar and a ream of brown paper. Why didn't you break his neck?"

David suggested that the law took a prejudiced view of that kind of thing, and that it would be a pity to hang anyone for such a creature as Reginald Henson.

"Our man is all right?" he asked.

"As a trivet," said Williams. "Sleeping like a baby; he is in my own bed over the stable. I'll show you into the harness-room, where Miss Enid's waiting for you, sir, and then I'll go and see as Henson don't come prowling about. Not as he's likely to, considering the clump on the side of the head you gave him. I take it kind of Providence to let me see that!"

Williams hobbled away, chuckling to himself and followed by David. There was a feeble oil-lamp in the harness-room. Enid was waiting there anxiously.

"So you have put Henson out of the way for a time," she said. "He passed me just now using awful language, and wondering how it had all come about. Wasn't it a strange thing that Van Sneck should come here?"

"Not very," David said. "He is evidently looking for his master, Reginald Henson. I have not the slightest doubt that he has been here many times before. Williams says he is asleep. Pity to wake him just yet, don't you think?"

"Perhaps it is. But I am horribly afraid of our dear friend Reginald, all the same."

"Our dear Reginald will not trouble us just yet. He came down as far as London with Bell. Of course he had heard the news of Van Sneck's flight. Was he disturbed?"

"I have never seen him in such a passion before, Mr. Steel. And not only was he in a passion, but he was horribly afraid about something. And he has made a discovery."

"He hasn't found out that your sister—"

"Is at Littimer Castle? That is really the most consoling part of the business. He has been at Littimer for a day or two, and he has not the remotest idea that Christabel Lee is our Chris."

"A feather in your sister's cap. She has quite captivated Littimer,
Bell says."

"And she played her part splendidly. Mr. Steel, it is very, very good to know that Hatherly has cleared himself in the eyes of Lord Littimer at last. Did Reginald suspect—"

"Nothing," Steel said. "He is utterly and hopelessly puzzled over the whole business. And Bell has managed to convince him that he is not suspected at all. That business over the Rembrandt was really a brilliant bit of comedy. But what has Henson found out?"

"That Chris is not dead. He has seen Walker and the undertaker. But he does not know yet that Dr. Bell was in the house that eventful night, which is a blessing. As a matter of fact, Reginald has not been quite the same man since Rollo nearly killed him that exciting evening. His nerves seem to be greatly shaken."

"That is because the rascal feels the net closing round him," Steel said. "It was a fine stroke on your sister's part to win over that fellow Merritt to her side. I supplied the details per telephone, but the plot was really Miss Chris's. How on earth should we have managed without the telephone over this business?"

"I am at a loss to say," Enid smiled. "But tell me about that plot. I am quite in the dark as to that side of the matter."

David proceeded to explain his own and Chris's ingenious scheme for getting Merritt into their power. Enid followed the story with vast enjoyment, tempered with the fact that Henson was so near.

"I should never have thought of that," she said; "but Chris was always so clever. But tell me, what was Henson doing in the garden just now? Williams says he was illtreating my aunt, but that seems hardly possible even for Reginald."

"It was over a ring that Mrs. Henson had," David explained. "She was running away with it, and Henson was trying to get it back. You see—"

"A ring!" Enid gasped. "Did you happen to see it? Oh, if it is only—. But he would not be so silly as that. A ring is the cause of all the trouble. *Did* you see it?"

"I not only saw it but I have it in my possession," David replied.

Enid turned up the flaring little lamp with a shaking hand. Quite unstrung, she held out her fingers for the ring.

"It is just possible," she said, hoarsely, "that you possess the key of the situation. If that ring is what I hope it is we can tumble Henson into the dust to-morrow. We can drive him out of the country, and he will never, never trouble us again. How did you get it?"

"Mrs. Henson dropped it and I picked it up."

"Please let me see it," Enid said, pleadingly. "Let me be put out of my misery."

David handed the ring over; Enid regarded it long and searchingly. With a little sigh of regret she passed it back to David once more.

"You had better keep it," she said. "At any rate, it is likely to be valuable evidence for us later on. But it is not the ring I hoped to see. It is a clever copy, but the black pearls are not so fine, and the engraving inside is not so worn as it used to be on the original. It is evidently a copy that Henson has had made to tease my aunt with, to offer her at some future date in return for the large sums of money that she gave him. No; the original of that ring is popularly supposed to be at the bottom of the North Sea. If such had been the case—seeing that Henson had never handled it before the Great Tragedy came—the original must be in existence."

"Why so?" David asked.

"Because the ring must have been copied from it," Enid said. "It is a very faithful copy indeed, and could not have been made from mere directions—take the engraving inside, for instance. The engraving forms the cipher of the house of Littimer, If Henson has the real ring, if we can find it, the tragedy goes out of our lives for ever."

"I should like to hear the story," said Steel.

Enid paused and lowered the lamp as a step was heard outside. But it was only Williams.

"Mr. Henson is in his bedroom still," he said. "I've just taken him the cigars. He's got a lump on his head as big as a billiard-ball. Thinks he hit it against a branch. And my lady have locked herself in her room and refused to see anybody."

"Go and look at our patient," Enid commanded.

Williams disappeared, to return presently with the information that Van Sneck was still fast asleep and lying very peacefully.

"Looks like waiting till morning, it do," he said. "And now I'll go back and keep my eye on that 'ere distinguished philanthropist."

Williams disappeared, and Enid turned up the lamp again. Her face was pale and resolute. She motioned David towards a chair.

"I'll tell you the story," she said. "I am going to confide in you the saddest and strangest tale that ever appealed to an imaginative novelist."

CHAPTER XLIV

ENID SPEAKS

"I am going to tell you the story of the great sorrow that has darkened all our lives, but I shall have to go a long way back to do it," Enid said. "I go back to the troublous day of Charles, as far back as the disastrous fight at Naseby. Of course I am speaking more from a Royalist point of view, for the Littimers were always followers of the Court.

"Mind you, there is doubtless a deal that is legendary about what I am going to tell you. But the ring given to my ancestor Rupert Littimer by Prince Rupert himself is an actuality.

"Naseby was over, and, so the legend goes, Prince Rupert found himself desperately situated and in dire peril of capture by Cromwell's troops, under one Colonel Carfax, a near neighbour of Rupert Littimer; indeed, the Carfax estates still run parallel with the property round Littimer Castle.

"Now, Carfax was hated by all those who were attached to the fortunes of the King. Seeing that he was of aristocratic birth, it was held that he had violated his caste and creed by taking sides with the Roundheads. History has told us that he was right, and that the Cavaliers, picturesque as they were, were fighting a dubious cause. But I need not go into that. Carfax was a hard, stern man who spared nobody, and many were the stories told of his cruelty.

"He and Rupert Littimer were especially at daggers drawn. I believe that both of them had been in love with the same woman or something of that kind. And the fact that she did not marry either made little difference to the bitterness between them.

"Well, Carfax was pressing close on Rupert, so close, indeed, that unless some strategy were adopted the brilliant cavalry leader was in dire peril. It was there that my ancestor, Rupert Littimer, came forward with his scheme. He offered to disguise himself and go into the camp of Carfax and take him prisoner. The idea was to steal into the tent of Carfax and, by threatening him with his life, compel him to issue certain orders, the result of which would be that Prince Rupert could get away.

"'You will never come back again, friend,' the Prince said.

"Rupert Littimer said he was prepared to run all risk of that. 'And if I do die you shall tell my wife, sir,' he said. 'And when the child is born, tell him that his father died as he should have done for his King and for his country.'"

"'Oh, there is a child coming?' Rupert asked.

"Littimer replied that for aught he knew he was a father already. And then he went his way into the camp of the foe with his curls cut short and in the guise of a countryman who comes with valuable information. And, what is more, he schemed his way into Carfax's tent, and at the point of a dagger compelled him to write a certain order which my ancestor's servant, who accompanied him, saw carried into effect, and so the passage for Prince Rupert was made free."

"The ruse would have succeeded all round but for some little accident that I need not go into now. Rupert Littimer was laid by the heels, his disguise was torn off, and he stood face to face with his hereditary foe. He was told that he had but an hour to live."

"'If you have any favour to ask, say it,' Carfax said.

"'I have no favour to ask, properly so-called,' Littimer replied; 'but I am loth to die without knowing whether or not I have left anybody to succeed me—anybody who will avenge the crime upon you and yours in the years to come. Let me go as far as Henson Grange, and I pledge you my word I will return in the morning!'

"But Carfax laughed the suggestion to scorn. The Court party were all liars and perjurers, and their word was not to be taken.

"'It is as I say,' Rupert Littimer repeated. 'My wife lies ill at Henson Grange and in sore trouble about me. And I should like to see my child before I die.'

"'Then you shall have the chance,' Carfax sneered. 'I will keep you a close prisoner here for two days, and if at the end of that time nothing happens, you die. If, on the other hand, a child is born to you, then you shall go from here a free man.'

"And so the compact was made. Unfortunately or fortunately, as the case may be, the story got abroad, and some indiscreet person carried the news to Dame Littimer. Ill as she was, she insisted upon getting up and going over to Carfax's camp at once. She had barely reached there before—well, long ere Rupert Littimer's probation was over, he was the father of a noble boy. They say that the Roundheads made a cradle for the child out of a leather breastplate, and carried it in triumph round the camp. And they held the furious Carfax to his word, and the story spread and spread until it came to the ears of Prince Rupert.

"Then he went to see Dame Littimer, and from his own hand he drew what is known in our family as Prince Rupert's ring. He placed it on Dame Littimer's hand, there to remain for a year and a day, and when the year was up it was to be put aside for the bride of the heir of the house for ever, to be worn by her till a year and a day had elapsed after her first child was born. And that has been done for all time, my aunt, Lady Littimer, being the last to wear it. After Frank was born it was put carefully away for his bride. But the great tragedy came, and until lately we fancied that the ring was lost to us for ever. There is, in a few words, the story of Prince Rupert's ring. So far it is quite common property."

Enid ceased to speak for a time. But it was evident that she had more to say.

"An interesting story," David said. "And a pretty one to put into a book, especially as it is quite true. But you have lost the ring, you say?"

"I fancied so till to-night," Enid replied. "Indeed, I hardly knew what to think. Sometimes I imagined that Reginald Henson had it, at other times I imagined that it was utterly gone. But the mere fact that Henson possesses a copy practically convinces me that he has the original. As I said before, a true copy could not have been made from mere instructions. And if I could only get the original our troubles are all over."

"But I don't see how the ring has anything to do with—"

"With the family dishonour. No, I am coming to that. We arrive at the time, seven years ago, when my aunt and Lord Littimer and Frank were all living happily at Littimer Castle. I told you just now that the Carfax estates adjoin the Littimer property. The family is still extant and powerful, but the feud between the two houses has never ceased. Of course, people don't carry on a vendetta these peaceful days, but the families have not visited for centuries.

"There was a daughter Claire, whom Frank Littimer got to know by some means or other. But for the silly family feud nobody would have noticed or cared, and there would have been an end to the matter, because Frank has always loved my sister Chris, and we all knew that he would marry her some of these days.

"Lord Littimer was furiously angry when he heard that Frank and Claire had got on speaking terms. He imperiously forbade any further intercourse, and General Carfax did the same. The consequence was that these two foolish young people elected to fancy themselves greatly aggrieved, and so a kind of Romeo and Juliet, Montague and Capulet, business sprang up. There were secret meetings, meetings entirely innocent, I believe, and a correspondence which became romantic and passionate on Claire Carfax's side. The girl had fallen passionately in love with Frank, whilst he regarded the thing as a mere pastime. He did not know then, indeed nobody seemed to know till afterwards, that there was

insanity in the poor girl's family, though Hatherly Bell's friend, Dr. Heritage, who then had a practice near Littimer, warned us as well as he could. Nobody dreamt how far the thing had gone.

"Then those letters of Claire's fell into Lord Littimer's hands. He found them and locked them up in his safe. Frank, furious at being treated like a boy, swore to break open the safe and get his letters back. He did so. And in the same safe, and in the same drawer, was Prince Rupert's ring. When Lord Littimer missed the letters he missed the ring also and a large sum of money in notes that he had just received from his tenants. Frank had stolen the ring and the money, or so it seemed. I shall not soon forget that day.

"After taking the letters Frank had gone straight to Moreton Wells, and it looked for a little time as if he had fled. Within an hour of the discovery of his loss Lord Littimer met Claire Carfax on the cliffs. She was wearing Prince Rupert's ring. Frank had sent it to her, she said. Anybody but a man in a furious passion would have seen that the girl was not responsible for her actions. Littimer told her the true circumstances of the case. She laughed at him in a queer, vacant way and fled through the woods. She went down to the beach, where she took a boat and rowed herself out into the bay. A mile or more from the shore she jumped into the water, and from that day to this nothing further has been seen of poor Claire Carfax."

"Or the ring, either?" David asked.

"Or the ring either. The same night Lady Littimer started after her boy. Littimer was going to have Frank prosecuted. Lady Littimer fled to Longdean Grange, where Frank joined her. Then my uncle turned up, and there was a scene. It is said that Lord Littimer struck his wife, but Frank says that she fell against his gesticulating fist. Anyway, it was the same as a blow, and Lady Littimer dropped on the floor, dragging a table down with her, flowers and china and all. You have seen that table in Longdean Granges. Since then it has never been touched, the place has never been swept or dusted or garnished. You have seen my aunt, and you know what the shock has done for her—the shock and the steady persecutions of Reginald Henson."

"Who seems to be at the bottom of the whole trouble," said David. "But do you think that was the real ring on the poor girl's finger?"

"I don't. I fancy Henson had a copy made for emergencies. It was he who sent the copy to Claire, and it was the copy that Littimer saw on her hand. You see, directly Frank broke open that safe, Henson, who was at the castle at the time, saw his opportunity—he could easily scheme some way of making use of it. If that plot against Frank had failed he would have invented another. And the unexpected suicide of Claire Carfax played into his hands. Henson has that ring somewhere, and it will be our task to find it."

"And when we have done so?"

"Give it to Lord Littimer and tell him where we found it. And then we shall be rid of one of the most pestilential rascals the world has ever seen. When you get back to Brighton I want you to tell this story to Hatherly Bell."

"I will," David replied. "What a weird, fascinating story it is! And the sooner I am back the better I shall be pleased. I wonder if our man is awake yet. If you will excuse me, I will go up and see. Ah!"

There was the sound of somebody moving overhead.

CHAPTER XLV

ON THE TRAIL

At the same moment Williams came softly in. There was a grin of satisfaction on his face.

"The brute is fast asleep," he said. "I've just been in his room. He left the lamp burning, and there is a lump on the side of his head as big as an ostrich egg. But he didn't mean to go to sleep; he hasn't taken any of his clothes off. On the whole, sir, wouldn't it be better for you to wake our man up and get him away?"

David was of the same opinion. Van Sneck was lying on the bed looking vacantly about him. He

seemed older and more worn, perhaps, because his beard and moustache were growing ragged and dirty on his face. He pressed his hand to his head in a confused kind of way.

"I tell you I can't find it," he said; "the thing slipped out of my hand—a small thing like that easily might. What's the good of making a fuss about a ring not worth £20? Search my pockets if you like. What a murderous-looking dog you are when you're out of temper!"

All this in a vague, rambling way, in a slightly foreign accent. David touched him on the shoulder.

"Won't you come back with me to Brighton?" he said.

"Certainly," was the ready response; "you look a good sort of chap. I'll go anywhere you please. Not that I've got a penny of money left. What a spree it has been. Who are you?"

"My name is Steel. I am David Steel, the novelist."

A peculiarly cunning look came over Van Sneck's face.

"I got your letter," he said. "And I came. It was after I had had that row with Henson. Henson is a bigger scoundrel than I am, though you may not think it."

"I accept your statement implicitly," David said, drily.

"Well, he is. And I got your letter. And I called.... And you nearly killed me. And I dropped it down in the corner of the conservatory."

"Dropped what?" David asked, sharply.

"Nothing," said Van Sneck. "What do you mean by talking about dropping things. I never dropped anything in my life. I make others do that, eh, eh! But I can't remember anything. It just comes back to me, and then there is a wheel goes round in my head.... Who are you?"

David gave up the matter as hopeless. This was emphatically a case for Bell. Once let him get Van Sneck back to Brighton and Bell could do the rest.

"We'd better go," he said to Enid. "We are merely wasting time here."

"I suppose so," Enid said, thoughtfully. "All the same, I should greatly like to know what it is that our friend Van Sneck dropped."

It was a long and tedious journey back to Brighton again, for the patient seemed to tire easily, and he evinced a marked predilection for sitting by the roadside and singing. It was very late before David reached his house. Bell beamed his satisfaction. Van Sneck, with a half-gleam of recognition of his surroundings, and with a statement that he had been there before, lapsed into silence. Bell produced a small phial in a chemist's wrapper and poured the contents into a glass. With a curt command to drink he passed the glass over to Van Sneck.

The latter drank the small dose, and Bell carried him more or less to a ground-floor bedroom behind the dining-room. There he speedily undressed his patient and got him into bed. Van Sneck was practically fast asleep before his head had touched the pillow.

"I went out and got that dose with a view to eventualities," Bell explained. "I know pretty well what is the matter with Van Sneck, and I propose to operate upon him, with the help of Heritage. I've put him in my bed and locked the door. I shall sleep in the big armchair."

David flung himself into a big deck lounge and lighted a cigarette.

"My word, that has been a bit of a business," he said. "Pour me out a little whisky in one of the long glasses and fill it up with soda.... Oh, that's better. I never felt so thirsty in my life. I got Van Sneck away without Henson having the slightest suspicion that he was there, and I had the satisfaction of giving Henson a smashing blow without his seeing me."

"Sounds like conjuring," Bell said, behind his cigar. "Explain yourself."

David went carefully into details. He told the story of Prince Rupert's ring to a listener who followed him with the most flattering attention.

"Of course, all this is new to me," Bell said, presently, "though I knew the family well up to that time. Depend upon it, Enid is right. Henson has got the ring. But how fortunately everything seems to have turned out for the scoundrel."

"If a man likes to be an unscrupulous blackguard he can make use of all events," David said. "But even Henson is not quite so clever as we take him to be. He has found out the trick we played upon him over Chris Henson, but he hasn't the faintest idea that all this time he has been living under the same roof at Littimer."

"The girl is a wonderful actress," Bell replied. "I only guessed who she was. If I hadn't known as much as I do she would have deceived me. But Henson has shot his bolt. After we have operated upon Van Sneck we shall be pretty near the truth. It is a great pull to have him in the house."

"And a nasty thing for Henson—"

"Who will find out before to-morrow is over. I feel pretty sure that this house is watched carefully. Any firm of private detectives would do that, and they need be told nothing either. I know that I was followed when I went to the chemist's to fetch that dose for our friend yonder. Still, it is a sign that Henson is getting frightened."

