POOR DOCUMENT

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THE CRIMSON BLIND

By FRED. M. WHITE, Author of "The Robe of Lucifer," etc.

A story of a novel type, stirring, fascinating; the most striking success in recent fiction.

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CHAPTER XI.—(Continued.)

"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' 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 curosity is about to be gratified. I am going to help you, and in return you are going to help me to come back to into the race again. By way of a start, you are going to ask me to come and dine with you tonight."

"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 dispised 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' 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 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 rumor 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 that.

"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 ecarte, 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 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 favorable 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 endeavor 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 today 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 today 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 recognize. 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 today. 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 tonight?"

"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 of 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 farily 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 Rottendean 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 consipracy. 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 may, I don't sleep tonight 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 tonight 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.

Willams 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 in 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. Hatheway 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 a dream for seven long years. Enid brought me back to the music again tonight, and it touched my heart, and now I am awake again. Do you recollect the 'Slumber Song,' Hatheway 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 discolored 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 today'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 Enids 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 archenemy 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, fortunately 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 tonight, 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.

A Medical Opinion.

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 had 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?"

(To be continued.)