

# The Crimson Blind

By FRED M. WHITE

## CHAPTER XXXIV.

## The Puzzling of Henson.

Chris smiled with the air of one who is perfectly satisfied with her work.

"For the present, fancy we have done enough," she said. "I want to go to bed now, and I want you both to do the same. Also I shall be glad if you will come down in the morning as if nothing had happened. Tell Reginald Henson casually that you have been convinced that you have done Dr. Bell a grave injustice, and give no kind of particulars. And please treat Mr. Henson in the same fashion as before. There is only one other thing."

"Name it, and it is yours," Littimer cried.

"Well, out the margin off that print, or at any rate turn the margin down, so it fits into the frame, and hang it up as if nothing had happened."

Littimer looked at Chris with a puzzled expression for a moment, and then his features relaxed into a satirical grin.

"Capital," he said. "I quite understand what you mean. And I must be there to see it, eh?—yes, I must be there to see it. I would not miss it for a strawberry leaves."

The thing was done and the picture restored to its place. Bell drew Chris aside for a moment.

"Do you rise early in the morning?" he asked, meaningly.

"Always," Chris replied, demurely. "I find the terrace charming before breakfast. Good-night."

Bell was down betimes despite the fact that it had been daylight before he was in bed. Among the terrace, looking over the cliffs, Chris was already walking, a great cluster of red and yellow roses in her hand. She looked as fresh and bright as if she and excitement were strangers. All the same she seemed to avoid Bell's eyes.

"Isn't it lovely here?" she exclaimed. "And these roses with the dew still upon them. Well, Dr. Bell, have you made fresh discoveries?"

"I have discovered that Henson is going to take his breakfast in bed," Bell said gravely. "Also that he requires a valet at half-past ten. At that time I hope to be in the corridor with Lord Littimer and yourself. Also I have made a further discovery."

"And what is that, Dr. Bell?"

"That you and I have met before—once before when I attended you in a kind of official capacity, and when I behaved in a distinctly discreditable professional manner. Dr. Walker was present. Dr. Walker seems to have been singularly short-sighted."

The roses fell from Chris's hands on to the path. Her face had grown very pale indeed; there was a frightened, appealing look in her eyes.

"Dr. Bell," she gasped, "do you suppose that anybody else knows—Henson, for instance? And I imagined that I had utterly deceived him!"

Bell smiled meaningly.

"I don't think you need have the slightest anxiety on that point," he said. "You see, Henson is comfortably assured that you are dead and buried. Whereas I know all about it. Fortunately for me, I became mixed up in this strange business on behalf of my friend, David Steel. Indeed, but for Steel, I should probably have given you away to our friend Walker."

"But surely you guessed that—"

"Not for the moment. You see, it was only a few minutes before that a flood of interesting light had been let in upon Henson's character by your sister to me, and my first idea was that Henson was poisoning you for some purpose of his own. Subsequently Steel told me all about that side of the story on our way back to Brighton."

"How did you penetrate my disguise?"

"My dear young lady, I have not penetrated your disguise. Your disguise is perfect—so quaint and dainty and original—and would deceive even Henson's eyes. I am sure that you were directly I found that you were taking a philanthropic interest in our friend. It came to me by a kind of intuition, the knack that stood me in such good stead in my professional days. When you said that you had been warned of Henson's coming by telegram I was certain."

"Then perhaps you guessed that Henson was the telegrapher?"

"That was obvious. Also it was obvious that Henson brought Frank Littimer along."

"Oh, he did. It was Frank's mission to steal the picture. I confounded him with a revolver and looked him in one of the bedrooms. It took all my courage and good resolutions to prevent me from betraying myself to the poor fellow."

"Rather cruel of you, wasn't it?"

"Well, yes. But I wanted to make the exposure as complete as possible. When the time comes to strip Reginald Henson of his pretence pretty late from the family, the more evidence we can pile up the better. But Frank is not bad; he is merely weak and utterly in the power of that man. If we can only break the bonds, Frank will be a powerful factor on our side."

"I dare say. But how was the Rembrandt stolen? Littimer's I mean."

"It was worked through an accomplice," Chris explained. "It had to be done before you arrived. And there was no better time than night for the operation. I guessed that when Henson drew the fact from me that I used the terrace after dinner. By a bit of good luck I found the accomplice and myself together in the day; in fact, I forced Reginald to lead so that he had to introduce me to the man."

"In which case you would know him again?"

"Of course. Presently I am going to show you a little more of the comedy. Well, I was on the terrace pretty late when I heard dear Reginald down the cliff calling for assistance. He pretended that he had slipped down the cliff and could not get up again. By the aid of a rope that fortunately happened to be close at hand I saved our

dear friend's life. I have learnt from one of the gardeners just now that Reginald placed the rope there himself—a most effective touch, you must admit."

"Very," Bell said, drily. "But I quite fail to see why—"

"I am coming to that. Don't you see that if anything happened, Reginald could prove that he was not near the house at the time? But just before that I saw his accomplice come up the cliff; indeed, he passed quite close to Henson on his way to the house. Reginald quite overlooked this fact in his greed for his own safety. When I had effected my gallant rescue I heard an owl hoot. Now, there are no owls about here."

"I guessed what that meant—it was a signal of success. Then I went back to the corridor and the Rembrandt was gone. The stays had been cut away. At first I was dreadfully upset, but the more I thought of it the more sure I was that it was all for the best."

"But you might have raised an alarm and caught the thief, who—"

"Who would have been promptly disclaimed by Reginald. Let me tell you, sir, that I have the thief and the lost Rembrandt in the hollow of my hands. Before the day is out I shall make good my boast. And there's the breakfast bell."