"Why do you bring Heritage into this matter?" David asked.

"Well, for a variety of reasons. First of all, Heritage is an old friend of mine, and I take a great interest in his case. I am going to give him a chance to recover his lost confidence, and he is a splendid operator. Besides, I want to know why Henson has gone out of his way to be so kind to Heritage. And, finally, Heritage was the family doctor of the Carfax people you just mentioned before he went to practise in London. Let me once get Heritage round again, and I shall be greatly disappointed if he does not give us a good deal of valuable information regarding Reginald Henson."

"And Cross. What about him?"

"Oh, Cross will do as I ask him. Without egotism, he knows that the case is perfectly safe in my hands. And if we care to look after Van Sneck, why, there will be one the less burden in the hospital. What a funny business it is! Van Sneck gets nearly done to death under this roof, and he comes back here to be cured again."

David yawned sleepily as he rose.

"Well, I've had enough of it for to-night," he said. "I'm dog-tried, and I must confess to feeling sick of the Hensons and Littimers, and all their works."

"Including their friend, Miss Ruth Gates?" Bell said, slily. "Still, they have made pretty good use of you, and I expect you will be glad to get back to your work again. At the same time, you need not trouble your head for plots for many a day."

David admitted that the situation had its compensations, and went off to bed. Bell met him the next day as fresh as if he had had a full night's rest, and vouchsafed the information that the patient was as well as possible. He was cold and no longer feverish.

"In fact, he is ready for the operation at any time," he said. "I shall get Heritage here to dinner, and we shall operate afterwards with electric light. It will be a good steadier for Heritage's nerves, and the electric light is the best light of all for this business. If you have got a few yards of spare flex from your reading-lamp I'll rig the thing up without troubling your electrician. I can attach it to your study lamp."

"I've got what you want," David said. "Now come in to breakfast."

There was a pile of letters on the table, and on the top a telegram. It was a long message, and Bell watched Steel's face curiously.

"From Littimer Castle," he suggested. "Am I right?"

"As usual," David cried. "My little scheme over that diamond star has worked magnificently. Miss Chris tells me that she has—by Jove, Bell, just listen—she has solved the problem of the cigar-case; she has found out the whole thing. She wants me to meet her in London to-morrow, when she will tell me everything."

CHAPTER XLVI

Lord Littimer sat on the terrace, shaded from the sun by an awning over his deck-chair. From his expression he seemed to be at peace with all the world. His brown, eager face had lost its usually keen, suspicious look; he smoked a cigarette lazily. Chris sat opposite him looking as little like a hard-working secretary as possible.

As a matter of fact, there was nothing for her to do. Littimer had already tired of his lady secretary idea, and had Chris not interested and amused him he would have found some means to get rid of her before now.

But she did interest and amuse and puzzle him. There was something charmingly reminiscent about the girl. She was like somebody he had once known and cared for, but for the life of him he could not think who. And when curiosity sometimes got the better of good breeding Chris would baffle him in the most engaging manner.

"Really, you are an exceedingly clever girl," he said.

"In fact, we are both exceedingly clever," Chris replied, coolly. "And yet nobody is ever quite so clever as he imagines himself to be. Do you ever make bad mistakes, Lord Littimer?"

"Sometimes," Littimer said, with a touch of cynical humour. "For instance, I married some years ago. That was bad. Then I had a son, which was worse."

"At one time you were fond of your family?"

"Well, upon my word, you are the only creature I ever met who has had the audacity to ask me that question. Yes, I was very fond of my wife and my son, and, God help me, I am fond of them still. I don't know why I talk to you like this."

"I do," Chris said, gently. "It is because unconsciously you yearn for sympathy. And you fancy you are in no way to blame; you imagine that you acted in the only way consistent with your position and dignity. You fancied that your son was a vulgar thief. And I am under the impression that Lady Littimer had money."

"She had a large fortune," Littimer said, faintly. "Miss Lee, do you know that I have a great mind to box your ears?"

Chris laughed unsteadily. She was horribly frightened, though she did not show it. She had been waiting for days to catch Littimer in this mood. And she did not feel disposed to go back now. The task must be accomplished some time.

"Lady Littimer was very rich," she went on, "and she was devoted to Frank, your son. Now, if he had wanted a large sum of money very badly, and had gone to his mother, she would have given it to him without the slightest hesitation?"

"What fond mother wouldn't?"

"I am obliged to you for conceding the point. Your son wanted money. and he robbed you when he could have had anything for the asking from his mother."

"Sounds logical," Littimer said, flippantly. "Who had the money?"

"The same man who stole Prince Rupert's ring—Reginald Henson."

Littimer dropped his cigarette and sat upright in his chair. He was keen and alert enough now. There were traces of agitation on his face.

"That is a serious accusation," he said.

"Not more serious than your accusation against your son," Chris retorted.

"Well, perhaps not," Littimer admitted. "But why do you take up Frank's cause in this way? Is there any romance budding under my unconscious eyes?"

"Now you are talking nonsense," Chris said, with just a touch of colour in her cheeks. "I say, and I am going to prove when the time comes, that Reginald Henson was the thief. I am sorry to pain you, but it is absolutely necessary to go into these matters. When those foolish letters, written by a foolish girl, fell into your hands, your son vowed that he would get them back, by force if necessary. He made that rash speech in hearing of Reginald Henson. Henson probably lurked about until he saw the robbery

committed. Then it occurred to him that he might do a little robbery on his own account, seeing that your son would get the credit of it. The safe was open, and so he walked off with your ring and your money."

"My dear young lady, this is all mere surmise."

"So you imagine. At that time Reginald Henson had a kind of home which he was running at 218, Brunswick Square, Brighton. Lady Littimer had just relinquished a similar undertaking there. Previously Reginald Henson had a home at Huddersfield. Mind you, he didn't run either in his own name, and he kept studiously in the background. But he was desperately hard up at the time in consequence of his dissipation and extravagance, and the money he collected for his home went into his own pocket. Then the police got wind of the matter, and Reginald Henson discreetly disappeared from Brighton just in time to save himself from arrest for frauds there and at Huddersfield. A member of the Huddersfield police is in a high position at Brighton. He has recognised Reginald Henson as the man who was 'wanted' at Huddersfield. I don't know if there will be a prosecution after all these years, but there you are."

"You are speaking from authority?"

"Certainly I am. Reginald Henson, as such, is not known to Inspector Marley, but I sent the latter a photograph of Henson, and he returned it this morning with a letter to the effect that it was the man the Huddersfield police were looking for."

"What an interesting girl you are," Littimer murmured. "Always so full of surprises. Our dear Reginald is even a greater rascal than I took him for."

"Well, he took your money, and that saved him. He took your ring, a facsimile of which he had made before for some ingenious purpose. It came with a vengeance. Then Claire Carfax committed suicide, thanks to your indiscretion and folly."

"Go on. Rub it in. Never mind about my feelings."

"I'm not minding," Chris said, coolly. "Henson saw his game and played it boldly. I could not have told you all this yesterday, but a letter I had this morning cleared the ground wonderfully. Henson wanted to cause family differences, and he succeeded. Previously he got Dr. Bell out of the way by means of the second Rembrandt. You can't deny there is a second Rembrandt now, seeing that it is locked up in your safe. And where do you think Bell found it? Why, at 218, Brunswick Square, Brighton, where Henson had to leave it seven years ago when the police were so hot upon his trail. He was fearful lest you and Bell should come together again, and that is why he came here at night to steal your Rembrandt. And yet you trusted that man blindly all the time your own son was suffering on mere suspicions. How blind you have been!"

"I'm blind still," Littimer said, curtly. "My dear young lady, I admit that you are making out a pretty strong case; indeed, I might go farther, and say that you have all my sympathy. But what you say would not be taken as evidence in a court of law. If you produce that ring, for instance—but that is at the bottom of the North Sea."

Chris took a small cardboard box from her pocket, and from thence produced a ring. It was a ruby ring with black pearls on either side, and had some inscription inside.

"Look at that," she said. "It was sent to me to-day by my—by a friend of mine. It is the ring which Reginald Henson shows to Lady Littimer when he wants money from her. It was lost by Henson a night or two ago, and it fell into the hands of someone who is interested, like myself, in the exposure and disgrace of Reginald Henson."

Littimer examined the ring carefully.

"It is a wonderfully good imitation," he said, presently.

"So I am told," said Chris. "So good that it must have actually been copied from the original. Now, how could Henson have had a copy made unless he possessed the original? Will you be good enough to answer me that question, Lord Littimer?"

Littimer could do no more than gaze at the ring in his hand for some time.

"I could have sworn—indeed, I am ready to swear—that the real ring was never in anybody's possession but mine from the day that Frank was a year old till it disappeared. Of course, scores of people had looked at it, Henson amongst the rest. But how did Claire Carfax—"

"Easily enough. Henson had a first copy made from a description. I don't know why; probably we shall never know why. Probably he had it done when he knew that your son and Miss Carfax had struck up a flirtation. It was he who forged a letter from Frank to Miss Carfax, enclosing the ring. By that means he hoped to create mischief which, if it had been nipped in the bud, could never have been traced to him. As matters turned out he succeeded beyond his wildest expectations. He had got the real ring, too, which was likely to prove a very useful thing in case he ever wanted to make terms. A second and a faithful copy was made—the copy you hold in your hands—to hold temptingly over Lady Littimer's head when he wanted large sums of money from her."

"The scoundrel! He gets the money, of course?"

"He does. To my certain knowledge he has had nearly £70,000. But the case is in good hands. You have only to wait a few days longer and the man will be exposed. Already, as you see, I have wound his accomplice, the Reverend James Merritt, round my finger. Of course, the idea of getting up a bazaar has all been nonsense. I am only waiting for a little further information, and then Merritt will feel the iron hand under the velvet glove. Unless I am greatly mistaken, Merritt can tell us where Prince Rupert's ring is. Already Van Sneck is in our grasp."

"Van Sneck! Is he in England?"

"He is. Did you read that strange case of a man being found half murdered in the conservatory of Mr. Steel, the novelist, in Brighton? Well, that was Van Sneck. But I can't tell you any more at present. You must wait and be content."

"Tell me one thing, and I will wait as long as you like. Who are you?"

Chris shook her head, merrily. A great relief had been taken off her mind. She had approached a delicate and difficult matter, and she had succeeded beyond her expectations. That she had shaken the man opposite her sorely was evident from his face. The hardness had gone from his eyes, his lips were no longer bitter and cynical.

"I may have been guilty of a great wrong," he murmured. "All these years
I may have been living under a misapprehension. And you have told me what
I should never have suspected, although I have never had a high opinion
of my dear Reginald. Where is my wife now?"

"She is still at Longdean Grange. You will notice a great change in her, a great and sorrowful change. But it is not too late to—"

Littimer rose and went swiftly towards the house. At any other time the action would have been rude, but Chris fully understood. She had touched the man to the bottom of his soul, and he was anxious to hide his emotion.

"Poor man," Chris murmured. "His hard cynicism conceals a deal of suffering. But the suffering is past; we have only to wait patiently for daylight now."

Chris rose restlessly in her turn and strolled along the terrace to her favourite spot looking over the cliffs. There was nobody about; it was very hot there. The girl removed her glasses and pushed back the banded hair from her forehead. She had drawn a photograph from her pocket which she was regarding intently. She was quite heedless of the fact that somebody was coming along the cliffs towards her. She raised the photograph to her lips and kissed it tenderly.

"Poor Frank," she murmured. "Poor fellow, so weak and amiable. And yet with all your faults—"

Chris paused, and a little cry escaped her lips. Frank Littimer, looking very wild and haggard, stood before her.

"I beg your pardon," he began. "I came to see you because—"

The words died away. He staggered back, pale as the foam beating on the rocks below, his hand clutching at his left side as if there was some mortal pain there.

"Chris," he murmured. "Chris, Chris, Chris! And they told me—"

He could say no more, he could only stand there trembling from head to foot, fearful lest his mocking senses were making sport of him. Surely, it was some beautiful vision he had come upon. With one unsteady hand he touched the girl's sleeve; he pressed her warm red cheeks with his fingers, and with that touch his manhood came back to him.

"Darling," he whispered, eagerly. "Dearest, what does it mean?"

Chris stood there, smiling rosily. She had not meant to betray herself; fate had done that for her, and she was not sorry. It was a cruel trick they had played upon Frank, but it had been necessary. Chris held out her hand with a loving little gesture.

"Are you not going to kiss me, dear?" she asked, sweetly.

Frank Littimer needed no further invitation. It was quiet and secluded there, and nobody could possibly see them. With a little sigh Chris felt her lover's arms about her and his kisses warm on her lips. The clever, brilliant girl had disappeared; a pretty, timid creature stood in her place for the time. For the moment Frank Littimer could do no more than gaze into her eyes with rapture and amazement. There was plenty of time for explanations.

"Let us go into the arbour," Frank suggested. "No, I am not going to release your hand for a moment. If I do you will fly away again. Chris, dear Chris, why did you serve me so?"

"It was absolutely necessary," Chris replied. "It was necessary to deceive Reginald Henson. But it was hard work the other night."

"You mean when I came here and—"

"Tried to steal the Rembrandt. Oh, you needn't explain. I know that you had to come. And we have Henson in our power at last."

"I am afraid that is too good to be true. But tell me everything from the beginning. I am as dazed and confused as a tired man roused out of a sound sleep."

Chris proceeded to explain from the beginning of all things. It was an exceedingly interesting and exciting narrative to Frank Littimer, and he followed it carefully. He would have remained there all day listening to the music of Chris's voice and looking into her eyes. He had come there miserable and downcast to ask a question, and behold he had suddenly found all the joy and sweetness of existence.

"And so you have accomplished all this?" he said, at length. "What a glorious adventure it must have been, and how clever you are! So is Mr. David Steel. Many a time I have tried to break through the shackles, but Reginald has always been too strong for me."

"Well, he's shot his bolt, now," Chris smiled. "I have just been opening your father's eyes."

Frank laughed as he had not laughed for a long time.

"Do you mean to say he doesn't know who you are?" he asked.

"My dear boy, he hasn't the faintest idea. Neither had you the faintest idea when I made you a prisoner the other night. But he will know soon."

"God grant that he may," Frank said, fervently.

He bent over and pressed his lips passionately to those of Chris. When he looked up again Lord Littimer was standing before the arbour, wearing his most cynical expression.

"He does know," he said. "My dear young lady, you need not move. The expression of sweet confusion on your face is infinitely pleasing. I did not imagine that one so perfectly self-possessed could look like that. It gives me quite a nice sense of superiority. And you, sir?"

The last words were uttered a little sternly. Frank had risen. His face was pale, his manner resolute and respectful.

"I came here to ask Miss Lee a question, sir, not knowing, of course, who she was."

"And she betrayed herself, eh?"

"I am sorry if I have done so," Chris said, "but I should not have done so unless I had been taken by surprise. It was so hot that I had taken off my glasses and put my hair up. Then Frank came up and surprised me."

"You have grown an exceedingly pretty girl, Chris," Littimer said, critically. "Of course, I recognise you now. You are nicer-looking than Miss Lee."

Chris put on her glasses and rolled her hair down resolutely.

"You will be good enough to understand that I am going to continue Miss Lee for the present," she said. "My task is a long way from being finished yet. Lord Littimer, you are not going to send Frank away?"

Littimer looked undecided.

"I don't know," he said. "Frank, I have heard a great deal to-day to cause me to think that I might have done you a grave injustice. And yet I am not sure.... In any case, it would be bad policy for you to remain here. If the news came to the ears of Reginald Henson it might upset Miss Machiavelli's plans."

"That had not occurred to me for the moment," Chris exclaimed. "On the whole, Frank had better not stay. But I should dearly like to see you two shake hands."

Frank Littimer made an involuntary gesture, and then he drew back.

"I'd—I'd rather not," he said. "At least, not until my character has been fully vindicated. Heaven knows I have suffered enough for a boyish indiscretion."

"And you have youth on your side," Littimer said gravely. "Whereas I—"

"I know, I know. It has been terrible all round. I took those letters of poor Claire's away because they were sacred property, and for no eye but mine—"

"No eye but yours saw them. I was going to send them back again. I wish I had."

"Aye, so do I. I took them and destroyed them. But I take Heaven to witness that I touched nothing else besides. If it was the last word I ever uttered—what is that fellow doing here in that garb? It is one of Henson's most disreputable tools."

Merritt was coming across the terrace. He paused suspiciously as he caught sight of Frank, but Chris, with a friendly wave of her hand, encouraged him to come on.

"It is all part of the game," she said. "I sent for our friend Merritt, but when I did so I had no idea that Frank would be present. Since you are here you might just as well stay and hear a little more of the strange doings of Reginald Henson. The time has come to let Merritt know that I am not the clever lady burglar he takes me for."

Merritt came up doggedly. Evidently the presence of Frank Littimer disturbed him. Chris motioned him to a seat, quite gaily.

"You are very punctual," she said. "I told you I wanted you to give Lord Littimer and myself a little advice and assistance. In the first place we want to know where that gun-metal diamond-mounted cigar-case, at present for sale in Rutter's window, came from. We want to know how it got there and who sold it to Rutter's people. Also we want to know why Van Sneck purchased a similar cigar-case from Walen's, of Brighton."

Merritt's heavy jaw dropped, his face turned a dull yellow. He looked round helplessly for some means of escape, and then relinquished the idea with a sigh.

"Done," he said. "Clear done. And by a woman, too! A smart woman, I admit, but a woman all the same. And yet why didn't you—"

Merritt paused, lost in the contemplation of a problem beyond his intellectual strength.

"You have nothing to fear," Chris said, with a smile. "Tell us all you know and conceal nothing, and you will be free when we have done with you."

Merritt wiped his dry lips with the back of his hand.

"I come peaceable," he said, hoarsely. "And I'm going to tell you all about it."

CHAPTER XLVII

THE TRACK BROADENS

There was an uneasy grin on Merritt's face, a suggestion that he did not altogether trust those around him. Hard experience in the ways of the wicked had taught him the folly of putting his confidence in anyone. Just for the moment the impulse to shuffle was upon him.

"If I say nothing, then I can't do any harm," he remarked, sapiently.
"Best, on the whole, for me to keep my tongue between my teeth."

"Mr. Henson is a dangerous man to cross," Chris suggested.

"He is that," Merritt agreed. "You don't know him as I do."

Chris conceded the point, though she had her own views on that matter. Lord Littimer had seated himself on the broad stone bench along the terrace, whence he was watching the scene with the greatest zest and interest.

"You imagine Mr. Henson to be a friend of yours?" Chris asked.

