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 VIII. (Continued.)

"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 fillls 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 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 occosion 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 humor. 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 color 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 engraivngs, 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. Gate'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 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 today. 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 Grange was lige 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, bule 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 color 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 decended 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 rage 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 a 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 prayed 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 Hanson. In the den 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 carelessly, like Petruchio might have done in his milder moments.

"My dear Enid, you misjudge me," he said. "But I snall 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 tonight. 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 tonight. 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 funeral 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 tomorrow?" Williams said. He tapped the top book significantly. "Tomorrow 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 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 tonight 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 spirit 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 the 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 now 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 Geona 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 tonight 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 counter-plot 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 attempt 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.

(To be continued.)