It looked quite natural some time later for the three conspirators to be lounging about the gallery when Henson emerged from his bedroom. He appeared bright and smiling, and most of the bandages had been removed from his throat. All the same he was not pleased to see Bell there; he gazed uneasily at the doctor and from him to Littimer.

"You know Bell," the latter said, carelessly. "Fact is, there's been a great mistake."

Bell offered him his hand heartily. It cost him a huge effort, but the slimy scoundrel had to be fought with his own weapons. Henson shook his head with the air of a man extending a large and generous measure of forgiveness. He sought in vain to read Bell's eyes, but there was a steady, almost boyish, smile in them.

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He repeated the last word helplessly; he seemed to have lost all his backbone, and lapsed into a flabby, jellified mass of quivering white flesh.

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But the stays were not intact. The heads had been shaved off with some cutting instrument; half of the stays gleamed like silver in the morning light. And yet the Rembrandt was there. The more Henson dwelt upon it the more he was puzzled. He began to wonder whether some deep trap was being laid for him.

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"I guessed what that meant—it was a signal of success. Then I went back to the corridor and the Rembrandt was gone. The stays had been cut away. At first I was dreadfully upset, but the more I thought of it the more sure I was that it was all for the best."

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thief who had taken orders of some kind. He is a sorry-looking scoundrel, and I look pretty much like him, especially the horrible smashed thumb."

"The what?" Bell exclaimed. "A thumb like a snake's head with a little pink nail on it?"

"That's what," Chris said. "So you happen to have met him?"

"We met on our way here," Bell said, drily. "The rascal sent the dogcart away from the station so that I should have to walk home, and he attacked me in the road." But I half-expected something of the kind, and I was ready for him. And he was the man with the thumb. I should have told you all this before, but I had forgotten it in watching your fascinating diplomacy. When the attack was defeated the rascal bolted in the direction of the cliffs. Of course, he was off to tell Henson of the failure of the scheme and to go on with the plot for getting the other picture. If he had stolen my Rembrandt then the other would have remained. I couldn't have turned up with a cook-and-bull story of having started with the picture and being robbed of it by a total stranger in the road. . . . But I am interrupting you."

"Well, I marked that thumb carefully. I have already told you that the thief passed me on his way to the house when he came up the cliff. I was leaning over the terrace when I saw him emerge into a band of light caused by the big arc in the castle tower. I forgot that I was in a deep shadow and that he could not possibly see me. I jerked my head back suddenly, and my diamond star fell out and dropped almost at the feet of the intruder. This was the man I should have gone to call out, but I didn't. I had a sudden idea, Dr. Bell—had an idea that almost amounted to an inspiration."

Chris paused for a moment and her eyes sparkled. Bell was watching her with the deepest interest and admiration.

"I let the man keep it," Chris went on, more slowly. "With an eye to the future, the man I stole the thing from, Miss Chris, I thought, 'I would be pretty sure to pawn the star—probably has done so by this time, and therefore we have him in our power. We have only to discover how to get the diamond back, and we are done.'—is that the correct expression?—I can swear an information, and the police will subsequently search the fellow's lodgings. When the search is made, the diamond will be found. I found them. Mr. Merritt would hardly dare to pawn that."

"Even if he knew its real value, which I doubt," Bell said, thoughtfully. "Henson would not tell his too much. Let me congratulate you upon your astuteness of a philanthropic kind in Moreton Wells, but he had no doubt that it could wait for an hour. And then for the best part of the morning he sat fuming politely, whilst Littimer chattered in the most unbecoming fashion. Henson had rarely seen him in a better mood. It was quite obvious that he suspected nothing. Meanwhile Chris and Bell were bowling along towards Moreton Wells, and sat well back in the roomy waggons, so that the servants could not hear them. Chris regarded Bell with a brilliant smile on her face.

"Chris," she said, "I confess that you are consumed with curiosity."

"It would be just as well to acknowledge it at once," Bell admitted. "In the happy old days your sister Edna always said that you were the clever and cautious one of the family. She said you would do or dare anything."

"I used to imagine so," Chris said, more quietly. "But the life of the last few years tried one's nerves terribly. The change has done me a deal of good—the change and the knowledge that Reginald Henson regards me as dead. But you want to know how I am going to get the Rembrandt?"

"That is what I am consuming me at present," Bell said.

"Well, we are going to see the man who has it," Chris explained, coolly. "I have his address in Moreton Wells at the present moment, and for the rest he is called the Rev. James Merritt. Between ourselves he is no more a reverend than you are."

"And if the gentleman is shy or refuses to see us?"

"I should think he would be arrested on a charge of theft."

"My dear young lady, before you can get a warrant for that kind of thing you have to prove the theft, you have to have information to show that you believe the property is in the possession of the thief, and that is not easy."

"There is nothing easier. I am prepared to offer that as evidence."

"That you actually know that the property is in the possession of the thief?"

"Certainly I do. I saw him put it in his pocket."

Bell looked at the speaker with blank surprise. If such was the fact, then Chris' present statement was exactly opposed to all that she had said before. Since Henson had taken him in the possession of the thief, and that is not easy."

"I saw that man steal the Rembrandt?" Bell gasped.

"Certainly not. But I did see him steal my big diamond star on a second charge of theft. If he had done so it would have gone hard with you to prove your innocence. But I am sure that he was going to try again. I watched him carefully yesterday and managed to see his letters and telegrams. Then I found that he had telegrams to James Merritt whose address in Moreton Wells I carefully noted down. It did not require much intellect to grasp the fact that this Merritt was to be the accomplice in the theft of the picture. I saw him. Merritt came over and saw his chief, with whom he had a long conversation in the grounds. I also forced myself on Mr. Merritt's notice."

"And so it happened that he introduced me to the place where the Rembrandt hung. He passed before the picture in a hesitating, fascinated way. His feet seemed to pull up before it involuntarily."

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