Merritt nodded and grinned. So long as he was useful to Henson he was fairly safe.

"Mr. Merritt," Chris asked, suddenly, "have you ever heard of
Reuben Taylor?"

The effect of the question was electrical. Merritt's square jaw dropped with a click, there was fear in the furtive eyes that he cast around him.

"I read about Reuben Taylor in one of our very smart papers lately," Chris went on. "It appears that Mr. Taylor is a person who nobody seems to have seen, but who from time to time does a vast service to the community at large. He is not exactly a philanthropist, for he is well rewarded for his labours both by the police and his clients. Suppose Mr. Merritt here had done some wrong."

"A great effort of imagination," Littimer murmured, gently.

"Had done something wrong, and an enemy or quondam friend wants to 'put him away.' I believe that is the correct expression. In that case he does not go to the police himself, because he is usually of a modest and retiring disposition. No, he usually puts down a few particulars in the way of a letter and sends it to Reuben Taylor under cover at a certain address. Is not that quite correct, Mr. Merritt?"

"Right," Merritt said, hoarsely. "Some day we shall find out who Taylor is, and—"

"Never mind that. Do you know that the night before your friend Mr. Henson left the Castle he placed in the post-bag a letter addressed to Mr. Reuben Taylor? In view of what I read recently in the paper alluded to the name struck me as strange. Now, Mr. Merritt, is it possible that letter had anything to do with you?"

Merritt did not appear to hear the question. His eyes were fixed on space; there was a sanguine clenching of his fists as if they had been about the throat of a foe.

"If I had him here," he murmured. "If I only had him here! He's given me away. After all that I have done for him he's given me away."

His listeners said nothing; they fully appreciated the situation. Merritt's presence at the Castle was both dangerous and hazardous for Henson.

"If you went away to-day you might be safe?" Chris suggested.

"Aye, I might," Merritt said, with a cunning grin in his eyes. "If I had a hundred pounds."

Chris glanced significantly at Littimer, who nodded and took up the parable.

"You shall have the money," he said. "And you shall go as soon as you have answered Miss Lee's questions."

Merritt proclaimed himself eager to say anything. But Merritt's information proved to be a great deal less than she had anticipated.

"I stole that picture," Merritt confessed. "I was brought down here on purpose. Henson sent to London and said he had a job for me. It was to get the picture from Dr. Bell. I didn't ask any questions, but set to work at once."

"Did you know what the picture was?" Chris asked.

"Bless you, yes; it was a Rembrandt engraving. Why, it was I who in the first place stole the first Rembrandt from his lordship yonder, in Amsterdam. I got into his lordship's sitting-room by climbing down a spout, and I took the picture."

"But the other belonged to Van Sneck," said Chris.

"It did; and Van Sneck had to leave Amsterdam hurriedly, being wanted by the police. Henson told me that Van Sneck had a second copy of 'The Crimson Blind,' and I had to burgle that as well; and I had to get into Dr. Bell's room and put the second copy in his portmanteau. Why? Ask somebody wiser than me. It was all some deep game of Henson's, only you may be pretty sure he didn't tell *me* what the game was. I got my money and returned to London, and till pretty recently I saw no more of Henson."

"But you came into the game again," said Littimer.

"Quite lately, your lordship. I went down to Brighton. I was told as Bell had got hold of the second Rembrandt owing to Henson's carelessness, and that he was pretty certain to bring it here. He did bring it here, and I tried to stop him on the way, and he half killed me."

"Those half measures are so unsatisfactory," Littimer smiled.

Merritt grinned. He fully appreciated the humour of the remark.

"That attack and the way it was brought about were suggested by Henson," he went on. "If it failed, I was to come up to the Castle here without delay and tell Henson so. I came, and he covered my movements whilst I pinched the picture. I had been told that the thing was fastened to the wall, but a pair of steel pliers made no odds to that. I took the picture home, and two days later it vanished. And that's all I know about it."

"Lame and impotent conclusion!" said Littimer.

"Wait a moment," Chris cried. "You found the diamond star which you pawned—"

"At your request, miss. Don't go for to say as you've forgotten that."

"I have forgotten nothing," Chris said, with a smile. "I want to know about the cigar-case."

Merritt looked blankly at the speaker. Evidently this was strange ground to him.

"I don't know anything about that," he said. "What sort of a cigar-case?"

"Gun-metal set with diamonds. The same case or a similar one to that purchased by Van Sneck from Walen's in Brighton. Come, rack your brains a bit. Did you ever see anything of Van Sneck about the time of his accident? You know where he is?"

"Yes. He's in the County Hospital at Brighton, He was found in Mr. Steel's house nearly dead. It's coming back to me now. A gun-metal cigar-case set in diamonds. That would be a dull thing with sparkling stones all over it. Of course! Why, I saw it in Van Sneck's hands the day he was assaulted. I recollect asking him where he got it from, and he said that it was a present from Henson. He was going off to meet Henson then by the corner of Brunswick Square."

"Did you see Van Sneck again that day?"

"Later on in the afternoon. We went into the Continental together. Van Sneck had been drinking."

"You did not see the cigar-case again?"

"No. Van Sneck gave me a cigar which he took from the common sort of case that they give away with seven cigars for a shilling. I asked him if he had seen Henson, and he said that he had. He seemed pretty full up against Henson, and said something about the latter having played him a scurvy trick and he didn't like it, and that he'd be even yet. I didn't take any notice of that, because it was no new thing for Henson to play it low down on his pals."

"Did anything else happen at that interview?" Chris asked, anxiously. "Think! The most trivial thing to you would perhaps be of the greatest importance to us."

Merritt knitted his brows thoughtfully.

"We had a rambling kind of talk," he said. "It was mostly Van Sneck who talked. I left him at last because he got sulky over my refusal to take a letter for him to Kemp Town."

"Indeed! Do you recollect where that letter was addressed to?"

"Well, of course I've forgotten the address; but it was to some writing man—Stone, or Flint, or—"

"Steel, perhaps?"

"That's the name! David Steel, Esq. Van Sneck wanted me to take that letter, saying as it would put a spoke in Reginald Henson's wheel, but I didn't see it. A boy took the letter at last."

"Did you see an answer come back?"

"Yes, some hour or so later. Van Sneck seemed to be greatly pleased with it. He said he was going to make an evening call late that night that would cook Henson's goose. And he was what you call gassy about it: said he had told Henson plump and plain what he was going to do, and that he was not afraid of Henson or any man breathing."

Chris asked no further questions for the moment. The track was getting clearer. She had, of course, heard by this time of the letter presumedly written by David Steel to the injured man Van Sneck, which had been found in his pocket by Dr. Cross. The latter had been written most assuredly in reply to the note Merritt had just alluded to, but certainly not written by David Steel. Who, then, seeing that it was Steel's private note-paper? The more Chris thought over this the more she was puzzled. Henson could have told her, of course, but nobody else.

Doubtless, Henson had started on his present campaign with a dozen different schemes. Probably one of them called for a supply of Steel's note-paper. Somebody unknown had procured the paper, as David Steel had testimony in the form of his last quarter's account. The lad engaged by Van Sneck to carry the letter from the Continental to 15, Downend Terrace, must have been intercepted by Henson or somebody in Henson's pay and given the forged reply, a reply that actually brought Van Sneck to Steel's house on the night of the great adventure. Henson had been warned by the somewhat intoxicated Van Sneck what he was going to do, and he had prepared accordingly.

A sudden light came to Chris. Henson had found out part of their scheme. He knew that David Steel would be probably away from home on the night in question. In that case, having made certain of this, and having gained a pretty good knowledge of Steel's household habits, what easier than to enter Steel's house in his absence, wait for Van Sneck, and murder him then and there?

It was not a pretty thought, and Chris recoiled from it.

"How could Van Sneck have got into Steel's house?" she asked. "I know for a fact that Mr. Steel was not at home, and that he closed the door carefully behind him when he left the house that night."

Merritt grinned at the simplicity of the question. It was not worthy of the brilliant lady who had so far got the better of him.

"Latch-keys are very much alike," he said. "Give me three latch-keys, and I'll open ninety doors out of a hundred. Give me six latch-keys of various patterns, and I'll guarantee to open the other ten."

"I had not thought of that," Chris admitted. "Did Van Sneck happen by any chance to tell you what he and Mr. Henson had been quarrelling about?"

"He was too excited to tell anything properly. He was jabbering something about a ring all the time."

"What sort of a ring?"

"That I can't tell you, miss. I fancy it was a ring that Van Sneck had made."

"Made! Is Van Sneck a working jeweller or anything of that kind?"

"He's one of the cleverest fellows with his fingers that you ever saw. Give him a bit of old gold and a few stones and he'll make you a bracelet that will pass for antique. Half the so-called antiques picked up on the Continent have been faked by Van Sneck. There was that ring, for instance, that Henson had, supposed to be the property of some swell he called Prince Rupert. Why, Van Sneck copied it for him in a couple of days, till you couldn't tell t'other from which."

Chris choked the cry that rose to her lips. She glanced at Littimer, who had dropped his glass, and was regarding Merritt with a kind of frozen, pallid curiosity. Chris signalled Littimer to speak. She had no words of her own for the present.

"How long ago was that?" Littimer asked, hoarsely.

"About seven years, speaking from memory. There were two copies made—one from description. The other was much more faithful. Perhaps there were three copies, but I forget now. Van Sneck raved over the ring; it might have been a mine of gold for the fuss he made over it."

Littimer asked no further questions. But from the glance he gave first to Chris and then to his son the girl could see that he was satisfied. He knew at last that he had done his son a grave injustice—he knew the truth. It seemed to Chris that years had slipped suddenly from his shoulders. His face was still grave and set; his eyes were hard; but the gleam in them was for the man who had done him this terrible injury.

"I fancy we are wandering from the subject," Chris said, with commendable steadiness. "We will leave the matter of the ring out of the question. Mr. Merritt, I don't propose to tell you too much, but you can help me a little farther on the way. That cigar-case you saw in Van Sneck's possession passed to Mr. Henson. By him, or by somebody in his employ, it was substituted for a precisely similar case intended for a present to Mr. Steel. The substitution has caused Mr. Steel a great deal of trouble."

"Seeing as Van Sneck was found half dead in Mr. Steel's house, and seeing as he claimed the cigar-case, what could be proved to be Van Sneck's, I'm not surprised," Merritt grinned.

"Then you know all about it?"

"Don't know anything about it," Merritt growled, doggedly. "I guessed that. When you said as the one case had been substituted for the other, it don't want a regiment of schoolmasters to see where the pea lies. What you've got to do now is to find Mr. Steel's case."

"I have already found it, as I hinted to you. It is at Rutter's, in Moreton Wells. It was sold to them by the gentleman who had given up smoking. I want you to go into Moreton Wells with me to-day and see if you can get at the gentleman's identity."

Mr. Merritt demurred. It was all very well for Chris, he pointed out in his picturesque language. She had her little lot of fish to fry, but at the same time he had to draw his money and be away before the police were down upon him. If Miss Lee liked to start at once—

"I am ready at any moment," Chris said. "In any case you will have to go to Moreton Wells, and I can give you a little more information on the way."

"You had better go along, Frank," Littimer suggested, under his breath. "I fervently hope now that the day is not far distant when you can return altogether, but for the present your presence is dangerous. We must give that rascal Henson no cause for suspicion."

"You are quite right," Frank replied. "And I'd like to—to shake hands now, dad."

Littimer put out his hand, without a word. The cool, cynical man of the world would have found it difficult to utter a syllable just then. When he looked up again he was smiling.

"Go along," he said. "You're a lucky fellow, Frank. That girl's one in a million."

A dog-cart driven by Chris brought herself and her companion into Moreton Wells in an hour, Frank had struck off across country in the direction of the nearest station. The appearance of himself in More ton Wells on the front of a dog-cart from the Castle would have caused a nine days' wonder.

"Now, what I want to impress upon you is this," said Chris. "Mr. Steel's cigar-case was stolen and one belonging to Van Sneck substituted for it. The stolen one was returned to the shop from which it was purchased almost immediately, so soon, indeed, that the transaction was never entered on the books. We are pretty certain that Reginald Henson did that, and we know that he is at the bottom of the mystery. But to prevent anything happening, and to prevent our getting the case back again, Henson had to go farther. The case must be beyond our reach. Therefore, I decline to believe that it was a mere coincidence that took a stranger into Lockhart's directly after Henson had been there to look at some gun-metal cigar-cases set in diamonds. The stranger purchased the case, and asked for it to be sent to the Metropole to 'John Smith.' With the hundreds of letters and visitors there it would be almost impossible to trace the case or the man."

"Lockhart's might help you?"

"They have as far as they can. The cigar-case was sold to a tall
American. Beyond that it is impossible to go."

A meaning smile dawned on Merritt's face.

"They might have taken more notice of the gentleman at Rutter's," he said, "being a smaller shop. I'm going to admire that case and pretend it belonged to a friend of mine."

"I want you to try and buy it for me," Chris said, quietly.

Rutter's was reached at length, and after some preliminaries the cigar-case was approached. Merritt took it up, with a well-feigned air of astonishment.

"Why, this must have belonged to my old friend, B—," he exclaimed.
"It's not new?"

"No, sir," the assistant explained. "We purchased it from a gentleman who stayed for a day or two here at the Lion, a friend of Mr. Reginald Henson."

"A tall man?" said Merritt, tentatively. "Long, thin beard and slightly marked with small-pox? Gave the name of Rawlins?"

"That's the gentleman, sir. Perhaps you may like to purchase the case?"

The purchase was made in due course, and together Chris and her queer companion left the shop.

"Rawlins is an American swindler of the smartest type," said Merritt. "If you get him in a corner ask him what he and Henson were doing in America some two years ago. Rawlins is in this little game for certain. But you ought to trace him by means of the Lion people. Oh, lor'!"

Merritt slipped back into an entry as a little, cleanshaven man passed along the street. His eyes had a dark look of fear in them.

"They're after me," he said, huskily. "That was one of them. Excuse me, miss."

Merritt darted away and flung himself into a passing cab. His face was dark with passion; the big veins stood out on his forehead like cords.

"The cur," he snarled—"the mean cur! I'll be even with him yet. If I can only catch the 4.48 at the Junction I'll be in London before them. And I'll go down to Brighton, if I have to foot it all the way, and, once I get there, look to yourself, Reginald Henson. A hundred pounds is a good sum to go on with. I'll kill that cur—I'll choke the life out of him. Cabby, if you get to the Junction by a quarter to five I'll give you a quid."

"The quid's as good as mine, sir," cabby said, cheerfully. "Get along, lass."

Meanwhile Chris had returned thoughtfully to the dog-cart, musing over the last discovery. She felt quite satisfied with her afternoon's work. Then a new idea struck her. She crossed over to the post-office and dispatched a long telegram thus:—

"To David Steel, 15, Downend Terrace, Brighton.

"Go to Walen's and ascertain full description of the tentative customer who suggested the firm should procure gun-metal cigar-case for him to look at. Ask if he was a tall man with a thin beard and a face slightly pock-marked. Then telephone result to me here. Quite safe, as Henson is away. Great discoveries to tell you.—CHRISTABEL LEE."

Chris paid for her telegram and then drove thoughtfully homeward.

CHAPTER XLVIII

WHERE IS RAWLINS?

Lord Littimer was greatly interested in all that Chris had to say. The whole story was confided to him after dinner. Over his coffee on the terrace he offered many shrewd suggestions.

"There is one thing wherein you have made a mistake," he said. "And that is in your idea that Henson changed those cigar-cases after Miss Gates laid your votive offering on Steel's doorstep."

"How else could it be done?" Chris said.

"My dear, the thing is quite obvious. You have already told me that Henson was quite aware what you were going to do—at least that he knew you were going to consult Steel. Also he knew that you were going to make Steel a present, and by a little judicious eavesdropping he contrived to glean all about the cigar-case. The fellow has already admitted to your sister that he listened. How long was that before you bought the cigar-case?"

"I should say it might have been a week. We had inquiries to make, you know. In the first instance we never dreamt of offering Mr. Steel money. I blush to think of that folly."

"Well, blush a little later on when you have more time. Then Henson had a week to work out his little scheme. He knows all about the cigar-case; he knows where it is going to be bought. Then he goes to Lockhart's and purchases some trifle in the shape of a cigar-case; he has it packed up, yellow string and all. This is his dummy. By keeping his eyes open he gets the chance he is waiting for. Ruth Gates hadn't the faintest idea that he knew anything when she left that case the day she bought it within reach of Henson. He gets her out of the way for a minute or two, he unties the parcel, and places the Van Sneck case in it. No, by Jove, he needn't have bought anything from Lockhart's at all. I only thought of that to account for the yellow string and the stamped paper that Lockhart's people use. He first takes one case out of the parcel and replaces it with another, and there you are. You may depend upon it that was the way in which it was done."

The more Chris thought over the matter the more certain she felt that such was the case. Like most apparently wonderful things, the explanation was absurdly simple. A conjurer's most marvellous tricks are generally the easiest.

"How foolish of us not to have thought of this before," Chris said, thoughtfully. "At any rate, we know all about it now. And we know who bought the cigar-case so promptly returned to Lockhart's by Henson. I should like to see this Rawlins."

"You have got to find him first," said Littimer.

"I'm going into Moreton Wells again to-morrow to make inquiries," said Chris.

But she was saved the trouble. Once more the ever-blessed telephone stood her in good stead. She was just on the point of starting for Moreton Wells when Steel called her up. Chris recognised him with a thrill of eager pleasure.

"You need not be afraid," she said. "You can speak quite freely. How is
Van Sneck?"

"Very queer," David responded. "Bell hoped to have operated upon him before this, but such a course has not been deemed quite prudent. The day after to-morrow it will be, I expect. Henson has found out where Van Sneck is."

"Indeed. Has he been to see you?"

"He has been more than once on all kinds of ingenious pretences. But I didn't call you up to tell you this. We have been making inquiries at Walen's, Marley and myself. The time has come now to let Marley behind the scenes a bit."

"Did Walen's people know anything about the tall American?"

"Oh, yes. A tall American with a thin beard and a faint suggestion of small-pox called about a week before the great adventure, and asked to see some gun-metal diamond-mounted cigar-cases—like the one in Lockhart's window."

"Did he really volunteer that remark?"

"He did, saying also that Lockhart's were too dear. Walen's hadn't got what he wanted, but they promised to get some cases out of stock, which meant that they would go to the same wholesale house as Lockhart's and get some similar cases. As a matter of fact, one of Walen's assistants was sent round to study the case in Lockhart's window. The cases were procured on the chance of a sale, but the American never turned up again. No notice was taken of this, because such things often happen to shopkeepers."

"And this was about a week before the night of the great adventure?"

