

# The Crimson Blind

By FRED M. WHITE

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—scrupulously finished 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 been 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 during the tardy supports that brought this black shame upon them.

But Steel's was ruin of another kind. The man was a fighter in his fingers. He had dogged determination and splendid physical courage, he had gradually thrust his way into the 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 paneled walls. The whole thing was still in its 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 pleasantly on his 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 there in the peaceful shade 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 a soul realizing itself. 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 cornice, there were mocking lights gleaming from Cellini's marbles that Steel had given far too much money for, and it did not seem to matter just at all. If all this artistic beauty had been Steel's purse there was a golden stream coming. "That 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 24 hours everything would pass out of his hands. To all practical purposes he 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 labor were as balm to his soul as the balm of Gilead. Within the next twelve months he could pay the debt three times over. He would cheerfully have taken the regiment, recouped 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-mannered man who tried 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. "Crisis" a few hours every butcher and baker and candlestick 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 mother say when she knew? Well, she had been a good mother to him, and it had been a labor 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 lit a cigarette. He paced restlessly round the dining-room. Never had he appreciated its quiet beauty more than he did now. There were flowers, blooded flowers, on the table under the graceful electric stand that Steel had designed himself. He snapped off the light as if the slight pain 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 from the East—

"Ting, ting, ting. Pring, pring, pring. Ting, ting, ting, ting." But Steel heard nothing. Every-

thing 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 lounge pregnant of cheap tobacco would come in and assume that he represented the sherry-bills would be hung like banners on the outward walls, and then—

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

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. Hello, 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 likely 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 a certain old-fashioned contemporary of yours would say, 'We meet again, my friend!' Stranger yet, your 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, who 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, pausing. "Who in the name of heaven are you?"

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

"To man has ever told me so—face to face."

"Good again. I recognize 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 Brighton, and I wish to see her before 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 to-night. 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. What a strange and weird plot came and went through his 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 gentleman, but we have enemies who are watching. 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 by 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 back to earth again to-night."

"You can hang up your receiver for five minutes," the voice said. "Precisely at half-past twelve you go and knock on your front door. They will 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 Celini 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 very foolish. 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 was shining with shining points lay on the white marble breadth of the step. A gun-metal cigar-case set in tiny diamonds.

The novelist fastened the front door and staggered to the study. A pretty, pale, earnest girl, as David had fully intended to purchase for himself, 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!

"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 are glad to get it. The money is yours. But Beckstein's people would not accept it on account—they can make far more money by 'selling you up,' as they would phrase goes. It is in your hands to pressure the company to 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 a person as you choose. It is up 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 picked up the assurance that there was nothing dishonorable in the thing. 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 under his head and the scent of groves sweet to his nostrils. And the matter 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, then, get ready, and I have a few risks as well as others. Go at once to Old Steine. Stand on the path close under the shadow of the statue of George V. Now, wait there. Somebody will say 'Come,' and you will follow. Good-night."

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 mother 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 experience had taught him that it was worth the risk. He was not afraid. He was horribly frightened, but physical courage he had in a high degree. And he was 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 re-assert as a loan—a loan to be paid off in any form. 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

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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, but 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 marvelously still there, so still that David could hear the tinkle of the pebbles on the beach. He stood back by the gate of the garden, watching the faintly lit 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' street came the tinkle of a bicycle bell. On to still a night the noise seemed bizarre and out of place. Then the cyclist loomed in sight; the rider, muffled and humped over the front wheel, might have been the cyclist of the past. The cyclist flashed by something white and gleaming dropped into the road, and the single word "Come" seemed to cut like a sword 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 longer figure emerged from the fog. It was like an instantaneous photograph—a flash, and the figure had vanished in the fog.

"This was interesting," Steel muttered. "Evidently my shadowy friend has dropped his coat 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 it. "The Tords 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 night. Open the door and it will yield to you; there is no occasion to knock. The first door inside the hall is the square. Walk into it. Walk into it and walk into it. 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 his card down the drain trap nearest at hand. A little way ahead of him he heard the cycle bell trilling as if in the white marble breadth of the step. A gun-metal cigar-case set in tiny diamonds.

The spirit of adventure was growing upon Steel now. He was no longer holding his shadowy friend in his eyes. He was ready to see the thing through for his own sake. And as he hurried up North street, along Weston 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 fast. He was not sure of the pitch square. All the houses were white and clean, and twenty-five of them in all. Twenty-five Bank of England notes for £10 each—£250!

"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 are glad to get it. The money is yours. But Beckstein's people would not accept it on account—they can make far more money by 'selling you up,' as they would phrase goes. It is in your hands to pressure the company to 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 a person as you choose. It is up to you. Now, are you going to place yourself entirely in my hands?"

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

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"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, then, get ready, and I have a few risks as well as others. Go at once to Old Steine. Stand on the path close under the shadow of the statue of George V. Now, wait there. Somebody will say 'Come,' and you will follow. Good-night."

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, but 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 marvelously still there, so still that David could hear the tinkle of the pebbles on the beach. He stood back by the gate of the garden, watching the faintly lit 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' street came the tinkle of a bicycle bell. On to still a night the noise seemed bizarre and out of place. Then the cyclist loomed in sight; the rider, muffled and humped over the front wheel, might have been the cyclist of the past. The cyclist flashed by something white and gleaming dropped into the road, and the single word "Come" seemed to cut like a sword 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 longer figure emerged from the fog. It was like an instantaneous photograph—a flash, and the figure had vanished in the fog.

"This was interesting," Steel muttered. "Evidently my shadowy friend has dropped his coat 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 it. "The Tords 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 night. Open the door and it will yield to you; there is no occasion to knock. The first door inside the hall is the square. Walk into it. Walk into it and walk into it. 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 his card down the drain trap nearest at hand. A little way ahead of him he heard the cycle bell trilling as if in the white marble breadth of the step. A gun-metal cigar-case set in tiny diamonds.

The spirit of adventure was growing upon Steel now. He was no longer holding his shadowy friend in his eyes. He was ready to see the thing through for his own sake. And as he hurried up North street, along Weston 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 fast. He was not sure of the pitch square. All the houses were white and clean, and twenty-five of them in all. Twenty-five Bank of England notes for £10 each—£250!

"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 are glad to get it. The money is yours. But Beckstein's people would not accept it on account—they can make far more money by 'selling you up,' as they would phrase goes. It is in your hands to pressure the company to 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 a person as you choose. It is up to you. Now, are you going to place yourself entirely in my hands?"

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