"Yes. Wait a bit. I have not quite finished yet. Now, once I had ascertained this, an important fact

becomes obvious. The American didn't want a cigar-case at all."

"But he subsequently purchased the one returned to Lockhart's shop."

"That remark does not suggest your usual acumen. The American was preparing the ground for Van Sneck to purchase with a view to a subsequent exchange. You have not fully grasped the vileness of this plot yet. I went to Lockhart's and succeeded in discovering that the purchaser of the returned case was a tall American, quite of the pattern I expected. Then I managed to get on to the trail at the Metropole here. They recollected when I could describe the man; they also recollected the largeness of his tips. Then I traced my man to the Lion at Moreton Wells, where he had obviously gone to see Reginald Henson. From the Lion our friend went to the Royal at Scarsdale Sands, where he is staying at present."

"Under the name of John Smith?"

"I suppose so, seeing that all the inquiries under that name were successful. If you would like me to come up and interview the man for you—"

"I should like you to do nothing of the kind," Chris said. "You are more useful in Brighton, and I am going to interview Mr. John Smith Rawlins for myself. Good-bye. Just one moment. For the next few days my address will be the Royal Hotel, Scarsdale Sands."

Chris countermanded the dog-cart she had ordered and repaired to the library, where Littimer was tying some trout-flies behind a cloud of cigarette smoke.

"Thought you had gone to Moreton Wells," he said. "Been at the telephone again? A pretty nice bill I shall have to pay for all those long messages of yours."

"Mr. Steel pays this time," Chris said, gaily. "He has just given me some information that obviates the necessity of going into the town. My dear uncle, you want a change. You look tired and languid—"

"Depression of spirits and a disinclination to exercise after food. Also a morbid craving for seven to eight hours' sleep every night. What's the little game?"

"Bracing air," Chris laughed. "Lord Littimer and his secretary, Miss Lee, are going to spend a few days at Scarsdale Sands, Royal Hotel, to recuperate after their literary labours."

"The air here being so poor and enervating," Littimer said, cynically.
"In other words, I suppose you have traced Rawlins to Scarsdale Sands?"

"How clever you are," said Chris, admiringly. "Walen's American and Lockhart's American, with the modest pseudonym of John Smith, are what Mrs. Malaprop would call three single gentlemen rolled into one. We are going to make the acquaintance of John Smith Rawlins."

"Oh, indeed, and when do we start, may I ask?"

Chris responded coolly that she hoped to get away in the course of the day. With a great show of virtuous resignation Lord Littimer consented.

"I have always been the jest of fortune," he said, plaintively; "but I never expected to be dragged all over the place at my time of life by a girl who is anxious to make me acquainted with the choicest blackguardism in the kingdom. I leave my happy home, my cook, and my cellar, for at least a week of hotel living. Well, one can only die once."

Chris bustled away to make the necessary arrangements. Some few hours later Lord Littimer was looking out from his luxurious private sitting-room with the assumption of being a martyr. He and Chris were dressed for dinner; they were waiting for the bell to summon them to the dining-room. When they got down at length they found quite a large number of guests already seated at the many small tables.

"Your man here?" Littimer asked, languidly.

Chris indicated two people seated in a window opposite.

"There!" she whispered. "There he is. And what a pretty girl with him!"

CHAPTER XLIX

A CHEVALIER OF FORTUNE

Littimer put up his glass and gazed with apparent vacancy in the direction of the window. He saw a tall man with a grey beard and hair; a man most immaculately dressed and of distinctly distinguished appearance. Littimer was fain to admit that he would have taken him for a gentleman under any circumstances. In manner, style, and speech he left nothing to be desired.

"That chap has a fortune in his face and accent," Littimer said. "'Pon my word, he is a chance acquaintance that one would ask to dinner without the slightest hesitation. And the girl—"

"Is his daughter," Chris said. "The likeness is very strong."

"It is," Littimer admitted. "A singularly pretty, refined girl, with quite the grand air. It is an air that mere education seldom gives; but it seems to have done so in yonder case. And how fond they seem to be of one another! Depend upon it, Chris, whatever that man may be his daughter knows nothing of it. And yet you tell me that the police—"

"Well, never mind the police, now. We can get Mr. Steel to tell Marley all about 'John Smith' if we can't contrive to force his hand without. But with that pretty girl before my eyes I shouldn't like to do anything harsh. Up till now I have always pictured the typical educated scoundrel as a man who was utterly devoid of feelings of any kind."

Dinner proceeded quietly enough, Chris having eyes for hardly anything else beyond the couple in the window. She rose presently, with a little gasp, and hastily lifted a tankard of iced water from the table. The girl opposite her had turned pale and her dark head had drooped forward.

"I hope it is not serious," said Chris. "Drink a little of this; it is iced."

"And they told me they had no ice in the house," the man Rawlins muttered. "A little of this, Grace. It is one of her old fainting fits. Ah, that is better."

The man Rawlins spoke with the tenderest solicitude. The look of positive relief on his face as his daughter smiled at him told of a deep devotion and affection for the girl. Chris, looking on, was wondering vaguely whether or not she had made a mistake.

"Lord Littimer obtained our ice," she said. "Pray keep this. Oh, yes, that is Lord Littimer over there. I am his secretary."

Littimer strolled across himself and murmured his condolences. A little time later and the four of them were outside in the verandah taking ices together. Rawlins might have been, and no doubt was, a finished scoundrel, but there was no question as to his fascinating manner and his brilliant qualities as a conversationalist. A man of nerve too, and full of resources. All the same, Littimer was asking himself and wondering who the man really was. By birth he must have been born a gentleman, Littimer did not doubt for a moment.

But there was one soft spot in the man, and that was his love for his daughter. For her sake he had been travelling all over the world for years; for years he had despaired of seeing her live to womanhood. But she was gradually growing better; indeed, if she had not walked so far to-day nothing would have happened. All the time that Rawlins was talking his eyes were resting tenderly on his daughter. The hard, steely look seemed to have gone out of them altogether.

Altogether a charming and many-sided rascal, Littimer thought. He was fond, as he called it, of collecting types of humanity, and here was a new and fascinating specimen. The two men talked together till long after dark, and Rawlins never betrayed himself. He might have been an Ambassador or Cabinet Minister unbending after a long period of heavy labour.

Meanwhile Chris had drawn Grace Rawlins apart from the others. The girl was quiet and self-contained, but evidently a lady. She seemed to have but few enthusiasms, but one of them was for her father. He was the most wonderful man in the world, the most kind and considerate. He was very rich; indeed, it was a good thing, or she would never have been able to see so much of the world. He had given up nearly the whole of his life to her, and now she was nearly as strong as other girls. Chris listened in a dazed, confused kind of way. She had not expected anything like this; and when had Rawlins found time for those brilliant predatory schemes that she had heard of?

"Well, what do you think of them?" Littimer asked, when at length he and Chris were alone. "I suppose it isn't possible that you and I have made a mistake?"

"I'm afraid not," Chris said, half sadly. "But what a strange case altogether."

"Passing strange. I'll go bail that that man is born and bred a gentleman; and, what is more, he is no more of an American than I am. I kept on forgetting from time to time what he was and taking him for one of our own class. And, finally, I capped my folly by asking him to bring his daughter for a drive to-morrow and a lunch on the Gapstone. What do you think of that?"

"Splendid," Chris said, coolly. "Nothing could be better. You will be good enough to exercise all your powers of fascination on Miss Rawlins to-morrow, and leave her father to me. I thought of a little plan tonight which I believe will succeed admirably. At first I expected to have to carry matters with a high hand, but now I am going to get Mr. Rawlins through his daughter. I shall know all I want to by to-morrow night."

Littimer smiled at this sanguine expectation.

"I sincerely hope you will," he said, drily. "But I doubt it very much indeed. You have one of the cleverest men in Europe to deal with. Good-night."

But Chris was in no way cast down. She had carefully planned out her line of action, and the more she thought over it the more sure of success she felt. A few hours more and—but she didn't care to dwell too closely on that.

It was after luncheon that Chris's opportunity came. Lord Littimer and Grace Rawlins had gone off to inspect something especially beautiful in the way of a waterfall, leaving Chris and Rawlins alone. The latter was talking brilliantly over his cigarette.

"Is Lord Littimer any relation of yours?" he asked.

"Well, yes," Chris admitted. "I hope he will be a nearer relation before long."

"Oh, you mean to say—may I venture to congratulate—"

"It isn't quite that," Chris laughed, with a little rising in colour. "I am not thinking of Lord Littimer, but of his son.... Yes, I see you raise your eyebrows—probably you are aware of the story, as most people are. And you are wondering why I am on such friendly terms with Lord Littimer under the circumstances. And I am wondering why you should call yourself John Smith."

The listener coolly flicked the ash from his cigarette. His face was like a mask.

"John Smith is a good name," he said. "Can you suggest a better?"

"If you ask me to do so I can. I should call myself John Rawlins."

There was just the ghost of a smile on Rawlins's lips.

"There is a man of that name," he said, slowly, "who attained considerable notoriety in the States. People said that he was the *dernière cri* of refined rascality. He was supposed to be without feeling of any kind; his villainies were the theme of admiration amongst financial magnates. There were brokers who piously thanked Providence because Rawlins had never thought of going on the Stock Exchange, where he could have robbed and plundered with impunity. And this Rawlins always baffles the police. If he baffles them a little longer they won't be able to touch him at all. At present, despite his outward show, he has hardly a dollar to call his own. But he is on to a great *coup* now, and, strange to say, an honest one. Do you know the man, Miss Lee?"

Chris met the speaker's eyes firmly.

"I met him last night for the first time," she said.

"In that case you can hardly be said to know him," Rawlins murmured. "If you drive him into a corner he will do desperate things. If you tried that game on with him you would regret it for the rest of your life. Good heavens, you are like a child playing about amidst a lot of unguarded machinery. Why do you do it?"

"That I will tell you presently. Mr. Rawlins, you have a daughter."

The hard look died out of the listener's eyes.

"Whom I love better than my life," he said. "There are two John Rawlins's—the one you know; and, well, the other one. I should be sorry to show you the other one."

"For the sake of your daughter I don't want to see the other one."

"Then why do you pit yourself against me like this?"

"I don't think you are displaying your usual lucidity," Chris said, coolly. Her heart was beating fast, but she did not show it. "Just reflect for a moment. I have found you out. I know pretty well what you are. I need not have told you anything of this. I need have done no more than gone to the police and told them where to find you. But I don't want to do that; I hate to do it after what I saw last night. You have your child, and she loves you. Could I unmask you before her eyes?"

"You would kill her," Rawlins said, a little unsteadily; "and you would kill me, I verily believe. That child is all the world to me. I committed my first theft so that she could have the change the doctors declared to be absolutely necessary. I intended to repay the money—the old, old story. And I was found out by my employers and discharged. Thank goodness, my wife was dead. Since then I have preyed on society.... But I need not go into that sordid story. You are not going to betray me?"

"I said before that I should do nothing of the kind."

"Then why do you let me know that you have discovered my identity?"

"Because I want you to help me. I fancy you respect my sex, Mr. Rawlins?"

"Call me Smith, please. I have always respected your sex. All the kindness and sympathy of my life have been for women. And I can lay my hand on my heart and declare that I never yet wronged one of them in thought or deed. The man who is cruel to women is no man."

"And yet your friend Reginald Henson is that sort."

Rawlins smiled again. He began to understand a little of what was passing in Chris's mind.

"Would you mind going a little more into details?" he suggested. "So Henson is that sort. Well, I didn't know, or he had never had my assistance in his little scheme. Oh, of course, I have known him for years as a scoundrel. So he oppresses women."

"He has done so for a long time: he is blighting my life and the life of my sister and another. And it seems to me that I have that rascal under my thumb at last. You cannot save him—you can do no more than place obstacles in my way; but even those I should overcome. And you admit that I am likely to be dangerous to you."

"You can kill my daughter. I am in your power to that extent."

"As if I should," Chris said. "It is only Reginald Henson whom I want to strike. I want you to answer a few questions; to tell me why you went to Walen's and induced them to procure a certain cigar-case for you, and why you subsequently went to Lockhart's at Brighton and bought a precisely similar one."

Rawlins looked in surprise at the speaker. A tinge of admiration was on his face. There was a keenness and audacity after his own heart.

"Go on," he said, slowly. "Tell me everything openly and freely, and when you have done so I will give you all the information that lies in my power."

CHAPTER L

RAWLINS IS CANDID

"So Reginald Henson bullies women," Rawlins said, after a long pause. There was a queer smile on his face; he appeared perfectly at his ease. He did not look in the least like a desperate criminal whom Chris could have driven out of the country by one word to the police. In his perfectly-fitting grey suit he seemed more like a lord of ancient acres than anything else. "It is not a nice thing to bully women."

"Reginald Henson finds it quite a congenial occupation," Chris said, bitterly.

Rawlins pulled thoughtfully at his cigarette.

"I am to a certain extent in your power," he said. "You have discovered my identity at a time when I could sacrifice thousands for it not to be known that I am in England. How you have discovered me matters as little as how a card-player gets the ace of trumps. And I understand that the price of your silence is the betrayal of Henson?"

"That is about what it comes to," said Chris.

"In the parlance of the lower type of rascal, I am to 'round on my pal'?"

"If you like to put it in that way, Mr. Smith."

"I never did such a thing in my life before. And, at the same time, I don't mind admitting that I was never so sorely tried. At the present moment I am on the verge of a large fortune, and I am making my grand *coup* honestly. Would you deem it exaggeration on my part if I said that I was exceedingly glad of the fact?"

"Mr. Smith," Chris said, earnestly, "I have seen how fond you are of your daughter."

"That is an exceedingly clever remark of yours, young lady," Rawlins smiled. "You know that you have found the soft spot in my nature, and you are going to hammer on it till you reduce me to submission. I am not a religious man, but my one prayer is that Grace shall never find me out. When my *coup* comes off I am going to settle in England and become intensely respectable."

"With Reginald Henson for your secretary, I suppose?"

"No, I am going to drop the past. But to return to our subject. Are you asking me to betray Henson to the police?"

"Nothing of the kind," Chris cried, hastily. "I—I would do anything to avoid a family scandal. All I want is a controlling power over the man."

"The man who bullies women?"

"The same. For seven years he has wrecked the lives of five of us—three women. He has parted husband and wife, he has driven the man I love into exile. And the poor wife is gradually going hopelessly mad under his cruelties. And he blackmails us, he extorts large sums of money from us. If you only knew what we have suffered at the hands of the rascal!"

Rawlins nodded in sympathy.

"I did not imagine that," he said. "Of course, I have known for years that Henson was pretty bad. You may smile, but I have never had any sympathy with his methods and hypocritical ways, perhaps because I never did anything of the kind myself. Nobody can say that I ever robbed anybody who was poor or defenceless or foolish. By heavens, I am a more honest man than hundreds of London and New York capitalists. It is the hard rogues amongst us who have always been my mark. But to injure and wound women and children!"

"Which means that you are going to help me?" Chris asked, quietly.

"As far as I can, certainly. Especially as you are going to let Henson down easily. Now please ask me any questions that you like."

"This is very good of you," said Chris. "In the first place, did you ever hear Mr. Henson speak of his relations or friends?"

"Nobody beyond Lord Littimer. You see, Henson and I were extremely useful to one another once or twice, but he never trusted me, and I never trusted him. I never cared for his methods."

"Did you go to Brighton lately on purpose to help him?"

"Certainly not. I had business in Brighton for some considerable time, and my daughter was with me. When she went away to stay with friends for a short time I moved to the Metropole."

"Then why did you go to Walen's in Brighton and ask them to show you some gun-metal cigar-cases like the one in Lockhart's window?"

"Simply because Henson asked me to. He came to me just before I went to the Metropole and told me he had a big thing on. He didn't give me the least idea what it was, nor did I ask him. He suggested the

idea of the cigar-case, and said that I need not go near Walen's again, and I didn't. I assure you I had no curiosity on the matter. In any case a little thing like that couldn't hurt me. Some days later Henson came to me again, and asked me to go to Lockhart's and purchase the cigar-case I had previously seen. He wanted me to get the case so that I could not be traced. Again I agreed. I was leaving the Metropole the next day, so the matter was easy. I called and purchased the cigar-case on approval, I forwarded dollar-notes in payment from the Metropole, and the next day I left."

"And you did all that without a single question?"

"I did. It was only a little consideration for an old confederate."

"And suppose that confederate had played you false?"

Two tiny points of flame danced in Rawlins's eyes.

"Henson would never have dared," he said. "My mind was quite easy on that score."

"I understand," Chris murmured. "And you kept the cigar-case?"

"Yes, I rather liked it. And I could afford a luxury of that kind just then."

"Then why did you dispose of it to Rutter's in Moreton Wells? And why Moreton Wells?"

Rawlins laughed as he lighted a fresh cigarette.

"I came to Moreton Wells knowing that Henson was at Littimer Castle," he explained. "I went there to borrow £200 from Henson. Unfortunately I found him in great need of money. Somebody who had promised him a large sum of money had disappointed him."

Chris smiled. She had heard all about Lady Littimer's adventure with the ring, and her stubborn refusal to give Henson any further supplies.

"Presently I can tell you who disappointed Henson," she said. "But fancy you being short of—"

"Of ready money; I frequently am. One of your great millionaires told me lately that he was frequently hard up for a thousand pounds cash. I have frequently been hard up for five pounds. Hence the fact that I sold the cigar-case at Moreton Wells."

"Well, the ground is clear so far," said Chris. "Do you know Van Sneck?"

"I know Van Sneck very well," Rawlins said, without hesitation. "A wonderfully clever man."

"And a great scoundrel, I presume?"

"Well, on the whole, I should say not. Weak, rather than wicked. Van Sneck has been a tool and creature of Henson's for years. If he could only keep away from the drink he might make a fortune. But what has Van Sneck got to do with it?"

"A great deal," Chris said, drily. "And now, please, follow carefully what I am going to say. A little time ago we poor, persecuted women put our heads together to get free from Reginald Henson. We agreed to ask Mr. David Steel, the well-known novelist, to show us a way of escape. Unhappily for us, Henson got to know of it."

Rawlins was really interested at last.

"Pardon me," he said, eagerly, "if I ask a question or two before you proceed. Is Mr. David Steel the gentleman who found a man half murdered in his house in Brighton?"

"The same. But don't you know who the injured man was?"

"You don't mean to say it was Van Sneck?" Rawlins cried.

Chris nodded gravely. Rawlins looked like a man who was groping about in a sudden dazzle of blinding light.

"I begin to understand," he muttered. "The scoundrel!"

"After that I will resume," Chris said. "You must understand that Mr. Steel was a stranger to us. We hit upon the idea of interviewing him anonymously, so to speak, and we were going to give him a gun-

metal cigar-case mounted in diamonds. A friend of mine purchased that cigar-case at Lockhart's. Mind you, Reginald Henson knew all about this. The same day Henson's tool, Van Sneck, purchased a similar case from Walen's—a case really procured for your approval—and later on in the day the case passed from Van Sneck to Henson, who dexterously changed the cases."

"Complex," Rawlins muttered. "But I begin to see what is coming."

"The cases were changed, and the one from Walen's in due course became Mr. Steel's. Now note where Henson's diabolical cunning comes in. The same night Van Sneck is found half murdered in Mr. Steel's house, and in his pocket is the receipt for the very cigar-case that Mr. Steel claimed as his own property."

"Very awkward for Steel," Rawlins said, thoughtfully.

"Of course it was. And why was it done? So that we should be forced to come forward and exonerate Mr. Steel from blame. We should have had to tell the whole story, and then Henson would have learnt what steps we were taking to get rid of him."

Rawlins was quiet for some time. Admiration for the scheme was uppermost in his mind, but there was another thought that caused him to glance curiously at Chris.

"And that is all you know?" he asked.

"Not quite," Chris replied. "I know that on the day of the attempted murder Van Sneck quarrelled with Reginald Henson, who he said had treated him badly. Van Sneck had in some way found out that Reginald Henson meant mischief to Mr. Steel. Also he couldn't get the money he wanted. Probably he had purchased that cigar-case at Walen's, and Henson could not repay him for the purchase of it. Then he went off and wrote to Mr. Steel, asking the latter to see him, as he had threatened Henson he would do."

"Ah!" Rawlins exclaimed, suddenly. "Are you sure of this?"

"Certain. I heard it from a man who was with Van Sneck at the time, a man called Merritt."

"James Merritt. Really, you have been in choice company, Miss Lee. Your knowledge of the criminal classes is getting extensive and peculiar."

"Merritt told me this. And an answer came back."

"An answer from Mr. Steel?"

"Purporting to be an answer from Mr. Steel. A very clever forgery, as a matter of fact. Of course that forgery was Henson's work, because we know that Henson coolly ordered notepaper in Mr. Steel's name. He forgot to pay the bill, and that is how the thing came out. Besides, the little wad of papers on which the forgery was written is in Mr. Steel's hands. Now, what do you make of that?"

Rawlins turned the matter over thoughtfully in his mind.

"Did Henson know that Mr. Steel would be from home that night?" he asked.

"Of course. He probably also knew where our meeting with Mr. Steel was to take place."

"Then the matter is pretty obvious," said Rawlins. "Van Sneck, by some means or other, gets an inkling of what is going on. He wanted money from Henson, which he couldn't get, Henson being very short lately, and then they quarrelled. Van Sneck was fool enough to threaten Henson with what he was going to do. Van Sneck's note was dispatched by hand and intercepted by Henson with a reply. By the way, will you be good enough to give me the gist of the reply?"

"It was a short letter from Mr. Steel and signed with his initials, and saying in effect that he was at home every night and would see Van Sneck about twelve or some time like that. He was merely to knock quietly, as the household would be in bed, and Mr. Steel would let him in."

"And Mr. Steel never wrote that letter at all?"

"No; for the simple reason that he never had Van Sneck's note."

"Which Henson intercepted, of course. Now, the mere fact of the reply coming on Mr. Steel's paper is evidence that Henson had plotted some other or alternative scheme against Mr. Steel. How long before the cigar-case episode had you decided to consult the novelist?"

"We began to talk about it nine or ten days before."

"And Henson got to hear of it. Then a better idea occurred to Henson, and the first idea which necessitated getting hold of Mr. Steel's notepaper was abandoned. Subsequently, as you have just told me, the note-paper came in useful after all. Henson knew that Steel would be out that night. And, therefore, Van Sneck is deliberately lured to Steel's house to be murdered there."

"I see," Chris said, faintly. "This had never occurred to me before.
Murdered, by whom?"

"By whom? Why, by Reginald Henson, of course."

Just for a moment Chris felt as if all the world was slipping away under her feet.

"But how could he do it?" she asked.

"Quite easily. And throw all the blame on Mr. Steel. Look at the evidence he had ready to his hand against the latter. The changed cigar-case would come near to hang a man. And Van Sneck was in the way. Steel goes out to meet you or some of your friends. All his household are in bed. As a novelist he comes and goes as he likes and nobody takes any heed. He goes and leaves his door on the latch. Any money it is the common latch they put on thousands of doors. Henson lets himself into the house and coolly waits Van Sneck's coming. The rest you can imagine."

Chris had no reply for a moment or two. Rawlins's suggestion had burst upon her like a bomb. And it was all so dreadfully, horribly probable. Henson could have done this thing with absolute impunity. It was impossible to imagine for a moment that David Steel was the criminal. Who else could it be, then, but Reginald Henson?

"I'm afraid this has come as a shock to you," Rawlins said, quietly.

"It has, indeed," said Chris. "And your reasoning is so dreadfully logical."

"Well, I may be wrong, after all," Rawlins suggested.

Chris shook her head doubtfully. She felt absolutely assured that Rawlins was right. But, then, Henson would hardly have run so terrible a risk for a little thing like that. He could easily have silenced Van Sneck by a specious promise or two. There must be another reason for—

It came to Chris in a moment. She saw the light quite plainly.

"Mr. Smith," she said, eagerly, "where did you first meet Henson and
Van Sneck?"

"We first came together some eight years ago in Amsterdam."

"Would you mind telling me what your business was?"

"So far as I can recollect it was connected with some old silver—William and Mary and Queen Anne cups and *jardinières*. We had made a bit of a find that we could authenticate, but we wanted a lot of the stuff, well—faked. You see, Van Sneck was an authority on that kind of thing, and we employed him to cut marks off small genuine things and attach them to spurious large ones. On the whole, we made a very successful business of it for a long time."

"You found Van Sneck an excellent copyist. Did he ever copy anything for you?"

"No. But Henson employed him now and again. Van Sneck could construct a thing from a mere description. There was a ring he did for Henson—"

"Was that called Prince Rupert's ring, by any chance?"

"That was the name of the ring. Why?"

"We will come to that presently. Did you ever see Prince Rupert's ring?"

"Well, I did. It was in Amsterdam again, about a year later than the time I mentioned just now. Henson brought the real ring for Van Sneck to copy. Van Sneck went into raptures over it. He said he had never seen anything of the kind so beautiful. He made a copy of the ring, which he handed back with the original to Henson."

Chris nodded. This pretty faithful copy of the ring was the one that Henson had used as a magnet to draw Lady Littimer's money and the same one that had found its way into Steel's possession. But Chris

had another idea to follow up.

"You hinted to me just now that Henson was short of money," she said. "Do you mean to say he is in dire need of some large sum?"

"That's it," Rawlins replied. "I rather fancy there has been some stir with the police over some business up at Huddersfield some years ago."

"A so-called home both there and at Brighton?"

"That's it. It was the idea that Henson conveyed to me when I saw him at Moreton Wells. It appears that a certain Inspector Marley, of the Brighton Police, is the same man who used to have the warrants for the Huddersfield affair in his hands. Henson felt pretty sure that Marley had recognised him. He told me that if the worst came to the worst he had something he could sell to Littimer for a large sum of money."

"I know," Chris exclaimed. "It is the Prince Rupert's ring."

"Well, I can't say anything about that. Is this ring a valuable property?"

"Not in itself. But the loss of it has caused a dreadful lot of misery and suffering. Mr. Smith, Reginald Henson had no business with that ring at all. He stole it and made it appear as if somebody else had done so by means of conveying the copy to the very last person who should have possessed it. That sad business broke up a happy home and has made five people miserable for many years. And whichever way you turn, whichever way you look, you find the cloven foot of Henson everywhere. Now, what you have told me just now gives me a new idea. The secret that Henson was going to sell to Lord Littimer for a large sum was the story of the missing ring and the restitution of the same."

"Kind of brazening it out, you mean?"

"Yes. Lord Littimer would give three times ten thousand pounds to have that ring again. But at this point Henson has met with a serious check in his plans. Driven into a corner, he has resolved to make a clean breast of it to Lord Littimer. He procures the ring from his strong box, and then he makes a discovery."

"Which is more than I have. Pray proceed."

"He discovers that he has not got the real Prince Rupert's ring."

Rawlins looked up with a slightly puzzled air.

"Will you kindly tell me what you mean?" he said.

"It was a forgery. Van Sneck made a copy from a mere description. That copy served its purpose with a vengeance, and is now at the bottom of the North Sea. I need not go into details, because it is a family secret, and does not concern our conversation at all. At that time the *real* ring came into Henson's possession, and he wanted a copy to hold over the head of an unfortunate lady whom he would have ruined before long. You told me just now that Van Sneck had fallen in love with Prince Rupert's ring and could hardly bear to part with it. He didn't."

"No? But how could he retain it?"

"Quite easily. The copy was quite faithful, but still *it was* a copy. But secretly Van Sneck makes a copy that would deceive everybody but an expert, and this he hands over to—"

"To Henson as the real ring," Rawlins cried, excitedly.

Chris smiled, a little pleased at her acumen.

"Precisely," she said. "I see that you are inclined to be of my opinion."

"Well, upon my word, I am," Rawlins confessed. "But I don't quite see why—"

"Please let me finish," Chris went on, excitedly. "Reginald Henson is driven back on his last trenches. He has to get the ring for Lord Littimer. He takes out the ring after all these years, never dreaming that Van Sneck would dare to play such a trick upon him, and finds out the forgery. Did you ever see that man when he is really angry?"

"He is not pretty then," Rawlins said.

"Pretty! He is murder personified. Kindly try to imagine his feelings when he discovers he has been

deceived. Mind you, this is only a theory of mine, but I feel certain that it will prove correct. Henson's last hope is snatched away from him. But he does not go straight to Van Sneck and accuse him of his duplicity. He knows that Van Sneck stole the ring for sheer love of the gem, and that he would not dare to part with it. He assumes that the ring is in Van Sneck's possession. And when Van Sneck threatened to expose part of the business to Mr. Steel, Henson makes no attempt to soothe him. Why? Because he sees a cunning way of getting back the ring. He himself lures Van Sneck to Mr. Steel's house, and there he almost murders him for the sake of the ring. Of course, he meant to kill Van Sneck in such a way that the blame could not possibly fall upon him."

"Can you prove that he knew anything about it?"

"I can prove that he knew who Van Sneck was at a time when the hospital people were doing their best to identify the man. And I know how fearfully uneasy he was when he got to know that some of us were aware who Van Sneck was. It has been a pretty tangle for a long time, but the skein is all coming out smoothly at last. And if we could get the ring which Henson forced by violence from Van Sneck—"

"Excuse me. He did nothing of the kind."

Chris looked up eagerly.

"Oh," she cried, "have you more to tell me, then?"

"Nothing authentic," Rawlins said; "merely surmise. Van Sneck is going to recover. If he does it will be hard for Henson, who ought to get away with his plunder at once. Why doesn't he go and blackmail Lord Littimer and sell him the ring and clear out of the country? He doesn't do so because the ring is not yet in his possession."

"Then you imagine that Van Sneck—"

"Still has the ring probably in his possession at the present moment. If you only knew where Van Sneck happened to be."

Chris rose to her feet with an excited cry.

"I do know," she exclaimed; "he is in the house where he was half murdered. And Mr. Steel shall know all this before he sleeps to-night."

CHAPTER LI

HERITAGE IS WILLING

Bell's sanguine expectation that Van Sneck would be ready for an immediate operation was not quite correct. As the day wore on the man seemed more feverish and restless, which feverishness was followed by a certain want of strength. After due deliberation Dr. Cross suggested that the operation should be postponed for a day or two.

"The man is out of our hands," he said. "You have identified him, and you desire that he should remain here. It is pretty irregular altogether. And I hope I shan't get into trouble over it. Still, in such capable hands as yours—"

Bell acknowledged the compliment with a smile.

"Between Heritage and myself," he said, "we shall pull him through, eh, Heritage?"

The other doctor nodded brightly. For some little time he had been directly under Bell's influence, and that had meant a marvellous change for the better, he had lost a deal of his hesitating manner, and was looking forward to the operation with the keenest interest.

"However, I will put you all right," Bell said. "I fancy the time has come when we can confide to a certain extent in Marley. And if the police approve of Van Sneck being here, I don't see that you can say any more."

Cross was emphatically of the same opinion. Later on, in the course of a long interview with Marley,

Bell and Steel opened the latter's eyes to a considerable extent.

"Well, I must congratulate you, sir," he said to Steel. "I'm bound to confess that things looked pretty black against you at one time. Indeed, I should have been fully justified in arresting you for the attempted murder of Van Sneck."

"But you never deemed me guilty, Marley?"

"No, I didn't," Marley said, thoughtfully. "I argued in your favour against my better judgment. I gather even now that there is a great deal for me to know."

"And which you are not going to learn," Bell said, drily. "When we have Van Sneck all right again, and ready to swear to the author of the mischief, you will have to be satisfied."

"That would satisfy me, sir. And I'm glad that cigar-case mystery is settled. You'll let me know how the operation goes on?"

Steel promised to do so, and the two returned to Downend Terrace together. They found Heritage a little excited and disturbed.

"Do you know I have had a visitor?" he exclaimed.

Bell started slightly. He looked just a little anxious.

"I'm going to guess it at once," he said. "Reginald Henson has been here."

"You are certainly a wonderful fellow," Heritage said, admiringly. "Nobody else could possibly have guessed that. He came to see me, of course."

"Oh, of course," Bell said, drily. "Naturally, he would have no ulterior motive. Did he happen to know that we had a kind of patient under the roof?"

Heritage explained that Henson seemed to know something about it. Also, by singular coincidence, he had met Van Sneck abroad. He expressed a desire to see the patient, but Heritage's professional caution had got the better of his friendship for once. Henson had given way finally, saying that he hoped to call again later in the day.

"It's a good thing you were firm," Bell said, grimly. "Otherwise there would have been no need for an operation on Van Sneck. My dear Heritage, it's quite time your eyes were opened to the true nature of your friend. Henson watched Steel and myself out of the house He wanted to see Van Sneck; he has probably known from the first that the latter was here."

"Matter of philanthropy, perhaps," Heritage suggested.

"A matter of murder," Bell said, sternly. "My dear fellow, Van Sneck was nearly done to death in yonder conservatory, and his would-be assassin was Reginald Henson."

"I was never more astounded in my life," gasped Heritage. "I have always looked upon Henson as the soul of honour and integrity. And he has always been so kind to me."

"For his own purposes, no doubt. You say that he found you a home after your misfortunes came upon you. He came to see you frequently. And yet he always harped upon that wretched hallucination of yours. Why? Because you were the Carfax family doctor for a time, and at any moment you might have given valuable information concerning the suicide of Claire Carfax. Tell Heritage the story of Prince Rupert's ring, Steel."

David proceeded to do so at some length. Heritage appeared to be deeply interested. And gradually many long-forgotten things came back to him.

"I recollect it all perfectly well," he said. "Miss Carfax and myself were friends. Like most people with badly balanced intellects, she had her brilliant moments. Why, she showed me that ring with a great deal of pride, but she did not tell me its history. She was very strange in her manner that morning; indeed, I warned her father that she wanted to be most carefully looked after."

"Did she say how she got the ring?" Steel asked.

Heritage did not answer for a moment.

"Oh, yes," he said, presently, "She said it was a present from a good boy, and that Reginald Henson had given it her in an envelope. I met Henson close by, but I didn't mention the ring."

"And there you have the whole thing in a nutshell!" Bell exclaimed. "Nothing of this came out at the inquest, because the ring story was hushed up, and Heritage was not called because he had nothing to do with the suicide. But Henson probably saw poor Claire Carfax show you the ring, and he got a bit frightened, and he kept an eye upon you afterwards. When you broke down he looked after you, and he took precious good care to keep your hallucination always before your eyes. Whenever he came to see you he always did that."

"You are quite right there," Heritage admitted. "He mentioned it this afternoon when I said I was going to take part in the operation on Van Sneck. He asked me if I thought it wise to try my nerves so soon again with the electric light."

"And I hope you told him he was talking nonsense," Bell said, hastily. "There, let us change the subject. The mere mention of that man's name stifles me."

Morning brought a long letter from Chris Henson to David, giving him in detail the result of her recent interview with John Rawlins. There was a postscript to the letter which David showed to Bell with a certain malicious glee.

"A nasty one for our friend Henson," he said. "What a sweet surprise it will be for that picturesque gentleman the next time he goes blackmailing to Longdean Grange."

Bell chuckled in his turn. The net was drawing very close about Henson.

"How is Van Sneck to-day?" David asked.

"Much better," Bell replied. "I propose to operate to-night. I'm glad to hear that your mother is going to be away a day or two longer."

Heritage appeared to be ready and eager for the work before him. A specially powerful electric light had been rigged up in connection with the study lamp, and an operating table improvised from the kitchen. More than once Bell looked eagerly at Heritage, but the latter stood the scrutiny bravely. Once the operation was successfully through. Heritage would never suffer from hallucinations again.

"I fancy everything is ready now," Bell said, at length. "After dinner to-night and this thing will be done. Then the story will be told—"

"Mr. Reginald Henson to see you, sir."

A servant looked in with this information and a card on a tray. There was a slight commotion outside, the vision of a partially-wrecked bicycle on the path, and a dusty figure in the hall with his head in his hand.

"The gentleman has met with an accident, sir," the parlourmaid said. Henson seemed to be knocked about a great deal. He was riding down the terrace, he said, when suddenly he ran over a dog, and—

"What sort of a dog?" Bell snapped out. "What colour and size?"

Henson was utterly taken aback by the suddenness of the question. He gasped and stammered. He could not have told Bell more plainly that the "accident" was an artistic fake.

"You must stay here till you feel all right again," David suggested.

"Stay here for the night," Bell growled, *sotto voce.* "Stay here till to-morrow morning and hear something from Van Sneck's lips that will finish his interesting career for some time. Medical treatment be hanged. A clothes-brush and some soap and water are all the physic that he requires."

Presently Henson professed himself to be better. His superficial injuries he bore with a manly fortitude quite worthy of his high reputation. He could afford to smile at them. But he feared that there was something internal of a sufficiently serious nature. Every time he moved he suffered exquisite agony. He smiled in a faint kind of way. Bell watched him as a cat watches a mouse. And he could read a deeper purpose behind that soft, caressing manner. What it was he did not know, but he meant to find out before the day was passed.

"Hadn't we better send him to the hospital?" David suggested.

"What for?" was Bell's brutal response. "There's nothing whatever the matter with the man."

"But he has every appearance of great pain."

"To you, perhaps, but not to me. The man is shamming. He has come here for some purpose, which

will be pretty sure to transpire presently. The knave never dreams that we are watching him, and he hugs himself with the delusion that we take his story for gospel. Fancy a man in the state that he pretends to be in sending his card to you! Let him stay where we can keep an eye upon the chap. So long as he is under our observation he can't do any mischief outside."

There was wisdom in what Bell suggested, and David agreed. Despite his injuries, Henson made a fair tea, and his dinner, partaken of on the dining-room sofa, was an excellent one.

"And now, do not let me detain you, as you have business," he smiled. "I shall be quite comfortable here if you will place a glass of water by my side. The pain makes me thirsty. No, you need not have any further consideration for me."

He smiled with patient resignation, the smile that he had found so effective on platforms. He lay back with his eyes half closed. He seemed to be asleep.

"I fancy we can leave him now," Bell said, with deep sarcasm. "We need have no further anxiety. Perfect rest is all that he requires."

Henson nodded in a sleepy fashion; his eyes were closed now till the others had left the room. Once he was alone he was alert and vigorous again.

"Ten minutes," he muttered, "say, a quarter of an hour. A touch, a spot of water, and the thing is done. And I can never be found out."

CHAPTER LII

PUTTING THE LIGHT OUT

Once the trio were in the operating-room Bell gave one rapid glance at Heritage. But the latter seemed to have forgotten all his fears. There was an alert air about him; he was quiet and steady. There was something of the joy of battle in his eyes.

"Now go and fetch Van Sneck in," Bell said.

The patient came at length. Everything was ready. Van Sneck murmured something and looked vaguely about him, like a man suddenly aroused from a deep sleep. But he obeyed quite willingly when Bell commanded him to get on the table. A moment or two later and he was gone under the influence of the ether administered by Bell.

A case of glittering instruments lay on the table. The strong electric light was switched on and hung just over the head of the unconscious patient.

"You hold the sponge," Bell whispered to David. "There will be very little blood. I like to have a man with me who has coolness and courage. Oh, here is the spot. Feel the depression of the skull, Heritage. That is where the pressure lies, and no larger than a pea."

Heritage nodded, without reply. He took up the knife, there was a flash of steel in the brilliant light and a sudden splash of blood. There was a scrape, scrape that jolted horribly on David's nerves, followed by a convulsive movement of Van Sneck's body.

"Beautiful, beautiful," Heritage murmured. "How easily it comes away."

Bell was watching in deep admiration of the strong hand that was yet light as thistledown. The big electric light flickered for just a moment, and Heritage stood upright.

"Don't be a fool," Bell said, sternly. "It's a mere matter of current." Heritage muttered that it must be. Nevertheless it had given him quite a turn. His face was set and pale and his hand shook ever so slightly. The knife was cutting deep, deeper—

A snarling oath broke from Bell's lips as the light flickered again and popped out suddenly, leaving the whole room in intense darkness. Heritage cried aloud. David felt a hand guiding his fingers to the patient's head.

"Press the sponge down there and press hard," Bell whispered. "It's a matter of life and death.

Another minute and Van Sneck would have gone. Heritage, Heritage, pull yourself together. It was no fault of yours the light went out—the fault is mine."

Bell stumbled down the kitchen stairs and returned with a candle. The electric lights were out all over the ground floor with the exception of the hall. One of the circuits had given out completely, as sometimes happens with the electric light. Bell leapt on a table and turned the hall light out. A second later and he was dragging the long spare flex from the impromptu operating-room to the swinging cord over the hall lamp. With a knife he cut the cord loose, he stripped the copper wires beneath, and rapidly joined one flex to the other.

"It's amateur work, but I fancy it will do," he muttered. "Anyway, that rascal is powerless to interfere with the circuit that controls the hall light."

Snap went the hall switch—there was a sudden cry from Heritage as the big lamp over the head of Van Sneck flared up again. Bell raced into the study and shut the door.

"A trick," he gasped. "The light was put out. For Heaven's sake, Heritage, don't get brooding over those fancies of yours *now.* I tell you the thing was done deliberately. Here, if you are too weak or feeble, give the knife to *me*."

The request had a sting in it. With an effort Heritage pulled himself together.

"No," he said, firmly, "I'll do it. It was a cruel, dastardly trick to play upon me, but I quite see now that it *was* a trick. Only it's going to make a man of me instead."

Bell nodded. His eyes were blazing, but he said nothing. He watched Heritage at work with stern approval. Nothing could have been more scientific, more skilful. It seemed a long time to David, looking on, but it was a mere matter of minutes.

"Finished," Heritage said, with a triumphant thrill. "And successful."

"And another second would have seen an end of our man," Bell said. "He's coming round again. Get those bandages on, Heritage. I'll look after the mess. Give him the drug. I want him to sleep for a good long time."

"Will he be sensible to-morrow?" David asked.

"I'll pledge my reputation upon it," Bell said. "Hadn't you better telephone down to your electrician to come and see to those lights? I see the fuse in the meter is intact; it is only on the one circuit that they have gone."

Van Sneck opened his eyes and stared languidly about him. In a clear, weak, yet wholly sensible voice he asked where he was, and then lapsed into slumber. A little later and he lay snug and still in bed. There was a look of the deepest pleasure in the eyes of Heritage.

"I've saved him and he's saved me," he said. "But it was touch and go for both of us when that light failed. But for Bell I fancied that I should have fainted. And then it came to me that it was some trick, and my nerve returned."

"Never to leave you again," Bell said. "It tried you high, and found you not wanting."

"Heaven be praised," Heritage murmured. "But how was it done?"

Bell's face was stern as he took the kitchen candlestick from the table and went in the direction of the dining-room.

"Come with me, and I'll explain," he said, curtly.

The dining-room was in pitchy darkness, for the lights there had been on the short circuit; indeed, the lights on the ground floor had all failed with the exception of the hall, which fortunately had been on another circuit. The fact had saved Van Sneck's life, for if Bell had not speedily used that one live wire the patient must have perished.

Henson looked up from his sofa with a start and a smile.

"I am afraid I must have been asleep," he said, languidly.

"Liar," Bell thundered. "You have been plotting murder. And but for a mere accident the plot would have been successful. You have worked out the whole thing in your mind; you came here on purpose. You came here to stifle the light at the very moment when we were operating on Van Sneck. You

thought that all the lights on the floor would be on the same circuit; you have been here before."

"Are you mad?" Henson gasped. "When have I been here before—"

"The night that you lured Van Sneck here by a forged letter and left him for dead."

Henson gasped, his lips moved, but no words came from them.

"You have a little knowledge of electricity," Bell went on. "And you saw your way pretty clear to spoil our operation to-night. You got that idea from yonder wall-plug, into which goes the plunger of the reading lamp on the cabinet yonder. At the critical moment all you had to do was to dip your fingers in water and press the tips of them against the live wire in the wall-plug. You did so, and immediately the wires fired all over the circuit and plunged us in darkness. But the hall light remained sound, and Van Sneck was saved. If it is any consolation to you, he will be as sensible as any of us to-morrow."

"Hensen had risen to his feet, pale and trembling, He protested, but it was all in vain. Bell approached the china wall-plug and pointed to it.

"Hold the candle down," he said. "There! You can see that the surface is still wet, there is water in the holes now, and some of it has trickled down the distemper on the wall. You ought to be shot where you stand, murderous dog."

Henson protested, with some dignity. It was all so much Greek to him, he said. He had been sleeping so quietly that he had not seen the light fail. Bell cut him short.

"Get out," he cried. "Go away; you poison the air that honest men breathe, and you are as fit and well as I am. Why don't you pitch him into the street, Steel? Why don't you telephone to Marley at the police-station, and say that the Huddersfield swindler is here? Oh, if you only knew what an effort it is to keep my hands off him!"

Henson made for the door with alacrity. A moment later and he was in the street, dazed, confused, and baffled, and with the conviction strong upon him that he had failed in his great *coup*. Van Sneck would be sensible to-morrow—he would speak. And then—

But he dared not think of that at present. He wanted all his nerve and courage now. He had just one last chance, one single opportunity of making money, and then he must get out of the country without delay. He almost wished now that he had not been quite so precipitate in the matter of James Merritt. That humble tool might have been of great advantage to him at this moment. But Merritt had threatened to be troublesome and must be got out of the way. But then, the police had not picked Merritt up yet. Was it possible that Merritt had found out that—

But Henson did not care to think of that, either, He would go back to the quiet lodgings he had taken in Kemp Town for a day or two, he would change his clothes and walk over to Longdean Grange, and it would go hard if he failed to get a cheque from the misguided lady there. If he were quick he could be there by eleven o'clock.

He passed into his little room. He started back to see a man sleeping in his armchair. Then the man, disturbed by the noise of the newcomer, opened his eyes. And those eyes were gleaming with a glow that filled Henson's heart with horrible dread. It was Merritt who sat opposite him, and it was Merritt whose eyes told Henson that he knew of the latter's black treachery. Henson was face to face with death, and he knew it.

He turned and fled for his life; he scudded along the streets, past the hospital and up towards the downs, with Merritt after him. The start was not long, but it was sufficient. Merritt took the wrong turn, and, with a heart beating fast and hard, Henson climbed upwards. It was a long time before his courage came back to him. He did not feel really easy in his mind until he had passed the lodge-gates at Longdean Grange, where he was fortunate enough, after a call or two, to rouse up Williams.

The latter came with more alacrity than usual. There was a queer grin on his face and a suggestion of laughter in his eyes.

"There seems to be a lot of light about," Henson cried. "Take me up to the house, and don't let anybody know I am here. Your mistress gone to bed?"

"She's in the drawing-room," Williams said, "singing. And Miss Enid's there. I am sure they will be glad to see you, sir."

Henson doubted it, but made no reply. There was a chatter of voices in the drawing-room, a chatter of a lightsomeness that Henson had never heard before. Well, he would soon settle all that. He passed

quietly into the room, then stood in puzzled fear and amazement.

"Our dear nephew," said a cool, sarcastic voice. "Come in, sir, come in. This is quite charming. Well, my sweet philanthropist and most engaging gentleman, and what may we have the pleasure of doing for you to-night?"

"Lord Littimer?" Henson gasped. "Lord Littimer *here*?"

CHAPTER LIII

UNSEALED LIPS

Bell gave a gesture of relief as the door closed upon Henson. Heritage looked like a man who does not quite understand.

"I haven't quite got the hang of it yet," he said. "Was that done for my benefit?"

"Of course it was," Bell replied. "Henson found out that Van Sneck was here, as he was certain to do sooner or later. He comes here to make inquiries and finds you; also he comes to spy out the land. Now, without being much of a gambler, I'm willing to stake a large sum that he introduced the subject of your old trouble?"

"He invariably did that," Heritage admitted.

"Naturally. That was part of the game. And you told him that you had got over your illness and that you were going to do the operation. And you told him how. Where were you when the little conversation between Henson and yourself took place?"

"He was asked into the dining-room."

"And then you told him everything. Directly Henson's eyes fell upon that wall-plug he knew how to act. He made up his mind that the electric light should fail at a critical moment. Hence the dramatic 'accident' with the cycle. Once Henson had got into the house the rest was easy. He had only to wet his fingers and press them hard against the two wires in the wallplug and out pops the light, in consequence of the fuses blowing out. I don't know where Henson learnt the trick, but I do know that I was a fool not to think of it. You see, the hall light being dropped through from the floor above was on another circuit. If it hadn't been we should have had our trouble with Van Sneck for nothing."

"He would have died?" David asked.

The two doctors nodded significantly.

"What a poisonous scoundrel he is!" David cried. "Miss Chris Henson does not hesitate to say that he was more or less instrumental in removing two people who helped her and her sister to defeat Henson, and now he makes two attacks on Van Sneck's life. Really, we ought to inform the police what has happened and have him arrested before he can do any further mischief. Penal servitude for life would about fit the case."

Van Sneck was jealously guarded by Heritage and Bell for the next few hours. He awoke the next morning little the worse for the operation. His eyes were clear now; the restless, eager look had gone from them.

"Where am I?" he demanded. "What has happened?"

Bell explained briefly. As he spoke his anxiety passed away. He saw that
Van Sneck was following quite intelligently and rationally.

"I remember coming here," the Dutchman said. "I can't recall the rest just now. I feel like a man who is trying to piece the fragments of a dream together."

"You'll have it all right in an hour or two," Bell said, with an encouraging smile. "Meanwhile your breakfast is ready. Yes, you can smoke afterwards if you like. And then you shall tell me all about Reginald Henson. As a matter of fact, we know all about it now."

"Oh," Van Sneck said, blankly. "You do, eh?"

"Yes, even to the history of the second Rembrandt, and the reason why Henson stabbed you and gave you that crack over the head. If you tell me the truth you are safe; if you don't—why, you stand a chance of joining Henson in the dock."

Bell went off, leaving Van Sneck to digest this speech at his leisure. Van Sneck lay back on his bed, propped up with pillows, and smoked many cigarettes before he expressed a desire to see Bell again. The latter came in with Steel; Heritage had gone elsewhere.

"This gentleman is Mr. Steel?" Van Sneck suggested.

Bell responded somewhat drily that it was. "But I see you are going to tell us everything," he went on. "That being so, suppose you begin at the beginning. When you sold that copy of the 'Crimson Blind' to Lord Littimer had you the other copy?"

"Ach, you have got to the bottom of things, it seems," Van Sneck gurgled.

"Yes, and I have saved your life, foolish as it might seem," Bell replied. "You came very near to losing it the second attempt last night at Henson's hands. Henson is done for, played out, burst up. We can arrest him on half-a-dozen charges when we please. We can have you arrested any time on a charge of conspiracy over those pictures—"

"Of which I am innocent; I swear it," Van Sneck said, solemnly. "Those two Rembrandts—they fell into my hands by what you call a slice of good luck. I am working hand in glove with Henson at the time, and show him them. I suggest Lord Littimer as a purchaser. He would, perhaps, buy the two, which would be a little fortune for me. Then Henson, he says, 'Don't you be a fool, Van Sneck. Suppress the other; say nothing about it. You get as much from Littimer for the one as you get for the two, because Lord Littimer think it unique.'"

"That idea commended itself to a curio dealer?" Bell suggested, drily.

"But yes," Van Sneck said, eagerly. "Later on we disclose the other and get a second big price. And Lord Littimer he buy the first copy for a long price."

"After which you discreetly disappear," said Steel. "Did you steal those pictures?"

"No," Van Sneck said, indignantly. "They came to me in the way of honest business—a poor workman who knows nothing of their value, and takes fifteen marks for them."

"Honest merchant," David murmured. "Pray go on."

"I had to go away. Some youthful foolishness over some garnets raked up after many years. The police came down upon me so suddenly that I got away with the skin of my teeth. I leave the other Rembrandt, everything, behind me. I do not know that Henson he give me away so that he can steal the other Rembrandt."

"So you have found that out?" said Bell. "Who told you?"

"I learn that not so long ago. I learn it from a scoundrel called Merritt, a tool of Henson. He tells me to go to Littimer Castle to steal the Rembrandt for Henson, because Dr. Bell, he find *my* Rembrandt. Then I what you call pump Merritt, and he tells me all about the supposed robbery at Amsterdam and what was found in the portmanteau of good Dr. Bell yonder. Then I go to Henson and tell him what I find out, and he laughs. Mind you, that was after I came here from Paris on business for Henson."

"About the time you bought that diamond-mounted cigar-case?" David asked, quietly.

Van Sneck nodded. He was evidently impressed by the knowledge possessed by his questioners.

"That's it," he said. "I buy it because Henson ask me to. Henson say he make it all right about the Rembrandt, and that if I do as I am told he give me £500. His money is to come on a certain day, but I pump and I pump, and I find that there is some game against Mr. Steel, who is a great novelist."

"That is very kind of you," David said, modestly.

"One against Miss Enid Henson," Van Sneck went on. "I met that young lady once and I liked her; therefore, I say I will be no party to getting her into trouble. And Henson says I am one big fool, and that he is only giving Mr. Steel a lesson in the art of minding his own business. So I ask no further questions, though I am a good bit puzzled. With the last bank-notes I possess I go to a place called

Walen's and buy the cigar-case that Henson says. I meet him and hand over the case and ask him for my money. Henson swears that he has no money at all, not even enough to repay me the price of the cigar-case. He has been disappointed. And I have been drinking. So I swear I will write and ask Mr. Steel to see me, and I do so."

"And you get an answer?" David asked.

"Sir, I do. You said you would see me the same night. It was a forgery?"

"It was. Henson had anticipated something like that. I know all about the forgery, how my notepaper was procured, and when the forgery was written. But that has very little to do with the story now. Please go on."

Van Sneck paused before he proceeded.

"I am not quite sober," he said. "I am hot with what I called my wrongs. I come here and ring the bell. The hall was in darkness. There was a light in the conservatory, but none in the study. I quite believed that it was Mr. Steel who opened the door and motioned me towards the study. Then the door of the study closed and locked behind me, and the electric light shot up. When I turned round I found myself face to face with Henson."

Van Sneck paused again and shuddered at some hideous recollection. His eyes were dark and eager; there was a warm moisture like varnish on his face.

"Even that discovery did not quite sober me," he went on. "I fancied it was some joke, or that perhaps I had got into the wrong house. But no, it was the room of a literary gentleman. I—I expected to see Mr. Steel come in or to try the door. Henson smiled at me. Such a smile! He asked me if I had the receipt for the cigar-case about me, and I said it was in my pocket. Then he smiled again, and something told me my life was in danger.

"I was getting pretty sober by that time. It came to me that I had been lured there; that Henson had got into the house during the absence of the owner. It was late at night in a quiet house, and nobody had seen me come. If that man liked to kill me he could do so and walk out of the house without the faintest chance of discovery. And he was twice my size, and a man without feeling. I looked round me furtively lor a weapon.

"He saw my glance and understood it, and smiled again. I was trembling from head to foot now with a vague, nameless terror. From the very first I knew that I had not the smallest chance. Henson approached me and laid his hand on my shoulder. He wanted something, he gave that something a name. If I passed that something over to him I was free, if not—

"Well, gentlemen, I didn't believe him. He had made a discovery that frightened me. And I had what he wanted in my pocket. If I had handed it over to him he would not have spared me. As he approached me my foot slipped and I stumbled into the conservatory. I fell backwards. And then I recovered myself and defied Henson.

"'Fool,' he hissed, 'do you want to die?'

"But I knew that I should die in any case. Even then I could smile to myself as I thought how I could baffle my foe. Once, twice, three times he repeated his demands, and each time I was obdurate. I knew that he would kill me in any case.

"He came with a snarl of rage; there was a knife in his hand. I hurled a flower-pot at his head and missed him. The next instant and he had me by the throat. I felt his knife between my shoulders, then a stunning blow on the head, and till I woke here to-day I cannot recollect a single thing."

Van Sneck paused and wiped his face, wet with the horror of the recollection. David Steel gave Bell a significant glance, and the latter nodded.

"Was the thing that Henson wanted a ring?" Steel asked, quietly.

CHAPTER LIV

WHERE IS THE RING?

Van Sneck looked up with some signs of confusion. He had not expected a question of that kind. There was just the suggestion of cunning on his face.

"A ring!" he murmured, vaguely. "A ring! What ring?"

"Now, look here," David said, sternly. "You are more or less in our power, you know, but we are not disposed to be hard on you so long as you are quite candid with us. Henson required something that he believed to be in your possession; indeed, you have as good as said you had it with you. Henson lured you into my house to get that more than anything else. That he would have killed you even after he got it, I firmly believe. But that is not the point. Now, was not Henson looking for Prince Rupert's ring that you got from him by means of a trick?"

Van Sneck dropped his hands helplessly on the bed.

"Gentlemen," he whined, "you are too much for me. The marvellous accuracy of your knowledge is absolutely overwhelming. It was the ring Henson was after."

"The one you stole from him years ago! But what did you know about it?"

Van Sneck smiled.

"There is no living man who knows more about those things than I do," he said. "It is a passion and a study with me. And some seven years ago, in Holland, Henson gave me the description of a ring he wanted me to copy. Henson never told me what the ring was called, but I knew it was the Prince Rupert ring. I made the copy, and Henson was pleased with it. Some time later he came to me with the original, and asked for another copy. I meant to be honest, but my love for those things got the better of me. I made him two copies: the one good, and the other an exact facsimile of the Prince Rupert. These I handed over to Henson, and he went away perfectly satisfied that he had a good copy and the original. I chuckled to myself, feeling pretty sure that he would never find out."

"But he did find out?" David said.

"Only lately. Probably he took it to an expert for valuation or perhaps for sale. Lately his idea was to offer the ring to Lord Littimer for a huge sum of money, but when he discovered he had been done he knew that Lord Littimer would not be so deceived. Also he had a pretty good idea that I should keep the ring about me. You see, I dared not sell an historic gem like that. And, as usual, Henson was perfectly right."

"Then you had the ring in your pocket the night you came here?" asked
Steel, with a commendable effort at coolness. "Did Henson get it?"

"No, he didn't," Van Sneck chuckled. "Come what might, I had made up my mind that he should never see that ring again. You see, I was frightened and confused, and I was not properly sober, and I did something with the ring, though to save my life I couldn't say what I did. Do you know, Dr. Bell, I have lost my sense of smell?"

Steel wriggled impatiently about on his chair. The interruption was exasperating. Bell, however, seemed to take a different view of the matter altogether.

"Quite naturally," he said. "The blow on your head held all your senses suspended for a time. After the operation I should not have been surprised to have found you half blind and stone deaf into the bargain. But one thing is certain—your smell will come back to you. It may remain in abeyance for a few days, it may return in a few moments."

"What on earth has this to do with our interview?" David asked.

"I fancy a great deal," Bell said. "The sense of smell has a great deal to do with memory. Doesn't the scent of flowers bring back vivid recollections of things sometimes for years forgotten? Van Sneck was going to say the air was heavy with the fragrance of some particular blossom when he was struck down by Henson in your conservatory."

"Very clever man, Dr. Bell," Van Sneck said, admiringly. "He seems to see right through your mind and out at the other side. To a great extent I recollect all that happened that eventful night. And just at the very last I seem to smell something powerful. That smell came to my nostrils just like a flash and then had gone again. Gentlemen, if I could have a good long scent at that flower I tell you what I did with that ring."

"Sounds rather complex," David said.

"Not a bit of it," Bell retorted. "Our friend is talking sound common sense, and our friend is going to rest now late into the afternoon, when we'll put him into an armchair with some pillows and let him sit in the conservatory. Associating with familiar surroundings frequently works wonders. Van Sneck, you go to sleep."

Van Sneck closed his eyes obediently. He was somewhat tired with the interview. But, on the whole, Bell decided that he was doing very well indeed. And there was very little more to be done for the present. The two men smoked their cigars peacefully.

"We have got to the end," Bell said.

"I fancy so," David murmured, "But we can't save the scandal. I don't see how Reginald Henson is going to get out of the mess without a prosecution."

Any further speculation as to the future of that engaging rascal was cut short by a pleasant surprise, no other than the unexpected arrival of Ruth Gates and Chris Henson. The latter was beaming with health and happiness; she had discarded her disguise, and stood confessed before all the world like the beautiful creature that she was.

"What does it all mean?" David asked. "What will Longdean village say?"

"What does Longdean village know?" Chris retorted. "They are vaguely aware that somebody was taken away from the house a short time ago to be buried, but that is all their knowledge. And there is no more need for disguise, Lord Littimer says. He knows pretty well everything. He has been very restless and uneasy for the past day or two, and yesterday he left saying that he had business in London. Early to-day I had a characteristic telegram from him saying that he was at Longdean, and that I was necessary to his comfort there. I was to come clothed in my right mind, and I was to bring Mr. Steel and Dr. Bell along."

"It can't be managed," said Bell. "We've got Van Sneck here."

"And I had forgotten all about him," said Chris. "Was the operation successful?"

Bell told his budget of good news down to the story of the ring and the mysterious manner in which it had disappeared again. David had followed Ruth into the conservatory, where she stood with her dainty head buried over a rose.

She looked up with a warm, shy smile on her face.

"I hope you are satisfied," she said, "you are safe now?"

"I was never very much alarmed, dearest," Steel said. "If this thing had never happened I might never have met you. And as soon as this business is definitely settled I shall come and see your uncle. I am a very impatient man, Ruth."

"And you shall see my uncle when you please, dear," she said. "You will find him quite as charming as you say your mother is. What will she say?"

"Say? That you are the dearest and sweetest girl in the world, and that I am a lucky fellow. But you are not going off already?"

"Indeed, we must. We have a cab at the door. And I am going to brave the horrors of Longdean Grange and spend the night there. Only, I fancy that the horrors have gone for ever. I shall be very disappointed if you don't come to-morrow."

Behind a friendly palm David bent and kissed the shy lips, with a vow that he would see Longdean Grange on the morrow. Then Chris caught up Ruth with a whirl, and they were gone.

It was after ten that Bell and Steel managed to convey Van Sneck to the conservatory. The place was filled with brightness and scent and colour and the afterglow of the sunshine. The artistic eye of the Dutchman lighted up with genuine pleasure.

"They say you islanders are crude and cold, and have no sense of the beautiful," he said. "But there are no houses anywhere to compare with those of the better-class Englishman. Look at those colours blending—"

"Hang those colours," said Bell, vigorously. "Steel, there is nothing like moisture to bring out the full fragrance of flowers. Turn on your hose and give your plants a good watering."

"It's the proper time," David laughed. "Turn on the tap for me."

A cooling stream played on the flowers; plants dropped their heads filled with the diamond moisture; the whole atmosphere was filled with the odour of moist earth. Then the air seemed laden with the mingled scent.

"I can smell the soil," Van Sneck cried. "How good it is to smell anything again! And I can just catch a suggestion of the perfume of something familiar. What's that red bloom?"

He pointed to a creeper growing up the wall. David broke off a spray.

"That's a kind of Japanese passion flower," he said. "It has a lovely full-flavoured scent like a mixture of violets and almonds. Smell it."

Van Sneck placed the wet dripping spray to his nose. Just for an instant it conveyed nothing to him. Then he half rose with a triumphant cry.

"Steady there," said Bell. "You mustn't get up, you know. I see you are excited. Has it come back to you again?"

"That's the scent," Van Sneck cried. "The air was full of that as I fell backwards. And Henson stood over me exactly by that cracked tile where Mr. Steel is now. Give me a moment and I shall be able to tell you everything ... Oh, yes, the first time I slipped on purpose. I told you I stumbled. But that was a ruse. And as I fell I took the ring from my waistcoat-pocket ... Let me have another sniff of that bloom. Yes, I've got it now quite clear."

"You know where the ring is?" David asked, eagerly.

"Well, not quite that. I took it from my pocket and pitched it away from me ... I saw it fall on to a pot covered with moss, but I can't say which pot or in which corner. I only know that I threw it over my shoulder, and that it dropped into the thick moss that lies on the top of all the pots. I laughed to myself as it fell, and I rejoiced to see that Henson knew nothing of it."

"And it is still here?" Bell demanded.

Van Sneck nodded solemnly.

"I swear it," he said. "Prince Rupert's ring is in this conservatory."

CHAPTER LV

KICKED OUT

Reginald Henson had had more than one unpleasant surprise lately, but none so painful as the sight of Lord Littimer seated in the Longdean Grange drawing-room with the air of a man who is very much at home indeed.

The place was strangely changed, too. There was an air of neatness and order about the room that Henson had never seen before. The dust and dirt had absolutely vanished; it might have been the home of any ordinary wealthy and refined people. And all Lady Littimer's rags and patches had disappeared. She was dressed in somewhat old-fashioned style, but handsomely and well. She sat beside Littimer with a smile on her face. But the cloud seemed to have rolled from her mind; her eyes were clear, if a little frightened. From the glance that passed between Littimer and herself it was easy to see that the misunderstanding was no more.

"You are surprised to see me here?" said Littimer.

Henson stammered out something and shrank towards, the door. Littimer ordered him back again. He came with a slinking, dogged air; he avoided the smiling contempt in Enid's eyes.

"My presence appears to be superfluous," he said, bitterly.

"And mine appears to be a surprise," Littimer replied. "Come, are you not glad to see me, my heir and successor? What has become of the old fawning, cringing smile? Why, if some of your future constituents could see you now they might be justified in imagining that you had done something wrong. Look at yourself."

Littimer indicated a long gilt mirror on the opposite wall. Henson glanced at it involuntarily and dropped his eyes. Could that abject, white-faced sneak be himself? Was that the man whose fine presence and tender smile had charmed thousands? It seemed impossible.

"What have I done?" he asked.

"What have you not done?" Littimer thundered. "In the first place you did your best to ruin Hatherly Bell's life. You robbed me of a picture to do so, and your friend Merritt tried to rob me again. But I have both those pictures now. You did that because you were afraid of Bell—afraid lest he should see through your base motives. And you succeeded for a time, for the coast was clear. And then you proceeded to rob me of my son by one of the most contemptible tricks ever played by one man on another. It was you who stole the money and the ring; you who brought about all that sorrow and trouble by means of a forgery. But there are other people on your track as well as myself. You were at your last gasp. You were coming to see me to sell that ring for a large sum to take you out of the country, and then you discovered that you hadn't really got the ring."

"What—what are you talking about?" Henson asked, feebly.

"Scoundrel!" Littimer cried. "Innocent and pure to the last. I know all about Van Sneck and those forgeries of Prince Rupert's ring. And I know how Van Sneck was nearly done to death in Mr. Steel's house; and I know why—good heavens! It seems impossible that I could have been deceived all these years by such a slimy, treacherous scoundrel. And I might have gone on still but for a woman—"

"A lady detective," Henson sneered. "Miss Lee."

Littimer smiled. It was good, after all, to defeat and hoodwink the rascal.

"Miss Chris Henson," he said. "It never occurred to you that Miss Chris and Miss Lee were one and the same person. You never guessed. And she played with you as if you had been a child. How beautifully she exposed you over those pictures. Ah, you should have seen your face when you saw the stolen Rembrandt back again in its place. And after that you were mad enough to think that I trusted you. My dear, what shall we do with this pretty fellow?"

Lady Littimer shook her head doubtfully. It was plain that the presence of Henson disturbed her. There was just a suggestion of the old madness in her eyes.

"Send him away," she said. "Let him go."

"Send him away by all means," Littimer went on. "But letting him go is another matter. If we do the police will pick him up on other charges. There is a certain consolation in knowing that his evil career is likely to be shortened by some years. But I shall have no mercy. Scotland Yard shall know everything."

There was a cold ring in Littimer's voice that told Henson of his determination to carry out his threat. The other troubles he might wriggle out of, but this one was terribly real. It was time to try conciliation.

"It will be a terrible scandal for the family, my lord," he whined.

Littimer rose to his feet. A sudden anger flared into his eyes. He was a smaller man than Henson, but the latter cowed before him.

"You dog!" he cried. "What greater scandal than that of the past few years? Does not all the world know that there is, or has been, some heavy cloud over the family honour? Lord and Lady Littimer have parted, and her ladyship has gone away. That is only part of what the gossips have said. And in these domestic differences it is always the woman who suffers. Everybody always says that the woman has done something wrong. For years my wife has been under this stigma. If she had chosen to keep before the world after she left me most people would have ignored her. And you talk to me of a family scandal!"

"You will only make bad worse, my lord."

"No," Littimer cried. "I am going to make bad infinitely better. We come together again, but we say nothing of the past. And the world sneers and says the past is ignored for politic considerations. And so the public is going to know the truth, you dog. The whole facts of the case have gone to my solicitor, and by this time to-morrow a warrant will be issued against you. And I shall stand in open court and tell the whole world my story."

"In fairness to Lady Littimer," said Enid, speaking for the first time, "you could do no less."

"You were always against me," Henson snarled

"Because I always knew you," said Enid. "And the more I knew of you the greater was my contempt. And you came here ever on the same errand—money, money, money. From first to last you have robbed my aunt of something like £70,000. And always by threats or the promise that you would some day restore the ring to the family."

"As to the ring," Henson protested, "I swear—"

"I suppose a lie more or less makes no difference to an expert like yourself," Enid went on, with cold contempt. "You took advantage of my aunt's misfortunes. Ah, she is a different woman since Lord Littimer came here. But her sorrow has crushed her down, and that forgery of the ring you dangled before her eyes deceived her."

"I never showed her the ring," Henson said, brazenly.

"And you can look me in the face and say that? One night Lady Littimer snatched it from you and ran into the garden. You followed and struggled for the ring. And Mr. David Steel, who stood close by, felled you to the earth with a blow on the side of your head. I wonder he didn't kill you. I should have done so in his place. And yet it would be a pity to hang anyone for your death. See here!"

Enid produced the ring from her pocket. Lord Littimer looked at it intently.

"Have you seen this before, my dear?" he asked his wife.

"Many a time," Lady Littimer said, sadly. "Take it away, it reminds me of too many bitter memories. Take it out of my sight."

"An excellent forgery," Littimer murmured. "A forgery calculated to deceive many experts even. I will compare it with the original by and by."

Henson listened with a sinking feeling at his heart. Was it possible, he wondered, that Lord Littimer had really recovered the original? He had had hopes of getting it back even now, and making it the basis of terms of surrender. Lady Littimer snatched the ring from Littimer's grasp and threw it through the open window into the garden.

She stood up facing Henson, her head thrown back, her eyes flaming with a new resolution. It seemed hardly possible to believe that this fine, handsome woman with the white hair could be the poor demented creature that the others once had known.

"Reginald Henson, listen to me," she cried. "For your own purpose you cruelly and deliberately set out to wreck the happiness of several lives. For mere money you did this; for sheer love of dissipation you committed this crime. You nearly deprived me of my reason. I say nothing about the money, because that is nothing by comparison. But the years that are lost can never come back to me again. When I think of the past and the past of my poor, unhappy boy I feel that I have no forgiveness for you. If you—Oh, go away; don't stay here—go. If I had known you were coming I should have forbidden you the house. Your mere presence unnerves me. Littimer, send him away."

Littimer rose to his feet and rang the bell.

"You will be good enough to rid me of your hateful presence," he said, "at once; now go."

But Henson still stood irresolute. He fidgeted from one foot to the other. He seemed to have some trouble that he could find no expression for.

"I want to go away," he murmured. "I want to leave the country. But at the present moment I am practically penniless. If you would advance me—"

Littimer laughed aloud.

"Upon my word," he said, "your coolness is colossal. I am going to prosecute you, I am doing my best to bring you into the dock. And you ask me—*me*, of all men—to find you money so that you can evade justice! Have you not had enough—are you never satisfied? Williams, will you see Mr. Henson off the premises?"

The smiling Williams bowed low.

"With the greatest possible pleasure, my lord," he said. "Any further orders, my lord?"

"And he is not to come here again, you understand." Williams seemed to understand perfectly. With

one backward sullen glance Henson quitted the room and passed into the night with his companion. Williams was whistling cheerfully, with his hands thrust deep into his pockets.

"Is that how you treat a gentleman?" Henson demanded.

"I ain't a gentleman," Williams said. "Never set up to be. And I ain't a dirty rascal who has just been kicked out of a nobleman's house. Here, stop that. Try that game on again and I'll call the dogs. And don't show me any of your airs, please. I'm only a servant, but I am an honest man."

Henson stifled his anger as best he could. He was too miserable and downcast to think of much besides himself at present. Once the lodge-gates were open, Williams stood aside for him to pass. The temptation was irresistible. And Henson's back was turned. With a kick of concentrated contempt and fury Williams shot Henson into the road, where he landed full on his face. His cup of humiliation was complete.

CHAPTER LVI

WHITE FANGS

Henson took his weary way in the direction of Brighton. He had but a few pounds he could call his own, and not nearly enough to get away from the country, and at any moment he might be arrested. He was afraid to go back to his lodgings for fear of Merritt. That Merritt would kill him if he got the chance he felt certain. And Merritt was one of those dogged, patient types who can wait any time for the gratification of their vengeance.

Merritt was pretty certain to be hanging about for his opportunity. On the whole the best thing would be to walk straight to the Central Brighton Station and take the first train in the morning to town. There he could see Gates—who as yet knew nothing—and from him it would be possible to borrow a hundred or two, and then get away. And there were others besides Gates.

Henson trudged away for a mile or so over the downs. Then he came down from the summit of the castle he was building with a rude shock to earth again. A shadow seemed to rise from the ground, a heavy clutch was on his shoulder, and a hoarse voice was in his ear.

"Got you!" the voice said. "I knew they'd kick you out yonder, and I guessed you'd sneak home across the downs. And I've fairly copped you!"

Henson's knees knocked together. Physically he was a far stronger and bigger man than Merritt, but he was taken unawares, and his nerves had been sadly shaken of late.

Merritt forced him backwards until he lay on the turf with his antagonist kneeling on his chest. He dared not struggle, he dared not exert himself. Presently he might get a chance, and if he did it would go hard with James Merritt.

"What are you going to do?" he gasped.

Merritt drew a big, jagged stone towards him with one foot.

"I'm going to bash your brains out with this," he said, hoarsely. His eyes were gleaming, and in the dim light his mouth was set like a steel trap. "I'm going to have a little chat with you first, and then down this comes on the top of your skull, and it'll smash you like a bloomin' eggshell. Your time's come, Henson. Say your prayers."

"I can't," Henson whined. "And what have I done?"

Merritt rocked heavily on the other's breastbone, almost stifling him. "Wot?" he said, scoffingly. The pleasing mixture of gin and fog in his throat rendered him more hideously hoarse than usual. "Not make up a prayer! And you a regular dab at all that game! Why, I've seen the women snivellin' like babies when you've been ladlin' it out. Heavens, what a chap you would be on the patter! How you would kid the chaplain!"

"Merritt, you're crushing the life out of me."

Merritt ceased his rocking for a moment, and the laughter died out of his gleaming eyes.

"I don't want to be prematoor," he said. "Yes, you'd make a lovely chaplain's pet, but I can't spare you. I'm going to smash that 'ere wily brain of yours, so as it won't be useful any more. I'll teach you to put the narks on to a poor chap like myself."

"Merritt, I swear to you that I never—"

"You can swear till you're black in the face, and you can keep on swearing till you're lily-white again, and then it won't be any good. You gave me away to Taylor because you were afraid I should do you harm at Littimer Castle. That Daisy Bell of a girl there told me so."

Henson groaned. It was not the least part of his humiliation that a mere girl got the better of him in this way. And what on earth had she known of Reuben Taylor? But the fact remained that she had known, and that she had warned Merritt of his danger. It was the one unpardonable crime in Henson's decalogue, the one thing Merritt could not forgive.

Henson's time was come. He did not need anyone to tell him that. Unless something in the nature of a miracle happened, he was a dead man in a few moments; and life had never seemed quite so sweet as it tasted at the present time.

"You gave me away for no reason at all," Merritt went on. "I'm a pretty bad lot, but I never rounded on a pal yet, and never shall. More than one of them have served me bad, but I always let them go their own way, and I've been a good and faithful servant to you—"

"It was not you," Henson gurgled, "that I wrote that letter about, but—"

"Chuck it," Merritt said, furiously. "Tell me any more of your lies and I'll smash your jaw in for you. It *was* me. I spotted Scotter in Moreton Wells within a day or two. And Mr. Scotter had come for me. And I got past Bronson in Brighton by the skin of my teeth. I turned into your lodgings under his very eyes almost. Before this time to-morrow I shall be arrested. But I'm going to have my vengeance first."

The last words came with intense deliberation. There was no mistaking their significance. Henson deemed it wise to try another tack.

"I was wrong," he said, humbly. "I am very, very sorry; I lost my nerve and got frightened, Merritt. But there is time yet. You always make more money with me than with anybody else. And I'm going abroad presently."

"Oh, you're going abroad, are you?" Merritt said, slowly. "Going to travel in a Pullman car and put up at all the Courts of Europe. And I'm coming as chief secretary to the Grand Panjandrum himself. Sound an alluring kind of programme."

"I'll give you a hundred pounds to get away with if you will—"

"Got a hundred pounds of my own in my pocket at the present moment," was the unexpected reply. "As you gave me away, consequently I gave you away to his lordship, and he planked down a hundred canaries like the swell that he is. So I don't want your company or your money. And I'm going to finish you right away."

The big stone was poised over Henson's head. He could see the jagged part, and in imagination feel it go smashing into his brain. The time for action had come. He snatched at Merritt's right arm and drew the knotted fingers down. The next instant and he had bitten Merritt's thumb to the bone. With a cry of rage and pain the stone was dropped. Henson snatched it up and fairly lifted Merritt off his chest with a blow under the chin.

Merritt rolled over on the grass, and Henson was on his feet in an instant. The great stone went down perilously near to Merritt's head. Still snarling and frothing from the pain Merritt stumbled to his feet and dashed a blow blindly at the other.

In point of size and strength there was only one in it. Had Henson stood up to his opponent on equal terms there could only have been one issue. But his nerves were shattered, he was nothing like the man he had been two months ago. At the first onslaught he turned and fled towards the town, leaving Merritt standing there in blank amazement.

"Frightened of me," he muttered. "But this ain't the way it's going to finish."

He darted off in hot pursuit; he raced across a rising shoulder of the hill and cut off Henson's retreat. The latter turned and scurried back in the direction of Long-dean Grange, with Merritt hot on his heels.

He could not shake the latter off.

Merritt was plodding doggedly on, pretty sure of his game. He was hard as nails, whereas good living and a deal of drinking, quite in a gentlemanly way, had told heavily on Henson. Unless help came unexpectedly Henson was still in dire peril. There was just a chance that a villager might be about; but Longdean was more or less a primitive place, and most of the houses there had been in darkness for hours.

His foot slipped, he stumbled, and Merritt, with a whoop of triumph, was nearly upon him. But it was only a stagger, and he was soon going again. Still, Merritt was close behind him; Henson could almost feel his hot breath on his neck. And he was breathing heavily and distressfully himself, whilst he could hear how steadily Merritt's lungs were working. He could see the lights of Longdean Grange below him; but they seemed a long way off, whilst that steady pursuit behind had something relentless and nerve-destroying about it.

They were pounding through the village now. Henson gave vent to one cry of distress, but nothing came of it but the mocking echo of his own voice from a distant belt of trees. Merritt shot out a short, sneering laugh. He had not expected flagrant cowardice like this. He made a sudden spurt forward and caught Henson by the tail of his coat.

With a howl of fear the latter tore himself away, and Merritt reeled backwards. He came down heavily over a big stone, and at the same moment Henson trod on a hedge-stake. He grabbed it up and half turned upon his foe. But the sight of Merritt's grim face was too much for him, and he turned and resumed his flight once more.

He yelled again as he reached the lodge-gates, but the only response was the barking and howling of the dogs in the thick underwood beyond. There was no help for it. Doubtless the deaf old lodge-keeper had been in bed hours ago. Even the dogs were preferable to Merritt. Henson scrambled headlong over the wall and crashed through the thickets beyond.

Merritt pulled up, panting with his exertion.

"Gone to cover," he muttered. "I don't fancy I'll follow. The dogs there might have a weakness for tearing my throat out and Henson will keep, I'll just hang about here till daylight and wait for my gentleman. And I'll follow him to the end of the earth."

Meanwhile Henson blundered on blindly, fully under the impression that Merritt was still upon his trail. One of the hounds, a puppy three parts grown, rose and playfully pulled at his coat. It was sheer play, but at the same time it was a terrible handicap, and in his fear Henson lost all his horror of the dogs.

"Loose, you brute," he panted. "Let go, I say. Very well, take that!"

He paused and brought the heavy stake down full on the dog's muzzle. There was a snarling scream of pain, and the big pup sprang for his assailant. An old, grey hound came up and seemed to take in the situation at a glance. With a deep growl he bounded at Henson and caught him by the throat. Before the ponderous impact of that fine free spring Henson went down heavily to the ground.

"Help!" he gurgled. "Help! help! help!"

The worrying teeth had been firmly fixed, the ponderous weight pressed all the breath from Henson's distressed lungs. He gurgled once again, gave a little shuddering sigh, and the world dwindled to a thick sheet of blinding darkness.

CHAPTER LVII

HIDE-AND-SEEK

Bell's professional enthusiasm got the better of his curiosity for the moment. It was a nice psychological problem. Already Steel was impulsively busy in the conservatory pulling the pots down. It was a regretful thing to have to do, but everything had to be sacrificed, David shut his teeth grimly and proceeded with his task.

"What on earth are you doing?" Bell asked, with a smile.

"Pulling the place to pieces," David responded. "I daresay I shall feel pretty sick about it later on, but the thing has to be done. Cut those wires for me, and let those creepers down as tenderly as possible. We can't get to the little pots until we have moved the big ones."

Bell coolly declined to do anything of the kind. He surveyed the two graceful banks of flowers there, the carefully trained creepers trailing so naturally and yet so artistically from the roof to the ground, and the sight pleased him.

"My dear chap," he said, "I am not going to sit here and allow you to destroy the work of so many hours. There is not the slightest reason to disturb anything. Unless I am greatly mistaken, Van Sneck will lay his had upon the ring for us without so much as the sacrifice of a blossom."

"I don't fancy so," Van Sneck replied. "I can't remember."

"Well, you are going to," Bell said, cheerfully. "Did you ever hear of artificial memory?"

"The sort of thing you get in law courts and political speeches?" David suggested. "All the same, if you have some patent way of getting at the facts I shall be only too glad to spare my poor flowers. Their training has been a labour of love with me."

Bell smoked on quietly for some time. He toyed with the red blossoms which had so stimulated Van Sneck's recollection, then tossed a spray over to Van Sneck and suggested that the latter should put it in his button-hole.

"So as to have the fragrance with you all the time," he said.

Van Sneck obeyed quietly, remarking that the scent was very pungent. The Dutchman was restless and ill at ease; he seemed to be dissatisfied with himself—he had the air of a man who has set out with two or three extremely important matters of business and who has completely forgotten what one of them is.

"You needn't distress yourself," David said, kindly.

"I beg your pardon," Bell said, tartly. "He is to do that very same thing. Mental exercise never hurts anybody. Van Sneck is going to worry till he puzzles it out. Will you describe the ring to us?"

The Dutchman complied at considerable length. He dwelt on the beauty of the workmanship and the exceeding fineness of the black pearls; he talked with the freedom and expression of the expert. Bell permitted him to ramble on about historic rings in general. But all the same he could see that Van Sneck was far from easy in his mind. Now and then a sudden gleam came into his eyes: memory played for the fragment of a second on a certain elusive chord and was gone.

"Were you smoking the night you came here?" Bell asked, suddenly.

"Yes," Van Sneck replied, "a cigarette. Henson handed it over to me. I don't deny that I was terribly frightened, I smoked the cigarette out of bravado."

"You went into the conservatory yonder and admired the flowers,"
Bell observed.

Van Sneck looked up with astonishment and admiration.

"I did," he confessed. "But I don't see how you know that."

"I guessed it. It takes the brain some little time to get level to the imagination. And as soon as you came face to face with Henson you knew what was going to happen. You were a little dazed and frightened, and a little overcome by liquor into the bargain. But even then, though you were probably unconscious of it yourself, you were seeking some place to hide the ring."

"I rather believe I was," Van Sneck said, thoughtfully.

"You smoked a cigarette there. Where did you put the end?"

Van Sneck rose and went into the conservatory. He walked directly to a large pot of stephanotis in a distant corner and picked the stump of a gold-tipped cigarette from thence.

"I dropped it in there," he said. "Strange; if you had asked me that question two minutes ago I should not have been able to answer it. And now I distinctly remember pitching it in there and watching it

scorch some of that beautiful lace-like moss. There is a long trail of it hanging down behind. I recollect how funnily it occurred to me, even in the midst of my danger, that the trail would look better brought over the front of the pot. Thus."

He lifted the long, graceful spiral and brought it forward. Steel nodded, approvingly.

"I came very near to dropping the ring in there," Van Sneck explained. "I had it in my fingers—I took it for the purpose from my waistcoat-pocket. Then I saw Henson's eye on me and I changed my mind. I wish I had been more sober."

Bell was examining a pot a little lower down. A piece had been chipped off, leaving a sharp, clean, red edge with a tiny tip of hair upon it.

"You fell here," he exclaimed. "Your head struck the pot. Here is a fragment of your hair on it. It is human hair beyond a doubt, and the shade matches to a nicety. After that—"

A sudden cry broke from the Dutchman.

"I've got it!" he exclaimed. "You have cleverly led my mind into the right direction. The only marvel is that I did not think of it before. You will find the ring in the pot where the tuberose grows. I am quite certain you will find it amongst the moss at the base."

David carefully scooped up all the loose moss from the pot and laid it on the study table. Then he shook the stuff out, and something glittering lay on the table—a heavy ring of the most exquisite and cunning workmanship, with a large gem in the centre, flanked by black pearls on either side. Van Sneck took it in his fingers lovingly.

"Here you are," he said. "Ach, the beauty! Well, you've got it now, and do you take care of it lest it falls into my hands again. If I got a chance I would steal it once more, and yet again, and again. Ah, what mischief those things cause, to be sure!"

The speaker hardly knew how much mischief the ring in question had caused, nor did his companions seek to enlighten him. David wrapped it up carefully and placed it in his pocket.

"I'm glad that is settled," he said. "And I'm glad that I didn't have to injure my flowers. Bell, you really are a most wonderful fellow."

Bell smiled with the air of a man who is well satisfied with himself. At this moment a servant came in with a message to the effect that Inspector Marley desired to see Mr. Steel on important business.

"Couldn't have come at a better time," David murmured. "Ask Mr.
Marley in here."

Marley came smilingly, yet mysterious. He evinced no surprise at the sight of Van Sneck. He was, doubtless, aware of the success of the operation on the latter. He particularly desired to know where Mr. Reginald Henson was to be found.

"This is a queer place to look for him," said Steel.

"But he was here yesterday," Marley protested. "He had an accident."

"Bogus," said Steel. "We turned him out of the house. Is he wanted?"

Marley explained that he was wanted on three different charges; in fact, the inspector had the warrants in his pocket at the present moment.

"Well, it's only by good chance that you haven't got one for me," David laughed. "If you have ten minutes to spare, between Van Sneck and myself we can clear up the mystery of the diamond-mounted cigar-case for you."

Marley had the time to spare, and, indeed, he was keen enough to hear the solution of the mystery. A short explanation from David, followed by a few pithy, pertinent questions to Van Sneck, and he was perfectly satisfied.

"And yet I seemed to have an ideal case against you, Mr. Steel," he said. "Seems almost a pity to cut a career like Mr. Henson's short, does it not? Which reminds me that I am wasting time here. Any time you and Van Sneck happen to be passing the police-station the cigar-case is entirely at your disposal."

And Marley bustled off upon the errand that meant so much for Reginald Henson. He was hardly out of the house before Ruth Gates arrived. She looked a little distressed; she would not stay for a moment,

she declared. Her machine was outside, and she was riding over to Longdean without delay. A note had just been sent to her from Chris.

"My uncle is in Paris," she said. "So I am going over to Longdean for a few days. Lord Littimer is there, and Frank also. The reconciliation is complete and absolute. Chris says the house is not the same now, and that she didn't imagine that it could be so cheerful. Reginald Henson—"

"My dear child, Henson is not there now."

"Well, he is. He went there last night, knowing that he was at his last gasp, with the idea of getting more money from Lady Littimer. To his great surprise he found Littimer there also. It was anything but a pleasant interview for Mr. Henson, who was finally turned out of the house. It is supposed that he came back again, for they found him this morning in the grounds with one of the dogs upon him. He is most horribly hurt, and lies at the lodge in a critical condition. I promised Chris that I would bring a message to you from Lord Littimer. He wants you and Dr. Bell to come over this afternoon and stay to dinner."

"We'll come, with pleasure," David said. "I'll go anywhere to have the chance of a quiet hour with you, Ruth. So far ours has been rather a prosaic wooing. And, besides, I shall want you to coach me up on my interview with your uncle. You have no idea how nervous I am. And at the last he might refuse to accept me for your husband."

Ruth looked up fondly into her lover's face.

"As if he could," she said, indignantly. "As if any man could find fault with you."

David drew the slender figure to his side and kissed the sweet, shy lips.

"When you are my wife," he said, "and come to take a closer and tenderer interest in my welfare—"

"Could I take a deeper interest than I do now, David?"

"Well, perhaps not. But you will find that a good many people find fault with me. You have no idea what the critics say sometimes. They declare that I am an impostor, a copyist; they say that I am—"

"Let them say what they like," Ruth laughed. "That is mere jealousy, and anybody can criticise. To me you are the greatest novelist alive."

There was only one answer to this, and Ruth broke away, declaring that she must go at once.

"But you will come this afternoon?" she said. "And you will make Lord Littimer like you. Some people say he is queer, but I call him an old darling."

"He will like me, he is bound to. I've got something, a present for him, that will render him my slave for life. *Au revoir* till the gloaming."

* * * * *

The dew was rising from the grass, the silence of the perfect morning was broken by the uneasy cries of the dogs. From their strange whimpering Williams felt pretty sure that something was wrong. At most times he would have called the dogs to him and laid into them with a whip, for Williams knew no fear, and the hounds respected his firm yet kindly rule.

But Williams was in an exceptionally good temper this morning. Everything had turned out as he had hoped for and anticipated, and the literal kicking-out of Henson the previous evening was still fresh and sweet in his memory. It would be something to boast of in his declining years.

"Drat the dogs," he exclaimed. "Now, what's the matter? I had better go and see. Got a fox in a hole, perhaps! We shall have to tie 'em up in future."

Williams darted into the thicket. Then he came full upon Henson, lying on his back, with his white, unconscious face and staring eyes turned to the sky, and two great dogs fussing uneasily about him. A big pup close by had a large swelling on his head. By Henson's side lay the ash stick he had picked up when pursued by Merritt.

Williams bent over the stark, still figure and shuddered as he saw how his clothing was all torn away from the body; saw the deep wounds in the chest and throat; he could see that Henson still breathed. His loud shouts for assistance brought Frank Littimer and the lodge-keeper to the spot. Together they carried the body to the lodge and sent for the doctor.

"The case is absolutely hopeless," Walker said, after he had made his examination. "The poor fellow may linger till the morning, but I doubt if he will recognise anybody again. Does anybody know how the thing came about?"

Nobody but Merritt could have thrown any light upon the mystery, and he was far away. Williams shook his head as he thought of his parting with Henson the previous night.

"I let him out and closed the gate behind him," he said. "He must have come back for something later on and gone for the dogs. He certainly hit one of the pups over the head with a stick, and that probably set the others on to him. Nobody will ever know the rights of the business."

And nobody ever did, for Henson lingered on through the day and far into the night. At the house Lord Littimer was entertaining a party at dinner. Everything had been explained; the ring had been produced and generally admired. All was peace and happiness. They were all on the terrace in the darkness when Williams came up from the lodge.

"Is there any further news?" Lord Littimer asked.

"Yes, my lord," Williams said, quietly. "Dr. Walker has just come, and would like to see you at once. Mr. Reginald Henson died ten minutes ago."

A hush came over the hitherto noisy group. It was some little time before Lord Littimer returned. He had only to confirm the news. Reginald Henson was dead; he had escaped justice, after all.

"Well, I'm not sorry," Lady Littimer said. "It is a rare disgrace saved to the family. And there have been trouble and sorrow enough and to spare."

"But your own good name, my dear?" Lord Littimer said. "And Frank's?"

"We can live all that down, my dear husband. Frank will be too happy with Chris to care what gossips say. And Dr. Bell and Enid will be as happy as the others."

"And Ruth and myself, too," David said, quietly. "Later on I shall tell in a book how three sirens got me into a perfect sea of mischief."

"What shall you call the book?" Littimer asked.

"What better title could I have," David said, "than *The Crimson Blind*?"

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CRIMSON BLIND ***

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